

**Paradise Lost and How Utopian
Literature Influenced Early America's
Political and Religious Controversies**

Introduction

Utopian literature captures people's imagination and hopes for a better world. Traditionally, utopian literature is defined as an "imaginary literature which depicts an ideal and therefore nonexistent society."¹ The human aspirations enshrined in 17th Century utopian literature were no exception, inspiring the discourse underpinning the American Enlightenment while propelling the Founding Fathers to seek an optimum balance between the government and its citizens. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) served as an indispensable aspect of the American canon, with the rival reactions by Thomas Jefferson and John Adams highlighting the clash in their vision of what America would stand for.

Although Jefferson and Adams both appreciated Milton's literary techniques, they read *Paradise Lost* in different lights. Jefferson and Adams' diverging reactions to the archetype of Satan foreshadowed their political rivalry. It also wasn't until Thomas Paine utilized quotes and insights from *Paradise Lost* to call out the Bible's inherent flaws that there would finally be a challenge toward organized religion—a politically moderate deist approach that evoked intense responses from both the public and fellow intellectuals.

Literature Review

This paper will attempt to answer a question that researchers have long grappled with: how did the founding fathers' divergent responses to *Paradise Lost* foreshadow and even influence early America's political controversies? Zooming in on texts and documents written during the Enlightenment period, it will analyze in-depth the paleography of the founding fathers' letters as

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well as other documents relevant to the research question. Therefore, textual analysis and inferences will be the main research methods in this study.

Previous scholars noted that both Jefferson and Adams admired the ingenuity of Milton's literary techniques. Jefferson, in a letter to Robert Skipwith in 1771, included Milton's *Paradise Lost* in a list of "books that I think indispensable to give a person just views of the moral system of the universe."² James Madison, another Founding Father, shared Jefferson's almost fanatical admiration for *Paradise Lost*. A special edition of *Paradise Lost* co-signed by both Jefferson and Madison reveals the fact that the two men read and handled the same copy of *Paradise Lost*, and this is situated in the context of their intellectual exchange regarding favorite literary works. It is the only copy in the world to contain both men's signatures on the same page, and Madison's signature appeared on five spots—four on the reverse sides and one below the title—although the reason Madison signed his name five times on the front cover is still a question that historians are unable to answer³.

Similarly, John Adams read *Paradise Lost* during early adulthood and wrote in his personal diary on 30 April 1756, that "I can only gaze at him [Milton] with astonishment, without comprehending the vast Compass of his Capacity."⁴ Even Adams' family expressed their admiration for Milton in their letters of exchange. Written on 15 March, 1819, Louisa Adams' letter to Charles Adams characterized *Paradise Lost* as a book that, while "very difficult would excite your admiration."⁵

Aside from her remarks on *Paradise Lost*, Louisa Adams also suggested a belief in the maturity and growth that can come from grappling with complex and challenging literature. In her letter, she encouraged Charles Adams to broaden his literary horizon and not limit himself to works that are

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easy or immediately comprehensible, mirroring the key themes of continual learning and intellectual exploration in the American Enlightenment. This is a time period in which intellectuals voraciously read literary works like *Paradise Lost* and reacted enthusiastically through letters or personal accounts.

But what previous researchers have often overlooked is the degree to which Jefferson and Adams dissented over Satan, the archnemesis of God and the main character in *Paradise Lost*. Because despite the founding fathers' consensus on Milton's pioneering literature, they reacted to *Paradise Lost* in fundamentally different ways that eventually led up to their political rivalry after the American Revolution. Jefferson, on the one hand, idolized Satan's rebellion and celebrated it through his collections of quotes from *Paradise Lost*, the majority of which derived from Satan's speeches. Jefferson copied the following passage from *Paradise Lost* into his commonplace book:

*“What thou the field be lost?
All is not lost; the unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield.”⁶*

Jefferson alluded to this passage throughout his subsequent life⁷. For example, Jefferson wrote to his close friend Peter Carr on August 18, 1785, “I am much mortified to hear that you have lost so much time...however, the way to repair the loss is to improve the future time.”⁸ The main ideas reflected in this letter correspond to the line “all is not lost; the unconquerable will” in Jefferson's *Paradise Lost* quote collections.

