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AN ORATION ON THE LIFE AND SERVICES OF THOMAS PAINE

BY ROBERT G. INGERSOLL

Delivered By Robert G. Ingersoll, At Fairbury, Ill., On The Evening Of January 80th, 1871, Peoria, Ill.

1871.

THOMAS PAINE

To speak the praises of the brave and thoughtful dead, is to me a labor of gratitude and love.

Through all the centuries gone, the mind of man has been beleaguered by the mailed hosts of superstition. Slowly and painfully has advanced the army of deliverance. Hated by those they wished to rescue, despised by those they were dying to save, these grand soldiers, these immortal deliverers, have fought without thanks, labored without applause, suffered without pity, and they have died execrated and abhorred. For the good of mankind they accepted isolation, poverty, and calumny. They gave up all, sacrificed all, lost all but truth and self-respect.

One of the bravest soldiers in this army was Thomas Paine; and for one, I feel indebted to him for the liberty we are enjoying this day. Born among the poor, where children are burdens; in a country where real liberty was unknown; where the privileges of class were guarded with infinite jealousy, and the rights of the individual trampled beneath the feet of priests and nobles; where to advocate justice was treason; where intellectual freedom was Infidelity, it is wonderful that the idea of true liberty ever entered his brain.

Poverty was his mother—Necessity his master.

He had more brains than books; more sense than education; more courage than politeness; more strength than polish. He had no veneration for old mistakes—no admiration for ancient lies. He loved the truth for the truth's sake, and for man's sake. He saw oppression on every hand; injustice everywhere—hypocrisy at the altar, venality on the bench, tyranny on the throne; and with a splendid courage he espoused the cause of the weak against the strong—of the enslaved many against the titled few.

In England he was nothing. He belonged to the lower classes. There was no avenue open for him. The people hugged their chains, and the whole power of the government was ready to crush any man who endeavored to strike a blow for the right.

At the age of thirty-seven, Thomas Paine left England for America with the high hope of being instrumental in the establishment of a free government. In his own country he could accomplish nothing. Those two vultures—Church and State—were ready to tear in pieces and devour the heart of any one who might deny their divine right to enslave the world.

Upon his arrival in this country, he found himself possessed of a letter of introduction, signed by another infidel, the illustrious Franklin. This, and his native genius, constituted his entire capital; and he needed no more. He found the colonies clamoring for justice; whining about their grievances; upon their knees at the foot of the throne, imploring that mixture of idiocy and insanity, George the III. by the grace of God, for a restoration of their ancient privileges. They were not endeavoring to become free men, but were trying to soften the heart of their master. They were perfectly willing to make brick Pharaoh would furnish the straw. The colonists wished for, hoped for, and prayed for reconciliation. They did not dream of independence.

Paine gave to the world his "Common Sense." It was the first argument for separation, the first assault upon the British *form* of government, the first blow for a republic, and it roused our fathers like a trumpet's blast.

He was the first to perceive the destiny of the New World.

No other pamphlet ever published accomplished such wonderful results. It was filled with argument, reason, persuasion, and unanswerable logic. It opened a new world. It filled the present with hope and the future with honor. Everywhere the people responded, and in a few months the Continental Congress declared the colonies free and independent states.

A new nation was born.

It is simple justice to say that Paine did more to cause the Declaration of Independence than any other man. Neither should it be forgotten that his attacks upon Great Britain, were also attacks upon monarchy; and while he convinced the people that the colonies ought to separate from the mother country, he also proved to them that a free government is the best that can be instituted among men.

In my judgment Thomas Paine was the best political writer that ever lived. "What he wrote was pure nature, and his soul and his pen ever went together." Ceremony, pageantry, and all the paraphernalia of power, had no effect upon him. He examined into the why and wherefore of things. He was perfectly radical in his mode of thought. Nothing short of the bed-rock satisfied him. His enthusiasm for what he believed to be right knew no bounds. During all the dark scenes of the Revolution, never for one moment did he despair. Year after year his brave words were ringing through the land, and by the bivouac fires the weary soldiers read the inspiring words of "Common Sense," filled with ideas sharper than their swords, and consecrated themselves anew to the cause of Freedom.

Paine was not content with having aroused the spirit of independence, but he gave every energy of his soul to keep that spirit alive. He was with the army. He shared its defeats, its dangers, and its glory. When the situation became desperate, when gloom settled upon all, he gave them the "Crisis." It was a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, leading the way to freedom, honor, and glory. He shouted to them, "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier, and the sunshine patriot, will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now deserves the love and thanks of man and woman."

To those who wished to put the war off to some future day, with a lofty and touching spirit of self-sacrifice he said: "Every generous parent should say, 'If there must be war let it be in my day that my child may have peace.'" To the cry that Americans were rebels, he replied: "He that rebels against reason is a real rebel; but he that in defence of reason rebels against tyranny has a better title to 'Defender of the Faith' than George the Third."

