

**How Thomas Paine's "Tug of War"
With Christianity Shaped American Politics**

Introduction

Religion has always been integrated to the monarchical structure of the British empire. The monarch is the descent of which the divine right of God is passed to, and the subject of the monarch is to submit to this power in the way they shall submit to God the Almighty. During the age of the Enlightenment is when turbulence started to spread due to innovative ideas proposed by John Locke and other great thinkers of the time, where they refuted the divine rights of God and emphasized on individual experiences, believing in rationality, reason, and empirical evidence. Christianity and the political system in America in its process of dispensing British rule became controversial and quavering, contradicting arguments became head-to-head. With the rising voice of rationality, many started to question the validity of this important religion while others maintained their spiritual reliance on religious belief.

Thomas Paine's Approach on Christianity

Enlightenment ideals of trusting human experiences and minimizing theological employment in the perception the natural world prompted Thomas Paine to question the absolute dominance of an overarching supernatural power. With that in mind, Thomas Paine published *The Age of Reason* in 1794 to establish Bible as merely a work of literature rather than a medium for communication between God and humans, which serves as the underlying framework for revelation to take place in the Christian traditions. Paine believes that the Bible should be approached from a critical standpoint, viewing it as a work of literature that could be analyzed and interpreted with human understanding and reasoning.

The Age of Reason: Paine and the Bible

Relying heavily on empiricism and rationalism, Thomas Jefferson justifies his own point of view for questioning the validity of the Bible as a bridge between God and humans, and further calls into question the revelation system that takes place. “Revelation is necessarily limited to the first communication... it cannot be incumbent on me to believe it in the same manner, for it was not a revelation made to me, and I have only his word for it that it was made to him.”¹ Paine, firmly grounded in his advocacy and belief in using experiences as the source of evidence, asserts that since he did not experience the revelations firsthand, he is not obligated to believe them the same way as those who persuades him to. This strong sense of reliance on personal experience is fundamentally an enlightenment ideology that was presented by John Locke. Furthermore, Paine emphasizes that he has only the person's word for it and that he would have to rely solely on the word about the revelation, explaining why he finds this secondhand account insufficient to convince him of the validity of the revelation.

After justification of his personal choice of disbelief towards the recordance of revelations, Paine further strikes the Bible's purpose as God's revelation to people by claiming that “revelation is a communication of something, which the person, to whom that thing is revealed, did not know before... Revelation, therefore, cannot be applied to anything done upon earth of which man is himself the actor or the witness; and consequently all the historical and anecdotal part of the Bible, which is almost the whole of it, is not within the meaning and compass of the word revelation, and, therefore, is not the word of God.”² By defining "revelation" as similar to a lecture of knowledge to those who are ignorant and Bible as a medium of communication from God to teach, he asserts that parts of the Bible that record

¹ Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (Feedbooks, 1807),6-7, <https://klymkowskylab.colorado.edu>

² Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, 17.

personal experiences are not within the scope of revelation. That is because revelation cannot be applied to actions or events on Earth in which human beings are directly involved as actors or witnesses and pertains solely to matters beyond human agency or observation. In the article *American Deism, Christianity, and the Age of Reason*, Donald Wayne Viney notes that Paine “acknowledges that there are “fragments of morality that are irregularly and thinly scattered” throughout the Bible. However, he maintains that these are not revealed truths, but truths known to every creature with a conscience.”³ Since the documentation of anecdotes in the Bible cannot be considered revelation as it has already been acknowledged by people rather than a revealing of new knowledge, Viney argues that the scattered pieces of truth are common sense rather than revealed inspiring news. *The Age of Reason* perfectly illustrates how Paine’s interpretation of Christianity became skeptical as he personally became more rational and reliant on empirical data as a result of the influential ideologies promoted during the age of the Enlightenment.

Paine’s Journey Downhill

Rather than simply converting Christians into Deists, Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* extracted polarized responses from the public. While the book prompted the spread of deistic ideas and contributed to the climate of religious skepticism that emerged in the 19th century, the majority of the public reacted with outrage and condemned the work, seeing it as an attack on religious tradition and a threat to social order.

³ Donald Wayne Viney, “American Deism, Christianity, and the Age of Reason,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 31, no. 2 (2010): 83–107, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ajt.0.0005>.

An Apology for the Bible

Richard Watson, a British Methodist wrote *An Apology for the Bible* as a response to Thomas Paine. In the work, Watson criticizes Paine's rejection of recognizing the possibilities of existing miracles and anecdotes that he has not personally experienced. While not directly addressing Paine, Watson makes a generalization and describes Deists he has encountered to "have found that the strangeness of these things was the only reason for their disbelief of them: nothing similar has happened in their time they will not, therefore admit it, that these events have really taken place at any time."⁴ He considers these reasons of disbelief as a result of the lack of personal experiences and a narrowed view on the world; Watson argues that the unfamiliarity of these events should not serve as justifications for dismissing their validity and implies that the deists' skepticism is a reflection of their failure to grasp the divine nature of these occurrences and their insufficient ability to understand and comprehend those that are above them.

