Civil Religion in the Age of Reason: Thomas Paine on Liberalism, Redemption, and Revolution

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For all its apparent confidence and optimism, the eighteenth century—in Europe and in America—was also uneasy, Prometheus haunted by Pandora. Celebrating material progress and the advance of science, shrewd observers recognized that these very gains entailed specialization and individuation, the weakening of community and authority, the encouragement of private ambition and the fragmenting of moral order. As the next century dawned, Jeremiah Atwater, who praised the "spirit of enterprise" and gloried in the extension of commerce, applied the moral to America: "With pain we are forced to acknowledge, that it is the natural tendency of prosperity to corrupt the human heart."[1]

The United States, while free from many of Europe's ills, had its own discomforts. The American Revolution, decorous by later standards, rejected convention and tradition, unsettling civil order and social authority. The gentlemanly code to

[1] Jeremiah Atwater, *A Sermon* (Middlebury, Vt., 1801), cited in Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing during the Founding Era* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1983), 2: 1184; see also the comments of Joseph Lathrop (1786), *ibid.*, 1: 659. On the mood in general, see Geoffrey Clive, *The Romantic Enlightenment* (New York: Meridian, 1960).

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which the framers adhered was giving way to the "democratization of mind." Engaged in creating a new regime, Americans were necessarily driven to theoretical ground, forced to appeal to first principles and to nature.[2]

Yet theorizing also had its shadows. American culture was antinomic, pulled between the conflicting poles of biblical religion and secular rationalism.[3] Some Americans were single-minded, but the generality gave both doctrines a portion of their allegiance, so that philosophic dialectic was at least a threat to the more comfortable habits of ambiguity.[4]

The Framers' Intent

Religion, of course, was the great voice of popular culture. The Bible was the common text of the new republic, and a great many Americans hoped or confided that the regime they were founding—while affording freedom of conscience—would be, at least implicitly, a Christian and Protestant commonwealth.[5] These convictions, moreover, were reflected in a widely shared political teaching.

[2] Gordon S. Wood, "The Democratization of Mind in the American Revolution," in Robert Horwitz, ed., *The Moral Foundations of the American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1977), pp. 102–128.

[3] Michael Kammen, *People of Paradox* (New York: Knopf, 1972).

[4] Perry Miller used the phrase "habit of ambiguity" in referring to the New England clergy of the eighteenth century (*The New England Mind* [Boston: Beacon, 1961], 2: 199). Of course, even carefully balanced teachings ultimately rest on first principles. John Wise's assurance that "Revelation is Nature's law in a fairer and brighter edition" implies that, in any apparent conflict, revelation is to be preferred as clearer and more beautiful (*A Vindication of the Government of New England Churches*, 1717 [Gainesville: Scholar's Facsimiles, 1958], pp. 31–32).

[5] Donald S. Lutz, "The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late 18th Century American Political Thought," *American Political Science Review* 78 (1984): 192; Benjamin Rush, *The Letters of Benjamin Rush*, ed. L. H. Butterfield (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 1: 584, 611–612; Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (Boston: E. Larkin, 1805), 1: 17–18; Benjamin F. Morris, *Christian Life and Character of the Civil Institutions of the United States* (Philadelphia: Childs, 1864), p. 119. Freedom of conscience and the free exercise of religion were upheld even by those who argued for public support for religious instruction or supported religious tests for officeholders. See, for example, Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 8, 449–453, 556, 666–669; 2: 1255, 1257.

In that Christian view, the secular goal indicated by the doctrine of redemption is the reconciliation of humanity with nature, the order of creation. God's willingness to have His Son undergo human life—with all its silences and sorrows, despair and death—testifies that such a life has a high dignity, worthy even of what is divine. The incarnation shows God's love for the world, thereby attesting that the world is lovable. For those who can read its lessons, redemption overcomes our human resentment against nature and its limits, saving life from the rage of human indignation: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." The Gospel "sets men free" precisely because they no longer experience nature as bondage; redemption turns human attention inward, toward the soul, rather than outward, toward the mastery of nature.[6]

Politics has a part to play in the education of the soul, helping to lead human beings out of self-centeredness toward a new sense of self as a part of the whole of creation.[7] Public spirit, the foundation of secular civic virtue, is a rung on the ladder to citizenship in the City of God. While the laws must restrain selfishness, their fundamental aim is positive, the development of the individual's capacity to love.[8] An indi-

[6] John 1:29, 3:16, 10:10; Matthew 5:13 instructs the disciples that they are the "salt of the earth," intended to restore savor to life. See also Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 307; 2: 850–851,1249.

[7] Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 3–4,13–14, 309, 528–529; 2: 848, 1031, 1246–1247. As Nathaniel Niles argued, the Christian view necessarily rejects the modern doctrine which gives individuals priority and legitimates private interest. The logical consequence of this position is that a social contract founded on the aim of protecting private rights is a usurpation of what is rightfully public (*Two Discourses on Liberty* [Neburyport: Thomas & Tingers, 1773]). See also Gilbert Tennent, *The Danger of Spiritual Pride Represented* (Philadelphia: William Bradford, 1745).

[8] Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 5–6, 292, 308–309, 410–411, 414, 432, 529, 552, 561, 659, 668, 1256; Samuel Davies, *Religion and Public Spirit* (New York: Parker, 1761); Gilbert Tennent, *Brotherly Love Recommended by the Argument of the Love of Christ* (Philadelphia: Franklin & Hall, 1748); Isaac Story, *The Love of Our Country Recommended and Enforced* (Boston: John Boyle, 1775). Public spirit is especially vital to republics, since such regimes attempt to minimize coercion; the self-governing soul is the foundation of a self-governing regime. "Let our pupil be taught," Rush wrote, "that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property" (Hyneman and

vidual will not risk involvement with others if he or she feels totally vulnerable; the soul demands the minimal assurance that it matters, that it is the object of concern. Learning to love others presumes the experience of *being* loved. The laws, while limiting the pursuit of private interest, must also ensure nurturance—"particular care"—and the opportunity for dignity in civil life. Such attentive community, like strong friendship, is necessarily exclusive: to draw close to some is to draw away from others. In secular life, human beings are not suited to universal government, although the church must remind them of their universal obligations. The best regime, in principle, is small, simple and austere, the Christian Sparta of Sam Adams's vision.[9]

The doctrine of redemption, moreover, is inseparable from the principle of grace. God's redeeming love for humanity is "gracious" because it is unearned, given not because of merit but in spite of sin. At most, God's love may have regard to what human beings may become, overlooking what they are. Love goes beyond justice, insisting that the exalted serve the lowly and treating the needs of the weak as the obligations of the strong.[10] Moreover, love is the free gift of the loving subject, made available without reciprocity. In other words, the principle of grace derives authority from the loving qualities of those who rule, not from the consent of the governed. Applied

Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 684). See also Rush, *Essays, Literary, Moral and Philosophical* (Philadelphia: Bradford, 1806), pp. 112–113, 131–134; Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 315, 415, 526–528, 659–660; 2: 994, 1173–1174, 1177, 1250. Abraham Williams (1762) scorned the modern doctrine which attempts to trap and channel private spirit in "artful labyrinths of Machiavellian politicks" as too superficial and weak a remedy (Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 14).

[9] *The Writings of Samuel Adams* (New York: Putnam, 1908), 4: 238; Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 264, 419, 525, 659, 677, 685. A "vastly extended republic" like the United States relies heavily on religion and private life to obviate the necessity for a central apparatus of coercion (*ibid.*, 2: 1252). Repeatedly, Christian theorists praise industry, because it draws human beings into civil life, but they also insist on frugality, the principle that acquisitiveness must be regulated by a public norm. Warren, *History*, 1: 18, 3: 336–337; Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 267, 554, 661–666; 2: 1001–1002.

[10] Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 285; 2: 1005, 1247.

to a republican regime, the same doctrine requires that the public-spirited qualities of citizens prevail over their servile desires and private interests.[11] Even in that mild, egalitarian form, however, the principle of grace offends modern sensibilities, for it has little respect for individual independence or private liberty.[12] Love cares and feels obligation, and hence is prone to intervene—or interfere—on the side of what it takes to be the best interest of the beloved.

Freedom, in this view, is no fit goal for individuals or for politics. Love cannot be commanded, and reconciliation must be agreed to: Christian political teaching, consequently, valued liberty and consent as indispensable means. The end, however, for the person or the polity, is dutiful civility and "good order." Freely given, love chooses to be bound.[13]

Widely held Christian doctrine, in sum, envisaged a *religious civility*, a political order shaped and informed by religion.[14] The framers of the American Constitution rejected that teaching, prescribing a secular regime aided by *civil religion*, aiming to discipline religion for the service of political society.

[11] Religion, Niles observed, teaches citizens to do their civic duty without regard to its probabilities of success. Christian citizenship maintains the distinctly aristocratic proposition that "It is great, it is glorious to espouse a good cause, and it is still more great and glorious if one stands alone" (*Two Discources*). Rulers, for example, must—on the authority of Scripture—be persons who hate covetousness (Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 299–300, 434; 2: 846, 1255). Moreover, since learning to love presumes the experience of love, the yearning love for excellence which elevates the many presumes the love of exemplary figures, condescending in the best sense, who make themselves available as models for emulation (*ibid.*, 1: 302, 556–557; *The Works of John Adams*, ed. C. F. Adams [Boston: Little Brown, 1856], 6: 232, 234; 8: 560).

[12] Mutual love, Gilbert Tennent wrote, is the "Bond and Cement" of society, but human beings, "by the Neglect of its Exercise, and more by its contrary, will be tempted against the *Law of Nature*, to seek a *single* and independent state . . ." (*Brotherly Love Recommended*, p. 3; his italics). So defined, the principle of love runs counter to what Rush called the "absurd hypotheses of modern philosophers" (*Essays*, p. 105).

[13] Sidney Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 119.

[14] Hence John Cotton's reference to the churches as "integral and conservant causes" of political virtue ("The Bloody Tenet Washed (etc.)," 1647, in *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* [London: Haddon, 1848], pp. 19–20).