On the other hand, Adams rejected Satan on the grounds of morality despite their shared fear of tyranny. Many scholars interpreted Adams' “A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of

the United States of America” as a thorough challenge to “big governments.” This view is not entirely accurate. What Adams instead desired was a republic in which “an empire of laws and not of men” existed, a phrase he took from James Harrington’s groundbreaking *Oceana*⁹. Adams also did not desire extreme liberty—for him, the notion of an anti-God rebellion was far too radical. What he wanted instead was for the government to circumvent the people’s liberty so that they would not descend into a state of chaos following the lack of religious piety. Within a week of his remarks on the ingenuity of *Paradise Lost*, Adams copied Addison’s “Criticism on Milton” into his commonplace book¹⁰, a clear reflection of his dissent against the idea of an anti-God revolt.

Adams’ dissent could be traced in contemporary artworks. John Martin’s 1846 mezzotint depicted Adam and Eve as they descended from the utopian “Garden of Eve” above to the world below. The painting contains a small yet sublime stream of light from above, demonstrating the superiority of God and the ephemeral nature of the utopian world. It implicitly framed heaven as the only true utopian, unveiling the destiny of Adam and Eve—which serves as a reminder of the repercussions of radical liberty and religious irreverence. How the two founding fathers’ opposing reactions influenced early America’s political and social dichotomy will be elaborated on in other sections of this paper.

Reflections on Early America’s Domestic Political Sphere

The two Founding Fathers’ reactions to Satan are stark representations of their political stances. Not surprisingly, Jefferson and Adams made very opposite, polarizing remarks regarding the French Revolution. In a letter to Abigail, Adams wrote that “Sin and Death seem to have departed the Place where Milton saw them and taken their abode in Paris,”¹¹ alluding to *Paradise Lost* to characterize

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the French Revolution as a chaotic failure. Jefferson, on the other hand, was an avid supporter of the French Revolution. He agreed with the French revolutionaries' visions for a utopian society celebrating pseudo-anarchy and radical freedom. In a letter to William Short, Jefferson asserted in a formal and subtly indignant tone that the early American government had to support the French Revolution despite the sacrifices of the innocent, "the liberty of the whole earth was depending on the issue of this contest, and was ever such a prize won with so little innocent blood?"¹² To Jefferson, sacrifices were necessary since the French Revolution wheeled on liberty as its end goal. Moreover, he sympathized with the Romantic ideals of freedom and anti-monarchy. This longing for radical liberty contradicts classical rationalist principles that Adams firmly upheld, shaping the two Founding Fathers' diverging reactions to the French Revolution.

The XYZ Affair

The divide between the founding fathers' attitudes toward the French Revolution would really come into play as tension started escalating between early America and the French Republic. Under Washington's presidency, John Jay was sent to sign a treaty known as the Jays Treaty—it revoked earlier bilateral deals that reached the consensus of both America and France because it leaned America closer to Britain in trade and diplomacy. Moreover, as France condemned the Washington regime for signing the Jays Treaty, Washington nonetheless decided to suspend wartime debt repayments to France. Provoked, France decided to seize American merchant ships and escalated tension between the two young nations. This was the context for the political rivalry that began to arise between Adams and Jefferson. In a special session of Congress on May 16, 1797, Adams proposed a rapid military buildup initiative in preparation for the seemingly inevitable war, which

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would later be known as the “Quasi-War with France.” His covert initiative also came to be known as the “XYZ Affair.” Meanwhile, Jefferson opposed Adams’ efforts to drive up support for the war. “The nomination of the envoys to France does not prove a thorough conversion to the Pacific system,” Jefferson wrote, pointing to the inefficiency of the peace mission¹³. In November 1797, Jefferson and his Democratic-Republican party stopped Adams’ request to Congress to fund a stronger military base against France. He wrote a letter to James Madison, indicating his hopes to stall congressional action to prevent Adams from launching a war, “if we could but gain this season, we should be saved. the affairs of Europe would of themselves relieve us.”¹⁴ Ultimately, under pressure from both Jefferson and the general public, Adams proposed peace missions and restored American ties with France through diplomacy. However, the political rivalry between Adams and Jefferson was far from over.

