

Our Debt to Thomas Paine, Patriot and Freethinker

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It is a hundred years, the eighth of this month, since Thomas Paine died at New Rochelle, New York, upon an estate given him in recognition of his services to the country. I want to take this opportunity of paying a just tribute to a man who loved freedom, gave his whole life, and his reputation to the cause of freeing the human soul from the bondage of political and ecclesiastical tyranny. I want also to present as faithfully as I may the strength and the weakness of his personality. It is a simple matter of personal justice that we should understand and acknowledge, so far as we can appreciate it, the service which this noble man performed for the principles of freedom and equality. We should do [so] the more readily because he was the victim of such violent and unjustifiable abuse at the hands of the ecclesiasticism of his times. Even now he is recognized for his true worth by only a very few.

Thomas Paine was born of humble parentage in England in the year of 1737. His father was a quaker, and the son certainly inherited the quaker love for freedom, and upon him the Spirit descended and aroused him to speak. His education was limited, but he made up for these limitations by rather wide reading. He came to know Benjamin Franklin, and following the advice of Franklin, came to this country in 1774. He immediately entered into the work of agitation for freedom and independence. His magazine articles during the Revolution were of tremendous influence in supporting and furthering the interests of freedom. In 1780 he was given a degree by the University of Pennsylvania

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #4"—that includes sermons from February 14, 1909 to December 26, 1909. Davis discusses Thomas Paine (1737-1809) in one of his history lessons provided in support of congregational education and written in the years before this sermon. See "Lecture IX: Thomas Paine and Theology Without the Church," <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/dbaird/lecture-ix-thomas-paine-and-theology-without-the-church/>.

in recognition of his services. In 1787 he went to France, and became an influential worker in the French Revolution. At this time, he published his *Rights of Man*.² While he was one of the most ardent fighters for liberty, he would not stand for tyranny, even if that tyranny be the tyranny of reform. He was elected to the French National Assembly, and when the Assembly, in the hands of the party which he represented, was bent on executing the dethroned monarch, the true nobility of Paine's character came to the front. In the face of the certainty of condemnation and death on the guillotine, Paine voted in favor of the King's life, and in defiance of the infuriated members of his party. He was then put into prison, and while there wrote his famous, *Age of Reason*.³ He was released from prison in 1795, and resided for two years with the family of James Munroe. In 1802 he returned to the United States in a Sloop of War. His return to America was marked by two characteristics. On the one hand, he was most cordially received by the men whose names have come down to us as names of honor in the life of the nation. On the other hand, he was most violently and unjustly attacked and criticized by the ecclesiastical elements of society. Strange nemesis of progress. Those who attacked him, and most bitterly maligned him, are remembered today only because of the relationships to him. The intellectual apparatus with which they sought to destroy his reputation and standing, has been discredited by the moral and intellectual progress of the last hundred years, and the essential principles for which Thomas Paine stood, and which he courageously defended, have been vindicated and are propounded today by the defenders of the faith.

Paine was the radical child of his time. He was one of those noble men who arose out of the political and social slime of the 18th century, somewhat stained on the outside by the looseness and immorality of the times in which they were born, but pure gold inside. His reputation has suffered severely by the unjust and malicious slander heaped upon him by a bigoted and narrow ecclesiasticism. Discounting the stains which the filth of the times in which he lived had marked him, and judging him with what Jesus calls a righteous judgment, by his purposes and the

² Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* was first published in 1791.

³ Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* was published in three parts successively in 1794, 1795 and 1807.

fidelity with which he worked for them, and you come upon one of the noble men of all time.

Robert Ingersoll's characterization of him from this point of view [is] searching and just, indicating at once his strength and his limitations: "Poverty was his mother—necessity his master."