Remembering religious wars and persecutions, the framers were also devoted to modern philosophies premised on individual rights and private liberties: principle as well as prudence counseled against meddling with the soul. Convinced that human beings could be reconciled with nature only by mastering it, they spurned the doctrine of redemption, and similarly, they rebuffed the principle of grace in favor of the consent of the governed.[15]

Following Locke, however, the framers did consider that political society requires the support of religion, including the belief in an afterlife. In the first place, religion is needed to inculcate decent civil morals, most fundamentally the responsibility of parents to children.[16] Moreover, in its distinctly political role, religion helps to make good certain practical deficiencies in liberal teaching, especially those inherent in the situation of the ruled, to whom the advantages of right conduct are less immediate and less evident.[17]

For the self-interested and self-preserving human beings of Lockean theory, the state of nature—originally, or soon afterward, a state of war—provided ample reason for making whatever promises are necessary to create civil society. It is much less clear, however, that it is in one's interest to keep

[15] In their public writings, while the framers were apt to refer to God as the Creator, they avoided the use of the term Redeemer (Catharine Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Theology of the American Revolution* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976], pp. 112–142; see also Winthrop Hudson, *Religion in America* [New York: Scribner's, 1965], p. 92).

[16] Locke tells us that reason reveals, to all "who would make use of that light," that God is "good and merciful," a kind and compassionate "Author and Father" whose example should inform the relation of fathers with their children (*The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. I.T. Ramsey [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958], sec. 231–232, p. 55). At the same time, it is clear that natural reason is *not* enough to show this, since it did not teach even the civilized ancients that they must not expose their children. Natural reason has "some light and certainty," but evidently does not create the will to "make use of that light." To this extent, the doctrine of reconciliation is useful to civil society (*ibid.*, sec. 242, p. 64). On the general point, see Nathan Tarcov, *Locke's Education for Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[17] *Reasonableness of Christianity*, sec. 245, p. 69; see also A. L. Macfie, *The Individual in Society* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967).

those promises once civil society has been established. On the contrary, it would seem that the best life, in theory, is to be able to break one's promises while one's fellows keep theirs, combining the freedom of the state of nature with the advantages of civil life.

Liberal theory responds that, in practice, the risks of promise-breaking are too great: (1) one is likely to be found out and punished, and (2) any successful violations are apt to be imitated, endangering political society and the social contract itself. This argument is plausible in the case of the great and powerful, who are likely to be noticed and emulated. It is less persuasive in the case of private persons, a particular danger in commercial society given the "unbridled" quality of the "spirit of enterprise."[18] The liberal response is least compelling when addressed to persons who are obscure and unpropertied, for they combine a hope of escaping detection and a probability that their conduct will not serve as a socially destructive example with a feeling of having nothing to lose.[19] "Promises, covenants and oaths," the very foundation of civil society, need the support of religious sanctions.[20]

Religion is also requisite, in the framers' view, as the ally of general interests—the interest of political society as a whole, but also, the interest of humanity—against the weight of private interest narrowly defined. These more inclusive interests may appeal to reason and to "diffuse" sentiments, but unaided they cannot hope to overcome the claims of the body

[18] *Federalist* no. 7.

[19] When Madison wrote that "Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates; every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob" (*Federalist* no. 55), he was contending that Socrates was or appeared to be virtuous because his public role made him visible and responsible. But in an assembly of philosophers, presumably, those in the back rows would not be able to restrain license with the fear of detection or the hope of honor.

[20] John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1982), p. 52; Jefferson followed Locke in doubting whether an atheist's testimony should be accepted at law (*Notes on the State of Virginia* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955], p. 159). Orthodox teachers concurred with some enthusiasm, of course (Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 452; 2: 847, 1015–1022, 1247).

and its senses or the demands of immediate relationships and day-to-day life. It is relatively easy for rulers to see the connection between the public interest and their own, since their personal lives are caught up in the broader world and since they themselves are more likely to be moved by the love of fame, "the ruling passion of the noblest minds."[21] For the ruled, however, patriotism—to say nothing of one's duty to humanity—is too weak a sentiment to prevail alone. Especially in republics, religion is an indispensable element of "self-interest rightly understood," the public philosophy of a well-ordered liberal regime.[22]

Given the need for civil religion, the framers saw abundant reasons for seeking an accommodation with Christianity, despite their quarrels with Christian teaching. Prudence alone argued against offending deeply rooted beliefs.[23] In any case, most of the framers seem to have been convinced, as Locke had been, that a strictly rational religion would never command the allegiance of most human beings, among whom reason needed the support of authority and miracle.[24] Upsetting customary beliefs, the products of experience and history, could too easily lead to the overturning of conventional morals and to the break-

[21] *Federalist* no. 72.

[22] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Schocken, 1961), 2: 145–149; see also Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1982), p. 231. Jefferson regarded religion as vital in teaching that slavery is a violation of human rights, especially in offering some counterweight to the immediate interest of slaveholders (*The Life and Selected Writings of Jefferson*, eds. Adrienne Koch and William Peden [New York: Modern Library, 1944], pp. 639–640, 570, 703–704). Notably, however, Jefferson did not—unlike Benjamin Rush—appeal to biblical sources in condemning slavery (Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 217–230).

[23] "The office of a reformer of the superstitions of a nation," Jefferson was to write, "is ever dangerous." Jesus "had to walk in the perilous confines of religion and reason, and a step to the right or to the left might place him within the grasp of the priests. . . ." Hence, Jefferson argued, Jesus was justified in linking his teaching to traditional doctrine "by evasions, by sophistries, by misconstructions and misapplications of scraps of the prophets" (*Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, eds. Andrew Lipscomb and Albert Bergh [Washington: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Assn., 1903–1905], 15: 260–261; compare Locke, *Reasonableness of Christianity*, secs. 59, 61, 139).

[24] *Reasonableness of Christianity*, secs. 1, 143, 237, 238, 252.

ing out of a purely natural—and hence passionate, narrow, and short-sighted—version of self-interest.[25] Certainly, reason's religion would prove inadequate in indoctrinating children, as yet insufficiently rational to appreciate it, and it would also fall short as a teaching for those whose rational interests afforded too uncertain a support for civil morality—preeminently, the poor and obscure, women and slaves.

In many ways, moreover, Christianity commended itself to the framers. Prevailing Christian doctrine respected personal autonomy, the freedom of conscience, and the consent of the governed, if only as means to very different ends. Less ambiguously, the framers admired Christian universalism, the proclamation that all human beings are members of one family, regarding that credo as more consonant with reason than the beliefs of purely national religions like Judaism (as the framers understood it) or paganism. In this sense, Christianity had value as a civil religion because of its more-than-civil qualities.[26]

For the framers, however, any détente with Christianity presumed that Christian superstitions and tendencies toward fanaticism—and with them, Christian political teaching—could be purged or rendered harmless. Christianity could serve as an acceptable civil religion only if it were civilized, disciplined to serve a rational and liberal regime.

The framers were greatly assisted by Locke's prestige, and especially by Locke's theism, which made his teaching minimally respectable in Christian circles.[27] They stopped short, however, of openly espousing Locke's civil theology.[28]

[25] *Ibid.*, sec. 243; compare Samuel Kendal's similar, but more orthodox, view, Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 2: 1253–1254.

[26] *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 13: 377; 15: 260–261; *Life and Selected Writings of Jefferson*, pp. 570, 703–704; *Reasonableness of Christianity*, secs. 240, 243. See also Sidney Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 61.

[27] Clinton Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), pp. 40, 53; for example, see Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 411–413, 416, 419, 422.

[28] Most of Jefferson's religious statements, for example, are found in letters, and he did not even complete his *Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* until 1819.

Locke had prescribed a "reasonable" Christianity which deemphasized or denied the doctrines of redemption and grace. Locke's creed proclaims Christ as the Messiah, a conquering king who overcame death, and hence a suitable inspiration in the struggle to master nature. He rejects the idea of Jesus as the Son of Man, the suffering servant who took on, and showed the nobility of, humanity's life and burden.[29] Second, Locke's Christianity emphasizes a "good life according to virtue and morality," a standard equated with the law of nature and without specifically Christian content.[30] Locke went

[29] In Locke's version, death is the "sole penalty" to which human beings are subject for Original Sin, since—despite "some mistaken places in the New Testament"—God would not place us under the "necessity of sinning continually" (*Reasonableness*, secs. 2, 4). Locke twice cites Romans 5:12, suppressing the second half of the verse, "so that death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (*ibid.*, secs. 6, 10). This unorthodox teaching, moreover, obscures the fact that human beings lost "bliss"—i.e., were compelled to work—when driven out of Eden (*ibid.*, sec. 5). Locke rejects the traditional view because it implies that sin is prior to—and worse than—death. Jesus' "peremptory decision," Locke says, puts it "past doubt" that some lives are worse than not having been, but Locke then goes on to doubt it, invoking—against Jesus—our common opinion that mortal life "is better than not being" (*ibid.*, sec. 6). Jesus redeemed man, Locke argues, by saving man from death; Locke has doubts about the resurrection, but he maintains that after Jesus, humanity no longer had to take death as a *given*. He refers repeatedly to what Paul says "concerning the resurrection" (1 Cor. 15:12), but—aside from the fact that Paul is arguing against doubters, despite what Locke says in secs. 237, 240 about the undeniability of Christ's miracles—Paul maintains that the resurrection must *follow* the messianic kingdom: "For he must reign till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (1 Cor. 15:25–26). This only emphasizes Locke's insistence on Christ the Messiah, as opposed to the Son of Man (*ibid.*, secs. 31, 38). Referring to Philip's preaching "out of Isaiah" to the Ethiopian, Locke cites Acts 8:35, omitting the fact that the prophecy in question speaks of a lamb led to the slaughter (Acts 8:32–33). Similarly, discussing Mark 8:35–38, Locke says that those who would not follow Jesus were punished by being made "to lose their souls, i.e., their lives" (*ibid.*, sec. 15). It is significant enough that Locke equates souls with lives, since the passage in question urges human beings to *lose* their lives in order to save them. Locke claims that the passage's meaning is "plain, considering the occasion it was spoke on." But that occasion involves a rebuke to Peter, who—like Locke—denied the teaching that "the Son of Man must suffer many things," proclaiming instead that Christ is the Messiah (Mark 8:29, 31).

