

# **TOM PAINE'S *AGE OF REASON* AND MODERN UNBELIEF**

Irving Hexham & Karla Poewe

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As I went out in the morning  
To breathe the air around Tom Paine's  
I spied the fairest damsel  
That ever did walk in chains.  
I offer'd her my hand,  
She took me by the arm.  
I knew that very instant,  
She meant to do me harm.

Bob Dylan

## **Introduction**

Two hundred years ago Tom Paine (1737-1809) nuked the advance of Evangelical Christianity with his *Age of Reason* (1794-1796).<sup>1</sup> Like a Cruise Missile his book struck home with deadly effect. Everywhere it was read believers lost their faith and skeptics were convinced they held the truth. Biblical Criticism, moral dilemmas, the challenge of other Faiths, literary theories and issues of science were all marshaled by Paine to destroy the confidence of believers. Anyone wishing to understand the intellectual issues facing Christianity today needs to face the fury of Paine's wrath because in embryo the criticisms we face today are found in Paine.

The arguments Paine advanced devastated Christian people throughout the nineteenth century. Wherever Anglo-Saxon Methodism or Continental Pietism thrived

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Paine, ed by William M. van der Weyde, *The Life and Works of Tom Paine*, New Rochelle, Tom Paine

*The Age of Reason* targeted Christians whose lively faith it destroyed. Even today we are contaminated by the fallout from Paine's work. Yet now few people recognize his name except as a haunting image in Bob Dylan's "As I Went Out One Morning" on his *John Wesley Harding* album.

### **Avoiding Paine**

Today there is a tendency to avoid dealing with Tom Paine and his criticisms of religion. Nevertheless, the religious writings of Tom Paine, American Revolutionary leader and master of propaganda, are perhaps the most important and neglected texts in the development of modern attitudes to religion. His role in the development of Religious Studies as a field of academic interest is both immense and almost completely ignored by modern scholarship. Nevertheless, British sociologist Susan Budd, in her article "The Loss of Faith: Reasons for Unbelief among Members of the Secular Movement in England, 1850-1950,"<sup>2</sup> that Paine "remained a dominant influence" on unbelief because of "the enormous circulation" of *The Age of Reason*.<sup>3</sup>

Why Paine's work and immensely valuable insights should be ignored by scholars writing about religion is an interesting question in itself. Secular historians certainly recognize his importance both as a political and religious writer. But, in theology and religious studies there is almost a conspiracy of silence.

In the three volume study *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West*<sup>4</sup> Paine is

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National Historical Society, 1925, Vol. VIII, p. 3

<sup>2</sup>Susan Budd, "The Loss of Faith: Reasons for Unbelief among Members of the Secular Movement in England, 1850-1950," *Past and Present*, 1967, No. 36, pp. 106-125

<sup>3</sup>Budd, 1967, p. 110

<sup>4</sup>Ninian Smart, John Clayton, Patrick Sherry and Steven Katz, eds., *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, 3 vols.

completely ignored. Similarly, Claude Welch in *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*<sup>5</sup> mentions Paine only once in volume one in a footnote which simply says "Paine was especially widely read."<sup>6</sup> But, there is no discussion of who read him or what effect his writings had on the contemporary religious scene. Then in volume 2 he simply points out that "Tom Paine's *Age of Reason*" was "a work regularly reprinted by the" Rationalist Press Association in England without commenting on its impact in North America which the whole tenor of his argument implicitly dismisses.<sup>7</sup>

Other books such as Nathan Hatch's much acclaimed *The Democratization of American Christianity*<sup>8</sup> mention Paine but follow the lead of earlier church historians and theological writers in completely failing to discuss his work or its impact.<sup>9</sup> David Beddington, an English evangelical historian is equally blind to Paine's importance in his recent book *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*<sup>10</sup> which makes no mention of Paine at all.

One reason for why so many religious writers ignore Paine is possibly the influence of Theology on Religious Studies. Most people who dominate the field of religious studies today, especially western religions, were originally trained in theology or church history. Hence they bring with them a tradition of scholarship which ignored men like Tom Paine. For example neither

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<sup>5</sup>Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, New Haven, Yale University Press, vol. 1, 1975, vol. 2, 1985

<sup>6</sup> Welch, 1975, p. 129, note 1

<sup>7</sup>For example in note 4 on page 129 of volume 1, Welch argues that "rationalist currents of thought seem to have had less effect in the United States than in Europe..." Later on page 215 of volume 2, he notes that "virulence in socialist hostility to Christianity was more characteristic of the Continental situation than of the British or American scene." While he may be correct in linking socialism to freethought he surely vastly underestimates the real impact of Paine and other freethinkers in Britain and America

<sup>8</sup>Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989

<sup>9</sup>Hatch does, in fact implicitly acknowledge Paine's importance when he writes "Nourished by sources as contradictory as George Whitefield and Tom Paine, many deeply religious people were set adrift from ecclesiastical establishments..." op cit, p. 225. Yet nowhere in his book does he discuss Paine's work

<sup>10</sup>David Beddington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730's to the 1980's*, London, Unwin Hyman, 1989

Paul Tillich in *Perspectives on 19th & 20th Century Protestant Theology*<sup>11</sup> nor Karl Barth in *From Rousseau to Ritschl*<sup>12</sup> make any mention of Paine. Therefore, if these giants, who dominated the scholarly scene earlier in this century, ignore Paine's work is it any wonder later writers follow their lead?