Some said it was not to the interest of the colonies to be free. Paine answered this by saying, "To know whether it be the interest of the continent to be independent, we need ask only this simple, easy question: 'Is it the interest of a man to be a boy all his life?'" He found many who would listen to nothing, and to them he said, "That to argue with a man who has renounced his reason is like giving medicine to the dead." This sentiment ought to adorn the walls of every orthodox church.

There is a world of political wisdom in this:—"England lost her liberty in a long chain of right reasoning from wrong principles;" and there is real discrimination in saying, "The Greeks and Romans were strongly possessed of the spirit of liberty, but not the principles, for at the time that they were determined not to be slaves themselves, they employed their power to enslave the rest of mankind."

In his letter to the British people, in which he tried to convince them that war was not to their interest, occurs the following passage brimful of common sense: "War never can be the interest of a trading nation any more than quarreling can be profitable to a man in business. But to make war with those who trade with us is like setting a bull-dog upon a customer at the shop-door."

The writings of Paine fairly glitter with simple, compact, logical statements, that carry conviction to the dullest and most prejudiced. He had the happiest possible way of putting the case; in asking questions in such a way that they answer themselves, and in stating his premises so clearly that the deduction could not be avoided.

Day and night he labored for America; month after month, year after year, he gave himself to the Great Cause, until there was "a government of the people and for the people," and until the banner of the stars floated over a continent redeemed, and consecrated to the happiness of mankind.

At the close of the Revolution, no one stood higher in America than Thomas Paine. The best, the wisest, the most patriotic, were his friends and admirers; and had he been thinking only of his own good he might have rested from his toils and spent the remainder of his life in comfort, and in ease. He could have been what the world is pleased to call "respectable." He could have died surrounded by clergymen, warriors and statesmen. At his death there would have been an imposing funeral, miles of carriages, civic societies, salvos of artillery,

a nation in mourning, and above all, a splendid monument covered with lies.

He chose rather to benefit mankind.

At that time the seeds sown by the great Infidels were beginning to bear fruit in France. The people were beginning to think.

The Eighteenth Century was crowning its gray-hairs with the wreath of Progress.

On every hand Science was bearing testimony against the Church. Voltaire had filled Europe with light; D'Holbach was giving to the elite of Paris the principles contained in his "System of Nature." The Encyclopædists had attacked superstition with information for the masses. The foundation of things began to be examined. A few had the courage to keep their shoes on and let the bush burn. Miracles began to get scarce. Everywhere the people began to inquire. America had set an example to the world. The word liberty began to be in the mouths of men, and they began to wipe the dust from their knees.

The dawn of a new day had appeared.

Thomas Paine went to France. Into the new movement he threw all his energies. His fame had gone before him, and he was welcomed as a friend of the human race, and as a champion of free government.

He had never relinquished his intention of pointing out to his countrymen the defects, absurdities and abuses of the English government. For this purpose he composed and published his greatest political work, "The Rights of Man."

This work should be read by every man and woman. It is concise, accurate, natural, convincing, and unanswerable. It shows great thought; an intimate knowledge of the various forms of government; deep insight into the very springs of human action, and a courage that compels respect and admiration. The most difficult political problems are solved in a few sentences. The venerable arguments in favor of wrong are refuted with a question—answered with a word. For forcible illustration, apt comparison, accuracy and clearness of statement, and absolute thoroughness, it has never been excelled.

The fears of the administration were aroused, and Paine was prosecuted for libel and found guilty; and yet there is not a sentiment in the entire work that will not challenge the admiration of every civilized man. It is a magazine of political wisdom, an arsenal of ideas, and an honor, not only to Thomas Paine, but to human nature itself. It could have been written only by the man who had the generosity, the exalted patriotism, the goodness to say, "The world is my country, and to do good my religion."

There is in all the utterances of the world no grander, no sublimer sentiment. There is no creed that can be compared with it for a moment. It should be wrought in gold, adorned with jewels, and impressed upon every human heart: "The world is my country, and to do good my religion." In 1792, Paine was elected by the department of Calais as their representative in the National Assembly. So great was his popularity in France that he was selected about the same time by the people of no less than four departments.

Upon taking his place in the Assembly he was appointed as one of a committee to draft a constitution for France. Had the French people taken the advice of Thomas Paine there would have been no "reign of terror." The streets of Paris would not have been filled with blood. The revolution would have been the grandest success of the world. The truth is that Paine was too conservative to suit the leaders of the French Revolution. They, to a great extent, were carried away by hatred, and a desire to destroy. They had suffered so long, they had borne so much, that it was impossible for them to be moderate in the hour of victory. Besides all this, the French people had been so robbed by the government, so degraded by the Church, that they were not fit material with which to construct a republic. Many of the leaders longed to establish a beneficent and just government, but the people asked for revenge.

Paine was filled with a real love for mankind. His philanthropy was boundless. He wished to destroy monarchy—not the monarch. He voted for the destruction of tyranny, and against the death of the king. He wished to establish a government on a new basis; one that would forget the past; one that would give privileges to none, and protection to all.

