

Thomas Paine

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Thomas Paine is one of the most maligned and least understood of men. One of the noblest minded of men in most respects, he has been represented for nearly a century as a groveling nature and a monster of iniquity. Supremely generous in all his public career, he is said to have been mean and self-seeking. Having refused to profit by the copyright of his religious and political works, he is called parsimonious. A rarely equaled friend of mankind, he is scorned as the enemy of the race. Clean in his conversation, and unusually correct in his conduct, he is painted as the corrupter of youth and the poisoner of morals. Having served this country incalculably, everything has been done to conceal his great services and cheat him of the gratitude of posterity. Having worked for the purity of religion, he is traduced as a destroyer of every sacred truth and a spoiler of every hallowed sentiment.

Nor is it sure that the whole truth about him will ever be generally known, because prejudice has so hardened into dislike that, unless his fame outlasts the Christian religion, the majority of the people will never even wish to do him justice. Those who desire to know the truth about him may easily discover it by the expenditure of a few cents for books, and the devotion of a few hours for their perusal; but the sadness of it is that there are so few who wish to know the truth about the man.

Nothing is more easily ruined than a reputation, and once ruined nobody cares to do the victim of misrepresentation and slander the justice to undeceive himself concerning him. But so lasting is fame that it is among the possibilities that Thomas Paine will yet be known to the world for what he was: in all his public life a stainless man and disinterested servant of his fellows; a lover of liberty and an apostle of progress.

Thomas Paine is best known to the world as the author of a book of which everybody heard but comparatively few have read. For nearly a hundred years *The Age of Reason* has been selling by the many thousand copies every year, but few Christians have read it. Preachers denounce it without having taken pains to inform themselves of its contents. It is common to speak of it as an Atheistic work, but it is really the product of a Deist. Thomas Paine was a firm believer in a being whom he called his "Creator God" and to whom he expected to answer for the deeds done in the body, in a future life. For this man, who is so constantly represented as being utterly without religion, had a stronger belief in God and immortality than many a preacher in some orthodox pulpits today. *The Age of Reason* is almost universally believed to be a book mainly directed against the Bible and the Christian religion, but it was written not for the purpose, primarily, of

destroying Christianity, but to stem the tide of Atheism in France that swept over that country in the unhappy days of the Revolution. It does indeed combat the idea that the Bible is inspired and that the Bible god is the real God, but it was more of a defense of religion, in the broad sense of that word, than an attack on any particular kind of religion. Far more dangerous attacks against the inspiration of the Bible are issuing from Christian pans today than Thomas Paine ever made; more dangerous to the dogma because the assaults upon that dogma that come today from Germany, and are re-echoed in the Broad Church of England and Scotland and the Liberal Church of America, are more scholarly and painstaking than it was possible for Paine to make, because the science of historical criticism had not in his day been developed as it now is.

The Age of Reason is a wonderful book, considering when it was written and that part of it was composed while the author was in prison and shut off from all access to books, not having even a Bible from which he might correctly quote. It is customary for ministers to tell their congregations that Paine's arguments against our conventional religion are stale and outworn; that they have all been demolished. But this is not true. They stand unanswered as they have stood for nearly a hundred years. But the Dutch critics of today are stronger in their arguments because they have the learning of a century over Paine.

In thus speaking of Paine's religious views I wish to impress what I have already said. The Age of Reason is a conservative book today. A minister, the active pastor of a Presbyterian church in New Jersey, walked into my office not very long ago and told me that, of course, he did not believe in God. He is one of those peculiar Christians who believe in no kind of God. Not a personal God nor an impersonal God. Not a God without a body nor a God with a body. Not a God who can do anything nor a God who cannot do anything. They believe in God; not a God, but just God. There are any number of men in orthodox pulpits now who would agree with the minister I speak of – in private, you understand, not in public –but Thomas Paine would have looked upon these men as little better than atheists. And I doubt whether Paine would have cared to join a radical Unitarian church of today, because the Unitarians are too uncertain about God and the future life to have suited Paine.

