

**The Art of Ridicule in the Age of Reason:
The Anti-Biblical Rhetoric of Thomas Paine**

By

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To my children, Eden, Jacob, Madeleine, Christian, and Monet,
who kept supporting their father's education long after
"summer soldiers and sunshine patriots" would have given up.
And to my wife, Emily, forever grateful she would
"twist [her] green willows somewhere near to mine."

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“As I choose to think my own reasons and write my own thoughts, I feel the more free the less I consult.” So wrote Thomas Paine in an essay on fishing rights published at the height of the American Revolution. Because independent thought helped bolster his Common Sense persona, Paine claimed that no outside help was needed to arrive at the self-evident truths he presented to his readers. Thus he made it a rule to claim what we might call his ideological and literary self-sufficiency. As he boasted in *Rights of Man*, “I neither read books, nor studied other people’s opinions. I thought for myself.”¹

Though I did a painful amount of “thinking for myself” throughout the many years leading up to and including this dissertation, claiming educational independence—other than for any mistakes contained herein—would be no more true of me than it was of Thomas Paine. Of course Paine read books, and his conversation partners included many of the greatest minds of his time, and in my own way, in my education I have enjoyed a similar blessing. This project would have been impossible without the help of others.

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¹ Thomas Paine, “Peace, and the Newfoundland Fisheries,” in Moncure D. Conway, *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 4 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1894), 2:24; *Rights of Man*, in *ibid.*, 2:463.

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CHAPTER 1

“FILTHY LITTLE ATHEIST”

In 1802, with Thomas Jefferson presiding in the White House, John Adams reconciling himself to post-presidential life in Quincy, and George Washington serenely entombed in Mount Vernon, a pair of letters passed between two of their oldest and most spirited associates: eighty-year-old Samuel Adams and sixty-five-year-old Thomas Paine. Fellow Founders and former friends, the aged compatriots would have had much to reminisce about, but this exchange, though cordial, was far from friendly, at least on Adams’s side. A quarter century removed from the publication of *Common Sense*, it centered on Paine’s intentions in writing *The Age of Reason*, an anti-Christian polemic that threatened to do to revealed religion what his earlier pamphlet had done to the British monarchy. For nearly a decade it had been spreading across America as irrepressibly as his other works, but unlike his political writings, which Adams applauded, Paine’s theological masterwork raised the elder statesman’s Puritan ire.

Dusting off the decades that had distanced them, Adams remained civil throughout, but did little to hide his contempt. He began his brief, two-paragraph missive with the most impersonal of greetings (“Sir”) and ended it just as tersely, bidding Paine “Adieu” after inscribing the Latin warning, *Felix qui cautus* (“Happy is he who is cautious”). In between, Adams noted their shared service “to my native and your adopted country” (the first sign of separation), and admitted that during the Revolution he had “esteemed” Paine “a warm friend to the liberty and lasting welfare of the human race,” phrased in a damning past tense. His opinion soured “when I heard that you had turned your mind to a defence of infidelity” (the period’s preferred dysphemism for religious skepticism). How dare Paine engage himself “in so bad a cause,” especially when “our friend, the President” was facing questions over his own religious “liberality.” Once an electrifying propagandist in his own right, Adams blasted Paine’s anti-

biblical attack and asked, condescendingly, “Do you think, that your pen, or the pen of any other man, can unchristianize the mass of our citizens?”¹

Adams’s question was rhetorical in more ways than one. Not only did it dramatize the seeming impossibility of slipping “Christian America” from its moorings on the rock of revelation, but it focused on rhetoric—the power of the pen—as the source of that spiritual drift. Rhetorical questions, of course, are not meant to be answered directly, but ironically for Adams, and notwithstanding the first rumblings of the Second Great Awakening which had him seeing backsliding believers “fast returning to their first love,” subsequent history has largely answered him in the affirmative. Paine did believe that his pen could pry Christians away from biblical belief, and the pens of subsequent skeptics have been most successful when they mimicked Paine’s style. More than any other writer in American history, Paine leveraged the power of rhetoric to “unchristianize” American unbelievers, who have been repeating his language, echoing his approach, and even commemorating his birthday ever since. In one of history’s fitting ironies, this religious iconoclast has himself become a patron saint for skeptics: his anti-biblicism their orthodoxy, his words their scripture, even his misplaced bones a promise of relics in waiting.²

This study will take Paine by his words and seek to explain why. Drawing upon the disciplines of rhetorical criticism and literary analysis, passing the resulting insights through the theoretical lenses of sociology, philosophy, and psychology, all while remaining grounded in the history of the period, we will analyze the pen of Tom Paine to understand its seemingly unanswerable persuasive power. His political writings will provide necessary counterpoint, but his religious writings—that is, his *irreligious* ones—will be the focus of our investigation. How did they “unchristianize” so many readers then and since? Or more broadly, how can rhetoric uproot ideology as deep-seated as religious belief? In Paine’s

¹ Samuel Adams to Thomas Paine, November 30, 1802; in Moncure D. Conway, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 4 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1894–1896), 4:201–02; because of its accessibility and searchability in scanned editions online, unless stated otherwise, quotations from Paine’s writings will be cited from this edition, noted hereafter as *Writings*.

² *Ibid.*, in *Writings*, 4:202; in a database of mid-nineteenth-century American Freethought periodicals, Thomas Paine’s lingering presence is visible throughout: their most frequent contributor was a posthumous Paine, and reports of his birthday commemorations appear frequently. See <https://popularfreethought.wordpress.com/>. On Paine’s misplaced corpse, see Paul Collins, *The Trouble with Tom: The Strange Afterlife and Times of Thomas Paine* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005).

case, he did so by simultaneously glorifying the head, targeting the heart, and leveraging the funny bone. With a politics of humor that has long been overlooked and undervalued, Paine weaponized laughter to shame, to flatter, and to reassure his readers into taking seriously his revolutionary views. When successful, those readers found themselves agreeing with Paine’s perspectives without fully recognizing the revolution within. His secret, prized by other iconoclasts but employed by none to more biting effect, was his reliance on the rhetoric of ridicule. He laughed at the Bible and soon his readers—some irreverently, some uncomfortably, and some indignantly—found themselves laughing along.

THE INFAMOUS THOMAS PAINE

Samuel Adams was hardly the last American patriot to damn Thomas Paine for his religious views, political sympathies notwithstanding. Theodore Roosevelt’s antipathy was far more famous, and provides a revealing look into the continuing impact of Paine’s antireligious rhetoric long after *The Age of Reason* appeared. In 1888, Roosevelt wrote a largely forgotten biography of a largely forgotten founding father: fellow New York politician Gouverneur Morris, the “Penman of the Constitution.” Roosevelt’s passion for politics inspired his choice of subject, but a lone paragraph in the volume, largely unnecessary as it was only tangentially connected to Morris himself, stands out as being inspired by one of Roosevelt’s other abiding interests, his love of the Holy Bible.³ Writing during the late-nineteenth-century “Golden Age” of American Freethought—the self-appointed euphemism for what the orthodox had earlier called skepticism, atheism, or more commonly, “infidelity”—Roosevelt vented his disdain for the Bible’s contemporary detractors by maligning the movement’s most venerated hero: the penman of the Revolution, Thomas Paine. Though nearly a century had passed since Paine had hurriedly handed off the first part of *The Age of Reason* on his way to a French prison cell, neither Roosevelt nor his Christian compatriots had forgiven him his frontal attack on revealed religion. Paine may have escaped the guillotine, but his book would be condemned to the Christian chopping block ever since.

³ On Roosevelt’s view of the Bible, see Christian F. Reisner, *Roosevelt’s Religion* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1922), 305–23.

Ironically, though Roosevelt only mentions Paine in passing, the one paragraph he devotes to him is better remembered than the 364 pages he dedicates to Gouverneur Morris. Worth repeating in full, it not only exemplifies an orthodox impression of Paine that long outlived him, but is itself a striking example of the rhetorical character assassination at which Paine himself was adept. Recounting the violence of the French Revolution during Morris's diplomatic time there, Roosevelt writes:

One man had a very narrow escape. This was Thomas Paine, the Englishman, who had at one period rendered such a striking service to the cause of American independence, while the rest of his life had been as ignoble as it was varied. He had been elected to the Convention, and, having sided with the Gironde, was thrown into prison by the Jacobins. He at once asked Morris to demand him as an American citizen; a title to which he of course had no claim. Morris refused to interfere too actively, judging rightly that Paine would be saved by his own insignificance and would serve his own interests best by keeping still. So the filthy little atheist had to stay in prison, 'where he amused himself with publishing a pamphlet against Jesus Christ.' There are infidels and infidels; Paine belonged to the variety—whereof America possesses at present one or two shining examples—that apparently esteems a bladder of dirty water as the proper weapon with which to assail Christianity. It is not a type that appeals to the sympathy of an onlooker, be said onlooker religious or otherwise.⁴

Roosevelt's rhetoric, representative of generations of Paine's detractors, is revealing throughout. First, though the future president briefly (though non-specifically) acknowledges Paine's service to the United States, twice he disowns him, first by correctly introducing him as "the Englishman," and second by incorrectly refusing him any claim to American citizenship, adding "of course" to make Paine's dishonor, not America's debt, seem the more obvious element. Second, Roosevelt's tone throughout is dismissive, suggesting that Paine is undeserving of history's attention or Christianity's concern. Paine's life was, in general, "ignoble" and "insignifican[t]," better left alone by others, just as he would have been better served by "keeping still" himself. Though by Roosevelt's time "infidelity" was on the rise, Roosevelt waves it away by speaking sarcastically of "shining examples" of late-nineteenth-century Paineism while drastically (and disingenuously) reducing their number to only "one or two." Nothing to be alarmed about, especially when even the non-religious could feel no sympathy for their efforts.

⁴ Theodore Roosevelt, *Gouverneur Morris* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1888), 288–89.

Lastly and most importantly, Roosevelt is as dismissive of Paine’s writings as he is of his memory. He never mentions Paine’s influence as a writer and avoids naming either *Common Sense* or *The Age of Reason* even while alluding to both. The closest he comes to the latter is by inserting the quote from Morris that Paine “amused himself with publishing a pamphlet against Jesus Christ,” which is itself a rhetorical ploy on Morris’s part.⁵ A mere “pamphlet” is no book; “publishing” is a step removed from Paine’s actual role as writer; and while he undeniably attacked revelation, Paine was careful to distinguish his lofty opinion of the historical Jesus from his disdain for the so-called Christian church. But no matter. Christianity was safe from such a “weapon,” affirmed Roosevelt. Before the “rock” against which hell itself could not prevail (see Matthew 16:18), Paine’s *Age of Reason* was nothing more than “a bladder of dirty water,” the perfect projectile for a “filthy little atheist” to throw.

With so much material to choose from, it was that three-word phrase that proved most memorable, and this despite the fact that none of those words described Paine accurately.⁶ His deism included belief in God, albeit a distant one; his hygiene only elicited comment in his final, time-worn years; and as even his foes were forced to acknowledge, there was nothing small about the man’s outsized influence in American political and religious history. Paine deserves to be classed among the nation’s Founding Fathers in politics and is in a class by himself as father of American Freethought. Unfortunately for his memory, however, in the minds of the orthodox his reputation for the second cancelled his claim to the first. If *Porcupine’s Gazette* could brand him “*the Apostle of the Devil, and the nuisance of the world*” for taking a political stand against George Washington, it was only fitting that Bible believers would dub him the “Apostle of Beelzebub” and the “Agent of Lucifer” for making a mockery of the sacred word of God.⁷

⁵ Moncure D. Conway picks apart Morris’s statement—“there is calculation in every word”—in *The Life of Thomas Paine* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1892), 115.

⁶ The phrase led to a protracted correspondence between Theodore Roosevelt and William van der Weyde. The letters are available online at <http://thomaspain.org/aboutpaine/the-van-der-weyde-t-roosevelt-letters.html>.

⁷ Eric Burns, *Infamous Scribblers: The Founding Fathers and the Rowdy Beginnings of American Journalism* (New York:

Eli Whitney, for example, better known for inventing the cotton gin than for marrying the granddaughter of straight-laced Jonathan Edwards, provided one of the more colorful descriptions of Paine after meeting him in a public house in Washington in 1802, the same year Sam Adams wrote his excoriating letter. Echoing commonly held opinions (and anticipating Roosevelt's by nearly ninety years), Whitney called Paine a "filthy old sot" and "a mere loathsome carcase [*sic*]." Saying nothing of Paine's contribution to independence, Whitney wrote instead of his complexion and intemperance. "Common carrion" was the impression Paine left on the inventor, who dismissed him as a "putrid rattle snake which has died from the venom of his own bite." If Paine's body were "exposed on the barren heath of Africa," Whitney mused, even "the Hyena & Jackals would turn away with disgust." Having reached that conclusion, both in person and in print Whitney did just that, abruptly excusing himself from Paine's company in Washington, and leaving the "horrid subject" after only a few paragraphs in his account, sorry for having spent "more time [with it] than it deserve[d]."⁸

Whitney's impression notwithstanding, scores of later writers have proven that, depending on the subject, Thomas Paine deserves as much time and attention as we can give him. His *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man* encouraged successful revolutions in both hemispheres and made their author a household name throughout the English-speaking world and beyond.⁹ Yet the political realm is not the only one to bear his indelible imprint. A child of the Enlightenment and a self-made Renaissance Man, Paine wrote on a multitude of topics ranging from politics, economics, and human rights to military practices, social norms, and scientific developments. He had an opinion on everything and a quill always within reach—capacity and a ready pen, John Adams had called it—a fact that, when coupled with the arrogance to

PublicAffairs, 2006), 343; Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 187.

⁸ Eli Whitney to Josiah Stebbins, 9 November 1802, in Jeanette Mirsky and Allan Nevins, *The World of Eli Whitney* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 1, 229.

⁹ On Paine's influence on political thought outside the English-speaking world, see Paul Cahen, "Bringing Thomas Paine to Latin America: An Overview of the Geopolitics of Translating *Common Sense* into Spanish," in *New Directions in Thomas Paine Studies*, ed. Scott Cleary and Ivy Linton Stabell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 207–28.

think that his thoughts were worth sharing and the readership to prove he was right, left a corpus of writings that are as deserving of study for their historical significance as they are for their rhetorical worth. Time has long since disproven the once-popular children's rhyme:

*Poor Tom Paine! There he lies;
Nobody laughs and nobody cries;
Where he has gone or how he fares,
Nobody knows and nobody cares!*¹⁰

But people did care about Thomas Paine, and posterity still does. The sheer magnitude and influence of Paine's voluminous writings, as well as his critical role in some of modernity's most pivotal events, compelled a host of contemporary writers to take to the page in response, some to report, many to applaud, and still others to criticize, condemn, and counteract him. These have been followed by scores of biographers, historians, political scientists, and rhetorical scholars, who, sharing Paine's confidence in the press and in their facility with the pen, have flooded the world with even more words *about* Paine than ever were written *by* him. Their shared shelf space ensures that Paine's ghost will continue to haunt our libraries and reading lists—a fitting resting place since his bones, once lost, were never found—but also forces subsequent scholars to justify their attempts to add yet more material discussing a man that refuses to be forgotten.¹¹

¹⁰ John Adams, *Autobiography*, in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1850), 2:509; Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 422. The first comprehensive collection of Thomas Paine's writings was Conway's *The Writings of Thomas Paine*. A generation later a ten-volume edition of his works appeared: William M. Van der Weyde, ed., *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine*, 10 vols. (New Rochelle, NY: Thomas Paine National Historical Association, 1925). After much additional research and the discovery of over 200 pieces not included in previous compilations, the definitive collection of Paine's writings is Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2 vols. (New York: The Citadel Press, 1945).

¹¹ The scholarship on Thomas Paine is deservedly voluminous. The first scholarly biography is that of Moncure Daniel Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 2 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1893), and one of the most exhaustive is John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (Boston: Little Brown, 1995). Other notable contributions include Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Man of Reason: The Life of Thomas Paine* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1959); Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989); J. C. D. Clark, *Thomas Paine: Britain, America, & France in the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); David Freeman Hawke, *Paine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Eric Foner, *Thomas Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Jack Fruchtman, Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1994); Harvey J. Kaye, *Thomas Paine: Firebrand of the Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Craig Nelson, *Thomas Paine: Enlightenment, Revolution, and the Birth of Modern Nations* (New York: Viking, 2006); Harlow Giles Unger, *Thomas Paine and the Clarion Call for American Independence* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2019). For some of the newer developments in the field of Paine studies, see Scott Cleary and Ivy Linton Stabell, eds., *New Directions in Thomas Paine*

In one such attempt, one of Paine’s modern-day admirers remarked that Paine’s “time has come again,” and then wondered, “Or perhaps it never wasn’t his time.” The fact that a question even exists is evidence that Paine’s place in our collective memory is as fraught as the wars he helped foment on two continents. Furthermore, the answer depends on what is being remembered, and by whom, for as Paine admitted in a letter to George Washington, wherever he went he attracted the same two types of people: “strong friends and violent enemies.” Such polarization is to be expected, of course, in partisan politics, especially when one’s positions were as revolutionary as Paine’s, but as the examples of Sam Adams and Teddy Roosevelt attest, his most violent enemies arose not in opposition to his political opinions, but to his religious views. The fame he gained in arguing for liberty from monarchy turned to infamy for arguing for freedom from religion. In political and social thought, therefore, Paine’s angel retains its halo, but popularity in that area ignores a long period of forced invisibility due to the devil of his religious iconoclasm. In a way, Paine’s memory followed the trajectory of the Biblical Book of Job (one of the few books of scripture that Paine consistently admired): the Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away, and the Lord restoreth again—though with a difference. Christianity’s orthodox defenders, many of whom stood, like Teddy Roosevelt, in positions of social and political power, felt that Paine’s memory had to be erased until his *Age of Reason* was forgotten; only then could he be reintroduced to school children on the basis of *Common Sense* alone. To this day, posterity looks back at Paine—when it looks at him at all—with a selectively whitewashed memory.¹²

Paine himself had something to say about memory, penned, fittingly, while facing his own impending demise. Writing in the same prison cell where he continued working on his *Age of Reason*, Paine “amused himself” by writing letters to a woman he called “The Little Corner of the World,” signing them “The Castle in the Air.” By such names perhaps he showed his hope to be remembered—

Studies (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and Sam Edwards and Marcus Morris, eds., *The Legacy of Thomas Paine in the Transatlantic World* (London: Routledge, 2018).

¹² Scott Cleary, “Introduction,” in Cleary and Stabell, *New Directions*, 1; Thomas Paine to George Washington, July 21, 1791; in *Complete Writings*, 2:1319.

secured in one “little corner” from floating off untethered into the “air.” Whatever his intent, in one letter he composed an ode not to the Goddess “MEMORY,” who likes “to hear herself flattered,” but rather to “the absent and silent Goddess, Forgetfulness,” who, like Paine must have felt of himself at the time, “has no votaries, and is never thought of.” In a moment of deep self-reflection, far from the seats of power or the scenes of upheaval where he had achieved his renown, Paine praised “this kind, speechless Goddess of a Maid, Forgetfulness,” grateful for the “opium wand” with which she “gently touch[es]” life’s more painful memories and “benumbs them into rest.” As for what lay ahead, he admitted, “Beyond that impenetrable veil, Futurity, we know not what lies concealed.”¹³

There is something poignant, almost prophetic, about this scene. On the one hand, Paine was contemplating his own descent into oblivion. On the other, he was in the middle of producing the one volume that posterity would be most eager to blot from memory, yet least willing to forgive and forget. Then again, how could believers forgive when unbelievers refused to let Paine be forgotten? The problem of contested memory is common to the writing of history, since that is typically done, as is often remarked, “by the winners.” But what if the victory is yet to be won? The Goddesses in question, Memory and Forgetfulness, are never far apart, especially when rival groups turn to them not in obeisance, but in contested attempts to harness their power. In Paine’s case, even within his lifetime he was sometimes a political hot potato and sometimes the object of a partisan tug-of-war. What one group wanted to touch with the “opium wand,” the other fought to protect from collective amnesia. Laid to rest only later to be resurrected, Paine’s beliefs, like his bones, refuse to stay buried.

Like Jefferson’s famous “wall of separation,” the line dividing Paine’s legacy separates his views of Church from his views of State. Both then and now, those who share Paine’s religious views tend to agree with him politically as well: Freethinkers embracing the hope (mistakenly attributed to Diderot) of seeing “the last king strangled with the entrails of the last priest”—literally then and metaphorically now. But for those who were first drawn to Paine’s politics, this did not necessarily mean an embrace of

¹³ Henry Redhair Yorke, *Letters from France, in 1802*, 2 vols. (London: H. D. Symonds, 1804), 2:346–47, 358.

his irreligion. Most, in fact, were repelled by it (though those numbers are shifting in his favor). This has left the more religious part of posterity with the difficult task of disentangling, without entirely dismantling, his legacy. In 1800 a New York Republican Society captured the issue perfectly in a toast to the famous writer: “May his *Rights of Man* be handed down to our latest posterity; but may his *Age of Reason* never live to see the rising generation.” Nearly sixty years later, a suggested epitaph, written in jest, proved the issue remained unresolved: “Here lies Tom Paine, who wrote in liberty’s defence, / And in his ‘Age of Reason’ lost his ‘Common Sense.’”¹⁴

RELIGION, RHETORIC, AND REASON

With the contest over Paine’s memory yet to be decided, it is precisely the cause behind this forced forgetfulness that this study intends to remember—the anti-religious rhetoric in Paine’s *Age of Reason*, which left the Christian Bible demythologized, delegitimized, and altogether desacralized in the minds of so many of its readers. Looking back from the other side of “Futurity’s impenetrable veil,” we can more clearly see the reasons that Paine’s religious views were a source of such angry and ongoing contention, for he took biblical delegitimization and democratized it, digesting the more esoteric scriptural skepticism that preceded him and regurgitating it in a form that proved much more digestible for the generations of skeptics and secularists that followed.¹⁵ Demonized by those who opposed him and deified by those who embraced him, this “forgotten Founder,” having belatedly received his political due, merits a similar resurrection in religious studies. Neither theologian, exegete, nor clergyman, Thomas Paine deserves to be classed among the most influential writers in the history of Biblical criticism—“criticism” in the pejorative sense especially—a passionate interest for Paine that

¹⁴ George H. Smith, *Freethought and Freedom: The Essays of George H. Smith* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2017), 211; Jill Lepore, *The Story of America: Essays on Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 69; “Thomas Paine’s Second Appearance in the United States,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 4, no. 21 (July 1859): 1–17.

¹⁵ On Paine’s religious views, see Harry Hayden Clark, “An Historical Reinterpretation of Thomas Paine’s Religion,” *University of California Chronicle* 35 (1933): 56–87; Vikki J. Vickers, “*My Pen and My Soul Have Ever Gone Together*”: *Thomas Paine and the American Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Edward H. Davidson and William J. Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority: The Age of Reason as Religious and Political Idea* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1994).

unfortunately, as a student of his political and social thought lamented, “has not generated much scholarly concern.”¹⁶ Alone among his writings, academic interest in Paine’s *Age of Reason* remains inversely proportional to its impact upon its readers. The climax of a trilogy of which *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man* are part, it remains an underexamined text whose influence on American secularization, and thence on American religious history, cannot be overstated.

This is not to say that it has been ignored by academia completely. Edward Davidson and William Scheick made it the centerpiece of their analysis of Paine’s religious and political philosophy. Patrick Hughes wrote a dissertation on its reception history during Paine’s lifetime, and Paine’s biographers cannot help but treat it at least briefly, with some affording it a chapter of its own.¹⁷ Revealingly (though not surprisingly), it tends to be taken most seriously by historians writing from the other side of the religious/secular divide, for Paine is Freethought’s universally acknowledged hero. Susan Jacoby lionizes him in her history of American secularism; Kerry Walters dedicates a chapter to him in *Revolutionary Deists*; Martin Marty dwells at length on the “Infidelity of the Tom Paine School” in his study of American Freethought; and his influence is rightfully felt in Leigh Eric Schmidt’s *Village Atheists*, Eric Schlereth’s *Age of Infidels*, and Matthew Stewart’s *Nature’s God*. Paine’s shadow looms over much of the period detailed in Christopher Grasso’s monumental *Skepticism and American Faith*, which presumably avoids dedicating an entire chapter to *The Age of Reason* only to make room for a host of lesser-known skeptics that it influenced.¹⁸

¹⁶ Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought*, 179.

¹⁷ Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture and Authority*; Patrick W. Hughes, “Antidotes to Deism: A Reception History of Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason*, 1794–1809,” (PhD Diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2013). For treatments of *The Age of Reason* within biographies, see Keane, *Tom Paine*, 389–402; Hawke, *Paine*, 293–315; Aldridge, *Man of Reason*, 229–37; Fruchtmann, *Apostle of Freedom*, 317–44; Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought*, 177–95.

¹⁸ Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004); Kerry Walters, *Revolutionary Deists: Early America’s Rational Infidels*, rev. ed. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011); Martin E. Marty, *The Infidel: Freethought and American Religion* (New York: Meridian Books, 1961); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America’s Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Eric R. Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Christopher Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

But these writers, along with the handful of scholars that have published articles on Paine's last major work, tend to focus either on the events surrounding its publication or on the storm of incensed responses that came in its wake.¹⁹ Even among those who use it as a window into Paine's theology (a deism not unlike that of his predecessors and peers), or those who view it as the urtext of American unbelief, scholars seldom venture beyond the *what* of its substance or the *why* of its purpose to explore the *how* of its remarkable style. Sadly, this is largely true of Paine studies in general. Rare is the attempt to understand Paine's rhetoric as distinct from his reasoning or his language as opposed to his life, a glaring irony since it was Paine's rhetorical gifts that gained him the attention, applause, and antipathy of millions. He was not a true politician. He held several positions of prominence and rendered public service in both the United States and France, but he never ran for public office. His pen was not a token, used to sign legislation, but a tool, meant to rally the people to action. Nor was Paine a military commander. Though he laid aside his Quaker pacifism to take up arms in conflict, he never cared to rise within the ranks. Instead he proved, as General Washington admitted, that the quill could cut deeper than the sword. Almost alone among his intimates (Hamilton and Franklin being other notable exceptions), Paine did not parlay his family name or family fortune to rise to power, for he had neither, nor did he turn his fame into a fortune or even a family of his own. But he did make himself a name, and unlike the charismatic Franklin, it had less to do with the force of his personality than the immeasurable weight of his words. His was purely a rhetorical leadership, not a political, military, or charismatic ascendancy. Of the humblest origins himself, and somehow sinking even lower in the end than he had been at the beginning, Paine remained invariably a man of the people, a voice for the vulgar, the most eloquent of champions for the unlettered common man.

¹⁹ For other treatments of *The Age of Reason*, see David C. Hoffman, "'The Creation We Behold': Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* and the Tradition of Physico-Theology," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 157, no. 3 (September 2013): 281–303; Franklyn K. Prochaska, "Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* Revisited," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33, no. 4 (1972), 561–76; Jay E. Smith, "Thomas Paine and *The Age of Reason*'s Attack on the Bible," *Historian* 58, no. 4 (Summer 1996): 745–61; James Smylie, "Clerical Perspectives on Deism: Paine's *The Age of Reason* in Virginia," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 6, no. 2 (1972–73): 203–20; Jerry W. Knudson, "The Rage Around Tom Paine: Newspaper Reactions to His Homecoming in 1802," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (Jan. 1969): 34–63.

Whether jealous of his notoriety or alarmed by the scale of its effect, many complained that Paine's writings were largely derivative, as much influenced as influential. A Baltimore newspaper in 1802, for example, not wanting to sully its own reputation by defending Paine's, described *Common Sense* as a "little work" that required Paine to do little more than "collect together and publish the general arguments of the day," a sentiment with which John Adams disdainfully concurred.²⁰ *The Age of Reason* was dismissed as even more unoriginal. Scholars have seen its arguments in the writings of such skeptics as Hobbes and Spinoza, Hume and Shafesbury, Voltaire and LeClarc, as well as the typical alphabet soup of well-known English deists: Blount and Bolingbroke, Collins and Chubb, Toland and Tindal, Whiston and Woolston, Middleton, Morgan and more.²¹ "There is not an idea in it which cannot be matched in the writings of the English free-thinkers of the Georgian era," wrote Woodbridge Riley over a century ago. Only admirers "unaware of his plagiarisms" would call him "a Prometheus who stole his fire from heaven." The more informed knew that "his sources were considerably lower." The *Gazette of the United States* located them lowest of all. Blasting "that living opprobrium of humanity, TOM PAINE," it described *The Age of Reason's* intellectual debts most graphically, branding Paine "the infamous scavenger of all the filth which could be raked from the dirty paths which have been hitherto trodden by all the revilers of Christianity."²² As contemporaries saw it, Paine was merely the latest to pave the well-worn path to hell.

But if Paine's ideas were already common currency, why the unmatched reaction to his works? How did he wield an influence so out of proportion to his humble background, his lack of status, or his absence from positions of power? The answer lies not in his thought, but in his words. There was

²⁰ The Baltimore *Republican; or, Anti-Democrat*, reprinted in the *New-York Evening Post*, Nov. 3, 1802; John Adams to Benjamin Rush, Apr. 12, 1809; in Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams*, 9:617.

²¹ See Herbert M. Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934); G. Adolf Koch, *Republican Religion: The American Revolution and the Cult of Reason* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1933); Diego Lucci, *Scripture and Deism: The Biblical Criticism of the Eighteenth-Century British Deists* (New York: P. Lang, 2008); Peter Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

²² I. Woodbridge Riley, *American Philosophy: The Early Schools* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1907), 299; *Gazette of the United States*, July 21, 1801.

something about Paine's rhetoric that resonated in an unprecedented way, especially among the masses who are required when making a movement. *Common Sense* ignited the American Revolution and the *Crisis* papers kept its flame alive. *Rights of Man* awakened the masses in Europe and *The Age of Reason* tried the faith of multitudes. A hostile newspaper editor was forced to admit, "As a political gladiator, his merit is of the highest kind. He knows, beyond most men, both when and where to strike. He deals his blows with force, coolness and dexterity." Even John Adams, try as he might, could not dismiss the rhetorical power of Paine's writings, though "some Whims, some Sophisms, [and] some artfull Addresses" were detectable to "Sensible Men."²³

Granted, every student of Thomas Paine is "sensible" to the power of his language, but few have subjected his writings to the rigors of rhetorical criticism. When they do, to borrow the words of the reviewer of one of the earliest attempts, the "major importance" of such efforts becomes obvious, "since everyone must recognize Paine as one of the greatest, if not the very greatest, propagandist in American history." The word "propagandist," however, might provide us a clue to Paine's neglect among scholars. The problem is one of specialization and a certain kind of snobbery. On the one hand, historians see the obvious impact of Paine's writings, but lacking training in rhetorical criticism, they privilege his aims and arguments over his literary artistry. On the other hand, rhetorical scholars, as one of their number was forced to admit, tend to ignore the writings of people like Paine, since their style—intended not for refined taste but for mass appeal—seems beneath the dignity of their scholarship. "Our critical tools are not normally sharpened on his kind of writing."²⁴

Thankfully, however, a growing number of experts have recognized Paine's rhetorical talents and have proffered insightful critiques of his use of "the available means of persuasion." The first to do

²³ Knudson, "The Rage Around Tom Paine," 41; *The [Richmond] Recorder*, December 1, 1802; John Adams to Abigail Adams, March 19, 1776, in *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1962), 3:330–35.

²⁴ Charles E. Merriam, review of *Thomas Paine*, by Harry Hayden Clark, *The American Political Science Review* 38, no. 4 (August 1944): 793; James T. Boulton, "Literature and Politics I. Tom Paine and the Vulgar Style," *Essays in Criticism* 12, no. 1 (January 1962), 18.

so with distinction was literary scholar Harry Hayden Clark, who published an article in 1933 identifying seven “theories of rhetoric” that characterized Paine’s writings: (1) “candour, simplicity, and clarity,” what the old textbooks called “perspicuity”; (2) boldness; (3) wit; (4) “an appeal to feeling” that brought readers “emotional or poetic pleasure”; (5) a “balance between Memory, Judgment and Imagination”; (6) the precise “adjust[ment of] language to thought” that was aimed at a definite audience; and (7) order, by which ideas were organized into a pattern designed for maximum effect. But not even Clark could fully embrace the man behind the message. Far enough removed from Paine’s nineteenth-century reputation to appreciate his facility with “the magic witchery of words,” Clark was still too close to forgive him fully for *The Age of Reason*. He thus found excerpts illustrating Paine’s rhetoric without having to “stain” his pages with “examples of the scarlet and profane Billingsgate and the coarse innuendoes which Paine unworthily employed as an attack upon Christianity.” For Clark, some rhetoric is simply beneath the dignity of serious study.²⁵

Following Clark, other rhetorical scholars have offered welcome contributions to our understanding of the persuasiveness of Thomas Paine. Michael Hogan and Glen Williams identified Paine’s “textual persona” and linked it to a style of “republican charisma.” Evelyn Hinz analyzed Paine’s “reasonable” style and concluded that his rhetoric was more “demagogic than democratic,” Paine’s protests to the contrary notwithstanding. James Boulton described Paine’s style non-pejoratively as “vulgar” (meaning “of the people”) and credited its popularity to the author’s “deceptive simplicity,” “lucid directness,” and “buoyant confidence.” Thomas Clark likewise studied Paine’s “vulgar” style but zeroed in on his grammar and syntax. More broadly, David Hoffman called attention to Paine’s “perceptual framing” in *Common Sense* and to his “testimonial strategies” in *The Age of Reason*, while Robert Ferguson recognized “a certain manic-depressive quality” in Paine’s prose and wrote insightfully of the “conflict of alternatives,” the “revisionist strategies,” and the “calculated indirections” that

²⁵ Harry Hayden Clark, “Thomas Paine’s Theories of Rhetoric,” *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of the Sciences, Arts and Letters* 28 (1933): 307–39; see also Harry Hayden Clark, “Toward a Reinterpretation of Thomas Paine,” *American Literature* 5 (1933): 133–45; Harry Hayden Clark, *Thomas Paine* (New York: The American Book Company, 1944).

characterized *Common Sense*. Bernard Bailyn painted Paine's writing in hues as vivid as the subject matter deserves: "violent, slashing, angry, indignant."²⁶

PAINE'S RHETORIC OF RIDICULE

But as helpful as these studies are, they tend to miss or minimize the one rhetorical tactic that most infuriated his opponents and which was obvious to so many of his peers: his sometimes irascible, often sarcastic, endlessly sardonic sense of humor. Perhaps assigning this more to innate personality than to intentional persuasion (it was both), the scholars just listed largely ignore the significance of Paine's rhetoric of ridicule. Ferguson notes "common language, easy alliteration, balanced phraseology, and verbal antitheses"—all part of Paine's "seemingly guileless but actually manipulative simplicity in style"—but never mentions wit, insult, or humor. The closest he comes is in describing a particular passage as "whimsical, even jocular," and in referring elsewhere to a "glib" argument that was part of Paine's "pattern of rhetorical play." Hoffman comes closer, calling attention to "Paine's talent for spectacular invective" at one point and his "calculated brutality" at another, but he does little to develop the significance of those rhetorical traits. Boulton recognizes in Paine a tendency to connect his opponents' views to modes of "comic entertainment," and mentions crude humor and "humorous interjections," but these remain overshadowed by other elements of Paine's vulgar style. Even in Clark's essay, which rightly includes "wit" as one of Paine's seven rhetorical values, this element receives the briefest treatment, most of the others receiving three to four times as much attention.²⁷

²⁶ J. Michael Hogan and Glen Williams, "Republican Charisma and the American Revolution: The Textual Persona of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 86, no. 1 (February 2000): 1–18; Evelyn J. Hinz, "The 'Reasonable' Style of Tom Paine," *Queens Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (Summer 1972): 231–41; Boulton, "Tom Paine and the Vulgar Style," 18–33; Thomas Clark, "A Note on Tom Paine's 'Vulgar' Style," *Communication Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1978), 31–34; David C. Hoffman, "Paine and Prejudice: Rhetorical Leadership through Perceptual Framing in *Common Sense*," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 373–410; "Cross-Examining Scripture: Testimonial Strategies in Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 31, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 261–95; Robert A. Ferguson, "The Commonalities of *Common Sense*," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (July 2000), 465–504; Bernard Bailyn, "The Most Uncommon Pamphlet of the Revolution," *American Heritage* 25, no. 1 (December 1973): 36–41, 91–93. Hoffman's "Paine and Prejudice" includes an excellent survey of rhetorical treatments of Paine's writing style; see pp. 380–84.

²⁷ Ferguson, "Commonalities of *Common Sense*," 488, 503, 481; Hoffman, "Cross-Examining Scripture," 283, 291; Boulton, "Tom Paine and the Vulgar Style," 27, 33; Clark, "Thomas Paine's Theories of Rhetoric," 307–39.

Perhaps here as well Paine falls victim to the strictures of specialization and snobbery. If rhetorical scholars are few compared to professors of history or literature, then humorologists (if such a word exists) are among the rarest of academics, for humor, by its very nature, suffers from the seeming non-seriousness of the subject. In fact, scholarly treatments of humor begin with some sort of *apologia* so often that it almost seems obligatory to include one. One of my favorites appears in an edited volume on religious humor that admits, “The writing of an essay, let alone a book, about the comic is in itself a comic adventure; for one is inevitably involved in the awkward double predicament of trying to take the comic seriously and the serious comically, and most likely being successful in neither to the dissatisfaction of all.” A sociologist studying religion and humor noted his discipline’s tendency to privilege the dramatic mode over the comic mode, and complained that “few philosophers have bothered to think seriously about the funny.” Another colleague in the field called humor “a curious ‘step-child’ in sociological research,” and the same could be said within psychology, where the absence of academic attention to the subject is “striking.” A literary scholar admitted that he had conducted his humor research despite the insinuation by some that it was “a withering misapplication of intelligence.”²⁸

Moreover, if scholars tend to graze in more reputable pastures, even those willing to lower themselves to laughter’s level seem to prefer humor’s brighter, more sociable side. The negativity associated with the darker side of humor—ridicule, scorn, mockery, and the like—remains the most neglected of all.²⁹ Consider David Hoffman’s excellent analysis of *The Age of Reason*, one of the few

²⁸ Chad Walsh, “On Being with It: An Afterword,” in M. Conrad Hyers, ed., *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969): 241; Peter Berger, *The Precarious Vision: A Sociologist Looks at Social Fictions and Christian Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 67; Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, 4–5; Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), xiv. The *Spectator* made a similar observation two and a half centuries earlier: “all Writers of Tragedy look upon it as their due to be seated, served, or saluted before Comick Writers.” *The Spectator*, no. 529 (Nov. 6, 1712). Milton L. Barron, “A Content Analysis of Intergroup Humor,” *American Sociological Review* 15, no. 1 (February 1950): 88. On mainstream psychology’s neglect of the study of humor, see Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), 27; and Jon E. Roedkelein, *The Psychology of Humor: A Reference Guide and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 1–7. Paul Lewis, *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 1.

²⁹ A few notable exceptions to this scholarly neglect of ridicule, specifically in the realm of religion, include Roger D. Lund, *Ridicule, Religion and the Politics of Wit in Augustan England* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2012); Raymond

which focuses on its rhetoric directly. Though he recognized that Paine's polemical "critical deism" outweighed his apologetic "positive deism," he neglected the former to focus on "the constructive case that Paine makes for deism" and the "rhapsodic style of apologetic" it contains. In this he aims for the target but misses the mark, for it was not Paine's constructive case for deism that sparked controversy, but his destructive case against the Bible. That is, people were not enraged by the rhapsody of his prose but the savagery of his ridicule. After all, *The Age of Reason* long outlived the deism it was Paine's ostensible goal to promote, largely because it shared later readers' disbelief, even if their beliefs were no longer Paine's. In other words, Paine's posthumous induction into later forms of irreligion illustrate the adage that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. For more than an apologist for deism, Paine was a polemicist against revealed religion, and whether or not later Freethinkers, atheists, or secularists cared for Paine's praise for the God of Nature, they reveled in his dismantling of the biblical word of God. When Thomas Williams was sentenced to one year of hard labor for selling *The Age of Reason* in England, the trial established the fact that the book's second, more polemical, anti-Biblical part was far more popular than the more apologetic, pro-deistical part one. Consequently, whereas *The Age of Reason* was indeed "the axis about which deistic thought in America rotated" as Herbert Morais suggested, the axle remained well-greased even as later generations kept changing out the wheel.³⁰

And what was that "wheel"? Here it would be wise to clarify two points that will guide this study going forward. First is the choice of *target* in Paine's religious polemic, the enemy that the wheel of American skepticism, in any of its forms (Deism, Freethought, Secularism, the New Atheism, etc.), hoped to grind down to dust. And second is the choice of *tactics*, which includes the specific *audience* Paine aimed at engaging and the general *approach* he used to enlist them. Determined most clearly in

A. Anselment, "*Betwixt Jest and Earnest*": *Marprelate, Milton, Marvell, Swift & the Decorum of Religious Ridicule* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979); and Terry Lindvall, *God Mocks: A History of Religious Satire from the Hebrew Prophets to Stephen Colbert* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

³⁰ Hoffman, "The Creation We Behold," 283; Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought*, 188; Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth-Century America*, 120.

The Age of Reason, Paine's target and tactics would color the efforts of American secularists ever after, cementing the book's ongoing influence as the "originating manifesto" of American skepticism.³¹

A BULLSEYE ON THE BIBLE

Paine's target was the Bible, which he hammered mercilessly in *The Age of Reason*, especially in its caustic second part. The reasons for this strategic objective will quickly become apparent, but it is worth noting first that the Bible's continuing influence ensured *The Age of Reason*'s ongoing impact, a war of words that would outlast any individual combatant. As will be discussed at length in a later chapter, Paine's book was the most widely read attack on revealed religion in American history. But it was also, out of all his writings, the work with the longest shelf-life, since *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man* lost a measure of their relevance with the passing of the revolutions they inspired. Those other major works largely accomplished their purposes, and thus went from political agents to historical artifacts. The aim of *The Age of Reason*, meanwhile, remains unfinished but not unattainable, thus ensuring the book's longevity throughout the history of American secularism. Its appearance was the high-water mark of the first, "Deistical" phase of American Freethought, which ended with Paine's death in 1809; its author's first posthumous birthday celebration in 1825 marks the beginning of the movement's second, "Popular" phase; "the Golden Age of Freethought," its third phase, saw popularizers striving to echo its substance and style; and it has remained influential in the fourth and final phase, which brings Freethought into the twenty-first century.³² As secularists are quick to point out, Paine's *Age of Reason* has never been out of print, despite endless opposition from its enemies. Then again, its target, the Bible, is likewise perpetually in print.

As these print wars attest, American religious history has from the beginning been not merely a struggle between and within denominations, but a tug-of-war between those who view religion's public

³¹ Schmidt, *Village Atheists*, 85.

³² These four stages were suggested by Marshall G. Brown and Gordon Stein, *Freethought in the United States: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), ix.

presence as a benefit to society and those who see it at best as a bother and at worst as a curse. Throughout much of American history, the first group is best embodied by the Protestant establishment, an informal coalition of denominations—Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, and Lutherans, to name the largest—that until the mid-nineteenth century provided the nation with most of its university presidents, political leaders, and public intellectuals.³³ Beating against these heirs of Plymouth Rock were “waves of networks of activists,” the agential force behind America’s gradual secularization. As Christian Smith has argued, these “secularizing activists” were individuals who were “largely skeptical, freethinking, agnostic, atheist, or theologically liberal; who were well educated and socially located mainly in knowledge-production occupations; and who generally espoused materialism, naturalism, positivism, and the privatization or extinction of religion.”³⁴ With this Paine would largely agree, though he would prove that being “well educated” was not a prerequisite for this kind of activism. The corset-maker’s son was determined to help the commonest of common men break their stifling bands and fill their lungs with the air of freedom.

The battle over the Bible accounts for the central place *The Age of Reason* would play in America’s ongoing contest between what Karel Dobbelaere called “sacralizers” and “secularizers,” or what Bruce Lincoln labelled religious “maximalists” and “minimalists.” Today one thinks of the “Religious Right” and the “Secular Left,” a case in which the Bible is correct in speaking of each hand not knowing, or at least not agreeing with, what the other hand doeth.³⁵ But in Paine’s day, with the promise—or threat—of religious disestablishment raising the stakes for both sides of the contest, the Bible’s place in American society was a matter of passionate feeling and fiery debate. Of course

³³ The cultural authority of this group can be seen in the subtitle of E. Digby Baltzell, *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy & Caste in America* (New York: Random House, 1964), in which the term “WASP”—“White-Anglo Saxon-Protestant”—was first popularized.

³⁴ Christian Smith, “Rethinking the Secularization of American Public Life,” in Christian Smith, ed., *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1.

³⁵ Karel Dobbelaere, “Secularization,” *Current Sociology* 29, no. 2 (summer, 1981): 61; Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11, 2001*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 4–5; Karin Fry, *Beyond Religious Right and Secular Left Rhetoric: The Road to Compromise* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

“Christendom” in Paine’s America was never as authoritarian as in Early Modern Europe, where the Church, according to Samuel Butler’s mock heroic *Hudibras*, was “Possess’d with absolute dominions, / O’er Brethren’s purses and opinions.” But Thomas Jefferson explicitly had religious establishments in mind when he swore “eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” Paine shared this hostility, binding “spiritual freedom” to “political liberty” as early as 1775, and by 1797, declaring that “of all the tyrannies that afflict mankind, tyranny in religion is the worst.”³⁶

But as time would prove, even religion disestablished was not religion dethroned. As Frances Trollope condescendingly observed after her American sojourn, “a religious tyranny may be exerted very effectually without the aid of government.” Where democracy governed and majority ruled, a generalized religious majority could still exert *de facto* control over a secular minority even without official political power, especially during an age in which the Christian clergy, as Max Weber observed, “exercised an influence through pastoral care, church discipline, and preaching, *beyond anything the modern mind can imagine.*” In early America, wrote Sidney Ahlstrom, the “clergy were the official custodians of the popular conscience,” and as such, they held considerable sway not only in the meeting house, but in the courthouse, clubhouse, counting house, schoolhouse, and statehouse, and this was what Paine opposed. Their sermons were “authority incarnate,” with the Bible serving as the “verbal armory” whereby they rhetorically policed their position of power. Again from Weber, there are “characterological consequence[s] of the permeation of life with Old Testament norms,” and thus the American character itself—guaranteed as it was to affect the nation’s political positions, economic policies, intellectual presuppositions, and cultural norms—would have to be denuded of its biblical apparel for secularism to succeed.³⁷

³⁶ Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, 2 vols. (London, 1822; originally published in three parts, 1663, 1664, 1678), Part III, Canto II, Lines 855–56; Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, September 23, 1800; Thomas Paine, “Thoughts on Defensive War” (1775), in *Writings*, 1:57, and “Letter to Mr. Erskine” (1797), in *Writings*, 4:211.

³⁷ Frances Milton Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 4th ed. (London: Whittaker, Treacher, & Co., 1832), 2:147; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 105, 112; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale

But anticlericalism is one thing—and a very old thing at that, even among religious believers.³⁸ Taking aim at the Bible is something else entirely. The first targets man (and until relatively recently, *only* men); the second targets God, at least as far as believers are concerned. Attacking the clergy for their political maneuverings, economic injustices, or moral lapses was thus the more frequent and less controversial approach to limiting religion’s public influence. But the Bible was the Protestant Pope. More than God’s mouthpiece, it was infallibly God’s word. Closer still, “the Word was God” (John 1:1), making the Bible metonymy for Divinity. Calling the Bible into question was thus an assault on Heaven itself—making God Almighty an “offender for [his] word” (Isaiah 29:21). Even as unorthodox an unbeliever as Benjamin Franklin warned an unnamed fellow freethinker (likely Paine himself) to tackle “a less hazardous Subject” than Biblical views of God’s “particular Providence,” advising him “not to attempt unchaining the Tyger.”³⁹ Attacking the Bible—the ultimate source of Christianity’s Providential views—was pulling the tiger’s whiskers and poking it in the eye.

Yet the Bible, Paine correctly perceived, was key to the clergy’s influence, and perhaps the tiger could be tamed by twisting its tail. As the official interpreters of God’s word, ministers seemed to wield God’s will, and thus the secularization of society would first require the desacralization of the Bible. No amount of anticlericalism alone could loosen the church’s hand on society’s helm as long as its other hand held an allegedly inerrant compass. The compass itself needed to be called into question. If it did not in fact point unerringly in divine directions, then society would be better served through a more reliable, more epistemologically verifiable (read: more rational, more scientific, more secular) means of navigation, as well as through more qualified pilots better able to steer. Anticlericalism was missing the

University Press, 2004), 672; Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 23; Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 225.

³⁸ On anticlericalism, see José M. Sánchez, *Anticlericalism: A Brief History* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972); S. J. Barnett, *Idol Temples and Crafty Priests: The Origins of Enlightenment Anticlericalism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999). A survey of American anticlericalism is yet to be written.

³⁹ “From Benjamin Franklin to _____, [13 December 1757],” *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 7, *October 1, 1756 through March 31, 1758*, ed. Leonard W. Larabee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 293–95.

forest for the trees, while anti-Biblicism was taking the axe to the forest's collective taproot. Paine had already proven the point in *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man* when he shifted his attack from the *person* of the king to the *principle* of hereditary monarchy. "We do not effect much...if we merely dethrone an idol," he once wrote, "we must also break to pieces the pedestal upon which it rested." As the *Spectator* observed, "Blossoms will fall of themselves, when the Root that nourishes them is destroyed." Closer to home, an American offered a similar insight in rhyme: "Remember Little *Stroakes* fell greate *Oakes*," trees toppled simply "by hacking in the Right Places."⁴⁰

"Hacking" seems an apt description of Paine's approach, but he considered his rhetorical violence justified because the Bible was not simply the key to anticlericalism; it was the key to anti-Christendom, "the epistemological keystone of Christianity itself." Remove the keystone and the entire arch would come crashing down. As early as the fifth century Augustine warned that "Faith will totter if the authority of Scripture begin to shake," and 1500 years later the Congregationalist-minister-turned-revolutionary-socialist Bouck White could still affirm that "Christendom reposes upon a book, the Bible," with a shift in its meaning the equivalent of "planting mines of...dynamite underneath this civilization...to blow up the whole apparatus." Among the Bible's defenders, Theodor Christlieb compared the doctrines of Christ to a fortress and called "the *doctrine of Holy Scripture*" the "moat" which protects it with "the benignant influence of its living waters." For secularists, to drain the moat was to expose the citadel. Their vision is suggested by Carl Jung's observation that due to the "impoverishment of [its] symbolism"—symbolism rooted in the biblical text—the Christian church would become "a fortress that had been robbed of its bastions and casemates, a house whose walls have been plucked away, that is exposed to all the winds of the world and to all dangers."⁴¹

⁴⁰ Thomas Paine, "An Essay for the Use of New Republicans," in *Complete Writings*, 2:541–42; *Spectator*, No. 16 (March 19, 1711); Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 191.

⁴¹ Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 156; Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2009), 27; Bouck White, "The Higher Criticism and Social Revolution," *The Sun* (New York), April 4, 1914, p. 8; Theodor Christlieb, *The Best Methods of Counteracting*

To “secular activists” like Thomas Paine, the Bible stood in the way of the nation’s secular progress because it propped up clerical authority by allowing the Protestant establishment to claim the sanction of deity. A scriptural quotation here, a Biblical reference there, even a mere allusion to the Word of God “lent a sanctified aura to arguments coming from elsewhere,” but the Bible was typically an echo, not the originating voice. In rhetorical terms, preachers did more to commandeer its *ethos* than to humbly discern its *logos*, a tactic Paine himself utilized (to John Adams’s dismay) when writing *Common Sense*. Thus the actual locus of authority was not the Bible itself, but rather the people who most convincingly wielded the Bible over against their ideological adversaries.⁴² Still, it was Paine’s genius to recognize that the Bible itself was the strategic objective. Disestablishmentarians who remained loyal to the Bible were no better than those who complained about Parliament without fighting the power of the Crown. “You shun the streams,” Paine had lamented in the earlier conflict, “and yet you are willing to sit down at the very fountain of corruption and venality.” The stream of clerical corruption and religious intolerance would continue to flow as long as clergymen had an unquestioned biblical fountain from which to draw. His efforts thus prefigured Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s contention that once people “understand...that Bibles...are all emanations from the brain of man, they will no longer be oppressed by the injunctions that came to them with the divine authority of ‘Thus Saith the Lord.’” Like the seventeenth-century Native American warriors who targeted John Eliot’s Algonquian-language Bibles for destruction during King Philip’s War, Paine saw the symbolic and political value of destroying what his rivals had made an imperialist text.⁴³

Modern Infidelity. A Paper Read Before the General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance, New York, October 6, 1873 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1874), 29–30; Carl Jung, *The Integration of the Personality*, trans. Stanley M. Dell (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1940), 61. Arthur McCalla employed a similar metaphor when he called biblical inerrancy “the levee Fundamentalists built to protect the city of God against the toxic floodwaters of theological liberalism.” Arthur McCalla, *The Creationist Debate: The Encounter between the Bible and the Historical Mind* (London: Continuum, 2006), 154.

⁴² This is one of the chief contentions in Mark A. Noll, *In the Beginning Was the Word: The Bible in American Public Life, 1492–1783* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15, 236, 269, 314, 327.

⁴³ Thomas Paine, “A Dialogue between the Ghost of General Montgomery just arrived from the Elysian Fields; and an American Delegate, in a wood near Philadelphia,” in *Writings*, 1:163 (some scholars have suggested that this dialogue was written by

I say “political” in part because that was Paine’s habitual rhetorical battleground, but also because it was the “politics” of Biblical interpretation that constituted the border war along the secular/religious divide. Both sides proved the point that “Hermeneutics is inevitably, though not restrictively, a ‘political discipline.’”⁴⁴ Consequently, *every* anti-biblical writing can be considered a *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, not solely Spinoza’s seminal work of that name. As Michael Legaspi has argued, “the fundamental antitheses” separating nonbelievers from believers (and separating various groups of believers from one another) “were not intellectual or theological, but rather social, moral, and political,” Paine’s usual targets of reform. Thus for secularizers, “the battle for freedom from the Bible was a fight against the ideological use of the Bible to support a governing elite,” just as the fight against monarchy was a battle against traditionalism’s enthronement of a governing aristocracy. As a pioneering (and secularizing) sociologist said condescendingly of theologians, “after they have marshalled in vain their texts and their reasonings, they have nothing else to appeal to.” Thus “their texts,” namely the Bible, became secularists’ primary target, with Paine’s pen leading the charge. Though said in a different context, the words of Parson Weems would have been an appropriate rallying cry: “Many things are not worth powder and shot. The Bible is a Galleon! Reserve your ammunition for that.”⁴⁵

PERSUASION TO THE PEOPLE

Having established the target, Paine’s second major contribution regarded tactics, embracing his audience and his approach. Both elements can be captured by the term “populist,” for Paine intended not

Samuel Adams rather than Thomas Paine, but the confusion alone proves that Paine would have agreed with the sentiment); Kathi Kern, *Mrs. Stanton’s Bible* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 46; Noll, *Bible in American Public Life*, 232; Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 43.

⁴⁴ Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 16.

⁴⁵ Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), ix, xii; Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 333; Edward Alsworth Ross, *Social Psychology: An Outline and Source Book* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 313; Weems quoted in Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 24.

only to speak *of* or *for* the people, but directly *to* them. Unlike Federalists who harbored a degree of “buyer’s remorse” after achieving independence, wondering just how far “down” the social ladder authority should reach, Paine argued for a degree of democratization that was unique even among the Founding Fathers.⁴⁶ In this he surpassed Jefferson and, looking forward, perhaps even Jackson. In fact, what was said at the death of democratic Jackson applies equally to the populist Paine: when someone comes to embody the spirit of an age, his popularity among the people comes “because they see in him their own image. Because in him is concentrated the spirit that has burned in their own bosoms.”⁴⁷ What Jackson achieved through his persona, Paine achieved through his prose, which helps explain the unprecedented popularity of Paine’s writings. They resonated with average readers because in them they saw their own sentiments put into print. No wonder they read his words aloud (thus extending Paine’s influence beyond readers to listeners): he spoke as they did, only more powerfully; he thought as they did, only more clearly; he felt as they felt, only more passionately.

And just as significantly, Paine laughed as they did, only more loudly. Among the tavern crowd, he could drink with the best of them, and though he wasn’t a swearer, his humor—quick-witted, sarcastic, irreverent, and impish—ingratiated him with those who couldn’t help but laugh along. The populist element in Paine’s rhetoric has become a scholarly commonplace, and for good reason. It lies behind what we have already explained as Paine’s “vulgar” style, and factors into many of the Painite “theories of rhetoric” identified by Harry Hayden Clark. But an unheralded trait of his personality and his language, one that ties together his audience and approach, is his powerful rhetoric of ridicule. His lowbrow humor resonated among society’s lower orders, even while his wit hit the higher registers. Reaching across the social spectrum, Paine’s humor also connected skepticism’s European past to its American future, a distance bridged by the sociality of laughter.

⁴⁶ See Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁴⁷ Washington McCartney, “Eulogy [on the death of Andrew Jackson],” quoted in John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 1.

Consider the unacknowledged role that anti-religious ridicule has played throughout history.⁴⁸ Though seldom recognized or remarked upon, most of history's most successful secularizers—the greatest popularizers and polemicists of unbelief—were men and women of caustic humor and rapier wit: Cicero and Lucretius, Hobbes and Spinoza, Gibbon and Hume, Shaftesbury and Rochester, Voltaire and d'Holbach, Ingersoll and Twain, Ernestine Rose and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Clarence Darrow and H. L. Mencken, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. The evidence is too overwhelming to be circumstantial. Because the core of religion lies outside the realm of epistemological certainty, it is a matter of faith rather than pure empiricism. That leaves it nonprovable (bad news for apologists), but also nondisprovable (a blow to polemicists). In the absence of empirical evidence, then, and absent the recourse to direct forms of force, what weapon remains for both sides to brandish? Rhetoric. Where they cannot prove, they seek to persuade, and it is there that the rhetoric of ridicule is most forceful.

Earlier European skeptics had also bantered with the Bible to reduce it to the absurd, but none had done so with Paine's level of mass appeal, and none with such effect on this side of the Atlantic. Typically confined to loftier circles within London coffeehouses and Paris salons, anti-biblical ridicule followed Paine into far lowlier haunts stretching from America's bustling seaboard to its sprawling frontier. It was as if Paine had to remind his so-called betters that commoners had a sense of humor as well, so he translated their witty urbanity into the belly laughs and mocking jeers of those in the trades, on the farm, or at the docks. In an early essay he had asked his "gentlemen" readers to "excuse my turning the smile upon them," but among the masses no such apologies would be necessary. As evidenced in a series of letters aimed at common fishermen (full of puns about his opposition "angling without a bait" and only catching "cods" among their readers), Paine could provide some "relief to the reader and amusement to [him]self" by setting up his adversaries "to a very agreeable ridicule."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ For one of the few scholarly works to recognize the breadth of this history, see Lindvall, *God Mocks*.

⁴⁹ Thomas Paine, "A Serious Address," *Pennsylvania Packet*, December 10, 1778; in *Complete Writings*, 2:278; Thomas Paine, "Peace, and the Newfoundland Fisheries," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 14 and 21, 1779; in *Writings*, 2:12–13, 25.

Moreover, although modern academics show a lamentable lack of interest in the role of humor throughout history, Paine's contemporaries did not suffer from this blindness. Closer in time to the ridicule of the Augustan Wits and the mockery of the French *philosophes*, familiar with men like Shaftesbury and Hutcheson who took seriously the politics of humor, and enamored with the witty *Spectator* of Addison and Steele, educated Americans saw in Paine a smiling sarcasm similar to what they recognized in his predecessors. And among the uneducated, many found themselves laughing in agreement without needing to fathom the politics of wit. Even before *The Age of Reason* appeared in print, *The Monthly Review* complained that Paine's "wit is coarse, and sometimes disgraced by wretched puns," but it could not help but recognize his recourse to humor. John Adams warned fellow Federalists against "that scoffing, scorning wit, and that caustic malignity of soul, which appeared so remarkably in all the writings of Thomas Paine." Singling out *The Age of Reason*, he characterized it as "billingsgate, stolen from" wittier writers such as Blount, Bolingbroke, and Voltaire. But however unpolished and uncourtly, Adams grumbled, "to the disgrace of human nature [it] never fails to command attention and applause." Even before *The Age of Reason* appeared, Paine's sense of humor was sufficiently well known that an enterprising London bookseller gave his collection of "patriotic bon mots, repartees, anecdotes, epigrams, [and] observations" the eye-catching title, "Tom Paine's Jestes."⁵⁰

Paine himself called wit "a perfect master in the art of bush-fighting; and though it attacks with more subtilty than science, has often defeated a whole regiment of heavy artillery." He frequently allowed his readers to "indulge a foolish laugh" and just as often indulged in them himself, even while protesting that if he sometimes turned his writing "into ridicule," it was only "to avoid the unpleasant sensation of serious indignation." Though early on he claimed to be "one of those few who never dishonors religion either by ridiculing or cavilling at any denomination whatsoever," he did so with zest throughout his life, and religion was only one of many targets of his mockery. Again pretending a

⁵⁰ *The Monthly Review*, May 1791, 81; quoted in Boulton, "Tom Paine and the Vulgar Style," 21–22; *The Works of John Adams*, 9:278, 627; *Tom Paine's Jestes* (London: H. D. Symonds and T. Spence, 1794).

love/hate relationship with laughter, when he first arrived in America, he wrote that “European wit is one of the worst articles we can import,” but as time would prove, he had already imbibed its “intoxicating power” before crossing the Atlantic. Paine’s childhood, a friend remembered, included “those childish amusements that serve to keep reflection from the mind,” and as he grew those “amusements” increasingly included the rhetorical kind.⁵¹

Paine imbibed humor by drinking in the culture of his day. Like many others, he was familiar with *Hudibras* and *Don Quixote* and was an admirer of Swift, Pope, and Shakespeare. He gained the friendship of Benjamin Franklin before attaining the slightest hint of reputation, suggesting a connection based on perspective and personality, which for both men included a marvelous sense of humor. Despite disclaiming book learning (a crafty ploy to maintain his “Common Sense” persona), Paine was familiar with the writings of Joseph Addison, the mind behind London’s witty *Spectator*; Voltaire, the impish French *philosophe*; Spinoza, the iconoclastic Dutch Jew; Martin Luther, whom many still knew as an uproarious anti-Catholic polemicist; and many of the leading British deists, who were products of England’s wild and witty Augustan age. As an early student of his rhetoric remarked, indulging in a hint of sarcasm of his own, “in respect to his wit, . . . Paine was a true citizen of that rationalistic century which produced such wits as Swift, Defoe, Bolingbroke, Pope, Churchill, Peter Pindar, Wilkes and Junius, all of whom Paine read and admired.”⁵² In an age of laughter, Paine was a man of his time.