[30] *Reasonableness*, secs. 16, 67, 70–72, 167, 171–172, 179–180. Consider the fact that Locke's citation of Romans 2:6 (sec. 6) makes no reference to the succeeding verse. By contrast to Locke's doctrine, see Romans 3:20.

even further in rejecting any *political* application of Christianity, since he denied that charity ought to influence law.[31]

The leading spirits among the framers shared, or sympathized with, Locke's doctrine, but they considered it unnecessary in the American context. In the United States, civil religion could be sufficiently embodied in and inculcated by the *laws*; it did not require the support of an official, civil *theology* which would, at best, recreate priestly hierarchy in a new form.[32] In America, it would be sufficient to follow Locke's institutional prescriptions, confining religion to a private sphere "wholly exempt" from the cognizance of civil society and relying on the proliferation of sects to check and confute any particular confession.[33] Christianity, and all other religions, could be left untroubled, free to attempt the instruction of the spirit.[34]

[31] *Letter Concerning Toleration*, p. 30; "No man ever said," Locke asserts, that "covetousness, uncharitableness, idleness"—among other things which are "sins, by the consent of men"—ought to be "punished by the magistrate." This exaggeration only underscores Locke's determination to limit the political order to the protection of "men's rights" and of "the public peace" (*ibid.*, p. 42). Early in the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, Locke cites three passages from Scripture, Luke 22:25–26, 2 Timothy 2:19, and Luke 22:32. He omits, then, certain passages from Luke 22 (the second halves of verses 25, 26, and 32 as well as all of verses 27–31), substituting a new central teaching which prohibits iniquity. The omitted passages, by contrast, assert a hierarchy of political regimes. Among the unfaithful Gentiles, lordship is a "benefaction"; among the faithful disciples, equality should be the rule and the chiefs are to serve; the disciples are also a kingdom with a right to judge the law-based "Tribes of Israel." Hence, according to the principle of grace, the faithful—who know that loving service among equals is the best form of rule—are entitled to judge, and hence to rule over, even law-abiding Israel, the best regime short of grace. For Gentiles, self-assertive and dominion-seeking, almost any rule is a gift. Locke subtly displaces this doctrine in favor of the limited and negative standard of 2 Timothy 2:19.

[32] Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Selected Writings* (Arlington: AHM, 1979), pp. xiv-xv; Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 635.

[33] Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 632–633; *Notes on the State of Virginia*, p. 161; Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., "Thomas Jefferson," in Morton J. Frisch and Richard G. Stevens, eds., *American Political Thought: The Philosophic Dimension of American Statesmanship* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), p. 38; *Letter Concerning Toleration*, pp. 13, 15, 19, 25, 27–29, 52, 54–55.

[34] Consequently, the frequent pagan invocations in the rhetoric of the revolution could be treated, by believers and by rationalists, as only so much hyperbole, not a

Locke's empiricism suggested that the mind, in the natural course of things, will follow its experience, especially if freed from repression and indoctrination. By establishing certain political truths, the laws also, in subtle ways, establish a variety of civil religion. In the framers' design, America would be exposed—through commerce and through argument—to many competing ways and views and would, increasingly, be disinclined to give exclusive credit to any. Gradually and of their own accord, the framers confided, Americans would come to see values and truths as commodities in the marketplace, where the accepted coinage would be human liberty, understood as the ability to do as one wills and entailing the mastery of nature.[35]

The framers' trust in the long-term working of the laws was a vital element in their rapprochement with Christianity. The American regime accorded revealed religion a combination of private freedom and civil respect. In addition, a considerable number of the clergy, especially among the enlightened, were inclined to see history as providential, discerning God's design in natural processes and conceding to human mastery a considerable role in redemption. They shared, in other words, the willingness to leave many questions to the arbitrament of progress.[36] John Witherspoon, for example, trusted that the moral instinct for benevolence, perfected by reason and allied

challenge to Christian orthodoxy (see Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers*, pp. 46–80). For us, of course, this side of civil religion has become second nature; even zealous Christians apparently have no qualms about civic idolatry in relation to the Statue of Liberty.

[35] Mansfield, *Thomas Jefferson*, p. xxv; Sanford Kessler, "Jefferson's Rational Religion," in Sidney A. Pearson, Jr., *The Constitutional Polity* (Washington: University Press of America, 1983), pp. 58–78; compare Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, vol. 1, bk. 20 (New York: Hafner, 1949), pp. 316–317. In our times, Claude Lévi-Strauss speaks of the tendency for ideas of what is "good to think" to follow the processes of exchange (*Totemism* [Boston: Beacon, 1963], p. 89).

[36] R.V. Sampson, *Progress in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956); James W. Jones, *The Shattered Synthesis: New England Puritanism before the Great Awakening* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, 1: 540–541; 2: 1075, and Benjamin Rush, *Six Introductory Lectures* (Philadelphia: Conrad, 1801), pp. 114–119.

to science, would result in a progressive approximation of Christian truth and virtue.[37] Yet despite this tilt toward natural religion, Witherspoon, like so many of his Christian fellows, upheld the existence of an objective moral order: in principle, natural rights entitle us only to what is right.[38] Similarly, Witherspoon considered it a task of government to develop civic character, and his list of civic virtues contained a number of distinctly religious excellences, such as piety and mercy.[39] Civil mannerliness, founded on the appeal to history, shrouded and postponed, but did not resolve, the quarrel between modern philosophy and ancient faith.

The framers were content to have it so, sure that the scientific design of the laws would prove decisive.[40] They were sufficiently assured to allow orthodoxy a certain sway in the private circles of life. In the main, they limited themselves to the sphere of law and institutions, economics and higher education, stereotypically "man's world." They were disposed to ignore the world of women—the sphere of domesticity and early education—regarding it as a harmless support for civil life. It was just this neglect which alarmed Thomas Paine, for orthodoxy was not so remiss. Paine's old friend, Benjamin Rush, urged Christians to attend to "the first impressions of the mind" by the "use of the Bible as a school book" and by attending to the education of women, who often regulate the "opinions and conduct of men."[41] Paine mistrusted the framers' reliance on the laws, fearing that the liberal republic might be corrupted by Christian teaching, and his *Age of Reason* is a call to renew the struggle between the Empire of Science and the Kingdom of God.

[37] John Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, ed. Jack Scott (Dover: University of Delaware Press, 1981), pp. 67, 78–80, 122–123, 186–187.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 110; see also pp. 50, 159.

[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 109, 112, 159–161.

[40] Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers*, pp. 202–204.

[41] Hyneman and Lutz, *American Political Writing*, 1: 680–683; *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, 2: 947, 1075; Rush, *Essays, Literary, Moral and Philosophical*, pp. 8–9, 81–92, 94–95, 98–101, 105, 112–113.

A Critique of Locke

The Age of Reason is a subtle book with complex intention. As a polemic against revealed religion in general and biblical religion in particular, the book's ostensible purpose, *The Age of Reason* is neither profound nor original, although it is argued with all of the public power of Paine's democratized rhetoric.[42] Paine's forcefulness, however, only emphasizes his abandonment of the stance, adopted in *Common Sense*, of treating Christianity with nominal respect, veiling his criticisms and emendations, and attempting to make Christianity into a "reasonable" support for a political order founded on natural rights.[43] Rejecting that earlier position, *The Age of Reason* presumes and involves a critique of Lockean civil religion.

At the same time, the book grew out of Paine's ruminations on the French Revolution. *The Age of Reason* was written in two parts, the first completed shortly before Paine was arrested by French revolutionary authorities and published while he was still in prison, the second composed after he had been released and written largely in response to criticisms of the earlier work. In Part II, Paine indicates that his overriding motive for writing was furnished by the departure of the French Revolution from its "just and humane principles," and by his desire to vindicate those tenets by separating them from the revolution's excesses.[44] Since Paine, expecting his arrest, knew that he would have to evade the revolution's censors, it is not surprising that there is no hint of this in Part I.[45] There, Paine

[42] Philip Foner concedes that "every one [of Paine's ideas] had been expressed by Deists before him" (*The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine* [New York: Citadel, 1969], 1: xxxvii).

[43] See my essay "The Bible in the American Political Tradition," in Myron J. Aronoff, ed., *Religion and Politics* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1984), pp. 22–24.

[44] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 514; 2: 1330, 1335.

[45] Almost gratuitously, Paine refers to an essay on Franco-American commerce he had "intended for" the very hostile Committee on Public Safety, one of many indications that Pain wrote with an eye to potential inquisitors (*ibid.*, 1: 514).

tells us only that he was moved to write his critique of revealed religion—originally intended for a "more advanced period of life"—by the French abolition of "compulsive systems of religion" and the consequent need to rescue "morality, humanity and the theology which is true" from the "wreck of superstition."[46] In fact, Paine chose a subject, the critique of religion, and a prescription, Deist theology, in which his views coincided with those of Robespierre. The Committee of the Surety General, which examined the manuscript of Part I, returned it with the comment that it would "do much good."[47]

In any case, Paine had no desire to write a work which could be seized and used by the revolution's conservative enemies. Paine was more concerned to defend the revolution's theories than to expose its practices: he spoke of the toleration established by law—the abolition of "compulsive systems of religion"—but he called no attention to persecution in fact.[48] Where Benjamin Rush argued that the French Revolution proved the insufficiency of reason without Christian revelation, Paine contended that the shortcomings of the revolution stemmed from Christianity itself.[49]

The most important of the "just and humane principles" of the French Revolution, moreover, underline Paine's quarrel with liberal civil religion. Dating the dedication to *The Age of Reason*, Paine—for the only time in the book—uses the revolutionary calendar, referring to "8th Pluvôise, Second Year of the French Republic, one and indivisible," going on to tell his American readers that this is equivalent to January 27, O.S. 1794.[50] The revolutionary calendar, of course, pro-

[46] *Ibid.*, 1: 464–465.

[47] *Ibid.*, 1: 513–514; on Robespierre's views, see Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul and Columbia University Press, 1962), 2: 78, 114–115.

[48] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 464; compare Lefebvre, *French Revolution*, 2: 78.

[49] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 514, 516; *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, 2: 746, 935.