The significance of all this is that within a hundred years, parts of the church itself have outrun Paine and become more nearly atheistic than he ever was. And yet there are persons who will listen to these half-atheistic preachers because they call themselves Christians, who would not have their children read Tom Paine's Age of Reason for the world. Such is the silliness of otherwise sensible people upon the subject of religion. It makes all the difference imaginable what you call things in this foolish world. If you call a man a Deist, as Thomas Paine was, he is under the ban of the whole Christian world, even though he believes in what few thinking persons can now accept: a personal God – and enjoys a hope of immortality. But if you call him a Progressively Orthodox Christian or a Unitarian he is all right, although he does not believe in a personal God and does not know whether to hope for immortality or not.

Thomas Paine was born in England on the 29th day of January, 1737 – one hundred fifty years ago last Wednesday. If he had died at the age of thirty-seven, before he left England to come to this country, he would never have been heard of outside a small circle of friends, chiefly obscure people. Like General Grant he was a sort of jack-of-all-trades until he was nearly forty years of age. He was a staymaker, a grocer, a school teacher, an excise man, a sailor; not sticking at anything very long. Nothing had fallen from his pen that was worth preserving or that gave much promise of what was in the man, except as we can read backward and see the tracks of a great man after he has become famous, in his early performances.

Everyone can now see what remarkable traits Lincoln had before he becomes great, but nobody would have thought of them if he had remained in obscurity.

Paine was nobody until more than half his life was passed. There must have been the making of a man in him, or he would not have been what he afterward became. But the Thomas Paine of the years between 1737 and 1774 is a person of little interest for his own sake and of no consequence to the world. I speak of this because I would like to impress it upon you that life is not necessarily wasted when half its years are told. Because you have passed the meridian of life is no reason why you should say "I am all I may ever be." To use the ringing phrase of Paine in one of his Crisis papers, written in the dark days of our war of independence, "These are the times that try men's souls," and there is work just before us that calls not only for young blood, but for the best energies of men who are no longer young. It is inspiring to reflect that more than one man has achieved distinction by being useful to the world who did not awake to his opportunities and responsibilities until at the time of life when most persons have begun to slacken their working pace.

Many a man has won distinction before the age at which Thomas Paine remained unknown and not very useful in the world. But Paine began late in life and carved for himself a name in the temple of fame. If you can be useful early in life and all through life, that is well – superlatively well – but if half your life is gone, that is no reason why you should not arise and shake yourself and enter into the battle against the religious and political superstitions that still twine about the feet of men like wild vines of the jungle, holding back the race in barbarism.

In 1774 Paine came to America. The war of independence was fast approaching. Our people were fretting under the injustices practiced upon them by England. Every educated American knows the history of that time; knows how insolent, how brutal England was; knows how the patience of America was tried to the snapping point. But in those days the sentiment of this country was strongly against breaking with England entirely. The American patriots were only clamoring to be put back to where they were prior to 1763, before the heavy weight of taxation was forced upon them. The Republican sentiment had not been born. The people of this country were heartily devoted to the king and were only demanding the preservation of their privileges as British subjects. It was at this period, when only a few persons, here and there, were looked upon as dangerous radicals, that Thomas Paine came to this country from England and wrote Common Sense, the first of that wonderful series of pamphlets that so often roused this people to dare and do for their rights.

That mind-stirring pamphlet went through the country like a fire, and by the time the people had the time to read it they were ready to cast off the yoke of the tyrant and be free.

It has been claimed by many respectable judges that Thomas Paine and not Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence. I do not know whether this is so or not, but there is not a shadow of doubt that he inspired it. So far as we can see, if it had not been for Thomas Paine, The Declaration of Independence would not have been written as it was, when it was, and by whom it was. And this is the debt of gratitude that the American people owe to Paine – a debt incalculable in its proportions and that has been repaid by heaping upon his name obloquy and contempt because he afterward wrote a book which offended the blind religious sensibilities of the people. Of all of the great men with whom Paine labored and suffered during the trying times of the war for independence, Thomas Jefferson was the only one who remained faithful to his friendship after *The Age Of Reason* was published. It is to the eternal shame of Washington,

who owed much to Paine, that he gave way to religious prejudice and neglected the author of *Common Sense* because he became the author of *The Age Of Reason* .