Nevertheless, Paine is important and secular historians recognize this. The claim that Paine did not influence nineteenth century religious thinking has been completely refuted by George Spater who shows that it is based on the fact that for a few years towards the end of his life and after his death Paine's influence was in decline. But, it revived strongly as after 1810 and continued to be influential at least until the end of the century. George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906) and Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891), Abraham (1809-1865) Emerson (1803-1882), Joseph Smith (1805-1844) all studied Paine's works as did thousands of others.<sup>13</sup>

The truth is that Tom Paine's writings were the scourge of religious thinkers in the nineteenth century. Even today their indirect influence remains strong. More than any other author Paine popularized free-thought by relentlessly attacking contemporary arguments for religious belief. He poured scorn on the Bible and prepared the way for Biblical Criticism.

## **Citizen Paine**

Thomas Paine was born in Thetford, England, the son of a Quaker corset-maker.

Although he grew up in a pious home Paine seems to have lost his faith in any form of

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<sup>11</sup>Paul Tillich, *Perspectives on 19th & 20th Century Protestant Theology*, New York, Harper & Row, 1967

<sup>12</sup>Karl Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl*, London, SCM, 1959

<sup>13</sup>Ian Dyck, ed., *Citizen of the World*, London, Christopher Helm, 1987, pp. 129-140

Christianity fairly early in life. Thereafter he became a Deist believing in a remote watchmaker type God who created the universe but had little interest in the personal affairs of men.

He emigrated to America in 1774 where he quickly joined the revolutionary movement. Publishing the forty-seven page pamphlet, *Common Sense* (1776), he urged an immediate declaration of independence. Later he wrote *The Rights of Man* (1791-1792)<sup>14</sup> in defense of the France Revolution and appealed to the English people to overthrow the monarchy by organizing a republic.

As a result of these "revolutionary activities" he was tried in absentia in England, convicted of treason, and outlawed in 1792. After the outbreak of the French Revolution he went to France where he was arrested and imprisoned as an English spy in Paris in December 1793. Facing an imminent death sentence remained in prison until November 1794 when he was released on request of American minister, James Monroe. Monroe argued that Paine was an American citizen and good citizen who deserved respect not punishment.

While in prison he wrote his infamous *The Age of Reason* published as Part I in 1794; and Part II in 1796. Returning to America in 1802 he spent his last years as a lonely neglected figure given to bouts of drinking and despair. He died in 1809.

### **Paine's Radical Criticism of Christianity**

Paine's work is remarkable because, in embryo, it contains all the themes used by later critics of Christianity. He presents a radical critique of the Bible, comments on the

implications of comparative religion and even offers a crude sociological approach to religious ideas similar to that later developed by Karl Marx. Yet in theology and religious studies there is almost a conspiracy of silence against his work.

Paine begins *The Age of Reason* by reciting his Creed and rejecting belief in the Trinity with the words:

I believe in one God, and no more. I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy.<sup>15</sup>

After these positive statements Paine makes it clear that he rejects all forms of dogma and established religion. Initially Paine's strategy is to create doubt in his reader's minds by relativizing Christian belief. For him Christianity is one false religion among many.

Constant references to Islam, Judaism and various Christian denominations enables Paine to argue that no one religion can possibly be true. He boldly announces:

The Jews have their Moses; the Christians their Jesus Christ, their apostles and saints; and the Turks their Mahomet; as if the way to God was not open to every man alike." Once this point is established Paine uses the same strategy to attack the idea of revelation. To Paine all claims to revelation are false because they contradict each other. In his words "Each of those churches accuses the other of unbelief; and, for my own part, I disbelieve them all ..."<sup>16</sup>

The effect of this approach is essentially that observed by Robert Bellah when he argued in 1978, that departments of Religious Studies create confusion in students' minds by

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<sup>14</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 6

<sup>15</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 50

<sup>16</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 7

introducing relativism in to the realm of faith with the result that they are instruments of secularization<sup>17</sup>

Of course, it could be replied that the very persistence of religion in human life suggests that humans are innately religious creatures. If this is so then the question must be asked whether we are a cosmic joke totally unsuited to our environment? How could evolution produce a religious creature in a religionless universe? And if we conclude that this is too unlikely for words then surely we have a duty to investigate religious claims precisely because one religion *may* be true. Thus instead of concluding that all religions are wrong we could just as easily conclude that either all religions are true or that only one religion is true while all other religions reflect that truth in one form or another.

### **The Problem of Myth**

To prevent Christians responding with an appeal to truth claims, Paine drives home his attack on Christianity by arguing that the stories that make up the basis of the Christian faith are derived from Greek paganism. He writes:

It is curious to observe how the theory of what is called the Christian church, sprung out of the tail of the heathen mythology. A direct corporation took place in the first instance ...<sup>18</sup>

The argument he uses here is essentially a development of Luther's polemic against Rome. A modern version, much loved by Jehovah's Witnesses is found in Alexander Hislop's book *The Two Babylons or Papal Worship Proved to be the Worship of Nimrod*

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Bellah, "Religious Studies as ,New Religion'", in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds., *Understanding the New Religions*, New York, Seabury, 1978, pp. 106-112.

