

The Visions of Thomas Paine



Portrait of Thomas Paine by Matthew Pratt

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Biographical sketch from Encyclopaedia Britannica

Thomas Paine, (born January 29, 1737, Thetford, Norfolk, England—died June 8, 1809, New York, New York, U.S.), English-American writer and political pamphleteer whose *Common Sense* pamphlet and *Crisis* papers were important influences on the American Revolution. Other works that contributed to his reputation as one of the greatest political propagandists in history were *Rights of Man*, a defense of the French Revolution and of republican principles, and *The Age of Reason*, an exposition of the place of religion in society.

Early life

Paine was born of a Quaker father and an Anglican mother. His formal education was meagre, just enough to enable him to master reading, writing, and arithmetic. At 13 he began work with his father as a corset maker and then tried various other occupations unsuccessfully, finally becoming an officer of the excise. His duties were to hunt for smugglers and collect the excise taxes on liquor and tobacco. The pay was insufficient to cover living costs, but he used part of his earnings to purchase books and scientific apparatus.

Paine's life in England was marked by repeated failures. He had two brief marriages. He was unsuccessful or unhappy in every job he tried. He was dismissed from the excise office after he published a strong argument in 1772 for a raise in pay as the only way to end corruption in the service. Just when his situation appeared hopeless, he met Benjamin Franklin in London, who advised him to seek his fortune in America and gave him letters of introduction (including one to Franklin's son-in-law, Richard Bache)."

Arrival to America

Paine arrived in Philadelphia on November 30, 1774. Bache introduced him to Robert Aitkin, whose *Pennsylvania Magazine* Paine helped found and edit for 18 months. In addition Paine published numerous articles and some poetry, anonymously or under pseudonyms. One such article was "African Slavery in America," a scathing denunciation of the African slave trade, which he signed "Justice and Humanity."

Paine had arrived in America when the conflict between the colonists and England was reaching its height. After blood was spilled at the Battles of Lexington and Concord, April 19, 1775, Paine argued that the cause of America should be not just a revolt against taxation but a demand for independence. He put this idea into "Common Sense", which came off the press on January 10, 1776. The 50-page pamphlet sold more than 500,000 copies within a few months. More than any other single publication, "Common Sense" paved the way for the Declaration of Independence, unanimously ratified on July 4, 1776.

During the war that followed, Paine served as volunteer aide-de-camp to Gen. Nathanael Greene. His great contribution to the patriot cause was the 16 "Crisis" papers issued between 1776 and 1783, each one signed 'Common Sense'. "The American Crisis, Number I," published on December 19, 1776, when George Washington's army was on the verge of disintegration, so moved Washington that he ordered it read to all the troops at Valley Forge. (...)

Return to Europe

In April 1787 Paine left for Europe to promote his plan to build a single-arch bridge across the wide Schuylkill River near Philadelphia. But in England he was soon diverted from his engineering project. In December 1789 he published anonymously a warning against the attempt of Prime Minister William Pitt to involve England in a war with France over the Dutch Republic, reminding the British people that war had "but one thing certain and that is increase of taxes." But it was the French Revolution that now filled Paine's thoughts. He was enraged by Edmund Burke's attack on the uprising of the French people in his "Reflections on the Revolution in France", and although Paine

admired Burke's stand in favour of the American Revolution, he rushed into print with his celebrated answer, "Rights of Man" (March 13, 1791). The book immediately created a sensation. At least eight editions were published in 1791, and the work was quickly reprinted in the U.S., where it was widely distributed by the Jeffersonian societies. When Burke replied, Paine came back with "Rights of Man, Part II", published on February 17, 1792.

What began as a defence of the French Revolution evolved into an analysis of the basic reasons for discontent in European society and a remedy for the evils of arbitrary government, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and war. Paine spoke out effectively in favour of republicanism as against monarchy and went on to outline a plan for popular education, relief of the poor, pensions for aged people, and public works for the unemployed, all to be financed by the levying of a progressive income tax. To the ruling class Paine's proposals spelled "bloody revolution," and the government ordered the book banned and the publisher jailed. Paine himself was indicted for treason, and an order went out for his arrest. But he was en route to France, having been elected to a seat in the National Convention, before the order for his arrest could be delivered. Paine was tried in absentia, found guilty of seditious libel, and declared an outlaw, and "Rights of Man" was ordered permanently suppressed.