Common Sense was the largest of Paine's revolutionary tracts, but he continued to publish short papers from time to time, as they were needed throughout the war. These papers were called crises, and reached the number of twelve or thirteen. They were published when the courage of the soldiers was oozing away under their terrible sufferings and suspense, or when it was necessary to stimulate the public mind to renewed confidence and zeal for the war. Never, perhaps in all history, is there such an illustration of the power of words in times of trial in practical affairs as is afforded by Paine's tracts. The fourth Crisis was published just after the defeat at Brandywine, and it is said if that the soldiers could have fought the battle over again after reading this pamphlet, they would have won it.

Such was the invaluable service Thomas Paine rendered this country by writing while he served in the army (for he was ever in the camps), that at the end of the war he was regarded as one of the foremost defenders of liberty and everywhere shared in the honors that were accorded to the heroes of the hour.

In 1787 he went to France, where he became an active participant in the thrilling affairs attending the revolution in that country; for, unlike La Fayette, who said, "Wherever Liberty is, there is my country," Paine said, "Wherever Liberty is not, there is my country." We need not follow his career in France further than to say that he became a member of the House of Deputies, and in one of the reactions that marked the period was thrown into the Bastille by the leaders of a faction which he denounced and who were in power for the time.¹ It was while he was in the Bastille that he wrote the second part of *The Age Of Reason* , and it should always be remembered in reading this great book that it was written under the shadow of the guillotine, which speaks volumes for the sincerity of the author. Men do not write insincerely when they believe themselves to be dying men.

Paine narrowly missed the guillotine. His life was spared by what would be called a special providence if he had been a Christian writing a book in defense of the Bible. The story is well known. It was the custom to take out those who were to be killed by night, without trial and without being informed for what offense they were to die. A mark was placed upon the door of the unfortunate wretch who was to lose his head and the gendarmes² passed through the prison and took those who occupied the cells the doors of which bore the fatal chalk mark. When Paine's door was marked it happened to be standing open, so that the inside of the door was marked.³ When the guards passed through the corridors of the prison for their victims, the door happened to be shut and the mark was not seen. Thus Paine escaped the fate of many of his companions.

He afterward went to England, then back to France, and finally returned to this country in 1802. Here he lived, most of the time, in and near New York until he died in 1809, in the seventy-second year of his life.

I pass over all of Paine's private life. Most persons are familiar with the calumnies that have been piled upon his memory. It has been said that he was a drunkard and that he bore improper

¹ Paine was not put in the Bastille, but in the Luxembourg Palace, which had been converted into a prison. He spent ten months and nine days there on the orders of Robespierre (Dec. 28, 1793–Nov. 4, 1794).

² A gendarme is a French army soldier who is assigned to duty in France itself.

³ The 500-page biography *Paine* by David Freeman Hawke (1974) carries no report of this near-execution and chalk mark on Paine's cell door. Whether or not the story is apocryphal, it is widely believed today. Paine certainly was in the prison through the "great terror."

relations with Mme. Bonneville, the widow of his friend, whom he brought to this country in order to care for her and her children in requital of M. Bonneville's friendship toward him while in France.⁴ The latter of these charges was completely disproved during Mr. Paine's life, and the first rests upon doubtful evidence.

Nothing would be gained by trying to make Thomas Paine out better than he was. He may have taken too much liquor while in France and in the troubled days when all his old friends were deserting him because of his religious views and political unpopularity. There was a time when he was not popular in France, but it should be remembered that he lived in a time when clergymen were often under the table after dinner and when it was part of the accomplishment of a gentleman to do his host the honor of getting drunk to prove he was being well entertained.

Paine was not an angel. He was a man of the world. But it a good testimony to the correctness of his life that no charge was ever made against him that has not been totally disproved, except for the occasional intoxication in an age when intoxication was much more common than now. There are spots on the Sun, and it is quite true that Paine's domestic life in his last years were clouded by many unpleasant episodes that we could wish were not there. But in all his public career he is utterly stainless.