Federalism vs. Republicanism

Early America’s domestic political affairs further reflected the two Founding Fathers’ differing reactions to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, as Jefferson and Adams would also become the largest domestic political rivals. In a letter to Jefferson on 15 November, 1813, Adams wrote, “I once proposed to you to unite in endeavors to obtain an Amendment of the constitution, prohibiting to the separate States, the Power of creating Banks; but giving Congress Authority to establish one Bank, with a branch in each State...But you Spurned the Proposition from you with disdain.”¹⁵ This statement testifies to Adams’ political stance as a federalist—he called for the emergence of a strong, centralized federal government as opposed to the de-centralized state governments Jefferson favored. This is rooted in Adams’ distrust of radical freedom, as seen in his reactions toward the archetype

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of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. For example, Adams presented his vision of an internal market with national roads, canals, universities, and other infrastructure initiatives considered “public goods.”¹⁶ This proposal was then met with fierce opposition as his political enemies pointed out that Adams’ proposal empowers the central government to the extent that it could interfere with and even disrupt regional affairs. Adams, nevertheless, advanced the central government’s power during his presidency. He ordered the construction of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal as well as connecting the Ohio River System to the Great Lakes, hiring military engineers for survey and construction operations in the process¹⁷. Adams’ achievements were very phenomenal because it was the first time an American president concentrated national resources to produce public goods. His precedents established an example of an empowered federal government that projected its political agenda over state administrations and became involved in regional affairs.

Jefferson’s domestic policies steered in the opposite direction, clashing against Adams’ federalist political stance. Jefferson, a firm Republican, wanted the government to refrain from interfering in the people’s affairs. His ideal vision included downscaling Hamilton’s huge standing army, and he therefore reduced army expenditures single-handedly—cutting down the size of both land infantry and Navy almost by half¹⁸. This was matched by Jefferson’s fiscal and economic policies that repealed taxes and implemented austerity measures to pay off public debts. Even more so, to uphold America as the “asylum” for “oppressed humanity,” Jefferson convinced Congress to reduce citizenship residency requirements from 14 to 5 years¹⁹, directly countering Adams’ Alien and Sedition Acts which restricted foreign-born Americans and limited free speech²⁰. Jefferson’s Republican policies reflected his beliefs in each state’s rights to handle regional affairs and advocacy for the limited role of the federal government.

Thomas Paine's Deist Approach

Beyond political controversies, the Enlightenment thinkers' responses to *Paradise Lost* also reflected religious controversies at the time. Early America went through an ultra-religious period known as the First Great Awakening—beginning in the 1730s and lasting to about 1740—in which a massive number of Americans adopted Christianity following waves of public sermons²¹. Amidst the context of religious revival, the American Revolution ascended as the Founding Fathers' political writings ignited the public's collective consensus to fight for independence. Most notable of those works is Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* since it posed a direct challenge to King George III's power and legitimacy. The challenge was not just a challenge toward monarchy, however, as it was also a challenge toward organized religion. Paine's reactions to and use of *Paradise Lost* highlighted deism as a new approach for Christian believers, which would later incite immense backlash.

Common Sense

In his politically inflammatory pamphlet *Common Sense*, Paine quoted a passage from Book IV of *Paradise Lost*: “For never can true reconciliation grow where wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep.”²² This quote is taken from Satan's monologue on the inevitability of conflict against God, and Paine deployed the quote in the context of an intensifying struggle between the colonists and King George III—colonists were angry for not only had Britain failed to protect the colonists but also dispatched mercenaries against them in fear of the rising claim for independence. Through his colloquial essay collection, Paine denied the possibility of reconciliation welcomed by

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many colonists at the time and encouraged a thorough military revolution modeled after Satan's in *Paradise Lost*. Connected to this idea is Paine's challenge toward the king's divine sovereignty. Whereas earlier, the king justified his power through God-given sovereignty, Paine ruthlessly challenged this concept in *Common Sense* by pointing out that the Bible does not endorse the idea of hereditary monarchy²³. The notion that human kings do not carry divine power grew in popularity following Paine's critique. Moreover, Paine did not reject a powerful central government altogether; he argued for a "continental constitution" in his work "Public Good" and called for a national convention to establish a stronger federal government through strengthening the efficacy of the Articles of Confederation²⁴. Unlike Jefferson, Paine thought that states ought to unite in times of national crises. Unlike Adams, Paine thought that states should still hold enough power to check and balance the federal government and prevent the type of concentrated power that leads to monarchy. Paine's political approach, in essence, mediated the divide between Jefferson's Republicanism and Adams' Federalism.