RECOGNIZING RIDICULE

After recognizing the ubiquity of humor in the age of Paine, however, difficulties quickly present themselves to those attempting to study it. The first challenge to confront is the semantic slipperiness of

⁵¹ Thomas Paine, “Epistle to Quakers,” included as an appendix to the third edition of *Common Sense; Writings*, 121; Thomas Paine, “The Eighteenth Fructidor” (1794); in *Writings*, 3:357; Thomas Paine, “Letter to George Washington,” July 30, 1796; in *Writings*, 3:234; Thomas Paine, “The Magazine in America,” *Pennsylvania Magazine, or American Museum*; in *Writings*, 1:18; Yorke, *Letters from France*, 2:355.

⁵² On writers who possibly influenced Paine, see Caroline Robbins, “The Lifelong Education of Thomas Paine: Some Reflections upon His Acquaintance among Books,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 127, no. 3 (June 16, 1983): 135–42; Clark, “Thomas Paine’s Theories of Rhetoric,” 314, 321.

words like “humor,” born of its difficulty to define. The comic lexicon is clouded by a seemingly endless array of near-synonyms, such that Erasmus’s goddess Folly warned that “Not with a hundred tongues” could one “list the forms of folly and their names.” The problem is no less complex when going from *gelao*, the Greek word for laughter, to *katagelao*, the term for laughter’s negative, more aggressive side. In the eighteenth-century *humor* was the more positive, sociable sibling, while *wit* was its more acerbic fraternal twin, defined in Henry Fielding’s satirical “Modern Glossary” (1752) as “Prophaneness, Indecency, Immorality, Scurrility, Mimickry, Buffoonery, Abuse of all good Men, and especially of the Clergy.” Here we will use the umbrella term *ridicule*, but it too can wear a variety of masks. It embraces sarcasm and satire, burlesque and buffoonery, parody and poetry, even scurrility and scatology. And it can range from harmless jesting at one extreme to caustic invective on the other, depending on its relative composition of honey and gall.⁵³

Endlessly flexible, ridicule functions across a spectrum of causes (from advocacy to entertainment) and a broad range of temperaments (from affable to angry). In a valiant attempt to combine functional distinctions with rhetorical tone, Terry Lindvall suggests a “Quad of Satire, which identifies four key elements on two axes: moral purpose versus ridicule and humor versus rage.”⁵⁴ Plotting humor across this graph allows for distinctions between reformatory ridicule and mere amusement, but implies a clarity of intent and a consistency of mood that is not always present in the wits and wags one investigates. In Paine’s case, plotting the first axis is relatively easy, since he propagandized with reformatory purpose. His was an activist’s approach to humor, with every joke or insult meant to go far beyond a mere punchline, raising laughs in hopes of raising an army of the likeminded. Plotting the other axis is less obvious. Paine slides across the spectrum showing a command of the whole, darting back and forth from bemused condescension to scornful rage, depending on the

⁵³ Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly and Other Writings*, ed. Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 43; Terry Lindvall, *The Mother of All Laughter: Sarah and the Genesis of Comedy* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 34; Henry Fielding, “A Modern Glossary,” *Covent-Garden Journal*, no. 4, p. 33–38; see Frederic V. Bogel, *The Difference Satire Makes: Rhetoric and Reading from Jonson to Byron* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 164.

⁵⁴ Lindvall, *God Mocks*, 7–9.

emotion he intends to arouse in his readers. A master of the art, Paine seemed uninterested in reducing it to science. As a recent scholar defined it, humor is at once “a weapon, an embrace, an evasion, a lesson, a puzzle and a game.”⁵⁵ For Paine it was all of these.

Thus, while sympathizing with those who consider academic interest in humor “folly,” it may be even greater “folly to ignore the sociocultural and historical dimensions of folk or people’s humor.” Christopher Hill’s words here apply and entice: what some might consider “a trivial blind alley in human thought” tantalizingly “trembles on the brink of major intellectual issues.” This is particularly true when humor is put in service to history, since its resonance both demands and facilitates contextualization. “Humor assumes and reveals social and psychological relations, cognitive processes, cultural norms and value judgments,” and each of these is time-bound and society-specific. A historian therefore might care little about whether a historically-situated witticism is still funny, but would greatly benefit by asking, “How do these jokes embody or reinforce value systems; how do they serve psychic, social, cultural or political objectives?” These are questions this study will be asking. Not *Do I find this funny?* but rather *Why did they? And what did Paine intend by it?* Answers to such questions in the context of Paine’s anti-biblical ridicule will make his humor “at once an outgrowth of and index to the collective American mind” on the subject. What’s more, if humor can act as a shaper and not solely a reflection of the collective mind, then as Keith Cameron has argued, “it should be possible to detect a relationship between the use of humour and the course of history.” Such correlative and/or causal clues provided by a culture’s comic undercurrents are among the blessings provided whenever the goddess Folly shows “how widely [her] sacred powers extend.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Lewis, *Comic Effects*, 156.

⁵⁶ Joseph Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter: People’s Humor in American Culture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 11; Paul Boyer applies Hill’s statement to apocalypticism in *Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 17; Lewis, *Comic Effects*, ix, 13; William Bedford Clark and W. Craig Turner, eds., *Critical Essays on American Humor* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1984), 3. Peter Berger wrote that “a good cartoon or a good joke can often be more revealing of a particular social reality than any number of social-scientific treatises. Thus the comic can often be understood as a sort of popular sociology.” *Redeeming Laughter*, 70; John Parkin, *Humour Theorists of the Twentieth Century* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 5; Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 11.

Speaking of wide extensions, this study is but the central installment in a much larger history of individuals who sought to tear down religion through the rhetoric of ridicule. Or by way of metaphor, it is the opening exhibit in the American section of a rogues' gallery that spans the length and breadth of Biblical reception history, or in this case, Biblical rejection history. If Washington D.C.'s Museum of the Bible, which opened to great élan at the end of 2017, contained a wing dedicated to anti-Biblical attacks, the bust of Thomas Paine would figure prominently. This study intends to show why.

CONCLUSION

As we will see in the chapters that follow, no single writer did more to transplant the wit of the British Deists and the laughter of the French *philosophes* onto American soil, translating them into a rough-hewn American idiom that nourished generations of indigenous Freethinkers through the echoes of his mockery. In fact, returning to Teddy Roosevelt's scathing opinion of Paine, he may have still had the "filthy little atheist" in mind as he turned back to Morris's role in the French Revolution. Following his paragraph on Paine he wrote a paragraph on the "overthrow of the Catholic religion by the revolutionists; who had assailed it with the true French weapon, ridicule, but ridicule of a very grim and unpleasant kind." Indeed, his invective aside, what can be admitted from Roosevelt's denunciation of Paine is the probable truth that Paine was "amused" while putting his irreligion on paper, for Paine seemed genuinely to relish the witty repartee that had thrived in European circles for over a century.

Paine's scathing wit and acerbic sense of humor defined his personality and his rhetoric. The image of a mischievous boy dropping water balloons—Roosevelt's "bladder of dirty water"—therefore seems fitting. In the only other mention of Paine in his biography of Morris, Roosevelt admits that Paine was "an adept in the art of invective," a trait easily recognized by Paine's original audience. Contemporary political writer Etienne Dumont described Paine as "a man of talent, full of imagination, gifted with popular eloquence," and noted his particular facility with "the weapon of irony." Benjamin

Rush said that Paine “destroys error by successive flashes of lightning,” electricity that his friend and fellow wisecracker Benjamin Franklin needed neither kite nor key to detect.⁵⁷

What the following chapters seek to establish is Paine’s reliance on the rhetoric of ridicule to popularize his unorthodox religious (and political) views, and to send out feelers for Paine’s antecedents and aftereffects, since his ghost still haunts the history that follows. It will also seek to explain the sociological, philosophical, and psychological aspects of humor that Paine used to such advantage, and the corresponding conditions in early America that disposed Paine’s audience to thus be taken advantage of. As a later historian described Paine’s rhetorical approach, he “philosophized with a hammer, gleefully focusing most of his energies upon demolishing the sacred cows of religious as well as political orthodoxy.” Though he was “neither the most profound nor the most systematic” of his kind, “he excelled in the not-so-genteel art of polemics,” combining to consummate effect “all the necessary requirements for success: passion, courage, tenacity, and, perhaps most important, the ability to capture his readers’ imagination with a finely tuned and memorable phrase.”⁵⁸ Representative of other biographers and historians, this author recognized many of the characteristics that lent power to Paine’s polemics, but he somehow left Paine’s laughter off the list. As we will see, what made Paine’s writings so memorable and emotive was frequently his recourse to ridicule. The “hammer” with which he philosophized was as likely to strike the funny bone as it was to hit the mind or heart.

⁵⁷ Roosevelt, *Gouverneur Morris*, 94; Etienne Dumont, *Recollections of Mirabeau, and of the Two First Legislative Assemblies of France* (Philadelphia: Carey & Lea, 1833), 277; Benjamin Rush to Jeremy Belknap, 6 June 1791, in Lyman Henry Butterfield, ed., *The Letters of Benjamin Rush: Volume 1: 1761–1792* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 583.

⁵⁸ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 45, 141.

CHAPTER 2

LAUGHTER IN THOMAS PAINE'S AMERICA

If Thomas Paine was to laugh the religious out of their belief in the Bible, his rhetoric of ridicule would have to do an immense amount of heavy lifting. But before we turn to a close reading and critical analysis of his anti-biblical humor, we need to understand the kind of rhetorical work that ridicule is intended to perform. As rhetorical scholars are quick to observe, a rhetor owes his or her persuasive power to a multitude of factors, from the proclivities of the audience they are addressing to the parameters of the historical moment they occupy. In Paine's case, the rhetorical situation in the early republic made his imagined audience particularly susceptible to the rhetoric of ridicule, and his target, the Bible, lent itself to Paine's project of what might best be termed "absurdification," despite the hallowed aura in which time and tradition had enveloped it.

To understand the ways Paine's ridicule resonated with his readers, however, we need to move our protagonist off centerstage and have him wait in the wings for a few scenes, to make room for a trio of supporting actors who will successively introduce the purposes and politics of humor. The work of two of these Paine would have known: Thomas Hobbes, who will help us navigate the sociological aspect of humor (chapter 2); and Francis Hutcheson, who will introduce humor's philosophical underpinnings (chapter 3). The third, Sigmund Freud, will describe the labor that laughter performs psychologically (chapter 4). In each of these areas, we will take note of the conditions that made Paine's audience vulnerable to that aspect of ridicule's rhetorical weight.

We do this while taking note of, and offering apologies to, the renowned writer and stylistician E. B. White (of "Strunk & White" fame), who warned, "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind."¹ It is hoped that neither death nor discouragement results from this extended excursus on the rhetoric of

¹ E. B. White, "Some Remarks on Humor," in *Essays of E. B. White* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1977), 303.

ridicule. In the first case, little actual humor will be harmed in these preliminary chapters, my intent here being too theoretical to involve the kind of dissection that will occupy us later on. Secondly, this subject ought to appeal to more than the purely scientific mind. Considering America's history of religious and secular rivalries, its tinderbox volatility born of broad diversity and deep devotion, and its "wall of separation" that is too high for some and too low for others, ridicule is still a dominant rhetorical form when dealing with the religious or irreligious Other. Popular pundits like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert frequently satirize faith (including their own), *The Simpsons* and *South Park* lampoon caricatured theologies and make martyrs of puppet prophets and spiritual strawmen, and the Tony award-winning *Book of Mormon* musical had sell-out crowds cackling at religion in general by mocking Mormonism in particular. Regardless of which side of the smile one might be on, it is worth understanding why a subject so ostensibly serious is so frequently reduced to the absurd.

Furthermore, by looking at laughter through the lenses of sociology, philosophy, and psychology first, and then turning our attention to Paine's rhetoric of ridicule second, we will be approaching the topic with the two tools that one scholar of satire said such subjects require: "theoretical analysis [the first half] and close reading [the second]." Admittedly, the same scholar described this work as "the labor of threading one's way through a kind of rhetorical minefield," due to humor's intrinsic mischievousness. Perhaps this explains the fact, as Mikhail Bakhtin observed, that "laughter and its forms represent...the least scrutinized sphere of the people's creation." A fellow student of the subject wrote more personally, "I now understand why so few historians have written about humor. The theoretical issues are endless, and reaching final judgment about something as slippery as humor often seems impossible." Still, she admits, the payoffs are often worth the pains.²

Recognizing these challenges but sharing these hopes we proceed, focusing in the next three chapters on three of humor's principal functions, as they relate to Thomas Paine's turn-of-the-

² Bogel, *The Difference Satire Makes*, viii, 57; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 4; Mary Lee Townsend, *Forbidden Laughter: Popular Humor and the Limits of Repression in Nineteenth-Century Prussia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), ix.

nineteenth-century American scene. Scholars have argued interminably for various theories of humor, confirming Michael Billig's conclusion that "no single theory can hope to explain the complexity of humour." Still, the most widely accepted theories fall into three categories—superiority, incongruity, and relief—which roughly coincide with the three theoretical facets we will now investigate: *social* superiority, *philosophical* incongruity, and *psychological* relief. Admitting the complexity of the subject as well as the gaps and overlaps in this approach, we would be wise, as Erik Erikson appropriately said, to "take our theories with a serious playfulness and a playful seriousness." Perhaps the time Paine spends impatiently waiting for the spotlight can be justified with Paul Lewis's terse observation, "Humor is too complex to be comprehended in a sentence."³

THOMAS HOBBS AND LAUGHTER'S "SUDDEN GLORY"

To guide us through the sociological aspect of humor, we will couple Paine with a fellow doubting Thomas, *Leviathan's* Thomas Hobbes. Not only would the two have much to talk about concerning natural rights and the social contract, but they would have likewise bonded over their biblical views, nearly half of *Leviathan* being occupied with Hobbes's controversial exegesis, which anticipates Paine's in many ways. Moreover, the dialogue would have been seasoned with more than a pinch of laughter, owing to the delight that both men took in the pleasantries of humor. Charles II granted Hobbes "free accesse to his Majesty" largely because the king "was always delighted in his witt and smart repartees," a gift that Paine shared, especially when primed with a bottle of brandy.⁴

Beyond personality, the two Thomases had other things in common. First, in *Leviathan*, Hobbes demythologizes the Bible through an obfuscatory rhetoric that prefigures much of what we will find in

³ Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Toward a Social Critique of Humour* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 175; see also Parkin, *Humour Theorists*, 4, 278; John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 4–23; Arthur Asa Berger, *Blind Men and Elephants: Perspectives on Humor* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995); Erickson quoted in James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), xiii; Lewis, *Comic Effects*, 6.

⁴ Quoted by C. B. MacPherson in his introduction to Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 14.

The Age of Reason. Second, the rhetorical situation in which Hobbes found himself—the volatile years of the English Civil War—finds analogies (both religious and secular) in the religious turmoil and political instability that marked Paine’s America, contexts which shaped the rhetorical choices both men made. Third, the political program Hobbes outlines in *Leviathan*, based on natural rights, enlightened self-interest, a rationalized epistemology, and a domesticated religiosity subservient to (if not yet separate from) the State, is essentially what Paine sought to establish in the United States. Hobbes’s thought speaks to the rhetorical choices, the contextual constraints, and the sociopolitical aims of his American sympathizers, chief among them Thomas Paine.

Hobbes’s disdain for those who “trust onely to the authority of books,” and his willingness to take “certain Texts of Holy Scripture” and turn them “to other purpose[s],” makes him a fitting precursor to Thomas Paine. His religious reductionism—faith growing out of “dreams, and other strong fancies,” prophets as “best guesser[s]” and “mad-men,” and prophecy as nothing but “a fiction of the mind”—earned him the epithet of “atheist,” the same label with which Paine was branded a century and a half later.⁵ As his more orthodox opposers cautioned, Hobbes was “making it as doubtful what is Scripture, and the sense and meaning thereof as difficult, as he was able to do.” If the “Monster of Malmesbury” had his way, they warned, *Leviathan* would “shake or rather overthrow all the reverence and submission which we pay unto [the Bible], as the undoubted word of God.”⁶ The same was said of *The Age of Reason*, and the similarities do not end there. Hobbes denied that religious certainty was possible in the absence of “immediate revelation from God himself,” just as Paine dismissed the second-hand testimony of the Bible authors, calling it “hearsay upon hearsay.” They both slammed blind belief as an abdication of independence and intelligence, Hobbes calling it “juggling and confederate

⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or the Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* (1651), in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, ed. William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1839), 3:37, vi, 9, 15, 102.

⁶ Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon; quoted in Paul D. Cooke, *Hobbes and Christianity: Reassessing the Bible in Leviathan* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 248, 250. The nickname comes from an anonymous work published in response to Hobbes’s work, entitled *The True Effigies of the Monster of Malmesbury; or, Thomas Hobbes in His Proper Colours* (London: n.p., 1680).

knavery,” and Paine “absurdity and extravagance,” with believers taking up the Bible “blindfolded,” willing it to “be the word of God whether it be so or not.”⁷

Though Paine’s was a more thorough-going and much less subtle anti-biblicism, both men pushed the reins of civil society as far away from clergymen as possible. Hobbes accused the Church of “casting atoms of Scripture, as dust before men’s eyes,” and both he and Paine turned the Church’s “artifice” back upon itself, vying for interpretive authority with those self-serving sectarians who maintained social control through scriptural manipulation. Hobbes compared religion’s “mysteries” to pills that cured only when “swallowed whole,” so he (as would Paine) drew his readers’ attention to the Bible’s more troublesome passages, confident that if his patients were allowed to chew before swallowing, the pill would prove indigestible and be vomited back instead. Aware of the controversies they were stirring, both men denied that they were calling God into question; they were simply cross-examining those who claimed to be recording or interpreting His words. For Hobbes, authority should rest instead in popular opinion and the authority of the sovereign, which Paine essentially conflated in the will of the sovereign people. Though Hobbes had to be much more careful with his scriptural demythologizing than Paine, both sought to empty its authority from within. The canon had to be naturalized so that natural rights could be canonized.⁸

More could be said of their shared opposition to scripture, but equally noteworthy are their rhetorical similarities, since both valued the rhetoric of ridicule. In Hobbes’s case, a contemporary admirer credited his “Eloquence” and “Wit” for facilitating *Leviathan*’s acceptance.⁹ A modern student of *Leviathan* noted how Hobbes “piled learning upon irony, and irony upon invective,” but few at the time saw the strategy at work in Hobbes’s style. He hints at it when he warns that those who trust

⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 55, 102; Paine, *Writings*, 4:24, 28, 222.

⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 602, 360, 377; Hobbes’s treatment of the Bible is so ambiguous that contemporaries and scholars alike have attached to him every label from devilish atheist to orthodox saint. The controversies surrounding his biblicism are presented in Cooke, *Hobbes and Christianity*, which informs much of the argument in this section.

⁹ Abraham Cowley, *True Effigies* (1680); quoted in Cooke, *Hobbes and Christianity*, 9–10.

blindly in books (he used fencing manuals as his example, a far safer target than the Bible) must fall in a real sword fight, in which a more experienced enemy “either kills, or disgraces him.”¹⁰ And since “killing” the Church’s authority was impossible in his day, he chose the second option, subtly dis-gracing the Bible by calling into question its divine inspiration.

Only a few pages later, Hobbes speaks of another power to disgrace, one which likewise boasted a sword-like ability to slice and cut. He calls it “*Sudden Glory*,”—a “passion” he places at the root of “those *grimaces* called LAUGHTER”—and argues that it is “caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.” This statement has come to encapsulate the superiority theory of humor: descriptively, the tendency of laughter to mock inequalities; normatively, its power to create them. Hobbes repeats his view in *Human Nature*, rooting laughter in “some *eminency* in ourselves, by *comparison* with the *infirmity* of others” and adds that to be “laughed at or derided” is to be “triumphed over.” Such is the power of humor, that mysterious “passion that hath *no name*.”¹¹

Immediately after defining laughter in *Leviathan*, Hobbes proceeds to analyze “shame,” “blushing,” and “the love of good reputation,” and later defines “dignity” as “the public worth of a man” and “honour” as “the opinion of Power,” suggesting that issues of status and strata are central to his thought. In his valuation of both objects and individuals, Hobbes argues that worth is not intrinsic or absolute, but extrinsic (“no more than it is esteemed by others”) and utilitarian (linked to “the use of [its] power”). Consequently, it is “not the seller, but the buyer [that] determines the price” of things, a price that can be raised or lowered by putting pressure on social perspectives. In short, superiority is largely a function of the manipulation of public perception. Even in religion, sanctity is in the eye of the beholder, such that any act of worship will cease to command our reverence once it is made to “seem ridiculous.”

¹⁰ Quoted in Cooke, *Hobbes and Christianity*, 255; Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 117.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 46; Hobbes, *Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy. Being a Discovery of the Faculties, Acts, and Passions, of the Soul of Man*, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, 4:45–46.

After all, to Hobbes reverence is merely a recognition of power, or as he stated more baldly earlier, “Honour consisteth only in the opinion of power.” By observing that what is revered by one group seem “ridiculous to another,” Hobbes not only prefigures the “social construction of reality” that epitomizes the modern study of sociology, but affirms that such relativism applies as much in the religious realm as in any other. In faith as in fashion it is appearance that matters.¹²

In Hobbes’s view, human nature is essentially comparative (“joy consisteth in comparing himself with other men”) and competitive (the “general inclination of all mankind [is] a perpetual and restless desire of power after power”). It is unsurprising, therefore, that his view of humor would likewise play off preeminence, self-aggrandizement, vainglory, and pride. His perspective finds more recent expression in the contention of Charles Gruner (himself an unyielding superiority theorist) that humor consists of “conflict, contest, competition, aggression, [or] hostility” that invariably leaves both a winner and a loser in its wake.¹³ And because winners and losers are typically defined by reputation, power is a product of perception, and therefore, of persuasion.

To Hobbes, even persuasive power is merely perceptual. To be eloquent one need not be prudent or wise, since eloquence is only “*seeming* prudence” and merely “*seemeth* wisdom.” The opposite is also true: to be disreputable one need not truly be unscrupulous; one need only *appear* (or be *made to appear*) corrupt. “Disreputable,” after all, has “reputation” at its root. Thus Hobbes could argue that in “invectives” (the angrier side of the rhetoric of ridicule), “the design is not truth, but... dishonour.” Targeting “the passions,” a rhetor need not leave the audience “enlightened” when being “dazzled” will do, an easier prospect than marshaling rational proofs, especially in contests over the nondisprovable. Hobbes also admits that it is easier to accuse than to excuse, meaning the burden of proof falls harder on

¹² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 46–47, 76, 80, 106 (italics added), 350, 353, 98; for a “social constructionist” view of religion, see, for example, Peter L. Berger, *The Precarious Vision and The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969; reprint 1990). See also Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

¹³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 156, 85–86; Charles R. Gruner, *The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 80.

apologists than polemicists, a reality that Paine would press to his own advantage (“Suspicion may be spread without any trouble,” he wrote in 1792, “it cannot be uprooted with anything like the same facility.”). In sum, Hobbes helps us see that power—whether political or persuasive—is a social, and therefore a rhetorical, construct. Except when power results from physical violence and literal oppression (the kind Hobbes had just witnessed in the English Civil War), words could shape wills, and the pen could displace the sword. Such was the hope, and eventual triumph, of *Leviathan*.¹⁴

Combining Hobbes’s political theory with his views on the competitive nature of social relationships, the perceptual nature of reputation, and the persuasive power of negative rhetoric, the thinking behind his superiority theory of humor comes into view, and the fog starts to lift from his rhetorical (mis)treatment of the Bible. His biblicism avoided the vitriol of Thomas Paine and lacked the drollery of Mark Twain or Robert Ingersoll, but his more subtle rhetoric of ridicule (including repeated words like “absurd,” “ridiculous,” “fiction,” and “knavery”) betrays a use of similar means in pursuit of similar ends. He refrains from mocking the Bible overtly, but through his “usual indirect tactics,” observes one Hobbesian scholar, “it is not immediately manifest how little he is really leaving to the supernatural authority of holy writ.”¹⁵ Like the louder laughter that would erupt from later writers, Hobbes leaves us with a Bible belittled: Christian responsibilities synonymous with natural rights, the Christian revelation inferior to human reason, the Christian kingdom subservient to the secular state. In each case, it is scriptural *inferiority* that is implied, which brings us back to the sense of *superiority* that laughter uncovers and that ridicule implies and evokes. In the centuries since *Leviathan*, secularism has habitually asserted its superiority over biblicism, and civil society has largely, though far from unanimously, acquiesced. As Cooke concludes, “Hobbes won the war he fought. Biblical religion is no longer a serious threat to peace and safety within societies based on the principles developed from the

¹⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 75, 89 (italics added), 58, 174–75; Thomas Paine “Answer to Four Questions on the Legislative and Executive Powers,” in *Complete Writings*, 2:529.

¹⁵ Basil Willey, quoted in Cooke, *Hobbes and Christianity*, 26.

natural rights Hobbes discovered.” The victory was hardly sudden, but behind the words of both Hobbes and Paine one hears echoes of laughter’s “sudden glory.”¹⁶

THE SUPERIORITY THEORY OF HUMOR

The superiority theory of humor has enjoyed prolonged preeminence. Centuries before Hobbes gave it its classic encapsulation the ancient Greeks placed antagonism at the center of consequential (as opposed to pleasurable) laughter, where its roles, according to one scholar, included “causing embarrassment or shame, signaling hostility, damaging a reputation, contributing to the defeat of an opponent, [or] delivering public chastisement.” Euripides framed the laughter of an enemy as worse than death at his hands, and Aristotle listed defamation and abuse alongside robbery, assault, and murder as acts of violence. More famously, Aristotle categorized “the Ludicrous” as “a subdivision of the ugly” and defined “Comedy” as “an imitation of characters of a lower type.” London’s wildly popular *Spectator* (parts of which Paine had memorized) quoted approvingly Hobbes’s definition of laughter as “sudden Glory” and further defined it as “secret Elation and Pride of Heart,” adding that “every one diverts himself with some Person or other that is below him in Point of Understanding, and triumphs in the Superiority of his Genius, whilst he has such Objects of Derision before his Eyes.” Shaftesbury said it most concisely: “‘Tis the persecuting Spirit has rais’d the *bantering* one.”¹⁷

Whether laughter emerged “from the mists of antiquity” with “a dagger in its hand,” as J. C. Gregory averred, or whether it armed itself at a later date, what laughter’s violent side suggests, and what most concerns us here, is the fact that the superiority theory of humor can boast a normative as well as a descriptive dimension; that is, it is not merely reactive (laughter as a *recognition* of superiority), but can be proactive as well (laughter as an *assertion* of superiority). The “superiority

¹⁶ Cooke, *Hobbes and Christianity*, 226.

¹⁷ Stephen Halliwell, “The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture,” *The Classical Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1991): 283, 286–87; Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (London: Macmillan, 1902), section V; *Spectator*, No. 47 (Tuesday, April 24, 1711); Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 3 vols. 2nd ed. (n.p., 1714), 72.

theory” is thus only one side of the story, the other being the “inferiority theory,” or as Alexander Bain characterized it (much to Freud’s liking), the “degradation theory.” As we saw with Hobbes, reputation is the royal road to preeminence and it is public perception that crowns the king. And since superiority is a comparative rather than an absolute value, lowering one’s opponent doubles as elevating oneself. What Samuel Johnson said of satire holds true of the entire arsenal of negative humor: it is the illegitimate offspring of Wit’s cohabitation with Malice, and can be recognized by its “quiver of poisoned arrows, which, where once they drew blood, could by no skill ever be extracted.”¹⁸

Much of the best work on the kind of social alienation at work here has been that of social scientists Michael Billig and Thomas Scheff. Scheff, a sociologist, has written extensively on shame, which he nominates “the premier social emotion,” as it provides a mechanism whereby society guards its values and marks its taboos. It is in policing potential threats to social bonds that he sees shame at its sociological best, ever ready to pressure, overtly or indirectly, potential trespassers from crossing the lines an ingroup has drawn in the social sand. Once internalized, the threat of embarrassment “bounds the individual’s behavior in areas of social life that formal and institutionalized constraints do not reach.” No wonder, as Hobbes said, we often act as if all laughter were directed at us. If “the dread of being ridiculous models every word and gesture into propriety,” as British wit Sydney Smith averred, then much of the energy expended by our social selves is spent avoiding laughter’s censure.¹⁹

Where Michael Billig, a social psychologist, is most helpful is in connecting shame’s effects to laughter’s causes; that is, in tracing our overactive sense of embarrassment to its roots in ridicule. Scholars like Scheff and Goffman, he notes, correctly identified shame as a central social emotion, but failed to identify the source from which shame derives its social power, namely the fear of becoming a

¹⁸ J. C. Gregory, *The Nature of Laughter* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1924), 13; Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1865), 247–53; Samuel Johnson, “An Allegory on Wit and Learning,” *The Rambler*, No. 22 (2 June 1750).

¹⁹ Thomas J. Scheff, “Shame in Self and Society,” *Symbolic Interaction* 26, no. 2 (2003): 239; see also his *Emotions, the Social Bond, and Human Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997); “Shame and Conformity: The Deference/Emotion System,” *American Sociological Review* 53 (June 1988): 395–406; Scheff, “Shame in Self and Society,” 256, 241; Sydney Smith quoted in Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 79.

laughingstock. Billig privileges the humor of alienation over the humor of identification, and argues that “ridicule lies at the core of social life, for the possibility of ridicule ensures that members of society routinely comply with the customs and habits of their social milieu.”²⁰ Laughter keeps us in line.

Thomas Paine certainly thought so, as appeals to shame appear frequently in his writings, with ridicule serving as constable. As he wrote in 1775, “Shame succeeds first, and then repentance,” a concise encapsulation of Paine’s tendency to take opposing views and “shame [them] out of countenance.” During the Silas Deane affair he warned readers against becoming “the laughing stock of every sensible and candid mind,” urged being “honest lest we be despised, and generous lest we be laughed at,” and expressed surprise “that any one who would be thought a man of sense, should risk his reputation upon such a frivolous tale.” In his infamous “Letter to George Washington,” he portrayed “every well-affected American” as having “blushed with shame” over the Jay Treaty, and later avowed, “If there is sense enough left in the heart to call a blush to the cheek, the Washington Administration must be ashamed to appear.” Pressuring Rhode Island’s holdouts to agree to a duty on imports, he warned them against placing themselves in a “foolish situation, to be laughed at by every one,” and finally declared, much more directly, “Be ashamed, gentleman...ask your conscience.”²¹

In analyzing ridicule’s leveraging of shame, Billig is most indebted to the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who explicitly dismisses the benevolent sociability that positivists emphasize in humor, seeing it as fleeting foam that hides “a saline base” and masks the bitter aftertaste of laughter’s inherent hostility. At its root, Bergson argues, laughter is meant to “intimidate by humiliating,” allowing the laughter to control the person laughed at “as a marionette” upon a string. In a broader sense, laughter is a “corrective,” by which “society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it,” leaving potential targets

²⁰ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 2, 8, 221.

²¹ Thomas Paine, “Reflections on Unhappy Marriages,” *Pennsylvania Magazine*, June 1775; in *Writings*, 1:51; “Crisis V,” in *Writings*, 1:236; “To the Public on Mr. Deane’s Affair,” *Pennsylvania Packet*, Dec. 31, 1778, and Jan. 2, 5, 7, and 9, 1779; in *Writings*, 1:434, 403; “Letter to George Washington,” in *Writings*, 3:238, 252; “Six Letters to Rhode Island,” *Providence Gazette*, Dec. 21, 28, 1782; Jan. 4, 11, 18, Feb. 1, 1783; in *Complete Writings*, 2:339, 359.

ever wary of how they appear in the eyes of others. Laughter enforces compliance out of fear, “the dread of becoming ridiculous” being indistinguishable from the “anxiety” to fit society’s mold.²²

As Billig interprets Bergson, “the cruelty of ridicule is necessary” for any society to guard its borders, maintain its standards, and ensure its adaptability (and thus its survival) in an ever-changing world—goals which Hobbes and Paine would have warmly applauded. As a means of socialization, laughter’s function is primarily disciplinary, “discouraging infractions of [society’s] codes and customs.” Sydney Smith observed that most people would “rather be hated than be laughed at” and concluded that “laughter is, to many men, worse than death.” Borrowing similar life-and-death language, Billig summarizes his functionalist model of laughter as follows: “Built into the fabric of social life is the mechanism for social embarrassment, threatening social actors with a form of social death each time they forget the codes of appropriateness.” That mechanism is ridicule, and Paine employed it in hopes of shaming believers out of one worldview and into another. “If meaning has to be socially policed,” Billig concludes, “then mockery and laughter are the friendly neighborhood officers, who cheerily maintain order.” Social animals ourselves, we tend to join in the pleasure of these officers’ enforcement, though “sometimes they wield their truncheons with punishing effect.”²³

THOMAS PAINE’S AMERICA

“Rhetoric functions within a culture,” wrote Sacvan Bercovitch, “It reflects and affects a set of particular psychic, social, and historical needs.” In Bercovitch’s work, this socio-specific rhetoric was employed to pull an audience back to the Bible, but the same reality applies to Paine’s efforts to draw believers away from it. This social-situatedness is especially true of the rhetoric of humor, since it must resonate with a group’s psychology, sociology, and history if it is ever to exercise normative effect. As Joseph Boskin observed, “The culture code is perhaps the elemental aspect in the structure of social

²²Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 122–23; Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 20, 136, 173, 197–200.

²³ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 195, 128, 132, 219–20, 238.

humor,” and that code is upheld, in Paul Lewis’s words, “implicitly, seductively,” an “intuitive sociology of humor underpin[ning] comic conflicts.” As this chapter isolates the sociological aspect of Paine’s anti-biblical ridicule, we ask: What social trends in Paine’s America made ridicule such a formidable rhetorical weapon? How was one’s social standing affected when he or she became a laughingstock, and was the threat of such derision enough to shape one’s public behaviors or even private beliefs? What factors made it possible for *The Age of Reason* to laugh people out of biblical belief?²⁴

Acknowledging that “society” is a moving and amorphous target, we might approach our subject by viewing American society during the Age of Paine through the lenses of four interrelated realities: the consequences of egalitarianism and democratization, the effects of social mobility, the fragility of personal reputation, and the power of popular opinion. Each played a significant role in exposing ordinary Americans to the risks of antibiblical ridicule. These realities defined the Revolutionary Era and the Early Republic and have colored American culture ever since.

Egalitarianism and Democratization

One of the most significant social sea-changes in the early United States—jarring to foreign observers and at times unnerving to Americans themselves—was the relative flattening of the social sphere in the aftermath of the Revolution. As republicanism replaced monarchy in houses of government and denominationalism spurred disestablishment in houses of worship, many wondered if American society was keeping its house in order at all. The Bible spoke of deference owed by subject to ruler, wife to husband, child to parent, even servant to master, and for centuries these dynamics had rarely been questioned, let alone contested. But by the 1780s and 90s, the Declaration’s avowal that “all men are created equal” was being put into unprecedented (albeit painfully uneven) practice. By the time Tocqueville toured the United States, nothing “struck [him] more forcibly than the equality of social

²⁴ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), xi; John Morreall, ed., *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 254; Lewis, *Comic Effects*, 67.

conditions,” which he considered the “fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived.” As he saw it, egalitarianism “creates opinions, engenders sentiments, suggests the ordinary practices of life, and modifies whatever it does not produce.”²⁵

Paine, whose writings had helped produce these leveling trends, also sought to take advantage of them, leading his readers to think less *of* themselves if ever they stopped thinking *for* themselves (even as Paine’s rhetoric subtly did much of that thinking for them). “My judgment,” he boasted, “being left free, makes its determination without partiality,” and he encouraged similar independence in his audience by appealing to their pride (or, more negatively, their shame). For example, in what he hoped would be a self-fulfilling prophecy he told Britons, “People generally choose to read and judge for themselves,” and then declared that if the British system of government were presented anew in this more enlightened age, “it would be impossible to cram such a farrago of imposition and absurdity down the throat of this or any other nation that was capable of reasoning upon its rights and its interest.” Notice Paine’s leveraging of “reasoning” and “absurdity” against a fulcrum of equal rights and independent thought, a tactic to which he would turn repeatedly. To the citizens of his adopted America he wrote, “I choose to think my own reasons and write my own thoughts,” and consequently, “I feel the more free the less I consult.” In almost all he wrote, Paine seemed intent on instilling in others the kind of independent self-respect captured in his letter to the British Home Secretary in 1791, which he signed, defiantly, “I am, Mr. Dundas, Not your obedient humble servant, But the contrary, Thomas Paine.”²⁶

What this self-assured egalitarianism meant for humor is that a growing number of commoners considered themselves active participants in the public sphere, which allowed them to engage in both the politics of government and the politics of wit. Early America fits Roger Lund’s thesis that “a rough correspondence [exists] between the ascendance of wit as a definitive rhetorical mode and the gradual

²⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, 3rd ed. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1838), xi.

²⁶ Thomas Paine, “Six Letters to Rhode Island,” in *Complete Writings*, 2:362; “Letter Addressed to the Addressers on the Late Proclamation” (1792), in *Writings*, 3:62; “Peace, and the Newfoundland Fisheries,” in *Writings*, 2:24; “To Mr. Secretary Dundas” (1792), in *Writings*, 3:29.

establishment of the public sphere in which traditional instruments of political control had been replaced...by criticism, journalism, and public debate.” The power of the public supplanted the power of crown, miter, or sword. Persuasion gradually replaced compulsion. Rhetoric came increasingly into play, making room for the humor that can prove so persuasive in shaping public perception. “The result,” wrote a historian of the period’s journalism, “was an increasingly vitriolic...politics of personal exposure” that was “essentially negative,” and that left nothing too sacred to deride, including the Bible. The rise of republicanism and “the sting of ridicule” went hand in hand.²⁷

Shaftesbury, for whom ridicule was the “test of truth,” explicitly connected ridicule with freedom, arguing that “only in a Free Nation” can ridicule fully function, otherwise falsehood could hide behind “the Credit of a Court, the Power of a Nobility,” or, most relevant here, “the Awfulness of a Church.” The freedoms enjoyed by early-eighteenth-century Britons underwrote, in Shaftesbury’s mind, the liberty of laughter, which in turn secured the freedom of finding truth, and the same would be even truer in Paine’s more libertarian United States. The conditions that gave rise to the common American thus gave rise to the comic American, “the last and noblest *Weed* of the Soil of *Liberty*.” A growing cadre of politicians on the stump and editors at the press increasingly turned to ridicule to add weight to their arguments and volume to their voice. They felt free to mock, deride, and ridicule, and their audiences felt free to laugh in return. Democracy enabled the free exchange of humor.²⁸

More significantly, as commoners came into their own, ridicule—and the sense of superiority that tends to accompany it—could no longer be seen primarily as a conservative force standing sentry for the status quo. Free to advance their own interests, average Americans could use humor to try to bring down their betters, just as those in an ideological minority could use derision to deflate a

²⁷ Lund, *Ridicule, Religion, and the Politics of Wit*, 3; Marcus Daniel, *Scandal and Civility: Journalism and the Birth of American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6, 13, 36.

²⁸ Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, “A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm to My Lord” (1708), in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 7; Corbyn Morris, *An Essay Towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule* (London: J. Roberts, 1744), 21; see Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 41–45.

majority's views. In either case, the unempowered could employ the power of ridicule to devalue their socially-defined superiors. This is superiority theory at its ironic best, employed by a society's so-called inferiors to pursue, politically, a transfer of power; economically, a reversal of fortunes; socially, a disruption of tradition; and religiously, in the words of an especially unsettled Victorian, "a regular topsyturvyfication of morality."²⁹

By Paine's time, with the help of such wisecrackers as Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard, William Cobbett's Peter Porcupine, Washington Irving's *Salmagundi*, and Hartford's Connecticut Wits, American humor was coming into its own. It was more insubordinate and widespread, more revolutionary and democratic, more *American*, than its ancestors. As one historian of humor noted (himself a superiority theorist), "The child became unrecognizable to many English observers, became nasty, and was disowned." This nastiness was a compound of "competitive invective and casual slander" (stretching across the entire "tonal" axis in Lundvall's "Quad of Satire"), a seemingly paradoxical mixture until one remembers the place of its birth: democracy providing its competitive spirit and egalitarianism ensuring its casual air.³⁰

In the words of American litterateur E. Sculley Bradley, "The British laugh at a thing for being so ridiculously what it is; Americans are more prone to be laughing because the thing is not what it should be....English humor is defensive, while American humor prefers to strike first." And it strikes, primarily, at pretension, the irritant of every underdog. Having risen from humble beginnings but never abandoning the roughness of his roots, Paine pulled no rhetorical punches whenever he thought someone was acting above his equals. He mocked "jingling names" and "pompous puffs," and reveled in bursting "full-blown bubbles" by portraying them in ways that proved them patently "ridiculous" and "untrue." His more barefaced labels—"the *Honorable* plunderer of his country, or the *Right Honorable* murderer

²⁹ Cited in Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957; reprint, 1985), 364.

³⁰ William Keough, *Punchlines: The Violence of American Humor* (New York: Paragon Houses, 1990), 4.

of mankind”—allowed the overawed to “see[] through the magic of a title,” their sense of “indignity” leading them to “despise the absurdity” and stand up for themselves. “Blush, aristocracy,” he once demanded, one of many attempts to color his enemies’ cheeks. “Clearly blessed with that enduring proletarian resentment toward the attitudes of pretentious ‘betters,’” as one biographer wrote, Paine personified what Bradley saw at the core of American humor: “We love to puncture an illusion, to burst an iridescent bubble of hot air. Pretensions of grandeur, false family pride, snobbishness, or conceit annoy us, and we enjoy destroying them with the sharp weapon of irreverence.” No wonder the Bible—the wellspring of clerical pretension—became such an object of Paine’s irreverent abuse. It was forced to face the egalitarian-infused laughter of a democratized America.³¹

The anti-pretentiousness of American humor (superiority theory at its finest) made it an ideal weapon to deflate the Bible by robbing it of the air of irresistibility. Just as anti-clerical humor was meant to burst the clergy’s bubble, anti-biblical ridicule promised to bring the book from heaven down to earth, where its inconsistencies could be exposed, its absurdities derided, its authority contested. Even better, in the process it belittled those naïve enough to let the book go unquestioned. As Bradley argued, the “necessary corollary” to the anti-authoritarianism of American humor is the ubiquity of the “sucker” as “our most comic figure,” the victim and foil to those ultra-American archetypes, “the slick deceiver, the crafty peddler, the plausible rogue.” Anyone naïve enough to be fooled by façades or taken in by pretense, anyone acquiescent enough to bow to an unproven better in a land of equal opportunity, anyone so pusillanimous as to stand on tradition without thinking for himself—such a one was deserving of derision. No wonder *The Age of Reason* fared so well on the frontier. On the other hand, American humor also enabled an escape from such embarrassment, provided that the “sucker” was willing to laugh along. Self-deprecating laughter not only allowed a dupe to save face, it saved society from having to

³¹ Thomas Paine, “To Mr. Secretary Dundas” (June 6, 1792), in *Writings*, 3:23; “To the Public on Mr. Deane’s Affair,” *Pennsylvania Packet*, in *Writings*, 1:418; “Reflections on Titles,” *Pennsylvania Magazine* (May 1775), in *Writings*, 1:46; “Dissertation on First Principles of Government” (July 1795), in *Writings*, 3:270; Nelson, *Thomas Paine*, 71; Sculley Bradley, “Our Native Humor,” *The North American Review* 242 (1936): 352–54.

punish more forcibly the transgressions of its norms. Embarrassment having been accepted, shared laughter reaffirmed the values a democratic society took so seriously.³²

An additional aspect of the laughter of degradation played off America's democratizing ethos in a counterintuitive way: it opened the possibility of *minority* rule, even in the land of a governing majority. If deftly employed, ridicule can marginalize a majority by laughing it into an embarrassed irrelevance. A democratic and deliberative *public* opinion can thus be made to pay homage to an emotional and often uninformed *popular* opinion, until the latter (which is normative) displaces the former (which ideally is empirical), all while taking its title and assuming its guise. When it came to biblical disbelief, contestive humor was overwhelmingly a minority affair, but part of Paine's genius was that he made his opinions seem the superior stance. Voltaire, whom Paine admired, provided an interesting example when he quipped that the only reason Sir Isaac Newton deigned to write a commentary on the biblical Book of Revelation was "to console mankind for the great superiority he had over them in other respects." In Voltaire's insinuation, skepticism provided the simplest commoner the chance to excel the incomparable Newton in at least one area, that of intelligent biblical disbelief. Paine would similarly suggest that religious credulity was beneath the dignity of the thoughtful. As he asked in exasperation in a late article on religion, "Why is man afraid to think?"³³

For Paine, "thinking" meant growing up and growing out of a childish belief in a Sunday-school Bible. Those courageous enough to do so would exchange a respectability based in religion for a respectability based in reason, an intellectual (or at least an individualistic) reputation compensating for the supposed loss of an ethical one. Thus the preferred choice of the title *Freethinkers* among Paine's heirs, combining as it did the cultural capital of both individual freedom and independent thought. The

³² Bradley, "Our Native Humor," 354–56; Andie Tucher discusses these archetypes in *Froth & Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 49.

³³ On the difference between public opinion and popular opinion, see Douglas Walton, *Appeal to Popular Opinion* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 19–27; Voltaire quoted in Jonathan Kirsch, *A History of the End of the World: How the Most Controversial Book in the Bible Changed the Course of Western Civilization* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 176; Thomas Paine, "Remarks on R. Hall's Sermon," *The Prospect* (Feb. 18, 1804); in *Writings*, 4:308.

European Enlightenment had long been known for the religious skepticism of its upper classes, and though the American Enlightenment was much less religiously radical than its counterparts in Europe, there were plenty of aspiring Americans who coveted a more refined or sophisticated social status. More significantly, unlike the more stratified states across the Atlantic, America's democratization removed many of the traditional barriers to that sort of ascendancy.

The Pull of Social Mobility

The egalitarianism of American society and the democratization it inspired are inseparable from the growth of social mobility that began to characterize the United States even before its establishment. As Tocqueville presciently admitted, in a democratic state "society will not stand still."³⁴ Whether that mobility was geographical, intellectual, political, or religious, society in the early republic seemed to be in a constant state of flux. Moreover, while the aristocratic Tocqueville expressed a wary hope that this movement might with care be directed forwards, Americans' embrace of Paineite aspirations essentially guaranteed that such would be the case. Even more than "Westward," "onward" and "upward" were the real watchwords of America's Manifest Destiny.

To put it pessimistically, however, in a society of ostensible equals and aspiring ambitions, one was never fully safe from one's inferiors. Human nature suggests that "one always needs to have someone smaller than oneself," and Paine's contemporaries were always on the lookout for inferiority.³⁵ Equality made differentiation all the more obsessive, ironically decreasing contentment and increasing competition as a result. Social comparison theory suggests that similarity breeds the desire for difference: the more alike we are to one another, the more we want to stand out from our peers. Add humor to the picture, and the same theory predicts that "the effectiveness of derision will depend on the similarity of the butt and the audience to the joke," precisely because that derision differentiates. If

³⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 18.

³⁵ Alain Grosrichard, quoted in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 201.

James Fenimore Cooper was correct in calling Americans the most homogenized population he'd ever seen in terms of tastes, manners, and social behaviors, then Americans' quickness to ridicule others and their fear of being derided themselves may account for some of that sameness.³⁶

Against what Philip Schaff called "the leveling influences of the press and public opinion," ridicule could open a wedge between two similar people or positions, forcing them further apart with each successive peal of laughter. And with the degradation of the Other, one's own sense of superiority increases by comparison. In the Revolution's aftermath, Americans craved status distinctions that independence made possible and that equality made desirable. Consequently, they began viewing one another with what Foucault calls "a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish." They began to watch each other more closely, judge each other more harshly, and mock each other more mercilessly. Worse yet, this mockery between supposed equals hurt more than before. Tocqueville noticed that in societies where equality was unimagined, social stratification did not lead to personal humiliation, since "the serf looked upon his inferior position as a result of the immutable natural order."³⁷ In democratic America, however, differences in social standing could be seen not as the will of God or the caprice of nature, but as indices of personal effort and ingenuity. If all men were created equal, what kept some men down and sent others on to greatness? Who deserved the credit or the blame if not the individual in question?

Under such circumstances, social superiority was a highly contestable commodity, to which almost anyone could lay claim. Western landgrabs found their equivalents in other areas (wealth, education, "gentility," etc.), but there never seemed enough to go around. "Life everywhere was a struggle for superiority," wrote Gordon Wood of the period, fertile soil for "sudden glory" to do its discriminating work. The promise of equality left almost everyone with a crippling fear of inferiority,

³⁶ Christopher P. Wilson, *Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function* (London: Academic Press, 1979), 140–41; James Fenimore Cooper, *Notions of the Americans: Picked Up By a Travelling Bachelor*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), 2:143.

³⁷ Schaff quoted in Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, 167; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 184–85; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 17.

and consequently, a ravenous appetite (John Adams called it avarice) for social status. Anxious Americans sent their children to finishing schools, sought the advice of etiquette manuals, and fumed over the condescending travelogues of European visitors. Owing to their “spirit of independence,” wrote one such observer, Americans “will brook no superiority” and “suffer none to treat him with disrespect.” Every man, wrote Adams, “must and will be on a level” with his neighbor.³⁸

As a result, the would-be socially ascendant guarded jealously their own reputations, that “valuable cargo carried in the hold of the self.” As Alan Taylor discerned in his study of “William Cooper’s Town,” social standing was everything. “The Revolution disrupted conventional means of acquiring property and traditional ways of securing prestige,” but it did not halt (more likely it hastened) an individual’s pursuit of those aims. Consequently, “Americans of means pursued gentility with a special anxiety and zeal because their fortunes were often so new and usually so insecure,” just as common men felt a “pervasive anxiety...that someone powerful was plotting to dishonor and subordinate them.” Anxiety was rampant at both ends of the social spectrum. Here we recall Bergson, who argued that where anxiety is present, the threat of shame is at work, and where the threat of shame is present, ridicule (whether real or imagined) is already at play. Indeed, Cooper himself “was vulnerable to calumny and ridicule from both the common and the polite.” Like others of his day, Cooper’s rise had outdistanced his roots, leaving him particularly susceptible to jealousy from below and contempt from above. As an observant Federalist remarked in the Revolution’s aftermath, “No minds are more susceptible of envy than those whose birth, education & merit are beneath the dignity of their station,” a fitting description of so many commoners insecure in their ascendancy.³⁹

If Cooper’s religiosity is at all parallel to his quest for respectability in other areas, it is revealing that he never joined a church, neglected study of “Sermons and Divinity,” and apparently did not own a

³⁸ Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 214, 476, 712.

³⁹ Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 131; Taylor, *William Cooper’s Town*, 57, 143.

Bible, though he twice condescended to check one out from a local lending library. Yet even the librarian asserted his superiority in jest, christening the aspiring but self-made patron “Cooper the Learned,” “Counsellor Cooper,” or “Sir William Cooper, Lord Proprietor” in the circulation records, thereby belittling Cooper’s lofty ambitions after titles that would never be his. During the deistical days of Cooper’s ascension, his religious behavior shared more with the class to which he aspired than with the class he hoped to abandon, providing evidence for the upward ambitions that Norbert Elias associates with the civilizing process, and which Charles Taylor in turn notes as a driver of secularization. Knowing that the rural settlers were more religious than the more skeptical village elite, Cooper leaned toward the latter, more anxious about losing face than losing faith.⁴⁰

Cooper’s aspirations to gentility reflect much of the period’s ladder-climbing, and in this religion was far from immune. In his seminal *Democratization of American Christianity*, Nathan Hatch noted religionists’ persistent “quest for respectability,” by which denominations moved inward from the fringes of faith. Zeal was tamed, excess was reined in, the Spirit itself was largely domesticated. But momentum away from the edges also led some to leave religion altogether, drawn away by what Paine called in a different context “the integrity of manly pride.” His political writings had often made a mockery of his rivals in an effort to “shame them out” of their errors, and his antireligious writings were similarly intended to “inspire mankind with a feeling of shame,” as when he accused believers of “not [being] bold enough to be honest, nor honest enough to be bold.” Paine himself had felt the sting of being “treated and higgled with as if I had no feelings to suffer or honor to preserve,” and his rhetoric of ridicule leveraged similar sentiments. If a young James Fenimore Cooper was “laughed out of a great many” country colloquialisms, could not some of his Christian contemporaries be laughed out of the language of faith?⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid., 143, 263, 6, 268, 20–25; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 138–39.

⁴¹ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 89–97, 193–

Laughter could be especially convincing when it seemed to be arising within oneself, making the opinions of others feel like one's own premonitions or, better yet, one's independently-arrived-at conclusions. Because of its spontaneity, especially within communal contexts, shared laughter can hide its social constructedness behind the mask of individuality, and its impulsiveness behind an assumption of rational thought. In this way it blinds us to the fact that our opinions may be the result of social reflex more than private reflection. Jay Fliegelman calls this approach the transformation of "coercion into conditioning," and saw it as a defining element of early America's "revolution against patriarchal authority." This indirect influence, sometimes called the rhetorical denial of rhetoricity, is what allows humor's "invisible hand" to have both a light touch and a strong grip, one reason that everything Paine wrote, even the most revolutionary, was presented as "common sense."⁴²

Such dexterity was especially important in America, where deferring to others showed a lack of independence, but where garnering public approval was essential to getting ahead. Historians have noticed at the center of American history "an undersocialized, individualistic concept of human nature" (a result of our egalitarianism and democratization) "set in an overdetermined story of progress" (our social mobility), a tension that required no little adroitness when navigating the social sphere. In religious beliefs as in political preferences, people "nurtured a prickly unease that could be aroused by any suggestion that they were dependent on the will of another." Candidates had to pay homage to the mental independence of the electorate, all the while planting seeds of persuasion they hoped would eventually bear political fruit. Rather than trumpet their own successes, therefore, which smacked too loudly of electioneering, candidates tended to attack their opponents, leaving themselves the victor in a

209; Thomas Paine, "Letter Addressed to the Addressers on the Late Proclamation," in *Writings*, 3:62; Thomas Paine to George Washington, January 31, 1779, in *Complete Writings*, 2:1167; Thomas Paine to Messieurs Condorcet, Nicolas de Bonneville and Lanthenas, June 1791, in *Complete Writings*, 2:1318; "An Essay on Dream," in *Writings*, 4:364; Thomas Paine to a Committee of Congress, Sept. 1785, in *Complete Writings*, 2:1253; James Fenimore Cooper cited in Taylor, *William Cooper's Town*, 297.

⁴² Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750 – 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 31; Vincent Crapanzano, *Serving the Word: Literalism in America from the Pulpit to the Bench* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 23, 244.

zero-sum game they were loath to appear to be playing. In this delicate contest, Taylor rightly observes, “their characteristic weapon was sarcastic ridicule,” and the same was true in practically every other social competition. Gordon Wood describes the era as a time when the line between “political struggles over policy” and “personal struggles over reputation” was difficult to draw, and likewise pointed to “personal insults, calumnies, and gossip [as the] common weapons” of choice.⁴³ For all the reasons superiority theory suggests, arguably no better arms could avail them. The rhetoric of ridicule could accuse without being blatant, influence without seeming manipulative, even attack without seeming overly antagonistic, all while preserving the possibility of retreating without seeming to surrender. Laughter, after all, wasn’t meant to be taken seriously, was it?

The Value of Reputation

Americans did take humor seriously, however, especially when it was aimed derisively in their direction. Maintaining (not to mention improving) their place in society demanded it. They felt as had Isaac Barrow, who had earlier warned that “the reputation of men” was “a thing so very brittle, yet of so vast a price; which being once broken or cracked, it is very hard, and scarce possible, to repair.” To protect such an irreparable treasure, the straight-laced and straight-faced clergyman anathematized raillery and ridicule—everything from “a tickling the ears, [or] wagging the lungs” to the “forming the face into a smile, a giggle, or a hum.” But no law could outlaw laughter. All Americans could do was avoid becoming its target, or in many cases, beat one’s opponent to the punch. Whenever they failed to do so, they took things humiliatingly hard.⁴⁴

Case in point: among the many “domestic manners” that Frances Trollope described in her 1832 American travelogue, the one she found “most remarkable” was Americans’ “exquisite sensitiveness

⁴³ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), 125; Taylor, *William Cooper’s Town*, 239; Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 159.

⁴⁴ Isaac Barrow, “Against Foolish Talking and Jesting,” in *The Theological Works of Isaac Barrow*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1818), 1:317–18.

and soreness respecting every thing said or written concerning them,” an observation quickly confirmed by the nation’s passionate reaction to her oft-disparaging book. She identified “an ardent desire for approbation,” and consequently, “a delicate sensitiveness under censure,” one the populace had taken to lamentable extremes. “Other nations have been called thick-skinned,” she noted condescendingly, “but the citizens of the Union have, apparently, no skins at all; they wince if a breeze blows over them, unless it be tempered with adulation.” Twenty-first-century Americans might be permitted a patronizing smile in reading Trollope’s words, but Paine’s America, showing the insecurity of unproven youth, bristled at what was, in effect, a self-fulfilling prophecy. Worse yet, Americans’ insecurity was masked behind an overblown sense of self, and it was this, Trollope detected, that “renders them so extremely obnoxious to ridicule, and so peculiarly restive under it.”⁴⁵ Americans were uniquely exposed to ridicule’s punitive effects precisely because they were so anxious about its application. They stood paralyzed before popular opinion because reputation meant too much.

Like Trollope, Tocqueville also took note of Americans’ unguarded zeal in protecting and promoting their own reputations. People “are attached to their opinions through pride as much as conviction,” caring less about truth and more about self-possession. “Honor,” he observed elsewhere, “controls men’s wills more than their beliefs,” and it was “public opinion,” not title or wealth, that was “the natural and supreme interpreter of the law of honor.” As a result, “Public approval seems as vital as the air they breathe and being at odds with the population as a whole is, so to speak no life at all.” Nothing as authoritative as legislation was required to shape one’s behavior or bend a person’s will. “Disapproval is enough. The feeling of isolation and powerlessness immediately overwhelms them and drives them to despair.” This fear of personal disapproval, coupled with a person’s democratic right to disapprove of others, created an insecure society caught between staring at one another and staring at the “looking-glass self” (in which I “see the other seeing me”). As Tocqueville had written earlier, no doubt with a wry smile, “If an American were to be reduced to minding only his own business, he would be

⁴⁵ Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 216–18, 180.

deprived of half his existence.” The opening sentence of the Declaration of Independence admits “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind,” but judging from Americans’ hand-wringing anxiety to protect their reputations, “decent respect” is a serious understatement.⁴⁶

To a propagandist like Paine, this anxiety over reputation could be turned in skepticism’s favor once belief was made to seem the less respectable option. He had already made deference to monarchy seem beneath an American’s dignity; he could do the same concerning deference to the Bible, especially when Christianity’s hold seemed like little more than acquiescence to traditional social norms. Achille Murat, the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte and an expatriate living in Florida, suggested that the strength of American Christianity was a mere façade, propped up by weak-willed supporters afraid of others’ opinions. It survived solely out of pretense, that most mocked of character flaws. “The women assemble in a circle, each with a Bible in hand, which she makes believe to read while yawning.” The men were even more duplicitous. How could it be otherwise “in a country in which public opinion reigns without mixture,” and where “competition is the grand maxim of the public mind”? By Murat’s watch, public religiosity and clerical influence assured “forced hypocrisy” for the time being, but “the skeptical party has only to know its strength, to shake off entirely the yoke of superstition.”⁴⁷

This was Paine’s conviction precisely. As early as 1775 he noted “how little mankind are, in reality, influenced by the principles of the religion by which they profess to be guided,” and he was confident that Christianity’s collapse, if pursued correctly, was simply a matter of time. “There is such a thing as a *sincere* and *religious* belief that the Bible is not the Word of God,” he once protested. “This is my belief; it is the belief of thousands...; and it is a belief that is every day increasing.” As he had said repeatedly elsewhere, “That which is right will become popular, and that which is wrong will soon lose its temporary popularity, and sink into disgrace,” especially if the right “has courage to show itself.” No

⁴⁶ Wickman connects humor to Charles Horton Cooley’s concept of “the looking-glass self” and William James’s idea of the “social self,” in *Senses of Humor*, 98–107; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 217–18, 715, 725, 747, 284.

⁴⁷ Achille Murat, *A Moral and Political Sketch of the United States of North America* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1833), 127, 135, 143–44.

matter how unpopular initially, once minority views are proven superior, “the minority will increase to a majority, and the error will reform itself by the tranquil operation of freedom of opinion and equality of rights.” It simply required “reputation” to alter its allegiance and the balance of power would shift.⁴⁸

As evidenced by the jealousy with which Americans guarded their reputations, the elements analyzed thus far combined to wreak havoc on Americans’ fragile sense of self, providing the ideal conditions to create a culture susceptible to the disciplinary power of shame. Cultural anthropologists distinguish between guilt cultures and shame cultures (among others), depending on which emotion is the principal driver, and thus which disciplinary actions and rhetorical appeals will be most effective in shaping beliefs and governing behaviors. Guilt cultures are sensitive to the complaints of conscience. They are policed by internal convictions and fear the judgment of God. Shame cultures, on the other hand, are policed externally and fear the judgment of peers. They are sensitive to ostracism and feel deeply the disgrace of embarrassment. Guilt brings contrition; shame brings conformity. Guilt looks inward and then, remorsefully, upward; shame looks outward and then, despondently, looks away.

This system of cultural categorization derives from the work of anthropologist Ruth Benedict, who wrote that “shame is a reaction to other people’s criticism.” “A man is shamed either by being openly ridiculed and rejected or by fantasizing to himself that he has been made ridiculous. In either case it is a potent sanction.” Note the centrality of ridicule as a driving force in shaming others, a truth already learned from Bergson, Scheff, and superiority theory in general. Alexander Pope captured the eclipsing of guilt by shame when he crowed, “Yes, I am proud; I must be proud to see / Men not afraid of God, afraid of me; / Safe from the Bar, the Pulpit, and the Throne, / Yet touch’d and shamed by Ridicule alone.” Americans’ jealous protection of reputation confirms the thought that “few horrors are more to be dreaded by members of a shame culture than to be publicly laughed at.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Thomas Paine, “Duelling,” in *Writings*, 1:45; “A Letter to Mr. Erskine,” in *Writings*, 4:230; “Six Letters to Rhode Island” in *Complete Writings*, 2:360; “The Crisis, X” in *Writings*, 1:332; “Thomas Paine to the Citizens of the United States,” in *Writings*, 3:400; “Dissertation on First Principles of Government,” in *Writings*, 3:274.