There are some reflections that I now wish to make about Thomas Paine. He was as brave as he was brilliant. I know that he was brave because a Frenchman once struck him at a dinner party and when he was a Deputy, which made the offense a capital crime. Paine not only did not strike the man in return, but he actually gave him money with which to get out of the country and so escape the dreadful punishment that would have befallen him.

But the prime characteristic of the man, and which made him great, was that he was capable of getting out of himself and living for the welfare of others. The ordinary man lives for bread and beef and beer. All his little thoughts are centered in his little self, his little destiny. He wonders how much money he can make, by any hook or crook, next year. He strives to push himself into prominence whether other people want him in a prominent place or not. He figures carefully upon everything he says and does as to what will be its effects upon his prospects in this world. Hence, he is orthodox in religion and social science. It does not pay to be a heretic; to believe and follow the truth, when the truth is unpopular. Such a man will desert his friends and abandon whatever principles he may happen to have for a mess of loaves and fishes at any time. Self-centered man; little men; ants; weathercocks; party howlers; religious devotees who make use of God because he can give them a lift in the political or business world. They would worship the Devil just as devoutly if the Devil were as popular as God is. They lift their eyes to heaven in ostentatious piety because the man who lifts his eyes to heaven has the best chance to be promoted in this world. Who could ever hope to be advanced the employ of some pious corporation or become an alderman if he did not lift his eyes to heaven?

The streets are lined with such men. You have jostled a dozen of them today. Men who would lie for a dollar and a half. Men who would buy themselves into office if they could. Men who would sell their mother's coffin if they could make anything by it. Men whose philosophy in life is to look out for number one. And nine out of ten of these men will tell you that Tom Paine was a very dangerous and bad man. And yet Thomas Paine never had a selfish thought when the

⁴ Nicolas de Bonneville was Paine's publisher and political ally in France, who also loaned Paine money and served as his host for five years. His wife Marguerite Brazier de Bonneville organized Paine's funeral and took custody of his personal papers at the time of his death.

good of all was concerned. He was capable of rising out of his personal affairs and becoming one in whom the interests of other people found a voice, a hand, and a heart.

I do not say that in doing this he was not pursuing his own happiness. No doubt he was. But that kind of selfishness that seeks happiness by promoting the happiness of others is far and away beyond the catch-penny greed that would let the country and the human race go to the dogs rather than devote a dollar or an hour's time to saving them. In time of war, one man gives his life and another man lends his money at a large rate of interest. Thomas Paine belonged to the class who give their lives, and is maligned by many whose patriotic zeal would be apt to take the form of trying to get a contract to furnish the army with shoddy.

There are always these two paths open before us. We may give ourselves up to "bread and cheese and kisses," or we may find our highest happiness in risking or suffering the loss of all that most men call dear. If we pursue the latter course, we shall be in the track of the noble infidel we commemorate.

There is one thing in the life of Thomas Paine to which I especially wish to call the attention of Liberals. I see, or I think I see, a disposition on the part of Liberals to confine themselves too much to the discussion of purely religious questions and ignore or taboo the discussion of the social question that is forcing itself to the front now as the question of separation forced itself to the front in Paine's day. More Liberals today, in my opinion, are interested in trying to demolish Calvinism than trying to bring about human freedom through a fair distribution of wealth; in trying to destroy the church than in trying to destroy the infamous monopolies of land and money that impoverish and imbrute the people.

I do not wish to underrate the iconoclastic work that Liberals are doing toward strictly religious superstitions, because, to my mind, the Church and State are essentially one, and as long as the Church survives men will be ruled by royal or political tyrants. But many Liberals, it seems to me, do not understand that intertwined with religious superstitions are political superstitions just as real and far more practically hurtful to the people than any purely religious superstition can possibly be. Thus we have English and German Liberals who are intensely loyal to the royal ruler and the aristocracy; and we have French and American Liberals who are steeped in the belief that there is no way in which society can get along except by the minority ruling the majority with policemen and soldiers.

