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THE AGE OF REASON

THOMAS PAINE

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The Age of Reason by Thomas Paine.
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Contents

Editor's Introduction With Some Results Of Recent Researches

Part 1

1. The Author's Profession Of Faith
2. Of Missions And Revelations
3. Concerning The Character Of Jesus Christ, And His History
4. Of The Bases Of Christianity
5. Examination In Detail Of The Preceding Bases
6. Of The True Theology
7. Examination Of The Old Testament
8. Of The New Testament
9. In What The True Revelation Consists
10. Concerning God, And The Lights Cast On His Existence And Attributes By The Bible
11. Of The Theology Of The Christians; And The True Theology
12. The Effects Of Christianity On Education; Proposed Reforms
13. Comparison Of Christianity With The Religious Ideas Inspired By Nature
14. System Of The Universe
15. Advantages Of The Existence Of Many Worlds In Each Solar System
16. Application Of The Preceding To The System Of The Christians
17. Of The Means Employed In All Time, And Almost Universally, To Deceive The Peoples

Recapitulation

Part 2

Preface

1. The Old Testament
2. The New Testament
3. Conclusion

Editor's Introduction With Some Results Of Recent Researches

IN the opening year, 1793, when revolutionary France had beheaded its king, the wrath turned next upon the King of kings, by whose grace every tyrant claimed to reign. But eventualities had brought among them a great English and American heart—Thomas Paine. He had pleaded for Louis Caper—"Kill the king but spare the man." Now he pleaded,— "Disbelieve in the King of kings, but do not confuse with that idol the Father of Mankind!"

In Paine's Preface to the Second Part of "The Age of Reason" he describes himself as writing the First Part near the close of the year 1793. "I had not finished it more than six hours, in the state it has since appeared, before a guard came about three in the morning, with an order signed by the two Committees of Public Safety and Surety General, for putting me in arrestation." This was on the morning of December 28. But it is necessary to weigh the words just quoted—"in the state it has since appeared." For on August 5, 1794, Francois Lanthenas, in an appeal for Paine's liberation, wrote as follows: "I deliver to Merlin de Thionville a copy of the last work of T. Payne¹, formerly our colleague, and in custody since the decree excluding foreigners from the national representation. This book was written by the author in the beginning of the year '93 (old style). I undertook its translation before the revolution against priests, and it was published in French about the same time. Couthon, to whom I sent it, seemed offended with me for having translated this work."

Under the frown of Couthon, one of the most atrocious colleagues of Robespierre, this early publication seems to have been so effectually suppressed that no copy bearing that date, 1793, can be found in France or elsewhere. In Paine's letter to Samuel Adams, printed in the present volume, he says that he had it translated into French, to stay the progress of atheism, and that he endangered his life "by opposing atheism." The time indicated by Lanthenas as that in which he submitted the work to Couthon would appear to be the latter part of March, 1793, the fury against the priesthood having reached its climax in the decrees against them of March 19 and 26. If the moral deformity of Couthon, even greater than that of his body, be remembered, and the readiness with which death was inflicted for the most theoretical opinion not approved by the "Mountain," it will appear probable that the offence given Couthon by Paine's book involved danger to him and his translator. On May 31, when the Girondins were accused, the name of Lanthenas was included, and he barely escaped; and on the same day Danton persuaded Paine not to appear in the Convention, as his life might be in danger. Whether this was because of the "Age of Reason," with its fling at the "Goddess Nature" or not, the statements of author and translator are harmonized by the fact that Paine prepared the manuscript, with considerable additions and changes, for publication in English, as he has stated in the Preface to Part II.

A comparison of the French and English versions, sentence by sentence, proved to me that the translation sent by Lanthenas to Merlin de Thionville in 1794 is the same as that he sent to Couthon in 1793. This discovery was the means of recovering several interesting sentences of the original work. I have given as footnotes translations of such clauses and phrases of the French work as appeared to be important. Those familiar with the translations of Lanthenas need not be reminded that he was too much of a literalist to depart from the manuscript

¹ The Age of Reason

before him, and indeed he did not even venture to alter it in an instance (presently considered) where it was obviously needed. Nor would Lanthenas have omitted any of the paragraphs lacking in his translation. This original work was divided into seventeen chapters, and these I have restored, translating their headings into English. The “Age of Reason” is thus for the first time given to the world with nearly its original completeness.

It should be remembered that Paine could not have read the proof of his “Age of Reason” (Part I.) which went through the press while he was in prison. To this must be ascribed the permanence of some sentences as abbreviated in the haste he has described. A notable instance is the dropping out of his estimate of Jesus the words rendered by Lanthenas “trop peu imite, trop oublie, trop meconnu.” The addition of these words to Paine’s tribute makes it the more notable that almost the only recognition of the human character and life of Jesus by any theological writer of that generation came from one long branded as an infidel.

To the inability of the prisoner to give his work any revision must be attributed the preservation in it of the singular error already alluded to, as one that Lanthenas, but for his extreme fidelity, would have corrected. This is Paine’s repeated mention of six planets, and enumeration of them, twelve years after the discovery of Uranus. Paine was a devoted student of astronomy, and it cannot for a moment be supposed that he had not participated in the universal welcome of Herschel’s discovery. The omission of any allusion to it convinces me that the astronomical episode was printed from a manuscript written before 1781, when Uranus was discovered. Unfamiliar with French in 1793, Paine might not have discovered the erratum in Lanthenas’ translation, and, having no time for copying, he would naturally use as much as possible of the same manuscript in preparing his work for English readers. But he had no opportunity of revision, and there remains an erratum which, if my conjecture be correct, casts a significant light on the paragraphs in which he alludes to the preparation of the work. He states that soon after his publication of “Common Sense” (1776), he “saw the exceeding probability that a revolution in the system of government would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion,” and that “man would return to the pure, unmixed, and unadulterated belief of one God and no more.” He tells Samuel Adams that it had long been his intention to publish his thoughts upon religion, and he had made a similar remark to John Adams in 1776. Like the Quakers among whom he was reared Paine could then readily use the phrase “word of God” for anything in the Bible which approved itself to his “inner light,” and as he had drawn from the first Book of Samuel a divine condemnation of monarchy, John Adams, a Unitarian, asked him if he believed in the inspiration of the Old Testament. Paine replied that he did not, and at a later period meant to publish his views on the subject. There is little doubt that he wrote from time to time on religious points, during the American war, without publishing his thoughts, just as he worked on the problem of steam navigation, in which he had invented a practicable method (ten years before John Fitch made his discovery) without publishing it. At any rate it appears to me certain that the part of “The Age of Reason” connected with Paine’s favorite science, astronomy, was written before 1781, when Uranus was discovered.

Paine’s theism, however invested with biblical and Christian phraseology, was a birthright. It appears clear from several allusions in “The Age of Reason” to the Quakers that in his early life, or before the middle of the eighteenth century, the people so called were substantially Deists. An interesting confirmation of Paine’s statements concerning them appears as I write in an account sent by Count Leo Tolstoi to the London ‘Times’ of the Russian sect called Dukhobortsy (The Times, October 23, 1895). This sect sprang up in the last century, and the narrative says: