## Clark University

## **Clark Digital Commons**

The Rise and Development of the Congregational Polity and Spirit in New England

History Manuscripts, -1907

March 2022

## Lecture Nine: Thomas Paine and Theology Without the Church

Earl Clement Davis

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.clarku.edu/history\_manuscripts\_2

## **Recommended Citation**

Davis, Earl Clement, "Lecture Nine: Thomas Paine and Theology Without the Church" (2022). *The Rise and Development of the Congregational Polity and Spirit in New England*. 9. https://commons.clarku.edu/history\_manuscripts\_2/9

This Lecture is brought to you for free and open access by the History Manuscripts, -1907 at Clark Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Rise and Development of the Congregational Polity and Spirit in New England by an authorized administrator of Clark Digital Commons. For more information, please contact larobinson@clarku.edu, cstebbins@clarku.edu.

Formas Parine, and Sheology without

the Church. he studying any developement of religious Thrught, or any other werevent for that matter, there is always a dauger of become ing to nanow in the range of motival. work use of, and in neglecting the sturn g side lights which way be Thurs ofer the worrement by the investigation of that material which seems to liz just outside the limits of the Correr. Lo many I suffore, Himas Paine world hardly be regarded as an enriching source for material ofor theological subjects, but, in spite of his errors, in spite the many mistokes that Paive made in his theological mintings due to his lack of knowledge and we time. in spots of the occasional traces of courses ver, and crudever, he stuck at the very heart of many of the follows

that feiflexed worry winds since his day. and the hest and wort scholarly results of worken historical investigations have gove to certiim and fur wory of the statements worke by Vaine, Camen the conservative religious thinkers accept work forts of the very volue that worke baine mile his age of leaser" this Paine ever cheamed of. They still retain a sewblance of belief in three ideas which Paines greater ferserval indefendance lead him to reject. While the foges that were written in demuciotion of Pecine and his ideas have long since her projection, the essentiel thathe for which Paine stovel have received the offiveral of history, and are in wary worp in confects accord with worlen thight. Born in The tfirel England, Jone 29. 1737. he lead a tim bolent life the field

with hitter disofficient ments until the he come to americo in 1773; bringing as his fairfirt into american hips, a letter written by Benjonin Franklin, du 1776 Le mote his favous, and what funed to 12 his sensational Corvern Leure, in which he toldly announced that sefaration \*from the wother country was the only method of dignity or sofiety in solving the ferring foblem which confronted the colonies in thre days . Then followed the unher of the Crisis," which were well aclofted to the problems of the day. At 2 remained in this country until 1787, when he ment to France and England to exhibit a wordel of a bridge he had inverted. Arining in France he found the feofle just on the first of beaking into the sevolution, and entered into the revolutionary wenewent, Being of a

less farimate and extreme native the leaders of the Revolution, as seen forticolonly in his voting for the King's bruishment, wathen then for his death, he was thrown Luxen bourg Prisen the his way to Prison he fort into the touch of a fublisher the first fort of leasen" the second fout wor his age of Reason" the second fout wor finished in 1795, She book wor declicated to the the American Reofle, and the deword there war for it, and the extent to which it fervoled the country, which wor longing for some quickening vorishment to relieve it from the seconth of dearth of finiture force horght about by Colorin com is clearly set forth in the following words of John White Chadwick. She age of Reason letter, programts, every thing that he even wrote of a theological character, does not woke of thee

hunched foges. a little croft. and yet it has outlined stowns in which whole fleets of of seventy four have gove to mech, and still keep the seas and files its sancy chollenge across many a fonder ous won: of: wor and feare for muchations. Selder have three hundred foges lived so long, and gove so far, and had so large an influence whether for good a for evil, In the last years of the eighteenth century and in the first years of the nineteenth, they were midely reach in England and america. Shey raised of boots of admites in every torm and willoge, worthy hard: headed men with little fortry a imagin: ation in them, and little fiely, whotever of sound wordity. They fere tooted to the rewatert confiner of civilizations, Shey feneticted to the rewatert confines of civilizations. The wondering feeller

carried them in his fack to the back = " woods were in his colin, and they still sell, effectably in the Great hert, huncheds and thresands of them every year, and are still midely read with various degrees of satisfaction. This is a work offeriative estimate of Paine's theological influence, this he has at times been accorded. For example on the fly leaf of the copy of the lage of Reason which is in the library here, are unitten there works, It is bitterly to be defined, that the genion which famed arow Levre! the Crisis" and hights of wore" should have ever beforeled itself with the obsenily and ribolchy of the age of Reason "and similar books," One young the that feacher arrining in this country from Englowel, expensed himself in these words. I thank God

that the boves of four Vaine have been? rooted up, and vo lorger disgrace the soil four country," I convot repain also from quoting the following which is a wosterfield of inconsisterry, the writer is speaking of Westcherter County, Havis formal the delight for milloge where the firs bot fersecuted Auguevots, flexing from officiens of lighty and intolerance, found a quiet and toffy forme: and where too is still forinted out the consecrated little enclosure, in which when the toil and sufferings of this life were over, they rested from their labors. and here, alas ! that the flace should be Room bot to be shumed, - here is yet seen the mines of the sail and forsoken sfot rendered infavous by the selulche of the infickel Parise." Works of Y. Paine. Pub. by Wes. Camer 1830 Prefore PXTT

But really what is there in this age of Keason .. that harght ofm the beach of its writer the denneiotions of the Christin Commity? bothing so very starthing often all, Iquote his stote went of behief, at lest its fariture sille. "I believe in one God, and no ware, and I hope for hopfiners heyoved this life. "I believe in the equality of won; and I believe that religious du très consect in doing justice, loving mercy, and encleavoring to woke our fellow creatures toffy." His conception of God wor for were volle and extalted the the notion flevailing awing the rank and file of the clergy who conclude him, and his faith much wore sound and massailable. Why he war even stoken of as an infidel one convot see, unless it be because he really struck have at the wolver ofle

fourt in the accepted faith of the day. 9 The following sentence gives us at once a she to the sauce of the many of the treatment which he received at the brack of the clengy, and also shows us the lofti= wer of his ideas concerning Jerus. The Christian Sherry is little tere else than the idolotry of the ancient hyphologies accordated to the purposes of former and revenue : and it yet remains to reason and Philosophy to abolish the amphibious frand." nothing that is here said con offly, even with the wort distant disrespect, to the real character of ferrer christ. He was a minture, and an amioble un. The wordity that he freached and fractised wor of the wort benevrlent kivel; and thrigh similar systems of wordity bod

teen feached by compressions, and by some of the breach Philosopher, wry years Jefore, and by the grokers since, and by worry good men in all ages, it has not been exceeded by any " a very just, and officiation statement of Jesus', and one inhich has the ment of being quite fre from gush. Thus it seems that in general from Paine held niews which are very acceptable to day To a very large under of firfle, and one an express these mens without from of such faitful criticisius as more forsect on Paine. The ideas which he advanced, represented the ofining of large unbers of pufle outside of the church, They have to a very large extent here token of into the church beliefs and reperent the liberal brancher of showt all religious bodies, as mell as the ideal

of three where are ofenly and avouredly literal. In only do there ideas reperent the religious ofinion of the American womenant ontricle of the church, but they are the essential frinciples where which the acueren Genemicut wor founded, I goot "The religious ofinions of Jefferson, John adams, Benjomin Franklin and a tost of others mine and good men in Europe and America, differ in vo usert from thre of Shower Paine." with There were Paine wor intrivote, and in connection with them did must to agoinge and launch this Muited States of america. wfor her course, defending vot only folitical freedow, and religious tolerotions but insisting ofon religious freedom, and the right of private interfectation of religious exferience. When we read in

ou constitution, - but vo religious test shall '2 even be required as a qualification to any office or fublic trust under the Mutec Stoles," it represents the influence of men who mere in hearty and corclic sympothy with the ideas of natural religion, which were funda: mental with the wer of former who fromed ou constitution, This current of seligious thought, on tricle of the church is one of the wort infortunt, if vot the wort infitut in the religious developement of the country, and the follfill = went of its floghetic character is been dewonstrated each day of one national byz.