In the Assembly, where nearly all were demanding the execution of the king—where to differ from the majority was to be suspected, and where to be suspected was almost certain death, Thomas Paine had the courage, the goodness and the justice to vote against death. To vote against the execution of the king was a vote against his own life. This was the sublimity of devotion to principle. For this he was arrested, imprisoned and doomed to death.

Search the records of the world and you will find but few sublimer acts than that of Thomas Paine voting against the king's death. He, the hater of despotism, the abhorrer of monarchy, the champion of the rights of man, the republican, accepting death to save the life of a deposed tyrant—of a throneless king. This was the last grand act of his political life—the sublime conclusion of his political career.

All his life he had been the disinterested friend of man. He had labored—not for money, not for fame, but for the general good. He had aspired to no office; had asked no recognition of his services, but had ever been content to labor as a common soldier in the army of Progress. Confining his efforts to no country, looking upon the world as his field of action, filled with a genuine love for the right, he found himself imprisoned by the very people he had striven to save.

Had his enemies succeeded in bringing him to the block, he would have escaped the calumnies and the hatred of the Christian world. In this country, at least, he would have ranked with the proudest names. On the anniversary of the Declaration his name would have been upon the lips of all the orators, and his memory in the hearts of all the people.

Thomas Paine had not finished his career.

He had spent his life thus far in destroying the power of kings, and now he turned his attention to the priests. He knew that every abuse had been embalmed in Scripture—that every outrage was in partnership with some holy text. He knew that the throne skulked behind the altar, and both behind a pretended revelation from God. By this time he had found that it was of little use to free the body and leave the mind in chains. He had explored the foundations of despotism and had found them infinitely rotten. He had dug under the throne, and it occurred to him that he would take a look behind the altar.

The result of his investigations was given to the world in the "Age of Reason." From the moment of its publication he became infamous. He was calumniated beyond measure. To slander him was to secure the thanks of the Church. All his services were instantly forgotten, disparaged or denied. He was shunned as though he had been a pestilence. Most of his old friends forsook him. He was regarded as a moral plague, and at the bare mention of his name the bloody hands of the Church were raised in horror. He was denounced as the most despicable of men.

Not content with following him to his grave, they pursued him after death with redoubled fury, and recounted with infinite gusto and satisfaction the supposed horrors of his death-bed; gloried in the fact that he was forlorn and friendless, and gloated like fiends over what they supposed to be the agonizing remorse of his lonely death.

It is wonderful that all his services were thus forgotten. It is amazing that one kind word did not fall from some pulpit; that some one did not accord to him, at least—honesty. Strange, that in the general denunciation some one did not remember his labor for liberty, his devotion to principle, his zeal for the rights of his fellow men. He had, by brave and splendid effort, associated his name with the cause of Progress. He had made it impossible to write the history of political freedom with his name left out. He was one of the creators of light; one of the heralds of the dawn. He hated tyranny in the name of kings, and in the name of God, with every drop of his noble blood. He believed in liberty and justice, and in the sacred doctrine of human equality. Under these divine banners he fought the battle of his life. In both worlds he offered his blood for the good of man. In the wilderness of America, in the French Assembly, in the sombre cell waiting for death, he was the same unflinching, unwavering friend of his race; the same undaunted champion of universal freedom. And for this he has been hated; for this the Church has violated even his grave.

This is enough to make one believe that nothing is more natural than for men to devour their benefactors. The people in all ages have crucified and glorified. Whoever, lifts his voice against abuses, whoever arraigns the past at the bar of the present, whoever asks the king to show his commission, or questions the authority of the priest, will be denounced as the enemy of man and God. In all ages reason has been regarded as the enemy of religion. Nothing has been considered so pleasing to the Deity as a total denial of the authority of your own mind. Self-reliance has been thought a deadly sin; and the idea of living and dying without the aid and consolation of superstition has always horrified the Church.

By some unaccountable infatuation belief has been, and still is considered of immense importance. All religions have been based upon the idea that God will forever reward the true believer, and eternally damn the man who doubts or denies. Belief is regarded as the one essential thing. To practice justice, to love mercy, is not enough. You must believe in some incomprehensible creed. You must say, "Once one is three, and three times one is one." The man who practiced every virtue, but failed to believe, was execrated. Nothing so outrages the feelings of the Church as a moral unbeliever—nothing so horrible as a charitable Atheist.

When Paine was born, the world was religious. The pulpit was the real throne, and the churches were making every effort to crush out of the brain the idea that it had the right to think.

The splendid saying of Lord Bacon that "The inquiry of truth, which is the love-making or wooing of it, the knowledge of truth, which is the presence of it, and the belief of truth, which is the enjoying of it, are the sovereign good of human nature," has been, and ever will be, rejected by religionists. Intellectual liberty, as a matter of necessity, forever destroys the idea that belief is either praise or blame-worthy, and is wholly inconsistent with every creed in Christendom. Paine recognized this truth. He also saw that as long as the Bible was considered inspired, this infamous doctrine of the virtue of belief would be believed and preached. He examined the Scriptures for himself, and found them filled with cruelty, absurdity, and immorality.