<sup>18</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 11

*and His Wife*.<sup>19</sup> It states that after the days of the apostles the early Church was corrupted by the adoption of stories, beliefs and practices that made Christianity more acceptable to pagans.

In Luther's view, this corruption was seen in the Roman Catholic Church. Paine simply extends Luther's basic argument to include most Christian doctrines which he claims are pale shadows of pagan beliefs. Thus, the Trinity is said to be a mere reduction of the thousands of gods of the Greek pantheon to three. Why Christians should want to do this or stop at three instead of producing a through going monotheism or even becoming atheists Paine does not explain. Indeed his argument rests on the emotional force of semi-blasphemy rather than logic. More importantly it has been thoroughly refuted by scholars like J. Gresham Machen in his *The Origins of Paul's Religion* and *The Virgin Birth of Christ*.<sup>20</sup>

In context Paine uses a clever argument. But, as J. Gresham Machen and Raymond Brown who show that there is no literary dependence between Greek myths and Christian stories like the Virgin Birth. Once this is recognized, the skeptic has to think again because the Virgin Birth is such an unusual and patently absurd story that its origin has to be explained in some way. For Machen the only reasonable explanation is that it is based on truth. Paine is on much sounder ground discussing devotional practices. He writes:

The statue of Mary succeeded the statue of Diana of Ephesus. The deification of

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<sup>19</sup> Alexander Hislop's book was originally a 54 page pamphlet *The two Babylons: their identity and the present Antichrist also the last PLACE*, Edinburgh, W. Whyte & Co., published in 1853. It was reissued in an enlarged edition with the title *The Two Babylons or Papal Worship Proved to be the Worship of Nimrod and His Wife*, Neptune, N.J., Loizeaux Brothers, and by 1916 had 330 pages.

<sup>20</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *The Origins of Paul's Religion*, Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1947, first published 1925; and *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, London and Edinburgh, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, n.d.



heroes changed into the canonization of saints. The Mythologists had gods for everything; the Christian Mythologists had saints for everything.

He is right when he points out the historical link between the worship of Diane of the Ephesians and the adoration of Mary. When Paul visited Ephesus in Acts 19 he was attacked because the silversmiths of that city feared that the worship of a new god would rob them of their lucrative trade in images of Diane. Four centuries later, after Christianity had conquered the Roman Empire, the Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.) declared Mary *Theotokos* (Mother of God). In doing so it opened the way for the Christian use, in worship, of images of Mary visibly identical to statues of Diane.

Even here, however, one needs to be careful in judging. English monk Bede, in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, records how in 601 A.D. Pope Gregory wrote to Christian missionaries in England suggesting that rather than destroying pagan temples they should be:

... aspersed with holy water, altars set up, and relics enclosed in them. For if these temples are well built, they are to be purified from devil-worship, and dedicated to the service of the true God.<sup>21</sup>

The Pope also suggested that local customs such as:

sacrificing many oxen to devils," should be replaced by "some other solemnity...such as a day of Dedication or the Festivals of the holy martyrs ..."<sup>22</sup>

Gregory reasoned:

In this way, we hope that the people, seeing that its temples are not destroyed, may abandon idolatry and resort to these places as before, and may come to know and adore the true God...

He based this pragmatic approach on Biblical insights and common sense saying:

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<sup>21</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, translated by Leo Sherley-Price, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965, p. 86

It was in this way that God revealed Himself to the Israelite people in Egypt ... If the people are allowed some worldly pleasures in this way, they will more readily come to desire the joys of the spirit. For it is certainly impossible to eradicate all errors from obstinate minds at one stroke, and whoever wishes to climb to a mountain top climbs gradually step by step, and not in one leap.<sup>23</sup>

Given the force of Paine's writing it is easy to conclude that he was right. To do so overlooks an important point. Pope Gregory suggested using local buildings and customs to eradicate pagan superstitions. Nowhere did the Pope advocate adapting Christian *beliefs* to pagan ones. Rather he believed that by adapting to the external practices of a local culture the internal belief system could be effectively changed. In this sense the Pope's argument is similar to the one made by the evangelical missionary and mission theorist Don Richardson in his book *Peace Child*<sup>24</sup> which is adapt what one can without changing the core message.

### **The Person of Jesus**

Like many people today Paine rejects Christian teachings while holding Jesus in the highest regard. Paine writes:

Nothing that is here said can apply, even with the most distant disrespect, to the real character of Jesus Christ ..."<sup>25</sup>

In his view Jesus was a great moral teacher like Confucius and the Quakers. Here arguments like those found in Bishop John Pearson's *Exposition of the Creed* (1659) which was very popular in Paine's day come into play. How could Jesus be such a good man when he is portrayed as seeing himself in messianic terms which imply that he is

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<sup>22</sup> Bede, 1955, p. 86.

<sup>23</sup> Bede, 1965, p. 87

<sup>24</sup> Don Richardson, *Peace Child*, Ventura, CA, 1974.

God? As C.S. Lewis' argued in *Mere Christianity* (1952), either Jesus was mad, an imposter, or what the Gospel writers concluded the Christ of God.<sup>26</sup> Despite all of Paine's sharp criticism of religion he cannot bring himself to reject Jesus or his core teachings. Consequently, he falls pray to the criticisms of Pearson and Lewis for his lack of consistency at this crucial point.