[Rise and Development of the Congregational Polity and Spirit]

[IX.] Thomas Paine and Theology Without the Church

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

No Date<sup>1</sup>

In studying any development of the religious thought, or any other movement for that matter, there is always a danger of becoming too narrow in the range of material made use of, and in neglecting the strong side-lights which may be thrown upon the movement by the investigation of that material which seems to lie just outside the limits of the canon. To many, I suppose, Thomas Paine would hardly be regarded as an enriching source for material upon theological subjects. Yet, in spite of his errors, in spite [of] the many mistakes that Paine made in his theological writings due to his lack of knowledge and culture, in spite of the occasional traces of coarseness and crudeness, he struck at the very heart of many of the problems that have perplexed many minds since his day, and the best and most scholarly results of modern historical investigation have gone to confirm and prove many of the statements made by Paine. Even the conservative religious thinkers accept more facts of the very nature that made Paine write his Age of Reason than Paine ever dreamed of. They still retain a semblance of belief in those ideas which Paine's greater personal independence led him to reject. While the pages that were written in denunciation of Paine and his ideas have long since been forgotten, the essential truths for which Paine stood have received the approval of history, and are, in many ways, in complete accord with modern thought.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Earl C. Davis wrote a good number of manuscripts concerning the history of the church. All are hand-written dating them before 1907-so Pittsfield or Harvard. Some, including this one, are pretty clearly part of a series provided to a congregation-so probably Pittsfield.

Born in Thetford, England, June 29, 1737, he led a turbulent life filled with bitter disappointments until he came to America in 1775, bringing as his passport into American life a letter written by Benjamin Franklin. In 1776, he wrote his famous, and what proved to be his sensational, "Common Sense," in which he boldly announced that the separation from the mother country was the only method of dignity or safety in solving the pressing problem which confronted the colonies in those days. Then followed the {???} of the "Crisis," which were well-adopted to the problems of the day. He remained in this country until 1787, when he went to France and England to exhibit a model of a bridge he had invented. Arriving in France he found the people just on the point of breaking into the revolution, and entered into the revolutionary movement. Being of a less passionate and extreme nature than the leaders of the [French] Revolution, as seen particularly in his voting for the King's banishment, rather than for his death, he was thrown [into] Luxembourg Prison. On his way to prison he put into the hands of a publisher the first part of his Age of Reason. The second part was finished in 1795. The book was dedicated to the American People, and the demand there was for it, and the extent to which it pervaded the country, which was longing for some quickening nourishment to relieve it from the dearth of spiritual force brought about by Calvinism, is clearly set forth in the following words of John White Chadwick,

> The Age of Reason, letters, fragments, everything that he ever wrote of a theological character, does not make up three hundred pages. A little craft, and yet it has outlived storms in which whole fleets of seventy-fours have gone to wreck, and still keep the seas and fires its saucy challenge across many a founders man-of-war and peaceful merchantmen. Seldom have three hundred pages lived so long, and gone so far, and had so large an influence, whether for good or for evil. In the last years of the eighteenth century and in the first years of the nineteenth, they were widely read in England and America. They raised up knots of advocates in every town and village, mostly hard-headed men with little poetry or imagination in them, and little piety, whatever of sound morality. They penetrated to the

remotest confines of civilization. The wandering peddler carried them in his pack to the back woodsman in his cabin. And they still sell, especially in the Great West, hundreds and thousands of them every year, and are still widely read with various degrees of satisfaction.<sup>2</sup>