He again made up his mind to sacrifice himself for the good of his fellow men.

He commenced with the assertion, "That any system of religion that has anything in it that shocks the mind of a child cannot be a true system." What a beautiful, what a tender sentiment! No wonder that the Church began to hate him. He believed in one God, and no more. After this life he hoped for happiness. He believed that true religion consisted in doing justice, loving mercy, in endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy, and in offering to God the fruit of the heart. He denied the inspiration of the Scriptures. This was his crime.

He contended that it is a contradiction in terms to call anything a revelation that comes to us at second-hand, either verbally or in writing. He asserted that revelation is necessarily limited to the first communication, and that after that it is only an account of something which another person says was a revelation to him. We have only his word for it, as it was never made to us. This argument never has been and probably never will be answered. He denied the divine origin of Christ, and showed conclusively that the pretended prophecies of the Old Testament had no reference to him whatever; and yet he believed that Christ was a virtuous and amiable man; that the morality he taught and practiced was of the most benevolent and elevated character, and that it had not been exceeded by any. Upon this point he entertained the same sentiments now held by the Unitarians, and in fact by all the most enlightened Christians.

In his time the Church believed and taught that every word in the Bible was absolutely true. Since his day it has been proven false in its cosmogony, false in its astronomy, false in its chronology, false in its history, and so far as the Old Testament is concerned, false in almost everything. There are but few, if any, scientific men who apprehend that the Bible is literally true. Who on earth at this day would pretend to settle any scientific question by a text from the Bible? The old belief is confined to the ignorant and zealous. The Church itself will before long be driven to occupy the position of Thomas Paine. The best minds of the orthodox world, to-day, are endeavoring to prove the existence of a personal Deity. All other questions occupy a minor place. You are no longer asked to swallow the Bible whole, whale, Jonah and all. You are simply required to believe in God, and pay your pew-rent.

There is not now an enlightened minister in the world who will seriously contend that Samson's strength was in his hair, nor that the necromancers of Egypt could turn water into blood, and pieces of wood into serpents. These follies have passed away, and the only reason that the religious world can now have for disliking Paine is that they have been forced to adopt so many of his opinions.

Paine thought the barbarities of the Old Testament inconsistent with what he deemed the real character of God. He believed that murder, massacre, and indiscriminate slaughter, had never been commanded by the Deity. He regarded much of the Bible as childish, unimportant, and foolish. The scientific world entertains the same opinion. Paine attacked the Bible precisely in the same spirit in which he had attacked the pretensions of kings. He used the same weapons. All the pomp in the world could not make him cower. His reason knew no "Holy of Holies," except the abode of Truth. The sciences were then in their infancy. The attention of the really learned had not been directed to an impartial examination of our pretended revelation. It was accepted by most as a matter of course. The Church was all-powerful; and no one, unless thoroughly imbued with the spirit of self-sacrifice, thought for a moment of disputing the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. The infamous doctrine that salvation depends upon belief—upon a mere intellectual conviction—was then believed and preached. To doubt was to secure the damnation of your soul. This absurd and devilish doctrine shocked the common sense of Thomas Paine, and he denounced it with the fervor of honest indignation. This doctrine, although infinitely ridiculous, has been nearly universal, and has been as hurtful as senseless. For the overthrow of the infamous tenet, Paine exerted; all his strength. He left few arguments to be used by those who should come after him, and he used none that have been refuted. The combined wisdom and genius of all mankind cannot possibly conceive of an argument against liberty of thought. Neither can they show why any one should be punished, either in this world or another, for acting honestly in accordance with reason; and yet, a doctrine with every possible argument against it has been, and still is, believed and defended by the entire orthodox world. Can it be possible that we have been endowed with, reason simply that our souls may be caught in its toils and snares, that we may be led by its false' and delusive glare out of the narrow path that leads to joy into the broad way of everlasting death? Is it possible that we have been given reason simply that we may through faith ignore its deductions, and avoid its conclusions? Ought the sailor to throw away his compass and depend entirely upon the fog? If reason is not to be depended upon in matters of religion, that is to say, in respect of our duties to the Deity, why should it be relied upon in matters respecting the rights of our fellows? Why should we throw away the laws given to Moses by God himself, and have the audacity to make some of our own? How dare we drown the thunders of Sinai by calling the ayes and noes in a petty legislature? If reason can determine what is merciful, what is just, the duties of man to man, what more do we want either in time or eternity?

Down, forever down, with any religion that requires upon its ignorant altar the sacrifice of the goddess Reason, that compels her to abdicate forever the shining throne of the soul, strips from her form the imperial purple; snatches from her hand the sceptre of thought and makes her the bondwoman of a senseless faith!