[50] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 463.

claimed openly what the American founding had only hinted at—human sovereignty over time.[51] Paine also chose a date, 8th Pluvôise, almost a month after his arrest, but the day on which the Assembly secularized education in France.[52] Paine's dating calls attention to human supremacy over history and education, indicating the human claim—a just principle, in Paine's view—to full mastery over the human world. The Revolution's trumpet, as Paine heard it, shattered the silences and challenged the evasions of liberal civil religion in America.

Some of Paine's lamest and most pedestrian arguments point in this direction. The burden of the second part of *The Age of Reason* is devoted to arguing that most of the books of the Old Testament could not have been written by the authors for whom the books are named. If this is so, Paine contends, then "every part of the authority and authenticity of those books is gone at once."[53] His critique leans heavily on anachronistic glosses which refer to times after the death of the supposed author. Yet the fact of later editing does not disprove original authorship, nor does it demonstrate any departure from the original teaching. Paine does refer to the "disorder and ignorance in which the Bible has been put together," but a little later he speaks of "the studied craft of the Scripture-makers."[54] In any case, the Bible on its own terms is immune to Paine's critique, since if God can inspire an author, He can also inspire an editor. Locke, however, relied on the great names associated with the books of the Bible, defining faith as the belief that a proposition comes from God, adopted "on the credit of the proposer."[55]

[51] Americans, of course, asserted the same principle in decorous Latin, while nominally respecting the Christian calendar: *Novus Ordo Secolorum*, 1787.

[52] Lefebvre, *French Revolution*, 2: 114.

[53] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 519.

[54] *Ibid.*, 1: 544–545, 553; see also 1: 574.

[55] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV:18:2.

Of course, Locke also appealed to miracles and "outward signs" as attesting that these proposers held a "commission from heaven."[56] For Locke, however, miracles are fundamentally only means of persuading the credulous many.[57] In Locke's view, no one can tell whether an event is truly miraculous, since to do so one would have to know the whole of the law of nature, to which a purported miracle claims to be an exception. By reason, we are entitled to say only that a "miracle" is an event whose cause we do not know. The multitude, however, is persuaded by deeds of power, since it is unable to discern or is indifferent to causes.[58]

Locke also maintains that the miracles were witnessed by such numbers as to be indubitable, although the examples he offers cast doubt on his proposition.[59] Paine attacks Locke's ostensible teaching very early in *The Age of Reason*, pointing out that the Immaculate Conception could not have been witnessed and that the Resurrection, though subject to confirmation, was witnessed only by the disciples, and by them ambiguously. The account of the Resurrection, Paine asserts, has "every mark of fraud and imposition." In relation to these two central miracles, Locke's claim of indubitable testimony is false.[60] This, Paine argues, illustrates the general principle that the appeal to miracles "implies a lameness or weakness in the

[56] *Ibid.*, IV:19:5; see also *Reasonableness of Christianity*, sec. 242.

[57] *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV:18:4; *A Discourse of Miracles*, in Ramsey, ed., *Reasonableness of Christianity*, p. 86; Paine follows the same line of reasoning in *The Age of Reason* (*Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 507–508).

[58] *A Discourse of Miracles*, pp. 80–81, 86; *Reasonableness of Christianity*, sec. 238. Jesus, by contrast, belittles one of the miracles to which Locke refers repeatedly, rating deeds of mastery as less significant than the suffering of the Son of Man (compare *Reasonableness of Christianity*, sec. 30, 38, 76, commenting on John 1:49 with John 1:50–51).

[59] In *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, sec. 240, Locke argues that Julian the Apostate "durst not deny" the evidence of the miracles, "which being granted, the truth of our Savior's doctrine and mission unavoidably follows." Obviously, however, it did not follow in Julian's case.

[60] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 467–468; see also the discussion of Locke's argument regarding the undeniability of the miracles in n. 29, above.

doctrine thus preached."[61] Paine faults the teaching; Locke held that the shortcomings were those of the many. Formally, Locke upheld the Bible's authority, but only by identifying it with—if not subordinating it to—the law of nature. This, Paine implies, amounts to a "pious fraud," adopted in violation of the principle of consent for the supposed good of the many.[62]

Much of Paine's critique of Scripture, in sum, amounts to a democratic critique of Locke, one which calls attention to Locke's pretenses as well as to the Bible's inconsistencies. Stripped of traditional and miraculous sources of authority and revealed as the product of human votes and councils, the Bible, Paine maintains, will be unable to stand comparison with Euclid's *Elements*, a work which rests on "self-evident demonstration entirely independent of its author."[63]

Yet *The Age of Reason* also involves a crucial imposture. Since the text is fundamentally an attack on the Bible, it is curious that Paine insists that in composing Part I, he lacked access to a copy of the Scriptures.[64] He explains that in his "precarious situation" he had to write quickly, but he assures us that his quotations from memory have proved to be correct.[65]

In one of these citations, Paine quotes Job 11:7, "Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty to perfection?" Paine goes on to say, "I know not how the printers have pointed this passage, for I keep no Bible. . . ."[66]

[61] *Ibid.*, 1: 508.

[62] *Ibid.*, 1: 505; *Reasonableness of Christianity*, secs. 14, 180, 182, 228, 229, 235, 241, 242.

[63] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 519; see also 1: 472–473, 477, 586, 594. It ought to be clear that Paine is hinting that the truths of the Declaration of Independence, if genuinely self-evident, do not require the Creator.

[64] *Ibid.*, 1: 484–485. He repeats this disclaimer in Part II, pp. 514–515 and again on p. 582. To anyone familiar with the history of Christianity, the fact that Paine repeats his denial three times is bound to raise suspicions (John 13:38, 18:16–27).

[65] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 582.

[66] *Ibid.*, 1: 485.

This is a curious reference, one that calls our attention to typesetting by printers, and particularly to *punctuation*. In fact, the King James Bible contains a striking error in punctuation: it does not capitalize the first word in the second question, an error Paine corrects. Paine could hardly have remembered that curiosity; by directing attention to typesetting, Paine gives the lie to his own assertion that he wrote without a Bible at hand. Those who accept Paine's denial, however, are likely to be lulled regarding Paine's use of Scripture, as Paine intended.

Later, Paine finds evidence that the books of Daniel and Ezekiel were written by their supposed authors in the fact that the "manner in which the books are written" agrees with the condition in which the authors found themselves. Commentators, Paine asserts—and by this time, in Part II, Paine is responding to commentators on his own work—who lack the "experience of captivity" fail to understand that exile or imprisonment forces a writer to write "in a concealed manner." Daniel and Ezekiel used "obscure and metaphoric terms," dreams and visions, because, as "prisoners of war or prisoners of state," they were obliged to devise a "cipher or secret alphabet." They intended to be understood, Paine claims, only by those to whom they wrote, and their intended audience was certainly not composed of "busy commentators and priests."[67]

Paine's own experience, of course, paralleled that of Daniel and Ezekiel: he claimed to understand their "mode of writing" because it was one he had adopted. When Paine wrote these comments, he was free from prison, but he was not, in a fundamental sense, free from exile. About the content of Daniel's prophecy he said nothing, but he did contend that Ezekiel's writing should be read in relation to "the project . . .

[67] *Ibid.*, 1: 564–565.

of recovering Jerusalem."[68] Paine was also concerned to recover a holy city, the revolutionary ideal.

When he wrote *Common Sense*, Paine recalled, he saw, "or at least I thought I saw," a "vast scene opening itself" in America, one which enabled Americans to offer a new system to mankind. At that time, he expected a change in religion to follow from a change of government, still holding—as the framers did—that a change in political and secular principles would, in the long run, shape sacred beliefs, trusting that the principle of consent, enshrined in law, would overcome the principle of grace.[69] Events caused Paine to question his earlier faith; the revolutionary's Jerusalem seemed to demand, not new framing, but a new foundation.

Paine's reconstruction involves three interrelated critiques, intended to reveal the weaknesses in revolutionary foundings deriving (1) from Lockean liberal theory, the particular danger in America; (2) from revolutionary practice, as revealed in France; and (3), at the most radical level, from the political impact of Christian culture, the common enemy, for Paine, of modern reason and revolutionary hope.

The New Man

Paine offers two prudential reasons for abandoning the Lockean effort to "civilize" Christianity. In the first place, increasing numbers of people have come to recognize or suspect that Christianity is fabulous. Consequently, Christianity is no longer politically defensible as a "rational" creed; it is now suited to produce only "atheists and fanatics."[70] Second, democratization makes the elitism of liberal civil religion politically unacceptable. A creed professed for the masses

[68] *Ibid.*, 1: 565.
[69] *Ibid.*, 1: 496–497; see also p. 465.
[70] *Ibid.*, 1: 464, 472.

made sense when the masses were subjects; the advent of democracy requires educating the many in the principles of rule. Democracy demands a creed which, while suited to the understanding of the many, can be laid "fairly and openly before the world."[71]

Moral and theoretical reasoning, Paine argues, support the same lesson. A variation between inward opinion and outward expression—inauthenticity—is essentially immoral, at least in matters of religion, and tends to prepare human beings "for the commission of any crime."[72] This sort of deception subordinates one's convictions about the highest things to low matters, material interests and pragmatic considerations, a perversion all too likely to corrupt the soul.[73] Parenthetically, it should be observed that Paine ignores any high motive for restricting what one says, such as the possibility that one might guard one's speech out of love or consideration for another's sensibilities. He accepts the idea of nurturant speech in relation to children, as will become clear, but he fears any extension to the speech of adults. The principle is not inegalitarian—we can limit what we say out of an equal regard for what is best in each other—but it does suggest the doctrine of grace, that love is sovereign over liberty and consent.

In fact, Paine maintains that to be content with inward freedom while acquiescing in a limitation on the expression of one's opinion is essentially slavish. It restricts one's "right of changing" one's opinion about what should be expressed, presuming a kind of permanence to the existing extent of

[71] *Ibid.*, 1: 465, 506. For example, during the French Revolution, the urban poor, seeing only immediate benefits, attempted to control the price of commodities, blind to the fact that the long-term effect would be to limit supply (2: 1336–1337). This suggests a need for discipline and patience as well as economic knowledge. The many need to learn that some things—the laws of the market were apposite, for Paine—are not subject to popular control, and that in some matters the principle of benevolence consists, as it does for Deism's God, in letting things alone.