⁴⁹ Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1946),

The Power of Popular Opinion

America's democratized egalitarianism and its competitive social mobility combined to evoke a frantic scramble for the social ladder's higher rungs. And with fragile reputation the measure of self- and societal-worth, the estimate of others became paramount. Add to this the fact that a democratic-republican political structure legitimized a majoritarian ethos, and what results is a deification of the nation's collective opinion. Unlike the Christian creedal God devoid of "body, parts, or passions," this mortal deity did possess a body (the so-called body politic), was composed of innumerable parts (influential subgroups ranging from newspaper readerships to lecture circuit audiences and from political parties to voluntary organizations), and was never without the passion to bend contrary opinions to the mass collective will. "In no country in the world did public opinion become more awesome and powerful than it did in increasingly democratic America," agree historians; the absence of "intellectual or moral authorities" and "lack of social orders and fixed distinctions" saw to that.⁵⁰

Tocqueville dedicated considerable space in his *Democracy in America* to the disciplinary side of public opinion, which he dubbed the "Tyranny of the Majority." The phrase, now commonplace, suggests not only *who* rules in America, but *how* they rule, with a despotism potentially no less demanding than the British yoke cast off only decades before. Thus he writes of "the omnipotence of the majority" and the "everlasting self-adoration" of the majority, terms usually reserved for deity but fitting for those who "worship" democracy "as a new god emerging from the void." A later thinker spoke of "the divine right of the masses...replac[ing] the divine right of kings," a process that Paine helped engender. But as Paine also proved, tyranny of any form could be undermined through

223–24; Alexander Pope, "Epilogue to the Satires: Dialogue II" (1738), lines 208–11; in Henry W. Boynton, ed., *The Complete Poetical Works of Alexander Pope*, Cambridge Edition (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1903), 213; Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 67–68.

⁵⁰ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 312; David Brion Davis, "Some Ideological Functions of Prejudice in Ante-Bellum America," *American Quarterly* 15, no. 2, part 1 (Summer 1963), 118, 120.

persuasive appeal, especially if so little of its authority resulted from individual agency and deliberate thought.⁵¹

The tyranny of the majority is a concept that appeared in the writings of many of Paine's contemporaries, and it was not simply a *political* tyranny that they feared, but a *social* majoritarianism that could be equally despotic. Tocqueville thus turned his attention from the majority's "actual power" in politics to its preliminary "power of opinion [which was] almost as great"; that is, from "the tyranny of the majority" to "the tyranny of public opinion." He described public opinion as "a commanding power" that "hovers" above political structures, "the primary and least resistible of powers, outside which there is no foothold strong enough to resist its attacks." This was what a later Victorian journalist called "the tyranny of your next-door neighbor," which "requires us to think other men's thoughts, to speak other men's words, to follow other men's habits"—one senses the writer's deep-seated wish to be free. A like-minded contemporary wrote similarly of an age "free from fear of the faggot or the torture," but exposed to "fear of the social circle, fear of the newspaper, fear of being odd, fear of what may be thought of people who never did think, still greater fear of what somebody may say." To these anxieties, fear of ridicule should be added to the list.⁵²

Tocqueville noted "several special circumstances" in America that "tend to make the power of the majority not merely all-powerful but also irresistible," circumstances which include high literacy rates and the power of the partisan press, to which we would add the elements of egalitarianism, democratization, and social mobility already discussed. "Social conditions [being] equal," he surmised, "the opinion of all bears down with a great weight upon the mind of each individual, enfolding, controlling, and oppressing him," not because the Constitution demands it, but because "the constitution of society" expects it. "Men have a right to reason," Paine observed, "yet, in point of practice, the

⁵¹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 296, 299, 286, 74, 105, 71; Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896); xi.

⁵² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 692, 145, 517, 297; Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 397–98.

majority of opinions, when known, forms a rule for the whole, and to this rule every good citizen practically conforms.” Consequently, it was America’s “besetting disposition to make public opinion stronger than the law,” lamented James Fenimore Cooper. “The most insinuating and dangerous form in which oppression can overshadow a community is that of popular sway.”⁵³

Popular opinion, therefore, often emerged not from independent consideration, but from the mass-instinct mentality of the herd. Tocqueville warned that “the majority takes upon itself the task of supplying to the individual a mass of ready-made opinions” to be accepted “without scrutiny,” thus “relieving him of the necessity to take the proper responsibility of arriving at his own.” John Adams spoke dismissively of “the common Herd of Mankind,” and Noah Webster called the lower classes “porpoises” because they swam in common schools of thought. John Ruskin described this mentality as “think[ing] by infection, . . . catching an opinion like a cold,” and, closer to our point, compared the contagion to the spread of laughter: one could “tease or tickle [a crowd] into any[thing].”⁵⁴ It was simply a matter of goading the herd in a different direction, which Paine had already done before.

RESHAPING PUBLIC OPINION

Informed by egalitarianism, democratization, and social mobility, and intensified by Americans’ anxiety over their own reputations, the power of public opinion is what made individuals, families, congregations, and communities susceptible to the sting of ridicule and the shame of scorn. Public opinion would prove secularists’ greatest obstacle and greatest opportunity, a two-edged sword that could cut whichever way one swung. The obstacle was obvious: an ingrained orthodoxy as embedded as

⁵³ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 145, 287–88; Thomas Paine, “Letter Addressed to the Addressers on the Late Proclamation,” in *Writings*, 3:91; “Dissertation on First Principles of Government,” in *Writings*, 3:273; James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat* (Cooperstown: H. & E. Phinney, 1838), 85–86; quoted in Frederick J. Antczak, *Thought and Character: The Rhetoric of Democratic Education* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1985), 53.

⁵⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 501; Lepore, *The Story of America*, 6, 120; John Ruskin, “Sesame and Lilies, Lecture I, Of Kings’ Treasuries,” in *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 18, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905), 81. On “herd mentality,” see James S. Fishkin, *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Le Bon, *The Crowd*.

Plymouth Rock. The opportunity was more elusive, but it fueled Paine's hopes: turn Christians' faith into doubt by turning their pride into shame. In *The Age of Reason*, the Bible's holy prophets would become the skeptics' holy fools, and one-time believers would laugh themselves out of their biblical faith. Once the tide began to turn, social contagion and laughter's oppressive sense of superiority would prove revealed religion false through an epistemology of numbers. "It is public opinion," predicted a Boston minister a generation after Paine's death, "that is to elevate our civil institutions to the throne of God, or to sink them and us into heathenism."⁵⁵

Of course, secularism faced what seemed like impossible odds, but so had the Continental Army, and Paine was no summer soldier or sunshine patriot. He was aware, to borrow again from Tocqueville, that religious nonconformists were made "the victim of all kinds of unpleasantness and everyday persecutions," which made it all but impossible for "skepticism [to] find an outlet for its views." But what if skeptics employed unpleasantness and subjected believers to everyday persecutions of their own, the kinds that were already shaming the European upper classes out of an increasingly uncomfortable orthodoxy? If erstwhile believers were forced to question the taken-for-granted, to justify deliberately what had been accepted only unconsciously, Paine was confident they would relinquish their unthinking grip on tradition. He saw biblical religion as one of those beliefs which "persists without effort because no one attacks it," so he decided to take the offensive.⁵⁶

According to John Fenno, editor of the *Federalist Gazette of the United States*, public opinion was "the great hinge upon which public affairs must turn," and if "public approbation" were once achieved, it would "give stability and success to any undertaking." Secularists had little hope of their views achieving public approbation directly, but if they could achieve, through their ridicule, a measure of public *dis*approbation for the Bible, then eventually a change in the nation's religious character could come through a change in the nation's opinion. Disapprobation would work on the public's sense of

⁵⁵ Hubbard Winslow, quoted in Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels*, 14–15.

⁵⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 298–99, 748.

shame, shifting the burden of proof—or in this case the burden of self-justification—from skeptics to believers. As Benedict Anderson said of “the great religiously imagined communities,” the Bible benefitted from “*unselfconscious coherence*,” but that would gradually unravel as people felt compelled to account for beliefs they had previously held uncritically. Granted, some would emerge more converted than before—Christians by conviction rather than Christians by culture. But others would either abandon the Bible entirely or would desacralize it to a degree. With time, fewer clergymen would preach biblical literalism, fewer parents would read the Bible in their homes, and a generation of secularists would grow up to replace the generation of biblicists that preceded them. As developmental psychologist Erik Erikson famously observed, “The younger generation makes overt what is covert in the older generation,” and as Pied Piper, Paine would laugh them away from biblical belief.⁵⁷

In Paine’s day, social pressures intimidated all but the most outspoken skeptics into an uncomfortable conformity, but those courageous enough to be uncloseted firmly believed in a groundswell of popular irreligion waiting to be awakened and freed. As Christopher Grasso has shown, Christians during this period were fearful that the nation’s Ethan Allens and Thomas Paines were but the tip of infidelity’s iceberg. The *Christian Inquirer* called attention to this “lurking skepticism” and alerted preachers to people who, “with the leaves of the Bible open before them, are skeptics as to its divinity.” These “secret skeptics” would be the secularizers’ *primary* target. To recruit them, skeptics would have to target the Bible in a way that made closeted unbelievers feel safe to come out of camouflage, as if *they* were the silent majority. Members of this imagined audience would first need to recognize themselves within it and then feel reassured in their membership before revealing their true inclinations. Arthur Koestler saw humor performing each of these social functions: “encouraging those who share our values and reinforcing those values as embedded in our own sense of humour,” all in hopes of “propagat[ing] that value as a social phenomenon.” As a “gesture of mutual reassurance in terms of the

⁵⁷ John Fenmo quoted in Daniel, *Scandal and Civility*, 32, 23; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 16; Erikson cited in Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 300.

value-systems upheld by the group of laughers,” the simplest joke about Jonah or gibe about Adam and Eve (two common favorites) would conjure a community as if by magic.⁵⁸

This would then embolden the undecided, those unaffiliated independents that always tip the scales once they’re convinced to pick a side. Christians themselves worried that within every congregation were church members “who are content to remain suspended in doubt whether the Christian revelation is true or false,” but who would “abandon the Bible if doing so became socially respectable.” These would be the secularizers’ *secondary* target. As a minister warned in the aftermath of *The Age of Reason*’s publication, “There are two classes of men who may be ruined by the pamphlet under review; infidels who wish it to triumph, and those, in a staggering situation, who know not what to believe. The former are contented with ridicule and no argument, while the latter are easily led aside by a sophistical play upon words.”⁵⁹ Through “ridicule” and “play,” humor could nudge both groups in an unbelieving direction. If faith was as superficial as many observers believed, then a shift in the current could precipitate a sea change in religious allegiance.

Shallow streams, after all, are the most easily diverted since they have yet to wear into the rock. It was those “sandy soil” saints Paine hoped to redirect into a secular channel that would then become socially embedded. By coaxing public opinion into the secularist camp, the bulk of the social spectrum could be nudged in secularism’s direction, emboldening the already outed, encouraging the closeted, and inspiring the undecided to finally take a stand. With such a shift of opinion, then it would be believers hiding their credulity and unbelievers parading their disbelief, the opposite of what Murat, Tocqueville, and Paine himself had noticed. Traditionalist Alexander Addison had seen this shift in pre-Revolutionary France, lamenting that clubs, societies, and print culture lauding “philosophy and reason” had caused skepticism to seep into French public opinion until “all prejudices in favor of religion and

⁵⁸ Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith*, 15; Parkin, *Humour Theorists*, 171.

⁵⁹ Christopher Grasso, “The Boundaries of Toleration and Tolerance: Religious Infidelity in the Early American Republic,” in *The First Prejudice: Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in Early America*, ed. Chris Beneke and Christopher S. Grenda (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 300–01; Thomas Meek, *Sophistry Detected, or a Refutation of T. Paine’s Age of Reason*, 2nd ed. (Newcastle: M. Angus, 1795), 38.

government were gradually sapped.” Paine worked and wrote—and scoffed and sneered—with similar goals for America, confident that “in proportion as knowledge is circulated through a country, . . . the minds of the people become cleared of ignorance and rubbish.”⁶⁰

Their aim is well expressed by a newspaper editor in the London of Paine’s youth, who wondered how many weak-willed Christians had “incurred the guilt of blasphemy, rather than the sneer of an infidel, or the ridicule of a club.” This was the equivalent of Peter denying his knowledge of Jesus, fearful of the crowd outside Caiaphas’ palace. And the cock was already crowing in Europe. Apparently divine displeasure was, for some, too distant a danger to be taken as seriously as public disapproval in the here and now. After all, God might be moved to mercy, but one’s peers were seldom so kind. Their surrender to social pressure proved the point of Samuel Johnson (paraphrasing Juvenal): “Of all the griefs that harass the distrest, / Sure the most bitter is a scornful jest.”⁶¹

In his mammoth study of the “secular age,” Charles Taylor notes that in policing its standards and enforcing its taboos, “civilization is in a sense a matter of feeling shame in the appropriate places.” This was Bergson’s point precisely, one that Thomas Conley also makes in his *Rhetoric of Insult*, seeing “the economics of shame” as one of society’s primary disciplinarians. Conley invokes Aristotle and Cicero to show that shame functions most powerfully in cultures where “reputation matters a great deal, where the opinions of others are valued, where honor can be attained or lost, where social rank is of significance, where credit can be extended and debts owed, where there are fragile bonds of intimacy, and where prestige can be measured by one’s good looks, family ties, wealth, and knowledge.”⁶² One is hard-pressed to find a better description of Thomas Paine’s America.

With ridicule in Europe already laughing believers into blasphemy, Paine believed that American irreligion could go and do likewise. In fact, due to the sociological elements discussed in this chapter,

⁶⁰ Schlereth, *Age of Infidels*, 73; Thomas Paine, “A Serious Address,” in *Complete Writings*, 2:290.

⁶¹ *The Adventurer* (London), December 30, 1752; cited in Lund, *Ridicule, Religion and the Politics of Wit*, 68; Samuel Johnson, “London: A Poem. In Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal,” in *Two Satires* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1759), 12.

⁶² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 142; Thomas Conley, *Toward a Rhetoric of Insult* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 99.

ridicule in this country had the potential of seeping further down the social strata than elsewhere. The prodigal was visible, if “yet a great way off,” but this time he was bringing his friends from the “far country” with him, ready to make merry for an entirely different reason. With secularization as with democratization, Paine felt the future was on his side, and a forward-leaning Enlightenment would eventually triumph over a backward-looking faith, even in this land of Puritan primitivism. In the meantime, it was public opinion that stood in his way—no little impediment, he knew, but one which he already had a history of overcoming. America itself had risen on what Jefferson called a “mighty wave of public opinion,” and the nation could progress toward a more secular future on a similar swell. In Paine’s words, “time and reason will effect great things.”⁶³

Confident in the assumed superficiality of Americans’ belief in the Bible, and relying on the malleability of public opinion once pressure combines with time, Paine intended to embolden the closeted and enlist the undecided until a new secular majority could oust a then-delegitimized bibliocracy. To give the words of John the Baptist an ironic spin, Paine was saying of the believers all around him, “They must decrease, but I must increase” (cf. John 3:30). All truth-claims and intellectual hierarchies aside, by making the secularist position *seem* superior, skepticism could emerge the victor in a zero-sum game with faith. Paine claimed to be doing this solely through rational argument and logical appeals, by invoking “common sense” and proclaiming an “age of reason.” But additionally, and perhaps more effectively (especially on the popular level), he made Biblical belief seem laughable through derogatory humor. Superiority theory then proceeded to take normative effect.

The process was captured insightfully in a discourse published by Reverend John Muir, Presbyterian minister in Alexandria, Virginia. Feeling “concern for [his parishioners’] welfare,” and considering it a part of his “pastoral charge” to keep wolves in sheep’s clothing from preying on his flock, he spoke out against *The Age of Reason* directly. Keeping a measured tone because he thought it

⁶³ Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, 21 March 1801; quoted in Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 308; Thomas Paine to the Right Honorable the Marquis of Lansdowne, 21 September 1787, in *Complete Writings*, 2:1265.

“improper” to “oppose scorn to scorn,” Muir explained infidelity’s ongoing evolution: “Men proceed not at once to extremes. From walking in the counsel of the ungodly, from standing in the way of sinners, they venture to sit in the chair of the scornful. Religion is turned into ridicule. It is attacked by scoffs and jeers; at hours the most unguarded it is called for, as Sampson was, to encrease men’s mirth; making a mock at sin, as nothing new. Sinners have often treated God’s threatnings and judgments with contempt. Look back O scorers, to him who introduced this practice, and boast of it, if you think well; the Devil heads the wretched band, he first turned God’s word into ridicule.”⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

With the help of the superiority theory of humor exemplified by Hobbes’s “sudden glory,” what this chapter has sought to establish are the normalizing effects of a weaponized laughter and the social conditions in Thomas Paine’s America that allowed him to leverage the social superiority implied by his rhetoric of ridicule. Borrowing Charles Taylor’s metaphor that, sociologically, civilization is “a game we play together,”⁶⁵ we can see that in Paine’s day egalitarianism and democratization leveled the playing field, social mobility blurred the boundaries between competing teams, the fragility of personal reputation intensified the competitive spirit, and the weight of popular opinion made the cheers and jeers of the crowd seem all-important. With its compendium of freedoms and its congeries of competing interests, its political stumping and economy of exchange, its multiplying voluntary organizations and burgeoning penny press, the early republic was a Habermasian public sphere that made every man his “brother’s keeper,” though not in the sense the God of Genesis intended. Rather, this set of circumstances made of American society the cultural equivalent of the Panopticon, the penitential system then being developed by Jeremy Bentham.

⁶⁴ John Muir, *An Examination of the Principles Contained in the Age of Reason. In Ten Discourses* (Baltimore: S. & J. Adams, 1795), 9.

⁶⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 142.

As Bentham envisioned it, the Panopticon would be a circular or semi-circular prison, with cells along the circumference facing, at a distance, a lone guard tower in the center of the space. From that central vantage point, every cell would be “reviewable with little, or, if necessary, without any, change of place” on the part of the guards. Bentham was not simply reducing foot traffic in the prison, however; he was drastically reducing the number of officers needed—potentially down to a cohort of none. For while the backlit cells would be completely visible to the darkened interior guard tower, the room inside the tower would be concealed behind “blinds or other contrivances,” thus keeping jailors invisible to the inmates in all directions. No officer had eyes in the back of his head, Bentham admitted, but with his revolutionary architectural contrivance, they would not need them. Inmates would be living under the *impression* of constant surveillance, not knowing when jailors were absent or looking away. Before an unblinking scrutiny, prisoners would suffer under “the sentiment of an invisible omnipresence,” the mortal equivalent of God’s all-seeing eye.⁶⁶

Michel Foucault described the Panopticon as “the perfect disciplinary apparatus,” both “visible and unverifiable,” assuring “the automatic functioning of power.” It was “a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned.” Bentham’s panopticon is also an apt metaphor for all we have discussed in this chapter: Tocqueville’s “tyranny of the majority,” Benedict’s “shame culture,” Bergson’s “intimidation through humiliation,” and Hobbes’s laughter of superiority. Indeed, it describes Thomas Paine’s intended monopolization of a trademarked “Common Sense,” which branded as nonsense any opinion that dared to oppose it. In terms of disciplinary humor, the panopticon also lies behind the fear of shame that the threat of ridicule always engenders.⁶⁷

Because of its power to humiliate, and due to the omnipresence and seeming omnipotence of public opinion in early America, ridicule could function as both pillory (in its actuality) and panopticon

⁶⁶ See “Selections from Bentham’s Narrative Regarding the Panopticon Penitentiary Project, and from the Correspondence on the Subject,” in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham, Part XXI* (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1842), 96.

⁶⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 173, 201–02.

(in its potentiality), though much more subtly and thus less objectionably. In the case of biblicism's decline, it could even reverse the roles of officer and inmate. For centuries religion had kept skepticism in the cell of social stigma—out of sight and out of mind—but Paine would occupy the guard tower of his own social Panopticon, with believers feeling the weight of being *in* the sight and *on* the mind of an unseen and unapproving surveillance. The pillory was outlawed in most states by the mid-nineteenth century (Delaware holding out until 1905), but since ridicule remains a socially accepted form of aggression—its coldhearted content masked by a more lighthearted style—it preserves its functions to the present day. In fact, as Kai Erikson observed, the reform of penal practices “coincided almost exactly” with the explosion of American print culture (much of it mean-spirited and often comical), with newspapers replacing the scaffold as the intersection of suffering and spectacle.⁶⁸ The press became panoptic, in other words, and the pillory was replaced by the pen, a weapon wielded by none more adroitly than Thomas Paine. Having escaped the guillotine himself, he put the Bible on the chopping block, and with a cutting wit reduced it to the absurd.

⁶⁸ Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 12; Wilson, *Jokes*, 190–91.

CHAPTER 3

REASON AND RIDICULE

Sociologically primed for the weaponized laughter of superiority, Paine's America was equally well prepared for a more philosophically informed perspective on humor, one that Paine could likewise turn against the Bible with delegitimizing effect. Times had changed in the century since *Leviathan*, with British political anthropology domesticating Hobbes's predatory wolf to become Locke's more tractable lap dog, and these changes facilitated a revised and more sociable theory of humor. "We do not laugh now as people once laughed,"¹ wrote Soviet folklorist Vladimir Propp, and as this chapter will show, this altered perspective provides a philosophical explanation not only for the rhetoric of ridicule Paine employed, but for its astonishing resonance among his readers.

As Michael Billig describes the shift, humor theory went "from a suspicious psychology of emotions towards a trusting psychology of cognition," softening assertions of superiority and replacing them with a recognition of comically incongruous ideas. Known as the incongruity theory of laughter, it trades less in the inferiorities exposed by comparing people, and more in the inconsistencies revealed by juxtaposing contradictory ideas, incompatible elements, or unexpected outcomes. J. C. Gregory adds a related element by preserving emotion but changing it from antipathy to sympathy, concluding that "laughter has steadily become, though with many a fluctuation, more gracious, genial, and kindly," less personally offensive and more socially inclusive.² Humor seen in this light is less about laughing *at*, and more about laughing *with*. This would be important for Paine's project of biblical desacralization, for laughing down at erstwhile believers had the potential to alienate the very people he hoped to attract, or worse, cause them to clutch even more tightly the book he hoped they would abandon. While the laughter of superiority would embolden the openly skeptical, encourage closeted doubters to come out

¹ Quoted in Halliwell, "The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture," 279.

² Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 58, 62; Gregory, *The Nature of Laughter*, 15.

of the shadows, and shame those most susceptible to the sting of public opinion, more contemplative Christians would need to be coaxed out of faith by subtler methods. For this, the laughter of incongruity proved well suited, as it leveraged the very ideal that Paine had trumpeted in pursuit of political independence: an ill-defined but rhetorically all-powerful “common sense.”

Before examining incongruity theory more closely, two points need to be reiterated. First, as is typical, scholars tend to focus on humor’s *causes* rather than its *effects*, and in this, incongruity theory has fared no better than superiority theory; in fact, it has fared worse. As mentioned in the previous chapter, focusing on humor’s causes traps us in a *reactive* view of laughter and an *objective* view of what is laughable (as if humor were inherent in the object itself). To avoid this trap, we emphasized instead the *proactive* and *subjective* nature of ridicule, as human subjects weaponize humor—and its implications of inferiority—to shame targets and imagined audiences into conformity with a supposedly superior position. Weaponized ridicule “put[s] human agency at the center of laughter,” where scoffers can turn the passively “risible” into the deliberately “ridiculous.” In this way, laughter becomes “person-centered rather than object-centered... a consequence of action rather than something inherent in the nature of things.” In this context, Wickberg does us a favor by tracing the rise of the word “raillery” alongside “ridicule” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. “Raillery, unlike ridicule, had no objective correlate,” he observes. “The ridiculous preceded the practice of ridicule. But raillery was pure practice. There was no such thing as a ‘railleros’ object, only raillery as a mode of action.”³

But what the superiority theory giveth, the incongruity theory taketh away—at least in terms of the subjective and proactive views of humor we are trying to establish. When laughter is objectified and intellectualized, the implied comparison which strikes us as funny does not implicate us one way or the other, as it does in superiority theory. Instead, “both parts of the incongruous may be perceived objectively, without direct reference to ourselves.” As with the “risible,” with the “incongruous” it is the object in question that counts. And with this reduction of subjectivity comes a reduction of agency. We

³ Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor*, 47, 50–53.

laugh in reaction to something that doesn't seem to fit, not in superiority but in spontaneity—less Hobbes's "sudden glory" and more Wordsworth's "surprised by joy."⁴

Where subjectivity and agency do reemerge in incongruity theory, however—and this is the second point—is in its perceived humanity and sociability. This was the reason it became so resonant in the eighteenth century, with its expansion of the companionable public sphere. Precisely because it was more object-oriented, the laughter of incongruity seemed less violent, less vindictive, and thus more socially acceptable among people who increasingly valued gentility, urbanity, and sociality. It helped "defang" and "domesticate" laughter, "humanizing" it since humans were less directly its target.⁵ Moreover, precisely because such inherent incongruities needed to be perceived in order to be risible, it invoked a measure of agency in the form of astute observation and/or witty formulation, and this "game...of intellectual cleverness" made for jovial company as well. Think of Franklin tittering over tea with the French aristocracy, or poking fun at British pomposity with friends like Paine back home. The laughter of incongruity avoided making enemies even as it helped in making friends.

So where does that leave incongruity theory in a study of anti-biblical ridicule? If it is more object-oriented and less personally derisive, wouldn't Paine be better served with the more subjective and less sociable superiority theory? Not necessarily, despite his frequent indulgence in personal derision. After all, this more objective approach would allow him to target the Bible directly, lessening the threat of alienating fence-straddlers who might otherwise feel personally attacked. Furthermore, as we will see in this chapter, the laughter of incongruity, despite its object-orientation, can still be made to target human subjectivity, even as it moves from an emotive to a cognitive dimension. Ridicule simply raises its crosshairs from the heart to the head, where blows still tend to hurt. After all, despite its sociability, the supposedly domesticated laughter of incongruity still has the potential to divide as much as unite, due to humor's dual effects of alienation and identification. Most importantly, incongruity

⁴ Robert Bernard Martin, *The Triumph of Wit: A Study of Victorian Comic Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 19.

⁵ Edmund Bergler, *Laughter and the Sense of Humor* (New York: Intercontinental Medical Book Corporation, 1956), 284.

theory, no less than superiority theory, can be normative, not solely descriptive—*implying* embarrassing incongruities instead of merely identifying them. To put things in grammatical terms, though laughter tends to function as an adjective, attaching itself to nouns it *describes* as ridiculous (that is, as *risible*), laughter can also function as a verb, and an imperative one at that. In that capacity it *does* something to an object to which it attaches. It *makes* ridiculous, it *absurdifies*. Wickberg’s observation notwithstanding, ridicule in an *incongruitizing* form can in fact make objects seem inherently *railleros*.

With these potentialities in mind, this chapter will analyze the incongruity theory of humor in order to show (in later chapters) how Thomas Paine delegitimized the Bible, and how doing so nudged his readers in the direction of disbelief. As the previous chapter highlighted the American social patterns that gave ridicule its emotional resonance, this one will examine the philosophical views—primarily Scottish Common Sense Realism—that account for its cognitive reverberations. Of course, people neither compartmentalize nor taxonomize their experiences as much as scholars tend to do it for them. Dividing humor into its sociological and philosophical (and later its psychological) dimensions is hopefully a helpful heuristic device, but people simply laugh and are laughed at, without pausing to analyze which theory of humor is principally at play. Most likely, all three are at work simultaneously, as are the three lenses of experience through which we have chosen to examine them. These three lenses are inherently connected, as we tend to feel things psychologically based on how we perceive things philosophically, which in turn depends largely on how we have been conditioned to weigh things sociologically. Our psychology, that is, is informed by our philosophy, and both play out on a sociological grid. What Paine’s audience felt, based on what they thought, in the context of the world they shared, are the questions we are trying to answer.

Both superiority and incongruity rest on certain relativities and subjectivities. In superiority’s case, these are the relativities of reputation (to establish a pecking order) and the subjectivity of valuation (to decide where to place importance). Incongruity, meanwhile, rests on a relativity of difference (to allow for comparison), and a subjectivity of propriety (to determine which traits are

suitable). In this area, the chief arbiter is always social-specific. Sociologically, as discussed in the previous chapter, it is determined by “public opinion.” Philosophically, as this chapter will show, it is determined by “common sense.” Whether ridicule targeted the heart or the head, and whether laughter erupted in the rough and tumble of social interaction or seeped into the solitude of quiet contemplation, Paine was able to target the Bible with withering effect.

To pursue the ways in which anti-biblical ridicule functioned philosophically in Thomas Paine’s America, we will first look to the humor theorizing of a pair of philosophers in the eighteenth-century British Isles. We will then turn to the philosophy of Common Sense Realism, not only in its Scottish origin but also in its American instantiation. There we will see that, due to the lack of “commonality” in common sense, a tug-of-war over its authority resulted, grounded in the rise of rationalism that the Enlightenment engendered. This, in turn, accounts for the normalizing power of reason-inclined ridicule, even when costumed in incongruity theory’s more innocent dress.

HUTCHESON’S INCONGRUITY THEORY

Whereas Thomas Hobbes introduced us to superiority theory and the sociology of laughter, for incongruity theory and laughter’s philosophical side, we will turn to Francis Hutcheson (1694–1745). Though a Bible believer himself, and thus opposed to the anti-biblical aims to which later skeptics would employ his theories, this professor of moral philosophy provides valuable insight into the cognitive dimension of humor, and into the Common Sense philosophy upon which it depended. He also did much to keep in circulation certain philosophical views of Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), an English Freethinker whose perspective on the Bible and whose championing of “ridicule as the test of truth” would more closely reflect the work of a sharp-witted biblioclast like Thomas Paine. Both men are able guides for ridicule’s philosophical dimension.

Francis Hutcheson, one of the founders of the Scottish Enlightenment and arguably “the most influential and respected moral philosopher in America in the eighteenth century,” is often credited for

recognizing the holes in Hobbes's philosophy of laughter and proposing a corrective. The error came in assigning superiority to the broad genus *laughter* instead of the narrower species *ridicule* where it belonged. To explain laughter, Hutcheson argued for a more widely applicable alternative: "the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea." Polishing his definition over the following pages, he clarified, "It is this contrast, or opposition of ideas of dignity and meanness, which is the occasion of Laughter," or more succinctly, we laugh when we "join together some whimsical image of opposite ideas."⁶

Hutcheson's incongruity theory made laughter not a prideful assertion of the ego, but "a grateful commotion of the mind." It proved popular during the flowering of Enlightenment rationality in the eighteenth century and remains the most widely accepted general theory of humor to this day. Samuel Butler hinted at it in *Hudibras*, in a line (which Hutcheson quotes) that mentions "thunder turn'd to vinegar," the striking reduced to the commonplace. Immanuel Kant captured it well when he defined laughter as "an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing," as did James Beattie in pointing to "an uncommon mixture of relation and contrariety, exhibited, or supposed to be united, in the same assemblage." Coleridge, in searching for "one humorific point common to all that can be called humourous," settled upon incongruity, especially that in which "a finite is contemplated in reference to the infinite"—a comparison that a biblioclast like Paine would exploit to devastating effect.⁷

Though incongruity does not necessarily imply a hierarchy of *higher* and *lower* in the way that superiority assumes, the result was often a demeaning or debasing of its object—a reduction to nothingness, as Kant's definition suggests, or more commonly, a reduction to the absurd. The mock-

⁶ Norman Fiering, *Moral Philosophy at Seventeenth-Century Harvard: A Discipline in Transition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 199; Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections upon Laughter, and Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees* (Glasgow: R. Urie, 1750), 19, 21, 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 13, 43; Samuel Butler, *Hudibras* (1663), Part I, Canto II, line 110; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (1790), trans. J. H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1892), 223; James Beattie, *An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition* (1764), in *Essays. On Poetry and Music, as they affect the Mind. On Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition. On the Utility of Classical Learning* (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1776), 344–45, 454; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notes and Lectures upon Shakespeare and some of the Old Poets and Dramatists with other Literary Remains of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. H. N. Coleridge, vol. 2 (London: William Pickering, 1849), 79.

heroic could work in reverse, as in *Don Quixote*, *Hudibras*, or some of the writings of Swift, Dryden, and Pope, where the lowly were inflated to the point of comic grandeur. But even this mock elevation had reduction as its goal. Thus Hutcheson's fellow philosopher James Beattie spoke of "irregularity and unsuitableness" as the comic forms of incongruity. Victorian writer H. D. Traill's list was longer, but likewise was invariably negative: "The incongruous is the unfit, the unsuitable, the discordant, the imperfect;...the unsymmetrical, the disorderly, in one word the *wrong*."⁸

This would pose problems for believers when Paine began calling attention to what he considered (and comically made to appear) the Bible's own incongruities, or when he implicated the Bible by comparing it to something infinitely beneath the divine. Whenever it was read (and even when it wasn't), the Bible was presented as the perfect, the inerrant, the true. Leather-bound and gilt-edged, larger, thicker, and heavier than almost any other book, the Bible was a commanding presence, occupying a place of prominence whether on the pulpit or in the parlor. Many intentionally left it open, to breathe an air of sanctity into its surroundings. Hutcheson noted that even inanimate objects acquire certain characteristics "by some strange associations of ideas made in our infancy" (that is, by social construction), and those characteristics elicit particular feelings: "solemnity and horror in shady woods" or a feeling of "sanctity in our churches." However, such feelings can be deconstructed if laughter breaks those emotional ties. If the laughter of incongruity is "the transformation of something large, momentous, or important into something small, frivolous, or insignificant," as Herbert Spencer believed, few objects had the potential of such downward derogation as the Christians' Holy Bible.⁹

Though he did his best to protect the sacred from laughter's lowering effects, even Hutcheson hinted at ways that incongruity theory might weaken one's reverence for the Bible. "If any writing has obtained an high character for grandeur, sanctity, inspiration, or sublimity of thoughts, and boldness of

⁸ Beattie, *An Essay on Laughter*, 323. Traill is quoted in Martin, *The Triumph of Wit*, 23.

⁹ Hutcheson, *Reflections upon Laughter*, 17–18; Spencer quoted in Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor*, 175.

images; the application of any known sentence of such writings to low, vulgar, or base subjects, never fails to divert the audience, and set them a-laughing.” He listed Homer, Diogenes, *Hudibras*, and *Don Quixote* as well-known examples, but admitted, “It were to be wished that the boldness of our age had never carried their ludicrous allusions to yet more venerable writings.” Ashamed that any would dare laugh at the expense of scripture, he seems loath to admit what “venerable writings” he had in mind, but finally confessed, “We know that allusions to the phrases of holy writ have obtained to some gentlemen a character of wit, and often furnished Laughter to their hearers.” Worse still, “preserv[ing one’s] gravity” in the face of such humor is difficult, even for “an orthodox Scotch Presbyterian, which sect few accuse of disregard for the holy scriptures.”¹⁰ Less concerned about preserving their gravity, many of Paine’s rough-hewn American readers would feel few of Hutcheson’s compunctions.

Though Hutcheson admitted that some inappropriate laughter may be unavoidable even for the elect, he considered the Bible immune to comic defamation. “He must be of a poor trifling temper who would lose his relish of the grandeur and beauty...of holy writ,” simply because an impious wit turned it to humorous use. In this he grossly underestimated what a Thomas Paine could do to the Bible. In Hutcheson’s case, this overconfidence grew out of the reverence this dutiful son of a Presbyterian minister had for the holy scriptures. As he saw things, “If an object, action, or event, be truly great in every respect, it will have no natural relation or resemblance to any thing mean or base; and consequently, no mean idea can be joined to it with any natural resemblance.” Hutcheson affirmed that ridicule’s “only danger” was “in objects of a mixed nature before people of little judgment, who, by jests upon the weak side, are sometimes led into neglect, or contempt, of that which is truly valuable.” But this was precisely what Paine intended to do: expose the Bible’s “mixed nature,” point to chaff amid the wheat, and then mock the first to demystify the second—all with a particular audience in mind: those whom others looked down upon as “people of little judgment” (the masses). As a later critic concluded, “[Hutcheson] writes as though there is always an objectively correct degree of admiration, fear,

¹⁰ Hutcheson, *Reflections upon Laughter*, 19–20, 9.

resentment, and so on;...But is it always possible to say what the ‘real moment or importance’ of a thing is? One might wonder whether his confidence is misplaced,” since “it may be possible to undermine people’s reverence for something by persistent joking about it.”¹¹ More than possible, Paine thought it probable. *The Age of Reason* would offer definitive proof.

SHAFTESBURY’S TEST OF TRUTH

“It was not until Hutcheson’s *Reflections [upon Laughter]* that the philosophical significance of [humor] was spelled out,” wrote one student of the Scottish Enlightenment. However, Hutcheson’s thought on the subject was heavily influenced by an earlier British philosopher to whom many Scottish Realists looked as the founder of the “moral sense” school: the unconventional Third Earl of Shaftesbury, whose popular *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* was the second most reprinted book in English in the eighteenth century. Two sections in this work, his “Letter Concerning Enthusiasm” and “Sensus Communis; an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour,” can more accurately be called the first significant philosophical treatments of humor. According to one historian of the period, these treatises “provided a rationale for the flowering of satire in the Augustan Age,” and underwrote a similar spread in Paine’s America near the end of the century. While those like the New Light Presbyterian Samuel Blair were warning, “There is no Argument in scornful Laughter and witty Burlesque,” Shaftesbury and his disciples were avowing that there could be no solid argument against it.¹²

To Shaftesbury, as with Hutcheson a generation later, humor was the servant of common sense, which in Shaftesbury’s philosophy was linked to common interests, common affections, and common needs. Thus the title “Sensus Communis” suggests common sense in the sociological rather than the

¹¹ Ibid., 28–29, 34; Elizabeth Telfer, “Hutcheson’s Reflections upon Laughter,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53, no. 4 (Autumn, 1995): 364–65.

¹² Alexander Broadie, “Introduction to Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections on Laughter*,” in *The Scottish Enlightenment: An Anthology*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997), 224; Stanley Grean connects Hutcheson to Shaftesbury in *Shaftesbury’s Philosophy of Religion and Ethics: A Study in Enthusiasm* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1967), x, 121; Alan Heimert discusses the contested place of ridicule in the First Great Awakening in *Religion and the American Mind*, 176–78.

epistemological sense (“common” as “shared,” not as “ordinary”), closer to social consensus than good judgment. Seen in this light, common sense was a socially beneficial unifying force that rested upon certain universal truths that were held to be self-evident—at least to those of high social standing. If they were to unify society, however, these truths had to be accepted by the masses as well, a goal that was proving extremely elusive, especially in the realm of religion. There, Shaftesbury complained, common sense was “as hard. . . to determine as *catholic* or *orthodox*,” and just as difficult to enforce. The “force of wit and raillery” therefore seemed the ideal solution: it spoke to the intellect even of commoners and united them in convivial sentiment, and it treated religious ills with “a gentler hand” than more “serious remed[ies].” Not that the deist Shaftesbury cared overmuch for religious sensibilities, despite his claims of being a “good Protestant.” It was social order, not a sense of the sacred, that led Shaftesbury to write the two treatises in which he recommended the “*proving* power” of ridicule. Unlike Hobbes’s antisocial laughter of degradation, Shaftesburian ridicule was a socially acceptable way to “polish one another and rub off our corners and rough sides by a sort of amicable collision.”¹³

In his “Letter Concerning Enthusiasm,” Shaftesbury recognizes the widespread use of wit among his contemporaries and not only applauds its ascension but recommends its extension, arguing for an unlimited freedom to probe areas that were often considered too sacred for the profanation of laughter. Even famous wits like Addison and Swift had warned against indecorous humor, especially the kind that made light of weighty subjects (the weightiest being religion), but Shaftesbury considered this a lack of confidence in both the self-evidence of truth and the reliability of human reason (areas in which Paine trusted completely). “How comes it to pass,” Shaftesbury wondered, “that we appear such cowards in reasoning and are so afraid to stand the test of ridicule?” Better to give ridicule free rein, allowing it to unmask impostures that were hiding behind misdirected gravity, or deceitfully claiming sanctuary within

¹³ Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 8–11, 31; Grean, *Shaftesbury’s Philosophy*, 124; on the difference between *sensus communis* in its sociological and epistemological senses, see Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 22–23, 38–39.

the walls of a church. Even as patient and perfect a believer as Job “makes bold enough with God” to risk “tak[ing] his Providence roundly to task.” Provided that “good manners” accompany “good humour,” one can never “examine [religion] with too much freedom and familiarity.”¹⁴

Shaftesbury also preferred ridicule for its supposedly gentler hand, realizing that trying to wrest from a child her favorite toy only leads to her gripping it more tightly. In the case of religious zealotry and “enthusiasm” (the original subject of his letter), persecution would only “turn a few innocent carbuncles into an inflammation and moral gangrene,” whereas, thanks to the freedom with which “knight-errantry” had been ridiculed since Cervantes’ day, “the rescuing of Holy Lands and [other] devout gallantries are in less request than formerly.” Classical Greece and Rome had been sensible enough “never to punish seriously what deserved only to be laughed at,” and Augustan England would be wise to apply the same “innocent remedy.” In fact, he added (edging dangerously close to more obvious indiscretion), had the Romans turned the early Christians into laughingstocks instead of martyrs, they may have been more successful at stopping Christianity’s advance. Likewise the Jews may have done more damage to Jesus’ messianic claims “had they but taken the fancy to act such puppet-shows in his contempt as at this hour the Papists are acting in his honour.” Such comments leave one wondering if Shaftesbury was more contemptuous of Catholicism, Judaism, or religion in general, but in the end, the specific target mattered little to this moderate but mischievous deist. Like Hobbes before and Paine after, societal order and public peace were his ends, and a sociable and good-natured sense of humor was his means. Ridicule and laughter provided both lubricant and glue to ensure that society’s gears meshed and moved smoothly. Because human beings are so “wonderfully happy in a faculty of deceiving themselves,” Shaftesbury thanked God for this corresponding faculty that so ably corrected their self-deception.¹⁵

Transposed to Paine’s own rhetoric, in “A Serious Address to the People of Pennsylvania” (1778) Paine weighed in on contemporary controversies (including religious ones) in terms that were profoundly

¹⁴ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 8, 18; on the question of decorum in humor, see Anselment, “*Betwixt Jest and Earnest*.”

¹⁵ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 9, 12, 15–16, 5.

Shaftesburian. “As a great part of the happiness of any people depends on their good temper with each other, so whatever tends to consolidate their minds, remove any misconceived prejudice, or illustrate any controverted point, will have a tendency to establish or restore that happiness”—a perfect depiction of the period’s preference for pleasant sociability and societal peace. In disputations, however, achieving these goals required considerable dexterity, lest conflict “rub off those fine feelings which should distinguish the Gentleman.” “Fair reasonings” and a “cool and unfretted” demeanor were thus in order, along with just that type of common sense that made angry argumentation unnecessary: essentially, avoiding the fight by kindly ignoring one’s opponent. As Paine presented them, his “points [were] so clear and definitive in themselves that they suffer[ed] by any attempt to prove them”; they “require[d] only to be looked at in order to be understood.” In the face of such self-evidence, no other evidence was needed, so Paine did not have to write “by way of proof,” but simply by way of “illustration.” Of course, his illustration of rival views would be of a decidedly inferior nature, dressed in ways that evoked the laughter of incongruity and employed ridicule as the test of truth. He wrote of “modes of government” too “ridiculous for imitation,” obsolete traditions akin to “wooden gods and conjuror’s wands,” and political “absurdities” like “kneeling to kiss a man’s hand, wrapt up in flannels with the gout.” Portrayed in this way, Paine could calmly affirm, “We see, know, and feel that those things are debasing absurdities, and could not be made to swallow them.” Rival solutions were “like cutting off a leg to cure a corn,” but “if the gentlemen choose to be cripples, . . . they are welcome to the honor. It is perhaps a new law in heraldry, that those who invented their own arms should have but one leg.” Feigning concern that his humor may have strained decorum, he even asked his “gentlemen” readers to “excuse my turning the smile upon them.” He would quickly “return to a more serious part of the business.”¹⁶

Returning to Shaftesbury, as its title suggests, in his second, related treatise, he extends his arguments for “the Freedom of Wit and Humour,” defining ridicule as “that manner of proof by which we discern whatever is liable to just raillery in any subject.” Though the definition seems somewhat circular

¹⁶ Thomas Paine, “A Serious Address,” in *Complete Writings*, 2:279, 286, 288–90, 302, 296.

(we laugh at things in order to discover what is laughable), it accords with Shaftesbury's views on the objectivity and perspicuity of truth, as well as the trustworthiness of society's collective rationality. In defending ridicule Shaftesbury goes so far as to affirm that "without wit and humour, reason can hardly have its proof or be distinguished," so apt are unjust and undiscerning individuals to fool and be fooled by one another. In the collective mind, meanwhile, there is safety, making it "best to stick to common sense and go no further," a sentiment Paine would have applauded. Clarifying his intentions, he notes "a great difference between seeking how to raise a laugh from everything" (mere buffoonery) and "seeking in everything what justly may be laughed at" (true, discerning jest). It is this second form he recommends, where even religious issues can safely and beneficially be examined. To be unable to pass such a test would be incriminating, just as being unwilling to stand the test would be "suspicious" in the first place.¹⁷

Shaftesbury does acknowledge the fear "that religion itself will be endangered by this free way," and therefore qualifies his call for ridicule's freedom by confining it to "the liberty of the Club," private gatherings of "gentlemen," or conversations between "friends who know one another perfectly well." His "common sense" is thus not so common after all. Still, two of his ideas about humor made ridicule innocuous in his mind, both of which pointed toward the laughter-as-incongruity of Hutcheson and away from the laughter-as-superiority of Hobbes (whose philosophies Shaftesbury repeatedly questioned). The first was Shaftesbury's belief that true laughter would adhere only to falsehood rather than truth, and the second, that "genteel wit" and "just raillery" would naturally overcome "scurrilous buffoonery" and "banter." With true piety and gentlemanly decorum thus protected, there seemed little danger in ridiculing others' religious views—the French Prophets, in Shaftesbury's case, or biblical prophets, in Paine's. Humor was human nature's "lenitive remedy against vice," and the quick-witted Earl applauded "those airy wits who fly to ridicule as a protection and make successful sallies from that quarter." As a guardian of order and a guide to truth, humor was "moral magic."¹⁸

¹⁷ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 30, 35, 61, 59, 36.

¹⁸ Grean, *Shaftesbury's Philosophy*, 121–27. Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 29–31, 36, 59, 62, 63.

COMMON SENSE EPISTEMOLOGY

Sensus communis as social consensus was only part of what “common sense” came to mean in the wake of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson’s thinking. Its related but far more powerful dimension—as evidenced by the frequency with which it was invoked and the variety of tasks it was called upon to perform—was common sense in its epistemological aspect: “the collective, everyday, instinctive judgments of ordinary people.” This deliberative dimension was trumpeted so enthusiastically that it came to be “offered up as an independent, disinterested, and sure epistemic authority” possessing the power to pass judgment on essentially all aspects of human experience. It wasn’t long before common sense underwent a shift in meaning from a primarily sociological sense of mutual perspectives and shared tastes to a primarily epistemological sense of inner witness and sound judgment. This also augured a shift from the subjective to the objective and from the emotional to the cognitive: common sense was less about those fashions that society felt drawn to at a particular moment, and more about those self-evident truths that inhere to an object or idea, regardless of time or place.¹⁹

Epistemologically, common sense is most closely associated with the school of thought that took its name and the philosophy that still bears it, popularly known as Common Sense Realism. Developed and popularized by such pillars of the Scottish Enlightenment as George Turnbull, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and most notably Thomas Reid, it held that though some things could not be proven (they had David Hume’s radical skepticism in mind), they ultimately did not need to be, for such truths were simply self-evident. Refuting common-sense realities was thus not only misguided, it was absurd, making absurdity an essential corollary to the concept. Notice its place in one of Reid’s most quoted definitions of the philosophy: “If there are certain principles...which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common

¹⁹ Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 3, 18–23.

concerns of life, without being able to give a reason for them; these are what we call the principles of common sense; and what is manifestly contrary to them, is what we call absurd.”²⁰

In other words, human nature ratifies a core of self-evident realities, with common sense ruling over this territory of the taken-for-granted. Absurdity, meanwhile, blunders around just beyond those borders. Our ability to discern between the two allows us to discredit automatically those things that are beneath the dignity—or even the possibility—of rational refutation, and it is laughter that stands sentry at the gate. The French theologian François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon saw “good sense” as the instinct that generates laughter at the shock of unreason, as when a child is asked a nonsensical question and responds, not with an answer, but with glee. Fénelon, in fact, affirmed that “of all the qualities which children possess,” “*good sense*” is the only one “on which you can calculate with certainty,” a sentiment that Paine would echo. Thus all are possessed of this *knowing* laughter that recognizes incongruities and calls comic attention to them. As William Hazlitt said, “a man of sense” is one who, even when saying nothing, “laugh[s] in the right place.”²¹

Having named absurdity—rather than falsehood—the true opposite of common sense truth, Reid did not find it difficult to identify the appropriate means of combating it. Echoing Shaftesbury and Hutcheson before him, Reid argued:

Opinions that contradict first principles are distinguished from other errors by this;...they are not only false, but absurd: And, to discountenance absurdity, Nature hath given us a particular emotion, to wit, that of ridicule, which seems intended for this very purpose of putting out of countenance what is absurd, wither in opinion or practice. This weapon, when properly applied, cuts with as keen an edge as argument. Nature has furnished us with the first to expose absurdity; as with the last to refute error.²²

Ridicule and reason thus go hand in hand in refuting, respectively, absurdity and error. Error refers to mistakes in making proper deductions from commonsense first principles; absurdity is found in doubting

²⁰ Thomas Reid, cited in Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Reid on Common Sense,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, ed. Terence Cuneo and René van Woudenburg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 83, 85.

²¹ François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon, *Fénelon’s Treatise on the Education of Daughters*, trans. Thomas F. Dibdin (Albany, NY: Backus and Whiting, 1806), 121–24, 80; Hazlitt quoted in Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter*, 77.

²² Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, quoted in Wolterstorff, “Reid on Common Sense,” 86.

the commonsense first principles themselves. In this area ridicule alone is effective because reason cannot be. As Reid wondered, “If any man were found of so strange a turn as not to believe his own eyes; to put no trust in his senses, nor have the least regard to their testimony; would any man think it worth while to reason gravely with such a person, and, by argument, to convince him of his error? Surely no wise man would.” Fénelon went one step further and argued that common sense not only supersedes but actually disallows such argumentation. Because it “immediately discovers the evidence or absurdity of a question,” it ends up “render[ing] the examination [itself] actually ridiculous, which determines that, despite oneself, one laughs instead of examining.” Paine had said as much in his attacks on hereditary monarchy: “The moment we begin to reason upon [it], it falls into derision.” Then why not begin with derision and avoid a needless debate? Though “serious argument and sound reasoning are preferable to ridicule,” there are times when “to reason...is throwing reason away.”²³

This would be Paine’s approach throughout *The Age of Reason*. The more ridiculous he could make the Bible appear, the less he would have to reason against it, since “some truths [are] so self evident and obvious...that they ought never to be stated in the form of a question for debate.” Such issues “needed nothing but plain and temperate argument, if [they] needed any,” and even that was overkill in any case when “reason[ing] upon it [would be] throwing away time and words for nothing.” Better to indulge a knowing laugh and then move on to more debatable questions. Paine turned this trick repeatedly in his writings, which helps explain why ridicule was such a comic correlate to his Common Sense persona. Laughter bolstered his arguments while masking the fact that there was sometimes precious little argument in play.²⁴

Furthermore, the more absurd he could portray the scriptures, the more *immune* to reason believers would appear, since they lacked the common sense that would make such absurdity obvious.

²³ Reid, quoted in Wolterstorff, “Reid on Common Sense,” 86–87; Fénelon quoted in Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 114; Thomas Paine, “Dissertation on First Principles of Government” (July 1795), in *Writings*, 3:259; “Prospects on the Rubicon” (Aug. 20, 1787), in *Writings*, 2:193; “Address to the People of France” (Sept. 25, 1792), in *Writings*, 3:99.

²⁴ Thomas Paine, “Six Letters to Rhode Island,” in *Complete Writings*, 336–37, 347.

In the aforementioned “Serious Address to the People of Pennsylvania,” Paine labeled one opposition stance “such a self-murdering argument [the polar opposite of a self-evident truth], that we have a right to question the rationality of those who advance it.” Both “those who proposed it” (Paine’s rivals), “and those it is proposed to” (Paine’s undecided audience), shared “one common supposition of idiotism, and to defend it is to confirm both the disgrace and the affront.” Paine felt that disgrace himself, “ashamed” he had to “argue this point any longer.” To him, it “seem[ed] like fighting, not against the wind-mill” (a nod to the insane Don Quixote), “but a butterfly,” an imaginary foe even less worthy of attention. Ingeniously, Paine even derided his opponent in the very act of denying his derision: “Set my wits against a child! *No*. If I set it at all, it should be against my match.” Rivals were simply beneath his notice and beneath his contempt. As he said elsewhere, “There is not a man in America, who will exercise his natural reason, that cannot see” the self-evidence of Paine’s positions. “Every natural idiot can see this; it is the stock-jobbing idiot only that mistakes.” In similar words from Paine’s friend and fellow deist Thomas Jefferson, “Nonsense can never be explained,” and therefore need not be rationally refuted. When one “has a kink in his head on some particular subject” (here Jefferson’s subject was religion), “neither reason nor fact can untangle” it. Consequently, “the straight jacket alone [is] their proper remedy,” a judgment with which Thomas Reid concurred. In such cases, pity is more appropriate than ridicule anyway. Ironically, then, Paine was paying his readers a compliment when mocking the Bible: he believed they maintained enough common sense to be laughed out of their momentary “metaphysical lunacy.” Laughter would help them reenter rational society, rescued by the reformatory sociability of ridicule.²⁵

It is because of this capacity—the tendency of laughter to increase social feeling and of ridicule to punish its violation—that humor became a potent tool in the hand of Common Sense Realists on both sides of the Atlantic. Scotland’s great rhetoricians, as well as their American heirs, commended humor

²⁵ Thomas Paine, “A Serious Address,” in *Complete Writings*, 2:297–98, 301, 285; “Six Letters to Rhode Island,” in *Complete Writings*, 358; “The Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance,” in *Writings*, 3:302; Jefferson quoted in James H. Hutson, ed., *The Founders on Religion: A Book of Quotations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 39, 162; compare Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 22. The phrase “metaphysical lunacy” is Reid’s, in describing the irreligion of the otherwise intelligent David Hume; see Wolterstorff, “Reid on Common Sense,” 87.

as an important part of the persuasive art, including it in their textbooks and teaching it to their students, many of whom became the next generation's influential politicians, professors, and clergymen. George Campbell foregrounded his monumental *Philosophy of Rhetoric* with a discussion of "wit, humour, and ridicule," revealing these concepts' importance in the author's mind. Campbell saw wit as a "very potent engine" meant to "influence the opinions and purposes of the hearers," especially when this "enchantress" began "debas[ing] things pompous or seemingly grave." Hugh Blair observed that "many vices might be more successfully exploded, by employing ridicule against them, than by serious attacks and arguments." Common Sense philosophers and rhetoricians were practically unanimous in their opinion of ridicule: against those assertions of incongruity that defied reason and common sense, there was no greater weapon than laughter. Many quoted Horace's couplet that "Ridicule shall frequently prevail, / And cut the knot when graver reasons fail." Henry Home, Lord Kames, put it simply: "If we follow nature, our best guide, we shall at least not be absurd."²⁶

AMERICA'S "CREEPING" COMMON SENSE

If Common Sense Realism emerged as a timely response to the philosophical skepticism unsettling the mid-eighteenth-century British Isles, it was also a catalyst, affirmation, and defense of the political rumblings taking place on the North American continent. Seen as both cause and effect of the American Revolution and the rise of popular democracy, the reliability of the common sense of the common people was a concept so resonant in the nascent United States that Scottish Realism became one of the eighteenth century's most important American imports.

Sophia Rosenfeld places "common sense" at the root of America's populism, egalitarianism, and subtle subversiveness, and what she marks in the political sphere Mark Noll detects in the theological: a self-assured, anti-traditionalist, common sense ethos that in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America

²⁶ George Campbell, *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776; reprint, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841), 18–19, 29; Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (New York: Collins & Co., 1819); facsimile reproduction with an introduction by Charlotte Downey (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1993), 12, 476–77; Beattie, *An Essay on Laughter*, 603, 585; Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Introduction to the Art of Thinking*, 4th ed. (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1789), 92.

made religious democratization as inescapable as revolutionary republicanism. Together with evangelical Protestantism and republican political ideology, Noll places commonsense moral reasoning at the center of what he calls “the American Synthesis,” from which the nation received “an ethical framework, a moral compass, and a vocabulary of suasion” that has remained with it, more or less, ever since. As both Noll and Rosenfeld suggest, Americans in the Age of Paine seemed neither to want nor to need outside authority, and their faith in what they held to be self-evident led them at once to abandon England politically and embrace Scotland philosophically. As evidenced by the popularity of two Thomases—Paine and Reid—Revolution and Realism were for many simply a matter of common sense.²⁷

In America, the popularity of common sense rested on its popular appeal—a stunning piece of circular reasoning—but one that went unquestioned because its inner logic seemed inherently unquestionable. As the prevailing opinion confidently (if naively) affirmed, “The best reason which anyone can have for believing any proposition is that it is so evident to his intellectual faculty that he cannot disbelieve it.” Seen in this light, common sense encompassed those philosophical commodities that everyone bought and no one had to sell. It was a creed for the anti-creedalists, an ideology masquerading as intuition, Enlightenment rationality in plain man’s clothes. As an escape from what satirist and poet Nicholas Amhurst called the “ethico-logico-physio-metaphysio-theological drama” of academic thought, common sense was “a fundamentally anti-intellectual construct,” and thus seemed perfectly suited to the popular anti-intellectualism of the American populace.²⁸ Though articulated *ad nauseum* by philosophers, it was heartily embraced by those who disdained philosophy, and who probably wondered why anything so obvious would need “philosophizing” at all.

Common Sense was America’s solution to the Gordian knot: the simplest way to cut through the most complex issues, all while avoiding what Richard Rorty called “the dangers of over-philosophication.”

²⁷ Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 136–80; Mark Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9.

²⁸ Noll, *America’s God*, 95; Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 30.

Unfortunately, this conception amounted to an oversimplification of what was originally much more intellectually nuanced and ideologically circumscribed, ensuring that America's populist version of common sense would quickly expand beyond the sociological and even the epistemological to encompass the propositional and controversial. Among the masses this couldn't be helped. Personified by popular heroes like Ben Franklin and (even more so) Andrew Jackson, common sense was an integral part of the cult of the self-made man, or what William McLoughlin called "the concept of the omniscient, self-governing, self-reliant common man." Realism's harmonization of common sense objectivity, indisputability, and accessibility made it an American siren song.²⁹

There was only one problem: partisans of rival positions—political, philosophical, or religious—simply could not agree on what common sense established. As Reid admitted, Common Sense Realism depended on a set of axiomatic assumptions that seemed impervious to doubt—fundamental premises that could not be logically demonstrated, but that would never need to be. Unfortunately for clarity's sake, it was never obvious how wide a net these assumptions should cast. The principal challenge lay in differentiating between what Reid called the two "offices" or "degrees" of reason, the first being the ability "to judge of things self-evident" and the second the ability "to draw conclusions that are not self-evident from those that are." Technically speaking, only the first category consisted of "first principles"; however, common sense came to encompass those secondary deductions as well, especially as time and tradition infused them with a givenness of their own.³⁰

Over time, the concept of common sense went from technical to general, from epistemological to social, and from physiologically circumscribed to perceptually universalized. It became almost synonymous with social norm or public opinion, and at the height of its ascendancy "was offered up as

²⁹ Peter De Vries, *The Tunnel of Love* (1954; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 136; Richard Rorty, "The Dangers of Over-Philosophication—Reply to Arcilla and Nicholson," *Educational Theory* 40, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 41–44; William G. McLoughlin, "Pietism and the American Character," *American Quarterly* 17, no. 2, part 1 (Summer 1965): 167; Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 8, 30, 155.

³⁰ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, cited in Terence Cuneo and René van Woudenberg, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 82.

an independent, disinterested, and sure epistemic authority related to questions of beauty, harmony, goodness, truth, and other communal value judgments.”³¹ To the degree that epistemological common sense became less particular and more inclusive, more and more tenets could be taken as truths and excused from the necessity of rational explanation and logical defense, at least within the communities that espoused them. Seen in this light, we might speak of a “creeping” Common Sense Realism that in the absence of sufficient opposition, essentially made irrefutable whatever principle was placed in its path. Like the legendary King Midas, anything common sense touched turned to gold.

THE CONTEST OVER COMMON SENSE

The spread of a vague, encompassing, common sense epistemology led to the concretization of certain beliefs as axiomatic and the acceptance of unverifiable opinions as incontrovertible truths. Such assumptions are seldom questioned and rarely analyzed, but once they are, their taken-for-grantedness collapses and their precariousness and provisionality become clear. Reid’s nemesis Hume complained of a lack of “bystanders”—people truly outside the dominant ideology who could “easily judge” that such beliefs were nothing more than “blind and bigoted attachment to the principles in which [the majority] has been educated.” A century earlier Spinoza had called for true examiners, brave enough to study the Bible independently that they might “not be led by blind impetuosity to take for granted whatever is set before [them].” To this invitation from Spinoza (whose writings he knew), Paine enthusiastically responded. Like his predecessors, he knew that once blind attachments were identified as such, the resulting relativization of ideas would allow for the introduction of alternatives. In a best-case scenario, he could christen old heresies as newly minted common-sense truths.³²

³¹ Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 18–23.

³² David Hume, *The History of Natural Religion*, in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Adam Black and William Tait, 1826), 4:487; Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Gebhardt edition, 1925, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 145.

This was the genius of Thomas Paine. In both the political and religious realms, he exposed the social-constructedness of theretofore unquestionable axioms. He perceptually reframed these “realities” as mere “prejudices” (a favorite term), made to *seem* unchangeable through the weight of mere “habit and custom.” And simultaneously, as if by rhetorical sleight of hand, he made revolutionary alternatives seem like long-standing, widely-held truths. In Habermasian terms, Paine seemed to intuit that what looks like “a normatively structured society” is in fact a collection of actors “groping from one problematic, momentary consensus to the next.” Thomas Farrell referred to such cultural contingency in terms of “social knowledge,” which finds its birth in “rhetorical knowledge,” and described it as “an attributed [rather than an actual] consensus” which the rhetor “attempts to actualize” in socially normative ways. This normative dimension is based on “certain notions of preferable public behavior,” empowering social knowledge with the same subtle coerciveness that we saw in the last chapter in terms of panoptic public opinion, and in this chapter in terms of a standardizing common sense. This socially-constructed, rhetorically-generated pseudo-consensus becomes “a covert imperative for choice and action.”³³

Returning to the incongruity theory of humor, due to the mutability of public opinion and the contingency of common sense, incongruities are multivalent as well—subjective perceptions, not objective realities. Consequently, potentially anything can strike us as ridiculous. Habermas wrote, “We call persons rational who can justify their actions with reference to existing normative contexts,” but reverse the polarity of the normative contexts, and such culturally magnetized labels as “rational” and “absurd” drop off certain groups and start adhering to their opposites. Or conversely: reverse enough labels and society’s normative contexts begin to change. Both social acceptability (as judged by “public opinion”) and what Habermas called “cognitive adequacy” (as judged by “common sense”) are comparative, inconstant, and therefore, contested.³⁴

³³ Hoffman, “Paine and Prejudice,” 373–410; Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, volume 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 124, 126; Thomas B. Farrell, “Knowledge, Consensus, and Rhetorical Theory,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 62, no. 1 (February 1976): 1–14.