If a man should tell you that he had the most beautiful painting in the world, and after taking you where it was should insist upon having your eyes shut, you would likely suspect, either that he had no painting or that it was some pitiable daub. Should he tell you that he was a most excellent performer on the violin, and yet refuse to play unless your ears were stopped, you would think, to say the least of it, that he had an odd way of convincing you of his musical ability. But would his conduct be any more wonderful than that of a religionist who asks that before examining his creed you will have the kindness to throw away your reason? The first gentleman says, "Keep your eyes shut, my picture will bear everything but being seen;" "Keep your ears stopped, my music objects to nothing but being heard." The last says, "Away with your reason, my religion dreads nothing but being understood."

So far as I am concerned I most cheerfully admit that most Christians are honest, and most ministers sincere. We do not attack them; we attack their creed. We accord to them the same rights that we ask for ourselves. We believe that their doctrines are hurtful. We believe that the frightful text, "He that believes shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned," has covered the earth with blood. It has filled the heart with arrogance, cruelty and murder. It has caused the religious wars; bound hundreds of thousands to the stake; founded inquisitions; filled dungeons; invented instruments of torture; taught the mother to hate her child; imprisoned the mind; filled the world with ignorance; persecuted the lovers of wisdom; built the monasteries and convents; made happiness a crime, investigation a sin, and self-reliance a blasphemy. It has poisoned the springs of learning; misdirected the energies of the world; filled all countries with want; housed the people in hovels; fed them with famine; and but for the efforts of a few brave Infidels it would have taken the world back to the midnight of barbarism, and left the heavens without a star.

The maligners of Paine say that he had no right to attack this doctrine because he was unacquainted with the dead languages; and for this reason, it was a piece of pure impudence in him to investigate the Scriptures.

Is it necessary to understand Hebrew in order to know that cruelty is not a virtue, and that murder is inconsistent with infinite goodness, and that eternal punishment can be inflicted upon man only by an eternal fiend? Is it really essential to conjugate the Greek verbs before you can make up your mind as to the probability of dead people getting out of their graves? Must one be versed in Latin before he is entitled to express his opinion as to the genuineness of a pretended revelation from God? Common sense belongs exclusively to no tongue. Logic is not confined to, nor has it been buried with, the dead languages. Paine attacked the Bible as it is translated. If the translation is wrong, let its defenders correct it.

The Christianity of Paine's day is not the Christianity of our time. There has been a great improvement since then. One hundred and fifty years ago the foremost preachers of our time would have perished at the stake, A Universalist would have been torn in pieces in England, Scotland, and America. Unitarians would have found themselves in the stocks, pelted by the rabble with dead cats, after which their ears would have been cut off, their tongues bored, and their foreheads branded. Less than one hundred and fifty years ago the following law was in force in Maryland:

*"Be it enacted by the Right Honorable, the Lord Proprietor, by and with the advice and consent of his lordship's governor, and the upper and lower houses of the Assembly, and the authority of the same:
"That if any person shall hereafter, within this province, wittingly, maliciously, and advisedly, by writing or speaking, blaspheme or curse God, or deny our Saviour, Jesus Christ to*

*"be the son of God, or shall deny the Holy Trinity, the Father,
"Son, and Holy Ghost, or the God-head of any of the three
"persons, or the unity of the God-head, or shall utter any pro-
"fane words concerning the Holy Trinity, or any of the persons
"thereof, and shall thereof be convict by verdict, shall, for the
"first offence be bored through the tongue, and fined twenty
"pounds to be levied of his body. And for the second offence,
"the offender shall be stigmatized by burning in the forehead
"with the letter B, and fined forty pounds. And that for the
"third offence, the offender shall suffer death without the
"benefit of clergy.*

The strange thing about this law is, that it has never been repealed, and is still in force in the District of Columbia. Laws like this were in force in most of the colonies, and in all countries where the Church had power.

In the Old Testament, the death penalty was attached to hundreds of offences. It has been the same in all Christian countries. To-day, in civilized governments, the death penalty is attached only to murder and treason; and in some, it has been entirely abolished. What a commentary upon the divine humbugs of the world!

In the day of Thomas Paine the Church was ignorant, bloody and relentless. In Scotland the "Kirk" was at the summit of its power. It was a full sister of the Spanish Inquisition. It waged war upon human nature. It was the enemy of happiness, the hater of joy, and the despiser of religious liberty. It taught parents to murder their children rather than to allow them to propagate error. If the mother held opinions of which the infamous "Kirk" disapproved, her children were taken from her arms, her babe from her very bosom, and she was not allowed to see them, or to write them a word. It would not allow ship-wrecked sailors to be rescued from drowning on Sunday. It sought to annihilate pleasure, to pollute the heart by filling it with religious cruelty and gloom, and to change mankind into a vast horde of pious, heartless fiends. One of the most famous Scotch divines said: "The Kirk holds that religious toleration is not far from blasphemy." And this same Scotch Kirk denounced, beyond measure, the man who had the moral grandeur to say, "The world is my country, and to do good my religion." And this same Kirk abhorred the man who said, "Any system of religion that shocks the mind of a child cannot be a true system."