He had more brains than books; more sense than education; more courage than politeness; more strength than polish. He had no veneration for old mistakes, no admiration for ancient lies. He loved truth for truth's sake, and for man's sake. He saw oppression on every hand; injustice everywhere; hypocrisy at the altar, venality on the bench, tyranny on the throne; and with a splendid courage he espoused the cause of the weak against the strong—of the enslaved many against the titled few.⁴

It is from that point of view that Thomas Paine should be judged, and he shows up a man.

Having suggested the important facts of his life, and indicated somewhat his purpose and his point of view, I wish to speak of him as a patriot. In doing this we must understand that his love for this country or any country was not a narrow imperialistic love, but was a love given through the country to humanity. His famous statement, "The World is my country, and to do good my religion."⁵

His coming to this country was not so much because of his love for this country as such, as because it afforded him the opportunity of throwing himself into the struggle for freedom, for liberty, equality and fraternity, to us the slogan of the radicals of the time. The reason why he was able to make such a tremendous contribution to the cause of the colonists was the

⁴ Robert Ingersoll (1833-1899) American lawyer, writer and orator, nicknamed "the Great Agnostic." This quotation is from his lecture, "The Apotheosis of Thomas Paine," in *Popular Edition of Col. Ingersoll's Lectures*, London: Freethought Publishing Co., 1883, p. 81. The lecture was delivered in Central Music Hall, Chicago, January 29, 1880.

⁵ Quoted in Robert Ingersoll's "The Apotheosis of Thomas Paine," in *Popular Edition of Col. Ingersoll's Lectures*, London: Freethought Publishing Co., 1883, p. 84.

fact that he saw with a naked eye the full significance of the situation here in America. He saw, and history has confirmed his insight, that the real point at issue was not the relationship that should exist between these colonies and Great Britain, but whether or not a form of government based upon the principles of liberty and justice should be established here in this new world. Here he saw the possibility for freedom to live. In one of his *Common Sense* articles he says of the situation in the colonies during the war of the Revolution,

The sun never shone on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a city, a county, a province, or a kingdom, but of a continent—of at least one-eighth part of the habitable globe. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected even to the end of time, by the proceedings now. Now is the seed-time of continental union, faith and honor.⁶

To him it was the conflict between tyranny and freedom; monarchy and republicanism; slavery and justice. At the close of that same article, we find an impassioned appeal to the colonists:

O! ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose, not only the tyranny, but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa, have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.⁷

Still again he says,

We have it in our power to begin the world over again. ... The birthday of a new world is at hand, and a race of men, perhaps as numerous as all Europe contains, are to receive their portion of freedom from the events of a few months. The reflection is awful—and in this point of view, how trifling, how ridiculous, do the little paltry

⁶ Thomas Paine, "Thoughts on the Present State of the American Affairs," from *Common Sense*, reprinted in *The Political Works of Thomas Paine*, Chicago: Belfords, Clarke & Co., 1879, p. 20.

⁷ Thomas Paine, "Thoughts on the Present State of the American Affairs," from *Common Sense*, reprinted in *The Political Works of Thomas Paine*, Chicago: Belfords, Clarke & Co., 1879, p. 34.

cavilings, of a few weak or interested men appear, when weighed against the business of the world.⁸ These passages strike the note of the challenge that Thomas Paine was sending out to the colonists, the challenge to honest manhood to come to the defense of a great principle, affecting all mankind and future ages. No one can ever estimate the influence of these searching moral appeals upon the movement that has paved the way for democracy. He might well be called the Pamphleteer of the American Revolution, and this nation.

The essential principles of his theory of government are simple. His contention was always in favor of the republican form of government as opposed to any form based upon class rule and heredity. In his *Dissertations on Government*⁹ he describes the nature of a republican form of government, and it is to be assumed that in so doing he is describing just that form of government that our forefathers believed they were establishing.