Now, these political superstitions are just as much superstitions as the belief in a God with a beard and a Devil with horns. And what I wish to call your attention to is that most of Thomas Paine's life was spent in fighting political superstitions. What John Most is doing today Thomas Paine did in his day.⁵ And if Thomas Paine's cause had been less well-timed or had failed for any reason, Thomas Paine would have died as Albert Parsons, August Spies, and their comrades died. Liberals should not forget that. When you honor the memory of Thomas Paine you should remember that you are trying to lengthen out the fame of a man whose ideas of government are almost identical with those of the hated so-called anarchists of today.

It seems to me that there is an incongruity between the man whom the liberals so highly esteem and the Liberals themselves. What I say should not be taken in ill part by any Freethinker, but I wish to call your attention to the fact that while many a Liberal League of today is heartily in sympathy with the capitalists who grind the faces of the poor and the form of government that

⁵ Johann (or John) Most (1846–1906) was a famous German anarchist communist and atheist who immigrated to the US in 1882. He advocated armed revolution with a particularly violent rhetoric.

makes this sort of thing possible, Thomas Paine fought against the form of government under which he lived when he discovered that it was not conducive to liberty and happiness and did all he could to overthrow it. He would never have been content to see a great social battle going on between the toilers in slavery and the idlers in wealth while he met a few friends from week to week in a hall for the purpose of fulminating against a merely religious system.

While Paine was in France, Camille Jordan made a report against the priests, public worship, and bells.⁶ Thomas Paine wrote to him as follows:

It is a want of feeling to talk of priests and bells while so many infants are perishing in the hospitals, and aged and infirm poor in the streets, from want of necessaries. The abundance that France produces is sufficient for every want, if rightly applied, but priests and bells, like articles of luxury, ought to be the least articles of consideration.

These words of Thomas Paine ought to ring in every Liberal's ear. It is all well enough to fight the church. I believe in doing that. But I tell you that the sewing women and factory children of this land and the underpaid workmen in every trade are of more concern than all the priests and creeds, and the Liberal who does not jump into the struggle for the emancipation of man socially and industrially is not in the track of Thomas Paine, who was a friend of man first, and after that an enemy of the church. If the church did not stand in the way of the redemption of the poor by enfeebling the mind and supporting every form of legal stealing, I, for my part, would not bother my head about her. And I long to see the day when the professed friends of Thomas Paine will love their fellow men more than they hate the doctrines of John Calvin,⁷ and turn against the church not so much because she teaches the fables of the past as because she enslaves the people of the present.

In a letter to a friend just before Paine came to America to die, and in which he expresses his love for this country, he says:

A thousand years hence, for I must indulge a few thoughts, perhaps in less, America may be what England now is. The innocence of her character, that won the hearts of all the nations in her favor, may sound like a romance, and her inimitable virtue as if it had never been. The ruins of that liberty, which thousands bled to obtain, may just furnish materials for a village tale, or extort a sigh from rustic sensibility; while the fashionable of that day, enveloped in dissipation, shall deride the principle and deny the fact.

Not one tenth of a thousand years has passed since those words were written, and they are nearly fulfilled. The "fashionable" of today, "enveloped in dissipation," care nothing for that liberty for which our forefathers fought. They do deride the principles of the Declaration of Independence and deny the fact that all men should be free and equal as to opportunities and rights. National decay has already set in, and the true admirers of Thomas Paine will devote themselves to the very work which he loved and did.

To set the mind free from all that is false in religion and government was Paine's work, and that should be our work. While we strive to drive out the moles and bats of Medieval Christianity, let us not forget the roaches and rats that infest the ship of State. Let us not cease to bow

⁶ According to Hawke (see note 3), Camille Jordan, in June of 1797, actually requested of the Council of Five Hundred that the Catholic Church be restored certain privileges, including the ringing of church bells. Pentecost has Jordan petitioning against the church.

⁷ John Calvin (1509–1564) was a French theologian and an important figure in the Protestant Reformation.

before Jehovah only to go down in worse bondage before a landlord, a banker, an alderman, or a policeman. When Jehovah abdicates his throne, earthly kings and queens should also go, and there should be an end of all that race of men who live in idleness upon the labor of others.

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