At that time nothing so delighted the Church as the beauties of endless torment, and listening to the weak wailings of damned infants struggling in the slimy coils and poison folds of the worm that never dies.

About the beginning of the nineteenth century, a boy by the name of Thomas Aikenhead, was indicted and tried at Edinburgh for having denied the inspiration of the Scriptures, and for having, on several occasions, when cold, wished himself in hell that he might get warm. Notwithstanding the poor boy recanted and begged for mercy, he was found guilty and hanged. His body was thrown in a hole at the foot of the scaffold and covered with stones.

Prosecutions and executions like this were common in every Christian country, and all of them were based upon the belief that an intellectual conviction is a crime.

No wonder the Church hated and traduced the author of the "Age of Reason."

England was filled with Puritan gloom and Episcopal ceremony. All religious conceptions were of the grossest nature. The ideas of crazy fanatics and extravagant poets were taken as sober facts. Milton had clothed Christianity in the soiled and faded finery of the gods—had added to the story of Christ the fables of Mythology. He gave to the Protestant Church the most outrageously material ideas of the Deity. He turned all the angels into soldiers—made Heaven a battlefield, put Christ in uniform, and described God as a militia general. His works were considered by the Protestants nearly as sacred as the Bible itself, and the imagination of the people was thoroughly polluted by the horrible imagery, the sublime absurdity of the blind Milton.

Heaven and hell were realities—the judgment-day was expected—books of account would be opened. Every man would hear the charges against him read. God was supposed to sit on a golden throne, surrounded by the tallest angels, with harps in their hands and crowns on their heads. The goats would be thrust into eternal fire on the left, while the orthodox sheep on the right, were to gambol on sunny slopes forever and forever.

The nation was profoundly ignorant, and consequently extremely religious, so far as belief was concerned.

In Europe, Liberty was lying chained in the Inquisition—her white bosom stained with blood. In the new world the Puritans had been hanging and burning in the name of God, and selling white Quaker children into slavery in the name of Christ, who said, "Suffer little children to come unto me."

Under such conditions progress was impossible. Some one had to lead the way. The Church is, and always has been, incapable of a forward movement. Religion always looks back. The Church has already reduced Spain to a guitar, Italy to a hand-organ, and Ireland to exile.

Some one not connected with the Church had to attack the monster that was eating out the heart of the world. Some one had to sacrifice himself for the good of all. The people were in the most abject slavery; their manhood had been taken from them by pomp, by pageantry and power. Progress is born of doubt and inquiry. The Church never doubts—never inquires. To doubt is heresy—to inquire is to admit that you do not know—the Church does neither.

More than a century ago Catholicism, wrapped in robes red with the innocent blood of millions, holding in her frantic clutch crowns and sceptres, honors and gold, the keys of heaven and hell, trampling beneath her feet the liberties of nations, in the proud moment of almost universal dominion, felt within her heartless breast the deadly dagger of Voltaire. From that blow the Church never can recover. Livid with hatred she launched her eternal anathema at the great destroyer, and ignorant Protestants have echoed the curse of Rome.

In our country the Church was all-powerful, and although divided into many sects, would instantly unite to repel a common foe.

Paine struck the first grand blow.

The "Age of Reason" did more to undermine the power of the Protestant Church than all other books then known. It furnished an immense amount of food for thought. It was written for the average mind, and is a straight forward, honest investigation of the Bible, and of the Christian system.

Paine did not falter from the first page to the last. He gives you his candid thought, and candid thoughts are always valuable. The "Age of Reason" has liberalized us all. It put arguments in the mouths of the people; it put the Church on the defensive; it enabled somebody in every village to corner the parson; it made the world wiser, and the Church better; it took power from the pulpit and divided it among the pews.

Just in proportion that the human race has advanced, the Church has lost power. There is no exception to this rule.

No nation ever materially advanced that held strictly to the religion of its founders.

No nation ever gave itself wholly to the control of the Church without losing its power, its honor, and existence.

Every Church pretends to have found the exact truth. This is the end of progress. Why pursue that which you have? Why investigate when you know?

Every creed is a rock in running water: humanity sweeps by it. Every creed cries to the universe, "Halt!" A creed is the ignorant Past bullying the enlightened Present.

The ignorant are not satisfied with what can be demonstrated. Science is too slow for them, and so they invent creeds. They demand completeness. A sublime segment, a grand fragment, are of no value to them. They demand the complete circle—the entire structure.