[72] *Ibid.*, 1: 465.

[73] Paine knew, of course, that this argument would be particularly effective with thinkers who shared Jefferson's conviction that "uprightness" is more important than rightness (*Life and Selected Writings*, pp. 431–433).

public capacities and to the existing order of things. A "pious fraud" may seem to do some good, but the original deception must be defended, requiring more and more repression—especially against science, which constantly threatens to expose the lie.[74] Like slaves, those who constrain expression voluntarily assume that the external world cannot be transformed or remade but demands an adaptation of the self.

Human freedom, by contrast, consists in doing, acting and creating, rather than in thinking. The human self must be recognized as essentially a human creation. In the beginning "scarcely distinguishable in appearance and condition from a common animal," humanity has overcome that state only through science and creative action.[75] Nature, still the standard for Lockean liberals, is too restrictive, in matters of right even more than in matters of fact.

In his quarrel with Locke and with the framers, Paine held that both relied excessively on the objective world, overconfiding in the ability of laws and institutions to shape the soul.[76] Writing to the Abbé Raynal in 1782, Paine described commerce—that bulwark of liberal political thought—as a "moral nullity," able to temper the mind's first principles but not to establish them. The object *may* reform the mind, Paine told the Abbé, but the mind may also "corrupt the object," or the two may "separate in disgust."[77]

Paine rejected the last alternative, so similar to the estrangement of church and state prescribed by liberalism, because it deprived civil society of strong and sustaining allegiance. This consideration had special force in America, where "common causes" would not support an "extensive, continued and determined" union. The American union required a civil religion "capable of reaching the whole soul of

[74] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 463, 505.
[75] *Ibid.*, 1: 603; see also pp. 602, 604.
[76] Norman Jacobson, "Political Science and Political Education," *American Political Science Review* 57 (1963): 561–569.
[77] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2: 239.

man and arming it with perpetual energy."[78] Right laws depend on the support of right principles.

For similar reasons, Paine was skeptical about historicism. Faith in progress, for empirical rationalists, derives from faith in nature, and specifically from trust in the teleological qualities of the passions. Much of human history, Paine conceded, seems to sustain Hume's argument that humanity has been moved toward good ends by the force of human wants. Good consequences have resulted from bad motives as well as good; the motive power of historical advance hitherto has been instinct, not intention.[79]

However, Paine observed, the force of need is no longer an adequate guide. Civilization meets the most pressing and the most obvious needs. Need loses intensity and clarity, weakening the hold of merely natural morality. More complicated and larger-scale societies, moving beyond the range and comprehension of need and feeling, find themselves at odds with natural sensibility. Instinct, sufficient to create nations, is inadequate to lead humanity beyond them.[80]

Hume's reasoning also led to the conclusion that natural morality is limited to "immediate propensity," especially to the bonds created by sexual attraction and by the feeling for one's progeny. All more inclusive moralities are the creations of convention and artifice, increasingly weak as they depart from their natural foundations. Universal morality, Hume held, can never be a ruling standard; in international society, the best

[78] *Ibid.*, 2: 220. Madison, by contrast, was content to rest the union on the laws and circumspect reason, prosaic substitutes for Paine's "perpetual energy."

[79] *Ibid.*, 2: 238; David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 413–418, and *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (London: Longmans Green, 1875), 1: 294–295.

[80] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 597; 2: 240–241. Intellectual progress is even more insecure. Reverence for antiquity, Paine believed, is due to the "interregnum of science" produced by Christian repression, making the ancients tower by contrast to what succeeded. That suppression indicates that religion may, for centuries, prevail over science. In fact, Paine held that the liberation of science in modern times was fundamentally accidental, an unintended consequence of the Reformation (*ibid.*, 1: 495).

that can be hoped for is the moderation imposed by the balance of power.[81]

Paine was unwilling to accept such limits to human creativity. He agreed that the remaining human wants—for example, the desire to be free from war—would be unable to overcome the "curious" and "singular," but universal, force of prejudice. This, however, only led Paine to conclude that any further moral and political progress depends on human intention; it presumes the ascendancy of theory over practice, the mind's triumph over nature.[82]

When he wrote Raynal, Paine still found common ground with the liberals, hoping that commerce—especially in letters and science—would be able to dispel prejudice, leaving the mind "fit for the reception of generous happiness" and able to entertain new and enlightened doctrine.[83] So it had seemed in France, where the "principles of America opened the Bastille." The upshot of the French Revolution, however, taught Paine that prejudice is even more tenacious than he had feared and principles much weaker than he had hoped, conclusions which are the premises of *The Age of Reason*.[84]

Still committed to revolutionary theory, Paine came to reject a central tenet of revolutionary practice. Revolutionary praxis is informed by the credendum that thought can create rebirth, that new ideas or new consciousness can make new men and women—one source of the perennial tendency of revolutionaries to become obsessed with "correct" ideology. Paine, by contrast, concluded that conscious thoughts and convictions

[81] Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, 1: 454–455; *Treatise of Human Nature*, pp. 41–46, 477–484; *Natural History of Religion*, in Charles Hendel, ed., *Hume: Selections* (New York: Scribner, 1927), p. 253.

[82] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2: 242. Paine regarded it as an advantage that, by the accidents of his early education, his political praxis derived from theory rather than the reverse. Political practice, Paine observed, teaches "Jockeyship," a kind of trivial domination, able to whip a people toward victory but unable to ask whether the race is worth running (*ibid.*, 1: 496–497).

[83] *Ibid.*, 2: 243, 245.

[84] *Ibid.*, 2: 1303, 1330–1331, 1335; 1: 514–515.

are no more than superstructures in the architecture of the mind.

As part of his argument that biblical prophecy was only poetry set to music, Paine relates that when the Bible tells us of Saul "among the prophets," it does not state what "*they prophesied* nor what *he prophesied*" because there was "nothing to tell." Prophecy was simply a concert. This instance, Paine asserts, by itself "would be sufficient" to prove his thesis.[85]

Prophecy, Paine implies, is pure performance, a making or doing to be judged by its effectiveness and not its content. He goes on to say that Saul "met a company of prophets" and prophesied with them, but it "appears afterward" that Saul "performed his part badly, for it is said that *an evil spirit from God* came upon Saul, and he prophesied."[86] So far, Paine has argued that an "evil spirit from God" can be reduced to a bad performance, a matter of technique and certainly not divine.

But the Bible's reference to an "evil spirit" comes much later than the meeting with the prophets which Paine describes. Telling us that it "appears afterward," Paine conceals the events and the amount of time which intervene between the two incidents.

The meeting with the prophets is itself the fulfillment of a prophecy the content of which we *are* told, part of the proof to Saul that the Lord has chosen him to be king:

> thou shalt meet a company of prophets . . . and they shall prophesy, and the Spirit of the Lord will come upon thee, and thou shalt prophesy with them, and shalt be turned into another man.[87]

Becoming a "new man," with its Christian analogy to Paul (Saul), in this case amounts to a revolution, raising a humble man to supreme power through the exaltation of the spirit.[88]

[85] *Ibid.*, 1: 475–476; Paine's italics.
[86] *Ibid.*, 1: 476; Paine's italics.
[87] 1 Sam. 10:5–6.
[88] Acts 9:21; Saul's humility is indicated by 1 Sam. 9:21.

Yet can such new human beings "perform" well? Later, Paine says of Paul that he "changed his thinking without altering his constitution"; new men are not really transformed because they cannot alter their basic characters.[89] The reference to Saul's evil spirit serves to make Paine's general point. In 1 Samuel 16:14, Saul is troubled by "an evil spirit from the Lord" because he has lost the "Spirit of the Lord." Prophetic ecstasy is not permanent; it creates a transient mood, not a new person.

At the urging of his servants, Saul sends for David, a "man who can play well," and David's playing does, temporarily, drive away the evil spirit. The reference to Saul *himself* prophesying under the influence of the evil spirit comes still later, in 1 Samuel 18:10. That passage does not, however, refer to Saul playing badly at music, although he does "perform his part badly." Rather, Saul's envy and jealousy of David lead him to lose control of himself. Saul's rage is caused by the fact that women have praised David in *their* music.[90] Women, in other words, have a prophetic or poetic power which, in this case, excites jealousy. Saul performs badly because he is not "another man." He is still where all human beings begin, under the influence and power of women.

As this suggests, in *The Age of Reason* Paine turned away from political revolution toward the education of the child and the shaping of those first impressions of the mind which are far more important than later schooling. The education of children, however, is an area of ineradicable inequality, one which can be justified—for an egalitarian like Paine—only if it leads toward eventual equality. Most readers probably construe Paine's title historically, equating the "age of reason" with the Enlightenment, appropriate enough so long as one notices the double entendre: Paine's ultimate concern is the achievement

[89] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 590; obviously, the comment also refers to the limited ability of a formal constitution to change the organic constitution of a regime.
[90] 1 Sam. 18:6–7.

of adulthood, arrival at "the age of reason." The human mind, Paine wrote, progresses by principles one can discern in one's own: psychology, not history, holds the key to the advances which matter.[91]

Paine aims to establish the kind of early education, and the sort of religion, suited to his version of the proper development of the child. The truth of his teaching, consequently, concerns him less than its educational utility.[92] Such doctrine cannot be effective, however, without the transformation of domestic life, a revolution which logically takes priority over the redesigning of the public sphere. Paine's new founding does require a revolution, the overthrow of Christianity and of women, the rulers of the private world.[93]

The Religion of Feeling

Early in *The Age of Reason*, Paine portrays Christianity and Judaism as corrupted creeds, the good aspects of which—monotheism and benevolence—have been fatally marred by pagan accretions and residues. In speaking of Satan, the Bible's stories hint at polytheism; the Virgin Birth is only "the tail of heathen mythology," and so on.[94]

[91] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 497. As Paine also indicates, those brought up in the Bible rarely doubt its truth because the ability to evaluate mystery, miracle, and prophecy, separating false claims from true, depends on one's prior principles (*ibid.*, 1: 529, 505–511).