### **Of Miracles**

Paine's arguments against miracles are in some ways more sophisticated than those of his contemporary, the philosopher, David Hume. Hume dispensed with miracles by definition claiming that they were "a violation of the laws of nature."<sup>27</sup> Paine, however, takes a more sophisticated line arguing:

... unless we know the whole extent of those laws, and of what are commonly called the powers of nature, we are not able to judge whether anything that may appear to us wonderful or miraculous be within, or be beyond, or be contrary to, her natural power of acting ...<sup>28</sup>

Therefore Paine is prepared to concede:

... it may be said that everything is a miracle... in one sense, while in the other sense there is no such thing as a miracle ...<sup>29</sup>

Then he mounts his real attack claiming that belief in miracles:

... implies a lameness or weakness in the doctrine that is preached ... is degrading the Almighty into the character of a showman, playing tricks to amuse and make the people stare and wonder.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 12

<sup>26</sup> Cf. C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, London, Macmillan, 1970, p, 42-44

<sup>27</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, La Salle, ILL., Open Court, 1966, p. 126, first published 1777.

<sup>28</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 92.

<sup>29</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 90.

<sup>30</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 95.

Like David Hume (1711-1776) he argues that belief in miracles really depends on “the credit of the reporter who says that he saw it.” But this, he claims, can never be proven because when someone says a miracle has occurred we must always ask:

... is it more probable that nature should go out of her course or that a man should tell a lie? We have never seen, in our time, nature go out of her course; but we have good reason to believe that millions of lies have been told ...<sup>31</sup>

Thus the arguments of both Paine and Hume eventually boil down to two questions: First do miracles occur today? Second how credible are the witnesses? The first argument is partially answered by countless examples of healings and answers to prayer which even our own medical establishment is gradually recognizing are real.<sup>32</sup> The second is very effectively addressed by William Lane Craig in his excellent book *The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus during the Deist Controversy*.<sup>33</sup>

## **The Resurrection**

Because belief in the resurrection is central to the Christian faith Paine sets out to prove that it never happened. He does this in two ways. First, he argues, in a surprisingly modern way, that the resurrection story is a literary device used to frame the Gospel narrative as a whole. Paine writes:

... as to the account given of his resurrection and ascension, it was the necessary

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<sup>31</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 95.

<sup>32</sup> Byrd, Randolph C., MD: "Positive Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer in a Coronary Care Unit Population." *Southern Medical Journal*, July, 1988, Vol. 81, No. 7, 826-829. Byrd, Randolph C., MD: "Positive Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer in a Coronary Care Unit Population." *Southern Medical Journal*, July, 1988, Vol. 81, No. 7, 826-829. "Doctors who Pray", *Christianity Today*, January 6, 1997 Vol. 41, No. 1, p. 20; and Phillip Wiebe, *Visions of Jesus*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>33</sup> William Lane Craig, *The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus during the Deist Controversy*, Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press, 1985.

counterpart to the story of his birth. His historians, having brought him into the world in a supernatural manner, were obliged to take him out again in the same manner, or the first part of the story must have fallen to the ground.<sup>34</sup>

This explanation of the virgin birth, resurrection, and ascension predates modern literary criticism by two hundred years. Yet, Paine says nothing more than members of the Jesus Seminar and similar scholars when they apply a literary approach to the gospels. Further, it is clear that his thinking provided D.F. Strauss with the impetus for his own literary analysis of the gospels and the development of his views on myth.<sup>35</sup>

Then Paine returns to his rationalist mode by raising questions about the reliability of the apostles' testimony by deliberately distorting the Biblical narrative. With a total disregard for the New Testament text, Paine claims that "not more than eight or nine"<sup>36</sup> people claimed to have seen Jesus after his resurrection. Having thus set up a man of straw for unwary readers Paine changes tack to present his main argument against belief in the resurrection:

A thing which everybody is required to believe, requires that the proof and evidence of it should be equal to all ...<sup>37</sup>

Why this should be, beyond appealing to our democratic instincts, Paine never explains. Is it really reasonable to argue that only those people who were actually living in Jerusalem in the first century and who saw the risen Jesus can believe? Surely not! Most of our beliefs and actions are based on the testimony of others. The type of proof, Paine demands, of the resurrection goes far beyond any reasonable ground for belief. More

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<sup>34</sup> Paine, 1925, p 11

<sup>35</sup> I have no direct quotes from Strauss to prove this, but an examination of his language reveals remarkable similarities to Paine's. And since Paine was avidly read in the circles within which Strauss moved the connection is highly plausible. Here is a good topic for someone's Ph.D. thesis.

<sup>36</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 12

<sup>37</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 12.

importantly, it shows that Paine sets up a moral standard that demands equality and equity even in matters of scholarship and judgement. Nevertheless, it is true that, once again, Paine scores a strong emotional and seemingly self-evident victory which in fact is baseless.

### **Paine, Feuerbach and Marx**

Paine believed that Christianity clouded people's thoughts obscuring the real nature of their situation. In Paine's view:

The effect of this obscurity has been that of turning everything upside down, and representing it in reverse, and among the revolutions it has thus made all produced it has made a revolution in theology.<sup>38</sup>

Paine continued:

As to the Christian system of faith, it appears to me as a species of atheism; a sort of religious denial of God. It professes to believe in a man rather than in God. It is a compound made up chiefly of manism with but little deism ...

