

Prospect Papers

from *The Prospect*, a magazine started by Elihu Palmer, and to which Paine contributed 13 essays.

“The preacher of the foregoing sermon [by a Protestant minister in England] speaks a great deal about infidelity, but does not define what he means by it. His harangue is a general exclamation. Everything, I suppose, that is not in his creed is infidelity with him, and his creed is infidelity with me. Infidelity is believing falsely. If what christians believe is not true, it is the christians that are the infidels.

The point between deists and christians is not about doctrine, but about fact — for if the things believed by the christians to be facts, are not facts, the doctrine founded thereon falls of itself. There is such a book as the bible, but is it a fact that the bible is revealed religion? The christians cannot prove it is. They put tradition in place of evidence, and tradition is not proof. If it were, the reality of witches could be proved by the same kind of evidence.

The bible is a history of the times of which it speaks, and history is not revelation. The obscene and vulgar stories in the bible are as repugnant to our ideas of the purity of a divine Being, as the horrid cruelties and murders it ascribes to him, are repugnant to our ideas of His justice. It is the reverence of the Deists for the attributes of the DEITY, that causes them to reject the bible.”

“Why do not the christians, to be consistent, make saints of Judas and Pontius Pilate, for they were the persons who accomplished the acts of salvation. The merit of a sacrifice, if there can be any merit in it, was never in the thing sacrificed, but in the persons offering up the sacrifice — and therefore Judas and Pontius Pilate ought to stand first on the calendar of saints.”

(February 18, 1804)

“Books, whether Bibles or Korans, carry no evidence of being the work of any other power than man. It is only that which man cannot do that carries the evidence of being the work of a superior power. Man could not invent and make a universe — he could not invent nature, for nature is of divine origin. It is the laws by which the universe is governed. When, therefore, we look through nature up to nature’s God, we are in the right road of happiness, but when we trust to books as the word of God, and confide in them as revealed religion, we are afloat on the ocean of uncertainty, and shatter into contending factions. The term, therefore, natural religion, explains itself to be divine religion, and the term revealed religion involves in it the suspicion of being artificial.”

(March 3, 1804)

“Here it is that the religion of Deism is superior to the Christian religion. It is free from all those invented and torturing articles that shock our reason or injure our humanity, and with which the Christian religion abounds. Its creed is pure, and sublimely simple. It believes in God and there it rests. It honours reason as the choicest gift of God to man, and the faculty by which he is enabled to contemplate the power, wisdom, and goodness of the Creator displayed in the creation; and reposing itself on his protection, both here and hereafter, it avoids all presumptuous beliefs, and rejects, as the fabulous inventions of men, all books pretending to revelation.”

(June 30 and July 7, 1804)

“There is not an article in the Christian religion that is cognizable by religion. The Deistical article of your religion, the belief of a God, is no more a Christian article than it is a Mahometan article. It is an universal article, common to all religions, and which is held in greater purity by Turks than by Christians; but the Deistical church is the only one which holds it in real purity; because that church acknowledges

no co- partnership with God. It believes in him solely; and knows nothing of Sons, married Virgins, nor Ghosts. It holds all these things to be the fables of priest-craft.”

(August 18, 1804)

“Since then there is so much doubt and uncertainty about the bible, some asserting, and others denying it to be the word of God, it is best that the whole matter come out. It is necessary for the information of the world that it should. A better time cannot offer than while the Government, patronizing no one sect or opinion in preference to another, protects equally the rights of all; and certainly every man must spurn the idea of an ecclesiastical tyranny engrossing the rights of the press and holding it free only for itself.”

“Whilst the terrors of the Church and the tyranny of the state, hung like a pointed sword over Europe, men were commanded to believe what the church told them, or go to the stake. All enquiries into the authenticity of the Bible were shut out by the inquisition. We ought therefore to suspect that a great mass of information respecting the bible and the introduction of it into the world has been suppressed by the united tyranny of Church and State, for the purpose of keeping people in ignorance, and which ought to be known.”

(June 17, 1804)