³⁴ Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 1:19, 58.

Essayist William Hazlitt, a contemporary of Paine, recognized this subjectivity in our “truths” as well as in the ridicule we use to police them. While it is true, he said, that “ridicule fastens on the vulnerable points of a cause and finds out the weak sides of an argument,” it remains as socially situated as the argument itself, “built on certain supposed facts, *whether true or false*, and on their inconsistency with certain acknowledged maxims, *whether right or wrong*.” Consequently, ridicule is “a fair test, if not of philosophical or abstract truth, at least of what is truth according to public opinion and common sense.” In the end, Hazlitt suggests that what we find ridiculous is based on what we subjectively find commonsensical, and as many a historian would stress, the latter is often more accidental than intentional. But if a change in common sense can effect a change in our sense of the ridiculous, can the reverse be true? And can it be intentionally effected? Paine seemed to act on this assumption. Hutcheson acknowledged the subjectivity of the incongruous, admitting that “what is counted ridiculous in one age or nation, may not be so in another,” and even includes “ancient writings” (presumably the Bible) in his warning against presentism in jest. But secular scoffers were already taking advantage of this manipulability in their mockery of the scriptures, and Paine would leverage this to even greater effect. If the common sense of the ancients was becoming the absurdity of the moderns, it might yet be true that “the heresies of one generation [would become] the common sense of the next.”³⁵

What was required to oust the Bible from its throne was, first, an enthronement of Reason, and second, an “absurdification” of the Bible to prove that a coregency was simply impossible, or better yet, laughably absurd. The first stage had been taking place for centuries, first through the Renaissance, with its flowering of knowledge and its rediscovery of classical (read: non-religious) philosophy; second through the Reformation, with its *sola scriptura* mentality privileging a rationalist (read: non-superstitious) interpretation of scripture; and third through the Enlightenment, with its embrace of the scientific method and an empiricist (read: non-revelatory) epistemology. By the eighteenth-century,

³⁵ Hazlitt quoted in Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter*, 76–77 (emphasis added); see Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage, 1953), 80, 84; Hutcheson, *Reflections upon Laughter*, 24–25; Bergler, *Laughter and the Sense of Humor*, xii.

Kant's *Sapere aude* ("dare to know") sounded louder in people's ears than St. Anselm's *Fides quaerens intellectum* ("faith seeking understanding"), until Christendom itself was largely (though not uniformly) roused by the call. Naively thinking that its own reign would be strengthened by forging what seemed an inborn alliance, it ultimately joined Athens and Jerusalem as sister cities until, like Charlemagne's coronation by Pope Leo III, Religion helped crown Reason king.³⁶

The deification of reason went largely unopposed in Christian circles, but Common Sense was something of a Trojan horse within the church, and believers should have been more careful in their courtship of what Martin Luther called the "whore reason."³⁷ Ministers welcomed it and put it to constant use, but it carried the danger of unraveling religion's claims to rationality, which had always been only partially justified at best. As Paul warned the saints in his day (fittingly, those who lived in the shadow of Athens), religion was never meant to rely on rationalism alone (see 1 Corinthians 2), and it was only a matter of time before "purer" rationalists began crying foul. Ministers might dip the Bible in Baconian waters, but skeptics knew it could never be baptized by immersion. Intellectually, the churches had spread Common Sense Realism thin, and then mistook its breadth for depth, drawn to rationalism's prestige but unwilling to admit its insufficiencies. Then, as the Enlightenment increased the distance between Athens and Jerusalem, reason began to outdistance revelation in the minds of many, until sufficient separation existed between them to suggest an opposition that had not existed earlier. This reduced orthodoxy's arsenal at the same time it multiplied its enemies. The growing volume of deists (measured in both decibels and demographics) made this painfully clear, as did a long-standing strain of skepticism that again began bubbling to the surface. To this point, as long as the *non*-rational was not branded *irrational*, both reason and revelation could coexist within religion, but as secularists staked a stronger claim to reason, religious *unreason* became a powerful tool.

³⁶ This is the central contention of James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), and Michael J. Lee, *The Erosion of Biblical Certainty: Battles over Authority and Interpretation in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

³⁷ Quoted in Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 100.

Rhetorically, the strategy consisted of a two-pronged attack pursuing dichotomization and demonization: simultaneously severing the assumed overlap between Reason and Revelation and using the criteria of the first to challenge the authority of the second. With Reason alone on the throne, the role of judge passed in part to the jester. The laughter of incongruity marked anything it touched with a scarlet letter “A”—for “Absurdity”—damning its bearer to embarrassed irrelevance. On the tactical level, through ridicule, skeptics drew attention to those elements of the Bible that never looked comfortable robed in Reason’s voguish dress. The ensuing laughter of incongruity made the numinous *nonrational* seem comically *irrational*, a vital and damning difference. To borrow from the story of David feigning madness—or closer to the terms of our discussion, when he “altered his good sense,” to use Robert Alter’s phrase—if scoffers could make the Bible look ridiculous, none would consider it king. So with sarcastic wit and pointed derision, they “let [their] spittle fall down upon [its] beard.”³⁸

THE ASSAULT OF LAUGHTER

Far from a mere diversion, and not reducible to shows of superiority alone, Paine employed a rhetoric of ridicule to define and police the oft-contested borders of common sense, buttressing those views he felt *should* be commonly accepted by making rival views look incongruous and therefore absurd. In the controversies that raged in early America, the maintenance of “comfortable certainties” often depended on fastening patent absurdities onto alternate views, and at this Paine was almost unequalled.³⁹ To a degree unappreciated by historians—though recognized by many Enlightenment philosophers and practiced by a host of able polemicists—common sense often relied on nonsense to stake out territory and mark its domain, precisely what Kenneth Burke meant by a rhetoric of negation adept at “yea-saying by nay-saying.” Many of society’s long-standing assumptions only *seemed* to dwell in untroubled safety; as

³⁸ See 1 Samuel 21:12–15. The story is referenced in the superscription of Psalm 34, which Robert Alter translates in his *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 117.

³⁹ The phrase comes from historian Thomas Haskell, who defines common sense assumptions as “the comfortable certainties of ‘what everybody knows.’” Cited in Noll, *America’s God*, 16.

Paine intuited, they were often enthroned only tentatively, vulnerable to being ousted through a barrage of comic counteroffensives.⁴⁰

Affixing absurdity to the position of one's adversary, though seldom the only rhetorical weapon used in written polemic or oral debate, was an attempt to disqualify that position by denying its claim to reason. Best of all, it excused the rhetors who used it from having to rely on purely reasonable arguments of their own. In extreme cases, merely *claiming* reason took the place of actual reasoning—the word standing proxy for the deed—with the mere mention of the word *absurd* serving as an unanswerable *ad hominem* attack. Admittedly, such a ruse was less likely to convert one's enemies than convince one's friends, but it was often sufficient subterfuge to make it seem that one had reason solely on his side, especially among the uninformed or undecided. Many were the rhetors who claimed, with or without supporting evidence, that the opposition's views were so glaringly ridiculous that they wore absurdity on their face. Such arguments *in absentia* were the rhetorical equivalent of the emperor's new clothes: to claim they were there persuaded others to "see" them, for to deny the commonsensical was to risk appearing absurd.

From *labeling* rival opinions absurd, making those opinions *appear* absurd was the next logical step, and in skepticism's case, this could be done by questioning inconsistencies between biblical accounts, presenting miraculous events as comic abnormalities, or feigning shock over incongruities between the morality the Bible commands and some of the immoral stories it contains. Ridiculing something directly was even more effective than simply calling it ridiculous, since it implied the supposed self-evidence that common sense epistemology made so appealing. Through ridicule, one could condition an audience to reject an opponent's position while letting them think they were judging for themselves. As a frustrated minister described *The Age of Reason's* approach: "[Paine] has hit upon the secret of conveying poison under the semblance of medicine. He compliments his readers with the information that they have an undoubted right to judge for themselves, and then endeavours to lead them

⁴⁰ Noll, *America's God*, 16; Conley, *Rhetoric of Insult*, 78.

to a belief of his pernicious opinions, by a chain of the most sophisticated reasoning any where to be met with.” Such was the “intoxicating influence” of the rhetoric of Thomas Paine.⁴¹

The demonization of absurdity thus mirrored the deification of reason during the Enlightenment; they were two sides of the same rhetorical coin, linked through a weaponized and normalizing humor. “Wit and sense,” wrote Leslie Stephen, “are but different avatars of the same spirit,” or as John Oldmixon observed even earlier, “Wit and Humour, Wit and good Sense, Wit and Wisdom, Wit and Reason, Wit and Craft, nay, Wit and Philosophy, are with us almost the same things.”⁴² Though some may have decried ridicule as “the paltry buffoon Mimic of REASON,” others saw it as “the unused side of wisdom,” or “*reasoning raised to a higher power.*” George Eliot (the last quote was hers) was so convinced of reason’s reliance on wit that she asked readers to weigh their comparative effects: “Every one who has had the opportunity of making the comparison will remember that the effect produced on him by some witticisms is closely akin to the effect produced on him by subtle reasoning which lays open a fallacy or absurdity.” When it came to cutting through falsehoods, James White wrote, the “Blade” of argumentation “derives its Strength from Reason, and its Edge from Wit.” The French poet Marie-Joseph Blaise Chénier defined wit most succinctly: “Reason expressed artfully.”⁴³

But “artfulness” implies both art and artifice, charm as well as cunning. Rosenfeld is right, then, to speak of “a politics of nonsense” to describe the efforts to claim sense through recourse to its opposite, whether ridiculing outlying opinions into oblivion or mocking the status quo to make a revolutionary alternative seem the commonsensical choice. No wonder the age of Common Sense was home to so much nonsense, even in what was ostensibly “reasoned debate.” Nathan Hatch noted “the wholesale introduction of humor” into the rhetoric of American religion during the period of its democratization:

⁴¹ Meek, *Sophistry Detected*, 6–7.

⁴² Stephen and Oldmixon quoted in Lund, *Ridicule, Religion, and the Politics of Wit*, 13–14.

⁴³ Quoted in Thomas B. Gilmore, Jr., “The Eighteenth-Century Controversy Over Ridicule As a Test of Truth: A Reconsideration,” *Research Paper Number 25* (January 1970), 28–29; Martin, *The Triumph of Wit*, 43, 83–84; and Bergler, *Laughter and the Sense of Humor*, 8.

“jokes, sarcasm, biting ridicule, witty anecdotes, clever plays on words, and irreverent doggerel.” He listed such preachers as Elias Smith, Lorenzo Dow, and Peter Cartwright as having reputations for wit, to say nothing of a popular polemicist like Thomas Paine. Less concerned with “Christian feeling” and dour decorum, skeptics were far more likely to indulge in insult, mockery, and scorn. Taking a negative approach, they proved Walter Blair’s assertion that “the appeal to common sense” is nothing less than “the greatest of all tricks for swaying American opinion.”⁴⁴

Secularists were able to take greater advantage of these tactics than their religious rivals because they had less territory to defend and more to attack. Other than defending their actions against accusations of immorality (an ever-present assumption on the part of believers, but one that had less to do with the Bible itself), biblioclasts could remain almost invariably on the offensive. They were more interested in dismantling the reigning bibliocracy than defending a particular replacement, since secular structures were already in place and enlightened rationality seemed already on their side. And as any builder knows, demolition tends to be easier than construction. This left apologists with the more onerous burden of proof, defenders forced into long and often complicated explanations, clarifications, and contextualizations that were less straightforward, less self-evident, and therefore less commonsensical than witty wisecracks told at the Bible’s expense. Polemics benefit from Hobbes’s observation that “to accuse, requires less eloquence, such is man’s nature, than to excuse; and condemnation, than absolution more resembles justice.” Moreover, when that condemnation took the form of humor, defense was even more difficult, since there was less (if any) of an argument to refute. The frustration of would-be defenders is well illustrated in the complaint of Thomas Andros, whose congregationalism was under attack from rival sectarian Elias Smith: “Ridicule, sneer, malignant sarcasm and reproach, are the armour in which he goes forth. On this ground, and not on sober argumentation, he knows the success of his cause depends.... Were he a dignified, candid, and intelligent controversialist, there would be enough to answer him, but who

⁴⁴ Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 243; Hatch, *Democratization*, 138; Walter Blair, *Horse Sense in American Humor: From Benjamin Franklin to Ogden Nash* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), x, 47.

would wish to attack a windmill? Who can refute a sneer?" Yeats described the problem more simply: "You can refute Hegel, but not...the Song of Sixpence."⁴⁵

Furthermore, the myriad biblical interpretations that sectarians were constantly contesting played directly into polemicists' hands, since they could agree with all arguments against while ignoring all counterarguments in favor. Equal-opportunity scoffers, they could mock any sectarian critique, regardless of the target. Moreover, since common sense, as Rosenfeld shows, "almost always exists in contrast to other views perceived as superstitious, marginal, or deluded, on the one hand, or overly abstract, specialized, or dogmatic, on the other," secularists could direct their anti-biblical fire at both the low ground (popular enthusiasm and ignorant credulity) and the high ground (lofty exegesis and erudite theologizing). Best of all, regardless of the direction of their ridicule, their humor signaled a shift from what Victor Raskin called the "bona-fide" to the "non-bona-fide" mode, freeing people to take both the attack and its target less seriously, forcing the Bible into foreign territory where irreverence reigned, sanctity became stuffiness, and halos never seemed to stay in place. As the *Spectator* warned, "Levity of Temper takes a Man off his Guard, and opens a Pass to his Soul for any Temptation that assaults it."⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

Against the backdrop of sociability's rise and common sense's reign, accusations of incongruity could be weaponized as readily as insinuations of inferiority, either one rendering one's own position the more commonsensical or superior, depending on one's preference for Hutcheson or Hobbes. After all, these theories show considerable overlap, and in Paine's day these two types of laughter mingled promiscuously. On the one hand, it was "an age of increasing politeness" in which "a new sensitivity to harsh words, especially religious ones" prevailed. And on the other, "far from being an age of classical virtue and republican self-restraint, political life in the postrevolutionary United States was tempestuous,

⁴⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 175; Andros and Yeats quoted in Hatch, *Democratization*, 135, 138.

⁴⁶ Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 15; Martin, *The Psychology of Humor*, 114; *The Spectator*, no. 598 (September 24, 1714).

fiercely partisan, and highly personal,” just as it remains today.⁴⁷ In terms of its rhetoric of ridicule, the period was as much Jefferson as Paine, came from the pen of John Adams as much as the quills of Peter Porcupine, and found embodiment as much in the diplomatic Benjamin Franklin of the Constitutional Convention as in the ribald Ben Franklin of the *New England Courant*.

Laughter is both emotional and cognitive, heart-driven and head-directed, just as people are prone to show strains of sympathy as well as antipathy, fellow feeling as well as pride. Whether we laugh at the inferior or the incongruous, what is most important to our discussion is the fact that either type of laughter could be weaponized, ridicule either debasing others socially on the basis of public opinion, or demeaning others intellectually on the basis of common sense. This chapter has focused on the latter, tracing the ascension of Enlightenment rationalism and the coronation of self-evidence as the epistemology of choice. This in turn invited the jester to share the throne, leveraging absurdity to buttress rationality, since common sense is never as uncontested as it claims. With ridicule applying its rhetorical weight, yesterday’s presumptions yielded to novel asseverations, as whomever laughed last and loudest came off conqueror. Within certain religious circles, fear of sounding blasphemous gradually gave way to dread of appearing ridiculous, until social stigma approximated the fires of hell. In G. K. Chesterton’s words, “As all thoughts and theories were once judged by whether they tended to make a man lose his soul, so for our present purpose all modern thoughts and theories may be judged by whether they tend to make a man lose his wits.”⁴⁸

Once we shift from a reactive to a proactive approach to laughter (from its causes to its effects), and from a descriptive to a normative perspective on ridicule (from the *evident* attributes it uncovers to the *contested* attributes it assigns), we see that just as superiority theory makes ridicule a social means of

⁴⁷ Chris Beneke, *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 115–16; Daniel, *Scandal and Civility*, 5.

⁴⁸ Barry Sanders argued, “The modern joke came into existence out of the collision of two highly charged worlds: the rhetorical, intellectual world (male, upper-class, literate) and the narrative, laughing world (female, peasant, oral). In other words, the modern joke fuses head and heart.” *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 26; G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. 1, ed. David Dooley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 218.

shaming one's inferiors, incongruity theory makes ridicule an intellectual way of reducing something to the absurd. In superiority's case, laughter at one's still-religious peers shows that one is more courageous, independent, and mature than they, as Charles Taylor gleaned from his reading of Gibbon. In incongruity's case, laughter at an old idea shows that we have replaced it with a new one, a fresh perspective that, in Thomas Kuhn's words, "is said to be 'neater,' 'more suitable,' or 'simpler' than the old"—in short, less incongruous.⁴⁹ Ridicule facilitates that paradigm shift.

By assigning nonsense to one's opponent, the ridiculer in effect lays sole claim to common sense, with his or her position benefitting from all the taken-for-granted self-evidence that such a label implies. After all, if common sense triggers laughter in the presence of the nonsensical (Fénelon), if laughter results from a recognition of incongruity (Hutcheson), and if ridicule is a sociable test of truth (Shaftesbury), then employing ridicule to elicit laughter at a rival position allows those associations to operate in reverse. In any zero-sum game, whenever laughter can be made to christen one side the nonsensical, the incongruous, the untrue, it simultaneously crowns the other as commonsensical, congruous, and true. As Freethought editor George Foote affirmed in the opening paragraph of the *Freethinker's* first issue, skepticism did "not scruple to employ...any weapons of ridicule or sarcasm that might be borrowed from the armoury of Common Sense."⁵⁰ Within that rhetorical armory, Thomas Paine (whom Foote admired) was quartermaster-in-chief. Marshalling *Common Sense* against the British monarchy and *Reason* against the Christian word of God, he may have foregrounded rationality, but wit was always waiting in the wings. And who's to say which did the heavier lifting? What passes for common sense can sometimes be difficult to discern, but even Wonderland's Mock Turtle could tell when something "sounds [like] uncommon nonsense."⁵¹

⁴⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 301, 364–66, 563, 590; Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 154. Kuhn suggests that such shifts may be triggered not by empirical evidence, but by "arguments, rarely made entirely explicit, that appeal to the individual's sense of the appropriate or the aesthetic."

⁵⁰ George W. Foote, *Prisoner for Blasphemy* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1886), 17.

⁵¹ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1869), 158.

CHAPTER 4

COOLING THE FIRES OF HELL

Shortly after besting his rivals in a clash between the gods, the Hebrew prophet Elijah had a more personal encounter with the God of Israel. A rough-hewn revivalist whose bristly “voice in the wilderness” echoed in later messengers from John the Baptist and Martin Luther to Peter Cartwright and Lorenzo Dow, Elijah had already faced down nearly 1000 rival prophets on Mount Carmel, where (depending on the translation) he had “mocked,” “taunted,” “teased,” and “scoffed” at the inferiority of his adversaries’ deities, “jesting” and “making fun of” the incongruity of weather gods unable to conjure a lightning bolt or send a single drop of rain. Elijah’s humor was coarse—the phrase “he is pursuing” in the Authorized Version is a euphemism for defecation that shows the delicacy of the King James translators—and what began with sarcasm later ended with the sword. But Elijah’s God was not cut from the same coarse cloth as Elijah’s raiment. Unlike the crass spitfire that called down fire from heaven, God in this later episode proved to the prophet that such visible demonstrations as earthquakes, wind, and fire were not the truest manifestations of deity. God was found most convincingly not in public but in private, not in rival theologies but in personal epiphanies, not in loud excoriations but in a “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12). Religion, the story suggests, is primarily neither sociological struggle nor philosophical contest, but spiritual and psychological state.

This chapter reflects Elijah’s second experience to examine the psychological aspects of Thomas Paine’s antibiblical attack, even as it hearkens back to the prophet’s first experience to include the role of ridicule. As the previous two chapters have shown, the laughter of superiority leveraged shame to demean Bible believers along a sociological axis informed by public opinion, and the laughter of incongruity leveraged absurdity to dismiss Biblical belief along a philosophical axis informed by common sense. In both cases, we emphasized what ridicule did to its audience and its object (the laughed at). In this chapter, we will focus more on what humor does to its source (the laugher). The

former was external and Other-directed; the latter is internal and self-directed. The first erected obstacles to biblical belief, embarrassing those who still held to the Bible. The second broke down barriers to embracing secular disbelief, reassuring those who were leaving the Bible behind.

Examining the laugher's emotional state is important because, as Christopher Grasso states, "The relationship of religious skepticism and faith was at once an intellectual concern and a matter of personal psychological struggle."¹ The personal decisions that pointed individuals either toward or away from biblical belief were informed by a multitude of voices and shaped by laughter in a variety of forms. They played out amid social interactions and reflected particular modes of thought, but just as importantly they were made (or avoided) based on interior states that affected those decisions. Paine's contemporaries may have been famously beholden to the demands of public opinion and the strictures of common sense, but they were also prone to credit "gut feelings" in their daily decisions. And though talk of "psychology" would have seemed too academic for most of them (if not largely unheard of before William James), what it said about the "soul" (the original sense of "psyche") would have been important to those weighing the risks and rewards of faith and doubt. What people felt about the Bible—and what they felt about those feelings—was of critical importance.

Human beings, after all, are not merely social animals or thinking machines. We are feeling beings, and those feelings, both self-reflective and other-induced, are incredibly complex. But complexity notwithstanding, interrogating the emotions of those who grappled with biblical disbelief is an essential part of our story. For them, these were not academic questions but personal dilemmas, issues that affected one's social standing, one's sense of identity, and most dramatically, the eternal state of one's soul. As a recent history of American skepticism begins, "Each man knew that beneath the intellectual debate they were conducting about the existence of God, the nature of humanity, and the possibility of revelation ran a current of personal psychological experience." Superiority and incongruity theories tell us much about what causes laughter, but a third broad theory is better equipped to explain

¹ Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith*, 3.

our concomitant emotional state. Grounded in psychology and tied most famously to Sigmund Freud, this hypothesis is best known as the theory of “release” or “relief.”²

THE RELIEF THEORY OF HUMOR

The simplest description of relief theory may be that of Erasmus’s Goddess Folly herself, who declared, “I bring mankind some relief from their accumulated woes.” As a later psychologist said, humor “‘spells’ the mind on an up-hill pull,” with laughter, as John Dewey defined it, a “sudden relaxation of strain.” Humor is diversion in both senses of the word—an amusement, pleasurable in its own right, as well as a distraction, something that turns our attention away from more serious concerns—and relief theory emphasizes both elements, especially when bottled emotion “erupts” into open laughter. This element of humor has been called a “parachute to the balloon of life,” a “switch on the railway of life preventing human collisions,” and a “spill-way for uncontrolled energy.” Akin to this last analogy, the image most frequently invoked is that of a safety valve, which allows the laugher to vent an excess of pent-up emotion. On the personal level, “humor is a way of allowing inner fears and frustrations to surface in a socially acceptable manner,” which, expanded to the level of society, acts “as a barometer of the internal and external pressures of a social group, and as a relief valve for those pressures.” Said Melville’s Ishmael, “a good laugh is a mighty good thing.”³

Situating the theory historically, Daniel Wickberg points out that “the notion of relief as the basis of the physiological act of laughter became standard in early twentieth-century explanations of laughter, just as the term ‘comic relief’ became widespread in American culture.” Charlie Chaplin, himself a social safety-valve for the pressures spanning two world wars and an economic depression, called humor “a kind of gentle and benevolent custodian of the mind which prevents us from being

² Bergler, *Laughter and the Sense of Humor*, 288; Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith*, 1.

³ Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 31; Linus Ward Kline, “The Psychology of Humor,” *The American Journal of Psychology* 18, no. 4 (October 1907): 438; John Dewey, “The Theory of Emotion,” *The Psychological Review* 1, no. 6 (November 1894): 559; Leonard J. Arrington, “The Many Uses of Humor,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 3 (2008): 7, 4; Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1967), 35.

overwhelmed by the apparent seriousness of life,” a release that Americans during the Revolutionary period were in no less need of if they were to escape, even momentarily, “the ever-present repressive forms of society” and “the constant galling grip of social claims.” Even an incongruity theorist like Shaftesbury interrupted his explanation of laughter’s epistemological dimension to acknowledge its psychological aspect, affirming that “the natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and whether it be burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged on their constrainers.” In Shaftesbury’s day as in Paine’s, the most unopposable constrainers of free spirits and free thought were Church and State, leading the opposition’s more careful rebels to disguise their antipathy through the ambiguity of humor. “If men are forbid to speak their minds seriously on certain subjects, they will do it ironically,” Shaftesbury admitted, and the humor “will naturally fall heaviest, where the constraint has been the severest.” In this Shaftesbury reserved his sharpest censure for religion, suggesting that the “greatest of buffoons” were found in “countries where the spiritual tyranny is highest.” Absent religious liberty, humor “is the only manner in which the poor cramped wretches can discharge a free thought.”⁴

Whatever the source of anxiety or oppression, the laughter of relief can calm our fears by reducing the ominous to the absurd, the way a joke can break the spell of a tense or threatening moment. Laughter creates reflective distance, allowing us to consider our fears simultaneously “Dreadful and Harmless,” as the *Spectator* noted, “so that the more frightful Appearance they make, the greater is the Pleasure we receive from the Sense of our own Safety. In short, we look upon the Terrors of a Description, with the same Curiosity and Satisfaction that we survey a dead Monster.” In Paine’s case, hereditary monarchy and established religion were the monsters he sought to slay, so he mocked them to deflate their awesome terror.⁵

⁴ Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor*, 177–82; Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter*, 254; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 34–35.

⁵ *The Spectator*, no. 418 (June 30, 1712).

Sometimes the enemy is not an external authority but an inner critic, the type that religion most frequently invokes. A prolific mid-twentieth-century psychologist, Edmund Bergler, examined humor under the light of then-popular psychoanalysis and concluded that “wit is an inner alibi directed against the unconscious conscience,” with laughter serving as “an internal debunking process” that frees us from psychological restraints. Citing a contemporary psychiatrist, Bergler agreed that humor is “an aggressive attack on the Oedipal father,” in which the roles of master (father) and servant (son) are reversed. And if the Oedipal father, why not the Heavenly Father, whose authority finds embodiment in the Church and its Bible, the ultimate Censor, Surveillance, and Judge. Though such psychoanalytic diagnoses have largely fallen out of fashion, there is something to the suggestion that we laugh in an effort to throw off the yoke of inner authority. If one cannot silence the voice of conscience, one can at least drown out its objections with the sound of refractory, guilt-relieving laughter.⁶

At other times, the laughter of relief allows us to admit previous errors in a way that allows us to save face. Jennifer McMahon suggests that “by displacing certain anxieties and disabling habitual resistances, comedy can bring to light things that might otherwise be too uncomfortable to acknowledge,” like the painful possibility that one’s most closely held convictions were misguided. Humor “diffuses some of the tensions” such fears engender, allowing for the “consideration of subjects [a person] might otherwise resist.” For the culturally self-conscious, laughter even allows one to revel in what is normally off-limits, explaining the “undeniable sense of relief” that accompanies “our reflexive delight in a good joke or parody that skewers some of our conceits or prejudices,” liberates us from “the weight of our efforts to be properly respectable and good,” and “gives us license...to violate the rules of conventional morality.” For the reluctantly religious but socially circumspect, such laughter at the expense of religion must have felt freeing indeed.⁷

⁶ Bergler, *Laughter and the Sense of Humor*, 162, 246, 254, 273.

⁷ Timothy Paul Sandifer, “Laughing at Them or with Them? Contemporary Comedy and the Criticism of Religion,” MA Thesis, Vanderbilt University, 2004; 8, 77; Leon Rappoport, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), xiii.

Relief theory also holds that laughter's lightness allows humor to speak truth to power, relieving, if only momentarily, the weight of obedience typically owed to authority. Psychologist L. W. Kline emphasized "the sense of freedom of which the sense of humor is the obverse side," subtly "pervert[ing] and break[ing] up the mechanism and order about us" by destabilizing our instinctual deference to conventional wisdom and traditional norms. Only Goddess Folly "dares to defy the world order with impunity"; she alone "can violate ruthlessly, without pain and without apology, the manifold human contrivances, social customs and relationships" that constrain us. Consequently, humor is "most prolific in those crises and changes in human affairs at which the consciousness of freedom breaks out," the habitual thought world of Thomas Paine.⁸

More suggestive of irreligion's use of laughter, Kline adds that humor's "largest function" may be "to detach us from our world of good and evil,...by keeping us larger than what we do and greater than what can happen to us." In secularists' hands, this would include feeling larger than one's supposed depravity and greater than the threat of divine judgment. Humor's promised "freedom" included feeling free of the Bible's authority and even free of the Bible's God. As Charles Taylor argued, secularism's rise was not primarily due to social "subtraction theories" with the sense of superiority they attach to disbelief, nor was it owing to the so-called "'scientific' proofs of atheism," which made fun of the incongruities in the Bible. Rather it was due in large part to the exhilarating release one feels in throwing off a chaffing and chastening yoke. "It is not the cast-iron intellectual reasoning which convinces," he insists; it is more often "the relief of revolt."⁹

FREUD, WIT, AND RELIEF FROM INHIBITION

To this point, we have been explicating relief theory and hinting at its relevance to anti-biblical humor without yet considering its most well-known proponent, Sigmund Freud. His belated introduction

⁸ Kline, "The Psychology of Humor," 435–38.

⁹ Ibid., 438; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 306.

is due, in part, to the fact that he neither originated the theory nor even named it explicitly in his most relevant work, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*.¹⁰ However, Freud's role as guide in this chapter is well-deserved. Not only is his name synonymous with psychology, but in the book just mentioned he gave humor its most sustained psychological treatment to date. Moreover, the fact that he "advertised his unbelief every time he could find, or make, an opportunity," as Peter Gay remarked, makes him particularly well-suited to help us make sense of Paine's comic attacks on the Bible, the book that underlay what Freud considered humanity's shared neurosis, organized religion. If minister and editor of *The Christian Century* Charles Clayton Morrison was correct in naming "empirical psychology" one of the sources of the "acid which ate away the historical significance, the objectivity and the particularity of the Christian revelation," then Freud, one of the founding fathers of empirical psychology, is a fitting embodiment of the laughter the Bible was up against.¹¹

At its core, Freud's thinking on "wit-work" was an extension of his thought on "dream-work," both subjects serving as windows into the unconscious since they emerge without conscious intent. Whether in sleep or in laughter, he argued, mental defenses are relaxed, the mind is permitted to overcome its own self-censorship, and latent emotions rise to the surface—they "vent" as the language of relief theory suggests. Unlike other students of the subject, Freud focused less on the emotional discharge and more on the inhibitions that are overcome when laughter erupts. At its simplest, his theory holds that "the main character of wit-making is to set free pleasure by removing inhibitions."¹²

One of the best encapsulations of Freud's thought on humor is that of John Morreall, a professor of Religious Studies and founder of the International Society for Humor Studies, one of those rare

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1916). Published originally in 1905 as *Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, this book is also known in English as *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, due to the ambiguity of the German word *Witz*. Quotations in this chapter will be taken from the 1916 Brill translation, as that would have been the version first known to American readers.

¹¹ See Keith G. Meador, "'My Own Salvation': The *Christian Century* and Psychology's Secularizing of American Protestantism," in *The Secular Revolution*, 289; Charles Clayton Morrison, "How My Mind Has Changed," *The Christian Century* 56, no. 45 (November 8, 1939): 1371. On Freud's role in secularization, see Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

¹² Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, 226, 206.

scholars that takes seriously both faith and fun. According to his summary, Freud taught that “when we express what is usually inhibited, the energy of repression is released in laughter.” Whether emotionally or cognitively, we summon energy to process what we are feeling or thinking, but when “we realize that we need not be concerned,...the energy summoned for the emotion is suddenly superfluous and available for discharge in laughter.”¹³ Discharging the energy of thought hints at incongruity theory, cognitive dissonance dispelled when one realizes one need not take the inconsistency seriously. Discharging the energy of emotion can include superiority theory, when the restraint on one’s pride is given vent through condescending laughter, or when the restraint inherent in deference to unwanted authority dissolves in the laughter of revolt. Beyond this, in the case of irreligion, emotional energies that might have been pressed into spiritual service—into feelings of reverence, veneration, or self-denial, for example—can escape through the release of unrestrained laughter, especially when taking the form of, or coming in response to, antireligious ridicule.

Though innocent humor releases emotional energies as well, Freud preferred what he called “tendentious-wit,” the accusatory kind that infused Paine’s polemics. The mainspring of tendentious wit is the release of deep-seated inhibitions, cultural constraints exemplified in Christian America by the Bible’s endless litany of “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” When aimed at people, derogatory humor releases the energies of inhibition by dehumanizing its target and desensitizing its audience. Similarly, antibiblical ridicule can demystify its target and disenchant the world of its audience, deadening laughs to feelings of guilt (for the act) and awe (for the object of ridicule), until they are ready—even eager—to hear another joke that further desacralizes what was previously esteemed as sacrosanct. Freud referred to “the degradation of the exalted” by comic means, the debasing of the “illustrious” by making it “lowly,” and the “*unmasking*” of an object that does not deserve the “dignity and authority” assigned to it. With these phrases the possibility of Bible as target becomes clear.¹⁴

¹³ Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter*, 111.

¹⁴ Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, 146, 149, 139–40, 324–25.

In the Bible's case this stripping away of sanctity provided less-objectionable opportunities to indulge in what we might call scriptural voyeurism—the objectification and manipulation of the heretofore untouchable, inaccessible, and invulnerable, with all the titillation of denuding something of the dignity that had previously commanded one's deference or respect. Like a drunken Noah found “uncovered within his tent” (a scene to which Paine called his readers' attention) the Bible seems to fall below its own professed nobility. Decorum demands that one avert the shaming gaze and modestly restore the Bible's dignity, reverently walking in backwards, Shem- and Japheth-like, to cover its nakedness with the garment of good repute. Tendentious humor, meanwhile, acts as Noah's immature youngest son Ham, who, moved with curiosity or conceit, draws attention to the breach of character, fixes his gaze on the exposed impropriety and brazenly tells his brothers about it. As Freud observes in his final chapter, while “the preacher entirely loses sight of humanity's defects of character” or mercifully chooses to ignore them, “the writer of comedy” fixates on those deformities, and “brings [them] out with so much effect.” Paine would do this mercilessly to the Bible.¹⁵

This last detail, the almost irresistible urge to share with others one's wit, is another key element of tendentious humor. “Wit-making is inseparably connected with the desire to impart it,” Freud insisted, “in fact this impulse is so strong that it is often realized after overcoming strong objections,” yet more energy-in-restraint to be released in an eruption of laughter. Here we see the sociability of humor so valued by the Common Sense Realists: the tittering of tale-bearers at clubs and coffeehouses, the back-slapping guffaws of fellow drinkers at the local tavern, and the mocking scorn that spread through gawking crowds at the pillory and post. We hear the prideful laughter and angry derision of those milling around the marketplace, as *Common Sense* blasted the “Royal Brute of Britain” or as *The Age of Reason* shocked listeners into laughing despite themselves. Part of the power of Paine's rhetoric was its common voice, one that was meant to be heard as much as read. His listenership was as important as his readership, and what was most likely to be remembered and repeated? Not his logical

¹⁵ This narrative is found in Genesis 9:20–27. Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, 356.

arguments or rational explanations, but the barbed insults and witty one-liners that punctuate his prose. In the public sphere especially, few things spread faster than a laugh.

The contagion of laughter should not be underestimated. As Freud maintained, since “every witticism...demands its own public,” tendentious wit “usually requires three persons.” In addition to the joke’s teller and its butt, there is “a third person in whom the purpose of the wit...is fulfilled”—a spectator listening in. This is the real audience of the humor, and laughter is meant to reposition them on the side of the teller of the joke. As we discussed in the last chapter, when ridicule dichotomizes an issue, it delegitimizes the Other in hopes of rallying an audience to its side. In fine, the first person converts the third person at the second person’s expense. Freud saw the same process at play here. In tendentious humor, he explains, “the aim...is to enlist this third person against our enemy. By belittling and humbling our enemy, by scorning and ridiculing him, we indirectly obtain the pleasure of his defeat by the laughter of the third person, the inactive spectator.” Best of all, the spectator tends not to remain inactive for long. As Freud said at the beginning of the book, “A new joke operates almost as an event of universal interest. It is passed on from one person to another just like the news of the latest conquest”—conquest being the operative term. By capturing the undecided, one conquers the opposition, and due to the “highly infectious” nature of laughter, humor “ricochets,” ensuring that laughter’s columns continue to advance. In each round of retelling, the “third person” laughing along becomes allied to the “first person” sharing the humor, together aligned against the “second person” who constitutes the butt of the joke. Spectators become partisans, who continue sharing the humor for the pleasure it provides, and cheerily the process continues, laughter extending its persuasive influence in a process not unlike the “creeping” common sense realism we saw in the last chapter.¹⁶

Connecting first and third persons in the conviviality of jest, the only real loser is the butt of the joke, but Freud seems less concerned with whatever comes of the victim’s emotional energies. “The discovery that it is in our power to make another person comical opens the way to unsuspected gains in

¹⁶ Ibid., 220, 233, 144, 150, 14, 240–42.

comic pleasure,” he exults, and best of all, those pleasure sources are infinite, since “every person is really defenseless against being made comical.” With this Freud suggests that absurdity is in the eye of the beholder, not inherent in the object of derision, a near-reversal of the objectivity implied in incongruity theory and a marked shift from the reactive to the proactive element in humor. As to motive, Freud adds, “a person”—and in the Bible’s case, a thing—“may be made comical in order to render him contemptible or in order to deprive him of his claims to dignity and authority,” precisely the goals of a secular biblioclast like Thomas Paine. In a key passage that combines the softening effect of the comic frame (to be discussed later) with the obfuscatory nature of the rhetoric of ridicule, Freud summarizes his argument thus far: “Wit permits us to make our enemy ridiculous through that which we could not utter loudly or consciously on account of existing hindrances... Moreover, the listener will be induced by the gain in pleasure to take our part, even if he is not altogether convinced,—just as we on other occasions, when fascinated by harmless witticism, were wont to overestimate the substance of the sentence wittily expressed. ‘To prejudice the laughter in one’s own favor’ is a completely pertinent saying in the German language.”¹⁷

To “prejudice”—that is, to pre-judge, to decide in advance—that is the heart of the issue. As we suggested in explaining the reliance of “common sense” on “nonsense,” humor tricks us into shallow but pleasurable agreement, fooling our minds into acquiescence by distracting reason and soothing troubled emotions that would normally serve as restraints. Humor “sets itself up against an inhibiting and restrictive power,” Freud wrote, this time “the critical judgment.” As he said earlier, “The thought seeks the witty disguise because it thereby recommends itself to our attention and can thus appear to us more important and valuable than it really is; but above all because this disguise fascinates and confuses our reason.” In fact, humor “establishe[s] in us a mood most unfavorable to reason”—even if (as in Paine) it pretends to be reason’s support.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., 303, 322, 150–51.

¹⁸ Ibid., 202–03, 197, 356, 211.

Critics have long complained that rhetoric camouflages actual content, but in humor this problem is magnified through the wiles of pleasurable distraction, which “keep[s] our conscious attention at a distance.” As Freud observed, “Wit is now recognized as a powerful psychic factor whose weight can decide the issue if it falls into this or that side of the scale.” Witty wording “deceives us so completely that we overestimate the content of the sentence,” making the speaker’s position seem more convincing (*pathos* serving *logos*), just as it makes the speaker appear more agreeable (*pathos* serving *ethos*). Yet it is neither the argument nor the speaker that has won the audience, but the audience’s own laughter that has convinced them. “*Strictly speaking*,” Freud admits, “*we do not know what we are laughing about*,” but we seldom take time to investigate. Like sleepy or inebriated sentries, the mind lowers its defenses, captive emotions escape, outside ideas enter, and by the time the guards regain their senses, the prison has passed into enemy hands, without a cognitive alarm even sounding. The sentinels return to their work of surveillance, unaware that they are now guarding opinions they had earlier guarded against. We could say this occurs under cover of darkness, but Freud describes it better. The obfuscation is not darkness, but “*an agreeable moonlight*” that is shed upon a topic, “which is in the main quite pleasant, but which does not show any one subject clearly.”¹⁹

Pleasant or not, humor appealed to Freud (and to Paine) for its revolutionary potential “as a weapon of attack or criticism of superiors who claim to be an authority.” Especially when overt opposition is impossible or unwise, wit “serves as a resistance against such authority and as an escape from its pressure,” with ridicule particularly “well adapted as a weapon of attack upon what is great, dignified, and mighty, that which is shielded by internal hindrances or external circumstances against direct disparagement.” In a rare nod to religion, Freud declares, “The object of attack by wit may equally well be institutions, . . . moral or religious precepts, or even philosophies of life which enjoy so much respect that they can be challenged in no other way than under the guise of a witticism, and one that is

¹⁹ Ibid., 238, 203, 132, 148, 60, 122.

veiled by a façade at that.” In such cases, Freud recommended “absurdity as a restorer of old liberties and as a relief from the pressure of intellectual upbringing.”²⁰

Inherent in much of Freud’s bubble-bursting humor was a certain degree of skepticism and even cynicism, key ingredients of any secularist’s anti-biblical approach. To skeptical humor Freud gave “a special place,” since what it attacks “is not a person nor an institution, but the certainty of our very knowledge.”²¹ This humor was not simply critical but meta-critical, and in this we hearken back to skeptics like Hobbes and Hume, who called into question not only specific biblical passages, but the entire intellectual and spiritual apparatus in which the Bible would be weighed. Paine indulged in this type of humor as well, making miracle, mystery, and prophecy—the cornerstones of Christianity’s rational epistemology—little more than ridiculous impossibilities, absurd irrationalities, and back-dated realities inserted after the fact. Defending the Bible against the endless witticisms polemicists aimed at specific passages was one thing. Laughter that threatened faith’s epistemological foundations was another attack entirely, and one that apologists were relatively ill equipped to counter.

As *The Age of Reason* would prove, the restraints of religion could dissolve in an eruption of laughter, as soon as skeptical wit successfully delegitimized the Bible. Biblical belief was an immense reservoir of spiritual energy, but if “the hearer of the witticism laughs with the amount of psychic energy which was liberated,” then scoffers at scripture could “laugh away” this psychic energy in equal amounts. More accurately, Paine was confident that the reservoir was actually filled with biblical *disbelief*, a lake of latent incredulity fed by countless streams of skepticism and rivulets of doubt. The dam restraining these floodwaters—the traditional reverence afforded the Bible—already showed signs of structural weakness, with anxious apologists nervously sticking fingers into the dike.²²

²⁰ Ibid., 6–7, 153–54, 160–61, 194, 146.

²¹ Ibid., 173–74.

²² Ibid., 229–30.

Before leaving Freud, it is worth noting one more of his insights: the figurative age of the person being laughed at. Tempted to generalize, Freud connects tendentious humor with “the awakening of the infantile,” and wonders “whether the lowering to the level of the child is only a special case of comic degradation,” or if humor itself “fundamentally depends” on this reduction to the juvenile. In laughter, the scoffer says of his target, “He does it just as I did when I was a child.” This insinuation of childishness, reminiscent of superiority theory, is what Taylor saw in the condescending tone of Edward Gibbon, and what we will see in the rhetoric of Thomas Paine. “Only in childhood did we experience intensively painful affects over which to-day as grown-ups we would laugh,” Freud insists. In childhood one felt fear, respect, or reverence when restrained by the authority of scripture. But as adults, such emotions appear laughable and are released in a smile, a smirk, or a peal of liberating laughter. The biblical boogeyman becomes a figment of childish imagination, which enlightened adults brush aside with comic catharsis. Grown-ups then sleep in peace, knowing no monsters lurk beneath their beds.²³

AMERICAN UNCERTAINTIES

Though the psychologizing of humor still lay in the future, Thomas Paine’s America seemed in need of the laughter of relief. No wonder the steam engine of Robert Fulton—with whom Paine compared mechanical notes in Paris—was such a fitting symbol of the age. Pressures were mounting and finding vent almost everywhere, teapot tempests that had the nation’s cultural kettles whistling loudly. At times the nation’s vented emotion had to do with minimizing external uncertainties, and at other times its people released the pressure of inner anxieties. To quote Paul’s words to the Corinthians, “We were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears” (2 Corinthians 7:5). These words could have been an American motto, no less fitting than “In God we trust,” and maybe even the reason for the latter’s resonance. The period’s three most popular comic tropes—the “Yankee Peddler” with his shrewd resourcefulness, the “Backwoodsman” with his larger-than-life invincibility, and the

²³ Ibid., 364, 370, 380.

“Black Minstrel,” with his happy-go-lucky naiveté—bespoke an air of adaptability to, invulnerability before, or unconcern with the many challenges of the day, bringing relief to (and ensuring popularity among) anxious Americans, largely because they offered a “sense of triumph [that] seemed a necessary mood in the new country.”²⁴ Paine’s America desperately needed the laughter of relief.

Despite the air of self-confidence that suffused the Age of Reason, Americans suffered from a sometimes crippling sense of self-doubt. Like the proud high school graduate painfully adjusting to life on his own, it did not take long for citizens of the newly sovereign nation to begin second guessing their quest for independence once the shock of victory set in. In fact, anxious young adulthood is too mature a metaphor. In Amanda Porterfield’s characterization, the United States was a nation “conceived in doubt,” and it gestated during a period Gordon Wood described as “pregnant with...momentous uncertainties.” From the beginning, skepticism, cynicism, and ambivalence formed an unholy trinity that created an “uneasy atmosphere of mistrustful doubt,” one in which “anxiety was a natural reaction, [and] confidence a necessary act of faith.” Historian Susan Juster noted “the massive erosion of republican confidence and character evident in all spheres of American life,” until “the need to separate the true from the false” in every area “took on a desperate quality.” Not coincidentally, she also noted the sound of mocking laughter throughout the period, harnessed to “an overwrought and overdetermined discourse of authenticity and imposture” to assist in that work of discernment, just as Shaftesbury advised.²⁵

The Bible had warned against “remov[ing]...the ancient landmark[s]” (Proverbs 22:28), and sure enough, having pulled up stakes behind them Americans were uneasy planting signposts to mark the path ahead. Massachusetts Congressman Fisher Ames compared the nation to a comet rushing headlong “into infinite space,” in danger of “jostl[ing] some other world out of its orbit,” even as it “quench[ed] the light of our own.” Due to the stark self-reliance their independent self-confidence had (ready or not)

²⁴ Rourke, *American Humor*, 86.

²⁵ Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt*, 2; Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, xiii; Peter J. Parish, “Confidence and Anxiety in Victorian America,” in *The North and the Nation in the Era of the Civil War*, ed. Adam I. P. Smith and Susan-Mary Grant (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 5; Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 208, 23.

pushed them into, Americans were, in Tocqueville's estimation, "almost always plagued by doubt," unsure as to the best course of individual or collective action. Beyond westward expansion, very little about America's destiny was clearly "manifest," and even that brought challenges to social stability. "People on the move spatially are usually on the move intellectually, financially, or psychologically," wrote Harvey Cox, with all the stress and insecurity such movement tends to bring. Unsure of the limits or consequences of American expansion, innovation, and change, a sizeable population moved forward with arms outstretched, not in a confident reaching for future possibilities, but in Isaiah's words, "grop[ing] for the wall like the blind" (Isaiah 59:10).²⁶

Personal doubts and social misgivings were particularly destabilizing in the religious sphere, undermining faith in one's creeds and convictions, faith in the commitment of fellow "believers," and most unnerving, faith in the word, the will, and even the existence of God. With diversity and disestablishment unsettling the churches, and with immigration and revivalism upsetting traditional denominational majorities, where was the security of religion? Geographically, Catholicism in French Louisiana and Spanish Florida stoked Protestant fears regarding the future of their biblical empire. Closer to home, exposure to denominational disagreements over scriptural hermeneutics undercut confidence in the perspicuity of the Bible, exposing it to alternate views. Deism's promise of unalloyed rationalism proved appealing to many, and some abandoned (dis)organized religion altogether. This option had long existed, but as Christopher Grasso wrote of the period, "What was new was that rapid social change encouraged more people to question what had once passed for common sense, that alternate ways of thinking were disseminated broadly with the spread of cheap print, and that in urban areas in particular opportunities arose for self-proclaimed freethinkers to form communities and institutions of their own."²⁷ Thomas Paine would leverage all of this to skepticism's advantage.

²⁶ Ames quoted in Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 358; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 558; Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, new ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 64.

²⁷ Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith*, 333.

THE DISCOMFORT OF DISBELIEF

Despite the political, social, and economic uncertainties that unsettled Americans throughout the age of Paine, to believers, these were mere peripheral problems. The anxieties they produced could be managed as long as one kept them in proper (by which they meant an “eternal”) perspective. It is only when “the centre cannot hold,” as Yeats observed in his haunting post-war poem, that “things fall apart,” drowning innocence, exploding conviction, and loosing “anarchy...upon the world.”²⁸ For many Americans, that stabilizing center was Christian faith rooted in the words of the Holy Bible (however frequently or infrequently read). Thus of all of life’s uncertainties, doubting one’s faith was the most spiritually distressing, and therefore the most in need of some type of psychological relief.

Even the deist Rousseau (whose thought influenced Paine profoundly) wondered “how any man can be sincerely a sceptic,” when “to be in doubt about things which it is important for us to know, is a situation too perplexing for the human mind.” And if Rousseau held such reservations, imagine what doubt would do to an orthodox Christian. Though Paine never intended to undermine belief in Nature’s God, even lower-tier doubts could be equally troubling, and the Bible was not much lower than God for many. William Glendinning, whose first encounter with Methodism was spent “looking on, and laughing,” became a Methodist minister himself after converting to the faith, but even as a circuit rider in Maryland he wrestled with doubts as to “whether the Scriptures were the truths of God or not.” Though he eventually settled his mind on the issue, his doubts “darkened” his mind and robbed him of “all spiritual comforts,” leaving him “the most miserable and wretched of all beings.” He even worried—agonizingly—if his temporary misgivings had cost him eternal salvation.²⁹ Those who succumbed permanently to the kinds of doubts that Glendinning overcame typically endured similar torments (at least at first), “haunted by the fear of hell” even after they ceased believing in heaven. In

²⁸ W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming,” *The Dial* 69, no. 5 (November 1920): 466.

²⁹ See Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 28–29; and John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 203–07.

Eric Schlereth’s words, “Free enquirers...emphasized that they did not abandon Christianity quickly, easily, or thoughtlessly,” nor, for the most part, could they. As Leigh Eric Schmidt said of America’s unbelievers, “the religious estrangements that vexed them were not philosophically abstracted; they were visceral, relational, and densely particular,” and therefore extremely difficult to reconcile.³⁰

Individual fears paralleled larger social concerns. The Bible was simply too central a cultural building block to be removed haphazardly; it was the keystone of the Protestant arch, and Americans feared society’s collapse if the scriptures ever fell from their load-bearing position. The Bible was the quintessential symbol of American Protestantism—and thus of early America—so much so that any attack on its iconicity, wrote Martin Marty, was cause for the type of “*psychohistorical* dislocation” that results whenever there occurs a “break in the sense of connection men have long felt with vital and nourishing symbols of their cultural traditions.” Try as secularists might to dislodge it from the depths of the American psyche, “repudiation” is not the same as “exorcism.” The first cuts philosophical strings, but the second requires the severing of emotional ties, and psychologically these are the hardest ones to break.³¹ God had bound his word to his people, and what “God hath joined together,” they knew by memory, “let not man put asunder” (Matthew 19:6).

For many former believers, emotional bonds still held even when spirituality gave way to mere aesthetics. As an Anglican hymnist turned Catholic priest lamented, the cadences of the Protestant King James Version were echoes that continued to reverberate long after faith loss (or in his case faith transition). “The uncommon beauty and marvellous English” of the text, he said, “lives on in the ear like a music that can never be forgotten, like the sound of church bells which the convert hardly knows how he can forgo....The memory of the dead passes into it. The potent traditions of childhood are stereotyped

³⁰ Dominic Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt: The Religious Roots of Unbelief from Luther to Marx* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 210; Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels*, 182; Schmidt, *Village Atheists*, 18.

³¹ Martin Marty, “America’s Iconic Book,” in *Humanizing America’s Iconic Book*, ed. Gene M. Tucker and Douglas A. Knight (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 12; Robert Jay Lifton, *Boundaries: Psychological Man in Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1970), 43; Eugene Goodheart, *Culture and the Radical Conscience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 9–10; Bergler, *Laughter and the Sense of Humor*, 128.

in its verses. The power of all the griefs and trials of a man is hidden beneath its words.” This may account for Paine’s continued use of biblical phrases, long after he abandoned belief in its message. As historian David Hempton has observed, “Poetry, cadence, and music left lingering echoes of old emotions in the hearts of disenchanted evangelicals even as their heads moved in different directions.”³²

Even those who remained skeptics often acknowledged the difficulty of their decision. “Doubting the foundational pieties of one’s own culture was not easy,” said one. While “it is easy and agreeable to trust and believe; to doubt requires an unpleasant effort.” In early America it was hiking uphill, swimming upstream. Pascal’s wager suggested that doubters at least hedge their bets and err on the side of acceptance, and no doubt many would-be freethinkers clung to what Susan Jacoby called “insurance policy religiosity.”³³ Secularists would have preferred active disbelief or passive unbelief, in that order, but even apathy and uncertainty would suit their needs in the meantime. The key was to shift the nation’s spiritual center of gravity until the Bible lost its grip on public opinion, and loosening its hold on private conscience was a preliminary step. Skeptics had to help believers get over their sense of the sacred, but this was no easy accomplishment.

Doubt was a spiritual steam engine that threatened to burst the boiler, causing psychological eruptions as dangerous as any paddleboat explosion captured in one of Mark Twain’s riverboat tales. Scriptural misgivings simmered beneath the surface, fed by the fires of enlightenment rationality and secular progress burning away at a biblical culture that provided almost limitless fuel. Amid the rising temperatures, questions of logic or moral concern formed most quickly, bubbling up to the surface until they reached the boiling point. Trapped by Protestant popular opinion that damned all biblical disbelief, emotional pressures increased until they drove the pistons of social engagement in later activists like Robert Dale Owen and Frances Wright, exploded into open apostasy in former ministers like Elihu

³² Gordon Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version, 1611–2011* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 174; David Hempton, *Evangelical Disenchantment: Nine Portraits of Faith and Doubt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 194.

³³ Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith*, 500; Susan Jacoby, *Strange Gods: A Secular History of Conversion* (New York: Pantheon, 2016), 388.

Palmer and Abner Kneeland, or hissed through holes opened by the humor of Ethan Allen and Thomas Paine. These pressures sought any means of escape, and one well-traveled route was through the laughter of relief. As a Virginia Presbyterian sensed in the laughter of skeptics, “Even those who have [the Bible] in derision, have it so, because it makes them uneasy.” They “seek relief in making as light of it as possible, as the afflicted sometimes seek relief in intoxication.”³⁴

Drunk with doubt but never free of the pressures of social stigma, laughter could also relieve some of the pressure inherent in “outing” oneself, since humor could soften the news of departure once the courage was found to announce it. Studies show that “people can generally accept serious news more readily and easily when it is presented to them in a humorous manner,” meaning that joking about the Bible’s perceived defects could make deconversion seem less like coming out of one’s faith and more like being let in on a joke. As Donald Hayworth remarked, laughter is “a vocal sign to other members of the group that they may relax in safety,” and whether that group is the one being abandoned or the one being joined, the lubricant of laughter would ease the emotional stress.³⁵

Edmund Bergler, the psychoanalyst who helped inform our earlier discussion of relief theory, argued that because “laughter is a *necessary and healthy INTERNAL debunking process*,” it is therefore a “*fear-reducing process*” aimed at “*internal powers*.” Though superiority theory would loudly disagree with Bergler’s exclusion of the external, his focus does allow us to bracket for a moment ridicule’s effect on others in order to analyze laughter’s consolation of oneself. Against the “constant avalanche” of an unsettled conscience, humor provides “defensive weapons” whereby it fosters the illusion that “the inner torturer is *too weak to be dangerous*... *To counteract his own fear, the frightened child seeks contradictions, absurdities, ‘stupidity’*” in the object of jest, and when he has found them, he is reassured “*that there is no reason to be either frightened or overawed*.”³⁶

³⁴ Muir, *An Examination of the Principles Contained in the Age of Reason*, 13.

³⁵ Sanders, *Sudden Glory*, 115; Hayworth quoted in Bergler, *Laughter and the Sense of Humor*, 26.

³⁶ Bergler, *Laughter and the Sense of Humor*, viii, x–xii, 75.

This last word, *overawed*, draws us back to the sense of the sacred Paine hoped to uproot. The Bible's iconicity ensured that it would be an object of reverence, so Paine poked holes in its pretensions to deflate that misplaced awe. He reassured anxious Americans that their fear of offending God was an unfounded worry, a false alarm only serving vested (or vestmented) interests. Considering the extreme psychological distress that religious doubt engendered, the relief theory of laughter helps account for some of the resonance of Paine's anti-biblical ridicule. His humor dissipated the anxiety of disbelief even as it punctured the source of those pressures, providing welcome anesthetic even as it cut into conscience. Thus reassured, readers could share in his scorn and join in his laughter. Their beloved Bible may have died, but as any funeral goer can attest, nothing is so welcome in a eulogy as a good laugh.³⁷

THE COMIC FRAME

If Ecclesiastes is correct in assigning “a time to weep, and a time to laugh” (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4), then it behooves the humorist to tell her audience what time it is—to provide some signal that she is shifting to the comic mood and that they should follow. Genre, along with the textual clues that identify it, functions much like a soundtrack, subtly guiding the emotions and expectations of its listeners. In a similar way, in the shift from the serious to the comic, verbal or visual cues—from a joke and a laugh to a wink and a grin—are helpful signposts along communication's path, helping the audience avoid wrong turns or cognitive crashes. In the case of satire and irony, sometimes the clues are so subtle that the audience can misinterpret the rhetor's intentions entirely, like confused readers taking literally Swift's “Modest Proposal” or Defoe's “Shortest-Way with the Dissenters.” Typically, however, some sign is given that Goddess Folly is queen for the day. It is Alice falling down the rabbit hole or passing through the looking glass, a transition into a Wonderland where life does not “go on in the common way.”³⁸

³⁷ Paul Lewis shares that “a study of audience responses to funeral eulogies found that what is most appreciated is not kindness or even candor but humor.” *Comic Effects*, 69.

³⁸ Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*, ed. Martin Gardner (New York: New American Library, 1960), 33.

The looking glass is an especially apt analogy for humor since mirrors are often framed, separating reflection from ordinary wall space. The frame encloses an altered reality, where Cheshire Cats can say, “We’re all mad here” (the contagious socialization of humor); where Mock Turtles learn the “different branches of Arithmetic—Ambition, Distraction, Uglification and Derision” (tactical calculations in the rhetoric of ridicule); and where Snarks can be spotted by their “slowness in taking a jest” (humor’s homogenizing attitudinal pressure). Or as Lewis Carroll suggested more seriously in his diary, frames help us “distinguish which is the waking and which the sleeping life.”³⁹ By “sleeping” Carroll meant “dreaming,” that unconscious, uninhibited state that Freud linked to humor. And if dreaming is bound within our slumber, humor is bordered by the confines of the looking glass. The topsyturvydom of laughter remains within—and draws us into—the “comic frame.”

Kenneth Burke, the rhetorical scholar who popularized the concept of the “comic frame,” called it “the attitude of attitudes” and defined it as “the methodic view of human antics as a comedy, albeit as a comedy ever on the verge of the most disastrous tragedy.” With this caveat, Burke recognizes the fragility of human life, but precisely because this *is* life, it must be lived, terrors and tragedies notwithstanding. It is here that the comic frame lends its welcome relief, making life livable by bracketing these dangers as if to say to them: “This is not how things really are,” or “This is not how things will always be.” Comedy, after all, is pleasurable, despite the tensions and incongruities that help create it. Humor reassures us that danger is illusory, anxieties will fade, and someday we’ll have a happy ending. Burke compared the attitude the comic frame engenders to that of “a contented village” that “evolved in culture at the edge of a sleeping volcano that is already, in its ‘subconscious’ depths, preparing to break forth and scatter destruction.” With this analogy Burke gives credence to our inner anxieties, but evokes the liberating laughter of relief. It is mirth, not the mountain, that eventually erupts.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid., 89–90, 129, 160.

⁴⁰ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 39. The 1955 introduction added to the original 1937 text is not paginated in this edition.

Max Eastman implied the comic frame in his first law of humor: that “things can be funny only when we are in fun.” Earnestness can kill a joke as fast as explaining it, for it draws the hearer outside the frame. However, because of humor’s pleasurable contagion, “fun” often cuts its own way, initiating all but the actively oppositional on contact. Then, once we submit to laughter’s invitation and join in the comic frame’s fun, Eastman’s second law becomes operative: “when we are in fun, a peculiar shift of values takes place. Pleasant things are still pleasant, but disagreeable things, so long as they are not disagreeable enough to ‘spoil the fun,’ tend to acquire a pleasant emotional flavor and provoke a laugh.” John Morreall sees this framing at work in sexist and racist humor, and the same truths apply to anti-religious ridicule. “Putting a ‘play frame’ around stereotypes aestheticizes them, removing them, at least temporarily, from moral scrutiny.” And as it aestheticizes, it also anesthetizes, deadening the discomfort one might normally feel were such opinions voiced within a normal non-play frame (Bergson calls it “a momentary anesthesia of the heart”). Humor thus tricks audience members into letting ideas “in under their moral radar” that “might quickly draw criticism” if it were presented in a “straightforward assertion.” In this way, Morreall continues, “humor disengages us *practically*...[and] *cognitively* from the object of amusement,” allowing “ideas to be slipped into people’s heads without being evaluated.”⁴¹

This aligns with Burke’s argument, that humor is at its most powerful in “the attitudinizing of the [comic] frame,” that is, in the signals the frame gives us as to the attitudes (and subsequent actions) that are deemed appropriate to the situation. Comedy, he suggests, invokes an attitude of immunity from the stupidities of the ignorant, one of pity toward humanity’s mistakenness, or at least one of cheerful resignation before the follies and misfortunes of fate. It tells us that dangers might be lived with, and that ultimately life goes merrily on. This it does by reducing the cosmic (the realm of tragedy) to the cultural (the realm of comedy), and by promoting acceptance of one’s situation, not through “*magnification*” of

⁴¹ Max Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), 3; Bergson, *Laughter*, 5; Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 105–07.

oneself (the role of “the heroic”) but by “*dwarfing the situation*” (the role of “the comic”). It is by this “trick of ‘conversion downwards’” that humor “provides us relief in laughter.”⁴²

The comic frame signals—ideally it elicits—a change in emotion and perception, capturing all that it encloses in a sense of triviality, surrender, or mirth. Freud spoke of certain indicators being used whenever one speaks of “the exalted,” and this would be its opposite.⁴³ Consider the different sights, smells, and sounds that usually accompany religious services, all meant to mark off sacred space and time. Even the robes (and until recently, the wigs) that judges wear in courts of law set them apart from those in the courtroom that are literally lower than (and figuratively beneath the dignity of) the bench. The comic frame either strips such ceremonial clothing, or more proactively, dresses the subject in cap and bells instead. In the Bible’s case, mockery strips it of its dignified dress. It is the youth mocking Elisha’s baldness or Delilah cutting Samson’s hair. It is Elijah joking that Baal was in the bathroom.