[92] *Ibid.*, 1: 497–498; Paine likens the Bible to Aesop in being composed of stories which, even when they teach a good moral, are apt to harm a child's "heart" (*ibid.*, 1: 543).

[93] In the same spirit, John Dewey was to write, "After democratic political institutions were nominally established, beliefs and ways of looking at life . . . that originated when men and women were externally controlled and subjected to arbitrary power persisted in the family, the church, business and school; and experience shows that as long as they persist there, political democracy is not secure" ("Democracy and Educational Administration," *School and Society*, April 3, 1937, in *Intelligence and the Modern World: John Dewey's Philosophy*, ed. J. Ratner [New York: Modern Library, 1939], pp. 402–403).

[94] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 467, 471.

Paine does not intend to "purify" Christianity. He does, however, attempt to dissociate Jesus from Christian faith, arguing that Jesus—who taught an "excellent sort" of morality, including belief in the equality of man—never meant to found a new religion. Once Jesus' story is cleared of myth, Paine contends, he is revealed as a "virtuous reformer and revolutionist," put to death by Jewish priests and the Roman state.[95]

Jefferson advanced a similar interpretation, but Jefferson held it "justifiable" that Jesus had linked and likened his teachings to traditional doctrines "by evasions, by sophistries, by misconstructions and misapplications of scraps of the prophets."[96] The teaching of Jefferson's Jesus, in other words, was drawn in the image of Locke's (and Jefferson's) attempt to create a "reasonable" Christianity. Paine, however, argued that these accommodations with tradition, whether they originated with Jesus or with his successors, adulterated Jesus' doctrine, reducing it to an "amphibious fraud."[97]

The "amphibious" qualities of Judaism and Christianity, consequently, allow Paine to reveal the peril to new teachings and laws arising from any accommodation with old doctrines and ways. The polytheistic corruptions *of* Christianity serve Paine as illustrations of the danger *from* Christianity.[98]

Repeatedly, Paine's citations from Scripture point to the problem posed by women—and particularly by women who serve alien gods—exerting their power through children, but also through the vulnerabilities of men. Women imperil the new regime because of their role as conveyers of tradition and defenders of inner space, the upholders of what is familiar and

[95] *Ibid.*, 1: 467, 469, 478.

[96] *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 15: 260–261; see n. 23, above.

[97] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 467.

[98] In referring to Christianity as "amphibious," Paine meant that it was of a mixed nature. It would be surprising, however, if he overlooked the double meaning, able to survive in water, for Christianity—unlike so many of the Old World's institutions—had been able to cross to the New.

close in opposition to what is new or distant. Moreover, women's role as mothers and nurturers not only gives them unique power in shaping character; it tends to involve a radical bias in favor of their own offspring.

Discussing the early life of Jesus, Paine relates the story of Jesus at twelve, asking questions in the temple. Going on to speak of the disciples who set this story down, Paine says that "it is most probable that they had this anecdote from his parents."[99] In fact, Luke 2:51 tells us that "his mother kept all these sayings in her heart." Mary's maternal pride is familiar, but it is a sentiment Paine has no desire to reinforce.

Favoring their own, women cater to and foster the child's desire to be the center of the world and the object of loving care. Revealed religion, of course, reifies these infantile yearnings, proclaiming a national or a personal God. Nurtured into narcissistic prejudice, infantilism is the root of nationalism, a failing of the French Revolution which Paine traced to women and to the Old Testament.

Moreover, women's power lies in and through love, and love is a menace to universal benevolence. The number of Solomon's wives, Paine comments, suggests foolishness rather than wisdom; "Divided love is never happy," and Solomon's household was necessarily a place of competition and complot.[100] Paine's aphorism points to a wider rule: love seeks to monopolize the love of its object, so that its corollary is always jealousy, the fear of infidelity. Abstracted into doctrine or principle, love's demand for fidelity translates into inquisition and persecution, the second great flaw of the French Revolution, rooted this time in the New Testament's high teaching.

Christianity, a religion of love, provides a theoretical justification for women's sensibilities; stereotypically "womanish," it deprecates outward mastery in favor of inward freedom

[99] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 478.
[100] *Ibid.*, 1: 550.

and feeling. Moreover, as Paine observed, despite its formally patriarchal imagery, the Bible often portrays God as *maternal*. As part of his argument that prophecy is poetry, Paine adds poetical lines of his own composing to two prophetic sayings in order to show the "poetical measure" of the original.[101] In the first, Isaiah 1:2, Paine substitutes "'Tis God Himself that calls attention forth" for the original, "I have nourished and brought forth children, and they have rebelled against me." The God of the Bible gives birth to children and nourishes them; Paine's deity "calls forth" attention. In the second case, Jeremiah 9:1, Paine adds three lines, making the prophet mourn for the "human race" where the Bible speaks of weeping "for the slain daughter of my people." Paine—who claims to be "carrying out the figure and showing the intention of the poet"—substitutes humanity as a whole for a specific child, the universal city for Jerusalem. Paine's doctrine will admit no womanly Divinity, no "nursing father."[102]

In Paine's eyes, Christianity was also effeminate in being a religion of feelings, founded on the primal desire to be the object of attention and care. The idea of God's self-sacrificial love for humanity, expressed in terms of God's sacrifice of his son, Paine regarded as "absurd" and "unnatural." He conceded, however, that the doctrine has the power to "enrapture" multitudes by appealing to "gross feelings"—and particularly to the "gloomy pride of man."[103]

The Bible, moreover, frequently depicts heroes as overcome by passion, making strength subject to desire. In its heroines, Paine insinuates, the Bible seems to moralize loose sexual conduct. Ruth Paine dismisses as an "idle, bungling story" of a

[101] *Ibid.*, 1: 475n.

[102] The Bible suggests that the political leader should be like "a nursing father" who "beareth the sucking child" (Num. 11:12; see also Isa. 49:23). See Aaron B. Wildavsky, *The Nursing Father: Moses as a Political Leader* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1984). Paul also speaks of apostolic leadership as "gentle . . . as a nurse nourishes her children" (1 Thess. 2:7).

[103] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 471–472.

"strolling country girl, creeping slyly into bed with her cousin."[104] (Although Paine also calls Ruth "one of the best books in the Bible, for it is free from murder and rapine": feminine guile, for all its faults, appears to be superior to masculine violence, a point to which I will return.) Similarly, Esther, the only other book named for a woman, inspires Paine to some sly allusions to Esther's sexual availability, and to the verdict that her conduct "is no business of ours; at least, it is none of mine."[105] The Bible, in other words, celebrates what ought to be kept decently private.

The Bible also inculcates the lesson that triumph over the passions can be won only through desolations of one's pride of body and power. In the Bible's teaching, wisdom derives from nature's discipline, not reason's mastery.

Distinguishing the "historical and anecdotal" parts of the Bible, Paine disclaims any interest in "paltry stories" like the tale of Samson—his first specific reference to Scripture in *The Age of Reason*. Whether such stories are true or not, Paine asserts, "we are neither the better nor the wiser for knowing them."[106] Paine goes on to deny that revelation has anything to do with whether Samson made off with the "gate posts of Gaza" (an implicit reference to Judg. 16:3), visited Delilah (16:4), "caught his foxes" (15:4) or "did anything else." Paine thus speaks of Samson's deeds, and of his adult life, omitting any reference to Samson's miraculous conception by a theretofore barren mother (Judg. 13). Even on these terms, he alludes specifically to only two of the three chapters dealing with Samson's adulthood, only hinting at the third. Yet that chapter, Judges 14, *does* contain a revelation: that unknown to

[104] *Ibid.*, 1: 535. In fact, Paine magnifies Ruth's supposed misconduct, since Boaz is Ruth's cousin by marriage. He also draws no attention to Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, who instructs Ruth in the ways of seducing Boaz (Ruth 3:1–4).

[105] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 547. In addition to his stated reason, I suspect that Paine also admires Ruth because Naomi, the native woman, not the alien Ruth, becomes nurse to the child, Obed (Ruth 4:16, 17).

[106] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 473.

Samson or his parents, his desire to wed a Philistine "was of the Lord, that the Lord sought an occasion against the Philistines" (14:4). Paine will not even take notice of the idea that God moves through the sexual passions. Moreover, Samson—force overcome by guile—recovers his powers when, blinded, he is no longer a slave to appearance and, his pride shattered, asks the Lord for strength (an acknowledgment of dependence he did not make before his suffering). In the end, Samson achieves his greatest victory by dying (16:30). In fact, Samson's death shows the true answer to the riddle, "out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness" (14:14). Samson's example gives Israel the *spiritual* strength to resist the Philistines, which they had previously lacked (15:11). Samson's death offers meat and sweetness: the truth that freedom demands inner strength even more than physical force. In this sense, Samson is a political redeemer, but for Paine redemption is a repugnant doctrine, best treated as a paltry story.

In Paine's view, the ethic of redemption undermines civil morals. Love, Christianity's foundation stone, is notoriously unjust, leading us to exaggerate the virtues and overlook the vices of those we love. Adding mercy and forgiveness toward those who do evil, Christianity explicitly deprecates justice, and this doctrine is worse—Paine claims—when extended to the principle "love your enemies." Paine admires the "doctrine of not retaliating," but says it is "better expressed" in Proverbs, (a collection he attributes to Gentiles as well as Jews): "If thine enemy be hungry, gives him bread to eat; if he be thirsty, give him water to drink" (25:21). However, Paine suppresses the rest of the saying, "For thou shalt heap coals upon his head, and the Lord shall reward thee." As this implies, Paine regards it as prudent to refrain from retaliation in order to break the cycle of violence and bring about civil peace. He also holds that the principle of benevolence, combined with the desire for civil tranquility, requires us to put the "best construction" on the deeds and acts of others. But he prefers Proverbs to the

teaching of Jesus because it reserves the right to inner resentment, the desire to see justice done.[107]

In general, Paine rejects any doctrine of forgiveness and reconciliation between human and human as he rejects it between humanity and God. "Love your enemies" for Paine can never be more than a "feigned morality," at best, as in Proverbs, a conscious pretense, at worst a self-deception.[108]

Reconciliation with creation is similarly false because, even putting the "best construction" on what we observe, we experience nature as indifferent, a "vast machinery" which does its work untended by us.[109] Paine praises Job as the work of a Gentile struggling honestly with the human situation. Yet, Paine says, the book shows man as "more disposed to be resigned than he is capable of being." Indeed, Paine goes on (in a footnote) to laud the Prayer of Agur as the "only sensible, well-conceived and well-expressed prayer in the Bible."[110] Agur, however, asks to be spared contentment as well as poverty.[111] Against that reasoned and moderate irreconcilability, Paine claims, the New Testament's doctrine is "mean and ridiculous," and amounts to "sinking man into a spaniel."[112]

Paine recognizes that the Christian ethic of sacrifice can be regarded as noble beyond the obligations of justice. However, he regards such aristocratic ideals, like Homer's, as appeals to "false glory" reflecting "mischievous notions of honor."[113] Christian nobility is infantilism magnified into a grandiose hope of immortality through love; the coadjutants, women and Christianity, work to perpetuate human frailties.