This is a more appreciative estimate of Paine's theological influence than he has at times been accorded. For example, on the flyleaf of the copy of the Age of Reason which is in the library here are written these words, "It is bitterly to be deplored that the genius which penned 'Common Sense,' 'The Crisis' and 'Lights of Man' should have even befouled itself with the obscenity and ribaldry of the Age of Reason and similar books." One young Methodist preacher arriving in this country from England expressed himself in these words, "I thank God that the bones of Tom Paine have been rooted up, and no longer disgrace the soil of our country."<sup>3</sup> I cannot refrain also from quoting the following, which is a masterpiece of inconsistency. The writer is speaking of Westchester County,

Here is found the delightful village where the pious but persecuted Huguenots, fleeing from oppressions and bigotry and intolerance, found a quiet and happy home; and where too is still pointed out the consecrated little enclosure in which, when the toils and sufferings of this life were over, they rested from their labors. And here, alas! that place should be known but to be shunned, here is yet seen the ruins of the sad and forsaken spot rendered infamous by the sepulcher of the infidel Paine. (Works of T. Paine, Pub. By Wm. Carver, 1830, Preface, p. xii.)

But really what is there in this Age of Reason that brought upon the head of its writer the denunciations of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> John White Chadwick, *Economy and Waste: A Sermon*, Charles P. Somerby, 1877. John White Chadwick (1840-1904) was an American writer and Unitarian preacher.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Quoted in J. J. Rousseau, *The Theological Works of Thomas Paine*, New York: William Carver, 1830, p. xi.

the Christian community? Nothing so very startling after all. I quote his statement of belief, at least its positive side,

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life.

I believe 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>4</sup>

His conception of God was far more noble and exalted than the notions prevailing among the rank and file of the clergy who condemned his, and his faith much more sound and unassailable. Why he was ever spoken of as an infidel, one cannot see, unless it be because he really struck home at the vulnerable point in the accepted faith of the day. The following sentence gives us at once a clue to the cause of the unsympathetic treatment which he received at the hands of the clergy, and also shows us the loftiness of his ideas concerning Jesus:

> The Christian Theory is little else than the idolatry of the ancient Mythologists, accommodated to the purposes of power and revenue; and it yet remains to reason and philosophy to abolish the amphibious fraud.

Nothing that is here said can apply, even with the most distant disrespect, to the *real* character of Jesus Christ. He was a virtuous and an amiable man. The morality that he preached and practiced was of the most benevolent kind; and though similar systems of morality had been preached by Confucius, and by some of the Greek philosophers, many years before; by the Quakers since; and by many good men in all ages, it has not been exceeded by any.<sup>5</sup>

A very just, and appreciative statement of Jesus, and one which has the merit of being quite free from gush.

Thus it seems that in general Tom Paine held views which are very acceptable today to a very large number of people, and one can express these views without fear of such

- <sup>4</sup> Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, Part I, p. 6.
- <sup>5</sup> Thomas Paine, The Age of Reason, Part I, p. 8-9.

painful criticisms as were passed on Paine. The ideas which he advanced represented the opinions of large numbers of people outside of the church. They have, to a very large extent, been taken up into the church beliefs and represent the liberal branches of about all religious bodies, as well as the ideas of those who are openly and avowedly liberal.

Not only do these ideas represent the religious opinions of the American movement outside of the church, but they are the essential principles upon which the American Government was founded. I quote, "The religious opinions of Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and a host of wise and good men in Europe and America differ in no respect from those of Thomas Paine."6 With these men Paine was intimate, and in connection with them did much to organize and launch this United States of America upon her course, defending not only political freedom and religious toleration, but insisting upon religious freedom, and the right of private interpretation of religious experience. When we read in our Constitution, "but no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States"<sup>7</sup> it represents the influence of men who were in hearty and cordial sympathy with the ideas of natural religion, which were fundamental with the men of power who framed our Constitution.

This current of religious thought, outside of the church, is one of the most important, if not the most important, in the religious development of the country, and the fulfillment of its prophetic character has been demonstrated each day of our national life.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> I cannot find the source of the quotation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> United States Constitution, Article VI, Section 3.