

Worship and Church Bells

Thomas Paine, letter to Camille Jordan, June 1797

Philip Foner's introduction:

This pamphlet, published in the summer of 1797 in Paris and London, was Paine's reply to a Report made to the French Convention by Camille Jordan, a royalist lawyer and member of the Council of Five Hundred, recommending the restoration of certain Catholic privileges, especially the church bells. The petition was rejected by the Convention.

“The modes of worship are as various as the sects are numerous; and amidst all this variety and multiplicity there is but one article of belief in which every religion in the world agrees. That article has universal sanction. It is the belief of a God, or what the Greeks described by the word Theism, and the Latins by that of Deism.

Upon this one article have been erected all the different superstructures of creeds and ceremonies continually warring with each other that now exist or ever existed. But the men most and best informed upon the subject of theology rest themselves upon this universal article, and hold all the various superstructures erected thereon to be at least doubtful, if not altogether artificial.

The intellectual part of religion is a private affair between every man and his Maker, and in which no third party has any right to interfere. The practical part consists in our doing good to each other. But since religion has been made into a trade, the practical part has been made to consist of ceremonies performed by men called priests; and the people have been amused with ceremonial shows, processions and bells.

By devices of this kind true religion has been banished; and such means have been found out to extract money even from the pockets of the poor, instead of contributing to their relief.

No man ought to make a living by religion. It is dishonest so to do. Religion is not an act that can be performed by proxy. One person cannot act religion for another. Every person must perform it for himself; and all that a priest can do is to take from him; he wants nothing but his money and then to riot in the spoil and laugh at his credulity.

The only people who, as a professional sect of Christians provide for the poor of their society, are people known by the name of Quakers. Those men have no priests. They assemble quietly in their places of meeting, and do not disturb their neighbors with shows and noise of bells. Religion does not unite itself to show and noise. True religion is without either. Where there is both there is no true religion.

The first object for inquiry in all cases, more especially in matters of religious concern, is TRUTH. We ought to inquire into the truth of whatever we are taught to believe, and it is certain that the books called the Scriptures stand in this respect in more than a doubtful predicament.

They have been held in existence, and in a sort of credit among the common class of people, by art, terror and persecution. They have little or no credit among the enlightened part, but they have been made the means of encumbering the world with a numerous priesthood, who have fattened on the labor of the people and consumed the sustenance that ought to be applied to the widows and the poor.

It is a want of feeling to talk of priests and bells while so many infants are perishing in the hospitals, and aged and infirm poor in the streets, from the want of necessaries. The abundance that France produces is sufficient for every want, if rightly applied; but priests and bells, like articles of luxury, ought to be the least articles of consideration.

We talk of religion. Let us talk of truth; for that which is not truth is not worthy of the name of religion.”

“As to bells, they are a public nuisance. If one profession is to have bells, and another has the right to use the instruments of the same kind, or any other noisy instrument, some may choose to meet at the sound of cannon, another at the beat of drum, another at the sound of trumpets, and so on, until the whole becomes a scene of general confusion. But if less nights and days they undergo, we shall feel the impropriety of increasing their distress by the noise of bells, or any other noisy instruments.

Quiet and private domestic devotion neither offends nor incommodes anybody; and the Constitution has wisely guarded against the use of externals. Bells come under this description, and public processions still more so.”

Conclusion

“Instead of concluding in the manner you have done, you ought rather to have said:

“O my colleagues! we are arrived at a glorious period—a period that promises more than we could have expected, and all that we could have wished. Let us hasten to take into consideration the honors and rewards due to our brave defenders. Let us hasten to give encouragement to agriculture and manufactures, that commerce may reinstate itself, and our people have employment. Let us review the condition of the suffering poor, and wipe from our country the reproach of forgetting them.

“Let us devise means to establish schools of instruction, that we may banish the ignorance that the ancien regime of kings and priests had spread among the people. Let us propagate morality, unfettered by superstition. Let us cultivate justice and benevolence, that the God of our fathers may bless us. The helpless

infant and the aged poor cry to us to remember them. Let not wretchedness be seen in our streets. Let France exhibit to the world the glorious example of expelling ignorance and misery together.

“Let these, my virtuous colleagues, be the subject of our care that, when we return among our fellow-citizens they may say, Worthy representatives! you have done well. You have done justice and honor to our brave defenders. You have encouraged agriculture, cherished our decayed manufactures, given new life to commerce, and employment to our people.

“You have removed from our country the reproach of forgetting the poor- You have caused the cry of the orphan to cease- You have wiped the tear from the eye of the suffering mother- You have given comfort to the aged and infirm- You have penetrated into the gloomy recesses of wretchedness, and have banished it.

“Welcome among us, ye brave and virtuous representatives, and may your example be followed by your successors!”

THOMAS PAINE
PARIS, 1797.