[107] *Ibid.*, 1: 597–599.

[108] *Ibid.*, 1: 598.

[109] *Ibid.*, 1: 472; in *Common Sense*, Paine says that Milton "wisely expresses" the principle that reconciliation is impossible when great injuries have been suffered. In fact, of course, Paine is quoting Satan's rejection of reconciliation with God (*ibid.*, 1: 23; Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IV:98–99).

[110] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 547–548.

[111] Prov. 30:9.

[112] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 597–598.

[113] *Ibid.*, 1: 543.

Nevertheless, those weaknesses—the need for nurturance and the force of passion—are original and durable in human nature. Convinced that the private order must be transformed, Paine recognized that faith, like love, can neither be uprooted by law nor swept away by revolutionary violence.

Paine interrupts his argument that Moses could not have authored the Torah to contend that, in any case, Moses' character is "the most horrid that can be imagined."[114] Paine says he will "state only one instance" to prove his point, referring to Moses' order to slay all the males and all the mature women among the Midianites, sparing only the virgins (Num. 31:13–18). Moses' reason for this savage command is explicit: the women incited Israel to sin "in the matter of Peor"—that is, the Midianite women used their sexual attractions to entice Israelite men to worship false gods (Num. 25:1–3). Moses, in other words, sought to overcome by violence the danger of women allied to alien gods.

Yet even Moses stopped short: he did not kill the Midianite virgins. Paine speaks of the feelings of the Midianite mothers, destined to die, but goes on to inquire into the feelings of the daughters and their inevitable rage and resentment of Moses' cruelty. "It is in vain that we attempt to impose upon nature, for nature will have her course, and the religion that tortures all her social ties is a false religion."[115] Moses shows the horror and the ultimate failure of Jacobinism: even the zealous cannot *obliterate* the world of women, private life and interest. Sexual desire betrays even very pure revolutionaries, as it did Moses and the Israelites, who kept virgins for their "prey." This compromise, however, introduced embittered alien women into the household of Israel; Moses' policy is futile as well as cruel.

Similarly, in discussing Joshua, Paine makes mention of an anachronistic reference to the capture of Jerusalem, "As for

[114] *Ibid.*, 1: 528; he acknowledges and calls attention to this digression with an explicit "return to my subject" on p. 529.
[115] *Ibid.*, 1: 529.

the Jebusites, the children of Judah could not drive them out, but the Jebusites dwell with the children of Judah at Jerusalem unto this day" (Josh. 15:63). He again calls attention to this passage when he is speaking of Judges, going on to maintain that Jerusalem was not taken until David's time and that Judges must have been written during David's reign.[116] The account of David's capture to which Paine refers describes David's ruthless attempt to purify Jerusalem, smiting not only the Jebusites but—monstrously—the lame and blind "that are hated of David's soul" (2 Sam. 5:8). Like the utopian revolutionaries, David yearned for a city free from ugliness as well as free from sin.

Paine proceeds to say that David's taking of the city is "also in I Chron., chap. xiv, ver. 4, etc.," but this verse does *not* describe the conquest of the city. Rather, it refers to the children David fathered in Jerusalem, and the preceding verse speaks of the taking, not of the city, but of the alien wives who gave birth to those offspring.[117] Even David, who would not bring the ark into an impure city, succumbs to desire and makes room for alien women.[118]

[116] *Ibid.*, 1: 533–535.

[117] *Ibid.*, 1: 535; compare 1 Chron. 14:3–4. Later discussing the errors in Ezra's numbering of Israel, Paine cites Ezra 2:3–60 in arriving at his total, contrasting it with the different figure given in verse 64 (*Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 546). Paine omits verses 61–63 which may account for the discrepancy; they refer to the children of priests, fathered on captured Gileadite women and regarded as "polluted," but nevertheless protected by David (1 Kings 2:7), who may have hated the lame, but appears to have had softer feelings for children.

[118] 1 Chron. 13:13. A third example of Paine's point is found in his treatment of the first book of Samuel (*Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 535–537). Referring to Samuel's death, Paine first mentions Saul's visit to the Witch of Endor, when Samuel's shade was summoned (1 Sam. 28). Only later does he speak of Samuel's death itself (1 Sam. 25). This inversion of chronological order—and Paine's critique of Scripture has emphasized just such errors—makes Saul's visit central among Paine's three citations from 1 Samuel (the other is 1 Sam. 9). Saul has been zealous to drive out witches and wizards, trying to purge Israel of superstition (1 Sam. 28:9). Yet, beset by fears and anxieties, Saul loses his nerve and turns to a witch's mediation. The woman does not console him, however, and her hostile vision completes the unmanning of Saul. In a moment of uncertainty, Saul needs support; given his record of persecution, he can expect—and gets—only enmity.

Yet conceding the faults of revolutionary violence, Paine still ranked the framers' liberalism among the fatuities. In addition to the defects of its trust in laws and in history, liberalism itself was "amphibious," tainted by its biblical past and rearing. Enlightened thinkers and partisans of science, after all, were founding theories on the "moral sentiments," appealing to the "heart," and speaking kindly of love.[119] Ancient faith and its confraternity of redemption, love and grace, could only be dispelled by a new teaching shaping a new education. To prevail, however, such a doctrine must first win—not conquer—women and the private world.

Paine prescribed a new prophecy, a new poetic making, to charm and enchant humanity. Deborah and Barak, Paine wrote, "are called prophets, not because they predicted anything, but because they composed the poem or song that bears their name, in celebration of an act already done."[120] But Deborah *did* predict: she foretold Barak's victory over Sisera, and also that Sisera would fall by a woman's hand (Judg. 4:6–7,9,14). Moreover, while the Bible does call Deborah a prophetess, Barak is not called a prophet at all. In fact, Barak is portrayed as a man morally dependent on woman, one who will not even go to battle unless Deborah goes with him (Judg. 4:4,8).

In the same passage, Paine also asserts that "David is ranked among the prophets, for he was a musician. . . ."[121] Yet so far as I can discover, the closest biblical connection between David and the prophets is drawn by Paul, who groups Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephtha, David, Samuel "and the prophets," praising them not as musicians but as men who have *subdued kingdoms* through faith (Heb. 11:32). Given Paine's claims, it is also noteworthy that Paul mentions Barak, and that he does so without referring to Deborah.

[119] *Life and Selected Writings of Jefferson*, pp. 395–407; Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, pp. 85, 113–114, 225.

[120] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 476.

[121] *Ibid.*

In Paul's list, moreover, the central figure is Jephtha, and Jephtha—a ruthless leader, for whom God's will is made manifest by success in battle—is an important, repeated illustration in Locke's Treatises. Jephtha, in fact, is willing to sacrifice his daughter to obtain victory.[122]

Paine elevates Barak and David, the two singers on Paul's list, to the rank of prophets. Unlike Locke, he does not appeal to Jephtha, the man of force. Instead, he praises two men who knew how to fascinate and beguile, masters of the womanly arts as well as skilled soldiers. Without appropriate gramarye, Paine was convinced, neither the force of law nor the reason of science would be able to eradicate their old adversaries, and Paine—a great spellbinder—offered his own version of Deist faith in the hope of winning that final victory.

Natural Religion

The articles of Paine's natural religion begin with a Supreme Being who reveals himself only "in the works of creation and by that repugnance we feel in ourselves toward bad actions and the disposition to good ones." Associated with benevolent morality and with the idea of equality, Paine's deity appears to be no mere demiurge, especially since Paine asserts his own "hope for happiness beyond this life."[123]

In this spirit, Paine begins his chapter "Of True Theology" by referring to nature as a "fair creation" which "cost us nothing." He proceeds to ask, "Is it we that light up the sun, that pour down the rain, and fill the earth with abundance?"[124] Yet

[122] Judg. 11:23–24, 30–40; John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, I, sec. 163; II, secs. 21, 109, 241.

[123] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 596, 464; however, the proposition that God's "Word" is to be found in things beheld or seen, rather than in things said or heard, assigns a second-class and suspect status to Paine's own words (1: 482, 490–491).

[124] *Ibid.*, 1: 472.

surely the abundance we enjoy is, to a considerable extent, the result of human work, and Paine's reminder that the universe came without *costs* does not speak of any *benefits*. The paragraph ends with Paine observing that the "vast machinery of the universe" goes on "whether we sleep or wake." Nature, that "fair creation," is blindly indifferent to us, "fair" not so much in being beautiful as in being just, no respecter of persons.

In Paine's telling of the story of Bethlehem, nature is revealed as even less generous. Jesus, Paine declares, was the Son of God only in the sense that all human beings are, "for the Creator is the Father of All." He then describes Jesus' family as "extremely poor, as appears from their not being able to pay for a bed when he was born."[125] Of course, the text makes no such statement, its familiar words telling us instead that "there was no room for them at the inn" (Luke 2:8). Paine's rendition ties Jesus to the poor and calls attention to social injustice, but it also indicates how inadequately the universal Father provides for his offspring, a point Paine will make more directly later on.