In music they want a melody with a recurring accent at measured periods. In religion they insist upon immediate answers to the questions of creation and destiny. The alpha and omega of all things must be in the alphabet of their superstition. A religion that cannot answer every question, and guess every conundrum is, in their estimation, worse than worthless. They desire a kind of theological dictionary—a religious ready reckoner, together with guide-boards at all crossings and turns. They mistake impudence for authority, solemnity for wisdom, and pathos for inspiration. The beginning and the end are what they demand. The grand flight of the eagle is nothing to them. They want the nest in which he was hatched, and especially the dry limb upon which he roosts. Anything that can be learned is hardly worth knowing. The present is considered of no value in itself. Happiness must not be expected this side of the clouds, and can only be attained by self-denial and faith; not self-denial for the good of others, but for the salvation of your own sweet self.

Paine denied the authority of bibles and creeds—this was his crime—and for this the world shut the door in his face, and emptied its slops upon him from the windows.

I challenge the world to show that Thomas Paine ever wrote one line, one word in favor of tyranny—in favor of immorality; one line, one word against what he believed to be for the highest and best interest of mankind; one line, one word against justice, charity, or liberty, and yet he has been pursued as though he had been a fiend from hell. His memory has been execrated as though he had murdered some Uriah for his wife; driven some Hagar into the desert to starve with his child upon her bosom; defiled his own daughters; ripped open with the sword the sweet bodies of loving and innocent women; advised one brother to assassinate another; kept a harem with seven hundred wives, and three hundred concubines, or had persecuted Christians even unto strange cities.

The Church has pursued Paine to deter others. No effort has been in any age of the world spared to crush out opposition. The Church used painting, music and architecture, simply to degrade mankind. But there are men that nothing can awe. There have been at all times brave spirits that dared even the gods. Some proud head has always been above the waves. In every age some Diogenes has sacrificed to all the gods. True genius never cowers, and there is always some Samson feeling for the pillars of authority.

Cathedrals and domes, and chimes and chants—temples frescoed and groined and carved, and gilded with gold—altars and tapers, and paintings of virgin and babe—censer and chalice, chasuble, paten and alb—organs and anthems and incense rising to the winged and blest—maniple, amice and stole—crosses and crosiers, tiaras and crowns—mitres and missals and masses—rosaries, relics and robes—martyrs and saints, and windows stained as with the blood of Christ, never for one moment awed the brave, proud spirit of the Infidel. He knew that all the pomp and glitter had been purchased with liberty—that priceless jewel of the soul. In looking at the cathedral he remembered the dungeon. The music of the organ was as not loud enough to drown the clank of fetters. He could not forget that the taper had lighted the fagot. He knew that the cross adorned the hilt of the sword, and so where others worshiped, he wept and scorned.

The doubter, the investigator, the Infidel, have been the saviors of liberty. This truth is beginning to be realized, and the intellectual are beginning to honor the brave thinkers of the past.

But the Church is as unforgiving as ever, and still wonders why any Infidel should be wicked enough to endeavor to destroy her power.

I will tell the Church why.

You have imprisoned the human mind; you have been the enemy of liberty; you have burned us at the stake—wasted us upon slow fires—torn our flesh with iron; you have covered us with chains—treated us as outcasts; you have filled the world with fear; you have taken our wives and children from our arms; you have confiscated our property; you have denied us the right to testify in courts of justice; you have branded us with infamy; you have torn out our tongues; you have refused us burial. In the name of your religion, you have robbed us of every right; and after having inflicted upon us every evil that can be inflicted in this world, you have fallen upon your knees, and with clasped hands, implored your God to torment us forever.

Can you wonder that we hate your doctrines—that we despise your creeds—that we feel proud to know that we are beyond your power—that we are free in spite of you—that we can express our honest thought, and that the whole world is grandly rising into the blessed light?

Can you wonder that we point with pride to the fact, that Infidelity has ever been found battling for the rights of man, for the liberty of conscience, and for the happiness of all?

Can you wonder that we are proud to know, that we have always been disciples of Reason, and soldiers of Freedom; that we have denounced tyranny and superstition, and have kept our hands unstained with human blood?

We deny that religion is the end or object of this life. When it is so considered it becomes destructive of happiness—the real end of life. It becomes a hydra-headed monster, reaching in terrible coils from the heavens, and thrusting its thousand fangs into the bleeding, quivering hearts of men. It devours their substance, builds palaces for God, (who dwells not in temples made with hands), and allows his children to die in huts and hovels. It fills the earth with mourning, heaven with hatred, the present with fear, and all the future with despair.

Virtue is a subordination of the passions to the intellect. It is to act in accordance with your highest convictions. It does not consist in believing, but in doing.

This is the sublime truth that the Infidels in all ages have uttered. They have handed the torch from one to the other through all the years that have fled. Upon the altar of Reason they have kept the sacred fire, and through the long midnight of faith, they fed the divine flame.

Infidelity is liberty; all religion is slavery. In every creed, man is the slave of God—woman is the slave of man, and the sweet children are the slaves of all.

We do not want creeds; we want knowledge—we want happiness.

And yet we are told by the Church that we have accomplished nothing; that we are simply destroyers; that we tear down without building again.