As these examples suggest, the comic frame includes a darker dimension. Burke speaks of the “mildly charitable ways of the comic discount,” which facilitates acceptance, but he also recognizes in satire, burlesque, and caricature the “polemic, negativistic genius” that facilitates rejection by “stressing the *no* more strongly than the *yes*.” In these he sees a “debunking” frame that pursues “*distintegrative* purposes” and specializes in “transcendence downwards.” Through a dual process of “alienation” and “repossession,” humor distances us from previously held notions, after which we can retake the earlier opinion with a looser, more comfortable grip.⁴⁴

Among the tactics that reign in this shadowy side of the comic frame, Burke lists several that Paine would employ at the Bible’s expense: reducing the reasonable to the absurd, pushing logical insights to illogical conclusions, removing context or necessary complexity, converting manners into mannerisms, and suppressing consideration of “mitigating circumstances” that might cast its victim in a

⁴² Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 40–43, 58.

⁴³ Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, 323–24.

⁴⁴ Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 92–93, 22, 43–44, 183n, 202.

more positive light. Like a funhouse mirror, humor distorts the familiar for comic effect, stretching and scrunching, skewing and warping. It relativizes the absolute and absolutizes the relative; it literalizes the figurative and figuralizes the literal; it creates unintended syntheses and forces unnatural divides, depending on which would deform things most comically. Even among apologists, the comic frame tends to replace the “messianic” with what Burke called the “Pollyannic,” reducing sobering doctrines of judgment and redemption to saccharine talk of positivity and good humor. Paine’s comic attempts to demystify the Bible prove the salience of Burke’s point about the comic frame: “It might mitigate somewhat the difficulties in engineering a shift to new symbols of authority.”⁴⁵

Taken to the extreme, some people spend so much time within the comic frame, or some objects are so habitually housed there, that there seems to be a perceptual shift, a shift in attitude in the first instance or in ontology in the second. Perception becomes reality and the caricature is more convincing than the portrait. In his masterpiece of religious reverse psychology, C. S. Lewis had the demon Screwtape observe, “Among flippant people the Joke is always assumed to have been made. No one actually makes it; but every serious subject is discussed in a manner which implies that they have already found a ridiculous side to it.” In the devil’s fight against God, Screwtape continues, “the habit of Flippancy builds up around a man the finest armor plating against the Enemy that I know.”⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

Having seen in this chapter the uncertainties—social, spiritual, and psychological—that plagued Paine’s contemporaries, and having noted the comforting reassurances within reach through the comic frame, the laughter of relief offers additional explanation for the resonance of Paine’s rhetoric of ridicule. Touching on almost all we have argued in this chapter—humor’s bravado, contagion, freedom, obfuscation, and iconoclasm—Freud provides a summary that is worth repeating in its entirety:

⁴⁵ Ibid., 54–57, 169n, 173, 166, 106.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Terry Lindvall, *God Mocks*, 249.

In the case of the aggressive tendency, wit by the same means changes the original indifferent hearers into active haters and scorers, and in this way confronts the enemy with a host of opponents where formerly there was but one. In the first case it overcomes the inhibitions of shame and decorum by the pleasure premium which it offers. In the second case it overthrows the critical judgment which would otherwise have examined the dispute in question. In the third and fourth cases where wit is in the service of the cynical and sceptical tendency, it shatters the respect for institutions and truths in which the hearer had believed, first by strengthening the argument, and secondly by resorting to a new method of attack. Where the argument seeks to draw the hearer's reason to its side, wit strives to push aside this reason. There is no doubt that wit has chosen the way, which is psychologically more efficacious.

In a statement that might as well have indicted religion directly, Freud further declared, "Owing to the repression brought about by civilization [read: "biblical religion"] many primary pleasures are now disapproved by the censor [read: "the church"] and lost. But the human psyche finds renunciation very difficult; hence we discover that tendency-wit furnishes us with a means to make the renunciation retrogressive and thus to regain what has been lost."⁴⁷ Seen in this light, the mocking of biblical mores not only frees the laugher's future, it seems to erase retroactively the restraints of the past. We excuse earlier compliance as childish conformity borne of unfounded fear, and stride boldly and unapologetically into a future of uninhibited freedom. With apologies to Milton, a "paradise lost" by ignoring divine restrictions thus becomes a "paradise regained," ironically, through the further renunciation of scriptural restraint. We laugh at the thought of a flaming sword, and the cherubim, embarrassed, abandon their post guarding the Tree of Life. Our knowledge of good and evil turns into laughter over life's comic incongruities, and we find "sudden glory" that newly opened eyes have made us even as the gods. We mock the rulebook of Eden and become, unencumbered, the lords of a Garden of Glee. We emerge, unashamed by earlier exposures and unafraid of cautioned consequences. After all, if serpents are made to talk then mortals are permitted to laugh. If God can play hide-and-seek among the fig trees, surely heaven can take a joke.

⁴⁷ Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, 204, 147.

This process is perfectly encapsulated by the experience of one of Paine’s secularist heirs. A generation after *The Age of Reason* created turmoil on both sides of the Atlantic, another activist followed Paine’s route from Britain to the United States, equally intent on improving the conditions of his fellow man. Like Paine, Robert Dale Owen envisioned a less authoritarian utopia, spread his vision with the zeal of a tireless evangelist, and trusted wholeheartedly in the power of print, ultimately editing a Freethought periodical in New York City with the much disparaged skeptic Fanny Wright. Like Paine, Owen was vocal and unapologetic about his own loss of faith in the Bible, and though lacking in Paine’s sense of humor, sought to pave the path for later skeptics to follow.

The story of his deconversion, entitled “Prossimo’s Experience” and disseminated as a “popular tract” that was repeatedly reprinted in New York and London, ends with a telling statement, one meant to reassure and encourage any erstwhile believers who “still stand on the bank of the Rubicon.” Having crossed that boundary himself when he abandoned the faith of his childhood, he describes what he found on the other side: “a land of freedom and of virtue, whence terror is banished, and where tranquility reigns. He that is a bold swimmer, let him fearlessly attempt the passage. He will never regret the efforts it may cost him. He will become a better, a wiser, and—my experience for it—a happier man.” He then signed his summons with the pseudonym he had chosen for the piece: less a name and more a guidepost to follow and an invitation to accept. His was the first testimonial and he was ready to pass the mic to the multitudes he hoped would follow: “Prossimo”; that is, “Next!”⁴⁸

Owen’s last three superlatives are worth pondering. “Better” bespoke the moral, “wiser” the rational, and “happier” the emotional, or to superimpose them on this study’s roadmap, they reflected the sociological, philosophical, and psychological concerns that bound Paine’s Christian contemporaries to biblical belief. Though Owen seldom indulged in humor himself, all these adjectives suggest superiority, the second suggests incongruity (he uses the word twice in referring to the Bible), and the

⁴⁸ Robert Dale Owen, “Prossimo’s Experience,” *Popular Tracts*, no. 4 (New York: The Free Enquirer, 1830), 1–12. The tract, in serial form, first appeared in the first volume of *The Free Enquirer*, in issues between November 1828 and January 1829.

third suggests emotional relief, all examples of the type of heavy lifting the rhetoric of ridicule was meant to accomplish. Paine's anti-biblical ridicule was intended to make doubters *look* superior to believers in the eyes of their neighbors ("better"), make them *think* that the Bible harbored inconsistencies others failed to notice ("wiser"), and make them *feel* that their fears of guilt or loss were unfounded ("happier"). By laughing at believers, laughing at the Bible, and laughing to themselves, Paine promised his imagined audience a sense of superiority, a sense of sagacity, and a sense of relief.

Though the dividing lines are far from tidy, assigning superiority theory primarily to sociology, incongruity theory primarily to philosophy, and relief theory primarily to psychology has allowed us to tease out some of the individual notes in humor's comic chords. But pushing the musical metaphor further, if superiority and incongruity form a perfect fifth, then a middle note can determine the emotion of the chord in question. The difference between a major third and a minor third is only a single semitone (a neighboring key on the piano), but with that small shift, the feeling the chord conveys moves between joy and sorrow. Trading harmonies for humor, laughter according to relief theory sounds that middle note, and it plays most resonantly in a psychological key, bumping the somber tones of the minor third into the joyful sound of a major triad. In the case of antibiblical humor, the laughter of relief helped resolve the dissonance of doubt by making disbelief more psychologically acceptable, just as it turned what felt like the minor chord of religious restraint into the major chord of emotional freedom. Just as the laughter of superiority helped laughers feel better than others, the laughter of relief helped laughers feel better about themselves. And just as the laughter of incongruity helped spot contradictions in one's expectations, the laughter of relief helped one deal with the disappointing results.

In the case of irreligion, dealing with the differences between the real and the ideal is especially important, since religion is usually meant to make sense of such things. Reinhold Niebuhr (and later, Peter Berger) famously linked humor and faith, since "both deal with the incongruities of our existence," humor with the "immediate incongruities of life and faith with the ultimate ones." Though Niebuhr's word choice makes this sound like incongruity theory (he mentions the theory himself), switch the word

“incongruities” for terms like “disharmonies,” “disappointments,” and “defeats” and we see relief theory poking its comforting head around the corner: lighthearted humor softening life’s passing pains, and firm-rooted faith steeling us against more far-reaching tragedies. Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl saw both functioning in the concentration camps, and owing to its “aloofness,” “self-detachment,” and “ability to rise above any situation” praised humor as one of “the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation.” Still, he admitted, in such circumstances there is “only the faint trace” of humor, and even then for only a few moments at a time.⁴⁹ Perhaps this is why Niebuhr welcomed laughter into “the outer courts of religion” and even granted it access to “the sanctuary,” but forbade its entrance into “the holy of holies.” In Niebuhr’s and Frankl’s thinking, certain areas of life are reserved for religion, too elemental for humor’s aloofness and too sacred for its diverting but irreverent mirth.

But it was precisely there—in the holy of holies—that Thomas Paine injected laughter. At times his humor was an anesthetic to deaden existential anxiety, laughing gas to replace the odor of incense. At other times his ridicule was a poison, meant to mortify those serving by the veil. But in either case, his anti-biblical ridicule was intended to evict the Temple’s earlier occupant—the biblical, as opposed to the deistical, God. Where Niebuhr saw humor as faith’s “prelude,” Paine transposed it into a postlude for biblical belief. Niebuhr held that “there is judgment...in our laughter” and called derision “an instrument of condemnation,” and this is precisely what Paine intended by his humor. If nothing else, Niebuhr held, even when laughter proves helpless to “destroy a great seat of power and authority,” it can still “preserv[e] the self-respect of the slave against the master,” a sentiment Paine would have appreciated, especially while languishing in a jail cell as *The Age of Reason* began to circulate outside. To those imprisoned by spiritual tyranny, Paine opened the Bible and, to borrow the words of a later *Yankee Doodle*, said defiantly to American Christendom: “The feast is spread—laugh and be happy! We will laugh first at the follies and absurdities and willful blindness and obstinate self-torturing of

⁴⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Humour and Faith,” in *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*, ed. M. Conrad Hyers (New York: Seabury Press, 1969): 134–49; Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*; Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 43, 124–25.

ourselves and all mankind: then, when these are extirpated from the world we will laugh, louder and heartier than before, that they are no more. We will laugh alike at the dying agonies of the old monsters and the ludicrous antics of the new-born dwarfs, that flee tattered and naked across the field of life.”⁵⁰

As we now turn from the theoretical to the rhetorical, we will see in the writings of Thomas Paine a convergence of the three umbrella theories of humor we have been investigating: superiority theory sees him mocking the childishness of biblical faith, incongruity theory has him laughing at the Bible’s irrationality, and relief theory helps him make concern over the Bible’s status seem a ridiculous and infantile fear. Moreover, for Paine himself the laughter of relief may have helped alleviate the painful irony that in the democratic society he helped create, the nation remained beholden to a Bible-believing, clergy-conditioned, unenlightened herd. Even as he ridiculed the Bible in hopes of changing the mind of the masses, his comic relief created for fellow freethinkers a “buffer” against the democratic disappointments their relative numbers ensured, and gave them hope that they would win the war eventually. Stubb, the *Pequod*’s unflappable second mate, may be American literature’s ideal type for this unflinching comedic resignation—one part easy-going optimism and another part epicurean indifference, held together by the uncanny laughter of relief. Facing imperturbably the caprices of fate, he shrugs, “I know not all that may be coming, but be it what it will, I’ll go to it laughing.” Why? “Because a laugh’s the wisest, easiest answer to all that’s queer.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ *Yankee Doodle* (New York), vol. 1 (1846): 2.

⁵¹ Melville, *Moby Dick*, 149. On Stubb, see Alan Dagovitz, “*Moby-Dick*’s Hidden Philosopher: A Second Look at Stubb,” *Philosophy and Literature* 32, no. 2 (October 2008): 330–46.

CHAPTER 5

ANTECEDENTS TO THE AGE OF PAINE

John Adams was at his begrudging best in 1805 when he credited “Tom” Paine’s “Career of Mischief” for having “had more influence on [the world’s] inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years” than anyone else’s. Paine (and others) had labelled the period the “Age of Reason” in honor of its Enlightenment ethos, and French rationalists had deified it when they consecrated to Reason its own Temple, Cult, Festival, and Goddess in 1793, crowning a courtesan in a mock ceremony in the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Repulsed by this irreverent excess, Adams preferred any other title than Reason for the era, murmuring that “the real intellectual faculty has nothing to do with the Age the Strumpet or Tom,” all three condemned with the same dismissive wave of the hand. In Adams’s view, something else was at work that, like the French courtesan, wore nobler trappings as an outward disguise.

Peeking beneath the costume Adams identified the period’s less noble but no less typical traits, and offered as alternative titles “the Age of Folly, Vice, Frenzy, Fury, Brutality, Daemons” and even “the Age of The burning Brand from the bottomless Pitt.” He conceded the aptness of a friend’s suggestion—“the Age of Frivolity”—but ultimately settled on what he considered the most descriptive, most inclusive, and therefore most appropriate label: “the Age of Paine.” Here was a title that subsumed all others. In Paine’s personality as well as his prose, fury was clothed in frivolity, vice combined with frenzy, and the goddess Folly masqueraded as the goddess Reason. “There can be no Severer satyr in the Age” than Tom Paine, Adams lamented, that “mongrel” mix “between Pigg and Puppy.” Strange hybrid indeed, but an evocative image of a playful wallower in the mud. Even the word “satyr” is revealing, since its contemporary meaning included not only the monstrous duality of man and beast, but a “remarkable” talent for “keen raillery,” one of Paine’s well-developed gifts. To Christians especially, even to less-than-orthodox believers like Adams himself, Paine was among the most detestable burning

brands from the bottomless pit, and his blasphemous *Age of Reason*, as well as its author, were deserving of both earthly and infernal flames.¹

But as is typical with embodiments of an age, the titular figure is more often the popularizer than the precursor of the period's character, more crescendo than opening chord in the music defining the day. So it was with Thomas Paine. By the time the thirty-eight-year-old sailed from his native England to her restive North American colonies, the writings of his irreligious European counterparts had long since found their way to American shores. Voltaire shared shelf space with Bolingbroke, Hume, and Bayle in Thomas Jefferson's library; Toland, Collins, and Tindal were read by members of the intelligentsia alongside Diderot and Volney; and Benjamin Franklin, who as a boy had sharpened his wit and modelled his quill on the puckish London *Spectator*, had already penned a few biblical parodies of his own. By Henry May's calculations, during America's revolutionary period "Hume's *Dialogues*, Gibbon's *Decline*, Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*, and Helvetius's *Treatise on Man* were more widely circulated than at any earlier or later time," not exactly a library of Christian classics. Even Lucretius, the ancient Roman skeptic and satirist, had crossed the Atlantic on a wave of European popularity, with at least five copies of *De Rerum Natura* finding their way to Monticello. "The present ambition of Americans," wrote Noah Webster a short decade after Paine's arrival, is "to introduce as fast as possible, the fashionable amusements of the European courts"—courts that abounded in both skeptical leanings and witty repartee.²

¹ Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. "Satyr"; available online at <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Satyr>; John Adams to Benjamin Waterhouse, 29 October 1805; available online at <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5107>.

² Lists of Jefferson's library holdings are available online at <http://tjlibraries.monticello.org/about/lists.html>. On the importation of European skepticism into colonial America, see Kerry Walters's introduction to *Elihu Palmer's Principles of Nature: Text and Commentary* (Wolfeboro, NH: Longwood Academic, 1990), 20–27. On Franklin's biblicism, see Prudence Steiner, "Benjamin Franklin's Biblical Hoaxes," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 131, no. 2 (June 1987): 183–96; Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 226; on Lucretius' work as satire, see T. H. M. Gellar-Goad, *Laughing Atoms, Laughing Matter: Lucretius' De Rerum Natura and Satire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020); on Lucretius' influence in early America, see Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012); Noah Webster, "Remarks on the Manners, Government, and Debt of the United States," in *A Collection of Essays and Fugitiv Writings. On Moral, Historical, Political and Literary Subjects* (Boston: I. Thomas and E. T. Andrews, 1790), 85.

Consequently, by the second half of the eighteenth century, the English Deists and French *philosophes*—skeptical wits almost without exception—were well known in American circles ranging from the New England literati to the Southern planter aristocrats. But those circles were too elevated to contaminate the masses, much to the relief of the unbelieving elite who saw religion’s utilitarian value and therefore treated it with benign condescension instead of open contempt. Paine changed all that, bringing what Carl Becker famously called “the heavenly city of the eighteenth-century philosophers” down to the earthly villages of the American rank and file. No single writer deserves more credit or blame for *popularizing* doubt in the nascent United States. As was said of another self-proclaimed “disturber and annoyer” of religious traditionalism, Paine’s “name would be had for good and evil” among all who encountered his writings, and so it has been.³ “The name is enough,” wrote Unitarian minister (and Paine sympathizer) William Bentley. “He never appears but we love & hate him.”⁴

Familiar with the writings of Voltaire, whom he dubbed “the flatterer and the satirist of despotism,” Paine recognized that the Frenchman’s “forte lay in exposing and ridiculing the superstitions which priest-craft, united with state-craft, had interwoven with governments,” and did his best to put similar skills to identical ends. Though he doubted that Voltaire’s motives were as philanthropic as his own, Paine applauded the man’s “strong capacity of seeing folly in its true shape, and his irresistible propensity to expose it,” crediting his “wit” for moving his readers in more enlightened directions.⁵ As we shall see, in lauding Voltaire, Paine was commending himself, for both iconoclasts were cut from the same comic cloth. As a rhetorician and revolutionary, Paine would become the Voltaire of the English-speaking masses.

³ These words refer to Joseph Smith, founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. See Joseph Smith—History, 1:20, 33, in *The Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013).

⁴ William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, volume 3, January, 1803–December, 1810* (Salem, MA: The Essex Institute, 1911), 37; entry is for August 23, 1803, as reports were circulating that Paine intended to visit Bentley’s New England.

⁵ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke’s Attack on the French Revolution* (London: J. Jordan, 1791); in *Writings*, 2:334.

But again, while Paine may have been the foremost, he was not the first to take aim at the Bible on American soil. Certain Americans began declaring their unbelief alongside their independence—two sides of a newly minted coin—making villages throughout the colonies home, if not yet to an outspoken “Village Atheist,” at least to a handful of unregenerate doubters, backsliding worldlings, and skeptical scoffers who made a sport of holy writ. Colonial militiamen imbibed a measure of skepticism from their European allies in the wars of the eighteenth century (the British during the French and Indian War and the French during the Revolution), making ministers wonder if America’s military allies were doing more spiritual harm than political good. Only later would people wring their hands over the influence of “a *Thomas Paine*” and his writings “among the gay, the heedless, and the less informed parts of our armies,” by then aware that his enlistment in “the American camp of Deism” had “strengthened the timid and wavering minds of hundreds, who wished to find some pretence to lay aside that book, which always stood in the way of their lusts.”⁶

During the earlier conflict Reverend Ezra Stiles worried that colonial troops would “come home minute philosophers initiated in the polite Mysteries & vitiated morals of Deism,” having laughed alongside soldiers who “ridicule the notion of moral accountableness, Rewards & Punishments in another life,” or even “if in fact the Soul survives the Body” at all. Of the latter war, wrote a later historian, it was the “foreign style” and “insinuating polish” of the French troops that infected impressionable Americans, who fell prey to “skillful proselytizers” used to “answering arguments with a sneering smile or effective shrug.” Even Ashbel Green, future minister and president of Princeton, “became skeptical in regard to the Holy Scriptures” during the Revolution, fighting under officers in the continental army who “did not hesitate to avow infidel sentiments.” Though none “ever formally reasoned against Christianity,” he recalled, formal reasoning was unnecessary since “their known opinions and loose practices” became obvious in more natural ways. As each of these instances

⁶ Ebenezer Bradford, *Mr. Thomas Paine’s Trial; being an examination of his Age of Reason, to which is added, two addresses, the First to the Deists, and the Second to the Youths of America* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas and Ebenezer T. Andrews, 1795), 62.

suggests, it was not the logical perusal of Enlightenment philosophy that led to disbelief. Such rational investigation or contemplative study was unlikely in the camps of mustering forces. Rather it was the casual conversations near the tents or around the campfires—with their sneers and shrugs and easygoing ridicule—that threatened to “spread Deism or at least Skepticism thro’ these Colonies.”⁷

Far more than direct exposure to Europe’s philosophical rationalism, it was through “the baneful contagion” of these more indirect, more emotional appeals that “the infidel philosophy of the old world gained a foothold in the new,” at least at society’s lower levels. A returning militiaman would introduce “his newly acquired habits of thinking and of life among the humble people of his town or wayside hamlet” and slowly “the religious tone” of the town would change. Even generations later the Episcopal Bishop of Virginia was still complaining of the “most baneful...influence” that “infidel France” had exercised on “our citizens generally” during the “union of our arms,” just as a nineteenth-century Connecticut historian continued to lament that after the Revolution “the great majority of those in active life, were sceptics and scoffers,” with “free-thinking and free-drinking...alike in vogue.”⁸

On the other hand (and the clergy’s alarmist jeremiads notwithstanding), as companies disbanded, skepticism no longer benefitted from a sense of critical mass. Soldiers returned home to resume their previous lives among the more believing. Those not quickly cured through reintegration into their communities and congregations could be socially quarantined as localized examples—isolated bad apples rather than signs of a spreading rot. It would take the press to both evince and evoke a more widespread effusion of anti-biblical sentiment, awakening latent suspicions and spurring seeds of doubt into more visible growth. Unfortunately for American orthodoxy, colonial printers were arranging type

⁷ Ezra Stiles, letter from Newport, Rhode Island, 24 September 1759; quoted in I. Woodbridge Riley, “The Rise of Deism in Yale College,” *The American Journal of Theology* 9, no. 3 (July, 1905): 480; Ashbel Green, *The Life of Ashbel Green* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1849), 124; Richard Joseph Purcell, *Connecticut in Transition, 1775–1818* (Washington, D.C.: The American Historical Association, 1918), 9.

⁸ Purcell, *Connecticut in Transition*, 7–8; William Meade, *Old Churches, Ministers and Families of Virginia*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1872), 1:175; (originally published in 1857); Ellen D. Larned, *History of Windham County, Connecticut* (Worcester, MA: Published by the author, 1874), 221; see also G. Adolf Koch, *Religion of the American Enlightenment* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968), 16–26.

into skeptical sentences even before *The Age of Reason* burst onto the scene. And one of them came from a homegrown hero even better known for freethinking and freedinking than Thomas Paine. The first American wave to crash against the rock of Christian revelation came not from the cosmopolitan streets of Philadelphia but from the green mountains of Vermont.

THE “HORNED DEVIL OF VERMONT”

A decade before Paine declared that the Age belonged to Reason, fellow Revolutionary Ethan Allen dubbed Reason “the Only Oracle of Man,” publishing a book by that name in 1784. Though never as popular as Paine’s later work, Allen’s volume anticipated Paine’s in both content and style, such that contemporaries familiar with both “accused Paine of being ungracious in failing to acknowledge the debt” to Allen. As a precursor to Paine’s *Age of Reason*, it is worth subjecting it to the same type of rhetorical criticism that Paine’s writings will later undergo, just as it is worth noticing that it raised the same kinds of objections. Yale’s Timothy Dwight identified it as “the first formal publication, in the United States, openly directed against the Christian religion,” and helped lead the establishment’s counteroffensive against it, dismissing it as having “the reptility of the angle worm,” and “the deformity, the venom, and the ill nature of the toad.”⁹

No doubt hoping for a more positive review, Allen asked fellow Vermonter Daniel Farrand what he thought of the book, to which this preacher, politician, and judge responded laconically, “The paper of the book was rather poor in quality—otherwise he thought it was a pity that so much of it should have been spoiled.” Poor paper or not, it made no difference to the flames that destroyed most of the first edition, whether by the lightning that struck the print shop or by the fire that the printer supposedly lit after converting to Methodism, either way judged by the faithful to be a retributive act of God. Still, earthly detractors and divine vengeance notwithstanding, Allen found a ready readership for the volumes

⁹ Matthew Stewart, *Nature’s God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 31–32; Timothy Dwight, “On the doctrine of chance: containing remarks on Ethan Allen’s Oracles of Reason,” *The American Museum, Or, Repository of Ancient and Modern Fugitive Pieces*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1787), 410.

that remained. An English traveler noted that it exercised “so much influence” that even distant Southerners were aware of it and termed it (whether approvingly or disparagingly he did not say), “The Rhode Island Bible,” a nod to that historically unorthodox “sewer of New England” known derisively as “Rogues’ Island.” As a later historian observed, “it was read more than its paltry sales might indicate, discussed more than it was read, and treated with clerical contempt more than it was refuted.” Allen himself knew that the book would prove unpopular, but as he later beamed in a letter to a friend, it “pleased more individuals than I expected.”¹⁰

Whatever its readership, what attracted them initially was more likely the man than the message. There was “an original something” about Ethan Allen, George Washington told the Continental Congress, and Jeremy Belknap, Ebenezer Hazard, and John Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur told others the same thing. Intrepid leader of the Green Mountain Boys, hero of the capture of Fort Ticonderoga, and prisoner of war after a failed attempt to take Montreal, Allen the man was, in Reverend Belknap’s words, “as rough and boisterous as the scenes he has passed through.” As a later historian characterized him, Allen “drank like a demon, swore more often (and more inventively) than any other Yankee of his time, and reveled in styling himself an unsophisticated backwoodsman.” A self-proclaimed “clodhopper,” Allen “disdained the pleasantries and conventions of polite society, exulting instead in rough, full-blooded frontier living,” particularly the autonomy it afforded. Consequently, from an early age he “felt a sincere passion for liberty” and pursued it obsessively whether in politics or in religion—the first at the risk of his life and the second at the risk of his reputation.¹¹

Allen’s uniqueness, however, was not in the *content* of his religious beliefs, which, like Paine’s, showed long exposure to deistical thought (despite his later denial that he even knew the term). As early

¹⁰ William Buell Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, vol. 1 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1857), 492; Ernest Cassara, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: University Press of America, 1988), 132; John Bernard, *Retrospections of America, 1797–1811* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887), 114; Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith*, 25; Ethan Allen to John Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, March 2, 1786, Ethan Allen Papers; quoted in Michael A. Bellesiles, “Works of Historical Faith: Or, Who Wrote *Reason The Only Oracle of Man?*” *Vermont History* 57, no. 2 (Spring 1989), 70.

¹¹ Cassara, *Enlightenment in America*, 129; Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 88; Ethan Allen, *A Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen’s Captivity*, 3rd ed. (Burlington, VT: H. Johnson & Co., 1838), 13.

as the French and Indian War, Allen claimed, he had discussed Freethought with some of the French prisoners of war he encountered, and the fires of his unorthodox faith in “Nature’s God” were subsequently fanned by his association with Thomas Young, a New England physician every bit Allen’s equal in his political and religious radicalism, his blunt outspokenness, and his populist defiance of traditional authorities. Timothy Dwight dismissed Allen’s *Oracle* as a “contemptible mass of every hackneyed, worn-out, half-rotten dogma of the English deistical writers” and chided Allen’s “meanness” for not acknowledging his sources, just as Paine’s detractors would do to him.¹²

No, it was not Allen’s unorthodoxy that was innovative—even his title seems borrowed from Charles Blount’s earlier *Oracles of Reason* published in 1693. Rather, Allen’s religious originality owed to the forcibleness with which he presented those views, unapologetically thrusting his “philosophical pitchfork” into the vitals of American Christianity. At a time when most politicians who preferred rational over revealed religion masked their heterodoxy behind paeans to a vague providentialism, Allen spent years to write and much of his personal property to publish a controversial philosophical treatise to which he courageously attached his own well-known name. Though officially titled *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*, it was colloquially known as “Ethan Allen’s Bible” (or the “Rhode Island Bible” as noted before), and his Bible pulled no punches attacking everyone else’s. His audience also evinced his originality, for while deism had long circulated among America’s cultural elite, Allen’s earthy tone and “uncultivated roughness” promised to resonate in a less exalted register. Try as he might to play the part of philosopher—he began signing his letters with that title after *Oracles* was published—he was never quite able to outgrow his hillbilly past. The would-be Man of Letters was forever a Green Mountain Boy, much to the relief of his theological adversaries. Any more education, mused one of them, and he would have proved “a dangerous member of society.”¹³

¹² Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 40; on Thomas Young (including his connection to and influence on Ethan Allen, see Stewart, *Nature’s God*; Dwight, “On the doctrine of chance: containing remarks on Ethan Allen’s *Oracles of Reason*,” 410.

¹³ Stewart, *Nature’s God*, 11; Reverend Samuel Williams wrote that “although Allen was a very indifferent writer, his pamphlets

As it was, Allen’s writing was dangerous enough, at least to those few clergymen who read enough of it to be moved to indignant reaction, or to those whose hearsay familiarity with its effect was enough to fill them “with a pious horror,” even after Allen’s passing. In their eyes, *Oracles* made its author “one of y^e wickedest men y^t ever walked this guilty globe,” the very “horned devil of Vermont.”¹⁴ Even worse, Allen’s popularity as an icon of the Revolution ensured that even his philosophical musings would be picked up by readers interested in whatever the hell-for-leather Hero of Ticonderoga had to say. Whether or not they persisted through the 477 pages of the original 1784 edition, and regardless of the success or failure of the thinner, more tightly typeset editions printed for later generations, even the mildly curious would have imbibed some measure of infidelity from its pages, drawn not to the book’s interminable title (nearly 50 words), but to the four words printed in equally large type just below it: “By Ethan Allen, *Esq.*”

“Esquire,” of course, was a bit of a stretch. We can indulge Allen in assuming the title, but his readers would have known him better as “General” or, more likely, “Colonel,” the title that graced the cover of an earlier and immensely popular book, *A Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen’s Captivity. Written by Himself*. Again, the popularity of the swashbuckling *Narrative*—it “sold like buttered rum” among an American audience eager for homegrown heroes—would have ensured at least an initial readership for *Oracles*, drawn to Allen’s larger-than-life personality even if they were unable to endure his long-windedness or follow his winding philosophical deliberations. More important to this study, the *Narrative* provides a glimpse into the role of humor in both Allen’s temperament and rhetorical style, qualities that appear frequently in *Oracles* as well. While reading the *Narrative* today may not substantiate Stewart Holbrook’s claim that “it shows humor on almost every page,” the book does

were much read, and regarded; and had a great influence upon the minds, and conduct of the people. The uncultivated roughness of his own temper and manners, seems to have assisted him, . . . And where all was a scene of violence and abuse, such a method of writing, did not greatly differ from the feelings of the settlers.” Samuel Williams, *The Natural and Civil History of Vermont*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Burlington, VT: Samuel Mills, 1809), 2:21–22; Ebenezer Hazard, quoted in Russell M. Lawson, *Ebenezer Hazard, Jeremy Belknap and the American Revolution* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), 79.

¹⁴ Reverend Nathan Perkins, *A Narrative of a Tour through the State of Vermont from April 27 to June 12, 1789* (Woodstock, VT: Elm Tree Press, 1920), 24; Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 89.

include a fair amount of name-calling, ridicule, and wit, true to the jocular makeup of its author. In fact, Allen's *Narrative* deserves more attention in histories of American humor than it receives, as it illustrates, almost paradigmatically, what Constance Rourke called the "half bravado, half cockalorum" nature of Yankee humor that had crystallized by the end of the eighteenth century: "indefatigably rural, sharp, uncouth, witty."¹⁵

ETHAN ALLEN'S CAPTIVITY NARRATIVE

True to Rourke's description, Ethan Allen was by all accounts a boisterous character with an outsized and irreverent sense of humor, despite occasional professions of religious zeal (he did, after all, claim to have captured Fort Ticonderoga "In the name of the great Jehovah, and the Continental Congress"). British actor and comedian John Bernard, who toured the United States during the period, called the Vermonter "a graft of the old Cromwellian, psalm-singing, cut-and-thruster upon the free-and-easy, bibacious cavalier; alternately swearing and praying; singing hymns and anacronics; sending people upwards and downwards." Himself a man of "a certain sparkle and an easy wit," Bernard could appreciate Allen's "shrewdness" amid his habitual "bombast," but worried that "the profanity of his clever sayings often neutralized the fun." His "extreme simplicity" sometimes "made him an object of amusement" to his social superiors, and his thought was often marked by "absurdity too empty to rebut, yet dangerous to laugh at" considering its source. It was this combination of backwoods simplicity and rip-roaring fun that endeared him to the masses who loved in him what they prized in themselves.¹⁶

Allen's rough-hewn personality shines through his rough-and-tumble prose. In the *Narrative*, for example, Allen called one of his captors a "rascal" and another a "monster," "detestable" men ready to be received by "legions of infernal devils...into the most exquisite agonies of the hottest region of hell fire." Allen confessed to having "flung" even more "extravagant language" at his adversaries, but

¹⁵ Stewart H. Holbrook, *Little Annie Oakley and Other Rugged People* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 40–41; Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character*, reprint ed. (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1953), 25.

¹⁶ Bernard, *Retrospections of America*, vi, 114–15.

because his words were too undignified to “grace a history,” we are left to guess at their exact nature. What we do see in Allen’s rhetoric is an earthy forcefulness becoming a backcountry frontiersman more accustomed to turning fields than turning phrases. He branded the British “brutish, prejudiced, abandoned wretches,” and often gave his derision a more humorous twist, as when he called a British military officer “a calico merchant” in hopes of ingratiating himself with his captors of a lesser rank. When asked his occupation by a visitor he replied that he “was a conjurer by profession,” and recalled that “the joke seemed to go in my favor” when he said he’d successfully “conjured [the British] out of Ticonderoga.” He “bantered” another visitor “so much, that...the laugh went against him”; he wisecracked with an officer about a lost bet over the fate of Fort Washington (“all in good humour” as he later recalled); and when threatened by the captain remanding him to England, he joked that if they waited to conquer America before they hanged him, he would assuredly die of old age first.¹⁷

Throughout his imprisonment, it seems, Allen hoped his captors might be “diverted by good sense, humour or bravery,” so he appealed to each of these attributes, lamenting that one particularly “underwitted” officer was impervious to all three. Allen admitted to having acted “in some measure the madman” with his captors, but when they “gave out that [he] was crazy” he protested, tongue-in-cheek, that he was no more “delirious” than he had been “from youth up.” For nearly three years, Allen languished as “America’s first celebrity prisoner of war,” and as the *Narrative* portrays it, it was largely his unconquerable attitude—punctuated by the indomitable humor of relief—that saw him through.¹⁸

Whether Allen actually indulged in such gallows humor and mockery behind bars might be questioned by his captors, but his American audience would have welcomed such bravado with ardor, especially at society’s lower levels. Here was the earnestness and earthiness they valued in themselves, the pluck that stands up to superiors and makes a boast of one’s lack of refinement, the rebellious underbelly of superiority theory bubbling up with scornful laughter from below. As another student of

¹⁷ Allen, *Narrative*, 123–25, 40–41, 46–47, 55, 57, 89, 68.

¹⁸ Allen, *Narrative*, 72–73, 92; Stewart, *Nature’s God*, 10.

Allen's writings observed, "in its comically self-conscious failure to achieve literary elegance," the Colonel's rip-roaring style "gave readers the sensation that the writer was laughing as he wrote, which in turn gave them confidence that he meant what he said." No wonder he got along so well with fellow skeptic and likely collaborator Thomas Young, once described as "a most surprising lad" by a schoolmaster who wondered if his "other talents [were] equal to his invention of means to excite laughter and merriment" in his classmates. In the safety of private conversation, it was Young who would joke over details concerning the Biblical Eden, wondering where Eve got the thread to sew her fig leaves, or questioning how the serpent learned to talk. Partner in Young's drolleries, Allen was a comic kindred spirit, and he laughed in the face of his adversaries, be they British officers or Biblical oracles. As evidenced by a Connecticut advertiser offering a hundred-dollar reward to take the Allen boys to task for their blasphemies, Ethan and his brothers were "notorious for blasphemous expressions in conversation" and adept at "ridiculing everything sacred," including the word of God.¹⁹

ALLEN'S ONLY ORACLE

Allen's specifically sacrilegious ridicule, apparently so notorious in conversation, became slightly more muted in print, but it is there, at least in *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*. In his earlier *Narrative* he confined his contempt to the British, showing (as disingenuously as Paine would) a modicum of respect for the Bible, along with a degree of familiarity with it that was impressive, though not uncommon for his day. To the man to whom he called himself a conjuror, he said he had "studied divinity" in his "younger days" and apparently his biblical knowledge outlived his biblical faith. According to a brother's later recollection, Allen faced down the New York Attorney General by invoking 1 Kings 20:28, "The gods of the valleys are not the gods of the hills." When a British officer bribed Allen with "a large tract of land" if he would defect, he compared it to the kingdoms that "the

¹⁹ Stewart, *Nature's God*, 132, 46, 12; Willard Sterne Randall, *Ethan Allen: His Life and Times* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 133.

devil offered Jesus Christ,” and noted the irony that, presumably in both cases, “the damned soul had not one foot of land upon earth” with which to make the offer. With even greater dexterity, Allen rephrased a disapproving passage from the first chapter of Romans to condemn Tories who “‘forgot the Lord, their God,’ and served Howe, Burgoyne, and Knyphausen, ‘and became vile in their own imagination, and their foolish hearts were darkened, professing’ to be great politicians...‘became fools.’” He later deployed biblical language when condemning England for setting up “the completest system of tyranny that ever God, in his displeasure, suffered for a time to be exercised over a forward and stubborn generation.” Sounding his own jeremiad he cried, “Vaunt no more, Old England! consider you are but an island!” and added, like the prophets of old, “Go home and repent in dust and sackcloth.”²⁰

But what had been rhetorical source in the *Narrative* became rhetorical target in *Oracles*, as Allen turned his barbs from the British to the Bible, nothing having “contributed so much to delude mankind in religious matters, as mistaken apprehensions concerning supernatural inspiration or revelation.” Any cautiousness on his part also seems to have decreased, as when he admitted that “he knew nothing of the mode or manner” of “the world of spirits” in his earlier work but wrote more confidently in the latter that such a place could hardly be thought to exist. “The priests have it in their power to amuse us with a great variety of visionary apprehensions of things in the world to come,” he quipped, but then added, shrugging, that these are phantasms “which, while in this life, we cannot contradict from experience.” What experience did contradict, he maintained, was that the Bible, with which the priests “amuse” their naïve and credulous listeners, could be taken as rational truth.²¹

²⁰ Ira Allen, *The Natural and Political History of the State of Vermont, One of the United States of America* (London: J. W. Myers, 1798); see H. Nicholas Muller III, “Vermont’s Gods of the Hills: Buying Tradition from a Sole Source,” *Vermont History* 75, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2007): 125–33; in Romans 1:21–22 Paul condemns those who “became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools”; ancient Israel is called “a stubborn and rebellious generation” in Psalm 78:8 and “a very forward generation” in Deuteronomy 32:20; “dust” and “sackcloth” (or the more common phrase “sackcloth and ashes”) are mentioned frequently in the Old and New Testaments as signs of contrition and repentance. See, for example, Job 16:15; Lamentations 2:10; Jeremiah 6:26; Daniel 9:3; Jonah 3:6; Matthew 11:21; Luke 10:13; Allen, *Narrative*, 55, 111, 114, 132–33, 138.

²¹ Ethan Allen, *Reason, the Only Oracle of Man, or a Compendious System of Natural Religion* (Bennington, VT: Haswell & Russell, 1784), 200, 469 (hereafter, *Oracles*); Allen, *Narrative*, 55.

Though much of *Oracles* is occupied by more positive expositions of deism's Enlightenment doctrines, Allen's rhetoric betrays his belief (borne out by his success at Ticonderoga) that the quickest path to victory is to identify the enemy's stronghold and take the offensive. In Allen's reconnaissance, the Bible was the enemy's citadel and Reason the drawbridge, so he wrested rationality from the clergy and made it seem squarely on his anti-establishment side. In essence he sought to capture the enemy's cannons and turn them on his foes, forcing them out of well-defended bastions, just as Ticonderoga's artillery later drove the British out of Boston. Humanity had been "miserably Priest-ridden" for far too long, so he took aim at the clergy's scepter of power—the Bible—to rescue his countrymen "from this Ghostly Tyranny." In a paragraph inexplicably excised from later editions of *Oracles*, Allen clearly made revelation subservient to reason, since reason is required to understand revelation in the first place. Canonizing Reason as the scripture of the deists, he protested that human beings would have to make use of the deistical Bible" if they ever hoped to make sense of the Christian one. For were we not rational creatures, "it would have been as ridiculous to have pretended to have given us a Bible, for our instruction in matters of religion or morality, as it would to a stable of horses."²²

At times Allen aimed (somewhat awkwardly) for eloquence, as when he referred at one point to the sun, "whose fiery mass darts its brilliant rays of light to our terraqueous ball with amazing velocity." Elsewhere his thought partook of the speculative, as when he posited the reasonableness of extraterrestrial life (a not uncommon thought during the period), including the possibility of life on the sun made "to suck in and breathe out flames of fire" just as humans "do the like in air." But most of the time he sought to be simply, straightforwardly, steadfastly rational, arguing for the supremacy and all-sufficiency of reason to read the book of Nature and discover the works of God. And yet, as we saw in our discussion of weaponized incongruity theory, in defense of rationality he often stooped to irrationality, indulging in humor and ridicule to make the tenets of revealed religion seem patently absurd. In that era Christians took it for granted that the Bible was reasonable, rational, and divinely

²² Stewart, *Nature's God*, 11; Allen, *Oracles*, 195–96.

revealed, but in Allen's war-weathered hands the Bible became a treasury of nonsense and a comedy of errors, leaving erstwhile believers feeling foolish about their faith.²³

Those who read the Bible literally and *Oracles* uncritically would be hard-pressed to hold to their scriptural convictions. Allen's rhetoric was meant to raise a blush about prior assumptions and traditional views, especially in those moments when his "repetitious, awkward, and sometimes torturous prose" was broken up with a comic comparison or a derisive jab. Belief in biblical miracles, for example—"in vogue" only among the "barbarous and ignorant"—was a reduction of nature to "nothing but a supernatural whirligig," as if God were indulging in "fictitious appearances" or irrational "sleight of hand." Belief in prayer was "stupidity or outright mockery," visions were "a delirium or a stupor," revelation was "ghostly intelligence," and prophecy was "the arbitrary prerogative of fanatics" who indulged their "distempered fancies." Even more colorfully, he called predestination a "darling folly" that was "nonsensically founded" by teachers who should be discharged so that their salaries could be spent instead on "good wine or old spirits to make the heart glad and laugh at [their] stupidity or cunning." Perhaps the hard-drinking Allen had ulterior motives beyond religious liberty alone!²⁴

As Allen's rhetoric of ridicule suggests, glad hearts and good laughs seem to be his habitual intention. Even his brother admitted that he and his siblings had "uttered some words that might be construed satirical" at the expense of "the pulpit thumpers" and "against the doctrines [of] some sectaries of Christians," making anti-biblical mockery something of a family tradition. In *Oracles* Allen called Samuel's execution of Agag "unmanly," an act of cowardice inexcusable without "a phiz of religion" to unsettle the mind. That God would command the slaughter of the Canaanites was not "compatible with reason" either, as indefensible as Catholic Spain's extermination of New World natives, as "every one who dares to exercise his reason, free from bias," would attest.²⁵

²³ Allen, *Oracles*, 32, 79.

²⁴ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 94; Allen, *Oracles*, 258, 265, 274, 329, 286, 97–98.

²⁵ Stewart, *Nature's God*, 132–33; Allen, *Oracles*, 310–12.

Parts of the Bible he explicitly branded irrational; others he left for his readers to decide: Jericho's walls succumbing to the mere "blast of ram's horns," a talkative Balaam's ass, Elijah made to "kite away into the air"? "Strange stories!" he declared. The account of Elisha and the she-bears wore "the appearance of a fable"; the Song of a "light headed" Solomon seemed "rather of the amorous" than the divinely inspired kind; and if Paul couldn't even decide "so domestic a matter" as the state of his body in his heavenly vision, how could he be considered "a competent judge" as to which level of heaven he had visited at all? Allen even took on such essential Christian doctrines as the sin of Adam and the atonement of Christ, dismissing the idea of imputation that is central to both by invoking the homely "old proverb, viz. 'every tub stands upon its own bottom.'" Sounding almost like Mark Twain at one point, Allen feigned outrage that the devil was let loose on such a "new made couple" in Eden, blindsided by temptation when they were so "destitute of learning or instruction, having been formed at full size in the space of one day, and consequently void of experience." Eve had just "been taken out of Adam's broad-side"; how could she have known any better? And how could Adam be expected to overcome his "innocency and imbecility" having not yet grown out of his "non-age"? Even in "this progressive age of the world," Allen quipped, the devil is far "more than a match for any one man (especially if in connection with a woman)." Poor inexperienced Adam didn't stand a chance.²⁶

Allen poked particular fun at Moses, feigning shock that he "was once admitted to a sight of [God's] BACK-PARTS" and pretending awe that Moses was "the only historian in the circle of my reading, who has ever given the public a particular account of his own death," an oddity to which Paine would also draw attention. "I must confess," Allen added, "I do not expect to be able to advise the public of the term of my life, nor the circumstances of my death and burial, nor of the days of the weeping or laughing of my survivors." Note the subtle dig that Allen hid in this last sentence. Deuteronomy 34, the final chapter of the five books whose authorship is traditionally assigned to Moses, does speak of Moses' death, burial, and lifespan, along with mourning at his passing, just as Allen described. But it

²⁶ Allen, *Oracles*, 312–14, 318, 390, 376.

makes no hint of any laughter among survivors. In Allen's parallel self-rendering, however, the laughter is there, and his efforts were meant to ensure that it happened at Moses' expense.²⁷

LEVERAGING LAUGHTER

Like Paine after him, in taking on the Bible Allen swung his axe at both the forest and the trees—mocking specific biblical passages, and ridiculing the idea of divine self-disclosure itself. “All our notions of the immediate interposition of divine illuminations,” he asserted, are “mere enthusiasm and deception,” leaving us “liable to be imposed upon by impostors,” which Allen associated with Islam. Even Paul the Apostle was sometimes unsure of his own inspiration, “and if he was at a loss” in such circumstances, “well may we be distrustful of it.” What we take for revelations are merely “our [own] romantic notions,” Allen affirmed, less like God's handwritten tablets and more like “Nebuchadnezzar's idol, ‘partly iron and partly clay.’” What more could be expected, considering “the infant state of learning and knowledge, then in the world”? Then again, Allen opined in mock benevolence, “We should not act the part of severe critics, with their writings, any further than to prevent their obtrusion on the world as being infallible.”²⁸

To Allen, as to Paine a decade later, “rely[ing] on dreams and visions” was “vanity,” “enthusiasm,” and “frenzy,” when true Reason could instead decide each issue. No wonder “our deceptions, blunders and confusions are increased to fanaticism itself.” The multiplicity of rival denominations, the avalanche of discordant commentaries, and the interminability of variant manuscripts disproved the Bible's infallibility and betrayed the “happy ignorance” of remaining believers. Couple these facts with the character of the “Creedmongers” and the strength of the “sacerdotal empire” that is “erected on the imbecility of human nature,” and one is left to conclude that if God had “made a revelation of his mind and will to mankind,” he would have put it “in the hands of

²⁷ Allen, *Oracles*, 278, 302.

²⁸ Allen, *Oracles*, 211, 220, 224, 221, 75.

men of a more unexceptionable character than those Holy Cheats can pretend to.” Consequently, Allen proclaimed both “the impropriety, and...impossibility of God’s having ever given us any manuscript copy of his eternal law,” calling into question the Bible’s original reception, not solely its subsequent transmission. And this he did on the basis of human reason, divine knowledge being too lofty for the understanding of antiquity, and ancient knowledge being too lowly for the benefit of modernity with all of its “progressive advances.”²⁹

As this last statement suggests, Allen considered belief in revelation a symptom of the infantility of humanity, the view inherent in Comte’s positivism or reflective of Kant’s definition of Enlightenment. Written in the same year as Allen’s *Oracles*, Kant’s essay “*Was ist Aufklärung?*” (“What is Enlightenment?”) defined the term as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred minority.” Importantly, the German word rendered as “minority” or “nonage” (*Unmündigkeit*), can more optimistically be translated as “tutelage,” with its suggestion of supervised education, or more disparagingly as “immaturity,” with its potential connotation of puerile inanity. Kant seems to suggest the more derogatory understanding, as he proceeded to associate this immaturity with “dumb animals,” the “unthinking masses,” and misogynistically, “the entire fair sex.” This was precisely the connotation that Ethan Allen intended to evoke. Just as Kant rooted this immaturity in “laziness and cowardice” rather than a mere “lack of understanding” (recall that it is “self-incurred” [*selbstverschuldeten*]: that is, “self-imposed,” or at its most deprecating, “self-inflicted”), Allen’s rhetoric made his readers feel lazy, cowardly, and even “unmanly” for holding to traditional belief. After all, “men will face destructive cannon and mortars,...and meet the horrors of war undaunted,” Allen averred with battle-won conviction, but open the Bible with its “devil and his banditti of friends and emissaries” and it will “fright them out of their wits.” *Sapere aude!* (Dare to know!) Kant urged, precisely the kind of daring for which the intrepid Vermonter was so renowned. Men like Allen could “laugh at all the stories” that prompted fear in other Bible readers, and that laughter would act as proof that they were not guilty of

²⁹ Allen, *Oracles*, 225, 449, 346, 468, 456, 199.

“indolence and inattention to nature and reason,” or worse, possessed of “natural imbecility.” The rest could be tarred with “the weakness of uncultivated reason,” and even be pitied for having succumbed to “the artifice of designing men...whose interest it has always been to impose on the weakness of the great mass of the vulgar.”³⁰

While Kant more obliquely decried the tendency to “have a book that understands for me” or “a spiritual advisor who has a conscience for me,” Allen was much more specific about which book and which spiritual advisors needed to be abandoned. “He dearly loved to shock [churchgoers’] opinions, and heckle their most hallowed associations,” wrote one early historian, as when on a particularly frigid morning he called to a shivering clergyman, “Good morning, Deacon! we need a little of your brisk hell-fire about our ears this morning.” In *Oracles* the same irreverent but affable personality shines through, as when Allen invoked the Bible’s promise that believers would not be hurt “if they drink any deadly thing” (Mark 16:18), and swore that he would “subscribe to their divine authority” if “any of them will drink a dose of deadly poison, which I could prepare...not that I have a disposition to poison any one.” Critical of ethereal assurances when tangible facts were at hand, this was the same Ethan Allen who impatiently endured a Bennington First Church sermon in the aftermath of the capture of Fort Ticonderoga, in which the minister repeatedly credited the victory exclusively to the providence of God. No doubt garnering some smiles among those in attendance, the mock-offended Colonel interrupted, “Don’t forget, Parson, that I was there!”³¹

Undeniably, Ethan Allen was there, itching for a fight whenever opportunities arose. Throughout *Oracles*, Allen demeaned any who dared disagree with him. “None are so stupid as not to discern” the validity of his positions, and rival views were “too absurd to deserve argumentative confutation,” a classic example of superiority theory demeaning one’s rivals to the point of excusing oneself from the

³⁰ Immanuel Kant, “What Is Enlightenment,” (German: *Was ist Aufklärung*) was published in the December 1784 edition of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (*Berlin Monthly*). Numerous transcriptions and translations are available online. Allen, *Oracles*, 257, 46.

³¹ Edward S. Isham, “Ethan Allen, A Study of Civic Authority,” in *Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society*, 1898, 66; cited in Koch, *Religion of the American Enlightenment*, 48n; Allen, *Oracles*, 265–66; Stewart, *Nature’s God*, 199–200.

contest. “Absurd,” in fact, seems to have been one of Allen’s favorite words, one he invokes at least a dozen times in what was meant to be a tribute to Reason, absurdity’s opposite. The story of Micaiah “is as absurd as any thing that is to be met with in story”; it is “absurd” to visit a person’s iniquity on the heads of subsequent generations; and it would be “absurd” to credit God with Abraham’s “shocking attempt” on the life of his own son. That God “should act in partnership with man” in almost anything is “too absurd to demand argumentative confutation,” and how “preposterously absurd” it would be to exclude “the exercise of reason” from “religious concerns,” when its place was so valued “in all other and less occurrences of life.” Still other biblical ideas are presented as “manifestly absurd,” “glaringly absurd,” “disgustfully absurd to common sense,” “a barefaced absurdity,” and “so great an absurdity, that it wants a name.” Shaming his readers through the laughter of superiority, this pitting of reason against supposed absurdity shows that incongruity theory was hard at work as well.³²

Other condescending insinuations abound. He referred to Moses’s “blunders” in describing the creation and suggested that “many errors have crept into his writings,” which were adapted more to the capacity of “the servile Israelitish *Brick-makers*, than for men of learning and science in these modern times.” The operations of the holy spirit were simply “the chimeras of weak, unintelligent minds,” thus God might as well have sent “supernatural revelation” to “beasts, birds and fishes” as to human beings, so impossible it would have been for the ancients to make any sense of the perfectly divine. His condescension is perhaps clearest in the volume’s closing line, where Allen asserted that “the fantastical illuminations of the credulous and superstitious part of mankind, proceed from weakness, and as far as they take place in the world, subvert the religion of REASON and TRUTH.”³³

In his opening pages, as in all that followed, Allen’s aim was to convince his readers to “dare to exercise their reason as freely on those divine topics, as they do in the common concerns in life,” confident

³² Allen, *Oracles*, 112, 322, 294, 303, 299 – 300, 476, 376, 399, 91, 419.

³³ Allen, *Oracles*, 74, 244, 213, 203, 477; in subsequent editions, the closing line went from a duo to a trio: deism’s popular Trinity of “REASON, NATURE, and TRUTH.”

that if they did, they would “in a great measure, rid themselves of their blindness and superstition.” Faith must be “regulated...by reason,” not left to the interpretation of those let “loose from the government of reason,” even when they falsely claim that reason governs their “spiritual discerning, as apparently as figures do to a mathematician.” Not so, Allen affirmed. So much of the Bible is so “repugnant to reason” that “if the human race in general, could be prevailed upon to exercise common sense in religious concerns, those spiritual fictions would cease, and be succeeded by reason and truth.” As he reaffirmed near the book’s conclusion, “Reason...must be the standard by which we determine the respective claims of revelation,” and “on this thesis, if reason rejects the whole of those revelations” we call the Bible, “we ought to return to the religion of nature and reason” and boldly leave the Bible behind.³⁴

For one paying homage to reason, however, as this section has demonstrated Allen seems awfully beholden to comic unreason for much of what he wrote. No doubt this is due in part to his outgoing, irreverent personality, but this proven tactician was also being strategic in his choice of rhetorical style. If he could make the Bible seem inherently ridiculous, its status as a collection of “spiritual fictions” would be assured. Rational religion would win the zero-sum game against revealed religion, with Reason standing squarely on the victor’s side. It was only “prejudice” (one of Paine’s favorite words), or “prepossession of opinion” that kept the ignorant in subjection to their scriptures; “therefore if we would acquire useful knowledge, we must first divest ourselves of those impediments.” What better, kinder, or more natural way than to be laughed out of them? Allen could affirm that we must “draw our conclusions from reason and just argument,” but many of his arguments were not exactly “just” or based on “reason” alone. Protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, Allen’s rhetoric reveals that reason is not, after all, the *only* oracle of man. Ridicule often shares its oracular office.³⁵

As if to excuse Reason’s reliance on its less dignified accomplice, Allen justified his approach by denying that pure reason would have altered the opposition anyway. If someone failed to see his logic,

³⁴ Allen, *Oracles*, 24–25, 338, 470, 279, 472, 475.

³⁵ Allen, *Oracles*, 475.

he suggests, the fault lies not in his impeccable reasoning, but in the person's obvious irrationality. He maintained that "nothing but reason can prevent or restrain" the excess of "folly and enthusiasm" that religion engenders, but conceded that at a certain point the enemy's position demands a departure from rational tactics. The "frenzy" of an enthusiast is "proof against reason and argument," just as belief in human depravity is proof that the doctrine is correct, at least in that believer's case. A mischievous grin hides behind this smirking circularity, but what can a rationalist do against an unarmed opponent? Believers "invalidate reason" by their faith in the irrational, and thus do not "deserve a rational argument," having placed themselves "out of the reach of rational conviction." Observing that "it is too common for great faith and little knowledge to unite in the same person," Allen concluded that "such persons are beyond the reach of argument," and turned to ridicule instead. How else could he penetrate the thick skulls of believers, whose ignorance makes their "faith immovable, though it cannot remove mountains"? With this nod to a well-known scripture (Matthew 17:20), Allen makes those with any faith feel like those "of little faith," turning their assumed belief into actual unbelief. Why else would his mountain of biblical objections remain immovable before their feeble faith? Moreover, by equating "great faith" and "little knowledge," he makes the first seem as deplorable as the second, with a reversal of measurements—"little faith" resulting from "great knowledge"—the logical cure. Among the social strata most enamored with upward mobility, the path to respectability seemed clear: abandon the childish faith of the unthinking, and join the ranks of intelligent unbelief.³⁶

Allen's strategy here is intriguing. He is suggesting that if you need to be laughed into logic, you are irrational to begin with, whereas if you are rational, ridicule is not needed at all. Ridicule thus becomes "beside the point" when in fact it *is* the point in much of what *Oracles* is designed to accomplish. By procuring its service without acknowledging his debt, Allen dresses laughter up as logic, unreason masquerades as reason, and nonsense takes charge of surveillance over a contestable common

³⁶ Allen, *Oracles*, 185, 225, 180, 277.

sense. That is, by bowing to reason while resorting to ridicule, Allen is sounding at two different depths, but only acknowledging the more respectable of the two.

Reason sounds at the level of the educated, while ridicule sounds at the level of the unlearned, but which was Allen's imagined audience? The first group (the educated) would have long been familiar with deism, having been introduced to it by much better writers than Allen. The second group (the unlearned) would not have understood those loftier writers, preferring a common voice like Allen's instead. Consequently, Allen's "Reason" would have been largely beneath the learned and beyond the ignorant, while his "Ridicule" would have resonated with both. In short, Allen was writing primarily for the second group, but flattered them into thinking they belonged to the first. He could say he was preaching to the choir, and do so in such a way that readers were shamed into identifying with its singers. It was as if he were saying, "For the ignorant, I must resort to ridicule; for the intelligent, such gibes are unnecessary but unobjectionable. In which group do you belong?" He could thus target his audience while pretending to aim far beneath them. And his readers could feel that they were responding to his reason, when in fact it was his ridicule that was having the more persuasive effect. As a historian said of revivalism's later achievements, Allen's rhetorical successes likewise came "in inverse ratio to their intellectual attainments, and in direct ratio to their emotional appeal." Readers could *feel* they were exercising their reason, when in fact they were going with their gut.³⁷

COUNTERING THE COLONEL'S ATTACK

Whatever the ratio, Ethan Allen's mixture of reason and ridicule caused a stir wherever it was read, a harbinger of the massive mobilization of saints and skeptics that would follow in the wake of *The Age of Reason*. When a single copy of *Oracles* reached Goshen, Connecticut, a cash-strapped storekeeper wrote to Allen offering goods in exchange for additional copies to keep up with demand. Almost comical is the peregrination of another copy described by the liberal-leaning Massachusetts

³⁷ Ralph L. Rusk, *The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier* (New York, 1925), 1:46.

minister William Bentley: from a J. W. Esq. to a Col. C. (“under solemn promise of secrecy”), to a Mr. Grafton, at whose death it was discovered in his chamber, “examined with horror by his female relations,” and hurriedly sent to a Mr. Williams, at whose shop it was “viewed as an awful curiosity by hundreds,” who noted the initials “W.B.” and finally assumed it to be Bentley’s, which “fixed” a “terrible opposition” to him “in the minds of the devout & ignorant multitude.” Matthew Stewart’s summary assessment seems accurate: Allen may have been “too impious to celebrate,” but he was also “too popular to ignore.”³⁸

This left the clergy with a final option: to counter, in hopes of keeping erstwhile believers and closeted skeptics from finding common cause with the irreverent Colonel. Their opposition arose immediately, not that Allen expected anything else. He had already predicted that any man brave enough to “break the fetters of their [false] education,” any with the “confidence publicly to talk rational[ly and] exalt reason to its just supremacy,” was “sure to be stamped with the epithet of irreligious, infidel, profane, and the like.” In this unveiled claim to superiority this disbeliever in prophecy proved prophetic. In fact, some used epithets even more damning than those in Allen’s list. Reverend Josiah Sherman, for example, published a sharply titled “Sermon to Swine” that promised to provide “A concise, but sufficient ANSWER, to *General ALLEN’s Oracles of Reason*.” Notably, he did so under the pseudonym “COMMON SENSE,” as if to reclaim what Allen had wrongfully called his own. Incensed, Common Sense branded Allen “a prophane, prayerless, graceless infidel” and dismissed “the prophane flouts he casts upon the sacred oracles of God.” He chided him for his “swinish ignorance” and accused him of having “made such gross blunders, that there needs a supplement to his Oracles of Reason, in order to correct them; and I leave him and the swine he feeds to cook that dish.” Alluding to the biblical Parable of the Prodigal Son (and calling both reason and honor to his side), Common Sense concluded, “I THINK I have said enough to dissuade all reasonable people, that would consult their own honour

³⁸ John Pell, *Ethan Allen* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), 253; William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D., Pastor of the East Church, Salem, Massachusetts* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1905), 82; Stewart, *Nature’s God*, 13.

and best interest, from seeking to fill their belly with these husks.” Ezra Stiles invoked an even stronger allusion, not to a wayward son who returns to the fold, but to a damned soul beyond hope of redemption: “And in Hell he lift up his Eyes being in Torments.”³⁹

What seems to have frustrated Allen’s enemies most was not his arguments, which might be refuted, but his ribald assertions, which logic was largely powerless to dislodge. The same would be true of Paine’s respondents, as we will prove in a later chapter. To borrow a phrase from the Bible they were bent on defending, they found it hard to counter blows from “one that beateth the air” (1 Corinthians 9:26). Timothy Dwight called *Oracles* “a long train of dreaming argumentation, in which nothing is premised, and nothing concluded.” At the same time he decried “the rusticity of the expressions, the jolting of the stile, the head-and-tail pomposity of the dogmatism and general naggishness of character, affectedly puffed from the beginning to the end.” No less unimpressed, Harvard’s Jared Sparks described it as “a crude and worthless performance, in which truth and error, reason and sophistry, knowledge and ignorance, ingenuity and presumption, are mingled together in a chaos, which the author denominates a system.” Ezra Stiles more succinctly labeled it “a Book replete with scurrilous Reflexions on Revelation,” and called its author a “profane & impious Deist.” What these critiques have in common, significantly, is their emphasis on Allen’s style: the rusticity and pomposity, the crudity and ingenuity, the scurrility and profanity. The *Oracles of Reason* was an oracle of ridicule instead.⁴⁰

Even more than his arguments—which they considered as unnecessary to refute as Allen thought them unnecessary to substantiate—it was his rhetoric, his *ridicule*, that most upset them. Dwight used the word “coltishness” to describe Allen’s writing, a word that Noah Webster first defined as “wanton; frisky; [and] gay.” Later waxing poetic, Dwight aimed more emphatically at Allen’s irrational rhetoric:

³⁹ Allen, *Oracles*, 468; Common Sense [Josiah Sherman], *A Sermon to Swine: FROM Luke xv. 16* (Litchfield, CT: Thomas Collier, 1787), 12, 13, 21; Ezra Stiles, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles, vol. III, January 1, 1782–May 6, 1795*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), 345 (diary entry for February 27, 1789).