In fact, Paine's subtler teaching is that nature reveals no moral law or meaning. Arguing that human beings can know God only as a first cause, discovered by reason, Paine tells us that "some chapters of Job and the 19th Psalm" are the only parts of the Bible "that convey to us any idea of God." These, Paine says, are "true *deistical* compositions," since they treat God through his works. Paine then quotes, not the text of the Nineteenth Psalm, but Addison's English paraphrase. Addison speaks of discerning a divine hand in the order of the heavens, as the psalm does, but omits the psalm's reference to the Lord's law ("perfect, converting the soul"), to the Lord's testimony ("sure, making the wise simple"), and to human sin, the result of neglecting law and testimony.[126] Unlike the psalmist, Paine separates nature from moral truth.

[125] *Ibid.*, 477–478.
[126] *Ibid.*, 1: 484–485; compare Ps. 19:7–13.

Later, Paine will tell his readers that, while we can observe the working of nature, its "operating cause"—Paine means its first and final cause—is perhaps the only true mystery, unknown and undecipherable. This is for the better, Paine contends, because even if we knew the secret, we could not perform the act of creation. Morality, however, is excepted from this argument: "The God in whom we believe is a God of moral truth. . . ." The distinction between physical nature and morality, then, lies in the fact that *belief* is the source of truth about moral matters. Moral creation, unlike its physical counterpart, is within our power because morality is essentially a thing of human making.[127]

Paine's exegesis on Job 11:7 maintains that we can, by searching, find out God (in contrast to the rhetorical implication of Job's first question) but that we cannot "find out the Almighty unto perfection" because his attributes cannot be completely known. In this discussion, Paine indicates three times that creation affords some, though ultimately incomplete, manifestation of God's "power and wisdom." In a similar passage, Locke, after speaking of the natural proofs of God's wisdom and power, went on to argue that God's "bounty and goodness" and his "peculiar care of mankind" are made evident only by God's revealed promises.[128] Just so, Paine, who eschews Scripture and revelation, makes no mention of God's goodness.

For that matter, as Paine's argument instructs us, while we can know that we exist "by" God's power, we have no reason to believe that this power is omnipotent. "True Theology," in Paine's treatment, proves to be natural science and mechanics,

[127] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 505–506. Paine is less critical of Genesis 1 than one might expect. He dismisses the account of creation as "traditionary," but Paine also asserts that "every nation of people has been world-makers, and the Israelites had as much right to set up in the trade of world-making as any of the rest" (*Ibid.*, 1: 474).

[128] *Ibid.*, 1: 486; Locke, *Reasonableness of Christianity*, sec. 228.

the means of knowing and moving the universe.[129]

And human beings need to move or master nature. The "munificence" of God in his role as "Almighty Lecturer," of which Paine speaks, appears to consist in not impeding humanity—opening the universe to humanity's discovering, but otherwise leaving humankind to provide for itself.[130] At the end of *The Age of Reason*, as we have already observed, Paine declares that without reason and science, the human being "would be scarcely distinguishable in appearance and condition from a common animal."[131]

God's laissez-faire governance gives special meaning to the principle of benevolence—that we should contribute to the "happiness of our fellow creatures"—since Paine says this is best achieved by acting toward others "as he acts benignly toward all." In these terms, benevolence consists in imposing no unnecessary barriers, and perhaps in providing opportunity, but otherwise in leaving human beings alone. Along with the duty to love our enemies, Paine rejects the obligation to care for strangers, and it might be said that the chilly benevolence of Paine's creed estranges us all.[132]

Just as divine benevolence, in Paine's teaching, eventually resolves itself into indifference, so the afterlife is gradually whittled down to a shadowy possibility. Paine rejects any religious creed that "shocks the mind of a child," having concluded, on the basis of his own experience, that children are naturally shocked by the idea of a father sacrificing his son.[133] Without an afterlife, however, we would be forced to conclude that the universal Father kills *all* his children. Belief

[129] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 487–489, 602–603. Paine illustrates his argument by discussing the triangle—the closest secular approximation of the Trinity's three in one and one in three—in relation to *leverage*. The scientific "trinity," in other words, involves the power to move nature (1: 489–490, 493).

[130] *Ibid.*, 1: 490.

[131] *Ibid.*, 1: 603.

[132] *Ibid.*, 1: 506. On the general point, see Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* (New York: Viking, 1984).

[133] *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 497–498.

in a future state appears to be a necessary concession to the mind of the child, and perhaps to the child in all of us, but Paine hopes to promote our weaning.

At the end of Part I, Paine asserts his "positive conviction" that "the Power that gave me existence is able to continue it . . . with or without this body," adding the very limited assurance that a future state is "more probable" than existence before birth.[134] In Part II, however, he rejects the idea of resurrection, holding that immortality is continued "consciousness of existence." Alone among human products, Paine argues, thought "is capable of being immortal." This, in turn, suggests that the consciousness which can produce an immortal thing "can be immortal also."[135] Soon, however, Paine's argument turns utilitarian: since the "Power that called us into being" *can* call us to account, it is rational to believe that he *will*. Probability, "or even a possibility," is enough.[136] Yet if we are rational, a mere possibility will not tempt us to play for high stakes: it may merit a modest investment in faith and decency, but not one that entails a great price. However, the passive benevolence of Paine's creed seems to ask for little more.

Providing children with a religious and moral education suited to their needs, Paine hoped to prepare them for faith in science, his true grail. Just as Paine himself had moved form Quakerism to science, so human beings reared in Paine's "true deism" would be led away from anthropocentrism and prepared for the scientific revelation that the Christian faith—and perhaps this world itself—is "little and ridiculous" when compared with a universe encompassing a plurality of worlds. It was no soft curriculum Paine was outlining: holding it fortunate that he had repressed his "turn . . . for poetry" until

[134] *Ibid.*, 1: 512.

[135] *Ibid.*, 1: 592; Paine surely recognized that, since thought is "immortal" only to the extent that it is thought by others, the immortality of its author might rest on the same foundation.

[136] *Ibid.*, 1: 599.

he had mastered science, he recommended the same Adeimantus-like censorship of the imagination to others.[137]

Paine hoped for human beings able to assert rational mastery over the feelings and over human relationships. In Benjamin Franklin, Paine found a model: "his mind was ever young, ever serene," Paine wrote; "science that never grows gray was ever his mistress."[138] Those who know Franklin's reputation may smile, but Paine meant us to think Franklin exemplary because he was not mastered by his mistresses. Paine's deprecation of pleasure as a source of happiness might seem unexceptionable were it not for the fact that he rejected love's dependencies along with the perishing things of this life. In Paine's view, liberty—mastery, or at least independence—shone as the human goal. Paine set out to free human beings from love, regarding that emancipation as a signpost of the age of reason. So understood, however, reason is a little sad and even more callow, lacking Solomon's ancient wisdom and love's high teaching.[139]

Love's Survival

Paine, like his friend Jefferson, appears to have underrated the strength of biblical religion in America. Hoping that the United States had "returned generally to sentiments worthy of former times," Jefferson invited Paine home in 1801, but Paine

[137] *Ibid.*, 1: 496, 498–504.

[138] *Ibid.*, 1: 551. Franklin's utilitarian—or latitudinarian—approach to sexual matters was well known (*Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, eds. Leonard W. Labaree et al. [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964], p. 150). Paine's imagery—contrasting graying mistresses with ageless science—is far too evocative not to suggest Franklin's "Old Mistress Apologue" (better known as "Advice to a Young Man on the Choice of His Mistress"). The essay was not published during Paine's lifetime, but it seems likely that Franklin discoursed on the subject, or even read the essay among friends. Long before it was published, the essay had acquired a certain "clandestine fame" (*Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, eds. Leonard W. Labaree et al. [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959–], 3: 27–31).

[139] Eccles. 4:7–12; John 16:12–13.

met a storm of vituperation. Even old allies like Rush and Sam Adams had critical words. Paine became, as Dixon Wecter wrote, a "hero in reverse."[140]

Orthodoxy was only Paine's most visible adversary. Despite Jefferson's theological heterodoxy, for example, his political thinking incorporated Christian ideas and influences in Jefferson's suspicion of commercialism, his opposition to self-love, and his hope of uniting Americans—and humanity—by "love, charity, peace, common wants and common aids."[141] As Paine suspected, American liberalism was "amphibious," touched by Christian ethics even when it abandoned Christian faith, and unwilling to settle for Paine's bloodless benevolence.

Today, however, most of Paine's anxieties seem exaggerated or misplaced. Liberal civil religion, embodied in the laws, appears to be carrying the day. Evangelism thunders, but in the main the "cosmopolitan, universal theology of the republic" prevails.[142] Ronald Reagan, a paladin for religious conservatives, even quotes Tom Paine; the laws are shaping the "habits of the heart."[143]

Yet even where God is thought to be dead, love is still alive—although, to be sure, love today is too often wordless as well as blind, reduced to hurling itself against the walls of the prison of the self.[144] Still, the fact of love's survival, even in a maimed form, ought to cheer us.

Paine and his allies taught a freedom which too easily becomes servile. Liberal political society cannot survive if it aims only at survival; obsessed with profit and well-being, a

[140] Dixon Wecter, "Hero in Reverse," *Virginia Quarterly* 18 (1942): 243–259; G. Adolph Koch, *Republican Religion* (New York: Holt, 1933), pp. 130–146.

[141] *Life and Selected Writings of Jefferson*, pp. 570, 639–640; *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. L.J. Cappon (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), pp. 484–485; *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 13: 377. On Jefferson's theology, see Kessler, "Jefferson's Rational Religion," pp. 58–78.

[142] Mead, *Nation with the Soul of a Church*, pp. 22–25, 69.

[143] Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).

[144] *Democracy in America* 2: 120.

commercial society stands to lose everything; having rights is no guarantee against acquiescing in wrongs. The last half-century is document enough. Liberal regimes need more than liberalism, more than individual liberty and self-interest rightly understood.[145] They need that ruler's wisdom to which love holds a key. Love moves human beings beyond the justice of personal claims to the sacrifice that may be demanded by the good of the whole. Anticipating Zarathustra, Paine rejected the camel of faith and the lion of rebellion in favor of the child.[146] Yet human beings are love-children even when bereft; it is no small virtue that liberalism lets the camel survive, if only in the desert.

[145] John P. Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
[146] *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, ch. 1.