This view of religion is remarkably similar to the one later developed by Ludwig Feuerbach who referred to Paine as "the famous American philosopher Tom Paine ..."<sup>39</sup>

Although Paine did not develop his arguments at length they clearly prepared the way for Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) and Karl Marx (1818-1883). In *The Essence of*

*Christianity* Feuerbach argued:

I show that the true sense of Theology is Anthropology<sup>40</sup> ... I, on the contrary, while reducing theology to anthropology, exalt anthropology into theology, very much as Christianity, while lowering God into man, made man into God ...<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 73,

<sup>39</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *Sämtliche Werke*, Stuttgart, Günther Holzboog Verlag, Vol. 8, p. 173.

<sup>40</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, translated by George Elliot, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1957 p. xxxvii

<sup>41</sup> Feuerbach, 1957, p. xxxviii

Later he develops these ideas when he writes:

Religion, at least the Christian, is the relation of man to himself ... The divine being is nothing else than the human being ...<sup>42</sup>

And:

It is not I, but religion that worships man, although religion, or rather theology denies this ... I have only found the key to the cipher of the Christian religion, only extricated its true meaning from the web of contradictions and delusions called theology ... let it be remembered that atheism - at least in the sense of this work - is the secret of religion itself ...<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, Feuerbach took up Paine's ideas and used them to develop his own projection theory of religion. Marx accepted Feuerbach's arguments and went on to explain why most people rejected them in terms of his theory of alienation. For Marx religion becomes a symptom of alienation that in turn is a symptom of the evils of society. Yet, even here Paine anticipated Marx, because he too saw arguments about religion as an essential prelude to political debate.<sup>44</sup>

Paine, Feuerbach, and Marx produce arguments that devastate those forms of Christianity that concentrate on Jesus alone. Thus, theologians as diverse as the liberal Schleiermacher and some conservative evangelicals fall victim to the charge that their beliefs dissolve into a form of practical atheism. On the other hand a full fledged orthodoxy which gives due place to both the incarnation and transcendence of God is not so easily dismissed.

Christians meet such arguments by arguing that contrary to popular opinion, and even the views of some scholars, there is a clear continuity of belief that constitutes what

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<sup>42</sup> Feuerbach, 1957, p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, translated by George Elliot, *The Essence of Christianity*, New York, Harper & Row, 1957, p. xxxvi

<sup>44</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 1.

Christians call “orthodoxy.” In orthodoxy Jesus does not stand alone as a substitute for God. Rather as James Orr showed in *The Christian View of God and the World* (1891) his very existence is only understandable within the context of a belief in God and His revelation. Thus Christianity makes sense as a system and is not a form of “manism” nor does it depend on human psychology for its appeal.

### **Paine and modern science**

Like so many people after him Paine accuses Christians of persecuting science in an attempt to suppress truth. Here once again he is adapting a Protestant argument against the Roman Catholic Church which saw the Middle Ages as the "Dark Ages." In the Protestant view, which owes its impetus to Luther, the Roman Catholic Church suppressed the truth of scripture and thus retarded human progress. In Paine's secularized version of this argument all form of Christianity are opposed to the truth of science. Paine writes:

... the advocates of the Christian system of faith...not only rejected the study of science...they also persecuted it.<sup>45</sup>

To drive home his point Paine cites the example of Galileo who "discovered and introduced the use of telescopes..."<sup>46</sup> but:

Instead of being esteemed for those discoveries, he was sentenced to renounce them, or the opinions resulting from them, as a damnable heresy...<sup>47</sup>

Thus, he claims:

... the age of ignorance commenced with the Christian system...It is owing to this long interregnum of science, *and to no other cause*, that we have now to look

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<sup>45</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 62

<sup>46</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 62.

<sup>47</sup> Paine, 1925, p.64.



back through a vast chasm of many hundred years to the respectable characters we call the ancients ...<sup>48</sup>

Having said this he identifies his Protestant roots when he says "The event that served more than any other to break the first link in this long chain of despotic ignorance is that known by the name of the Reformation by Luther."<sup>49</sup>

Once again Paine's argument is very popular today. It anticipated by a hundred years the theme of Andrew Dickenson White, the first president of Cornell University, who wrote *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*.<sup>50</sup> Yet reality, like Paine's work, it is pure anti-Christian propaganda and far from the truth. There can be no doubt that Galileo was treated badly by some member of the Roman Catholic Church. But, as Arthur Koestler, who was not known for his Christian sympathies, shows in his book *The Sleepwalkers*<sup>51</sup> Galileo was no innocent victim. A more weighty judgment is found in the argument of historian of science, A. Rupert Hall in *From Galileo to Newton, 1630-1720*.<sup>52</sup> He states quite bluntly that:

The tradition that Galileo was a great experimental scientist dose not stand up to serious examination.

Nor, as he shows, does the tradition that science arose in direct conflict with Christianity. Rather, as Hooykaas argues in *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science*<sup>53</sup> it was Christian faith which made real science possible.