On the other hand, Watson puts aside the extent of the Bible's validity and points to the degree of necessity of Christianity as a faith. In *Thomas Paine's The Age of Reason Revisited*, Franklyn K. Prochaska ascertains that "The very things Paine ridiculed, "mystery, miracle, and prophecy," were the very things that made Christianity a viable and popular religion. Man yearned for something greater than himself, outside himself, and Watson claimed that Christianity, not deism, provided it."⁵ By setting aside the controversy regarding the purpose of the Bible as a communication between God and Human, Watson criticizes Paine for overturning Christianity as a source of fulfilling spiritual satisfaction to the people who yearn more than simple scientific justifications in their life, but a religious power that can permeate their soul.

⁴ Richard Watson and Thomas Paine, *An Apology for the Bible* (London, Printed for T. Evans ... 1796 (third edition)/ 1796., 1796), 9-10.

⁵ Franklyn K. Prochaska, "Thomas Paine's the Age of Reason Revisited," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33, no. 4 (October 1972): 568, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708857>.

Watson was not the only one who felt violated by Thomas Paine's refutation on the Bible being a book of revelation. James H. Smylie, in the article *Clerical Perspectives on Deism: Paine's The Age of Reason in Virginia*, recorded the responses of clergyman to *The Age of Reason*. Smylie records that the Clergy points out that "God's creation was not the immediate revelation for which he had argued. Creation itself was a medium God used for communication with man. In this manner the clergy were able to accentuate what Muir called the 'instrumentality of the creation'."⁶ The clergy reframes the concept of revelation by highlighting the "instrumentality of the creation", proposing that God utilized the act of creation itself as a means to communicate with his people. In other words, they crafted an argument that the natural world itself, being a creation of God, is the revelation which carries inherent messages and lessons from the divine. This approach likely aimed to reaffirm the revelation of God itself and to shift the focus from Paine's questioning of religious authority based on rationality and skepticism to a fresh appreciation of the world in its natural state as a revelation of God's almighty.

Response From the People

The madness and intolerating perspective of Thomas Paine's rejection of the Bible was presented in many ways other than critique books directly shooting back at *The Age of Reason*, many of them presented themselves in dramatic and intriguing forms.

⁶ James H. Smylie, "Clerical Perspectives on Deism: Paine's the Age of Reason in Virginia," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 6, no. 2 (1972): 213, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3031673>.

“Mad Tom in A Rage”

A popular drawing “*Mad Tom in a Rage*” (see image 1) by an unknown artist that was published in 1801 as a response to the Age of Reason. In *Thomas Paine and The Age of Reason’s Attack on the Bible*, Jay E. Smith includes the drawing with the description being: “Paine trying to destroy the foundations of America with the help of his old friend Satan.”⁷ The article also transcribed the dialogue between the two characters on the drawing.

“Satan: ‘Pull away. Pull away my son. Don’t fear. I’ll give you all my assistance.’

Paine: ‘Oh! I fear it is stronger rooted than I expected, but with the assistance of my Old Friend and a little more brandy I will bring it down.’”⁸

By using Satan, a symbolic biblical figure that represents the betrayal of Adam and Eve to God’s moral guidelines, the painting insinuates Thomas Paine’s betrayal of Christian faith and thus the foundations of America, considering the Age of Reason as an attack and provocation on American beliefs. Coincidentally, the painting happens to reciprocate Paine’s view on Christianity to America. While the painting portrays Paine as the one who associates himself with Satan, who is the origin of all sins, Paine also considers the Bible as a “the most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries that have afflicted the human race.”⁹ Smylie took record of Paine’s attempt to replace the Divine power with Reason, writing that “The Christian objected to the improper conception of reason which placed Reason ‘on the throne of God’ and allowed man to worship it as a ‘deity’ of his own creation.”¹⁰ This precisely offers an explanation of why people responded with fear and anger, interpreting *The Age of*

⁷ Jay E. Smith, “Thomas Paine and the Age of Reason’s Attack on the Bible,” *The Historian* 58, no. 4 (1996): 755, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24451908>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 755.

⁹ Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, 147.

¹⁰ James H. Smylie, *Clerical Perspectives on Deism*, 214.

Reason as tearing apart the foundation of America. The objection results from their perception that Paine places excessive trust in human reason alone as the solid ground for America, neglecting the role of faith and the moral values taught by the Christian faith. Therefore, they view Paine as simply destroying the American Political structure and to reconstruct it with the outcome of Reason.

