

TOM PAINE

A Political life

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On Religion

Beginning in January 1803, within weeks of Paine's having returned to America, his writings openly contradicted his avowed conviction that party faction was bad for the American republic. Everything he published contributed points and arguments that deepened, not healed, the existing party wounds within American society. The paradox was that, unconsciously, Paine actually contributed to the pluralization of power and identities that is now regarded as a vital feature of republican democracy. His vigorous attacks on the Federalists, which hastened the crystallization of party politics, were only one aspect of this paradox. Of greater consequence were his digs into the soil of religious assumptions binding together American civil society.

These probes hardened the hearts and toughened the resolve of Paine's critics and encouraged them to strike back against what they considered vicious cuts into the body politic. Trouble descended on Paine after New Year's Day, 1803, when he wrote a carefully worded letter to Samuel Adams on the subject of religion and politics. The previous month, Adams, then eighty years old and living quietly in retirement, had written to Paine to express his concern about his friend's atheism. Adams praised Paine's fundamental contributions to the formation of the United States: "Your Common Sense and your Crisis unquestionably awakened the public mind, and led the people loudly to call for a declaration of our national independence. I therefore esteemed you as a warm friend to the liberty, and lasting welfare of the human race." Adams's words then stiffened: "But when I heard that you had turned your mind to a defense of infidelity, I felt myself much astonished and more grieved that you had attempted a measure so injurious to the feelings and so repugnant to the true interest of so great a part of the citizens of the United States." Adams went on to remind Paine that neither religion nor liberty could long survive amid "the tumult of altercation" and "the noise and violence

of faction." He concluded, "Do you think that your pen or the pen of any other man can unchristianize the mass of our citizens, or have you hopes of converting a few of them to assist you in so bad a cause?"⁵⁸

Paine put care into his reply. He showed a draft to acquaintances in Washington and reworked it to incorporate their reactions. He considered the letter politically important and sent a copy to the *National Intelligencer* for publication, the aim being to ensure the maximum possible readership of the first reply to his critics on the subject of religion since his return to America. Throughout, Paine's tone was civil and humble. "Even error has a claim to indulgence, if not respect, when it is believed to be truth," he began, pleading for less calumny, more freedom of expression, and greater tolerance of social divisions — especially religious divisions — within the young republic. He went out of his way to repeat the key point that most critics of *The Age of Reason* had willfully ignored: that he was a firm believer in God and that the world's religions, despite their various renditions of God, actually concurred. "Do we want to contemplate His power?" asked Paine, adopting for a moment the tone of priest, scholar, and holy man. "We see it in the immensity of the creation. Do we want to contemplate His wisdom? We see it in the unchangeable order by which the incomprehensible whole is governed. Do we want to contemplate His munificence? We see it in the abundance with which He fills the earth. Do we want to contemplate His mercy? We see it in His not withholding that abundance even from the unthankful."

Paine presented a version of his belief in the possibility of global harmony among citizens of all nations by arguing that the evident diversity of life on earth is founded ultimately upon a publicly indisputable rock-solid foundation that is the wellspring of all life, the giver of meaning to all things, the First Principle of the universe. Yet in literary terms, the letter to Adams contained a strategic contradiction. The sheer energy and radicalism with which it questioned orthodox Christianity unnerved many of Paine's readers, most of whom (like Adams himself) had heard of but never read *The Age of Reason*. Intended or not, the letter to Adams felt like a knife in the heart of Christianity, which currently gripped American civil society and which, in Paine's view, made its citizens more narrow-minded and bigoted than was consistent with an open and pluralistic democratic republic. Christians, Paine told Adams, do not like to admit that the history of Christianity is the history of changing human interpretations of the meaning of Christianity. He argued that Christianity is riddled with theanthropy — the projection onto God of qualities that are alleged to be essentially derived from that Being but are in fact the artifi-

cial work of flesh-and-blood human beings who confuse and conflate the identity of God with their own temporal existence on earth. Christianity represents God in man's own image. Paine drew from this the conclusion that infidelity is an intrinsic feature of the Christian tradition and not somehow its opposite. "If we go back to your ancestors and mine three or four hundred years ago," he said, "we shall find them praying to Saints and Virgins, and believing in purgatory and transubstantiation; and therefore all of us are infidels according to our forefathers' belief." He flung Adams an example to ponder: "The books that compose the New Testament were voted by *yeas* and *nays* to be the Word of God, as you now vote a law, by the popish Councils of Nice and Laodicea about one thousand four hundred and fifty years ago."

Paine reminded Adams that the peoples of Christian countries had paid a high price for Christians' dogmatic interpretations of their own Christianity. Latter-day Christians may well pride themselves on their reasonableness and charitableness, but the sad fact is, said Paine, that the history of Christianity has been full of dogmatism, scourged by the insistence that this or that interpretation of Christianity is absolutely true. Such dogmatism is a quintessential, not an accidental, feature of Christianity. Paine insisted that Christianity and other organized religions — if only to preserve their power over their followers, attract believers, and protect themselves against their competitors — are compelled to pretend that they are infallible. Intolerance and persecution are the inevitable results. Viewed lightheartedly, such dogmatism amounts to an absurdity. "If I do not believe as you believe, it proves that you do not believe as I believe, and this is all that it proves," he noted. Unfortunately, Paine argued, persecution and bloodshed, pushing and shoving, have been the inevitable practical consequences of dogmatism: "The world has been over-run with fable and creeds of human invention, with sectaries of whole nations against all other nations, and sectaries of those sectaries in each of them against each other." With the notable exception of the Quakers, he continued, each Christian faction has persecuted as it has been persecuted. "Those who fled from persecution persecuted in their turn, and it is this confusion of creeds that has filled the world with persecution and deluged it with blood."

The idea that Christianity, or its various sects, is a mask invented by human beings for the purpose of carrying on struggles for power over others was among Paine's most original insights. Developed (it seems) in isolation from Comte de Volney's parallel argument and well before the similar ideas of nineteenth-century figures such as Karl Marx and Friedrich

Nietzsche, it was used by Paine to explain to Adams why he considered utterly dishonest the current Federalist campaign against him and his supposed atheism. Their “*war-whoop* of the pulpit,” as he called it, was being used to conceal their lust for power and to legitimate their attempts to destroy the system of federal representative institutions established during the Revolution. But Paine’s argument had much broader ramifications, as many critics of *The Age of Reason* quickly spotted. By attacking the Christian tradition in the name of God, Paine, whether he knew it or not, prepared the intellectual ground in America and elsewhere for a more secular system of government and society in which, at a minimum, the freedom to believe and worship according to individual and group conscience required a pluralistic civil society, within whose nooks and crannies citizens enjoy the space in which to exercise the freedom *not* to believe and to shun the worshipping of any religion. The seeds of this subversive implication were evident in Paine’s moving final sentence to Adams: “Our relation to each other in this world is as men, and the man who is a friend to man and to his rights, let his religious opinions be what they may, is a good citizen, to whom I can give, as I ought to do, and as every other ought, the right hand of fellowship, and to none with more hearty good will, my dear friend, than to you.”⁵⁹