Nevertheless, some doubts remain. Paine may have been wrong in his sweeping

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<sup>48</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 66

<sup>49</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 67

<sup>50</sup> Andrew D. White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, New York, George Braziller, 1955, first published 1895.

<sup>51</sup> Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, London, Hutchinson, 1968.

<sup>52</sup> A. Rupert Hall, *From Galileo to Newton, 1630-1720*, London, Collins, 1963, p. 56.

<sup>53</sup> R. Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1972.

judgments but White appears to prove that Luther, Calvin and a host of other learned Christians fought tooth and nail against every scientific discovery of their day. After all White has Calvin saying:

Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit.<sup>54</sup>

Convincing as this and similar quotations may sound they are in fact false. This was demonstrated by Edward Rosen in his article "Calvin's Attitude towards Copernicus."<sup>55</sup>

Rosen begins by drawing attention to Bertrand Russell's remark that:

Calvin similarly, demolished Copernicus with the text: 'The world also is stablished, that it cannot be moved' (Psa. XCIII.I), and exclaimed: 'Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above the Holy Spirit?'<sup>56</sup>

The problem, Rosen points out, is that Russell provides no citation for this remark. But, in another book, where Russell uses the same argument, he attributes it to White's book on religion and science.<sup>57</sup> When the reader checks White, however, he or she quickly discovers that White also fails to provide a reference to Calvin's works. Instead, he cites the preface of Canon Frederic William Farrar's (1831-1903) *History of Interpretation*.<sup>58</sup> When Farrar is consulted we again find that he provides no reference for his citation.

At this point Rosen argues that in fact there are no references to Copernicus in any of Calvin's works. He then cites Farrar's son, who wrote: "In judging Farrar's work ... it must not be forgotten that there are two orders of scholars, the 'intensive' and the 'extensive' ... it was to this

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<sup>54</sup> White, 1955 p. 127-128.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Edward Rosen, "Calvin's Attitude Towards Copernicus", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1960, XXI (3):431-441; and "A Reply to Dr. Ratner," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1961, XXII (3):386-388.

<sup>56</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 8th. ed. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962:515, first published 1946; cf. Rosen, 1960, p.431.

<sup>57</sup> Rosen, 1960, p. 432.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. White, 1955, pp.127-128 note \*. Cf. Canon Frederic William Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, London, Macmillan, 1886, p. xviii, cited by Rosen, 1960, p. 435.

latter class that my father belonged. Explaining what he means he adds:

... expression was easy to him ... Quotation with him was entirely spontaneous ...<sup>59</sup>

This means, as Rosen points out, that Farrar quoted from memory and did not use exact references. The problem is that memory can be misleading as Farrar himself realized when he wrote:

In a work which covers such vast periods of time and which involves so many hundreds of references it would be absurd to suppose that I have excepted from errors ...<sup>60</sup>

In other words Farrar admitted that his practice of citing from memory could lead to the type of false attribution we find in his Calvin quote.<sup>61</sup>

### **Paine's Moralism, Anti-Semitism, and Biblical Criticism**

Contrary to the impression often given Paine is not a deist in the normal sense. Rather, he is an advocate of the "religion of nature."<sup>62</sup> Basic to this new religion, of which Paine is the leading evangelist, is his attack on scripture.<sup>63</sup> By destroying the authority of scripture Paine hoped to make way for a new political order based on a new religion. Thus, behind all of the criticisms Paine raises against the Christian Faith lies a passionate political moralism that stands in judgment on God.

This can be seen in his attack on miracles when Paine writes that belief in miracles:

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<sup>59</sup> Reginald Farrar, Reginald, *The life of Frederic William Farrar, sometime dean of Canterbury*, London: Nisbet & Co. 1904, p. 193; cited by Rosen, 1960, p. 434.

<sup>60</sup> Dean Farrar, 1886, p. xxix; cited by Rosen, 1960, p. 435.

<sup>61</sup> Rosen, 1960, 431.

<sup>62</sup> Jack Fruchtman, Jr., *Tom Paine and the Religion of Nature*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1993. Richard H. Popkin, "The Age of Reason versus the Age of Revelation. Two Critics of Tom Paine: David Levi and Elias Boudinot," in J.A. Leo Lemay, ed., *Deism, Masonry and the Enlightenment*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1987, pp.158-170.

<sup>63</sup> Edward H. Davidson and William J. Scheick, *Paine, Scripture and Authority*, Bethlehem, Lehigh University

... implies a lameness or weakness in the doctrine that is preached ... is degrading the Almighty into the character of a showman, playing tricks to amuse and make the people stare and wonder.<sup>64</sup>

It is also clear when he attacks belief in the resurrection by arguing:

A thing which everybody is required to believe, requires that the proof and evidence of it should be equal to all ...<sup>65</sup>

Finally, we find Paine's moralism rising to its greatest fervor in his attack on the Jews.