The administration of a republic is supposed to be directed by certain fundamental principles of right and justice, from which there cannot, because there ought not to be any deviation; and whenever any deviation appears, there is a kind of stepping out of the republican principle, and an approach towards the despotic one. This administration is executed by a select number of persons, periodically chosen by the people, who act as representatives and in behalf of the whole, and who are supposed to enact the same laws, and pursue the same line of administration, as the people would do were they all assembled together.¹⁰

This is simple clear-cut commonsense, and has in it the whole theory and philosophy of those who carried a large part of the burden in establishing this nation under freedom. To what extent we have betrayed the trust placed in our hands by the early patriots is well illustrated by the action of the present

⁸ Thomas Paine, "Appendix" to *Common Sense*, reprinted in *The Political Works of Thomas Paine*, Chicago: Belfords, Clarke & Co., 1879, pp. 49-50.

⁹ Thomas Paine, *Dissertations on Government and Affairs of the Bank and Paper-Money*, reprinted in *The Works of Thomas Paine*, Philadelphia: James Carey, 1797.

¹⁰ Thomas Paine, *Dissertations on Government and Affairs of the Bank and Paper-Money*, reprinted in *The Works of Thomas Paine*, Philadelphia: James Carey, 1797, p. 326.

congress of the United States. Would to God that a few more such infidels as Thomas Paine might come to the front in our generation and rescue our nation from despotism to freedom, and give her a new birth of service to mankind.

It was natural for Paine to respond to the angel of liberty calling to him from the shores of France. There also he did valiant work for freedom, and did one of the most heroic things that any man ever did. Interested as he was in the revolution from the overthrow of monarchy, he understood very clearly how easily it is to establish a new tyranny quite as despotic as the old. He had worked to overthrow the monarchy, had voted for the banishment of the dethroned king, but he would not vote for the king's death. That would itself have been an act of injustice, and tyranny. Rather than violate his principles, he faced the possibility of death, in fact the certainty of it, for it was only an accident that saved him from guillotine, and cast his vote for justice, mercy and freedom.

This ended his political career, but it gave him the opportunity of doing another great service to mankind. While in prison he devoted himself to writhing his *Age of Reason*. I suppose that no other book published in this country has been the cause of such bitter and lasting opposition. This book has to do with the theological convictions of Thomas Paine. I advise every man to read [it]. It is not a book of final authority, but it is very certain that it contains the rough outline of many religious principles that have now become established. On the fly leaf of the copy of his theological writings which is in the Athenaeum¹¹ are written these words,

It is bitterly to be deplored, that the genius which penned "Commonsense," "The Crisis," and "Rights of Man" should have ever befouled itself with the obscenity and ribaldry of "The Age of Reason" and similar books. Signed G.L.

That, I suppose, expresses very mildly the consensus of opinion concerning this book, and others at the time when they were written, and even later. That would still express the opinion of many today. Fortunately, such ones are growing fewer each day,

¹¹ Earl Davis most likely is referring to the Boston Athenaeum, a member supported library founded in 1807. It is the oldest independent library still operating (as of 2023) in the United States.

and we are coming to see with ever increasing clearness, that it was just the most logical thing in the world for the man who had been giving his life for political freedom, should also sound his protest against ecclesiastical tyranny, and apply the power of his reason to the problems of religious thought.

It is quite the expected thing to come across this sentence in the opening pages of *The Age of Reason*,

Soon after I published the pamphlet, "Common Sense," in America, I saw the exceeding probability that a revolution in the system of government would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion.¹²

Anyone [better: No one] who is at all familiar with the history of religious thought of the last hundred years, and the present condition of religious thinking, would deny the sagacity of that remark.

You can see by his confession of faith that he was a deist. "I believe," he says at the beginning of his book, "in one God and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life."

I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy.¹³

In this book, *The Age of Reason*, he shows three things as summarized at the close.

First—That the idea or belief of a word of God existing in print, or in writing, or in speech, is inconsistent in itself for reasons already assigned. These reasons among many others, are the want of a universal language; the mutability of language; the error to which translations are subject; the possibility of totally suppressing such a word; the probability of altering it, or fabricating the whole and imposing it upon the world.