Years in France

The first years that he spent in France formed a curious episode in his life. He was enthusiastically received, but, because he knew little French, translations of his speeches had to be read for him. In France Paine hailed the abolition of the monarchy but deplored the terror against the royalists and fought unsuccessfully to save the life of King Louis XVI, favouring banishment rather than execution, which he argued would alienate American sympathy. He was to pay for his efforts to save the king's life when the radicals under Maximilien Robespierre took power. Paine was imprisoned from December 28, 1793, to November 4, 1794, when, with the fall of Robespierre, he was released and, though seriously ill, readmitted to the National Convention.

While in prison, the first part of Paine's "Age of Reason" was published (1794), and it was followed by "Part II" after his release (1796). Although Paine made it clear that he believed in a Supreme Being and, as a Deist, opposed only organized religion, the work won him a reputation as an atheist among the orthodox. The publication of his last great pamphlet, "Agrarian Justice" (1797), with its attack on inequalities in property ownership, added to his many enemies in establishment circles. Paine remained in France until September 1, 1802, when he sailed for the United States.

The final years

He quickly discovered that his services to the country had been all but forgotten and that he was widely regarded only as the world's greatest infidel. Despite his poverty and his physical condition, worsened by occasional drunkenness, Paine continued his attacks on privilege and religious superstitions. He died in New York City in 1809 and was buried in New Rochelle on the farm given to him by the state of New York as a reward for his Revolutionary writings.

Extracts from the writings of Thomas Paine

Common Sense (1776)

"From the errors of other nations, let us learn wisdom,"

"For all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have the right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others forever, and tho' himself might deserve some decent degree of honours of his contemporaries, yet his descendants might be far too unworthy to inherit them."

“Small islands, not capable of protecting themselves, are the proper objects for kingdoms to take under their care; but there is something absurd, in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island.”

“When I was teaching children I began every day writing this on the blackboard: "Do to others what you would like them to do to you", telling them how much better the world would be if everybody lived by this rule.”

“It is not in numbers, but in unity, that our great strength lies; yet our present numbers are sufficient to repel the force of all the world.”

“Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one; for when we suffer, or are exposed to the same miseries by a government, which we might expect in a country without government, our calamity is heightened by reflecting that we furnish the means by which we suffer.”

“The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind. Many circumstances have, and will arise, which are not local, but universal, and through which the principles of all Lovers of Mankind are affected, and in the Event of which, their Affections are interested. The laying of a Country desolate with Fire and Sword, declaring War against the natural rights of all Mankind, and extirpating the Defenders thereof from the Face of the Earth, is the Concern of every Man to whom Nature hath given the Power of feeling; of which Class, regardless of Party Censure, is the AUTHOR.”

“Let a crown be placed thereon, by which the world may know, that so far as we approve of monarchy, that in America THE LAW IS KING. For as in absolute governments the King is law, so in free countries the law OUGHT to be King; and there ought to be no other. But lest any ill use should afterwards arise, let the crown at the conclusion of the ceremony, be demolished, and scattered among the people whose right it is.”

Rights of Man (1791)

“When it can be said by any country in the world, my poor are happy, neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them, my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars, the aged are not in want, the taxes are not oppressive, the rational world is my friend because I am the friend of happiness. When these things can be said, then may that country boast its constitution and government. Independence is my happiness, the world is my country and my religion is to do good.”

“Whatever is my right as a man is also the right of another; and it becomes my duty to guarantee as well as to possess.”

“If men will permit themselves to think, as rational beings ought to think, nothing can appear more ridiculous and absurd, exclusive of all moral reflections, than to be at the expense of building navies, filling them with men, and then hauling them into the ocean, to try which can sink each other fastest. Peace, which costs nothing, is attended with infinitely more advantage than any victory with all its expense. But this, though it best answers the purpose of Nations, does not that of Court Governments, whose habited policy is pretence for taxation, places, and offices.”

“Reason obeys itself; and ignorance submits to whatever is dictated to it.”

“But with respect to religion itself, without regard to names, and as directing itself from the universal family of mankind to the divine object of adoration, it is man bringing to his maker the fruits of his heart; and though these fruits may differ from each other like the fruits of the earth, the grateful tribute of everyone is accepted.”

The Age of Reason (1793–1794)

“I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church. All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolise power and profit.”¹

“One good schoolmaster is of more use than a hundred priests.”

“I have always strenuously supported the right of every man to his own opinion, however different that opinion might be to mine. He who denies to another this right, makes a slave of himself to his present opinion, because he precludes himself the right of changing it.”