Distasteful as this is it is important that everyone understands both what Paine says and why he argues as he does. Paine writes:

It is from the Bible that man has learned cruelty, rapine, and murder; for the belief of a cruel God makes a cruel man. That blood-thirsty man, called the prophet Samuel, makes God to say, (1 Sam. 40:3) Now go and smite Amaleck, and utterly destroy all that they have, and *spare them not, but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.*

That Samuel or some other impostor might say this, is what, at this distance of time, can neither be proved nor disproved, but in my opinion it is blasphemy to say, or to believe, that God said it. All our ideas of the justice and goodness of God revolt at the impious cruelty of the Bible. It is not a God, just and good, but a devil, under the name of God that the Bible describes."<sup>66</sup>

Reading this passage it is very important to note that Paine's high moral tone and democratic commitment leads him from the criticism of scripture to a full-blown anti-Semitism. Anticipating nineteenth century anti-Semitism, and writers like Karl Marx,<sup>67</sup> Paine lambastes the Jews asking:

Could we permit ourselves to suppose that the Almighty would distinguish any nation of people by the name of *His chosen people*, we must suppose that people to have been and example to all the rest of the world ... and not such a nation of ruffians and cut-throats as the ancient Jews were; a people who, corrupted by and copying after such monster and impostors as Moses and Aaron, Joshua, Samuel and David, had distinguished themselves above all others on the face of the earth for barbarity and wickedness...the flattering

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Press, 1994

<sup>64</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 94.

<sup>65</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 94.

<sup>66</sup> Tom Paine, *The Complete Works of Tom Paine*, Vol. 2, New York, The Citadel Press, 1945, p.1397, letter to unknown recipient, 12 May 1797.

<sup>67</sup> Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, New York, International Publishers, Vol. 3, 1975, pp. 146-174

appellation of *His chosen people* is no other than a *lie* which the priests and leaders of the Jews had invented to cover the baseness of their own characters, and which Christian priests, sometimes as corrupt and often as cruel, have professed to believe.<sup>68</sup>

His anti-Semitism reaches its climax when he claims:

We know nothing of what the ancient Gentile world (as it is called) was before the time of the Jews...But, as far as we know to the contrary, they were a just and moral people, and not addicted, like the Jews, to cruelty and revenge.<sup>69</sup>

Although Paine's comments are shocking to many readers the sentiments he expresses are not unique. Actually, Anti-Semitism based on a rationalistic moralism lies behind the development of modern Biblical Criticism to a far greater degree than most people realize.

### **The Dark Side of Biblical Criticism**

To suggest that modern Biblical Criticism has its roots in anti-Semitism contradicts standard accounts of the history of the movement and evokes the dismissive response that anyone who questions the "scientific" nature of Biblical scholarship must be a crude fundamentalist. Thus a historical tradition defended by an ad homonym argument that labels any critic anti-intellectual has largely suppressed what is potentially a very important field of study. Yet as can be seen from the radical criticisms of the methods used by Biblical scholars found in Walter Kaufmann's *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*,<sup>70</sup> it is possible to question the foundations of Biblical scholarship without being a believer in anything except rational thought. Further, as Graf Henning von Reventlow shows the issue of anti-Semitic influences on modern Biblical scholarship is far more complex and directly linked to political goals than most scholars

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<sup>68</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 125

<sup>69</sup> Paine, 1925, p. 135

<sup>70</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, London, Faber and Faber, 1958, pp. 268-282.

imagine.<sup>71</sup>

Read any major history of Biblical criticism and you will find essentially the same story. We are repeatedly told that Biblical Criticism arose as an intellectual movement that slowly developed from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment until, inspired by the work of men like Spinoza [1632-1677], Lessing [1729-1781], the English Deists, it flowered in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany with the work of men like Schleiermacher [1768-1834], F.C. Baur [1792-1860], D.F. Strauss [1808-1874], G.H.A. Ewald [1803-1875], Paul de Lagaard [1827-1891] and Julius Wellhausen [1844-1918] to mention only a few.<sup>72</sup> Thus the rise of Biblical criticism is represented as the intellectual adventure of a few heroic individuals who pushed the limits of intellectual discovery against the opposition of an entrenched religious establishment bent on frustrating their work.

To a historian the fascinating thing about these accounts is that they are entirely focused on the development of Biblical Criticism as an academic method within the discipline of theology with an almost complete disregard for the social and historical context within which Biblical Criticism arose. Thus Stephen Neill and Tom Wright,<sup>73</sup> William Baird,<sup>74</sup> John Rogerson,<sup>75</sup> and even conservative writers like Donald Guthrie,<sup>76</sup> and R.K. Harrison,<sup>77</sup> all treat the development of Biblical Criticism in an intellectual vacuum dealing with the history of theological ideas and theories of Biblical authorship in almost complete isolation from other cultural, social, and historical events.

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<sup>71</sup> Graff. Henning von Reventlow, ed., *Biblical Studies and the shifting of paradigms, 1850-1914*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.

<sup>72</sup> Edgar Krentz, *The Historical Critical Method*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1975, pp. 6-32.

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988

<sup>74</sup> William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1992.

<sup>75</sup> John Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century*, London, SPCK, 1984.

<sup>76</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1970.

