

HAPPY 270th BIRTHDAY TOM PAINE (January 29, 1737)

Patriot and Vilified Theologian



In 1975 America was preparing to celebrate its Bicentennial, and I wanted to write something special for the occasion. There was a program on NPR in which Theodore Roosevelt was quoted as calling Tom Paine "a dirty little atheist." That comment definitely piqued my interest, and I decided that I would research the religious views of our founding thinkers. The result was an article "Religious Liberalism and the Founding Fathers,"

<http://www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/foundfathers.htm>

which I presented at the Bicentennial Symposium of Philosophy in New York City in October of 1976.

Thomas Paine did more for the success of the American Revolution than any other thinker. As Lafayette once said, "Free America without Thomas Paine is unthinkable." Practically every literate American read Paine's "Common Sense." The illiterate, among whom were many of Washington's soldiers, were indirectly inspired by it.

A later book by Paine, *Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology*, was also widely read in America, but this time Americans, in an incredible display of religious intolerance, turned against the great patriot. Paine quickly realized that, contrary to his prediction, the revolution for complete religious liberty and freedom of thought had not followed upon the heels of the political revolution.

Paine's reputation did not improve as Americans, who knew *Age of Reason*, looked back in retrospect. As I said above, Theodore Roosevelt condemned Paine as an atheist and also declared: "There are infidels and infidels, but Paine belonged to the variety ... that apparently esteems a bladder of dirty water as the proper weapon with which to assail Christianity."

If one reads *Age of Reason*, one must agree that Paine's criticism of Christianity is not a model of diplomatic scholarship. The tone of the book is aptly portrayed in this statement concerning the virgin birth: "Jesus Christ, begotten, they say, by a ghost, whom they call holy, on the body of a woman, engaged in marriage, and after married . . . a theory which, speaking for myself, I hesitate not to disbelieve, and to say, is as fabulous and as false as God is true."

Behind irreverent rhetoric like the above, there are some interesting and, for some who read it, compelling points. Paine makes it clear that he is not an atheist. In fact, he claims that his book is designed to counter the effects of atheism. In his opinion, Christianity is founded on such poor arguments that it, rather than subduing atheism, unwittingly promotes its spread in the world.

The first axiom of Paine's theology is that there is God and his creation and "no more." What he meant by this "no more" is this: no more idolatry of the Bible as the Word of God, no more deification of Jesus the man and moral teacher, no miracles, no angels, no Hell, no original sin, and no Trinity. All of these additions to the first axiom are erroneous or mythical, and are actually detrimental to the cause of religion.

There is an interesting connection between Paine and Joel Barlow, who shared the same religious views and who was entrusted with a copy of *Age of Reason* while Paine was in a French prison. Barlow's main claim to fame was the diplomat who negotiated the Treaty of Tripoli with the notorious Barbary Pirates. The beginning of 11th article of the treaty is the following: "As the Government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion" President Washington approved the treaty and it was ratified, with no recorded debate, by the Senate on June 7, 1797. President Adams signed it on June 10, 1797 and it was first published in the Session Laws of the Fifth Congress, first session in 1797.

An investigation of the Arabic copy of the treaty reveals that the 11th article is very different. All that is stated here is a principle of general religious tolerance: that Christians should respect Muslims when in America and vice versa. There is nothing at all in the Arabic to support Barlow's strong statement. There is a good possibility that,

long before the dirty tricks of America's Religious Right, Barlow committed one of first deceptions of early America's Religious Left.

Perhaps the most interesting points that Paine makes in *Age of Reason* are the objections he raises against the concept of Revelation. Orthodox Christians take the entire Bible as pure Revelation, a direct and immediate message from God. Paine observes, however, that most of the Bible is straightforward historical fact or fancy that is not of this character at all.

When Revelation is purported to have occurred, as in the case of Moses, God was speaking to one person and one person only. Revelation is always in the first person and therefore it is, by legal definition, only hearsay if the message goes beyond the single person.

For Paine true Revelation is nature itself. Human language cannot serve as God's medium; it is too fragile and inadequate. Nature, however, is "an ever-existing original which every man can read. It cannot be forged; it cannot be counterfeited; it cannot be lost; it cannot be altered; it cannot be suppressed. It does not depend upon the will of man whether it shall be published or not; it publishes itself from one end of the earth to the other. It preaches to all nations and to all worlds; and this word of God reveals to man all that is necessary for man to know of God."

This is called natural theology and even the Apostle Paul supports it in the Book of Romans (1:19-20), and those who fail to see the existence of God in "the things that have been made . . . are without excuse." The Catholic thinker Thomas Aquinas built the fundamentals of Christian theology on what human reason could clearly affirm.

The full implication of this theory is Paine's declaration that the true language of religion was the language of science. Paine sums up his religious creed in this statement: "The Almighty Lecturer, by displaying the principles of science in the structure of the universe, has invited man to study and imitation. It is as if He said to the inhabitants of this globe, that we call ours, 'I have made an earth for man to dwell upon, and I have rendered the starry heavens visible, to teach him science and the arts. He can now provide for his own comfort, and learn from my munificence to all, to be kind to each other.' "

Such was the New Gospel of the great patriot, Thomas Paine. But because of this new gospel, Paine was vilified by a people whom he had helped to become free. Religious liberals such as John Adams rejected him; the sponsor for his return to America, Thomas Jefferson, who agreed with his religious views, shunned him out of political expediency; and his own Quakers refused to bury him. There were only six people at his funeral and two of them were African Americans.

Tom Paine, the voice of the American Revolution, deserved much, much better than this.