¹² Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason: An Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology*, New York, D.M. Bennett, Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1877 (first published between 1794 and 1807), p. 6.

¹³ Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason: An Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology*, New York, D.M. Bennett, Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1877 (first published between 1794 and 1807), p. 5.

Second—That the creation we behold is the real and ever-existing word of God, in which we cannot be deceived. It proclaims his power, it demonstrates his wisdom, it manifests his goodness and beneficence.

Third—That the moral duty of man consists in imitating the moral goodness and beneficence of God manifested in the creation towards all his creatures. That seeing as we daily do the goodness of God to all men, it is an example calling upon all men to practice the same towards each other; and, consequently, that every thing of persecution and revenge between man and man, and every thing of cruelty to animals, is a violation of moral duty.¹⁴

It was to show these three things that Paine wrote *The Age of Reason*. Of course in so doing he said many things that appeared to the people of that time as extremely sacrilegious. As a matter of fact, the work that has been done since that time along the lines of Biblical scholarship, has confirmed his main points, and no sane man of today believes that the Bible is a supernaturally inspired book. That is no longer a debatable question. It is settled. But in the process of the years we have come to see one thing about the Bible that Paine for the most part overlooked. He only went far enough to see that it was not a supernaturally inspired book. We go that far with him, and one step beyond, we see that it is an intensely human book. It is written for the most part by men through whose veins flows the red blood of human life. They met life with an intensity, and a conviction that makes life real. They faced the problems of their day [with] a serious wholeheartedness, and made their contributions to human progress. The ecclesiasticism which made of the Bible a huge monstrosity, robbed Paine of the delight of seeing in it the imprint of those personalities, who were keenly alive to the throbbing pulsating aspirations of the human soul under freedom. The ecclesiasticism of today is doing that very same thing to hundreds and thousands of men of character and high purpose, depriving them of the pleasure and the benefit of a book that is rich with the records of human life, depriving [them] of the free access to its human pages, by poisoning their minds with the idea that it is a book unlike all other books,

¹⁴ Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason: An Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology*, New York, D.M. Bennett, Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1877 (first published between 1794 and 1807), p. 54.

beclouding the thing with superstition and mystification. Someday I hope that we shall be able to see this great book in its true light, as one of the rich treasures, recording the hopes and aspirations, the victories and failures, the truth and the error in which a great nation believed.

But while Paine lost his perspective in treating the Bible, and failed to see the intensely human side of it, he was more fortunate in his estimate of Jesus. Through the deathly coat of mail, which the ecclesiastics have covered the person of Jesus, Paine was able to see. He saw just what we of today see. His estimate of Jesus, while it lacks that gushing volubility that is sometimes poured forth like rivers of oil, was just and true. He had keenness to see that behind the monstrosity of the Theological Christ, was a man, lovable, virtuous, and that the morality he preached and practiced was the most benevolent, and not exceeded by any preached by other men at any time.

His theological books are full of minor errors, and his lack of refinement sometimes shows up. But on the whole, the position taken in them is regard to supernatural religion is true. His philosophy, or rather [his] deistical idea of God is about the only survival of a monarchical system, which he did so much to **???**. A more democratic conception of the indwelling spirit of life in the universe has become the thought of modern times concerning God. The great point of Paine's work on such subjects as these was his application of the principle of freedom to the problems of religious life and thought.

I have wished to make this a plain statement of fact so far as I could, to point out to you Paine's point of view, and the motives that influenced him. I believe that you will agree with me that quite apart from his contributions to the freedom of body and mind from the oppression of tyranny, that his whole attitude towards life was right. We regret some of the accidents of conduct that were but a part of the common, and conventionally accepted, standards of his day, but we feel the thrill of the red blood of humanity, as we are touched by his tremendous appeals in behalf of righteousness and justice. Moreover, we feel that he is true to the heart of things when he

says that, "Any system of religion ... that shocks the mind of a child, cannot be a true system."¹⁵

¹⁵ Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, New York, D.M. Bennett, Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1877, p. 39.