⁴⁰ Dwight, “On the doctrine of chance: containing remarks on Ethan Allen’s *Oracles of Reason*,” 410; Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New-England and New-York* (London, 1823), 2:388; Jared Sparks, *The Life of Col. Ethan Allen* (Burlington, VT: C. Goodrich & Company, 1858), 220; Stiles, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 345 (diary entry for February 27, 1789).

“In vain thro realms of nonsense ran / The great clodhopping oracle of man. / Yet faithful were his toils; What could he more? / In Satan’s cause he bustled, bruised and swore.” Doctor Lemuel Hopkins, one of the Connecticut Wits, likewise captured his impression of the *Oracles* in verse, complaining that Allen fights with “One hand clench’d to batter noses; / While tother scrawls ‘gainst Paul and Moses,” and later bowing in mock reverence as Allen “Descends from hyperborean skies, / To tell the world, *the bible lies.*” To Dwight, Hopkins, and their kind, it was these scrawlings that proved unanswerable, not the more rational expositions of deistical philosophies the clergy had been battling for decades. Perhaps this accounts for their decision to answer ridicule with verse, an attempt to fight emotional fire with emotional fire, even though both sides were convinced of their position’s logical coherence.⁴¹

An even more obvious example of this counter-emotionalism is the attempt by the *Vermont Gazette* to fight fire with fire. In 1786 it published a letter supposedly written by a London politician who extolled Allen as “an exalted genius, unparalleled in our present age.” In mock reverence it called *Oracles* “an incomparable code of reasoning” and promised that its author, the “venerable Vermontese *Demi god,*” would someday “be admired as a miracle of holiness and, like a second Mahomet (your great antitype and pattern) be worshipped on the Green Mountains with the veneration due to so much wisdom and piety.” In a follow-up article, the *Gazette* sarcastically reported that thanks to the four copies of the *Oracles of Reason* that were sent to the Ottoman Empire, all the Mufti were converted, the “Grand Signior” of Turkey had sent a ship to convey “Saint Ethan Allen” to Constantinople, and four of the royal concubines were being delivered as “a present to St. Ethan from the Grand Turk.” Hardly a rational response to a well-reasoned argument, but hopefully they reached Allen’s impressionable readers. As these “letters” show, reason was neither Allen’s nor his adversaries’ primary concern.⁴²

⁴¹ Dwight, “On the doctrine of chance,” 410; Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “Coltish”; Timothy Dwight, *The Triumph of Infidelity* (London: J. Mathews, 1791), lines 387–390; on this poem see Colin Wells, *The Devil & Doctor Dwight: Satire & Theology in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith*, 41.

⁴² Quoted in Stewart, *Nature’s God*, 434.

For his part, Allen remained unflinching before the mockery of the press or the anathemas of the clergy. How could the Bible's defenders overawe him when the Bible itself left him undaunted and unbowed? In *Oracles* Allen described the Bible's threats of being damned for disbelief as "crouding 'damned' hard upon unbelievers in christianity," but dismissed them with a nod to Americans' long-standing anti-Catholicism as "merely a Jesuitical fetch to overawe some and make others wonder." A demystified Bible was no more to be feared than a defeated British king. Americans who did not tremble at the sound of firing muskets need not shudder at the rustling of pages from a demythologized book. Even here Allen's rejoinder is more name-calling than reasoned response: "all the satisfaction the honest man can have while the superstitious are squibbing hell fire at him, is to retort back upon them that they are priest ridden."⁴³

Regardless, the fact that the clergy were offended by his gibing only showed their failure to act the part of well-bred men, able to take a joke. In this light, something Allen said within *Oracles* may have been intended to reflect those who overreacted to it. Reminding his readers of the story of Elisha, in which a pair of she-bears mauled forty-two children for having mocked the man of God, Allen writes: "That Elisha should be so exasperated at the children for calling him *bald head*, and telling him to *go up*, was rather a sample of ill breeding; most gentlemen would have laughed at the joke, instead of cursing them, or being instrumental in their destruction, by merciless, wild and voracious beasts. Though the children were saucy, yet a man of any considerable candor, would have made allowance for their non-age, 'for childhood and youth are vanity.'" In Allen's reenactment, the clergy played the part of Elisha while he displayed the "sauciness" of youth. Why take his mocking so seriously? Why threaten destruction when any well-bred man would merrily laugh along? Allen's anti-biblical ridicule was surely a laughing matter, and as his words repeatedly insinuated, the Bible called for comedy as well.⁴⁴

⁴³ Allen, *Oracles*, 339, 468. In later editions of *Oracles*, the word "damned" is omitted, removing not only the offensive language, but Allen's original pun.

⁴⁴ Allen, *Oracles*, 312–13.

CONCLUSION

Having listened for Allen's laughter in his *Narrative* and having examined his rhetoric in *Oracles*, one need not accept Ernest Cassara's suggestion that Thomas Young wrote the latter book's "ponderous philosophical propositions" while Allen was the source of its "amusing, sometimes hilarious comments on orthodox Christian belief" to agree with his overall impression that "the irreverent, destructive sections make more interesting reading than the constructive ones." Our study of humor theory has prepared us to see through Allen's strategies and to recognize the rhetorical work his ridicule was intended to perform. But even without that understanding, Allen's homespun intended audience would have proven the point, moved more by his style than his substance. The hard-spoken, hard-drinking Vermonter was a man of the people, and his laughter reflected—and excited—their own.⁴⁵

As is usually the case when tidy taxonomies give way to the line-crossing, boundary-blurring realities of life, Ethan Allen's anti-biblical humor was a combination of superiority, incongruity, and relief, as he laughed *down* the authority of an establishmentarian clergy, laughed *up* the absurdities of well-known scriptural storylines, and laughed *out* the anxieties that any Bible-quoting cradle Christian would have felt in rethinking their perspective on the word of God. Laughter is typically just such an unstable compound, elements combining at no single temperature and in no single way. But combine they did, and village atheists, closeted doubters, and quiet questioners found themselves joining one of their Revolutionary heroes in a community of laughter that made them feel a little less lonely—and far less afraid. Doubt did have a leg to stand on, and the legs of those cocksure Christians placing all their weight on a rationalist epistemology might be made to buckle if the Bible were kicked in just the right places. To repurpose Hobbes's analogy, the intrepid Vermonter had taken a fencing match usually reserved for the blue-blooded nobility, and turned it into a wrestling match, stick pull, or tavern scrape among people who knew the real color of blood, having actually drawn it on occasion. The Battle over the Bible along with all it represented—a hireling clergy, vest(ment)ed interests, and priestcraft tied to

⁴⁵ Cassara, *Enlightenment in America*, 129–30.

kingcraft—was moving from higher to lower ground, where a populist strain of skepticism might flip Allen’s boast and prove that the “gods of the valleys” were no more unimpeachable than the “gods of the hills.” Doubt was descending, as laughter began to spread at lower elevations.

In Ethan Allen, we see a proto-Paine, and in *Oracles of Reason*, a very “rough” rough draft of *The Age of Reason*. But the battle lines were drawn, and the rhetoric of ridicule that rippled from Vermont’s Green Mountains would soon roar through the streets of Philadelphia, Boston, and beyond. Far less of a warrior but a much greater writer, Thomas Paine, who had already laughed the Redcoats back to Great Britain, would soon have American Christians turning red over biblical belief.

CHAPTER 6

THOMAS PAINE'S RHETORIC OF RIDICULE

If Ethan Allen was the rough-hewn Elijah of American anti-biblical ridicule, Thomas Paine was its Elisha, a polished reflection of his earthier predecessor. Whereas the Bible leaves us wondering if Elisha was granted his wish for a “double portion” of Elijah’s spirit (2 Kings 2:9), history attests that when Allen’s mantle of scriptural mockery fell upon Paine, the effect of his scriptural ridicule was multiplied immeasurably. Moreover, if to sectarian historians “Ethan Allen’s freethinking was a blot on the escutcheon of pious heroes of the Revolution,” then the thought of Thomas Paine constitutes a major tarnishing of the nation’s Christian coat of arms. In both cases, the stains bore the marks of mockery. Reverend Billy Hibbard, whose own sense of humor was as informal as his preferred first name, noted that by the late 1790s, after Allen’s *Oracles* and Paine’s *Age of Reason* had begun spreading infidelity, it was not the deists alone who had begun “to ridicule all religion, and make it a phantasm.” The reformer William Alcott recalled imbibing religious skepticism in his youth from an old veteran who had drunk “deeply of the spirit and sentiments of Thomas Paine and Ethan Allen,” which led Alcott eventually to read Paine for himself, along with a host of writers like him, including wits like d’Holbach and Voltaire. The most popular among this circle of skeptics, Paine had been aiming at various unorthodoxies for years, and a growing number of readers were laughing along.¹

Paine called himself “a *Farmer of thoughts*”—a metaphor Dumont repeated when speaking of “the seed thrown out by the audacious hand of Paine”—and as this chapter will prove, it was his habit to plant those thoughts with the help of humor, breaking the hardened crust of tradition using scorn for a shovel and wit as his hoe. Or to change the metaphor only slightly, ridicule prepared the emotional soil of his audience so that the revolutionary ideas he was planting would seem to grow naturally, almost

¹ Koch, *Religion of the American Enlightenment*, viii ; Billy Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard, Minister of the Gospel...* (New York: J. C. Totten, 1825), 138; Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith*, 296, 301.

instinctively—a Paineite version of Jesus’ parable of the seed growing secretly, in which a man plants seeds and with little or no actual tending, sees new plants “spring and grow up, he knoweth not how” (Mark 4:26–27). Joseph Hawley’s experience reading *Common Sense* is typical: “Every sentiment has sunk into my well prepared heart.” Such is the obfuscatory nature of the rhetoric of ridicule: it conceals the outside influence of the rhetor behind the inner acceptance of the intended audience. As Paine affirmed in his earliest piece of persuasion, “There are some cases so singularly reasonable, that the more they are considered, the more weight they obtain,” and humor, whether as scornful ridicule or lighthearted jest, was one way of exuding “simplicity and honest confidence” in pursuit of an open-minded hearing. Playing notes in a resonant frequency, laughter recasts language in an audience’s own voice, thus partaking of rhetoric’s self-effacing ideal: artifice that obscures the marks of the artificer.²

Whether as acid, eating away at long-standing foundations, or as water, unobtrusively causing new thoughts to grow, Paine’s acerbic wit was not a foray into untried rhetorical territory when he wrote *The Age of Reason* near the end of his life. In this chapter we will see that ridicule characterized Paine’s rhetoric throughout his literary career, shedding light on his choice of persuasive tactics when writing against the Bible. By seeing his rhetorical habits take shape in his earlier writings, we can trace the trajectory that culminated most controversially in his last major work, for by then, Paine had been subtly manipulating his readers for decades. Though he once protested that his words “come from a heart that knows not how to beguile,” even this was an example of his rhetorical legerdemain. To preview the coming terrain, then, this chapter will establish Paine’s rhetoric of ridicule; chapter seven will explore his biblicism, and chapters eight and nine will combine the two in an analysis of what one contemporary called “that primer of infidelity,” *The Age of Reason*. By the time that work rolled off the presses and into the hands of an eager readership, Paine had been leveraging humor for a long, long time.³

² Thomas Paine to Henry Laurens, 1778, in *Collected Writings*, 2:211; Dumont, *Recollections of Mirabeau*, 271; Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 86; Thomas Paine, “Case of the Officers of Excise” (1772), in *Writings*, 4:499.

³ Thomas Paine, “To Mr. Secretary Dundas” (June 6, 1792), in *Writings*, 3:15; Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith*, 198.

THE PERSON AND THE PEN

Paine's "outgoing, friendly, and quick-to-charm personality" had much to do with his rhetorical voice, since one's temperament affects the tone of one's writing. Close friend Clio Rickman described Paine's early adulthood as one surrounded by a "convivial set of acquaintance, who were entertained with his witty sallies," and Benjamin Franklin received a letter from Paine that spoke of his plans to "entertain" a mutual friend "with a few amusing particulars." Later in life, while living with Rickman as he wrote *Rights of Man*, Paine often played games with Rickman's family and engaged in "witty and cheerful" conversation with visiting friends, his dialogue always "full of information, entertainment, and anecdote," the ideal combination among Europe's cultured socialites. At one dinner party, political philosopher William Godwin looked forward to enjoying Paine's celebrated "powers as a conversationalist" and grew frustrated when Mary Wollstonecraft monopolized the evening instead. Another visitor, wary of the "odiously disagreeable things I was led to expect" of him, found "his conversation remarkably entertaining" and was drawn to his personality despite herself. Hobnobbing with the period's notables, Paine's manner was witty but "never frivolous," Rickman avowed, but Paine's sense of humor made him as comfortable with the low puns of common folk as with the refined wit of the more genteel. When he indulged in a low-brow dig at King George's mental health (his "Madjesty"), Rickman objected to Paine's pun "as beneath him," to which his friend retorted, "Never mind. They say Mad Tom of me, so I shall let it stand."⁴

And "let it stand" he did, on paper no less. Resonant at any level, it was Paine's writing that put that personality into print, filling volumes' worth of material marked with what Rickman called "the finest strokes of genuine satire, wit, and humour." Years before *Common Sense* made a name for its anonymous author, young Tom discovered a talent for language that began tickling ears and turning heads. Whether writing on behalf of fellow excisemen in Sussex, debating friends in the well-named

⁴ Nelson, *Thomas Paine*, 40, 177; Thomas Clio Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine* (London: by the author, 1819), 38, 101, 135–36, 65; Thomas Paine to Benjamin Franklin, March 4, 1775, in *Complete Writings*, 2:1131. The pun "Madjesty" appears in Paine's letter of June 6, 1792 to Home Secretary Henry Dundas, in *Writings*, 3:24.

Headstrong Club in Lewes, or penning, as a child, a eulogy in rhyme for a fallen crow in Thetford, Paine's facility with words became obvious to all, and he sharpened his quill on the whetstone of wit.⁵

In beginning his time as editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, for example, shortly after his arrival in Philadelphia, he described periodicals as “a kind of market for wit and utility,” supported by the twin pillars of “Utility and Entertainment.” Of the first he felt that America had an endless supply, and of the second, notwithstanding European slights to the contrary, the colonies had “many valuable springs,” flowing with even purer humor than the “froth highly fomented” that stagnated in European wells—especially the stuff of “a browner complexion” then raising laughter in England. Even in these lands of Puritan austerity and Quaker drabness, he asserted, “In matters of humour and entertainment there can be no reason to apprehend a deficiency.” Paine himself would see to that, supplying many of the “sallies of innocent [and not-so-innocent] humour calculated to amuse and sweeten the vacancy of business!” As a later biographer described him, “at the height of his fame [Paine] would lead the life of a real-world Mr. Spectator,” that fictional but most famous of eighteenth-century wits.⁶

One of his earliest pieces, published in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* in July 1775 but written long before as a recitation piece that helped gain him the title of “General of the Headstrong War” among club members back in England, was a “ridiculous” story (based on an actual event) about a dog that was hanged for chasing a hare to its death. Paine took the tale and pressed it into poetic form, choosing heroic verse couplets (aa, bb, cc, etc.) in iambic tetrameter (a clip-clopping meter of four two-syllable beats) that by then was known as Hudibrastic verse, a form made popular by Samuel Butler in his anti-Puritan mock-epic, *Hudibras*, and preferred by Jonathan Swift in his satirical poems. Following Butler and Swift even more closely, Paine's comic poem also includes a smattering of strained rhymes and feminine rhymes (rhyming an unaccented syllable) to heighten its comic effect. The result was “a work of exquisite wit and humour,” a sympathetic bookseller wrote, but beyond his sense of humor, even at

⁵ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 111.

⁶ Thomas Paine, “The Magazine in America,” in *Writings*, 1:14–19; Nelson, *Thomas Paine*, 32.

this early stage one sees it put to more pragmatic use.⁷ Beyond the absurdity of the tale, the poem shows hints of Paine's impatience with privilege and the laws that sustain it, as he sarcastically exaggerates the seriousness of the hare's death: "Which treason was, or some such thing, / Against our SOVEREIGN LORD THE KING." Despite this shocking act of rebellion, Farmer Short, the dog's owner, escapes punishment since "fortune" deigns "to attack the pride / Of those who over others ride," and a constable is sent to arrest the dog instead. Unfortunately for this hapless authority figure, the dog attacks him out of fear that he had come to steal his master's money (recall that Paine worked as a despised tax collector himself), and during the "rout" that ensued, the onlookers simply "stand and laugh" as they argue over whether the crown's representative has any "business" meddling in such common affairs. Ultimately the dog is tried for what can best be described as involuntary hare-slaughter, and the jury levels the death sentence after an argument of "logic, rhetoric, and wit" that "nicely did the matter hit."

While the tale seems meant for entertainment alone, as Paine tells it, it might also be read as a satire against legal maneuverings and government overreach. There is also a chance that Paine was mocking not only political niggling, but ecclesiastical hair-splitting as well. At the beginning of the poem, the three justices who pursue the case are described with an allusion to *Hudibras* ("Each by his wondrous art could tell / Of things as strange as Sydrophel"), which portrays them in a negative religious light. In Butler's anti-religious mock-epic, Sidrophel is an astrologer and cheat. He is first described as a Rosicrucian, a member of a mystical order drawn to esoteric spiritual knowledge, and becomes the foil of the comic Presbyterian knight, Sir Hudibras, Butler's equivalent of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. With this nod to religious fanaticism (in the mention of Sidrophel specifically but also in the allusion to *Hudibras* in general), the remainder of Paine's description of the three justices can be interpreted as a reflection of the theological quibbling common in his day:

Each by his wondrous art could tell
Of things as strange as Sydrophel;
Or by the help of sturdy ale,

⁷ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 40.

So cleverly could tell a tale,
That half the gaping standers by
Would laugh aloud. The rest would cry.
Or by the help of nobler wine,
Would knotty points so nice define,
That in an instant right was wrong,
Yet did not hold that station long,
For while they talk'd of wrong and right,
The question vanish'd out of sight.⁸

With talk of reversing right and wrong for expediency's sake, or of dismissing such standards altogether, was Paine inveighing against state-craft, lawyer-craft, or priest-craft? All three could be tarred with the same brush, as they knotted up common sense with their convoluted wranglings. Poor commoners, meanwhile, were left to suffer at the mercy of their supposed superiors, unsure whether to laugh or cry.

Of the two, Paine habitually preferred laughter to tears. Though seldom as obvious a foray into comedy as his canine-inspired Hudibrastic satire, Paine indulged in humor as often as occasion would permit. When he took the reins of Philadelphia's *Pennsylvania Magazine* in 1775, he wrote an introductory poem, "The Snowdrop and the Critic," that mentioned "the summer time of wit," "the keen eyed wit," and "wondering wits." Lest readers should come to expect only the positive, sociable side of humor however (the laughter of incongruity), Paine allowed for the possibility of humor's darker, superiority side as well, in case some enemy "Should draw his gray goose weapon, dipt in gall, / And mow ye down, plants, flowers, trees, and all." Himself no stranger to the "gray goose weapon" (a writer's quill), Paine was equally comfortable with either addition to the ink—mirthful honey or acerbic gall—though with time his preference lay with the latter.⁹

Paine's humor, after all, was meant to be utilitarian, not merely entertaining, and a touch of scurrility could go a long way to humble the pretentious in a land growing restless beneath its second-class status. In another early piece, Paine in dream entered the underworld to pay a visit to Alexander the

⁸ Atlanticus [Thomas Paine], "The Farmers Dog Porter," in *Writings*, 4:478–81; see Frank Smith, "New Light on Thomas Paine's First Year in America, 1775," *American Literature* 1, no. 4 (January 1930): 347–71.

⁹ Thomas Paine, "The Critic and The Snowdrop," *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, February 1775; in *Writings*, 4:481–82.

Great (whom he calls “the madman of Macedon” elsewhere, perhaps another allusion to the mentally infirm King George.) Once there, Paine reveled in the discovery that the object of his interest, though a great emperor while on earth, had been turned into a horse in the realms below, and even more embarrassingly, sometimes turned himself into “*a piece of dung*” to escape “*a good licking*” in the stable. Pretending shock at “such astonishing degradation” (recall that Freud preferred calling laughter’s superiority theory the “degradation” theory instead), Paine was about to recross the Styx when he noticed that he had “picked up a *bug* among the Plutonian gentry,” that turned out to be none other than Alexander. In a Lilliputian twist that would have had colonists thinking of George III, Paine recounted, “holding up the emperor between my finger and thumb, he exhibited a most contemptible figure of the downfall of tyrant greatness. Affected with a mixture of concern and compassion (*which he was always a stranger to*) I suffered him to nibble on a pimple that was newly risen on my hand, in order to refresh him.” From emperor to horse and from dung to boil-biting beetle, Alexander’s “greatness” had one more step in its reduction to the absurd. Just after Paine placed the diminutive emperor in a tree for safe-keeping, a “Tom Tit” (a small bird, but likely a play on Paine’s name as well) swooped by and “chopped him up with as little ceremony as [Alexander] put whole kingdoms to the sword.” The author—this time he signed the article “Esop”—then gives us the moral of his story: that it is “with pleasure” that a common man can reflect on the fact “That I was not ALEXANDER THE GREAT.”¹⁰

Closer to our subject, another early comic piece fused religion and ridicule in ways that make *Age of Reason* seem a natural climax instead of a shocking change of heart. Another piece of Hudibrastic verse, it struck at the problem of religious intolerance, similar to Franklin’s much earlier “Parable against Persecution,” which he gleefully passed off as scripture. But whereas Franklin used King James language as his style and Father Abraham as his example, Paine used doggerel rhymes as his style and a monk and a Jew as his characters, allowing his mostly Protestant audience to gratify their

¹⁰ Esop [Thomas Paine], “New Anecdotes of Alexander the Great,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, February 1775; in *Writings*, 1:26–28; Thomas Paine, “Thoughts on Defensive War,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, July 1775; in *Writings*, 1:57.

own egos at Catholicism's and Judaism's expense. Paine's ending is also decidedly negative, even morbid, when compared to Franklin's piece. The poem's Jew had fallen through the ice and was hanging by his chin when a passing monk offered to save him, but only if he converted to Catholicism first, since "T is heresy to help a Jew." Moved by the endangered man's entreaties, but unwilling to allow common humanity to trump religious intolerance, the monk explains:

"By holy mass, 't is hard, I own,
To see a man both hang and drown,
And can't relieve him from his plight
Because he is an Israelite;
The church refuses all assistance,
Beyond a certain pale and distance;
And all the service I can lend
Is praying for your soul my friend."

Recognizing his plight, the Jew eventually renounces his faith and promises, though insincerely, to "co to mass as soon as ever / I get to toder side the river." Afraid the man might be lying, but counting his "confession" as sufficient for the purpose, "the bigot Papist joyful hearted / To hear the heretic converted" promptly breaks his promise and "Popp'd Mordecai beneath the ice," judging it better for him to "die a Christian now, / For if you live you'll break your vow."¹¹ A Catholic pious fraud overcoming a Jewish lie of self-protection, as told by a lapsed Quaker to largely intolerant Protestants—a fitting snapshot of the religious world of Thomas Paine.

But more than Paine's outer world, these samples of Paine's early poetry provide a peek into his inner world, one that prized personal freedom against government interference, one that despised the kind of bigotry that valued one's own religion over another man's life, and one that reveled in comic cadences and mocking jests. In one of his earliest American articles, to words like "witticisms," "jested," "whimsical," "laughs," and "fashionable follies," he adds the term "pasquinaders" (a twist on an uncommon word describing satirical taunts meant to shock or amuse publicly, usually at a public

¹¹ Atlanticus, [Thomas Paine], "The Monk and the Jew," *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, March 1775; in *Writings*, 4:482–83.

figure's expense), suggesting just how familiar he was with humor as a rhetorical genre. Who else describes mining by personifying the earth as a prudish spinster trying to "conceal her age" by refusing the scandalous European habit of "receiving visitants in her dressing-room"? He called both dueling and titles of nobility "absurdities," hoping that, Cervantes-like, he could laugh such knight-errantry into disrepute. Even during the Revolution's soul-trying times, Paine's favorite pastime remained engaging in "a long fireside evening discussion helped along by gossip, laughter, hard argument, and some wine." With the weight of the world bearing down on him, write a recent biographer, "Laughter sparked by satire helped keep Paine afloat." Though some of his verbal dexterity was lost on its way to the printed page (one friend found him "wittier in discourse than in his writings, where his humour is clumsy enough"), still his writings seldom stray too far from a smirking wink or a devilish jibe.¹²

NONSENSE IN *COMMON SENSE*

Shifting from coffeehouse magazine to political propaganda, Paine's rhetoric of ridicule remains prominent, shining through the work that originally garnered him national attention, the ingeniously entitled *Common Sense*. The title was ingenious partly because it was disingenuous. It belied the truly revolutionary nature of the course he was recommending, overturning centuries of conventional wisdom and urging the abandonment of what unnumbered generations of European ancestors, as well as the colonists themselves until only recently, had taken for granted as but an earlier iteration of culturally-conditioned common sense. There was nothing commonsensical about the course *Common Sense* encouraged, but as discussed in chapter 3, the phrase alone served as its own justification. Its power is what convinced Jefferson to heed Franklin's advice to replace "sacred" with "self-evident" in presenting for ratification the views of the Declaration of Independence.¹³

¹² *Atlanticus*, [Thomas Paine], "Useful and Entertaining Hints," *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, February 1775; in *Writings*, 1:21–23; "Duelling," and "Reflections on Titles," *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, May 1775; in *Writings*, 1:40, 46; Keane, *Tom Paine*, 166, 183; Theobald Wolf Tone, quoted in Nelson, *Thomas Paine*, 296–97.

¹³ See Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), xiv–xv, 160.

In Rosenfeld's words, "What is so striking about this political pamphlet is ultimately how Paine manages to use such appeals to popular sentiment and popular language to argue *against* the dominant assumptions of his moment and place," that is, how he uses the *assertion* of common sense to overturn a previous *assumption* of common sense. "No matter how unconventional and hyperbolic in reality," Paine presented his views as "simple in form, obvious in content, and consequently universal and indisputable in effect." But as Rosenfeld also recognizes, Paine's positive confirmation of this newer common sense relied largely on his negative portrayal of what it sought to replace. "Throughout *Common Sense*," she writes, "all propositions contrary to those that Paine calls self-evident are labeled if not ridiculous or absurd, then unnatural, useless, childish, farcical, or a kind of folly," all examples of leveraging laughter to assign inferiority or incongruity to the opposite side. Such derogatory words abound in the pamphlet, as do depictions of rival views that trick readers into unconsciously applying such labels themselves, coaxed into accord by their subtly manipulated "common sense."¹⁴

The British government's system of checks and balances, for example, is in Paine's portrayal "farcical" and "a mere absurdity!" Monarchy is both "absurd" and "exceedingly ridiculous," a flawed inheritance from "a French bastard" (William the Conqueror) who brought "an armed Banditti" across the English Channel to impose himself upon an unoffending populace that would have been better off without him—"a very paltry rascally original" of which George III, Paine seems to suggest, was a cheap imitation. Paine unfavorably compares the king's actions to those of "brutes" and "savages," but what can one expect from "crowned ruffians" better known as royalty? Nature itself proves the "folly" of hereditary monarchy, Paine declares with a grin, "otherwise, she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule by giving mankind an *Ass for a Lion*." With this rhetorical sleight-of-hand, Paine dexterously credits history with a joke of his own creation, allowing the author to mingle with the audience, pretending to be one of the crowd. Later in the pamphlet Paine muses that "there is something very absurd, in supposing a Continent to be perpetually governed by an island," though he gives no reason

¹⁴ Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 143–45.

why this arrangement was any more absurd than a country being governed by a captain or a crew of sailors being led by a single captain. Such parallels were beside the point, for words—and their connotations—were what mattered to Paine. America was a “continent,” not a collection of maritime colonies, and England was an “island,” not an empire that covered much of the globe. Planting seeds with such insinuations, Paine could then leave “common sense” to do its subtle work, spreading tendrils until they wrapped around his readers’ hearts and minds.¹⁵

As such language evinces, part of Paine’s strategy in dethroning a previously entrenched convention was to puncture the reverence that had entwined itself around certain words. “Men fall out with names without understanding them,” he warned, and then proceeded to take golden titles and lace them with lead. “King” was in Paine’s hands an “unmeaning name,” and was thus undeserving of deference. He singled out the phrase “*parent or mother country*” as one that unjustly profited from people’s inborn reverence for maternity, and then explained that the phrase “hath been jesuitically adopted by the king and his parasites, with a low papistical design of gaining an unfair bias on the credulous weakness of our minds” (all while hiding his own exploitation of bias and credulity behind allusions to popular anti-Catholicism). Regardless, it was a “monster,” not a “mother,” that England represented. In British hands such words as parent and child had become “violated unmeaning names,” and should therefore hold no weight in the minds of independent Americans.¹⁶

In *Common Sense*, Paine not only coined the term “enemyship,” but created the rhetorical conditions for its existence, his words eating away at what had previously been citizenship in the political sphere or, later, discipleship in the realm of religion. In a single paragraph he compares Britain’s treatment of her colonies to prostitution, rape, robbery, and murder, incendiary language obviously intended to make enemies of former friends. But inflammatory phrasing notwithstanding, Paine typically employed much subtler forms of rhetoric to make a cacophony of what Lincoln later

¹⁵ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, in *Writings*, 1:72, 73, 83, 86, 84, 79, 92.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:83, 71, 86–87, 92.

called “the mystic chords of memory.” His humor allowed him to laugh long-standing assumptions off the stage. Speaking of *Common Sense*’s mistreatment of the monarchy in terms equally applicable to *The Age of Reason*’s abuse of the Bible, one historian wrote, “In a few pages, Paine lampooned the whole history of the venerated institution..., rendering its familiarity strange, making it feel distant, silly, pretentious, profligate, and unworthy of its pompous power.” In both instances, humor helped uproot a cultural cornerstone that “suddenly seemed trivial and passé.” For when the choice is between “the absurdity of Royalty and the reasonableness of a Republic,” as Paine would posit later in France, common sense makes the decision immediately clear.¹⁷

Paine knew the mass and momentum of traditional views, but also recognized the power and “penalty” of “public disesteem” and thus used the leverage of weaponized “common sense” to shame his readers into conformity with its still-contested conclusions. What today may be “strange and difficult” will tomorrow be “familiar and agreeable,” he promised, adding by way of self-fulfilling prophecy that “it is pleasant to observe by what regular gradations we surmount the force of local prejudices.” *Common Sense* begins with that end in mind, admitting in its first paragraph that though its position might “not yet [be] sufficiently fashionable,” it was only weak “Custom” and “long Habit” that slowed its inexorable progress. Counting on the cumulative weight of a contagious popular opinion (and confessing a rare doubt as to the all-sufficiency of unaided reason), he states that “time makes more Converts than Reason,” and time was on America’s side. “Independancy” was already a foregone conclusion, Paine having “never met with a man” who did not feel that separation between the two “countries” (a title America had not yet declared, let alone attained) would someday occur. “All men allow the measure,” he repeated in a classic example of the bandwagon effect; they “vary only in their opinion of the time.” A new edition published almost immediately after the distribution of the first gave

¹⁷ Ibid., 1:86, 100; Thomas Paine, “An Essay for the Use of New Republicans” (1792), in *Complete Writings*, 2:542. On “enemyship,” see Jeremy Engels, *Enemyship: Democracy and Counter-Revolution in the Early Republic* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010); Keane, *Tom Paine*, 116.

credence to words that Paine had then added—that certain truths “appear clearer and stronger every day.” Paine was leading his readers to see independence as “a self-evident position.”¹⁸

Arguing for self-evident truths is risky, as it threatens to expose the strings on which a writer is dangling a tenuous position (or the strings by which he hopes to move his readers, while remaining safely out of sight). Paine minimizes this risk by resorting frequently to a rhetoric that combines the condescending with the apophatic, as when he claims not to have “recourse to the harsh ill sounding names of oppression and avarice,” even while suggesting for England such attributes throughout. Later he excuses himself from arguing too much against hereditary monarchy, since “it is needless to spend much time in exposing the folly,” but then adds, even more sharply, “If there are any so weak as to believe it, let them promiscuously worship the Ass and the Lion, and welcome. I shall neither copy their humility, nor disturb their devotion.” Elsewhere Paine admits that “it is something very ridiculous” that a political system would allow “a youth of twenty-one (which hath often happened) to rule over millions of his elders,” but he “decline[s] this sort of reply, though I will never cease to expose the absurdity of it.” Here we almost get lost in what Paine is trying to expose beneath his concealment. In a single sentence Paine says he won’t say what he just said, all while saying he would never cease to say it! And once again words like “ridiculous” and “absurdity” remain operative throughout.¹⁹

By presenting his arguments in this way, Paine gives the impression that there is precious little to argue about. Both common sense and *Common Sense* suggest that some things should simply be obvious, things that “men should rather privately think of, than be publicly told of,” precisely the types of assumptions that humor unobtrusively conveys. Consequently, Paine tends to avoid overt argumentation, offering instead merely “well-intended hints.” This feigned nonchalance (often with a tone of comic understatement or sarcastic indifference) is a trick that Paine uses often, as when he “threw out a few thoughts... (for I only presume to offer hints, not plans),” doing some of his best

¹⁸ Paine, *Common Sense*, in *Writings*, 1:70, 111, 87, 67, 93, 101, 114.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:75, 83–84, 94–95.

unargumentative arguing through what he elsewhere called “useful and entertaining hints.” Rather than call attention to the contested nature of his assertions, Paine presents instead “plain truth” (the title he originally intended for the pamphlet) and “fact[s] not to be contradicted.” His comparisons, he avows, are so unanswerable that “the most subtle sophist cannot produce a juster simile,” so why try? As Paine would have it, “every reasonable person” (other than the “truly childish and ridiculous”) would instinctively agree with him, since none could be so “ignorant, as not to know” or “so unwise, as not to see” the obvious undeniability of his positions. He presented his views as facts, and as he wrote elsewhere, “facts need but little arguments when they prove themselves.”²⁰

Having reduced the possibilities to a binary and claiming a univocal common sense that was firmly on his side, all that was left for the opposition were untenable positions that Paine portrays as “truly farcical,” “fatal and unmanly,” and “truly childish and ridiculous,” a perfect illustration of the process of dichotomization and demonization discussed in chapter three. Those other alternatives “will not bear looking into”; they are “the most barefaced falsit[ies] ever imposed upon mankind”; and they come from those who “spoke without thinking,” people whom “future generations” would remember “with detestation,” incongruity and superiority vibrating side by side. With unveiled condescension he describes those who disagree with him as being “interested men,” “weak men,” or “prejudiced men” (a fourth possibility, “moderate men,” are described in even worse terms than the other three); of being guilty of “fatal and unmanly slumbers”; and of having “the heart of a coward, and the spirit of a sycophant.” And just in case others thought such name-calling was unfair or hyperbolic, he baldly declares, “This is not inflaming or exaggerating matters,” expecting his readers to take his word for it. Paine’s was the pure and simple truth, with all rival opinions “repugnant to reason,” “the utmost stretch of human wisdom,” “folly and childishness,” “madness and folly.” Paine pretends to have weighed both sides in an even balance, with the opposition found wanting. And how could it be otherwise? “How

²⁰ Ibid., 1:119, 118, 109, 74, 81, 96, 94; Paine, “Useful and Entertaining Hints,” and “Thoughts on Defensive War,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, February and July 1775, respectively; in *Writings*, 1:20–25, 56.

trifling, how ridiculous, do the little paltry cavilings of a few weak or interested men appear, when weighed against the business of a world.” With finality Paine declares that “the period of debate is closed,” leaving one wondering if it had ever been open to begin with.²¹

Ironically, before creating straw men he could easily burn in effigy, Paine promises to rise above personal insult, since self-evident truths need no recourse to base offenses. “The author hath studiously avoided every thing which is personal” evidently forgetting this resolution when he later compares courtly obeisance to “the trembling duplicity of a spaniel.” In the appendix of a quickly updated “new edition,” Paine singles out a speech—“if it may be called one”—from the King that surfaced in Philadelphia on the same day that *Common Sense* first appeared. He called it “a wilful audacious libel against the truth,” its only redeeming feature being its clarity—clear “brutality and tyranny” that is. In the same spirit this self-proclaimed avoider of personality politics calls George III a greater “Savage” than “the naked and untutored Indian,” brands an address by Sir John Dalrymple “a whining jesuitical piece,” and declares that anyone who disagrees with him has “forfeited his claim to rationality,” is “an apostate from the order of manhood,” and has already “sunk himself beneath the rank of animals” and “contemptibly crawls through the world like a worm.” So much for avoiding personal insult.²²

Such rhetoric hardly seems appropriate coming from an author who purportedly wanted to remain untouched by prejudice, person, or party in order to place his trust in “the influence of reason and principle” alone. Yet Paine continued to claim reliance on “a plain method of argument” and a persuasive approach based “on the principles of nature and common sense.” A few subtle hints might be allowed him, since “it is but seldom that our first thoughts are truly correct” (so much for common sense!), but left to themselves, ordinary Americans would recognize the unembellished truth. How would they know when they found it? Paine answers unflinchingly, “Common sense will tell us.”²³

²¹ Paine, *Common Sense*, in *Writings*, 1:88, 91, 96, 81, 82, 84, 90, 119, 92, 100, 119.

²² *Ibid.*, 1:68, 107, 112–13.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1: 68, 89, 85, 96, 105.

But was that common sense the epistemological principle or “Common Sense” the literary persona? Paine went to great lengths to conflate the two, until they were essentially one in his mind. When Silas Deane objected to Paine using the pseudonym during their controversy, Paine simply protested, “The signature has, I believe, an extensive reputation, and which, I trust, will never be forfeited while in my possession.” Be that as it may, how can we account for Paine’s Janus-faced duplicity? His sardonic humor provides a partial answer, as it allowed him to say in jest what he claimed he would never say in earnest, and to hint at truths he denied were in need of actual proof. As he admits in a letter to the Quakers that accompanied later editions of *Common Sense*, in some cases an “inconsistency is too glaring not to be seen; [an] absurdity [is] too great not to be laughed at.” More importantly, humor allowed him to move the intended audience from the second persona (the target) to the third (an accomplice), aligning readers to his side, not as potential converts but as the already convinced, as though he were talking *to* them *about* someone else—someone other, someone lesser, someone irrational and absurd. At one point Paine addresses his reader directly and intimately—“I’ll tell you, friend”—and he often writes with the familiarity of one who knows he is speaking in confidence, poking fun at someone “off the record” in ways he would never say to that person directly. As Paine admits, “I have frequently amused myself both in public and private companies, with silently remarking, the specious errors of those who speak without reflecting.” In *Common Sense* he seems to be scratching that itch, amusing himself with the idiocy of others, but this time laughing in the company of friends.²⁴

“THE FORESTER’S LETTERS”

Paine’s rhetoric of ridicule helps define his approach in *Common Sense*, but it is hardly confined to his initial foray into revolutionary pamphleteering. Name-calling, condescending sarcasm, and witty scurrility seemed to flow naturally from his ever-active pen, as though gall were mixed with ink whenever he dipped his quill. In this he was unapologetic, trusting the potential of ridicule’s persuasive

²⁴ Thomas Paine, “To the Public on Mr. Deane’s Affair,” in *Writings*, 1:410; *Common Sense*, in *Writings*, 1:126, 99, 115.

effect. “If the sincerity of disdain can add a cubit to the stature of my sentiments,” he admits in “The Forester’s Letters” (borrowing a biblical phrase as was often his habit), “it shall not be wanting.”²⁵ Duly warned, readers of those letters were feted with a carnival of mocking incivility, all the more intriguing because they decry in a rival author the same rhetorical tactics Paine employs to even greater effect himself. In fact, unlike *Common Sense*, which took on a tradition in general, as the Forester Paine has an actual foe to combat, allowing us to see even more clearly the rhetorical weapons he brings to a fight.

In “The Forester’s Letters,” the target of Paine’s abuse was a series of pro-British essays that appeared in Philadelphia in the Spring of 1776, in answer to the wildly popular *Common Sense*, which had been published there shortly before. Entitled “Cato’s Letters,” they were likely written by Reverend William Smith, an Anglican loyalist hoping to take advantage of the popularity of an earlier collection of writings by the same name. However, unlike their predecessors, these letters, as Paine described them, were “gorged with absurdity, confusion, contradiction, and the most notorious and wilful falsehoods.” They consisted of “punning nonsense,” “wild and unintelligible” comments, and “silly and water-gruel definitions.” Compared to Paine’s “more manly” prose, they were written “vainly and ridiculously,” with little hope of swaying rational readers. Or so the author of *Common Sense* affirmed. In each of these aspersions, Paine implies that Cato’s letters fail the objective test of reason. Paine then proceeds to prove his point by reducing Cato and his letters to the absurd.²⁶

As the Forester, Paine admits that his “chief design” was to “detect and expose the falsehoods and fallacious reasonings of Cato.” This negative approach essentially relieved him of having to prove the legitimacy of his own arguments, since a comparative victory would suffice. Paine understands the difference between negative reasoning and positive proof because he accuses Cato of relying on the former, even when he does little to provide the latter himself. Instead, he casts aspersions on his rival,

²⁵ Thomas Paine, “The Forester’s Letters”; in *Writings*, 1:127. These letters are four in number, and were published in 1776, on April 1, April 10, April 22, and May 8, respectively.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:128, 145, 146, 132, 127, 131.

calling him both unoriginal (he borrows “stale and hackneyed” phrases from “the little wits and bucks of St. James’s” [the London quarter that was home to the British aristocracy]) and mercenary (“Cato’s patent for a large tract of land is yet unsigned” by the “sceptered savage”). “Alas poor Cato!” Paine adds in mock compassion. Throughout, figurative expressions concerning Cato’s rhetoric outnumber more rational refutations of his political position. As Paine describes it, “It is truly of the bug-bear kind,” a rhetorical bogeyman meant to scare the immature and unsuspecting; it is “truly of the legerdemain kind, appearing at once both right and wrong”; and it “has as much order in it as the motion of a squirrel,” “jump[ing] about” as if its author “knew not what to write next.”²⁷

In these letters, one of Paine’s most ingenious strategies is to mask his own rhetorical tactics by calling out his opponent’s. He accuses Cato of “jesuitical cunning” for trying to “disgrace what [he] cannot disprove,” yet the rhetoric of ridicule pursues precisely this approach. “Alas!” Paine cries, “We are not now, Sir, to be led away by the jingle of a phrase,” though few Revolutionary writers are more famous for the memorable jingling of their phrases. “It is not your throwing out, now and then, a little popular phrase, which can protect you from suspicion,” Paine continues with no little irony (himself being unequalled in such efforts). “They are only the gildings under which the poison is conveyed.”²⁸

Paine was no stranger to gilding contested assertions with more convincing emotions. At times he feigns anger over Cato’s “unprincipled method of writing and reasoning,” a rhetorical approach that in Paine’s opinion reflected both “effrontery” and “impiety.” Elsewhere he gives (and then takes back) mock praise, admitting that even the unprincipled “cannot help sometimes blundering upon truth.” But more often his natural response is the merriment of scorn. “I cannot help laughing,” Paine shrugs, a tacit invitation for his readers to join in the fun. Moreover, when it comes to the cause that Cato was defending, inborn intelligence was sufficient to turn reason into jest. “Nature seems sometimes to laugh at mankind,” Paine observes, “by giving them so many fools for Kings.” Our folly, or the laughter that

²⁷ Ibid., 1:132–34, 136, 138.

²⁸ Ibid., 1:142, 130, 131.

arises when once we are cured of it, thus “do[es] us right by abusing us into reason.” As Paine would have us believe, his own abusive rhetoric was aimed at precisely those reasonable ends.²⁹

As usual, Paine acts hesitant to descend to scurrility, pretending to prefer the civility of pure reason instead, as natural as the pristine woods from which the eponymous Forester supposedly emerged. “Pay some attention to the plain doctrine of reason,” he urges, but since Cato seems immune to reason, and “frequently forces me out of the common tract of civil language,” answering him scornfully is but “to do him justice.” Note that the blame here falls to Cato, whose rhetoric “forces” Paine to lower his pretended standard in order to follow suit. “Moderation and temper” at such times is “really unequal to the task,” so Paine responds with more appropriate tactics, confident that his well-meaning readers would agree that “an unfair and sophistical reasoner doth not deserve the civility of good manners.” “I fear not the field of fair debate,” Paine reassures them, but since Cato “stepped aside and made it personal,” what choice does Paine have but to descend to his rival’s “lurking hole of mischief” and join him in the mud? He “must not expect...to be treated like one who had debated fairly” when his “violation of truth and reason” appears on every page. Against such inanity, blunt directness was the best approach, as when he explodes with biblical gravity, “Cato! thou reasonest *wrong*.”³⁰

Of course, Reason could legitimately favor either side in this debate, which is why both sides relied more on rhetoric to carry them. *Common Sense* drew readers to one side while Cato recommended *Plain Truth* (a rival pamphlet) to lead them to the other. As these titles suggest, both sides were vying for sole rights to reason, even while each relied on emotion to claim the superiority of its version of self-evident truth. To borrow from a passage in Cato with which Paine took particular offense, both sides were fighting to decide whether certain political positions were “*common sense, or common nonsense,*” just the type of contest in which ridicule could play a leading part.³¹

²⁹ Ibid., 1:138, 140, 150.

³⁰ Ibid., 1:128, 140, 143, 133, 134.

³¹ Ibid., 1:146.

With each demeaning slight of Cato's rhetoric (and each more dexterous sleight to hide his own), we see more clearly the intention of Paine's cleverly crafted prose. He calls out Cato to "come forth...and prove [his] assertion[s]" but does very little to substantiate his own. Then again, why would he need to, when Cato's comments are "so glaringly absurd" that "a short comment" or two should suffice to refute them? By labeling Cato's positions absurd, Paine excuses himself from having to answer them, as though the case had already been decided in Paine's favor. In Cato's irrationality he had "fairly gone beyond" the reach of Paine's reason, let alone his audience's respect. "I have not language to bring thee back," Paine laments in mock resignation. "Thou art safely entrenched indeed!—Rest therefore in thy strong-hold till *HE* who fortified thee in it shall come and fetch thee out." Who is this HE on whom Cato relies? Paine gives no answer, but perhaps alludes to one a few paragraphs later. "Get thee behind me," Cato," Paine commands with a nod to the biblical Satan. Yet even with this exorcism Paine keeps Cato's rhetoric unremittingly before his readers' judging gaze.³²

By largely avoiding reason himself, Paine implies the irrationality of the opposition and pays his readers the compliment of needing no reason or outside instruction to reject Cato's position for themselves. As usual, that is, Paine pretends to be speaking for Common Sense itself, planting seeds in soil that bears no evidence of tilling, trusting that growth will result as he plays to his audience's pride. As he says of Cato's rhetoric, trying to "allure the Public" with such drivel is like "attempt[ing] to catch lions in a mouse-trap," a clever phrase that allows Paine simultaneously to praise his audience and malign his opponent. Cato's "specious falsehoods" might "mislead the credulity of unwary readers," but Americans with any degree of intelligence would naturally discount declamations that "can hardly be equalled, either for absurdity or insanity." Incredulously Paine asks Cato (and by association, any who might be tempted to agree with him), "Art thou mad...or art thou foolish—or art thou *both*—or art thou *worse* than both?" Paine's readers, meanwhile, could leave feeling they were neither.³³

³² Ibid., 1:142, 139, 129, 144.

³³ Ibid., 1:128, 142.

With such aspersions against an author, what self-respecting reader would want to be tarred with the same brush? Only “persons remote from better intelligence”; only those who have “arrived at their second childhood, the infancy of threescore and ten.” These alone—the stupid and the senile—would not feel “greatly embarrassed” for having mistaken “falsehoods...for truths.” But the average American would feel to blush at such a stigma. As Paine implies, if Cato “does not believe one half of what himself has written,” then why should his readers be any more accepting? Cato is thus left “to *frighten* his readers into a belief of the whole,” just as Paine is left to shame them into an equally total rejection. Fear of insanity by association would prompt most readers to leave Cato in a constituency of one, and this was Paine’s intention. Mocking Cato for employing “a punning Soliloquy,” he turns the device back onto its user: “Cato’s title to soliloquies is indisputable; because no man cares for his company.”³⁴

THE AMERICAN CRISIS

If *Common Sense* struck the match and “The Forester’s Letters” shielded the kindling, *The American Crisis* kept the fire burning through a long and difficult conflict, one that went far beyond pamphleteering as it spilled across countless bloody battlefields. A series of thirteen articles (to match the number of colonies) written between December 1776 (the “times that try men’s souls”) and April 1783 (“‘the times that tried mens souls,’ are over”), these pamphlets fanned the flames of revolution throughout the colonies, raising spirits from Valley Forge to the Continental Congress, and in homes and hearts from the rocky soil of northern New England to the broad plantations of southern Georgia. Signed by “Common Sense” himself, these writings likewise owe much of their effectiveness to Paine’s rhetoric of ridicule. It was emotion he meant to arouse, so it was emotion he infused in his rhetoric.³⁵

Of course Paine was loathe to admit this, so true to form, he claimed to rely upon pure rationality, not “the vapours of imagination.” “I bring reason to your ears,” he declared, “and in

³⁴ Ibid., 1:152, 155, 146, 144.

³⁵ Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis*; in *Writings*, 1:170, 370.

language, as plain as A, B, C, hold up truth to your eyes.” No more should be needed, since “he that rebels against reason is a real rebel,” and anyone lacking “the first rudiments of reason” is “an idiot.” However, just as England turned to stronger arms to put down America’s political rebellion, Paine was likewise forced to employ more violent words to combat Britain’s idiotic insurrection against self-evidence. Thus in the first number of *The Crisis* Paine claims to have been “tender” towards his enemies in offering them “numberless arguments” to win them to his side. But the time for tenderness had passed (if there had ever been one). This was a case “which cannot be overdone by language,” meaning their “folly” and “baseness” required sharper, stronger words.³⁶

Similarly, in the third number Paine claims (disingenuously) that “in every former publication” he had acted upon the “charitable supposition” that his ideological opposites “were rather a mistaken than a criminal people,” and thus “applied argument after argument with all the candor and temper I was capable of” in order to “reclaim them from ruin to reason.” Immune to such argumentation, however, those who could not see the obvious truth of what he was describing were “either rogues or fools” whose “blind folly and obstinacy” had loosened their grip on rationality. Consequently, Paine, having exhausted the arsenal of logic and civility (so he claimed), was now forced to turn to more objectionable rhetorical weapons, no matter how “harsh and uncourtly” he happened to sound. Part of Paine’s personality, ridicule was often the armament closest at hand, but he made his choice seem a matter of principle rather than preference. It was Britain’s own “stupidity” that “exposes” it to “satire and contempt.” In the politics of wit, “the connection between vice and meanness” was a “fit object for satire,” all the more effective when the satire was also “a fact,” for then it “cuts with the irresistible power of a diamond.” Predictably, Paine finds symptoms to justify his diagnosis and prescription, making insinuations of British insanity—“sickness of thought” he calls it—throughout his ongoing work. “The union of absurdity with madness” had never been “more distinguishable.”³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., 1:178, 179, 271, 173–74, 177.

³⁷ Ibid., 1:228, 178, 180, 280, 263, 216, 298, 266.

“Folly” is a word Paine repeats or hints at often. England was fast becoming “the Land of Fools,” enclosing itself in a “circle of absurdity.” As he wrote in a letter between Crisis V and Crisis VI, the batty old mother country was more likely to be “*mad*” than “*wise*,” and consequently “there is no act of absurdity she is not capable of committing.” England’s conduct was “a compound of rage and lunacy,” a clear indication that “Bedlam [was] in concert with Lucifer,” allowing Paine to make a diagnosis combining the evil with the insane. Thankfully, however, shame (both rhetorical and military) was beginning to perform its remedial work. Three years into the fighting, King George was finally “coming a little to his reason,” his “sense of pain” at Britain’s embarrassments “the first symptom of recovery in profound stupefactions.” As if to increase the dosage of derision, Paine then sneers at General Howe directly: “I laugh at your notion of conquering America”; your proclamation of authority is looked at only “to be laughed at.” Parliament had treated American resistance as “unworthy of a serious thought” and considered it “a triumph of laughter.” Now it was America’s turn to laugh.³⁸

Paine’s similes are as striking as the smiles they elicited. Britain was “like a gamester nearly ruined” hoping to make up his losses with one last near-impossible bet. Her leaders were “like men in a state of intoxication,” too drunk to see their own “stupidity.” Howe’s military maneuvers resembled “a puppy pursuing his tail” or a “military jig” that looked “truly ridiculous,” and his army was “like a wounded, disabled whale” posing danger only through the helpless “flapping of [its] tail.” Turning on his own, Paine wrote that war-averse Quakers were like “antiquated virgins” who mistake “wrinkles for dimples” and, ignorant of their own ugliness, “wonder at the stupid world for not admiring them.” Readers could not help but snicker at the pictures Paine was painting: bumbling drunkards or ugly old women, desperate gamblers or frolicking soldiers, hyperactive puppies or thrash-about whales.³⁹

Throughout Paine’s portrayal, Britain is “mad and foolish,” her military officers are more like “dancing-master[s]” than soldiers, and General Howe specifically is “truly ridiculous.” Willing to see

³⁸ Ibid., 1:252, 275, 246, 266, 245, 191, 190, 272.

³⁹ Ibid., 1:200, 263, 243, 198, 221.

the latter's "folly in every point of view I can place it," Paine admits to saying in "jest what I wish you to see in earnest." And jest he did, since nothing less cutting would awaken them to reason. After all, "to argue with a man who has renounced the use and authority of reason," Paine says to Howe, "is like administering medicine to the dead, or endeavoring to convert an atheist by scripture." Paine allows him the enjoyment of his own flawed opinion, along with his "insensibility of feeling and reflecting." Holding to such is his natural right, just as it is "the prerogative of animals," marking Howe as an equal to the "savage" and the inferior of the "bear." Paine later dubs Sir Howe "the new knight of the windmill and post," combining the comical image of Don Quixote with the deplorable image of a pilloried perjurer, the first to be laughed at and the second to be publicly shamed. He hints at an even more violent treatment when he recommends "a balmage...of humble tar" and "a hieroglyphic of feathers" to "rival in finery all the mummies of Egypt," tar and feathers being yet another example of shaming someone through a painful reduction to the absurd. An extreme measure, perhaps, but what better to cure "the venomous malignity of a serpent and the spiteful imbecility of an inferior reptile"?⁴⁰

Though Howe is his favorite target in the *Crisis*, Paine is at his sarcastic best in disparaging King George. "Good Heavens!" he cries, "what volumes of thanks does America owe to Britain! What infinite obligation to the fool, that fills, with paradoxical vacancy, the throne!" Turning the apothecary he continues, "Nothing but the sharpest essence of villany, compounded with the strongest distillation of folly" could have formed a solvent strong enough to dissolve such bonds of loyalty. Combining alliteration with insult he heaps scorns upon those who act "as if proud of being cuckolded by a creature called a king." By calling them cuckolds, Paine was not only laughing at loyalists, he was mocking their manhood. As he said elsewhere, Britain's idle threats had "feebleness and cowardice on the face of [them]," and thus could only be distressing to "women and weak minds" (the stereotypical antitheses of reasoned masculinity). Meanwhile, "any one who can reason justly and firmly" (think rational men) would also be "able to look and laugh them in the face." Paine dismissed England's later calls for

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1:188, 193, 243, 183, 233, 235, 237.

reconciliation as “childish,” and asked if it was “manly to sob over it like a child for its rattle, and invite the laughter of the world, by declarations of disgrace.” At a time when men dueled to defend their slighted honor, Paine’s rhetoric of ridicule was a white glove to the face.⁴¹

It was Paine’s psychological anthropology that informed his use of ridicule, just as it had for Europe’s eighteenth-century philosophers of wit. “When the governing passion of any man, or set of men, is once known,” he wrote in the *Crisis*, the method of managing them is easy.” With shame being just such a governing passion, Paine’s method of mockery is well founded, leading him to paint the political picture in such a way as to “make you blush.” Then, to justify his appeal to shame, he adds, “But, as, when any of the prouder passions are hurt, it is much better philosophy to let a man slip into a good temper than to attack him in a bad one, for that reason, therefore, I only state the case, and leave you to reflect upon it.” Especially in aspiring America, self-respect was among the proudest of passions, but hurting it with humor was a way of softening the blow. It leveraged good temper and allowed the rhetor to seem disinterested—dropping hints in softened soil and then nonchalantly walking away. Moreover, in ever-impulsive man, emotion acted more quickly than intellect. “In sentimental differences,” it was often “some striking circumstance, or some forcible reason quickly conceived,” that “effect[ed] in an instant what neither argument nor example could produce in an age.” Paine therefore inundated his readers with rhetoric best suited to effect this type of blitzkrieg change of heart.⁴²

RIGHTS OF MAN

Proud that his writings had helped America win her ideological and then political revolutions, Thomas Paine was eager for the rhetoric of ridicule to cross the Atlantic and return to the lands of its birth. In 1791 and 1792, therefore, he wrote *Rights of Man*, in defense of the increasingly controversial French Revolution and in hopes that similar social and political upheaval would spread to his native

⁴¹ Ibid., 1: 212, 216, 224, 223, 364.

⁴² Ibid., 1:225, 288, 214.

England. In this lengthy two-part volume, Paine combines to outstanding effect the best elements of his earlier writings: the political populism of *Common Sense*, the targeted antagonism of “The Forester’s Letters,” and the personality politics of *The American Crisis*, exchanging General Howe for an even loftier adversary, conservative philosopher and parliamentarian Edmund Burke. With a more eloquent rival and a more encompassing stage, however, Paine did little to restrain his ridicule or polish his oft-informal prose, sneering at Burke’s “learned jargon” and offering to serve as his interpreter to the unlettered masses, an audience with whom Paine resonated far more naturally. If anything, his American experience had emboldened his more brash, more “American” humor, and with it, he hoped to laugh, mock, or shame the Europeans into demanding their liberty as well. In both hemispheres, he envisioned a “new order of things” emerging from a “new order of thoughts.”⁴³

As opposed to his earlier writings, this time Paine wrote under his actual name, though by then it was synonymous with the oft-invoked “Common Sense.” With or without the pseudonym, the assumption (in both senses of the word) of commonsense self-evidence still did most of his rhetoric’s heavy lifting. And as before, it was nonsense that helped police common sense’s porous and oft-contested boundaries. Paine linked aristocracy with “imbecility,” for example, credited its decline to “contempt” rather than “hatred,” and observed that it was “rather jeered at as an ass, than dreaded as a lion.” To this Paine would add more jeering of his own, as when he laughed that the term “Nobility” is better rendered “No-ability,” an act of word-play meant to do some of his rhetorical word-work.⁴⁴

As with Cato in the “Forester’s Letters,” Howe in the *Crisis* papers, and even King George in *Common Sense*, Paine takes a rival political position and largely embodies it in a flesh-and-blood antagonist—a whipping boy who, being more tangible, is easier to attack. In *Rights of Man* he takes on Burke from the beginning. Paine accuses him of “rancour, prejudice, [and] ignorance” for having “poured forth” so many “epithet[s] of abuse” in such “copious fury” and in such “a phrenzy of passion.”

⁴³ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (1791); in *Writings*, 2:358–59, 333.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:347.

And all in defense of a principle—hereditary monarchy—that is “the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies.” Paine detects “poison” in Burke’s “horrid principles,” but then downgrades the poison’s potency by labelling it the greatest “absurdity” imaginable: “a more ridiculous figure of government” one “cannot conceive.” Such a time-worn and outdated ideology “is now so exploded as scarcely to be remembered,” blown up by explosions of laughter, Paine seems to suggest.⁴⁵

Sure enough, Paine writes that the concept of monarchy was “falling into ridicule” and was already “considered as an absurdity” in America. Ask an American if he misses having a King and he would ask “if I take him for an idiot.” Paine’s adopted countrymen were aware that monarchy had been “imposed on the credulity of mankind” through unnumbered “absurdities,” but freedom was proceeding with “a mightiness of reason” that its enemies “cannot keep pace with.” Burke and his outdated ideals had fallen behind the period’s political pace, but Paine allowed his rival to defend the indefensible at his own pleasure—and peril. “If he can amuse himself” with the “childish names and distinctions” required to argue the impossible, “I shall not interrupt his pleasure.” At one point Paine asks Burke directly, “Is this the language of a rational man?”⁴⁶

Taking issue with Burke’s counterrevolutionary *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Paine downgrades his target from the weighty to the lightweight, all the better to treat it lightheartedly. He then excuses his comic treatment of Burke by shifting the blame from the source to the target, a common tactic in ridicule, which makes the butt of the joke inherently laughable. “If Mr. Burke’s arguments have not weight enough to keep one serious,” Paine apologizes, “the fault is less mine than his; and as I am willing to make an apology to the reader for the liberty I have taken, I hope Mr. Burke will also make his for giving the cause.” For his part, Burke attempted to brand Paine and his French compatriots as “comedians at a fair” and as players in a “monstrous tragic-comic scene,” but it was Paine who employed the comic branding to most damning effect. By the end of *Rights* he predicts that

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2:275–79, 416.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 2:366, 367, 279, 284, 414, 286.

