

[Rise and Development of the Congregational Polity and Spirit]

[IX.] Thomas Paine and Theology Without the Church

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In studying any development of the religious thought, or any other movement for that matter, there is always a danger of becoming too narrow in the range of material made use of, and in neglecting the strong side-lights which may be thrown upon the movement by the investigation of that material which seems to lie just outside the limits of the canon. To many, I suppose, Thomas Paine would hardly be regarded as an enriching source for material upon theological subjects. Yet, in spite of his errors, in spite [of] the many mistakes that Paine made in his theological writings due to his lack of knowledge and culture, in spite of the occasional traces of coarseness and crudeness, he struck at the very heart of many of the problems that have perplexed many minds since his day, and the best and most scholarly results of modern historical investigation have gone to confirm and prove many of the statements made by Paine. Even the conservative religious thinkers accept more facts of the very nature that made Paine write his *Age of Reason* than Paine ever dreamed of. They still retain a semblance of belief in those ideas which Paine's greater personal independence led him to reject. While the pages that were written in denunciation of Paine and his ideas have long since been forgotten, the essential truths for which Paine stood have received the approval of history, and are, in many ways, in complete accord with modern thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Earl C. Davis wrote a good number of manuscripts concerning the history of the church. All are hand-written dating them before 1907—so Pittsfield or Harvard. Some, including this one, are pretty clearly part of a series provided to a congregation—so probably Pittsfield.

Born in Thetford, England, June 29, 1737, he led a turbulent life filled with bitter disappointments until he came to America in 1775, bringing as his passport into American life a letter written by Benjamin Franklin. In 1776, he wrote his famous, and what proved to be his sensational, "Common Sense," in which he boldly announced that the separation from the mother country was the only method of dignity or safety in solving the pressing problem which confronted the colonies in those days. Then followed the {??} of the "Crisis," which were well-adopted to the problems of the day. He remained in this country until 1787, when he went to France and England to exhibit a model of a bridge he had invented. Arriving in France he found the people just on the point of breaking into the revolution, and entered into the revolutionary movement. Being of a less passionate and extreme nature than the leaders of the [French] Revolution, as seen particularly in his voting for the King's banishment, rather than for his death, he was thrown [into] Luxembourg Prison. On his way to prison he put into the hands of a publisher the first part of his *Age of Reason*. The second part was finished in 1795. The book was dedicated to the American People, and the demand there was for it, and the extent to which it pervaded the country, which was longing for some quickening nourishment to relieve it from the dearth of spiritual force brought about by Calvinism, is clearly set forth in the following words of John White Chadwick,

The *Age of Reason*, letters, fragments, everything that he ever wrote of a theological character, does not make up three hundred pages. A little craft, and yet it has outlived storms in which whole fleets of seventy-fours have gone to wreck, and still keep the seas and fires its saucy challenge across many a founders man-of-war and peaceful merchantmen. Seldom have three hundred pages lived so long, and gone so far, and had so large an influence, whether for good or for evil. In the last years of the eighteenth century and in the first years of the nineteenth, they were widely read in England and America. They raised up knots of advocates in every town and village, mostly hard-headed men with little poetry or imagination in them, and little piety, whatever of sound morality. They penetrated to the

remotest confines of civilization. The wandering peddler carried them in his pack to the back woodsman in his cabin. And they still sell, especially in the Great West, hundreds and thousands of them every year, and are still widely read with various degrees of satisfaction.<sup>2</sup>

This is a more appreciative estimate of Paine's theological influence than he has at times been accorded. For example, on the flyleaf of the copy of the *Age of Reason* which is in the library here are written these words, "It is bitterly to be deplored that the genius which penned 'Common Sense,' 'The Crisis' and 'Lights of Man' should have even befouled itself with the obscenity and ribaldry of the *Age of Reason* and similar books." One young Methodist preacher arriving in this country from England expressed himself in these words, "I thank God that the bones of Tom Paine have been rooted up, and no longer disgrace the soil of our country."<sup>3</sup> I cannot refrain also from quoting the following, which is a masterpiece of inconsistency. The writer is speaking of Westchester County,

Here is found the delightful village where the pious but persecuted Huguenots, fleeing from oppressions and bigotry and intolerance, found a quiet and happy home; and where too is still pointed out the consecrated little enclosure in which, when the toils and sufferings of this life were over, they rested from their labors. And here, alas! that place should be known but to be shunned, here is yet seen the ruins of the sad and forsaken spot rendered infamous by the sepulcher of the infidel Paine. (Works of T. Paine, Pub. By Wm. Carver, 1830, Preface, p. xii.)

But really what is there in this *Age of Reason* that brought upon the head of its writer the denunciations of

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<sup>2</sup> John White Chadwick, *Economy and Waste: A Sermon*, Charles P. Somerby, 1877. John White Chadwick (1840-1904) was an American writer and Unitarian preacher.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in J. J. Rousseau, *The Theological Works of Thomas Paine*, New York: William Carver, 1830, p. xi.

the Christian community? Nothing so very startling after all. I quote his statement of belief, at least its positive side,

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life.

I believe the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy.<sup>4</sup>

His conception of God was far more noble and exalted than the notions prevailing among the rank and file of the clergy who condemned his, and his faith much more sound and unassailable. Why he was ever spoken of as an infidel, one cannot see, unless it be because he really struck home at the vulnerable point in the accepted faith of the day. The following sentence gives us at once a clue to the cause of the unsympathetic treatment which he received at the hands of the clergy, and also shows us the loftiness of his ideas concerning Jesus:

The Christian Theory is little else than the idolatry of the ancient Mythologists, accommodated to the purposes of power and revenue; and it yet remains to reason and philosophy to abolish the amphibious fraud.

Nothing that is here said can apply, even with the most distant disrespect, to the *real* character of Jesus Christ. He was a virtuous and an amiable man. The morality that he preached and practiced was of the most benevolent kind; and though similar systems of morality had been preached by Confucius, and by some of the Greek philosophers, many years before; by the Quakers since; and by many good men in all ages, it has not been exceeded by any.<sup>5</sup>

A very just, and appreciative statement of Jesus, and one which has the merit of being quite free from gush.

Thus it seems that in general Tom Paine held views which are very acceptable today to a very large number of people, and one can express these views without fear of such

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, Part I, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, Part I, p. 8-9.

painful criticisms as were passed on Paine. The ideas which he advanced represented the opinions of large numbers of people outside of the church. They have, to a very large extent, been taken up into the church beliefs and represent the liberal branches of about all religious bodies, as well as the ideas of those who are openly and avowedly liberal.

Not only do these ideas represent the religious opinions of the American movement outside of the church, but they are the essential principles upon which the American Government was founded. I quote, "The religious opinions of Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and a host of wise and good men in Europe and America differ in no respect from those of Thomas Paine."<sup>6</sup> With these men Paine was intimate, and in connection with them did much to organize and launch this United States of America upon her course, defending not only political freedom and religious toleration, but insisting upon religious freedom, and the right of private interpretation of religious experience. When we read in our Constitution, "but no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States"<sup>7</sup> it represents the influence of men who were in hearty and cordial sympathy with the ideas of natural religion, which were fundamental with the men of power who framed our Constitution.

This current of religious thought, outside of the church, is one of the most important, if not the most important, in the religious development of the country, and the fulfillment of its prophetic character has been demonstrated each day of our national life.

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<sup>6</sup> I cannot find the source of the quotation.

<sup>7</sup> United States Constitution, Article VI, Section 3.