However, Paine's deist approach incited widespread religious controversies. His objective was not to critique Christianity as a religious faith, but instead, he aimed his criticisms at the institution of organized religion. In his pamphlet, Paine drew a subtle parallel between the American colonists to "Satan," the archenemy of God, by alluding to Satan's revolution in *Paradise Lost*. This parallel suggests an implicit defiance of God because it characterizes God as the ruthless dictator towering above His subjects. Nevertheless, Paine did not reject God's divinity because he still used divine justifications of human rights to support his argument—the premise of Paine's argument is structured on an appeal to natural rights, which Paine viewed as inherent and given by God to all humans²⁵. He made the case that a government's legitimacy comes from its ability to secure the well-being of

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the people and respect these God-given rights. By that metric, he argued, the British rule over the American colonies was principally illegitimate, and these God-given rights thus provided the ethical grounding for Paine's advocacy of independence.

The Age of Reason

The parallel between the colonists and the archetype of "Satan" mirrored early deist beliefs gaining prominence at the time, a deviation from traditional forms of Christian orthodoxy. This belief system revolved around the notion that God was the single creator of the universe and did not intervene in human affairs that occur due to natural laws. Inspired by *Paradise Lost*, Paine took a strong belief in deism—which would later lead to his rejection of organized religions and the embodiment of his belief in human rationality²⁶. In his work *The Age of Reason*, Paine wrote that "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."²⁷ Paine, firmly grounded in his belief in lived experience, found secondhand accounts of revelations insufficient to convince him of their validity. His strong reliance on personal experience is fundamentally an enlightenment ideology popularized by John Locke. Paine even disproved the divine nature of revelations in the next paragraph, "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."²⁸

Response From the People

While *The Age of Reason* prompted the spread of deism and contributed to the emerging climate of religious skepticism, the public majority reacted with outrage and condemnation, perceiving it as an attack on religious tradition and a threat to social order.

An Apology for the Bible

Richard Watson, a British Methodist, wrote “An Apology for the Bible” as a response to Thomas Paine. In his work, Watson criticized Paine’s rejection of documented miracles and anecdotes. While not directly addressing Paine, Watson made a generalization and described 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.”²⁹ He considered deists’ disbelief in revelations as a result of their lack of personal experiences and therefore argued that unfamiliarity should not serve as a justification for dismissing revelations.

On the other hand, Watson also pointed to the necessity of organized religions in maintaining Christian beliefs. In “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.”³⁰ Watson therefore criticized Paine for overturning Christian churches’ authority and sending their followers, who yearn not for simple scientific justifications in their life but for a religious power that can permeate their souls, into despair.

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Watson was not the only one who felt violated by Paine's refutation of the Bible and its book of Revelations. James H. Smylie, in the article "Clerical Perspectives on Deism: Paine's *The Age of Reason* in Virginia," recorded clergymen's responses to *The Age of Reason*, "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'."³¹ The clergy reframed the concept of revelation by highlighting the "instrumentality of the creation," proposing the notion that God utilized the act of creation itself as a means to communicate with his people. In other words, they argued that the natural world itself, as a creation of God, contains revelations that carry inherent messages and lessons from the divine. This approach aimed to reaffirm revelations by linking their credibility to God itself and shift the focus from Paine's skeptical questioning of religious authority to a fresh appreciation of the world in its natural state as a revelation of God Almighty.

"Mad Tom in A Rage"

In addition, A 1801 painting "Mad Tom in a Rage" was created by an unknown artist to respond to Paine's *Age of Reason*. In "Thomas Paine and The Age of Reason's Attack on the Bible," Jay E. Smith describes "Mad Tom in a Rage" with the following words, "Paine trying to destroy the foundations of America with the help of his old friend Satan."³² The article also transcribed the dialogue between the two characters depicted in 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.'*³³

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Wheeling on the archetype of Satan, the painting insinuated Paine's betrayal of Christianity and thus the foundations of America. The depiction of Paine's interactions with Satan in the text served as a satirical critique of his opinions on organized religion and religious authorities. This was prompted by Paine's employment of quotes from Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Indeed, Paine considered the Bible as "the most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries that have afflicted the human race."³⁴ Smylie recorded Paine's attempt to replace the Divine power with Reason, noting 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."³⁵ This assertion traced the source of public outrage aimed at Paine, interpreting The Age of Reason as undermining the very foundation of America. Numerous religious intellectuals took issue with Paine, arguing that he placed undue reliance solely on human reason as the bedrock for America, thereby overlooking the significance of faith and ethical principles imparted by Christianity.