“the time is not very distant when England will laugh at itself,” suggesting that those who agreed with him were simply more quick-witted and were already getting the joke.⁴⁷

Paine makes “hereditary legislators” as “absurd as an hereditary mathematician” and “as ridiculous as an hereditary poet-laureat.” In the second part he returns to this idea, admitting, “I smile to myself when I contemplate the ridiculous insignificance into which literature and all the sciences would sink, were they made hereditary.” By “smiling,” he dismisses the seriousness of his opponent’s position, and acts as if he were getting the joke rather than making it. Indeed, it was “nature” herself that “acts as if she disowned and sported with the hereditary system”—“sporting,” like “smiling,” a signal of nonserious play. This she did by reducing “the mental characters of successors” to a level “below the average of human understanding,” one generation “a tyrant, another an idiot, a third insane, and some all three together.” With this rogue’s gallery lined up before them, readers had a final alternative that made for an easy choice: reject hereditary monarchy and prove that you are none of the above.⁴⁸

As smiling and sporting suggest, Paine’s comic frame repeatedly turns kingship not into tragedy, which is meant to be taken seriously, but into comedy, which can be laughingly dismissed. Were it not for “the miseries of war” which “check all inclination to mirth, and turn laughter into grief,” he wrote in the preface to the French edition of *Rights of Man*, “the frantic conduct of the government of England would only excite ridicule.” To throw off that inhibition, therefore, Paine mocks monarchy directly. At one point he calls it a “farce,” and elsewhere “a silly, contemptible thing.” It is “the greatest of all ridiculous things,” full of “childish embarrassments.” Elsewhere he observed that “Hereditary succession is a burlesque upon monarchy,” thus making the system the butt of its own joke. “It puts it in the most ridiculous light” (just as Paine was doing), “by presenting it as an office which any child or idiot may fill.” By calling attention to these absurdities, Paine hoped to rouse the “mass of sense [that was] lying in a dormant state,” in part by decrying the “indiscriminate reverence” and “obedience to

⁴⁷ Ibid., 2:440, 508; see also Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 50–51.

⁴⁸ Paine, *Rights of Man*, in *Writings*, 2:323, 419, 416.

ignorance” that kept some “below the stature of mental manhood.” Citing instances of regents assuming power as they wait for underage heirs to take the throne, he makes a statement that could equally apply to the immaturity of those content with such childish forms of government: “It is ridiculous that nations are to wait...till boys grow to be men.”⁴⁹

By linking reason to maturity and manhood (already the dominant assumption) and calling both into question, Paine could leverage shame at multiple angles. He had already cited Archimedes when he said that with the right place to stand on, he could raise “Reason and Liberty” throughout the world. Apparently, human nature was that standing point, with shame as the fulcrum and ridicule the lever. One could opt for “the high democratical mind” Paine recommended, or descend to being “governed by children and idiots,” yielding to “all the motley insignificance of character, which attends such a mere animal system, the disgrace and the reproach of reason and of man.” Not much of a choice when presented in those terms. To anyone still unsure Paine adds, “Man ought to have pride, or shame enough to blush at being thus imposed upon,” adding by way of self-fulfilling prophecy, “and when he feel his proper character, he will.”⁵⁰

By employing humor—at times insouciant and dismissive, at other times derisive and scornful—Paine turns the substantive political treatise Burke intended (and future generations of conservatives applauded) into an imaginative work of irrational fancy. At one point he calls it a “parody” and elsewhere a play, complete with “theatrical exaggerations” penned while “in the rhapsody of his imagination.” Such fictions are not meant to be analyzed and argued against, much less allowed to be implemented in actual practice. Paine thus excuses himself and his audience from the more difficult labor of weighing Burke’s arguments and addressing them rationally. If Burke’s work was a “Comedy of Errors” and a “pantomime of *Hush*,” one should laugh and let it pass away in silence.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid., 2:273–74, 425, 426, 447, 417, 419, 420.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 2:401, 423, 426, 481.

⁵¹ Ibid., 2:287, 286, 296, 315.

True to this second tactic, and echoing what he had said of earlier adversaries, Paine asserts that his opponent “merits not reply,” deserving instead either “contempt for his prostitute principles, or pity for his ignorance.” With mock exasperation he prays, “From such principles, and such ignorance, good Lord deliver the world!” He later excuses himself from arguing more specifically by saying that Burke’s position was “too detestable to be made a subject of debate; and therefore, I pass it over with no other notice than exposing it.” What more could he do against the “gay and flowery” language of his opponent, which Paine compares to “a place in America called Point-no-Point” because it “continually recedes” as you pursue it, and ends up being “no point at all”? Burke’s words are more “theatrical” than rational, are written for “the sake of show” instead of the sake of argument, and are meant to produce, “through the weakness of sympathy, a weeping effect.” How sad that Burke has only discovered “a world of wind mills,” with the added sorrow “that there are no Quixots to attack them.”⁵²

Of course, in Paine’s hands, there actually was a Quixote to attack those windmills, and as with the celebrated Man of La Mancha, it was the same disordered mind that invented them in the first place. Near the end of *Rights of Man* he dubs Burke “the knight-errant of modern times,” and expresses fear that he was “growing out of date, like the man in armor.” Throughout, Paine revels in his role as Cervantes to Burke’s Knight of the Woeful Countenance. At one point he boasts that “the farce of monarchy and aristocracy, in all countries, is following that of chivalry,” laid low by the same laughter of derision. Burke, meanwhile, “is dressing for the funeral,” and should be allowed to attend it. Let him and his laughable form of government “pass quietly to the tomb of all other follies, and the mourners be comforted.” Meanwhile, and more importantly for this study, with the political and social forces of counterrevolution being laughed off the American and European stage, there seemed to be only one entrenched obstacle remaining: the conservative force of the Christian church.⁵³

⁵² Ibid., 2:366, 452, 286–87.

⁵³ Ibid., 2:505, 496, 508.

CONCLUSION

After this whirlwind tour through Paine's major writings, it should be obvious that the rhetoric of ridicule infused almost everything he wrote. Few are the publications that do not descend to mockery or indulge in jest, even when it was Paine accusing his opponents of using words as a mere "juggle to amuse the people with." This was Paine's description of the "ridiculous puffs" being printed by Silas Deane and his "whirligig friend Mr. Plain Truth" (Mr. Common Sense's rival in trademarking self-evidence). Notably, during that affair it was not solely his opponents' graft and corruption that Paine protested; he expressed disgust that Deane and his associates lacked "wit, matter or sentiment" in their polemics and had "neither wit, manners nor honesty" in their personalities, lack of genteel humor being the common complaint. The least Deane could have done was engage in gentlemanly repartee, but his "ungenteel evasion[s]" forced Paine into a battle of wits against an unarmed opponent, "gentlemen [who] seem to wince before they are touched." Decrying his adversary's "wretched support" and "crazy supporters," he confessed to his own sympathizers, "I am really ashamed to be seen replying to such ridiculous trash."⁵⁴

In this we see Paine as a fitting personification of that most prized of European exports: the Enlightenment's enthusiasm for the politics of wit. Fan of Voltaire, Swift, Cervantes, Addison, and heir to a host of lesser luminaries, Paine bore the mantle of Hobbes's sudden glory, Shaftesbury's test of truth, Hutcheson's sociable wit-work, Reid's disciplinary ridicule, and Fénelon's instinctual laughter of discernment. Citizen on two continents and at home in both the intellectual and workaday worlds, Thomas Paine embodied a transatlantic community that took its laughter seriously, whatever the social strata. He reveled in a "public mind" that could "smile at wit, or be diverted with strokes of satirical humor," and successfully shaped that mind through his own frequent recourse to ridicule.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Thomas Paine, "To the Public on Mr. Deane's Affair," in *Complete Writings*, 2:112–16, 125, 101, 146–47.

⁵⁵ Thomas Paine, "Thomas Paine to the Citizens of the United States, Letter IV," *The National Intelligencer*, Dec. 6, 1802, in *Writings*, 3:399.

In a celebrated literary career that spanned more than three decades, Thomas Paine used nonsense to shore up *Common Sense*, swung a comic axe in “The Forester’s Letters,” turned *The American Crisis* into an anti-British farce, and proved that mocking one’s opponent was one of the inalienable *Rights of Man*. In each endeavor he pitted “self-evident absurdity” against common sense reality (both portrayals being largely of his own invention), convinced that readers thus persuaded would correctly determine which side should be proudly adopted and which “would justly be the ridicule of the world.” By the time he was done depicting each contestant, the ideas he opposed had become “a comedy of errors,” and it was only a matter of time until “the actors [were] chased from the stage.”⁵⁶

As described in this chapter, Paine turned to humor to entertain his friends and to infuriate his enemies. His ridicule popped pretension and empowered the lowliest laughs. It uprooted assumptions and turned the status quo into childish acquiescence, reversing previous polarities of embarrassment and pride. At times he magnified the perceived errors of his enemies through the weight of his invective, and elsewhere he minimized the gravity of their positions through his lighthearted turns of phrase. Throughout, his humor played to his readers’ aspiring sense of self, leveraging their claims to intelligence, to independence, and to manly maturity by denying those traits in his opponents, whether delegitimizing them through casual laughter or demonizing them through venomous scorn. Almost invariably, he laughed his opponents out of court in ways that denied there was even a case on the docket. Alternately flippant and fiery, Paine’s humor suggested that there was no evidence worth acknowledging, no witnesses worth cross-examining, and certainly no jury in need of convincing, for the judge, whether roused to indignation or suppressing a laugh, was dismissing the case with either a scowl or a smile.

After two decades of sharpening his wit on the anvil of political discourse, Thomas Paine, renowned mocker of monarchies, turned his full attention to an otherworldly sovereign that had reigned uninterrupted for nearly two millennia, Christianity’s Holy Bible. His *Age of Reason*, written in part

⁵⁶ Thomas Paine, “The Eighteenth Fructidor” (1794), in *Writings*, 3:347, 346, 353.

from the confines of a French prison, promised to free all Christendom from its bondage to the clergy-controlled word of God. Finishing what he started in *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man*, Paine intended to break down the final obstacle to full liberty of thought, and to do so, he wielded his habitual rhetorical weapons. After he was done dismantling, delegitimizing, and demonizing it, the Bible, Paine hoped, would evoke the same reaction he described (or invented) for one of King George's speeches: "It was inquired after with a smile, read with a laugh, and dismissed with disdain." Looking down on their former, more faithful selves (superiority), keen to what they saw as the Bible's manifest absurdities (incongruity), and free of the specter of an angry, judgmental God (relief), former believers would be able to walk away from their scriptures "with that tranquil confidence which cared nothing about its contents," since the Bible was no longer their King. Whether rejecting King George III or the King James Bible, Paine hoped that "the pride of not being laughed at would induce a man of common sense to leave it off." As he predicted in a letter to *The Republican*, with his help and through "the pride of human nature" (the usual target of Paine's ridicule), the day was coming when "Men will be ashamed of Monarchy." Thanks to *The Age of Reason*, many would begin blushing at the Bible as well.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Thomas Paine, "Common Sense, on the King of England's Speech," February 19 and 28, 1782; in *Writings*, 1:323, 326; Thomas Paine, "To the Authors of *The Republican*," July 2, 1791; in *Writings* 3:8.

CHAPTER 7

THE BIBLE AND TOM PAINE

Thick with ridicule, Paine's political writings were likewise littered with scripture, another sedimentary layer of the common man's common tongue. Though hindsight would eventually reveal Paine's stratagem (utilitarianism at best and hypocrisy at worst), leading up to *The Age of Reason's* publication the public would have assumed that Paine supported the Bible's religious claims, and that the Bible supported Paine's political positions in return. "*Common Sense* had to make biblical sense" to be generally accepted, historian James Byrd has shown, and the same was true of Paine's other works. Consequently, its author made sure to lace his writings with the well-worn language of scripture, hitching the Bible's *ethos* to his own. Examples abound throughout his work, showing Paine to be not only a consummate rhetorician, but a well-versed scriptorian, as biblically literate as the readers whose own biblical literacy he hoped to exploit. In fact, whether or not we trust his assertion that the first part of *The Age of Reason* was written without having a Bible at hand, his command of the scriptures is remarkable, no doubt the result of his Quaker upbringing, his love of literature, and his immersion in a political tradition of Hebraic republicanism that might as well have placed Moses among America's Founding Fathers. At a time when American revolutionaries were drawing upon the Bible as "a common fund of linguistic structures, legitimizing images, and organizing assumptions," Paine stands out among his peers as drawing even more deeply, more creatively, and more humorously from the biblical well, more preacher than politician in both scriptural content and revivalist style. Like the householder in one of Jesus' most obscure parables, Paine was a "scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven," able to bring forth from the scriptural treasury "things [both] new and old" (Matthew 13:52).¹

¹ James P. Byrd, *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2; Eran Shalev, *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 12; see also Nathan R. Perl-Rosenthal, "The 'Divine Right of Republics': Hebraic Republicanism and the Debate over Kingless Government in Revolutionary America," *The William and Mary*

Even if unaware of what we might call Paine's hermeneutic of exploitation, a survey of his earlier use of scripture reveals his familiarity with the raw material that would fill *The Age of Reason*, long before the goals of that work came shockingly into view. As the first part of this chapter will prove, Paine's writings are steeped in the Bible's stories and thick with the well-known phrases that had been rolling off the English tongue since the time of King James. Paine's political writings may in fact be one of the best examples of what Robert Alter said of the King James Bible, that "once a text, together with the language in which it is cast, has been authoritative, that authority continues to make its force felt in the work of later writers, even those who no longer assent to the original grounds for the authority." The power of certain texts can long outlive the authority that originally infused them, and nowhere is this more evident than in the Bible's ongoing influence. "Hewn from deep quarries of moral and spiritual experience" and full of "intrinsic poetic power," the Bible requires even its detractors to "contend with it," with the more intrepid among them "even be[ing] tempted to put it to use."²

In this chapter it will be usage first and contention second. Once we establish Paine's biblicism, we will then explore its politicization, where we first see hints of its eventual delegitimization. Those subtle insinuations would eventually become bold asseverations, but even before Paine's skepticism became unmistakable, he was leaving clues along the way. These hints will provide insight into his perspective on religion and his understanding of rhetoric, both of which explain his approach in *The Age of Reason*. Depending on one's perspective, these elements are evidence of Paine's brilliance as a polemicist or his hypocrisy as a biblicist, conclusions that Paine would likely have smiled at either way.

BIBLICAL BORROWINGS

Having seeped into Paine's vocabulary and added to his cache of literary allusions, the Bible found its way into his writings from the beginning. In many instances, Paine draws upon the Bible only

Quarterly 66, no. 3 (July 2009): 535–64.

² Robert Alter, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 4, 7.

in passing—a phrase here, an allusion there—as when he mentions “the witch of Endor” in his encomium for “The Magazine in America” or compares the gathering of manna to the catching of fish in his letter on the Newfoundland fisheries. In these cases, it was not the Bible’s authority that Paine was commandeering (more on that in a moment); rather, he was simply trading in the common coin of a biblical culture, using words and phrases that would ring familiar in his audience’s ears. This habit seems indicative of the emphasis on clever sociability and witty repartee that underwrote incongruity theory, though Paine was not yet in pursuit of incongruities. These were more like “inside jokes” requiring a knowledge of the Bible, not yet ill-natured jokes being told at the Bible’s expense.³

Examples abound from the famous to the obscure. Paine refers to “the handwriting on the wall” (an allusion to Daniel 5) in a discussion of Britain’s national debt, of “counting the cost” (a nod to Luke 14:28) in a pamphlet slighting the British military, and of “a pearl thrown before swine” (from the Sermon on the Mount [Matthew 7:6]) in an essay on war. Among his letters to Thomas Jefferson he refers to Liverpool as “the Sodom and Gomorrah of brutality” in one and mentions “Absalom (I think it was)” in another. On two separate occasions he referred to contributions he had made as offering his “mite” (adding in one, “Where the treasure is, there will the heart be also” [Matthew 6:21]), and he mentioned “Jonah at Sea” in a discussion of navies. He even added a biblical allusion to a jab at General Washington’s Revolutionary War record, suggesting that any old woman would have been just as successful with the taunt, “Deborah would have been as good as Barak.”⁴

In listing these examples (and more could be multiplied), it is important to recognize that in none of them is the Bible itself the topic at hand, nor is Paine making a point that requires the Bible as principal witness. Rather, in each instance the biblical allusion is merely tangential and could have been

³ Paine, “The Magazine in America,” in *Writings*, 1:17; “Peace, and the Newfoundland Fisheries,” in *Writings*, 2:15.

⁴ Thomas Paine, “Prospects on the Rubicon,” in *Writings*, 2:217; “To the People of England on the Invasion of England,” in *Writings*, 4:453; “On the Question, Will There be War?” in *Complete Writings*, 2:1012; Thomas Paine to Thomas Jefferson, Jan. 25, 1805 and Feb. 26, 1789, in *Complete Writings*, 2:1462, 1282; Thomas Paine to Daniel Clymer, September 1786, in *Complete Writings*, 2:1255; “Dissertations on Government” (1786), in *Writings*, 2:152; Thomas Paine to William Short (June 1, 1790), in *Complete Writings*, 2:1307; “Letter to George Washington” (1796), in *Writings*, 3:247.

eliminated with no break in logic or change in meaning. Paine was going out of his way, that is, to include these biblical phrases, knowing that they would strike a chord of familiarity in an audience steeped in the language of scripture. When he mentioned “hewers of wood and drawers of water”; threatened, “the Lord will smite thee, thou whitened wall”; and included, “it was like the trees of the forest, saying unto the bramble, come thou and reign over us”—all in the same “Letter to the Addressers”—he was speaking his readers’ language, a language he also considered his own. With no little irony, even while continuing his work on *The Age of Reason* during his French imprisonment, Paine was still thinking in terms of the Bible he was picking apart. Seeing his friends sent to the guillotine almost daily, he felt “almost [to] say like Job’s servant, ‘and I, only, am escaped.’”⁵

Long after his true feelings regarding the Bible had become clear, Paine was still weaving biblical language into his writings, often with comic effect. A prime example is Paine’s open letter to the citizens of the United States, published in 1802. In it, Paine drolly compares ex-President John Adams to the biblical king of Babylon, picturing Adams “strutting” around the capital in “consummate vanity” until, “like Nebuchadnezzar, [he] was driven from among men, and fled with the speed of a post-horse.” In the same letter, he describes his clerical critics as having raised “the chorus of *Crucify him, crucify him*” against Paine’s alleged infidelity, drawing an awkward comparison between himself and the crucified Christ. A less objectionable but no less ironic allusion is made to the Passover, when Paine portrays his narrow escape from the French guillotine as “the destroying angel pass[ing] by” a mark that was placed on his prison door (proof that Providence did more to bring Paine home to “the Promised Land” than “she did by the Jews,” who “all died in the wilderness”). He even puns on Vice President Burr’s first name while poking fun at him for interfering in Jefferson’s election, saying of a co-conspirator, “To save *Aaron*, he betrays *Moses*, and then turns informer against the *Golden Calf*.” By letter’s end, he had compared the Federalists in Congress to “the serpent that beguiled Eve” and joked

⁵ Thomas Paine, “Letter Addressed to the Addressers on the Late Proclamation” (1792), in *Writings*, 3:63, 71, 77; “Forgetfulness” (1794), in *Writings*, 3:319.

that much to John Adams's honor, "certain *eastern wise men*" had come "to pay homage to him on his birthday." To the end of his life, Paine spoke a biblical dialect that had long since become his own.⁶

As innocent as most of the foregoing allusions appear, Paine's was usually a more intentional rhetorical biblicism, put to polemical ends. We saw a hint of this in the previous paragraph, when Paine bullied John Adams with a biblical text, but in most of what we've seen thus far Paine turned to the Bible casually, to illustrate, not deliberately, to convince. Having acknowledged this less purposeful use of the scriptures, we now turn to his more calculated employment of the Bible, which served as an occasional co-author, even co-conspirator, in Paine's efforts to move readers in particular ways. As with the Silas Deane affair, in which Paine compared Deane to both a fallen Adam ("hid[ing] from the eye of the public like Adam from the face of his Maker") and a guilty Jonas (the source of the threatening storm), Paine often asked the Bible to carry a share of the rhetorical weight.⁷

In an early essay on "African Slavery in America," for example, we see clear evidence of his use of the Bible as a source of authority and persuasive power (along with subtle hints as to his attitude concerning the Old Testament, which point us in the direction of biblical delegitimization yet to come). Having already appealed to his readers' "Reason [and] Conscience" (the twin pillars of Paine's common sense epistemology), Paine then attacks one of pro-slavery's favorite defenses, biblical precedents, as being "most shocking of all." "One would have thought none but infidel cavillers would endeavour to make them appear contrary to the plain dictates of natural light, and Conscience," he said unironically. In retrospect, one cannot help but smile at Paine's condemnation of "infidel cavillers" pitting reason against scripture, but that need not occupy us yet. Sufficient for now is his use of "the Sacred Scriptures" to bolster his argument and weaken the rival view. To those who protest that "the practice was permitted to the Jews," Paine responds that "the example of the Jews, in many things, may not be imitated by us," citing polygamy, divorce, and the slaughter of the Canaanites as examples. Here already we see Paine's

⁶ Thomas Paine, "To the Citizens of the United States" (1802), in *Writings*, 3:390, 394, 396, 406, 415–16.

⁷ Paine, "The Affair of Silas Deane," in *Complete Writings*, 2:150, 162.

recognition of some of the Bible's more objectionable practices, evidence he would damningly present in *The Age of Reason*. Against these Old Testament examples, Paine invokes the "Gospel light" of the New: not only Paul's specific condemnation of "menstealers" (1 Timothy 1:10), but more general truths ranging from the erasure of national distinctions and the universality of Christian love to the Second Great Commandment and the Golden Rule. Only "pretended Christians" (again, a smile must be allowed us) would persist in a practice in such stark "opposition to the Redeemer's cause" and their own "*Divine Religion*." Perhaps it was empathy alone that could soften a hardened heart: enslave a few thousand white Americans, Paine suggests, and see if that "might convince more than Reason, or the Bible."⁸

In this final statement Paine lets fall the ace from his sleeve, the rhetorical trump card of personal feeling. Leveraging emotion, especially through the rhetoric of ridicule, would be a hand he would play repeatedly when pretending to pit two of his oft-used authorities—Reason and Scripture—against each other in *The Age of Reason*. But here all three seem firmly on his side, and he would continue to call them collectively to the witness stand. He quotes from the Parable of the Rich Fool in his condemnation of Lord Clive and sarcastically sorrows over Clive's passing, picturing "some David mourning for his Absalom" (recall that Absalom died in infamy as well). He reminds his readers of the New Testament's prohibition of revenge as he calls for a similar end to the practice of dueling, and alludes to both the Lord's Prayer and the Parable of Abraham and the Dives when arguing on behalf of the officers of excise. In these instances, Paine was not merely mining the Bible for stock words or phrases; he was calling upon the Bible to provide amicus briefs in court. Pushing the metaphor still further, for years the Bible would serve as Paine's congenial second witness; only later would he shift its role to defendant in the dock.⁹

⁸ Justice and Humanity [Thomas Paine], "African Slavery in America," *Postscript to the Pennsylvania Journal and the Weekly Advertiser*, March 8, 1775; in *Writings*, 1:4–9.

⁹ Atlanticus [Thomas Paine], "The Life and Death of Lord Clive" (March 1775), and "Duelling" (May 1775); both in *Writings*, 1:32, 33, 45; Paine, "Case of the Officers of Excise," in *Writings*, 4:502, 500.

THE POLITICIZATION OF THE BIBLE

Paine's biblical borrowing appears most famously within his most famous work, with enough scripture scattered throughout *Common Sense* to make it seem that American independence had the sanction of heaven. As Ethan Allen had done in his *Narrative*, Paine leaned on biblical passages to present his opinions and bolster his arguments, borrowing the language of scripture to share in the Bible's authority and appeal to the religious predilections of his audience. This was more than vague religiosity, as when he gives a nod to "Christian kindness" or defends "above all things, the free exercise of religion" and the "diversity of religious opinions." Yes, Paine went to great lengths to appear more orthodox than he really was—it is God, not "the Royal Brute of Britain," that is the true "King of America," he proclaimed at one point—but his biblicism shows a familiarity and intentionality that goes far beyond a nebulous providentialism or dubious shouts of praise. Turning biblical prophets into revolutionary patriots, in Paine's major works he deliberately politicizes the Bible.¹⁰

In *Common Sense*, for example, Paine alludes to Adam and Eve when he calls government, like dress, "the badge of lost innocence." He makes original sin and hereditary succession "unanswerabl[e]" parallels, the one subjecting us to Satan and the other to an earthly sovereign. He describes "heaven" as the only place "impregnable to vice," mentions "Lucifer in his revolt" and calls King George "the hardened, sullen tempered Pharaoh of England." He quotes the New Testament in affirming that "a house divided against itself" cannot stand, refers to "the scripture chronology" when invoking history, and calls America's chance for a new beginning the first "since the days of Noah." Most explicitly, Paine opposes monarchy "on the authority of scripture," calling Gideon and Samuel to the stand to condemn the Jews' "national delusion [in] request[ing] a king." He quotes their words and recounts their history at considerable length before concluding that "all anti-monarchical parts of scripture have been very smoothly glossed over in monarchical governments," evidence of the clergy's complicity with kings. In the middle of his exegesis, Paine states in the most homespun of terms that monarchy was

¹⁰ Paine, *Common Sense*, in *Writings*, 1:108, 98, 99.

nothing but a Jewish “hankering” for “the idolatrous customs of the Heathens,” placing so-called Enlightened Christians on the level with Pagans and Jews “fully bent on their folly.” By the end of his scriptural excursus, Paine affirms on the authority of 1 Samuel 8 that if monarchy is not false, then the scriptures must be. As time would tell, Paine hoped eventually to falsify both, but for now it was safer to enthrone the Bible at the expense of the Crown. He envisioned a national charter ceremoniously presented with “the Divine Law, the Word of God” resting beneath it and a crown placed above it, symbolically showing that “in America the law is king.” The ceremony would end with the demolition of the symbol of royal authority at the uppermost. Only later would it become clear that Paine’s aims for independence in every sphere inspired his attempts to demolish the underlying authority as well.¹¹

Paine’s politicization of the Bible continued in *The American Crisis*, where he invokes the Epistle of James (“shew your faith by your works”); the Book of Acts (“live and breathe and have a being”); the Epistle to the Philippians (“a peace which passeth all understanding”); the Book of Luke (putting one’s “hands to the plough”); and the Psalms (“the fool hath said in his heart, There is no God” as applied to an “atheism against nature”). He references the account of the Fall (comparing Lord Howe to Satan and America to Eve); the story of Jacob and Esau (selling one’s “birthright for a little *salt*” [the salt tax]); and the Sermon on the Mount (“like a pearl before swine”). He speaks of Judas and John, Herod and the destruction of the innocents, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the shaving of Samson, the “passionate folly” of Pharaoh, the “writing on the wall” from Daniel, and the story of Jonah—both the belly of the whale and the lesser-known withered gourd. These were “the times that tried men’s souls.” What better to stir those souls than words they associated with God?¹²

By the writing of *Rights of Man*, Paine was still not ready to reveal his antibiblicism, but neither was he ready to end his forced conscription of the word of God. At one point he accuses Burke of setting

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1:69, 81, 70, 97, 73, 75, 118, 76–79, 99.

¹² Paine, *The American Crisis*; in *Writings*, 1:176, 363–64, 177, 194, 202, 180, 192, 250, 233, 248, 266, 281, 297, 294, 291. Scriptural references alluded to or quoted include James 2:18; Acts 17:28; Philippians 4:7; Luke 9:62; Psalms 14:1; Genesis 25:29–34; Matthew 7:6; Matthew 2; Genesis 19; Judges 16; Exodus 5–14; Daniel 5; Jonah 1–4.

up a “political Adam, in whom all posterity are bound for ever”; at another he alludes to the words of John the Baptist (“lay then the axe to the root” [Matt. 3:10]); and elsewhere he quotes the apostle Paul without naming him, crediting “a certain writer, of some antiquity” instead. He compares Great Britain to Samson bringing down the temple upon its own head, and likens “the absurdity of worshipping Aaron’s molten calf, or Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image” to the absurdity of revering the Crown. Reflecting on his contest with Burke a decade later—and twenty years removed from America’s victory in the Revolution—Paine was still making fun of Britain’s defeat and turning to the Bible for his punchlines. Calling Solomon’s son Rehoboam “a fool” for having “lost ten tribes out of twelve,” he laughed that “there are those in later times who lost thirteen.”¹³

Outside of his major works, one of Paine’s most ingenious attempts at this politically motivated scriptural subterfuge is his 1792 “Letter Addressed to the Addressers,” published during Britain’s attempts to suppress both the rights of men and Paine’s *Rights of Man*. It contains a remix of *Common Sense*’s biblical anti-monarchialism, but one that had grown more acerbic after sixteen years. Then again, it had also grown more sugary, and dripped with a syrupy sarcasm that sweetened the whole. Written so close to the publication of the first part of *The Age of Reason*, it also approached Paine’s long-suppressed anti-biblicism, though for now he safely couched it in words spoken by someone else.

In mock generosity, Paine offers the British Lords a speech they might give “on the excellence of the [British] constitution.” As it begins, these parliamentarians express their delight in having such a vast supply of wisdom, undiminished for ages since none of it has ever been put to use. Their reverie is interrupted, however, when they realize that their vaunted constitution has not fixed a minimum amount of intelligence required in their illustrious king. For this, the Lords propose a bill based in the Bible, or as Paine’s imaginary orator calls it, “the Statutes at Large of the Jews, ‘a book, my Lords, which I have not read, and whose purport I know only by report,’ *but perhaps the bench of Bishops can recollect*

¹³ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*; in *Writings*, 2:280, 295, 319, 471, 316; “The Construction of Iron Bridges” (June 13, 1803), in *Writings*, 4:447.

something about it.” Hiding behind an invented speaker, Paine here desacralizes the Bible even as he sets it up as a political authority (his *modus operandi* for years), and suggests that its reputation is based in tradition alone since the nobility, and probably even the clergy, have never read the book themselves. Paine is at his comedic, belittling best when his speaker identifies the passage that inspired the bill, one overlooked during *Common Sense*’s creation: “Saul gave the most convincing proofs of royal wisdom before he was made a King, *for he was sent to seek his father’s asses and he could not find them.*” Here was the precedent deserving of Parliament’s enactment: require all future kings to evince the wisdom required to be unable to find lost livestock, something any common farmer could do.¹⁴

Not yet finished with his fun, Paine’s proxy continues, “We further read, my Lords, in the said Statutes at Large of the Jews, that Samuel, who certainly was as mad as any Man-of-Rights-Man now-a-days (hear him! hear him!), was highly displeased, and even exasperated, at the proposal of the Jews to have a King, and he warned them against it with all that assurance and impudence of which he was master.” Here Paine repeats the same text that lay at the heart of the Hebraic republicanism in *Common Sense* (1 Samuel 8); however, he frames it in a comic anti-clericalism that was absent in his earlier work. “I have been, my Lords, at the trouble of going all the way to *Paternoster-row*, to procure an extract from the printed copy. I was told that I should meet with it there, or in *Amen-corner*, for I was then going, my Lords, to rummage for it among the curiosities of the *Antiquarian Society*. I will read the extracts to your Lordships, to shew how little Samuel know of the matter.” Suggesting that the Bible had been relegated to the haunts of superstitious Catholics, irrational enthusiasts, or antiquated primitivists, he then redeems it by implying that all of Samuel’s prophecies (of the dangers of having a king) came to pass. However, this he does in words drenched in sarcasm, then to damn the principle of monarchy, later to damn the Bible itself. That is, read sarcastically, their words show Samuel to be a true prophet, for the people of Israel suffered as unbearably under their kings as England was suffering under theirs. But read straightforwardly, the speaker’s words foreshadow the bold anti-biblicism Paine would put in print in

¹⁴ Thomas Paine, “Letter Addressed to the Addressers on the Late Proclamation” (1792), in *Writings*, 3:50–52.

only a few short years: “Is there a word of truth, or any thing like truth, in all that [Samuel] has said? He pretended to be a prophet, or a wise man, but has not the event proved him to be a fool, or an incendiary? Look around, my Lords, and see if any thing has happened that he pretended to foretell!”¹⁵

We will see more hints of Paine’s anti-biblicism in a moment, but by now the aims of his biblicism should be clear. By yoking a cherry-picking textualism to a republican hermeneutic, bolstering it with weaponized humor and covering the entire apparatus with the cloak of a normalizing common sense, Paine was able to brand his opponents’ positions simultaneously with three manifestations of the Scarlet Letter “I”—Immaturity, Irrationality, and Impiety. Or to borrow from the crucifixion, Paine was able to affix a sign above his enemies with words in three different tongues: the socially shaming language of puerility, the intellectually embarrassing language of absurdity, and the spiritually damning language of infidelity. Manhood, Reason, and Scripture—the Trinity of Enlightened American Christianity—were unitedly on his side. Charges of impiety carried an especially cutting edge, so Paine unsheathed it often. In *Common Sense* he exclaimed, “How impious is the title of sacred Majesty applied to a worm, who in the midst of his splendor is crumbling into dust!” and charged that offering reverence to kings is paying “idolatrous homage” which a jealous God condemns whenever a government “so impiously invades the prerogative of Heaven.” In *The American Crisis* he asserted that such idolatry reflects “a cast of mind bordering upon impiety” and warned that “even the expression” of monarchical authority “is impious; for so unlimited a power can belong only to God.” Couched in these terms, Paine’s opponents were worse than political impediments; they were religious infidels. Bolstered by the Bible, his was a project of demonization in the literal sense.¹⁶

As these examples evince, throughout his writings Paine commandeered a decontextualized Bible to press it into political service, a scriptural conscription that cared little for the Bible’s original intent. At several points in *Rights of Man*, Paine questions whether the Bible is “divine authority, or

¹⁵ Ibid., 3:52–54.

¹⁶ Paine, *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis*, in *Writings*, 1:76, 140, 170, 188.

merely historical,” but ultimately shows little concern for either possibility. He points to the Creation as the “divine origin of the rights of man,” yet says nothing of man’s expected obedience to God, as emphasized in that account. He points out that Christ can trace his genealogy to Adam, but only to suggest that liberty should find its lineage there as well. He uses “the Mosaic account of the creation” to defend “*the unity or equality of man,*” but only because that interpretation serves his democratic ends. The Bible, to Paine, was merely a cultural/literary instrument put to a larger sociopolitical purpose, a quotebook of resonant one-liners with the aura of infallibility attached. It was *ethos* for hire. As such, Paine’s use, misuse, and later abuse of the Bible fits well the common conception of rhetoric as the “harlot of the arts”—persuasive power available to anyone willing to pay. And like the prostitutes outside the taverns of Philadelphia or the consorts frequenting European courts, once his biblical rhetoric served his higher political purpose, Paine felt no compunction about casting it unceremoniously aside.¹⁷

EYEING *THE AGE OF REASON*

In less colorful terms, Paine had no qualms about using the Bible as weapon in his earlier writings and target in his final major work. The Bible served its purpose in his earlier efforts, just as it served its purpose in an earlier time. But like the “much boasted constitution of England,” which was “noble for the dark and slavish times in which it was erected” but later proved “imperfect, subject to convulsions, and incapable of producing what it seems to promise,” so too the Bible had outgrown whatever usefulness it had served in the barbaric times that gave it birth.¹⁸

Admittedly, what I just did was unfair—or at least anachronistic. The quotation is from *Common Sense*, not *The Age of Reason*, and was only an indictment of Britain, not the Bible. However, if Paine is being honest in his later boast of abandoning belief in early boyhood, and if John Adams is correct in remembering that Paine, by 1776 at least, planned to dismantle the Bible eventually, then we might be

¹⁷ Paine, *Rights of Man*; in *Writings*, 2:304–05.

¹⁸ Paine, *Common Sense*; in *Writings*, 1:72.

excused in reading Paine's future into earlier works, especially when intimations abound. Whether or not these earlier hints were meant to perform double duty at the expense of both State (then) and Church (later), they lose none of their resonance when transposed from the political to a religious register. In most cases, in fact, what Paine says of monarchy in his political writings, he says directly of the Bible in his anti-religious finale. His later rhetoric thus justifies our gathering clues from what he wrote in earlier years. An astute minister said as much, recalling (with the benefit of hindsight, since he wrote after *The Age of Reason's* appearance) that in *Rights of Man*, "whenever [Paine] has the smallest hint at religion, he seems to ridicule a particular doctrine, which thousands deem sacred and important." He first noticed it when Paine used the biblical figure Adam "as a burlesque on hereditary government," detecting that Paine's ridicule was killing two birds with one comic stone. He was convinced that beneath his political ridicule, Paine "laughed at the fundamental doctrines of Christianity," making "the transition to Deism" (his and his readers') "easy and natural."¹⁹

Anticipating Paine's later frontal attack on organized religion, it is revealing to gather his earlier insinuations, seeds that would wildly proliferate once sown in an open field of religious doubt. Though the following paragraphs are somewhat speculative, Paine's rhetoric is so suggestive that drawing parallels between the political and the religious seems justified, especially since Paine often does this explicitly himself. Connect religion and politics often enough, and Paine would have conditioned his readers to draw similar parallels without his conscious direction, the ultimate aim of the obfuscatory rhetoric at which Paine was so adept. If "my pen and my soul have ever gone together," as he earlier admitted, then examining the first is key to unlocking the second. Turning that key, Paine's pen reveals that his soul was firmly opposed to all earthly authorities, including that of the Christian Church—authority firmly rooted in the Holy Bible. He may have claimed to be steering between superstition on the one hand and infidelity on the other, but time would prove to which side his vessel listed.²⁰

¹⁹ Meek, *Sophistry Detected*, 6.

²⁰ Paine, *The American Crisis*, in *Writings*, 1:171, 196.

To begin with the most explicit connections, in *Rights of Man* Paine laments that “Government by Monks” is no better than “government by Kings,” since the first “know nothing of the world beyond the walls of a Convent” and the second are equally ignorant of life outside the palace. The “sort of superstition” that supported the latter (and by association, the former) “may last a few years more, but it cannot long resist the awakened reason and interest of man.” Paine later repeats the comparison explicitly, associating political traditionalism with “a superstitious reverence for ancient things, as monks shew relics and call them holy.” Whether “political popery” or “ecclesiastical popery,” both despotisms have “had [their] day, and [are] hastening to [their] exit. The ragged relic and the antiquated precedent, the monk and the monarch, will moulder together,” and the sooner the better. Paine’s exposés were simply speeding the natural process of enlightenment, since whether at Court or in the Church, “every ministry acts upon the same idea . . . , namely, that the people must be hood-winked, and held in superstitious ignorance by some bugbear or other.”²¹

The preceding paragraph hides Paine’s skepticism behind an acceptable anti-Catholicism, but Protestantism could be tarred with the same brush. Elsewhere in *Rights of Man*, Paine more broadly connects “the Monarchy, the Parliament, and the Church,” not merely in an association of authority but in an actual “*rivalship* of despotism”—a rivalry that religion seems to have won, since “the feudal despotism” can only operate “locally,” whereas “the ministerial despotism operat[es] everywhere.” Later Paine points to religion as the oldest imposition of authority, the “government of priestcraft” founded on “Superstition” preceding that of “conquerors” founded on “Power,” and both, only recently, giving way to that of “reason” founded on “the common rights of man.” But until reason reigns supreme, these older tyrannies remain dark possibilities, especially when in league with one another. “Fraud [and] force,” “*Church and State*,” the “key of St. Peter and the key of the Treasury”—these unnatural unions are in Paine’s depiction “a sort of mule-animal, capable only of destroying, and not of breeding up.” As long as superstition lasts, “artful men” can continue “pretend[ing], through the medium of oracles, to hold

²¹ Paine, *Rights of Man*, in *Writings*, 2:386, 417, 441, 473.

intercourse with the Deity, as familiarly as they now march up the back-stairs in European courts.” In either case, whether spiritually or temporally, it is “knaves and fools” that are being “imposed upon.”²²

Even in less overt instances, it is easy to see how Paine’s words regarding political tyranny can fittingly be applied to the religious realm. “Every office and department has its despotism,” Paine argued in *Rights of Man*, “Every place has its Bastille, and every Bastille its despot.” In Christianity’s case, their Bastille was the Bible and the clergy its guard, arrayed, like the political peers Paine was discussing, in “an endless labyrinth of office,” until the ultimate source of their authority was “scarcely perceptible” and therefore unassailable. In either case, despotism was “founded upon custom and usage,” and had persisted so long that a deep-seated sense of duty led the unthinking to tyrannize themselves. In his “Letter to Mr. Erskine,” published after *The Age of Reason* revealed his true colors, Paine made no such veiled pretenses. “Of all the tyrannies that afflict mankind, tyranny in religion is the worst: Every other species of tyranny is limited to the world we live in, but this attempts a stride beyond the grave, and seeks to pursue us into eternity.”²³

Before *The Age of Reason* made his antipathy obvious, Paine avoided throwing down the gauntlet and dropped subtler hints instead. Again from *Rights of Man*, replace courtiers with clergy and monarchy with scripture and we see one of Paine’s later points in *The Age of Reason*: “*Notwithstanding appearances, there is not any description of men that despise monarchy [scripture] so much as courtiers [the clergy].*” Translated into religious terms, the clergy are enlightened enough to see through the Bible’s pretensions, but pay it self-serving homage nonetheless. Like their courtly counterparts, ministers “well know, that if it were seen by others, as it is seen by them, the juggle could not be kept up; they are in the condition of men who get their living by a show, and to whom the folly of that show is so familiar that they ridicule it; but were the audience to be made as wise in this respect as themselves, there would be an end to the show and the profits with it. The difference between a republican and a

²² Ibid., 2:285, 308, 327.

²³ Ibid, 2:285; Paine, “A Letter to Mr. Erskine,” in *Writings*, 4:211.

courtier with respect to monarchy [or in this case between a skeptic and a clergyman with respect to scripture] is, that the one opposes monarchy [or scripture], believing it to be something; and the other laughs at it, knowing it to be nothing.” A later phrase describing monarchy captures Paine’s view of the Bible precisely: “It is the master-fraud, which shelters all others.”²⁴

Tying Paine’s religious and political antiestablishmentarianism tightly together, a pair of experts observed that even *The Age of Reason* was primarily “a political treatise,” though “with a strong religious design,” and the same could be said of his earlier works. Because the State tended to draw much of its authority from (or hide much of its power behind) its established Church, both were enemies to individual freedom. To borrow from the Book of Revelation, the beast (the State) was in league with the false prophet (the Church), and both must be cast into the bottomless pit. *The Age of Reason* was thus intended to free humanity from “the despotic triumvirate of scripture, church, and state,” with the Bible as the center of those three concentric circles.²⁵

In Paine’s estimation, clerical authority and their bookish beliefs were anachronisms from a less enlightened age, to be set aside, like his earlier Quaker pacifism, when circumstances demanded. It was to Quakers withholding their help, in fact, that Paine made this statement in 1775: “We live not in a world of angels. The reign of Satan is not ended; neither are we to expect to be defended by miracles.” Relegating biblical miracles to a bygone age, he concluded that “the pillar of the cloud existed only in the wilderness” and divine protection occurred only “in the nonage of the Israelites.” With talk of providence past and the absence of angels, Paine cordons off his readers from their sense of living in biblical time. Faith in the intervening God of scripture might be acceptable in one’s “nonage” (the opposite of Kant’s Enlightenment), but by Paine’s day, human nature (common sense realism) and Nature’s God (the abiblical God of deism) demand that people act and think for themselves.²⁶

²⁴ Paine, *Rights of Man*, in *Writings*, 2:331–32, 448–49.

²⁵ Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 18.

²⁶ A Lover of Peace [Thomas Paine], “Thoughts on Defensive War” (July 1775); in *Writings*, 1:55.

Later in the same article, among the first Paine published in America, he links political and spiritual freedom repeatedly, the two being “intimately related” and “sympathetically united.” Here, the ostensibly pious Paine credits the “*spiritual freedom*” manifest “through Christ” for ushering in “*political liberty*,” which increases “in proportion” to the rise of its religious patron. But in a first-shall-be-last-and-last-shall-be-first reversal, after pursuing political freedom from the British king, Paine would ultimately fight for spiritual freedom from “the visible church.” Though here he condemns “the popish world” to reassure his Protestant readership, he distinguishes between “popish principles,” which Anglo-American society avoided, and “popish practices,” which were subjugating even them. Darkness and ignorance could be turned to political (and religious) purposes even in Protestant countries, for they “will always be a temptation to the lovers of arbitrary power.” As Paine would prove in his later shift from attacking State to opposing Church, “the union between spiritual freedom and political liberty seems nearly inseparable, [and] it is our duty to defend both.” Furthermore, in both instances Paine’s aim was to recruit the erstwhile uncommitted to his side of the battle. Noninvolvement in the cause of freedom (or later in Freethought), would be mistaking “peace for cowardice.”²⁷

In a final hint from Paine’s first year in America, he wrote a short reflection on the practice of bestowing “pompous titles...on unworthy men.” His adjectives alone reveal his attitude, made all the clearer with nouns like “indignity” and “absurdity.” In this piece, it is the meaningless honorifics of nobility which Paine derides, but similar shame would be heaped on terms like “prophet,” “miracle,” and “scripture” in *The Age of Reason*. Using words pregnant with religious significance, Paine worries that empty titles “over-awe the superstitious vulgar, and forbid them to inquire into the character of the possessor: Nay more, they are, as it were, bewitched to admire in the great, the vices they would honestly condemn in themselves.” This is precisely the tack Paine would take with the objectionable Biblical practices he assigned to ancient Judaism in his earlier objection to slavery. In *The Age of Reason* he would make clear that certain biblical “virtues” would be considered “vices” if practiced today, that

²⁷ Ibid., 1:57–58.

people demand higher standards of themselves than they do of the Biblical Jehovah, and that the Bible only maintains its aura of sanctity because Christians are bewitched into avoiding a rational investigation. Here he calls it a “sacrifice of common sense” and there he would make it an outrage against it.

Thankfully, Paine implies, “the reasonable freeman sees through the magic” and “examines...before he approves.” Once the scales fall from the public’s eyes, the pride falls from the possessor of those titles, who promptly “disown their rank, and, like glow-worms, extinguish themselves into common reptiles, to avoid discovery.” In the Bible’s case, this would be a reduction, not to the level of common reptiles but of common myth—going from Gospel to glow-worm, no longer the light of the world.²⁸

Ignore the title and cover the context and in many of Paine’s polemics, one would be hard-pressed to discern whether he were puncturing political or religious pretensions. In *Rights of Man* is it political or religious rank he has in mind when he denounces the shallowness of titles? Either way, such empty obeisance “reduces man into the diminutive of man in things which are great, and the counterfeit of woman in things which are little.” In *Common Sense*, is he decrying the strength of the Crown or the Church when he speaks of “those evils which when once established [are] not easily removed,” especially when “fear” and “superstition” lie at their root? Is he speaking of Britain or the Bible when he complains that “traditionary history” is “stuff’d with fables”? Either way it is easy to “trump up some superstitious tale conveniently timed, Mahomet like, to cram...down the throats of the vulgar.” Whether in politics or religion, “antiquity” is but a “dark covering” and past views are “like the almanacks of the last year”—useful and “proper then,” but “superceded and useless now.” “Alas,” Paine reflects with equal applicability to monarchy or scripture, “we have been long led away by ancient prejudices and made large sacrifices to superstition.” In both cases, the source of those strictures must go.²⁹

Paine draws parallels between politics and religion incessantly. In *The American Crisis* Paine argues that “a narrow system of religion” is as inimical to human freedom as a “narrow system of

²⁸ Vox Populi [Thomas Paine], “Reflections on Titles,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, May 1775; in *Writings*, 1:46–47.

²⁹ Paine, *Rights of Man*, in *Writings*, 2:319; Paine, *Common Sense*, in *Writings*, 1:79, 80, 85, 86.

politics,” both being “calculated only to sour the temper, and be at variance with mankind.” Later he places “the farcical benedictions of a bishop” and “the cringing hypocrisy of a court of chaplains” on the same level as “the formality of an act of parliament,” and denies the authority of all three. To the French clergyman and political theorist Abbé Sieyès he wrote, “it is against all the hell of monarchy that I have declared war,” and to Samuel Adams he defended *The Age of Reason* for having waged the same war in reverse—not the “hell of monarchy” but the “monarchical priestcraft” of those who wielded the threat of hell. Indeed, Paine linked tyranny and hell in *The American Crisis*, since neither is “easily conquered.” *The Age of Reason* would link tyranny with heaven, an even more challenging conquest to undertake.³⁰

Scattered throughout his earlier writings are other anti-religious hints that *The Age of Reason* would make explicit. *The American Crisis* mocks British pride by comparing it to “the solemnity of prophetic confidence.” “The Forester’s Letters” bemoan “the meanest of all passions, religious spleen.” Repeatedly he blasts “the superstitious authority of antiquity,” a phrase as applicable to ancient religions as to ancient political systems. Consider the following: “We have been amused with the tales of ancient wonders,” Paine wrote in *The American Crisis*. Then he was referring to political histories, but later his focus would target Christianity’s biblical past. “Mankind have lived for very little purpose, if, at this period of the world, they must go two or three thousand years back for lessons and examples.” There he was speaking of ancient Greece and Rome, but he would cast similar doubt upon biblical Israel. Accusing England of treating news from America as “a tale from antiquity, in which the distance of time defaces the conception, and changes the severest sorrows into conversable amusement,” Paine would take similar advantage of the Bible’s antiquated tales, turning ancient solemnities into modern frivolities. As Paine affirms in a final swipe at antiquity, men should not surrender their natural rights before “the authority of a mouldy parchment,” whether it were written on by prophets or kings.³¹

³⁰ Paine, *The American Crisis*, in *Writings*, 1:217, 249, 170; Thomas Paine to Abbé Sieyès, July 8, 1791; in *Writings*, 3:10; Thomas Paine to Samuel Adams, January 1, 1803; in *Writings*, 4:205.

³¹ In *Writings*, 1:293, 158, 207, 253, 294; 2:383, 343, 284.

If antiquity was one element of the aura that protected both Church and State, mystery was another, and Paine was intent on deflating the pretensions of both. “The affectation of mystery, with all the artificial sorcery by which [it] imposed upon mankind, is on the decline,” he wrote in *Rights of Man*. “It has received its death-wound; and though it may linger, it will expire.” A few pages earlier, he described monarchy as “something kept behind a curtain” not to be penetrated, a point he would later make of the Bible when safely kept in the scholar’s study or the preacher’s pulpit. In either case, “there is a great deal of bustle and fuss, and a wonderful air of seeming solemnity; but when, by any accident, the curtain happens to be open—and the company see what it is, they burst into laughter.”³²

FAITH IN THE FUTURE

As with practically everything he wrote, it was this burst of laughter that Paine was after, trusting that nothing could pop pretension as quickly as the sharpened point of his well-honed wit. Irreverence was the ultimate antidote to a misplaced awe that was keeping people from peeking behind the curtain of solemnity. If “imagination” could give “figure and character to centaurs, satyrs, and down to all the fairy tribe,” then reverence could do the same for kings, nobles, and all the regal court—or for that matter, for angels, demons, and all the heavenly host. On the other hand, Paine affirmed, “if a whole country is disposed to hold [such things] in contempt, all their value is gone, and none will own them.” Such is the natural result “when society concurs to ridicule them.” Of knight errantry Paine said that “the world has seen this folly fall,” and with yet another nod to Cervantes added, “and it has fallen by being laughed at.” Other farces would “follow its fate,” former beliefs being made “a burnt-offering to Reason.”³³

Paine was confident that enlightenment, especially in its deconstructive phase, was a one-way street, a door that, once opened, could only swing wider. In fact, Paine denied that enlightenment was deconstructive at all since ignorance was not itself constructive. Rather, ignorance had a negative

³² Paine, *Rights of Man*, in *Writings*, 2:453, 426.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2:320–21.

ontology—it “is only the absence of knowledge”—and therefore man could only “be *kept* ignorant, he cannot be *made* ignorant.” Once common sense perceives a self-evident truth that an epistemological despotism had earlier kept hidden, ignorance can never be reasserted. Once seen, that is, truth cannot be unseen, it being “impossible to put the mind back to the same condition it was in before it saw it.” In terms of the rhetoric of ridicule, a joke may be rationally refuted, but the emotional damage has been done. Just as “it has never yet been discovered how to make man *unknow* his knowledge, or *unthink* his thoughts,” it is impossible to *unlaugh* a spontaneous chuckle. Returning to Paine’s analogy of the curtain, “When once the veil begins to rend, it admits not of repair.”³⁴

Paine was not so naïve as to think that this curtain would open on its own, and unlike the rip that began at the top of the temple veil at Christ’s crucifixion, his intended tears in the cultural fabric would have to begin from below, his customary place of persuasion. The political and religious ideologies he sought to displace were “too deeply rooted to be removed, and the Augean stables of parasites and plunderers too abominably filthy to be cleansed, by anything short of a complete and universal Revolution.” But it was revolution—first political and then religious—that Paine envisioned. Moreover, in Paine’s mind these would not be glacial-paced, multi-generational, Kuhnian paradigm shifts, but something closer to an instantaneous collapse, the type brought on by a well-placed explosion—in Paine’s case, an explosion of laughter. Echoing a sentiment expressed earlier in *The American Crisis*, in *Rights of Man* Paine again reflected on the speed with which a “spell can be dissolved,” if only exposed to the right rhetorical solvent. “A single expression, boldly conceived and uttered, will sometimes put a whole company into their proper feelings; and whole nations are acted upon in the same manner.” Experience had shown that Paine’s rhetoric of ridicule was an ideal vehicle for just such expressions.³⁵

Though Paine’s dreams of instant revolution proved overconfident (one cannot blame him after his success in ‘76), he was not naïve concerning the forces he was up against. In raising opposition to

³⁴ Ibid., 2:359–60.

³⁵ Ibid., 2:481.

both the Crown and the Surplice, he knew he was facing two of the world's most deeply entrenched traditions, but tradition was not synonymous with truth. "A continual circulation of lies among those who are not much in the way of hearing them contradicted, will in time pass for truth; and the crime lies not in the believer but the inventor." Christians themselves were thus not as culpable as the clergy, but they were slaves to tradition nonetheless. Repeating the same argument later, he held that authority rested only on "the tyranny and the antiquity of habit," with man bound down only by "the slavery of fear." Thankfully, however, these obstacles to enlightenment were "already on the wane, eclipsed by the enlarging orb of reason." As Paine affirmed, undaunted, "Such is the irresistible nature of truth, that all it asks,—and all it wants,—is the liberty of appearing." "Reason, like time, will make its own way."³⁶

The sources of Paine's confidence were twofold: one calmed his fears by diminishing his obstacles and the other fortified his faith by crowning his approach. Of the first, Paine firmly believed that some views linger only out of inertia, with a given law remaining on the books "not because it *cannot* be repealed, but because it *is not* repealed; and the non-repealing passes for consent." Tradition is merely "an *assumed usurped* dominion" but that usurpation would end as soon as the assumption upon which it rested is questioned. Later he wrote that prejudices which "have yet to stand the test of reason and reflection" stand only as long as ignorance protects them from examination. They hide behind the assumption of their correctness (common sense epistemology at its laziest), but once a person "see[s] it is not so, the prejudice will be gone." Consequently, one should "not confide too much in what has been the customary prejudices of the country," be they political or religious. No matter how deep-seated or long-standing, authority founded in falsehood cannot stand forever.³⁷

Paine had faith in Reason's triumph, believing that change—political or religious—would come with time. In *Common Sense* he admits that effecting a sea change in public opinion seems daunting only because "a long Habit of not thinking a Thing *wrong*, gives it a superficial appearance of being

³⁶ Paine, *The American Crisis*, in *Writings*, 1:185; *Rights of Man*, in *Writings*, 2:401, 331, 403.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:281, 283, 399.

right,” and the same applied to the momentum of Biblical belief. Whenever revolution occurs, expect “a formidable outcry in defence of Custom,” but trust that public sentiment would turn in time. In fact, time was further on his side since a draw was as good as outright victory. In the Revolution he had boasted to Lord Howe, “We conquer by a drawn game, and you lose by it,” and the same could be said of his scriptural offensive. If he could get Christians to question their sacred text, doubt was almost as good as outright disbelief, especially since he did not have to defend a rival text (other than the “Book of Nature”) to take its place. He did not have to destroy the Bible; he needed merely to dislodge it.³⁸

And it was the Bible, not merely the clergy, that needed to be dislodged. In *Rights of Man*, Paine recognized that “a casual discontinuance of the *practice* of despotism, is not a discontinuance of its *principles*,” and in like manner, clerical reform (the practice) would remain largely ineffective so long as Biblical authority (the principle) reigned supreme. Paine thus aimed to create what he once called a “jaundiced eye, [which] transfers the colour of itself to the object it looks upon, and sees every thing stained and impure.” This would be his tactic with the Bible—jaundice the Christian eye until its view of scripture was one of revulsion instead of reverence. If “the present generation [was to] appear to the future as the Adam of a new world,” as he had earlier predicted, he would have to convince his Christian countrymen to expel Adam from paradise, away from God’s authority. Only then, he said with a nod to his upcoming endeavor, could “the present age...merit to be called the Age of reason.”³⁹

Here we detect Paine’s second source of confidence: his faith in the attitude-altering power of well-written words. Paine believed that the untrammelled human mind would recognize what was in its own best interest, “provided it be presented clearly to their understanding, and that in a manner not to create suspicion by any thing like self-design, nor offend by assuming too much.” Paine recognized both the positive and negative aspects of rhetoric’s potential—both its power and its peril, based on the relative quantities of artistry and artifice. “Mankind are not now to be told they shall not think,” he

³⁸ Paine, *Common Sense*; in *Writings*, 1:67; Paine, *The American Crisis*; in *Writings*, 1:189.

³⁹ Paine, *Rights of Man*; in *Writings*, 2:284, 512; Paine, *The American Crisis*; in *Writings*, 1:267.

observed, but he was also careful not to be too direct when telling them what he felt they should be thinking. As he wrote in a letter to Robert Morris, “Considering how unwilling men are to recede from fixed opinions, and that they feel something like disgrace to being convinced, the way to obtain something is to give something.” Humor, with its gift of pleasure, its subtle suggestiveness, and its artful self-effacement, met all of these criteria remarkably, the perfect persuasion to slip in unawares. Additionally, “where we would wish to reform, we must not reproach,” Paine warned, and though his own ridicule was frequently reproachful, by setting up his adversary as an absurdly insipid straw man, his real audience—undecided readers or those who already agreed with him—felt confirmed in the feeling that Paine was not reproaching them. In short, Paine knew that people could be “provoked...to think, by making them feel,” and therefore leveraged humor to facilitate both.⁴⁰

RHETORICAL HINTS, HUMOR, AND HYPOCRISY

With the role of rhetoric in the foreground, it is worth going beyond the biblical quotations, allusions, and possible insinuations that pepper Paine’s political writings to gather one more collection of clues from his earlier works: hints about Paine’s use of rhetoric to effect large-scale ideological change. We have already noted his frequent dismissal of the need for argument, an effective way of delegitimizing his opponent’s position and excusing himself and his readers from critical thought. For if “fact is superior to reasoning,” as Paine affirmed in *Rights of Man*, then why present reasoned arguments when one’s assertions can be made to look like uncontested facts instead? One of the most ironic examples of this tactic comes in a piece entitled “Public Good,” in which he argues (while pretending to avoid needing arguments) for Virginia’s claim to additional western territory. To minimize the issue he shrugs, “To reason on a case like this is such a waste of time, and such an excess of folly, that it ought not to be reasoned upon”—despite the fact that Paine’s own “reasoning” upon the subject is almost two-

⁴⁰ Paine, *Rights of Man*, in *Writings*, 2:392, 398, 359; Thomas Paine to Robert Morris, December 7, 1782, in *Complete Writings*, 2:1216.

thirds as long as his reasonings in *Common Sense*. Dismissively he concludes, “As a reasonable thing the [opposition’s] claim can be supported by no argument, and therefore needs none to refute.”⁴¹

Paine’s tendency to deny complexity facilitates easy agreement on the part of his readers, making prolonged deliberation seem unnecessary and those not reaching automatic agreement look dimwitted or empty-headed (the aims of his humor). “To overthrow Mr. Burke’s fallacious book was scarcely the operation of a day,” he once boasted, and bragged elsewhere that he could disprove Silas Deane’s arguments “without stirring a step from the room I am writing in, or asking a single question of any one.” In writing *Common Sense*, he claimed, he “neither read books, nor studied other people’s opinion,” but rather “thought for myself” and ended up at the obvious, an approach he later generalized into a rule “to consult nobody, nor to let anybody see what I write till it appears publicly.” To do otherwise, he jeered, would be to share in the “timidity” and “puny judgment” of those who seem to live in “a world of babies in leading strings.” Manhood is thus synonymous with independent thought and immediate reaction, requiring no more time than what passes between a joke and a laugh. “How easy does even the most illiterate reader distinguish the spontaneous sensations of the heart, from the labored productions of the brain,” he once said, revealing that his “common sense” and “reason” were more emotional than cognitive. “Truth,” like love, should occur “at first sight.” Thus it should not have taken a long and expensive war for England to “gain the wisdom which an hour’s reflection might have taught,” nor should it take a lifetime of scripture study to arrive at the same skeptical conclusions Paine reached naturally in the course of his childhood. An hour’s exposure to *The Age of Reason* should be enough to cure anyone of their childish credulity.⁴²

Paine plays this trick repeatedly, propping up the inevitability of his conclusions by denying that arriving at them required any intentional thought. Of *Common Sense* he says, “Perhaps there never was a

⁴¹ Paine, *Rights of Man*; in *Writings*, 2:410; “Public Good,” in *Writings*, 2:57, 58.