A Roman Catholic Canary

One occasion that seemed to be accidental but also carries the deep sense of disrespect towards Thomas Paine was an entry by Bishop Fenwick on Paine's last hours before his death that was later proven fabrication by *A Roman Catholic Canard* published in around 1883. Although the entry itself is fake, the existence of a fabricated entry which involves explicit criticism of Thomas Paine's views on Christianity demonstrates the hatred and anger of the general public towards him. In *The Death of Thomas Paine*, which contains a transcription of a entire entry, records that whomever fabricated the entry wrote that, "All this time I looked on the monster with pity, mingled with indignation at his blasphemies. I felt a degree of horror at thinking that in a very short time he would be cited to appear before the tribunal of his God, whom he so shockngly blasphemed, and with all his sins upon him."¹¹ The quote reveals a strong sense of condemnation and disapproval from the general public towards Thomas Paine's deism views perceiving his ideas as blasphemous, offensive, and morally objectionable. By referring to Paine as a monster, the contempt and dehumanization directed towards Paine was further highlighted by the use of such strong language, demonstrating the intense emotions that Paine's deist ideas has evoked among the general public. Additionally, the fact that it was recorded in *A*

¹¹ Donald Connolly, "The Death of Thomas Paine," Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia 69, no. 3/4 (1958): 122, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44210544>.

Roman Catholic Canard that “Several newspapers, religious and secular, have lately published” the entry demonstrates how the entry’s point of view resonated with many people, regardless of the religious or secular nature of the newspaper.

Quaker’s Denial of Paine’s Request

Thomas Paine, receiving many hatred towards the ending of his life, did not either receive a satisfying arrangement for his journey to afterlife. In an obituary published on the second page of New-York Evening Post (see image 2 and 3) on June 10, 1809, it notes that “Mr. Paine had a desire to be interred in, the Quaker burying ground, and some days previous to his demise, had an interview with some Quaker gentlemen on the subject, but as he declined a renunciation of his deistical opinions, his anxious wishes were not complied with. He was yesterday interred at New Rochelle, Westchester country, perhaps on his own farm”.¹² The denial of his request to be buried in the Quaker burial ground reflects the reluctance of the Quaker community to align themselves with Paine’s deistic views which poses many queries on Quaker’s Christian faith. The rejection of Paine’s request by the Quaker is explained in *Thomas Paine and the Attitude of the Quakers to the American Revolution*, although the author Robert P. Falk acknowledges that “many of the Quaker ideals parallel those of deists”¹³, he noted how “it is the extreme to which Paine pushed his thought in the spheres of politics and society which distinguishes him from the true Quaker... the contrasting attitude of the deist, will bring out the primary difference in the two faiths.”¹⁴ The Quakers do not seem reluctant as they began to draw the line between Paine’s beliefs and moral standards and those of their own. The obituary,

¹² “Thomas Paine,” New York Evening Post, June 10, 1809.

¹³ Robert Falk, “Thomas Paine and the Attitude of the Quakers to the American Revolution,” University of Pennsylvania Press 63, no. 3 (June 30, 1939): 303.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 303.

written in a perfunctory manner continues by including a quote from citizen, “he had lived long, done some good, and much harm”.¹⁵ This quote captures the general hostility towards Thomas Paine to the extent which even acknowledging his endeavor to overthrow monarchy and advocate for liberty of man, they would still prefer to spit on his unforgivable blasphemy of Christianity.

Conclusion

Thomas Paine, embodied by ideologies of the age of the Enlightenment that would later influence the intellections of millions, was one of the most rational thinkers in his way of interpreting the existence of God. His deistic views that he has fervently advocated for in *The Age of Reason* has nevertheless inspired the prosperity of reason and deism in America, regardless of the amount blame and hate placed on him during his lifetime. This so called “filthy little atheist”’s bold questioning of established religious doctrines and his rejection of a dominating religion challenged deeply entrenched beliefs and stirred controversy.¹⁶

¹⁵ “Thomas Paine,” New York Evening Post, June 10, 1809.

¹⁶ Jay E. Smith, “Thomas Paine and the Age of Reason’s Attack on the Bible,” *The Historian* 58, no. 4 (1996): 755, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24451908>.



Image 1: *Mad Tom in A Rage* (1801) by Unknown Artist

...with the particulars which were...
...the French ships...
...the explosion...
...the result of the explosion...
...the result of the explosion...
...the result of the explosion...

crew of the two former were removed. The...
...the French ships...
...the explosion...
...the result of the explosion...
...the result of the explosion...

...the French ships...
...the explosion...
...the result of the explosion...
...the result of the explosion...
...the result of the explosion...

for the promotion and protection of domestic...
...the French ships...
...the explosion...
...the result of the explosion...
...the result of the explosion...

ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD.
...THE THIRTIETH DOLLAR...
...THE THIRTIETH DOLLAR...
...THE THIRTIETH DOLLAR...

Died, on Thursday morning, the 8th inst. THOMAS PAINE, author of the Crisis, Rights of Man, &c. Mr. Paine had a desire to be interred in, the Quaker burying ground, and some days previous to his demise, had an interview with some Quaker gentlemen on the subject, but as he declined a renunciation of his deistical opinions, his anxious wishes were not complied with. He was yesterday interred at New-Rochelle, Westchester county, perhaps on his own farm. I am unacquainted with his age, but he had lived long, done some good, and much harm—Citizen.

Image 3: New-York Evening Post, June 10, 1809. Reporting on Thomas Paine.

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