A Roman Catholic Canary

An instance that initially appeared unintentional, but also bore a profound sense of disdain towards Thomas Paine, was a record by Bishop Fenwick about Paine's final hours before his demise. This account was subsequently debunked as a falsehood by 'A Roman Catholic Canard' around 1883, revealing its deep-seated disrespect. Although the entry itself is proven to be fake, its explicit criticisms of Paine's views on Christianity demonstrate the church's animosity against him. The Death of Thomas Paine, which contains a transcription of the entire entry, records the following statement, "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

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before the tribunal of his God, whom he so shockingly blasphemed, and with all his sins upon him.”³⁶ The quote reveals a strong sense of condemnation and disapproval towards Paine's deist views. Additionally, the fact that it was recorded in *A Roman Catholic Canard* that “Several newspapers, religious and secular, have lately published”³⁷ demonstrates how the entry's objection toward Paine resonated with the general public, regardless of the religious or secular nature of the newspaper.

Quaker's Denial of Paine's Burial Request

Thomas Paine did not receive a satisfying arrangement for his journey to the afterlife. In an obituary published on the second page of *New-York Evening Post* on June 10, 1809, the pastor noted that “Mr. Paine had the 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.”³⁸ The denial of his request to be buried in the Quaker burial ground reflects the reluctance of the Quaker community to align with Paine's deistic views, since it cast doubt on the grounds of their Christian faith. The rejection of Paine's request was explained in more nuance in “Thomas Paine and the Attitude of the Quakers to the American Revolution”--although the book's author Robert P. Falk acknowledged that “many of the Quaker ideals parallel those of deists,”³⁹ 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.”⁴⁰ The Quakers then began to draw the line between Paine's beliefs and moral

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standards and those of their own. The obituary, written in a perfunctory manner, included a quote from fellow citizens, “he had lived long, done some good, and much harm.”⁴¹ This quote captures the general hostility towards Paine—even though the general public acknowledged Paine’s endeavor to overthrow hegemony and recognized him as an advocate for liberty, they still lashed out at his unforgivable stance on organized religion, which was perceived as blasphemy.

Conclusion

The Constitution of early America can be seen as a masterful blueprint that struck a delicate balance between rejecting the idea of a purely secular state and avoiding the pitfalls of an overly religious society, as exemplified in the age of the Puritans. This balance allowed for progress and religion to coexist harmoniously—early America preserved its innate religious dynamism while embracing the aspirations for liberty that were at the core of its identity. Hence, despite being rooted in the concept of God's creation and divinity, the Constitution was also forward-thinking in granting religious freedom and expanding individual liberties⁴². However, the Constitution was designed amidst two controversies—the political controversy pivoting around the rivalry between Adams and Jefferson and the religious controversy behind Thomas Paine's deist approach. Both controversies are inspired by and reflected in the founding fathers’ reactions to *Paradise Lost*. Notably, Thomas Paine’s deist approach was not popular initially, but it did gain traction over time and, therefore, profoundly impacted the design of the Constitution. The political rivalry between Federalists and Republicans, embodied by the iconic friend-enemy relationship between Adams and Jefferson, also remained an implacable divide, but both parties checked and balanced each other and secured a just distribution of power.

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To fully understand Early America's intellectual history, one must first understand the wider context in which key issues were disputed and settled behind closed doors—the American Enlightenment. This was a time period in which great thinkers struggled to strike a balance between America's ties with France and Britain, big and small governments, and religious freedom and piety. Although many attempts failed or met public resistance, they propelled public discourse and contributed significantly to the formation of enduring principles of the Constitution—such as the notion of inherent rights and the belief that all individuals are born equal—that continue to resonate even in the modern context.

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