A NEW LOOK AT THE WRITINGS OF THOMAS PAINE
WHILE HE LIVED IN FRANCE

by John B. Shrawder

I was disappointed to see in the last Bulletin of Thomas Paine Friends that there were no events in New York City, Philadelphia, Bordentown, or New Rochelle for Paine's birthday celebration. To celebrate his birthday, I read a book on Paine's experience in France and wrote the following review on it. It's some little way to make up for the lack of a birthday celebration.

The book is entitled Illuminati Manifesto of World Revolution by Nicolas Bonneville with an Introduction by Marco Di Luchetti, Booksurge Publishing, 2011. In the following paper I combined the findings expressed in the book with known events from the French Revolution and the life of Thomas Paine. --JBS

Thomas Paine's ideas seemed to have changed greatly after he went to France in 1792. The ideas he expressed in The Age of Reason and Agrarian Justice differ substantially from those of Common Sense and Rights of Man.

In Common Sense (1776), Paine uses religious references frequently. For example, "As the exalting of one man so greatly above the rest cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature, so neither can it be defended on the authority of scripture; for the will of the Almighty, as declared by Gideon and the prophet Samuel, expressly disapproves of government by kings".

But in The Age of Reason Part 1 (1793): he disparages organized religion. "All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit."

In 1791, Paine dedicated Rights of Man Part 1 to George Washington. In 1796 he would say the following about Washington:

"the world will be puzzled to decide whether you are an apostate or an impostor; whether you have abandoned good principles or whether you ever had any."

What happened between 1792 when Paine went to France and 1794 when he finished The Age of Reason Part 1? Could a clue be in his will (1809)? Paine gave most of his estate to the Bonneville family and especially to the patriarch Nicholas Bonneville of Paris, France.

"Margaret Brazier Bonneville, wife of Nicholas Bonneville, of Paris, for her own sole and separate use, and at her own disposal, .... I give the remainder of the money arising from that sale, one half thereof to Clio Rickman, .... and the other half to Nicolas Bonneville, of Paris, husband of Margaret B. Bonneville, aforesaid .... and to pay the rents and profits thereof to the said Margaret B. Bonneville, in trust for her children, Benjamin Bonneville, and Thomas Bonneville for their education and maintenance."

Bonneville was a major figure in Paine's life. Who was he and how could he have influenced Paine after 1792?

L'Esprit des Religions, a work attributed to Nicolas Bonneville, has recently been translated as, The Illuminati Manifesto of World Revolution, 1792, by Marco Di Luchetti, Esq., of Bologna, Italy. A drawing of Thomas Paine is on the center of the cover.

Bonneville is listed as the author. However, Bonneville's pamphlet is only about 42 pages while Di Luchetti's introduction is 376 pages.

I was originally put off by the reference to the Illuminati, thinking this was a book about fantastic conspiracy theories. However, the Illuminati was a well-known group from Bavaria in the 1770s and 1780s. Di Luchetti's book contains serious scholarship; it contains substantial documentation from European sources that are difficult to find.

The introduction is a hard read. It is not well organized and takes substantial time to understand. Nonetheless, it is worth the effort for Paine enthusiasts as it provides substantial information about the complex events that occurred in France in the 1780s and early 1790s.

The basic connection between the two men--Paine and Bonneville--is well documented. Paine became a member of the Social Circle which was Bonneville's publishing house in Paris, and which served as Paine's translator and publisher in France. Paine lived with the Bonneville family in France from 1797 to 1802; Bonneville's wife and sons lived with Paine in America after 1802. Nicolas Bonneville was born in 1760 and was proficient in several languages. While in his 20s he was a translator of d'Alembert, a co-editor of the Encyclopedie.

Because of Paine's influence, Bonneville's son Benjamin attended West Point and was the subject of Washington Irving's 1837 book The Adventures of Captain Bonneville. At some point Nicolas Bonneville moved to New York; he was observed by Irving at Battery Park in New York in the early 1820s. He passed away in Paris in 1828 so likely he traveled with Lafayette to France in 1824.

Di Luchetti argues that both Paine and Nicholas Bonneville were members of the Illuminati.

Adam Weishaupt argues the Illuminati in Bavaria on May 1, 1776 (soon after Paine wrote Common Sense in Philadelphia). In 1785 Weishaupt and other members of the Illuminati were forced to flee Bavaria after secret societies were outlawed. One member of the Illuminati was struck by lightning during their flight. The papers in his possession, with a list of Illuminati members, were seized by the Bavarian Government. These names were made public in an 1869 book derived from the archives of the Austrian government. The membership included Bonneville, Paine, and many leading members of the 1789 French Revolution. No other Americans were on the list.

Di Luchetti establishes the connection between the Illuminati of Bavaria and the Les Amis Reunis lodge in Paris. He finds evidence of meetings between Bonneville and Illuminati leader Bode in 1787 and 1788 in Paris. In 1789 Bonneville formed the Social Circle publishing house which became the most prolific publishing house in France. Most of those in the French Illuminati are commonly named the "Girondins".