Is it nothing to free the mind? Is it nothing to civilize mankind? Is it nothing to fill the world with light, with discovery, with science? Is it nothing to dignify man and exalt the intellect? Is it nothing to grope your way into the dreary prisons, the damp and dropping dungeons, the dark and silent cells, where the souls of men are chained to the floors of stone, to greet them like a ray of light, like the song of a bird, the murmur of a stream, to see the dull eyes open and grow slowly bright, to feel yourself grasped by the shrunken and unused hands, and hear yourself thanked by a strange and hollow voice?

Is it nothing to conduct these souls gradually into the blessed light of day—to let them see again the happy fields, the sweet, green earth, and hear the everlasting music of the waves? Is it nothing to make men wipe the dust from their swollen knees, the tears from their blanched and furrowed cheeks? Is it a small thing to reave the heavens of an insatiate monster and write upon the eternal dome, glittering with stars, the grand word—Freedom?

Is it a small thing to quench the flames of hell with the holy tears of pity—to unbind the martyr from the stake—break all the chains—put out the fires of civil war—stay the sword of the fanatic, and tear the bloody hands of the Church from the white throat of Science?

Is it a small thing to make men truly free—to destroy the dogmas of ignorance, prejudice and power—the poisoned fables of superstition, and drive from the beautiful face of the earth the fiend of Fear?

It does seem as though the most zealous Christian must at times entertain some doubt as to the divine origin of his religion. For eighteen hundred years the doctrine has been preached. For more than a thousand years the Church had, to a great extent, control of the civilized world, and what has been the result? Are the Christian nations patterns of charity and forbearance?

On the contrary, their principal business is to destroy each other. More than five millions of Christians are trained, educated, and drilled to murder their fellow-Christians. Every nation is groaning under a vast debt incurred in carrying on war against other Christians, or defending themselves from Christian assault. The world is covered with forts to protect Christians from Christians; and every sea is covered with iron monsters ready to blow Christian brains into eternal froth. Millions upon millions are annually expended in the effort to construct still more deadly and terrible engines of death. Industry is crippled, honest toil is robbed, and even beggary is taxed to defray the expenses of Christian warfare. There must be some other way to reform this world. We have tried creed, and dogma and fable, and they have failed; and they have failed in all the nations dead.

The people perish for the lack of knowledge.

Nothing but education—scientific education—can benefit mankind. We must find out the laws of nature and conform to them.

We need free bodies and free minds—free labor and free thought—chainless hands, and fetterless brains. Free labor will give us wealth. Free thought will give us truth.

We need men with moral courage to speak and write their real thoughts, and to stand by their convictions, even to the very death. We need have no fear of being too radical. The future will verify all grand and brave predictions. Paine was splendidly in advance of his time; but he was orthodox compared with the Infidels of to-day.

Science, the great Iconoclast, has been busy since 1809, and by the highway of Progress are the broken images of the Past.

On every hand the people advance. The Vicar of God has been pushed from the throne of the Cæsars, and upon the roofs of the Eternal City falls once more the shadow of the Eagle.

All has been accomplished by the heroic few. The men of science have explored heaven and earth, and with infinite patience have furnished the facts. The brave thinkers have used them. The gloomy caverns of superstition have been transformed into temples of thought, and the demons of the past are the angels of to-day.

Science took a handful of sand, constructed a telescope, and with it explored the starry depths of heaven. Science wrested from the gods their thunderbolts; and now the electric spark freighted with thought and love, flashes under all the waves of the sea. Science took a tear from the cheek of unpaid labor, converted it into steam, created a giant that turns with tireless arm, the countless wheels of toil.

Thomas Paine was one of the intellectual heroes—one of the men to whom we are indebted. His name is

associated forever with the Great Republic. As long as free government exists he will be remembered, admired and honored.

He lived a long, laborious and useful life. The world is better for his having lived. For the sake of truth he accepted hatred and reproach for his portion. He ate the bitter bread of sorrow. His friends were untrue to him because he was true to himself, and true to them. He lost the respect of what is called society, but he kept his own. His life is what the world calls failure, and what history calls success.

If to love your fellow men more than self is goodness, Thomas Paine was good.

If to be in advance of your time, to be a pioneer in the direction of right, is greatness, Thomas Paine was great.

If to avow your principles and discharge your duty in the presence of death is heroic, Thomas Paine was a hero.

At the age of seventy-three, death touched his tired heart. He died in the land his genius defended—under the flag he gave to the skies. Slander cannot touch him now—hatred cannot reach him more. He sleeps in the sanctuary of the tomb, beneath the quiet of the stars.

A few more years—a few more brave men—a few more rays of light, and mankind will venerate the memory of him who said:

"Any system of Religion that shocks the mind of a child cannot be a true system."

"The world is my Country, and to do good my Religion."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AN ORATION ON THE LIFE AND SERVICES OF THOMAS PAINE ***

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