In reality, the history of Biblical Criticism is not so neat or heroic an academic enterprise as it is usually depicted. As long ago as 1915 Rabbi Solomon Schechter, of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, in his paper “Higher Criticism – Higher anti-Semitism”<sup>78</sup> argued that at the root of German Biblical scholarship was a rabid and unexamined anti-Semitism. In particular he singled out the great German critic Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) as one of the major figures who popularized anti-Semitism in the study of the Bible. For Wellhausen anti-Semitism is a basic presupposition that shapes the methods he used to examine Biblical texts. Schechter’s argument is disputed by Leo H. Silberman who argued:

On the basis of my own teacher, Jacob Z. Lauterbach, who studied with Wellhausen in Göttingen at the turn of the century, I find it necessary to reject Schechter’s conclusions. Wellhausen was no vulgar anti-Semite. Nevertheless, the evidence drawn from the *Prolegomena* calls for the conclusion that it, like practically everything written by German Protestant theologians of the period and many subsequently and to this day, is a work of anti-Judaism.<sup>79</sup>

Of course Silberman is correct at a superficial level, but his argument misses the main point of Schechter’s critique. This real issue is to what extent an underlying anti-Semitism shaped the work of Wellhausen and other Biblical critics and whether anti-Semitism was one of the basic ingredients of their method. The argument that Wellhausen’s work reflected contemporary political and social issues is actually supported by Silberman who comes to the conclusion:

Wellhausen’s portrayal of Judaism was, it seems clear, motivated by interests that had little or nothing to do with what happened in Judea restored in the sixth or fifth centuries BCE. The real Judaizers were not of the past; they were alive and flourishing in the nineteenth century.<sup>80</sup>

To claim, as Silberman does, that this is simply anti-Judaism, and not anti-Semitism that

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<sup>77</sup> R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, W.B. Eerdmans, 1977.

<sup>78</sup> S. Schechter, *Seminary addresses and other papers*, New York, Arno Press, 1969, first edition, 1915.

<sup>79</sup> Douglas A. Knight, ed., *Julius Wellhausen and His Prolegomena to the History of Israel*. Chico, CA, Scholars Press, 1983, p. 75.

<sup>80</sup> Knight, 1983, p. 78.

motivated Wellhausen and other nineteenth century Protestant theologians seems to us to be splitting hairs. Of course, Wellhausen was not a crude anti-Semite, very few people were. Even members of the top Nazi leadership were rarely crude anti-Semites. Men like Goebbels,<sup>81</sup> Himmler<sup>82</sup> and Eichmann<sup>83</sup> were well educated, often sophisticated, individuals who despite their own propaganda usually treated individual Jews relatively well. In other words they were not the jack-booted thugs of Hollywood imagery.<sup>84</sup> This negates the argument that “Wellhausen was no vulgar anti-Semite” and makes it all the more troubling because his academic sophistication conceals the crudity of his basic outlook and the danger of the ideas he implants in his reader’s minds. Only when the tradition of Biblical criticism is traced back to Tom Paine do we see very clearly that the arguments Wellhausen dressed in clever language are actually rest on a vulgar foundation.

A study of Tom Paine’s work clearly demonstrates the fact that the origins of modern Biblical Criticism is intimately tied up with radical politics, a quest for a new religion, and a deep seated moralism that flows to and from a rabid anti-Semitism. Thus a presuppositional framework based on a sense of moral superiority and a disdain for Biblical morality lies behind the work of many biblical critics starting with Tom Paine whose moralism and anti-Semitism is beyond dispute. How his work influenced later critics, particularly German scholars, is an issue that deserves close attention. All we have attempted to do here is draw attention to what we believe is a very dangerous prejudice that continues to exert an unrecognized influence on contemporary scholarship.

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<sup>81</sup> Claus-Ekkehard Bärsch, *Der Junge Goebbels: Erlösung und Vernichtung*, München, Boer Verlag, 1995.

<sup>82</sup> Peter Üadfoeöd, *Himmler Seichs Führer-SS*, London, cassell, 2001.

<sup>83</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichman in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil*, Hamondsworth, Penguin Books, 1994.



## Conclusion

Tom Paine encapsulated the modern attitude towards religion when he wrote the much quoted line: "My own mind is my own church ..." <sup>85</sup> Today this is the attitude of Roman Catholics who practice birth control contrary to the teachings of the Vatican, and a host of other believers who profess allegiance to a tradition while selecting from it those things they find palatable. In many ways such an attitude can be helpful and healthy. But, behind it lies numerous arguments which still circulate in popular culture undermining confidence in the Christian Faith throughout Western society.

There can be no doubt that many of Paine's arguments still haunt the Christians today. Every year thousands of students confront them in more sophisticated garb in countless religious studies and theology courses. Yet because today they are usually presented in milder forms which stop short of Paine's relentless condemnation of Christianity their impact is all the greater.

Paine's great virtue is that he does not mince words. In his book rubbish is rubbish, irrationalism is irrationalism, and Christianity is composed of both. Unlike many moderns Paine does not destroy the fundamentals of Christian Faith while proclaiming a "higher" or "purer" understanding of religion. He does not pretend that one can deny miracles, prophecy and basic Christian truths without rejecting Christianity.

The great strength of Paine's work is his plain speech. This is why he ought to be read by Christians today. Paine confronts with a direct challenge to belief which when seen for what it is can be convincingly answered. He attacks in a straightforward way which demands a response. Unlike modern critics Paine does not employ stealth to

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<sup>84</sup> Joachim C. Fest, translated by Michael Bullock, *The Face of the Third Reich*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1970.

undermine faith. He attacks openly and in doing so exposes the deception of many modern writers who lack the courage to spell out the implications of their arguments.

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<sup>85</sup> Payne, 1925, p. 6.