It is difficult to see how Paine could have been a member of the Illuminati by 1785. He was only outside the United States for

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However, many of the works of Paine and the Social Circle are in general agreement with the beliefs of the Illuminati. These were put forth in many Illuminati publications of the 1780s. Di Luchetti describes the following core beliefs.

1) Commitment to the rights of man or cult of the law which includes freedom of religion
2) Universal public education that would eventually lead to an end of religion and replaces it with the worship of nature
3) Dividing up lands so every family can provide for its own needs thus eliminating poverty
4) Establishing a universal republic thus ending war

The Social Circle would add the ending of black slavery as a fifth core belief.

The Illuminati are portrayed in legend as a monolithic group with beliefs that cannot be disputed by any members. This did not happen in France as many members abandoned these core principles. For example, Paine would take a different position on land ownership.

Di Luchetti asserts that the idea to modernize France was developed by philosophers in 1765 after the publication of Rousseau’s Social Contract.

He also asserts that the Illuminati put in place the forces that incited the French Revolution. Some of their methods were not admirable. The following are examples.

Anton Mesmer was the discoverer of Hypnosis and a member of the Illuminati. He arrived in Paris and set up Illuminati lodges throughout France modeled on Freemasonry between 1778 and 1785. In 1785, they summoned the forger Cagliostro from Italy and created a story of an extraneous purchase of a diamond to embarrass Queen Marie Antonette and discredit the royal family. Paine arrived in France in 1787 and met with two leading figures planning the Revolution—Condorcet and Brissot. He would become much closer to them on his return to France in 1792.

In 1789, Duc d’Orléans, the king’s cousin and one of the wealthiest men in France, orchestrated a grain shortage. This would lead to a revenue shortage that exacerbated the cost of the debt incurred from the American Revolution. King Louis XVI was persuaded to summon the Estates General to raise taxes to address the need for revenue. This would be the first meeting of this body since 1614. It would consist of three groups—nobles, clergy, and commoners.

Member Mirabeau incited “The Great Fear” by spreading rumors that France was under attack by enemies. Bonneville then argued for an armed national guard. Their plan was to create an armed force that would counterbalance the army. Lafayette was placed in charge of the national guard. Orders from the king were also forged to attack nobles and the church in Provence creating further fear.

On July 14 1789, the Knights Templars stormed the Bastille to avenge the French king’s destruction of the Templars of the Middle Ages. The Duc d’Orléans renounced aristocratic privileges and joined the common people. The three houses of the Estates General then consolidated into a single convention and a constitution was written. The Social Circle was then the dominant force in France, publishing many documents including “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen”; Condorcet wrote “Equality and Property”; Brissot formed a club to end slavery.

In 1791, Paine wrote Rights of Man Part 1. It included comments on the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen". King Louis was captured trying to flee France. Brissot, who now led the Social Circle, asked that the king be deposed.

By 1792, the Girondins were at the peak of their powers. The Social Circle was the official propaganda arm of the French Government and was financed by duc d’Orléans. Paine published Rights of Man Part 2.

In April, France declared war on Austria. This was opposed by Robespierre and Marat. Prussia entered the war against France. In August, events got worse. A mob gathered around King Louis at Champ de Mars and over 600 of the historic Swiss Guards were killed trying to protect the king. The French Assembly banned the role of the church in education and asked all priests to raise hands in allegiance or leave France. Many left. On September 17 priests were killed on the way to Abbaye jail. Bonneville denounced this violence. Prussia and Austria crossed the border into France but were halted at the Battle of Valmy.

At this point, Paine arrived in Paris as the most popular writer in the world. He wrote his address to the French People as the French army’s fortune improved and they began advancing into Brussels and the Rhine. However, Paine would be unsuccessful at influencing France in the 1790s. This is unfortunate because he was on the right side of history.

In November, letters from King Louis were discovered that asked foreign nations for help. Louis was brought before the convention and was convicted for treason. By a single vote, the Convention voted to execute Louis. On January 19, 1793, Paine addressed the Convention to spare the life of Louis.

“...if by any act of ours the number of the nation’s enemies shall be needlessly increased, and that of its friends diminished—at a time when the finances may be more strained than today—we should not be justifiable for having thus unnecessarily heaped obstacles in the path of our successors.... France has but one ally—the United States of America. That is the only nation that can furnish France with naval provisions, for the kingdoms of northern Europe are, or soon will be, at war with her. It unfortunately happens that the person now under discussion is considered by the Americans as having been a friend of their revolution. His execution will be an affliction to them, and it is in your power not to wound the feelings of your ally.”

Paine’s argument was rejected and Louis was publicly executed. As a result, England declared war in February and joined Holland, Prussia, Austria, and Spain in the First Coalition to oppose France. The United States declared its neutrality but continued trading with England. France would be in a continuous state of war for over 20 years. The wars did not go well for France so in April a 13-member Committee of Public

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Safety led by Georges Danton was appointed.

