Doubting Thomas Paine

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For all its iconoclasm, *The Age of Reason* is a profoundly religious book. It is ironic that its author should be so hatefully reviled as an atheistic destroyer of faith. For almost two centuries, vilification has besmirched his name, notwithstanding that (quite ambivalently) Thomas Paine continues to be patriotically revered as a champion of freedom and the rights of man. Like his contemporary, Benedict Arnold, he is a historical Jekyll and Hyde, a Janus with a face of good and a face of evil. But does he merit the latter countenance? Paine has been found guilty of the crime of Godlessness. Yet he repeatedly declared his fervent belief in the Creator and in His almightiness. It was this alleged infidel who said:

"I believe in one God, and no more; I hope for happiness beyond this life . . . Deism teaches us, without the possibility of being deceived, all that is necessary or proper to be known . . . It is the fool only, and not the philosopher, or even the prudent man, that would live as if there were no God." These are hardly the words of an atheist. Why, then, is the man who wrote them condemned as a faithless denier of the existence of God? The answer is intriguing.

What Doubting Thomas Paine scoffed at, sought to debunk, was not the God-concept, but the religious fabrications of men. He took a dim view of Bibles, Testaments, churches, congregations, rituals, and the like, all of which he insisted were fashioned by mortals, and none the work of God. He dismissed such mundane trappings as mere physical structures or romantic mysticism. He found divine revelation in creation, in the universe, and in existence, which evidence of an Almighty power he considered "infinitely stronger than anything we can read in a book that any imposter might make and call the word of God." As for morality, Paine wrote, "The knowledge of it exists in every man's conscience."

Lacking the philosophical detachment and self-sufficiency of Henry Thoreau, Paine was hurt and bewildered by the vehement reaction of "the establishment" to his opinions on religion. He was particularly distressed because, like Thoreau, he had no desire to condemn those having contrary ideas, who, he said, "have the same right to their belief as I have to mine." He only urged man to be faithful to himself, pointing out that "infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe." Therein is the essence of Paine's effort: he fought not against religion, but against hypocrisy.

Far from an atheist, Thomas Paine was not even an agnostic. He did not deny or question God's being. His target was the "religion" concocted by man, not the affinity between any individual and the Spirit that may ennoble him. Paine needed no house of worship; he said: "My own mind is my own church."