Miscellaneous

“To argue with a man who has renounced the use and authority of reason, and whose philosophy consists in holding humanity in contempt, is like administering medicine to the dead, or endeavouring to convert an atheist by scripture.” (*The American Crisis*)

“The Christian religion is a parody on the worship of the Sun, in which they put a man whom they call Christ, in the place of the Sun, and pay him the same adoration which was originally paid to the Sun.” (*An Essay on the Origin of Free-Masonry*)

“He that would make his own liberty secure must guard even his enemy from oppression; for if he violates this duty he establishes a precedent that will reach to himself.” (*Dissertation on First Principles of Government*, 1795)

¹ Contrast this with HPB’s statement in the *Secret Doctrine*:

“No one can study ancient philosophies seriously without perceiving that the striking similitude of conception between all — in their exoteric form very often, in their hidden spirit invariably — is the result of no mere coincidence, but of a concurrent design: and that there was, during the youth of mankind, one language, one knowledge, one universal religion, when there were no churches, no creeds or sects, but when every man was a priest unto himself.” *SD* 1:341

“The Adepts in America in 1776”

By an Ex-Asiatic (pen name for W. Q. Judge) “Theosophist”, October 1883.

The following suggestions and statements are made entirely upon the personal responsibility of the writer, and without the knowledge or consent—as far as he knows—of the adepts who are in general terms therein referred to.

The reflecting mind is filled with astonishment upon reviewing the history of the rise of the United States of N. America, when it perceives that dogmatic theology has no foundation in any part of the Declaration of Independence or Constitution for the structure which it fain would raise and has so often since tried to erect within and upon the government. We are astonished because those documents were formulated and that government established at a time when dogmatism of one kind or another had supreme sway. Although the Puritans and others had come to America for religious freedom, they were still very dogmatic and tenacious of their own peculiar theories and creed; so that if we found in this fundamental law much about religion and religious establishments, we would not be surprised. But in vain do we look for it, in vain did the supporters of the iron church attempt to lay the needed corner stone, and today America rejoices at it, and has thereby found it possible to grow with the marvellous growth that has been the wonder of Europe.

The nullification of these efforts made by bigotry in 1776 was due to the adepts who now look over and give the countenance of their great name to the Theosophical Society.

They oversaw the drafting of the Declaration and the drawing of the Constitution, and that is why no foothold is to be found for these blatant Christians who desire to inject God into the constitution.

In the declaration, from which freedom sprang, “*nature and nature’s god*” are referred to. In the 2nd and 3rd paragraphs the *natural rights of man* are specified, such as *life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*. The king is spoken of as being unworthy to be “the head of a *civilized nation*,” nothing being said as to whether he was the head, or worthy to be, of a *Christian* one.

In appealing to their British brethren, the declaration says the appeal is “made to their *native* justice and magnanimity.” All reference to religion and Christianity or God’s commands are left out. This was for the very good reason that for 1700 years religion had battled against progress, against justice, against magnanimity, against the rights of man. And in the concluding sentence the signers mutually pledge each other to its support ignoring all appeals to God.

In the constitution of 1787 the preamble declares that the instrument was made for union, for justice, for tranquillity and defence, the general good and liberty. Art. VI says no religious test as a qualification for office shall ever be required, and the 1st Amendment prohibits an establishment of religion or restraint of its free exercise.

The great Theosophical Adepts in looking around the world for a mind through which they could produce in America the reaction which was then needed, found in England, Thomas Paine. In 1774 they influenced him, through the help of that worthy Brother Benjamin Franklin, to come to America. He came here and was the main instigator of the separation of the Colonies from the British Crown. At the suggestion of Washington, Franklin, Jefferson and other Freemasons, whose minds through

the teachings of the symbolic degrees of masonry were fitted to reason correctly, and to reject theological conservatism, he wrote "*Common Sense*," which was the torch to the pile whose blaze burned away the bonds between England and America. For "*Common Sense*" he was often publicly thanked. George Washington wrote September 10th, 1783, to Paine: "I shall be exceedingly happy to see you. Your presence may remind Congress of your past services to this country, and if it is in my power to impress them, command my best exertions with freedom, as they will be rendered cheerfully by one who entertains a lively sense of the importance of your works." And again in June 1784, in a letter to Madison, Washington says: "Can nothing be done in our assembly for poor Paine? Must the merits and services of '*Common Sense*' continue to glide down the stream of time unrewarded by this country? His writings certainly have had a powerful effect upon the public mind. Ought they not then to meet an adequate return?"