On May 6, Paine wrote to Danton:

"...The danger every day increases of a rupture between Paris and the departments. The departments did not send their deputies to Paris to be insulted, and every insult shown to them is an insult to the departments that elected and sent them. I see but one effectual plan to prevent this rupture from taking place and that is to fix the residence of the Convention and of the future assemblies at a distance from Paris ..."  

Paine’s opinion was rejected again. On June 2, the committee stormed the Assembly and seized 22 Girondins. Most were executed. Few would remain from those who orchestrated the 1789 revolution.  

A civil war began as rioting broke out in Vendee, Marseilles, Nantes, Bordeaux, Lyon, and Brittany. Some French military leaders defected and some areas welcomed foreign forces. The Committee ordered mass conscription and attacked the Royalists and Girondins in the departments. Over 250,000 persons were killed in Vendee alone.  

Part of the success of the opponents of the Girondins was because of the defection by member Anacharsis Cloots of Prussia. Rather than ending religion through education, Cloots wanted to make atheism France’s state “religion”. He worked to close 200 churches and established the “Festival of Reason” on Nov 10, 1793.  

In response, Paine wrote in The Age of Reason Part 1:  

"...You will do me the justice to remember, that I have always strenuously supported the right of every man to his own opinion, however different that opinion might be to mine. He who denies to another this right, makes a slave of himself to his present opinion, because he precludes himself the right of changing it....The circumstance that has now taken place in France, of the total abolition of the whole national order of priest-hood, and of every thing appertaining to compulsive systems of religion, and compulsive articles of faith, has not only precipitated my intention but rendered a work of this kind exceedingly necessary, lest, in the general wreck of superstition, of false systems of government, and false theology, we lose sight of morality, of humanity, and of the theology that is true."  

On November 17, Cloots denounced members of the Committee. The Committee then began arresting foreigners. On December 28, both Paine and Cloots were imprisoned. In March Bonnville (though not a foreigner) was arrested. Cloots was executed in March, 1794; Danton in April; and Robespierre in July. In opposition to Cloots and the atheists, Robespierre ordered a mandatory worship of a supreme being and designed the “Festival of the Supreme Being” on June 8, 1794 just before his own execution.  

In 1788, Mirabeau proposed “Agrarian Laws” advocating the common use of all land. In 1792, the Girondins passed the “Agrarian Laws” dividing lands currently in common use into individual plots. It followed the beliefs of the Illuminati but was not accepted by peasant farmers.  

To alleviate poverty, Gracchus Babeuf, another member of the Social Circle, defected from the Girondins and formed the “Conspiracy of Equals” in 1795. He advocated the common use of all lands. The fruits of all land would go into stores for sharing by all. Sylvain Marechal supported Babeuf’s point of view in “Manifsto of the Equals”. Their beliefs formed the basis of Communism in the 19th and 20th century.  

Paine responded directly to Babeuf and Marechal’s beliefs on land distribution by writing Agrarian Justice opposed to Agrarian Law in 1797. In the preface, Paine argues that Babeuf’s solution was an unacceptably undemocratic violent seizure of power:  

"....the conspirators did their best to renew disorder and confusion and constituted themselves into a Directory which is formally destructive of election and representation.”  

Paine broke from the Girondins because he believed the value of land into its base value and the value gained from cultivation. Paine felt that Babeuf’s plan robbed cultivators of the fruit of their labors which created a new injustice. Paine urged having a death tax which would break up estates over time and alleviate the loss of common land with the least amount of disruption.  

On May 8, 1796, 17,000 conspirators met and planned to overthrow the French government. Babeuf and many leaders of the conspiracy were arrested and executed in May 1797.  

In his Maritime Compact (1797), Paine offered an opinion on the Illuminati’s belief in a universal republic. He recommended establishing an association of nations to enforce trade—particularly trade during war. Each member nation would retain its sovereignty but would not trade with warring nations. Paine was in conformity with Bonnville’s writings of 1792 that proposed an association of nations. Cloots had earlier taken a different position and supported creating a centralized world government.  

Bonneville translated Maritime Compact into French in 1800. In the summer of 1800, Paine delivered a copy to all the foreign ministers then meeting in Europe. As a result of this paper, Russia, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Portugal, and Naples shut their ports to all warring nations.  

One can question some of D’Luchetti’s views of people and events. He demonizes Robespierre and barely mentions Danton at all.  

The book is worth reading for those who are interested in Thomas Paine. It puts many of his most important writings in the context of the times.  

John Shrawder resides in New Jersey and has been a TPF member since 2009. He is a long time reader of historical and philosophical topics particularly those pertaining to the European Enlightenment and the American Revolution. In an email from Shrawder: I have never seen any references to the Illuminati in Paine’s writings. In 1800, Thomas Jefferson wrote some brief comments about them. Neither Jefferson nor Franklin was on the list of Illuminati members uncovered in the 1869 investigation discovered in the Austrian archives.  

Illuminati sources:
http://sites.google.com/site/illuminatiofbavaria
http://bavarian-illuminati.info