In the "*Age of Reason*" which he wrote in Paris several years after, Paine says: "I saw, or at least I thought I saw, a vast scene opening itself to the world in the affairs of America; and it appeared to me that unless the Americans changed the plan they were then pursuing and declared themselves independent, they would not only involve themselves in a multiplicity of new difficulties, but shut out the prospect that was then offering itself to mankind through their means." Further on he says: "There are two distinct classes of thoughts; those produced by reflection, and those that bolt into the mind of their own accord. I have always made it a rule to treat these voluntary visitors with civility, and it is from them I have acquired all the knowledge that I have." [emphasis added]

These "voluntary visitors" were injected into his brain by the Adepts, Theosophists. Seeing that a new order of ages was about to commence and that there was a new chance for freedom and the brotherhood of man, they laid before the eye of Thomas Paine—who they knew could be trusted to stand almost alone with the lamp of truth in his hand amidst others who in "times that tried men's souls" quaked with fear,—a "vast scene opening itself to Mankind in the affairs of America." The result was the *Declaration*, the Constitution for America. And as if to give point to these words and to his declaration that he saw this vast scene opening itself, this new order of ages, the design of the reverse side of the U.S. great seal is a pyramid whose capstone is removed with the blazing eye in a triangle over it dazzling the sight, above it are the words "the heavens approve," while underneath appears the startling sentence "a new order of ages."

That he had in his mind's eye a new order of ages we cannot doubt upon reading in his "Rights of Man," Part 2, Chap. 2, "no beginning could be made in Asia, Africa or Europe, to reform the political condition of man. She (America) made a stand not for herself alone, but for the world, and looked beyond the advantage she could receive." In Chap. 4, "The case and circumstances of America present themselves as in the beginning of a world * * * there is a morning of reason rising upon man, on the subject of Government, that has not appeared before."

The design "of the seal" was not an accident, but was actually intended to symbolize the building and firm founding of a new order of ages. It was putting into form the idea which by means of a "voluntary visitor" was presented to the mind of Thomas Paine, of a vast scene opening itself, the beginning in America of "a new order of ages." That side of the seal has never been cut or used, and at this day the side in use has not the sanction of law. In the spring of 1841, when Daniel Webster was Secretary of State, a new seal was cut, and instead of the eagle holding in his sinister [left] claw 13 arrows as

intended, he holds only six. Not only was this change unauthorized, but the cause for it is unknown. When the other side is cut and used, will not the new order of ages have actually been established?

More than is claimed for the Theosophical Adepts than the changing of baser metal into gold, or the possession of such a merely material thing as the elixir of life. They watch the progress of man and help him on in his halting flight up the steep plane of progress. They hovered over Washington, Jefferson, and all the other brave freemasons who dared to found a free Government in the West, which could be pure from the dross of dogmatism, they cleared their minds, inspired their pens and left upon the great seal of this mighty nation the memorial of their presence.

“Seven Kinds of Dreams” by H.P. Blavatsky

We may roughly divide dreams also into seven classes, and subdivide these in turn. Thus, we would divide them into:—

1. Prophetic dreams. These are impressed on our memory by the Higher Self, and are generally plain and clear: either a voice heard or the coming event foreseen.
2. Allegorical dreams, or hazy glimpses of realities caught by the brain and distorted by our fancy. These are generally only half true.
3. Dreams sent by adepts, good or bad, by mesmerisers, or by the thoughts of very powerful minds bent on making us do their will.
4. Retrospective dreams of events belonging to past incarnations.
5. Warning dreams for others who are unable to be impressed themselves.
6. Confused dreams, the causes of which have been discussed above.
7. Dreams which are mere fancies and chaotic pictures, owing to digestion, some mental trouble, or such-like external cause.

How the Mahatmas use visions to influence individuals

Knowledge comes in visions, first in dreams and then in pictures presented to the inner eye during meditation. Thus have I been taught the whole system of evolution, the laws of being and all else that I know—the mysteries of life and death, the workings of karma. Not a word was spoken to me of all this in the ordinary way, except, perhaps, by way of confirmation of what was thus given me—nothing taught me in writing. And knowledge so obtained is so clear, so convincing, so indelible in the impression it makes upon the mind, that all other sources of information, all other methods of teaching with which we are familiar dwindle into insignificance in comparison with this. One of the reasons why I hesitate to answer offhand some questions put to me is the difficulty of expressing in sufficiently accurate language things given to me in pictures, and comprehended by me by the pure Reason, as Kant would call it. Theirs is a synthetic method of teaching: the most general outlines are given first, then an insight into the method of working, next the broad principles and notions are brought into view, and lastly begins the revelation of the minuter points.