⁴² Paine, *Rights of Man*, in *Writings*, 2:463; “Letter Addressed to the Addressers,” in *Writings*, 3:45–46; “To the Public on Mr. Deane’s Affair,” in *Writings*, 1:419; “Thomas Paine to the Citizens of the United States,” in *Writings*, 3:404; *The American Crisis*, in *Writings*, 1:327.

pamphlet, since the use of letters were known, about which so little pains were taken, and of which so great a number went off in so short a time.” He would say something similar of *The Age of Reason*, which he wrote to dismantle the Bible without even needing a Bible at hand. By minimizing his efforts and maximizing their effects, Paine vouches for the self-evidence of his positions. No real thought was required to express them, so none was needed for others to accept them. *Common Sense* could be “turned upon the world like an orphan”; no parent or guardian (let alone an identified author) was needed to ensure its survival so it was left “to shift for itself.” Rival views, meanwhile, could not stand on their own self-evidence, and therefore “withered away like a sickly unnoticed weed.”⁴³

However, it was not exactly the Bible itself that Paine was attacking; rather, it was his decontextualized caricature that came under condemnation—the same straw-man strategy we saw him employ against Edmund Burke or, even earlier, against Cato, even while accusing both adversaries of employing the same tactic against him. He slammed Burke’s critique of the French Revolution as “a dramatic performance” full of “poetical liberties” that did injustice to the truth at hand. He accused him of “omitting some facts, distorting others, and making the whole machinery bend to produce a stage effect.” Similarly, Paine blasted Cato for “beating down an idol which himself *only* had set up,” not the independence that *Common Sense* endorsed, but an independence of Cato’s contriving, a “dream... wholly [his] own.” Cato was cherry-picking passages and then basing his arguments on “a false meaning uncivilly imposed” upon them, or taking quotes out of context to put words into Paine’s mouth that were “directly repugnant both to the letter and spirit of every page in the piece.” Throughout, Cato was twisting Paine’s words to make his writings seem self-contradictory, “unfairly introducing *our* terms into *his* arguments, and thereby beget[ing] a monster which he sends round the country for a show.”⁴⁴

There is no little irony in these complaints, just as one finds it difficult to sympathize with Paine when he accuses Silas Deane of “alter[ing] the sense of my expression, so as to suit a most malicious

⁴³ Paine, “The Forester’s Letters,” in *Writings*, 135–36, 138.

⁴⁴ Paine, *Rights of Man*, in *Writings*, 297, 298; “The Forrester’s Letters,” in *Writings*, 1:148, 145, 142.

purpose in his own.” Christians raised the same objections against Paine’s mistreatment of the Bible, making Paine’s complaints of unfair rhetorical practices seem as blatantly hypocritical as his earlier exploitation of his readers’ biblical beliefs. As they saw it, Paine was making a mockery of the Bible to create an easier target for attack. He was “uncivilly impos[ing]” false meanings, setting scripture into contradictory poses, and quoting the letter of certain passages while ignoring the spirit of the whole. A century earlier Anglican apologist Edward Stillingfleet had accused the deists of “hunt[ing] up and down the *Scriptures* for every thing that seems a difficulty...and then by heaping all these together...make the *Scriptures* seem a confused heap of indigested stuff,” and Paine was repeating the tactic. He had earlier admitted, “It is an exceeding easy thing...to exhibit any measure, however good, just or necessary it may be, in an odious and offensive light, by tacking to it a number of deformities which have no relation to it,” and this was precisely his approach with the Bible. In Christian eyes, therefore—in the unjaundiced ones at least—it was not their Bible being rejected, but Paine’s, with all its decontextualized passages and wrested texts. What called for condemnation was not scripture, but Paine’s misbegotten monster posing as the word of God. They would have preferred, to borrow Paine’s own language, to “examine the naked question, unclothed either with invented deformities or needless embellishments.”⁴⁵

Two of Paine’s other quibbles with Cato are also worthy of attention, as they suggest additional elements of what Christians considered Paine’s rhetorical hypocrisy. As they argued over independence, Paine censured Cato’s kind for “mingling their punning nonsense with subjects of such a serious nature,” a complaint shared by many of Paine’s detractors once he dared attack the word of God. Even more disingenuous was Paine’s complaint that Cato “hath turned the scripture into a jest,” hypocrisy he matches in *The American Crisis* when he calls it “disgraceful” that “men can dally with words of the most sacred import, and play them off as mechanically as if religion consisted only in contrivance.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Paine, “To the Public on Mr. Deane’s Affair,” in *Writings*, 1:427; Edward Stillingfleet, *A Letter to a Deist, in Answer to several Objections against the Truth and Authority of the Scriptures* (London: n.p., 1677), 9; Paine, “Six Letters to Rhode Island” (1782), in *Complete Writings*, 2:328, 339.

⁴⁶ Paine, “The Forrester’s Letters,” and *The American Crisis*, both in *Writings*, 1:145, 152, 219.

This brings us back to Paine’s reliance on ridicule—exactly the kind of “punning,” “nonsense,” “jest,” “dally,” and “play” that characterized his earlier writings and that would permeate *The Age of Reason*. Paine was the American high priest of what Hume’s character Cleanthes had called this “sect of jesters or railers,” or “this humorous sect of the sceptics,” a community of doubters so rhetorically cunning that it was hard to tell whether they were speaking “thoroughly in earnest” or “only in jest.” These were guilty of “breaking thro’ all fences, [to] profane the inmost sanctuaries of the temple,” and that innermost sanctuary was the Bible. No common characteristic united the various strains of deistical thought more than their rejection of the divine inspiration of scripture, and no literary device was more frequently or effectively employed than the rhetoric of ridicule. As Paine affirmed to the Abbé Sieyès, “I consider myself at liberty to ridicule, as they deserve, Monarchical absurdities, whensoever the occasion shall present itself,” and in Paine’s mind, that included the absurdities of biblical despotism. In his political controversies as later in his religious polemics, he listed “reason and discussion, persuasion and conviction” as the “weapons in the contest.” He should have added ridicule as well.⁴⁷

Then again, forthrightness and fun are strange bedfellows at best. On the one hand, humor trades in half-truths and comic inconsistencies, pardoning breaches of deference and decorum in the carnivalesque of the comic frame. On the other hand, if the jester’s cap and bells allow him to speak truth to power, then perhaps there is more honesty in humor than we tend to admit; it simply masks its earnestness in levity and clenches its teeth behind a painted grin. Considering how powerfully Paine’s anti-monarchical ridicule poured forth from his ever-active pen, it is a feat of almost superhuman restraint that he waited nearly twenty years before giving revealed religion a similar (mis)treatment—and then only because the prospect of death stared him relentlessly in the face. Perhaps this explains the occasional well-masked jibe in the Bible’s direction in his earlier works; relief theory suggests that pressure can build for only so long before finding some kind of vent.

⁴⁷ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: n.p., 1779), 20, 32, 17; Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 38; Thomas Paine to the Abbé Sieyès, July 8, 1791; in *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*, 380; Paine, *Rights of Man*, 653.

EXPLAINING THE GAME

To the degree that Paine needed to vent his pent up anti-biblicism, or to alter the metaphor, however tempted he was to let others in on his game, the earliest clear evidence of doing so comes from a conversation he had with John Adams shortly after the publication of *Common Sense*. In a well-known exchange, Adams questioned Paine's use of scripture throughout the pamphlet. Though he shared Paine's conclusions, Adams considered Paine's Old Testament exegesis "ridiculous" and could not decide if they "proceeded from honest Ignorance, or foolish Superstition on one hand, or from willfull Sophistry and knavish Hypocrisy on the other." The latter option proved entirely correct, placing Paine in the train of a long line of closeted skeptics who successfully hid their heterodoxies beneath a patina of reverence for the Bible. When Adams confronted Paine directly, Paine merely "laughed," a laughter that quickly turned to "contempt," both for the Old Testament specifically "and indeed of the Bible at large." This surprised John Adams. It would later shock the Christian world.

Even in that early period, Adams recalled, Paine expressed a desire to publish his "Thoughts on Religion" but, like Hume before him, thought it best to "postpone it, to the latter part of Life," in part owing to Adams's own reaction to his flippancy. "He saw that I did not relish this," Adams remembered, and when *The Age of Reason* appeared, more orthodox Americans would "relish" it even less. Not only did it diminish the status of the Bible, but it also forced them to trade a long-held reverence for Thomas Paine the patriot for revulsion at Tom Paine the infidel. With the benefit of hindsight, Adams credited his earlier self with catching on to the charade earlier than most. "I perceived in him a conceit of himself, and a daring Impudence, which have been developed more and more to this day."⁴⁸

Paine's prostitution of scriptural language troubled Adams's elocutionary sensibilities, perhaps as much as its seedier flesh-and-blood equivalent shocked his vaguely Puritanical mores. But it was not Paine's disbelief alone that concerned him, for he had often been exposed to the Enlightenment

⁴⁸ John Adams autobiography, part 1, "John Adams," through 1776, sheet 23 of 53 (electronic edition), *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society, available online at <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>; see also John Adams to Benjamin Rush, April 12, 1809; in Adams, *Works*, 9:617.

skepticism of others and was never completely orthodox himself. His autobiography includes several encounters with skeptics who, like Paine, specialized in scriptural scoffing. One, a Mr. Harrison, was “perpetually ridiculing the Bible, calling it the Worst Book in the World,” and another, the scientist and revolutionary double agent Edward Bancroft, not only spiced his food with too much “Chayan Pepper” for Adams’s liking, but also peppered his conversation with too many swipes at “the Bible and the Christian Religion” for Adams’s taste. In Bancroft’s case, there was no holding back his infidel humor, for these were his favorite “Subjects of Invective and ridicule.” Paine shared similar sentiments.⁴⁹

But again, Paine as freethinker was not the subject of Adams’s ire. It was Paine the hypocrite, Paine the pretender (not to mention Paine the anti-Federalist), that angered him. It was natural to doubt Christianity’s supernatural claims; Adams himself became a Unitarian. And it was debonair to snicker at scripture in private company; what else was a well-cultured child of the Enlightenment supposed to do at dinner parties? But to gain the heart and mind of the masses at the level Paine was able to achieve (cue Adams’s envy), and to do so largely by mimicking a shallow and decontextualized biblicism in public discourse (cue Adams’s rationality), only to mock that same source privately and later to eviscerate it publicly (cue Adams’s integrity), was beyond the pale for any gentleman, especially since that same mass of commoners were in particular need of Christianity’s civilizing effects (cue Adams’s sense of superiority, civility, and responsibility). Scriptural supernaturalism notwithstanding, Christianity was the “Religion of Wisdom, Virtue, Equity and Humanity,” wrote Adams in his diary two years after the first part of *The Age of Reason* appeared, “let the Blackguard Paine say what he will.”⁵⁰

Adams is worth quoting because his early encounter with Paine’s scriptural disingenuousness provides a preview of what others would say when *The Age of Reason* hit bookshelves years later. It also shows the concern that religious traditionalists and social conservatives shared when contemplating the effect that Paine’s brand of antibiblicism would have on common citizens—nominal Christians and open

⁴⁹ John Adams autobiography, part 2, sheet 15 of 37, and part I, sheet 33 of 53 (electronic edition), in *Adams Family Papers* online.

⁵⁰ John Adams diary, July 26, 1796 (electronic edition), in *Adams Family Papers* online.

infidels alike. In 1770 Adams learned from a “Connecticut Hemp Man” named Stephens that “the whole Colony” had paid more attention to political and economic developments “than to their Bibles for some Years,” and Paine’s popular infidelity would only make matters worse. Even before *Common Sense* swept the colonies, Adams warned his wife Abigail that Paine was “peevisish, passionate and violent,” and those attributes only intensified with time. In November of the year *The Age of Reason* first shocked him, Adams wrote Abigail with no little enthusiasm (and perhaps a hint of jealousy) about hearing “an elegant and sublime” sermon in which, “among other good Things,” the minister “gave Tom Paine a hearty Reprobation.” Adams had been doing that himself for nearly twenty years.⁵¹

As if to prove his prescience, by the time he wrote his autobiography in the early 1800s, Adams could say that “at this day it would be ridiculous to ask any questions about Tom Paines Veracity, Integrity or any other Virtue.” He vented at “that insolent Blasphemer of things sacred and transcendent Libeller of all that is good Tom Paine,” and lamented that it was “a disgrace to the moral Character and the Understanding of this Age, that this worthless fellow should be believed in any thing,” even if “Impudence and Malice will always find Admirers.” Looking back at the revolutionary age that he—and Paine—helped inaugurate, Adams reflected on those “fire brands” who gain a “momentary Celebrity” by throwing “fewell” on a fire, but who “produce future Evils which may excite serious Repentance.” He had “so many” in mind, but singled out specifically only one: the producer of those “worthless and unprincipled Writings” that excited the world, the “profligate and impious Thomas Paine.”⁵²

CONCLUSION

Near the end of Thomas Paine’s tumultuous life, having spilled an ocean of ink across two continents, three decades, and countless well-worn pages, he proudly claimed that in all his writings, regardless of the subject, “I speak a language full and intelligible, I deal not in hints and intimations.”

⁵¹ John Adams diary, June 26, 1770; Letters from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 18 November 1775 and 17 November 1794 (electronic editions), in *Adams Family Papers* online.

⁵² John Adams autobiography, part 1, sheets 24 and 9 of 53 (electronic edition), in *Adams Family Papers*; Adams, *Works*, 3:93.

Judged by the forcefulness of his prose and the clarity of his language, few would dispute the first half of his statement. But as this chapter has shown, the second half was not entirely true—rather it was just more rhetoric to cover his ever-rhetorical tracks. As pamphleteer and propagandist, “hints and intimations” were among the tools of his trade, and in Paine’s works they ranged from the scriptural suggestiveness he employed to prop up his politics, to the political clues he dropped that foreshadowed irreligiousness yet to come.⁵³

Throughout this chapter, we have seen the interplay of Paine’s two thought-worlds (the religious and the political) and the ways he used the former to bolster the latter and then the second to target the first. Coming from the biblical direction, we went from words casually dropped from the storehouse of scripture to more deliberate deputizations of the sacred word of God. And from the political direction, we saw both overt comparisons condemning political and religious parallels, and more subtle allegations hinting at links between the two. Paine credited *Common Sense*’s success in part to his dual citizenship and cultural bilinguality—separating America from England, he thought, required an intimate knowledge of each. Here the same could be said for both his biblical politics and his political anti-biblicism, that is, both his Hebraic republicanism and his republican anti-hebraism. An amphibian of sorts, he lived in a scriptural as well as in a political world and was comfortable drawing from both.⁵⁴

Paine once said of Silas Deane and his supporters that they were “blaz[ing] away...in a whirlwind of their own raising,” and the same could be said of Paine’s experience during the firestorm he ignited with the publication of *The Age of Reason*. There the “hints and intimations” discussed in this chapter came clearly into view, as did the reactions of incensed antagonists who more than hinted at their indignation. John Adams, whose outrage preceded most, had famously called *Common Sense* “a poor, ignorant, malicious, short-sighted, crapulous mass,” and that was the least impious of Paine’s writings. Though Adams left no such pointed criticism of Paine’s final book (what a loss to the lexicon

⁵³ Paine, “Examination of the Prophecies” (1807), in *Writings*, 4:406.

⁵⁴ Thomas Paine to a Committee of the Continental Congress (Oct. 1783), in *Complete Writings*, 2:1239.

of imaginative adjectives!), the Christian world would call on similar language to denounce *The Age of Reason*. As we have discussed here, on the one hand, the book shocked their scriptural sensibilities and disabused them of their positive impression of its author, but on the other, had they read his previous writings with a greater degree of discernment, they should have seen the betrayal coming. Paine had been dropping hints all along.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Paine, “To the Public on Mr. Deane’s Affair,” in *Writings*, 1:409–10; Adams, *Works*, 3:93; 6:403.

CHAPTER VIII

USHERING IN *THE AGE OF REASON*

Ever in search of undemocratic fields to till—“Where liberty is not, there is my country”¹—the cosmopolitan Citizen Paine found himself as embroiled in the French Revolution as he had been in the American, defending it in *Rights of Man* and being rewarded with honorary French citizenship as a result. By the early 1790s Paine’s European peregrinations (and the price on his head in England) had him living in France, where he was elected to the National Convention and selected to assist in the drafting of a new constitution for the nascent French Republic. But not even his popularity could protect him from the eventual antipathy of Robespierre. Having done much to inaugurate a New Age in France, Paine welcomed the New Year, 1794, in a French prison, and languished there for most of that year, barely escaping the guillotine when his life literally swung on the hinge of his prison door. Had it been closed instead of open when the mark of death was placed upon it, Paine’s execution would have proceeded as planned. But as luck, fate, or either divine or demonic intervention would have it, Paine outlived his death sentence, and spent his prison time plotting the death of the Bible instead.

This chapter will begin with history, chronicling the production, publication, and popularization of *The Age of Reason*, and will end with rhetoric, focusing solely on the pamphlet’s ingenious title (its contents will follow in chapter nine). The journey will first take us from Paine’s cell in the Luxembourg Prison to the booksellers and coffeehouses that allowed Paine’s words to reach his readers, and will then reveal the rhetorical artifice that began persuading Paine’s imagined audience even before they opened the book. To the degree that a book *can* be judged by its cover, a mere glance at an unopened copy of *The Age of Reason* not only convinced people to proceed to its contents, but placed them within a specific cognitive and emotional frame that primed them to see in particular ways all they would find

¹ He reportedly said this in response to Benjamin Franklin, who had said, “Where liberty is, there is my country.” See Keane, *Tom Paine*, xiii.

inside. Leaning to look over the shoulder of anyone quick enough to purchase a copy, or straining to hear portions read over the sounds of a gathering crowd, countless individuals—inhabitants of an American public sphere partly of Paine’s own creation—were being ushered into a new religious epoch, at least in their personal religious outlooks. Their Age of Reason had begun.

INSCRIBING *THE AGE OF REASON*

Facing violent rejection and possible death at the hands of an increasingly volatile extremism, Paine began writing *The Age of Reason* in an effort to save God from a similar fate. In his self-exculpatory letter to a “much astonished and more grieved” Sam Adams, Paine explained that at the height of the French Revolution’s anti-clerical priesthood purge, the masses were “running headlong into Atheism” and he wanted “to stop them in that career.” His hope was to protect belief in God (which he cherished) from those bent on destroying God’s self-appointed representatives (whom he abhorred), so in his version of robbing Peter to pay Paul, he attacked the Creed to safeguard the Creator. It was only “divided beliefs and *allegorical* divinities” he protested, not divine providence or human morality. But this distinction, which lay at the heart of moderate deism (and much of Anglican latitudinarianism and American Unitarianism for that matter) was lost on sectarians that saw any hint of heterodoxy as blatant infidelity. What was not lost, not on Paine at least, was the painful irony that, having forfeited his freedom for defending the King of France, he then lost his reputation for defending the King of the Universe. His motives were misunderstood in both instances, for it was neither amnesty (for Louis) nor execution (for God) he was urging, but rather permanent exile—to America in Louis’ case, and to Nature in the case of Deity. Regardless, what was one small step to the right in an increasingly atheistic France was one giant leap to the left in a staunchly biblical America. As Paine saw it, those who cried “Infidel!” should at least complete their charge against that “wicked Man...Thomas Paine!” For full disclosure’s sake, “they might as well add, for he believes in God and is against shedding blood.”²

² Thomas Paine to Samuel Adams, January 1, 1803; in *Writings*, 4:203, 205.

With these concerns his impetus, and the specter of death adding urgency to his pen, Paine collected a lifetime of thoughts and began recording his views on religion, most likely in the fall of 1793 though perhaps as much as a year earlier.³ The book's subtitle is more indicative of its contents than the eye-catching title (more on that later), and promised readers "an investigation of true and fabulous theology"—the "true" referring to Paine's narrowly circumscribed, deistically-informed view of Nature's God and human morality, and the "fabulous" referring to the biblical "fable" uncritically accepted as the inerrant word of God. Published in two parts (essentially one to establish the "true" and the other to dismantle the "fabulous"), the first appeared in February of 1794, while Paine was debating religion with a fellow-prisoner even more skeptical than himself. As he said looking back from the preface of part two, he had rushed the first part's completion in the face of rising political uncertainty and a growing sense of personal endangerment, finishing it a mere six hours before his arrest and imprisonment in the waning days of 1793. En route to the *palais du Luxembourg* (a palace-turned-prison), he managed to get the completed manuscript into the hands of fellow writer, republican, and rebel Joel Barlow, who helped arrange its publication in England for the rock-bottom price of three pence, ensuring it would find its way into the hands of Paine's ever-intended audience, the common man. Like the superscription on the cross of Christ, by the end of 1794 Paineite infidelity (with or without his name attached) was heralding the death of Christianity in three languages: French (*Le Siècle de la Raison*), German (*Untersuchungen Über Wahre Und Fabelhafte Theologie*), and English (*The Age of Reason*). The book began spreading across America even before Paine was released from prison.⁴

When he did emerge, having spent the bulk of 1794 deteriorating physically and psychologically in prison, a "severely weather-beaten" and embittered Thomas Paine spent the following year

³ Yale librarian and Paine collector Richard Gimbel called the first edition of *The Age of Reason* a "bibliographical enigma." Richard Gimbel, "The First Appearance of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*," *The Yale University Library Gazette* 31, no. 2 (October 1956), 87. On the possibility of an even earlier version of the text, published in French in early 1793, see David Hoffman and Claudia Carlos, "Thomas Paine's *Le Siècle de la Raison, ou Le Sens Commun Des Droits De L'Homme*: Notes on a Curious Edition of *The Age of Reason*," in Cleary and Stabell, *New Directions in Thomas Paine Studies*, 133–53.

⁴ On the publication history of *The Age of Reason*, see Hughes, "Antidotes to Deism," 35–97.

convalescing in the home of America's newly appointed minister to France, James Monroe. There he returned to the work his imprisonment had interrupted, writing a second part to *The Age of Reason* that was meant, as Paine described it, not to counter the wave of responses that was crashing upon him from England and America, but rather to further diminish the basis of their arguments—the truthfulness and trustworthiness of their so-called “Scripture Evidence and Bible authority.” By August of 1795 he had finished the second part and had it printed in Paris later that fall, with two other editions appearing in London in the coming months, and fifteen crates' worth of copies on their way to Philadelphia.⁵

Even after completing *The Age of Reason*, Paine persisted in attacking revealed religion and its advocates, confiding to Thomas Jefferson in 1800 that in response to Bishop Richard Watson's *Apology for the Bible* (*The Age of Reason*'s most popular response), he had begun working on “a third part” for the volume and would “continue to do so, till an opportunity arrive for publishing it.” That opportunity still had not come when Paine died in 1809, but by the time his “Reply to the Bishop of Llandaff” was published posthumously in 1810, it could be printed alongside such other works as a skeptical “Essay on Dream” (a subject on which several biblical narratives depended), and a dismissive “Examination of the Prophecies” that supposedly linked the Old Testament to the New. Though never combined in Paine's lifetime, a “third and last part of Paine's Age of Reason” did appear in London in 1811 with much of this material included. Paine's hopes for such a work are captured in a letter to fellow deist Elihu Palmer (dated 1802 years “since the Fable of Christ”), in which he boasts that his envisioned third part would “make a stronger impression than anything I have yet published on the subject.” Though it made only ripples compared to the tidal waves of controversy that the earlier parts produced, it was alarming enough to the British authorities that its publisher was sentenced to eighteen months in prison, “and that he stand in the PILLORY between the hours of twelve and two, once within a month!!!”⁶

⁵ Nelson, *Thomas Paine*, 286–89; Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:88.

⁶ Thomas Paine to Thomas Jefferson, October 1, 1800; Thomas Paine to Elihu Palmer, February 21, 1802, in *Complete Writings*, 2:1412, 1426; *Trial of Mr. Daniel Isaac Eaton, for Publishing the Third and Last Part of Paine's Age of Reason* (London: Daniel

In a pillory of his own for publicizing his scandalous religious views, in his final years Paine began writing less and working more on his earlier designs for iron bridges—an ironic undertaking considering his theological works (along with his scathing public diatribe against George Washington) had burned the bridges that connected him to most erstwhile associates and former friends. This meant that *The Age of Reason* was Paine’s last major work, the final installment (together with *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man*) in the libertarian trilogy with which Paine hoped to free the human mind.

Within this trilogy, the third would pick up precisely where the second left off, so one last backward glance is in order. With only a few paragraphs remaining in *Rights of Man*, Paine looks back at what he had written and, proud of having shielded religious belief from his revolutionary writings, boasts that “there is only a single paragraph upon religion.” (Hoping his readers would follow his example, he must not have looked very hard.) The paragraph he had in mind was innocuous—“viz, ‘*that every religion is good, that teaches man to be good*’”—but as we saw in the previous chapter, scattered throughout the book were less innocent allusions to religion, each of which foreshadowed what Paine would attempt in *The Age of Reason*. Only one paragraph in *Rights of Man* may have spoken of religion *per se*, but what of the times he used religious terms when targeting politics? Or was he using political terms to target religion? Honestly it can sometimes be hard to tell. As already shown, explicit analogies from religion to politics abound, but possible analogies from politics to religion are just as common.⁷

Paine saves one of his most revealing hints for these final pages of *Rights of Man*, the one extended discussion of religion in the volume. He admits that he “carefully avoided” the subject out of fear that it would distract his readers (and excuse the government) from turning their attention to the political issues that he felt were more pressing. But since religion so often *was* a political issue (Paine calls it “a political machine” once it loses its spiritual essence), he dedicates a few brief paragraphs to

Isaac Eaton, 1812), 80. Exactly what Paine intended to include in his third part of *The Age of Reason* is unclear, but it likely included, beyond the three works described here, Paine’s “Private Thoughts on a Future State,” an essay “On the Origin of Free-Masonry,” and possibly his “Letter to the Honourable Thomas Erskine.” See Hughes, “Antidotes to Deism,” 77–87.

⁷ Paine, *Rights of Man*, in *Writings*, 2:515.

explain that essence as he sees it, which is precisely what he would do in the first pages of *The Age of Reason*, as if to connect the two volumes intentionally. By bracketing this discussion of religion as the core of what Paine found acceptable (and therefore off-limits from attack), we better understand the religious accidentals that Paine considered fair game for rhetorical violence.⁸

Religion, Paine explains in *Rights of Man*, was akin to “a large family of children,” who “made it a custom to present to their parent some token of their affection and gratitude.” Paine’s individualism allowed for a diversity of gifts and a pluralism in presenting them to God—even “a simple weed” was acceptable if it seemed a pretty flower to the child who had picked it. Paine pictures God being “gratified by such variety,” even imagining the divine acceptance of his own rhetorical offerings aimed at social improvement and political peace (Paine’s “religion” of choice). He considered uniformity of worship an indication of “cold...contrivance” or “harsh...control” and thought religious persecution an even greater travesty. No parent, mortal or divine, could countenance their children “fighting, scratching, reviling, and abusing each other about which was the best or the worst present.”⁹

Beyond this paean to religious liberty and spiritual pluralism, Paine had said nothing specifically religious in *Rights of Man*. Or so he told his readers. But like the “hints and intimations” that filled the last chapter, he does include in these final paragraphs one provocative parallel that suggests what was likely his ecclesiastical thinking all along, thoughts *The Age of Reason* makes unmistakable. This was a parallel between religion’s “doctrinal points” and “what is called the British constitution,” which he combines as proof that interpretive uniformity is evidence of unthinking acquiescence to arbitrary authority. Had he left it at that, it may have stood as a simple plea for a diversity of viewpoints in both Church and State. But he continued, speaking of the constitution—and ostensibly of the Bible—in terms that were far more foreboding: “It has been taken for granted to be good, and encomiums have supplied

⁸ Ibid., 2:515.

⁹ Ibid., 2:515–16.

the place of proof. But when the nation come to examine into its principles and the abuses it admits, it will be found to have more defects than I have pointed out in this work and the former.”¹⁰

With such a bold anti-establishment claim, those exposed to Paine’s views would likely have rushed to reread both the work he was condemning (looking for its “defects” and “abuses”), and the works in which he condemned it (to see what he had already “pointed out”). But this time they would see through a lens that Paine had already tinted. With a “jaundiced eye” trained to detect discrepancies (largely through a proactive laughter of incongruity that had planted many of those absurdities to begin with), readers would have noticed defects in the British constitution they had not been aware of previously. Even more ominously for Christian readers, were they to follow the same approach with the Bible and view it through the lens *The Age of Reason* would provide them, their assumptions of its goodness and the clergy’s encomiums of its truth would go up in smoke together. Paine had called the Bible “a book that has been read more, and examined less, than any book that ever existed,” and *The Age of Reason* was meant to reverse that. People would examine it more—but from a decidedly Painite perspective—and consequently read it less, having seen “defects” and “abuses” they had never noticed before.¹¹

Rights of Man offers one additional insight into what readers would discover in *The Age of Reason*, and it has to do with the relative weight of positivity and negativity in rhetoric, or to borrow again from humor theory, the difference between the laughter of identification and the laughter of alienation, between sociable banter and vituperous scorn. Unlike the solitary *Common Sense* or the serial “Forester’s Letters” and *American Crisis*, *Rights of Man* was a two-part work, and each half had a specific purpose and distinct tone. In the first part, Paine sought to dismantle the British political system, but he later realized that he “did not go far enough” because it “did not produce a regular system of principles in the room of those which it displaced.” Therefore, in the second part he “combin[ed] Principle and Practice” so that readers could see the goal toward which they should be moving.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2:516.

¹¹ Paine, “Letter to Mr. Erskine” (1797), in *Writings*, 4:221.

As Paine had come to recognize, both negative deconstruction (Part 1) and positive reconstruction (Part 2) were needed to replace an entrenched ideology with something new but not-yet popular. In *Rights of Man* he had first torn down and then built up; in *The Age of Reason* he would simply reverse the order. Part one presented a positive Deism to replace traditional Christianity, but here again Paine had not gone far enough. The old had to be actively torn down to make room for the new to replace it. So Paine focused his fire on the foundation of that earlier edifice, and did to the Bible what had been done to monarchy by the first part of *Rights of Man*: “It detected errors; it exposed absurdities; it shook the fabric of political superstition.” Replace “political” with “religious” and we have a fitting description of what *The Age of Reason*’s more caustic second part was designed to do. Take the two parts together, and *The Age of Reason* would turn American religion on its head.¹²

SPREADING LIKE HELL FIRE

Typically printed in a single, two-part book, *The Age of Reason* raced across the Anglo-American world. It spread throughout Great Britain in the tracks left by *Rights of Man* (which it outsold), and then stormed the United States in edition after edition—seventeen appearing there by 1796 and twenty-one within the decade. In rural Ireland a rector “heard it much talked of, and, by some, extolled in the highest strains of panegyric, as an unanswerable argument for infidelity.” Though his flock was probably not well-read, he noted that “some men extol Mr. Paine’s *Age of Reason* as the *best written book* they had met with,” and among many of his type of reader, it probably was. A New England minister reported nervously to his diary that it was “greedily received in Vermont,” and he couldn’t help but learn for himself what they were reading. In a pair of terse journal entries nearly five months apart he wrote, “Read some in Paine’s *Age of Reason*. Shocking!” and “Read *Age of Reason*. Part II blasphemous. My salt-rheum rages very much.” While the poor man’s outbreak of eczema (“salt-rheum”) may not have been caused by reading *The Age of Reason*, the work was definitely getting under

¹² Paine, “Letter Addressed to the Addressers on the Late Proclamation” (1792), in *Writings*, 3:46.

his skin. He had to break up his study time with more uplifting reading, so the next day: “Read some in *Pilgrim’s Progress*.” Two days later: “Read Paine.” Three days after that: “Read Bishop Watson’s *Apology for the Bible*. A thorough answer to Paine.” Though perhaps not thorough enough. Fifteen months later he was turning again to anti-Paine apologetics: “Read in Levi’s *Letters to Paine*.” In one of his final mentions of the arch-infidel, he wrote in 1802, “T. Paine has arrived at Baltimore.” Sure enough, in the same brief entry he lamented, “My salt-rheum something troublesome.”¹³

The spread of Paine’s troublesome volume was aided in part by his habitual willingness to sacrifice profit for popularity. Once the second part was in print, he sent 15,000 copies to Benjamin Franklin Bache to be distributed throughout America, and the second American edition could be had for the price of a pound of pork. Elias Boudinot complained that when the book was sold at auction in Philadelphia after an overprinting, the price was so low (a cent and a half per copy) that even “children, servants, and the lowest people”—Paine’s typical audience—gobbled them up, tempted by “the novelty of buying a book at so low a price.” In this way people who may have only owned one book—and that most likely a Bible—would have laid beside it its archenemy, an irony exceeded only by the fact that Paine’s addition to the library of the common man was easier to understand and more entertaining to read. By offering it for a sum that would “hardly pay the cost and expenses” of publication (to quote a rival publisher), Paine helped make *The Age of Reason* “the most widely circulated religious work of the eighteenth century”—and certainly the most controversial. It was his “two-and-six-penny Bible purge,” as he called it, and with it, the farmer of thoughts made sure to get his water to the end of every row.¹⁴

There is a fitting irony in the fact that *The Age of Reason*’s appearance coincided with a period of imprisonment for its author, for by that time neither Paine’s reputation nor his writings could be kept

¹³ Daniel M’Neille, *Dogmatism Exposed, and Sophistry Detected: or, a Confutation of Paine’s “Age of Reason.” To which is prefixed, a brief account of the replies already published* (London: T. Chapman, 1794), 7, 44; Thomas Robbins, *Diary of Thomas Robbins, D.D. 1796–1854*, vol. 1, 1796–1825 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1886–1887), 17, 12, 22–23, 51, 184 (entries for August 15, June 15, November 5, 6, 8, 11, 1796; February 16, 1798; November 16, 1802).

¹⁴ See Keane, *Tom Paine*, 396, 513; Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt*, 16–17; Elias Boudinot, *The Age of Revelation. Or The Age of Reason shewn to be an Age of Infidelity* (Philadelphia: Asbury Dickins, 1801), xx; Daniel, *Scandal and Civility*, 243–48.

under lock and key. The ubiquity of *Common Sense* in America, estimated at one copy for every twenty people, had catapulted him onto the international scene, and *Rights of Man*, according to one English radical, was “as much a standard book” in Great Britain “as Robinson Crusoe and the Pilgrim’s Progress,” lofty (and much less controversial) company indeed. As late as 1792 Jefferson could congratulate his long-time friend that “our people...love what you write and read it with delight.” But with *The Age of Reason*, all that would change. In that masterwork, Paine’s last, he did precisely what he swore he would never do in the *Rights of Man*: “write himself out of reputation.” In that earlier context he had said he would be “careful to avoid that rock,” but here he steered directly into it, making shipwreck of his public prominence when he crashed against the rock of Christian revelation. Even his erstwhile admirers had to distinguish between which version of Paine they supported. “May his *Rights of Man* be handed down to our latest posterity,” toasted one turn-of-the-century Republican Society, “but may his *Age of Reason* never live to see the rising generation.”¹⁵

But see them—rising generation after rising generation—it did. The popularity of its author ensured it, especially among those who, nearly twenty years later, still considered “his *Common Sense*...a jewel which cannot be too much esteemed.” Paine himself felt as much, boasting in *Rights of Man* that he had “completely gained the ear and confidence of America” in 1776 and had enjoyed it “undiminished” ever since. Paine’s characteristic hubris notwithstanding, if Tocqueville was right that it was “the authority of a name” rather than “the strength of an argument” which “has produced the mighty and swift changes in men’s opinions,” then the name of Thomas Paine continued to carry considerable weight among the general public. It also carried weight among profit-hungry publishers, some of whom (orthodox Christians among them), ironically treated it like many treated the Bible—spreading the word without exactly knowing its contents. Some kept spreading it even after they knew. The enterprising Parson Weems, for example, was willing to peddle the “affair of Master Tommy Pain” as long as Bishop

¹⁵ Stewart, *Nature’s God*, 334; Benjamin Vaughan, quoted in Daniel, *Scandal and Civility*, 240; Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Paine, June 19, 1792; available online at <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-20-02-0076-0014>; Paine, *Rights of Man*, in *Writings*, 2:396; Lepore, *The Story of America*, 69.

Watson's response was included alongside it. The net effect would therefore be positive, he must have rationalized, without stopping him from netting a handsome profit from its sales.¹⁶

But as was always the case with Thomas Paine, it was not his name alone that spurred the spread of his writings. Most of their ongoing vitality was owed not to Paine's prestige, but to the power of his prose, the way *Common Sense* had caught the American imagination long before the identity of its author became common knowledge. Lyman Beecher famously excoriated "the infidelity of the Tom Paine school" that colored the Yale of his youth, and Harvard and Princeton fared no better, with skeptical students reveling in their increased ability to discombobulate their more conservative professors, most of whom were ministers. One of them worried that those most likely to "suck in the errors of the Deists" would be "students at colleges; young physicians, and attorneys at law," and for the most part this proved prescient, these being just the type of impressionable, self-conscious, upwardly-mobile ladder-climbers most susceptible to the shaming laughter of superiority and most eager to engage in the gentlemanly laughter of incongruity. Though the intensity of Beecher's characterization may have resulted in part from his own revivalist rhetoric, it was nonetheless true that many of his generation, especially among the young, "read Tom Paine and believed him." Why else flood New England's campuses with Bishop Watson's response? Even if *The Age of Reason* was "denounced far more than it was read," as Jon Butler suggests, the deluge of denunciations suggest more than a trickle of readers. Indeed, efforts to stem the tide may in fact have helped to lift it.¹⁷

Revolutionary poet and skeptic Philip Freneau, for example, recalled a conversation with a friend who credited the clergy for the popularity of *The Age of Reason*. The book "would never have been much known in this country if the Clergy had suffered it to rest," the man opined, "but they dragged it

¹⁶ Philip Freneau, *Letters on Various Interesting and Important Subjects* (New York: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1943), 37; Paine, *Rights of Man*, in *Writings*, 2:463; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 745; Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, 58; Mason Locke Weems, *His Words and Ways in Three Volumes, a Bibliography Left Unfinished by Paul Leicester Ford*, ed. Emily Ellsworth Ford Skeel, 2 vols. (New York, 1929), I:297–98; quoted in Smylie, "Clerical Perspectives on Deism, 209.

¹⁷ Bradford, *Mr. Thomas Paine's Trial*, 69; Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 199–200; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 219; Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels*, 57–58.

into publicity—let the text be what it would, animadversions on Paine made a part of the sermon.” Paine himself laughed that the clerical “banditti...are now bellowing in all the hackneyed language of hackneyed hypocrisy about humanity and piety, and often about something they call infidelity.... I am become so famous among them that they cannot eat or drink without me. I serve them as a standing dish, and they cannot make up a bill of fare if I am not in it.” The more the clergy thundered, the more the people read, inspiring one of Paine’s favorite toasts: “The best way of advertising good books,—by prosecution.” Even worse for the clergy’s cause, Paine’s words were more powerful, more memorable, and thus more effective than almost anything Christianity’s “weak, yet conceited friends” could write or say against him, and consequently, Freneau’s friend concluded, “Paine too frequently came off with flying colours.”¹⁸

Nor was it only among educated rabble-rousers or curious church-goers that *The Age of Reason* struck a chord, confirming that Paine’s popularity owed more to his earthy style than his ethereal subject. Beecher spoke of common farm laborers reading it in the barn. Lincoln kept a copy on the Illinois campaign trail in 1846. In rural Kentucky the book was “imbibed by the youth particularly, [and] with avidity,” until it flooded across the area “like a mighty tide.” Along the frontier, copies of Paine’s treatise on the Bible may have been more numerous than copies of the Bible itself, appearing everywhere from “the cabin of the farmer, [to] the bench of the tailor,” and from “the shops of the smith and the carpenter” to “the table of the lawyer, and...the desk of the physician.” Nineteenth-century Yale professor William Beers described “well-thumbed copies” passing “from hand to hand in many a rural tavern or store, where the village atheist wrestled in debate with the deacon or the school-master.” One copy even found its way into the hands of a young Joseph Smith, Sr., soon-to-be father of the Mormon prophet, when his own father, a Universalist, angrily threw it at him to keep him from joining the Methodists, which it did. It did not keep Smith from joining his son’s church once it was organized years later, but then again, Mormonism’s relationship to the Bible was never very orthodox to begin with. As itinerant preacher Jeremiah Minter observed, having ridden across nearly every state in the Union,

¹⁸ Freneau, *Letters on Various Interesting and Important Subjects*, 37–38; Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 127, 155.

ordinary Americans were imbibing Rousseau, Voltaire, Volney, and Hume, but most of all they were drinking in Tom Paine. In Minter's view, the devil himself was behind Paine's "hatred of holy Christianity" and inspired him in his writing. "Lucifer...was surely in this man, as it were in full."¹⁹

However it spread, Dr. Benjamin Rush is likely correct in complaining that *The Age of Reason* "probably perverted more persons from the Christian faith than any book that ever was written for the same purpose." And it owed its effect to its style more than its substance. From their earliest acquaintanceship Rush had recognized Paine's "wonderful talent of writing to the tempers and feelings of the public" and credited the book's effect to its "popular, perspicuous and witty style." Paine probably even benefitted from having risen to prominence on the wings of a pamphlet, a genre well suited to his temperament and tone. Pamphlets thrive on controversy, generate public engagement, and benefit from a "topicality, spontaneity, and loose form" that move them closer to the "rhythms and personal pressure of speech" than more formal writings. In pamphlets, "rectification and excoriation vie for tonal control," and "invective and banter...compete on the same terms with rational argument." Paine embodied these elements in his revolutionary pamphleteering, and was able to maintain that tone, undiminished, even in his much longer works. Elihu Smith found the book "lively and humorous," which makes for popular reading regardless of a book's length. Consequently, Paine was among those skeptical writers who "wrote so well or so cautiously that their works were widely sold," despite most Americans' opposition to infidelity. In Paine, wrote the *New York Gazette* as it announced the old man's passing, "the faculties of an angel were connected [to] the dispositions of a fiend."²⁰

The difficulty for most readers was separating the two sides of Paine, the angelic from the fiendish or the pro-democratic from the anti-religious. As Methodist itinerant Nathan Bangs

¹⁹ See Jacoby, *Strange Gods*, 301–02; Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt*, 16–17; Henry A. Beers, *An Outline Sketch of American Literature* (New York: Chautauqua Press, 1887), 65; Lucy Mack Smith, *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir*, ed. Levina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 291–92; Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith*, 94–95.

²⁰ Benjamin Rush, *A Memorial Containing Travels Through Life or Sundry Incidents in the Life of Dr. Benjamin Rush* (Lanoraie: Louis Alexander Biddle, 1905), 196–97; Robert A. Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment, 1750–1820* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 87; May, *Enlightenment in America*, 234, 118.

remembered, unsuspecting Americans could not have known that “Thomas Paine as a politician and Thomas Paine as a theologian were very different men.” Consequently, Paine’s “effusions against the Bible were received with greater avidity by Americans on account of the eminent services he had rendered to his country during the war of the revolution,” in the same way Ethan Allen’s *Narrative* helped stoke interest in *Reason, the Only Oracle of Man. The Age of Reason* was so “widely circulated,” in fact, that Bangs spoke for all the clergy in warning that its “deleterious influence...threatened to poison the fountains of knowledge with their pestiferous contents.” Paine’s influence on the spread of infidelity was so great that Bangs later made it a point that a certain Methodist convert had once been “a professed disciple of Thomas Paine,” the ultimate prize for a revivalist preacher. Upon conversion the former skeptic “committed his infidel books to the flames” and “substitut[ed] in their place the Bible and the Hymn book.” With *The Age of Reason*, Paine’s intention was to do the reverse.²¹

Led to open the book by the name of its author and seduced into turning its pages by the titillating flow of its prose, those who read its contents would have been blindsided by Paine’s antibiblical broadside, forced to rethink their opinions of two wildly popular cultural icons that they thought they had known and assumed they could trust. The first was Paine himself, for any reader of his earlier works would naturally have assumed that Paine was a Bible-believer, based on his use of the Bible as a proof-text for his political positions. Ebenezer Bradford wrote, “Many in America” who had earlier praised and defended Paine “are now struck dumb, at his bold infidelity and almost unheard of blasphemy against the holy scriptures.”²² Paine’s biblical patina had been thick enough to ensure an aura of scriptural respectability, but in reading *The Age of Reason*, they would have seen their beloved Apostle of Freedom morph into a different member of Christ’s chosen twelve. Paine the exciseman-turned-revolutionary had already changed from a Levi at the receipt of custom to a Simon the anti-

²¹ Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church, volume 2, from the year 1793 to the year 1816*, 3rd ed. (New York: T. Mason & G. Lane, 1840), 21, 164.

²² Bradford, *Mr. Thomas Paine’s Trial*, 13.

establishment zealot; somehow, he had also changed from a John the Beloved to a modern-day Doubting Thomas—or worse, to a Judas the betrayer of Christ.

Far more devastating to the majority, *The Age of Reason* would have opened their eyes to a vastly different Bible, which till then they had assumed was unerringly pious, historical, rational, and good. Paine would rob it of each of these adjectives, but would do so, as if by magic, in a way that would turn outrage into acceptance, or at least shock into serious (or in Paine’s case not-so-serious) reflection. Many who were shaking their heads at the book’s beginning were nodding their heads by its end. What Cheetham said of *Common Sense* may be even truer of *The Age of Reason*: “At first...it was read with indignation and alarm; but when the reader, and every body read it, recovering the first shock, re-perused it, its arguments nourished his feelings and appealing to his pride, re-animated his hopes, and satisfied his understanding.” When that occurred, earlier impressions of pious Paine and sacred scripture went down together, for reading the unfiltered Paine cured many of their shallow preconceptions of a now-demystified Bible. If average Americans during the Revolutionary period read “the Bible, *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, and Thomas Paine,” as historian Jill Lepore has said, then the more they read of that final entry, the less they believed in the first. Imbibing the deistical beliefs and witty sense of humor that Franklin and Paine prized in one another, Paine’s readers would end up laughing at all three.²³

NAMING *THE AGE OF REASON*

Laughter, however, was only Paine’s hidden hope; it was never his stated purpose. Far from it, in fact, judging from the title he ended up choosing. As an angry Ebenezer Bradford wrote, concerned for America’s youth: “This title, will doubtless lead thousands to read this pernicious book, who would never [have] thought it worth their while to have spent a moment upon it, had the book been entitled, *an horrid outrage against revelation!* which is a title much more agreeable to the contents of the book itself....However, the *Age of Reason* carries a kind of charm in its very sound, for what can be more

²³ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 60; Lepore, *These Truths*, 95.

captivating, to a young and reasonable being, who has been mortified with ten thousand unreasonable things, in the course of his life, than to hear of the *Age of Reason*?" As Bradford suggests, had Paine been forthright in his target and tactics, which he was not, he would have chosen something more obviously satirical: "The Folly of Faith," "A Burlesque on the Bible," or perhaps a sardonic twist on Locke's famous treatise, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, with Paine's sarcasm waiting just past the title page. In a way, this final option captures Paine's choice precisely, because the title he selected, the high-minded and respectable *Age of Reason*, hinted at the dichotomization and demonization his rhetoric of ridicule was meant to accomplish, proving that in an age defined by its rationality, the Bible was anything but. A reader of the *American Minerva* suggested that the book be called the "Age of Insanity" as a swipe at its author; Paine would have thought it appropriate when describing the Bible.²⁴

Openly announcing that the book before them would soon have them scoffing at scripture was far too obvious for Paine's liking. He would need to keep his humor in hiding by foregrounding a nobler authority: human reason. His would therefore be advertised as an epistemology of the head, not the heart, much less the funny bone, though all three were targets of his aim. "The mind of a *living* public," he once said, "feels first and reasons afterwards," but with humor, which bridges the two, he could strike an emotional chord while pretending to be addressing one's intelligence. Paine reveals his thinking in two passages concerning humor in his earlier "Letter to the Abbé Raynal," both of which shed light on Paine's anti-biblical approach, in which ridicule (woven into the book's pages) hides behind reason (emblazoned on the book's cover and spine).²⁵

In the first, Paine admits the difficulty of combining "warm passions with a cool temper," which he describes as balancing "imagination" (the emotional) with "judgment" (the rational) in such a way that readers can be made to "feel, fancy, and understand justly at the same time." Being able to strike the proper balance between these elements "is a talent very rarely possessed," but it is one, Paine seems to

²⁴ Bradford, *Mr. Thomas Paine's Trial*, 66–67; "For the Minerva," *American Minerva*, August 4, 1794, 3.

²⁵ Paine, "The Affair of Silas Deane," in *Writings*, 1:395.

suggest, that he had successfully developed. Recall that it appears fifth in Harry Hayden Clark's list of Paine's seven "theories of rhetoric," but it equally applies to his third: Paine's use of wit. Sure enough, when describing this concept of balance between the head and heart, Paine includes the role of humor, explaining that on the one hand, "It often happens that the weight of an argument is lost by the wit of setting it off," while on the other hand, "a certain degree of animation must be...raised in the reader, in order to interest the attention." In other words, there is a rhetorical "sweet spot" with just enough emotion to capture a reader's interest, but not so much that the rhetor loses control. This is sound rhetorical theory, balancing Aristotle's *pathos* and *logos*, Cicero's "lenity" and "gravity," or George Campbell's "conversation" and "declamation," but no wonder this "Goldilocks Zone" between boredom and frenzy is more easily recommended than truly achieved (even by Paine). Emotion is a powerful animal but must always be bridled by the mind. For propagandists with a knack for humor, this meant that ridicule was never allowed to run roughshod over reason, but was relegated to a secondary role. Whether as comic relief or as humorous hitman, laughter was a strong supporting actor on argument's rational stage, but was careful not to steal the spotlight from nobler characters in the starring role.²⁶

Paine's second humor-related insight in his letter to Reynal is similar to the first. In it he admits that "draw[ing] foolish portraits of each other, is a mode of attack and reprisal, which the greater part of mankind are fond of indulging." Hence the contemporary popularity of the pictorial satires of William Hogarth, the satirical cartoons of James Gillray, the bawdy sketches of Thomas Rowlandson, and the comic caricatures of Isaac Cruikshank (father of the more famous illustrator George), all precursors of today's ever-popular political cartoons. But as Paine protested, "The serious philosopher" (here one thinks of Ethan Allen's assumption of the title "philosopher" after publishing *Oracles of Reason*), "should be above" such folly, for often in a "war of wit all real character is lost." It is easy enough, "by a

²⁶ Clark, "Thomas Paine's Theories of Rhetoric," 307–39; Cicero, *On Oratory and Orators*, trans. J. S. Watson (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), 143 (book II, chapter LIII); George Campbell, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 8.

little pencilling,” to take something and “distort [it] into whimsical features,” but such funhouse mirror reflections are unfair and often “the painter becomes as much laughed at as the painting.”²⁷

In *The Age of Reason*, Paine wanted no laughter wasted on himself or his writing; he wanted it all trained mercilessly on the Christian Church and Bible instead. To circumscribe laughter in that way, he would indulge his gift of ridicule but have it come flying Reason’s colors. To the Abbé Reynal, he admitted that “maxims and reflections” (which include humorous ones) are “both an ornament and a useful addition to history,” as they hold a readers’ attention better than “facts [that] are coldly and carelessly stated.” But they must never detract from the author’s purpose. Paine considered it “absolutely necessary that the root from whence they spring...should be well attended to,” and he followed his own advice, keeping reason always before his readers’ eyes, even when indulging in its opposite. As reliant as he was on ridicule to push his agenda, Paine consistently made efforts to disguise this dependence by hiding it behind nobler methods. As described in chapter three, he put nonsense in service to common sense, and marshalled absurdity to police the borders of rationality.²⁸

Consider his oft-repeated but completely unfounded claims to rely on, and appeal to, reason alone. In work after work he promises his readers that he would root his arguments in pure rationalism—their treasured inheritance from Newton, Bacon, and Locke—but as we have seen, Paine’s rhetoric consistently belies his professed reliance on reason alone. In *Common Sense*, he promised to “offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense” (“coyness itself,” objected Jill Lepore), but he frequently resorted to logical fallacy and verbal abuse to make his point. In *The American Crisis* he spurned “the vapours of imagination” even while exhaling them, and vowed to “bring reason to your ears, and, in language as plain as A, B, C, hold up truth to your eyes,” which he did, though not in undiluted purity. In *Rights of Man* he praises Reason (along with the Liberty to exercise it) as an Archimedean lever with which to “raise the world,” but seldom uses it without first

²⁷ Thomas Paine, “Letter Addressed to the Abbé Raynal, on the Affairs of North America” (1782), in *Writings*, 2:113.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, in *Writings*, 2:79.

greasing the fulcrum. And in his dedication to *The Age of Reason*, he enthrones Reason as “the most formidable weapon against errors of every kind” and affirms (disingenuously), “I have never used any other, and I trust I never shall.” Yet the arguments that follow that assertion, as Davidson and Scheick rightly observe, are marked throughout with “scurrility, satire, quotation for insulting effect, and personal and dramatic asides.” Rhetorically, Paine promises one thing while delivering another, claiming reason even for his non-rational remarks. In doing so, he is being true to his period’s Enlightenment sensibilities but not fully true to his word.²⁹

In *The Age of Reason*, Paine’s trickery begins with its title. We saw this tactic before in the title he gave to his literary debut and the pseudonym that subsequently resulted. *Common Sense* was far from commonsensical in either sense of the term—as received wisdom and prevailing opinion or as unadorned philosophical rationalism—because it described neither Paine’s political position nor his persuasive style. Yet somehow Paine made it seem fitting in both respects, which is testament to his rhetorical prowess generally and to his use of ridicule specifically. In *The Age of Reason* he turned this trick again, declaring the age, and his irreligious perspective on it, deserving of the glorious name of Reason. In both instances, Paine’s titles were a strategic stroke of genius.

In the case of Paine’s seemingly unanswerable political pamphlet, his original choice of title, *Plain Truth*, would have carried similar implications, but he was wise to take Benjamin Rush’s advice and name it *Common Sense* instead, for the same reason that Thomas Jefferson was wise to heed Benjamin Franklin’s counsel to replace “sacred & undeniable” with “self-evident” when describing the truths of the Declaration of Independence. In both instances, Jill Lepore’s words apply: “Truths that are sacred and undeniable are God-given and divine, the stuff of religion. Truths that are self-evident are laws of nature, empirical and observable, the stuff of science.” This was Paine’s preferred arena, and the

²⁹ Paine, *Common Sense*, in *Writings*, 1:84; *The American Crisis*, in *Writings*, 1:178; *Rights of Man*, in *Writings*, 2:401; *The Age of Reason*, in *Collected Writings*, 1:665; Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 19; Lepore, *The Story of America*, 61.

Enlightenment ensured that whoever planted his flag there would claim a measurable home field advantage.³⁰

But these claims were never uncontested, as evidenced by the pseudonym of one of Paine's earliest adversaries, who took the title that Paine surrendered and countered his rival's "Common Sense" with "Plain Truth" of his own. The fact that common sense—and much of the incongruous laughter that protects it—"generally only comes out of the shadows and draws attention to itself at moments of perceived crisis or collapsing consensus," suggests that the rhetorical use of the term is a political ploy to shore up social accord. Ironically, then, the ubiquity of the term suggests the paucity of the object it designates. No wonder "common sense became a rhetorical weapon in the arsenal of multiple, conflicting constituencies." Like Baconian induction, which was also immensely popular at the time (and which foreshadowed many of Realism's common sense principles), "common sense" as a rhetorical tool "easily became in practice simply a tool for attacking the views one disliked."³¹

Rosenfeld does well to draw ongoing attention to what she calls the "imagined authority" of common sense, less as an intellectual faculty performing an epistemological function and more as a normative agent playing a rhetorical role. In this latter dimension, the *term* "common sense" becomes a label that assigns self-evidence to any truth claim to which it can be convincingly affixed. Its implied consensualism suggests unanimity where none exists, its seeming objectivity hides the hands that are grasping for it; its apparent irrefutability disguises the tenuousness of its claims, and its supposed taken-for-grantedness forecloses rational inquiry by making additional thought seem unnecessary or even inane. Though some (Kant, for instance) were sufficiently able to see through its rhetorical bluster to decry its often-empty shows of strength, common sense has "long existed as a fake normative criterion for making choices." As such, its imprimatur quickly became a highly contested cultural commodity,

³⁰ Lepore, *These Truths*, xv.

³¹ Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 24, 36; Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630–1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 155.

ironically worsening ideological disagreements it had originally been intended to mollify, and cheapening debate by shifting the basis of argumentation from the soundness of one's arguments to the persuasiveness of one's pretensions to self-evidence. Opposing parties acted like rival companies fighting over trademarks, logos, or Internet domain names, more concerned with marketing than perfecting the product itself.³²

As soon as one side of an argument was able to make “common sense” seem like a registered trademark or a proprietary piece of intellectual property, the contest was largely won. Just ask John Adams and Thomas Paine, who were making similar arguments in 1776, though with different degrees of rhetorical resonance. Or fast-forward a generation and ask their heirs John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson about the election of 1828—the man who read books defeated by the man who read men. By making the more convincing claim to common sense, the Tennessee soldier gained the ultimate political endorsement, and was able to make the Harvard don's impressive intellect look more like a liability—to a military mind a political instance of negating an enemy's advantages by altering the rules of engagement. As an expert in rhetoric (after his presidency he served as the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard), Adams would have known the persuasive power of words, but he proved unable to counter Jackson's claim to that all-important ideograph, “common sense.”³³

TRADEMARKING REASON®

“Ideograph” is a rhetorical term that Professor Adams would not have known, since communications scholar Michael McGee coined the term a century and a half after his time. By it McGee meant a constellation of ideas and allegiances that center on a single, vaguely-defined term, or more technically, “a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal.” Ideographs, McGee explains, are “one-term sums of an

³² Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 9–10, 55, 244, 36, 54.

³³ See Ward, *Andrew Jackson*, 52.

orientation”; they “signify and ‘contain’ a unique ideological commitment,” and because their fundamental logic is unquestionable in the society that defines (and is defined by) them, they can be employed as “agencies of social control.” Like “Liberty” during the American Revolution, “Freedom” during the Civil War, or “Progress” through much of modern history, these words exert an immense rhetorical influence whenever they are used to confirm a position or justify an action, no matter how ill-fitting (to some) the word and action might ultimately be. Charles Taylor noted that such words—he calls them “slogan terms”—trade on “favourable resonances,” and are “often deployed as argument-stopping universals.” Concentrating within themselves many of the vague hopes or fears of their society, they “acquire a Procrustean force. Shallowness and dominance are two sides of the same coin.”³⁴

The vagueness of a regnant ideograph trades depth for breadth, precision for applicability, and clarity for resonance. Its nebulosity allows for multiple interpretations, claims and counterclaims, “a host of divergent connotations and applications” that are “camouflage[d]” by the “very universality of the language” used to describe them. Historian Carl Becker called one of his period’s ideographs (*freedom*) a “magic but elusive word,” perhaps without suspecting that much of the magic of such words comes not despite but because of that very elusiveness. As a knowing rhetorical scholar remarked, “the very fact that a word is not used very analytically may increase its rhetorical potency.”³⁵

But semantic imprecision does not explain why ideographs are so forcefully debated and jealously contested. Outside of zealous lexicographers, plenty of vague vocabulary words elicit no definitional discord. Arguments over ideographs, however, are more like turf wars or zero-sum games: rival parties fighting for control over a precious ideological resource that loses its value if divided or shared. Because of an ideograph’s endowment of cultural capital, Foner points out, “to ‘capture’ [such] a word...is to acquire a formidable position of strength in political conflicts,” strength that can be “used to

³⁴ Michael C. McGee, “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980): 1–16; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 478–79.

³⁵ Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (1953; reprint: Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1985), 217.

convey and claim legitimacy” for any number of positions or programs. Walter Lippmann spoke similarly of cultural symbols and described them as “handles” that leaders “can use to move a crowd.” John Fenno lamented that “the word republicanism” (one of his period’s dominant ideographs) “seems to be snatched up as a weapon to knock an adversary down,” and the same could be said of ideographs in general.³⁶

Prefiguring McGee’s coinage of “ideographs,” rhetorical scholar Richard Weaver dwelt at length on what he called “ultimate terms,” and affirmed that “by confining the term to our side we make an evaluation in our favor.” As synonyms Weaver offered “charismatic terms,” “uncontested terms,” or most exaltedly, “God terms.” The gravitational pull of such terms, as well as the “coupling” with other concepts they induce, mirrors what Lippmann said about the cultural symbols that shape public opinion, which he compared to “a strategic railroad center where many roads converge regardless of their ultimate origin or their ultimate destination.” Such terminals are inherently multidirectional, but for that very reason, “he who captures the symbols by which public feeling is for the moment contained, controls by that much the approaches of public policy. And as long as a particular symbol has the power of coalition, ambitious factions will fight for possession.” No wonder the annexation of ultimate symbols is an ultimate strategic goal. As rival rhetors make bets over the future of the societies they are seeking to influence, such terms, Weaver said, are “rhetorical trump cards,” and whoever draws them ends up holding the winning hand.³⁷

Of course, in a game between card sharks the gamble is often won by the better bluffer, especially when no one sees, let alone holds, all the cards. Rhetoric is often reducible to a contest over ideographic identification—who best identifies with the ideograph and convinces others to identify with that version of it as well—but holding onto those trump cards requires considerable sleight of hand. To Weaver, it requires rhetorical “charisma,” but it is an “engineered charisma,” even when it “sound[s]

³⁶ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), xv–xv; Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1922; reprint, New York: Free Press, 1997), 150; Daniel, *Scandal and Civility*, 91.

³⁷ Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, 221, 211, 213; Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 133.

like the very gospel of one's society." As such, not only are ideographs "more pregnant than propositions ever could be," they are more difficult to dislodge since their vague positivity and seeming self-evidence make them largely inarguable. They function more like facts, and as Paine said in his earliest political pamphlet, "Where facts are sufficient, arguments are useless." No wonder the label "God terms" is so appropriate, since speaking against them almost amounts to blasphemy. If such terms can be "made to stick" to one's position, they "will validate almost anything."³⁸

Conversely, they can also invalidate almost anything. Foner wisely draws attention to the fact that "central elements of our political language" are often "defined and redefined with reference to [their] putative opposite[s]," and observes that "such binary oppositions have ordered Americans' understanding of the world." In this Weaver agrees, suggesting that a useful test for identifying a society's "God terms" is to discover their opposites: the word "whose antonym carries the greatest rebuke." These antonyms are a society's "devil terms," and rhetorically they function as "prime repellants" against positions which are thereby made to seem anathema. As Sidney Mead said of revivalism (and the kind of rhetoric under examination here is nothing if not revivalistic), the oversimplification required to reach a mass audience means that rhetors "must reduce all the complex of issues to a simple choice between two clear and contrasting alternatives." God terms and devil terms make this process easy; consequently, partisans often resort to a rhetoric of ideographic opposition. Consider Jonathan Mayhew's 1749 sermon in which he trumpeted "Liberty, the BIBLE and Common Sense, in opposition to Tyranny, PRIEST-CRAFT and Non-sense," or Elihu Palmer's 1793 Fourth of July oration in which he blasted "King-craft and priest-craft, those mighty enemies to reason and liberty." In both cases, each God term is further exalted by its opposition to a corresponding devil term. But revealingly, both orators—one a Congregational minister and the other a freethinking deist—put similar God terms to the service of rival ideologies. They meant very different things by "priest-craft," and would not have agreed on what "common sense" or "reason" confirmed, but neither language nor

³⁸ Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, 227–32; Paine, "Case of the Officers of Excise," in *Writings*, 4:501.

logic kept them from claiming the authority those ideographs implied. If rhetoric is the “harlot of the arts,” then ideographs (positive or negative) are the charismatic terms most seductively open for hire.³⁹

With no formal training in rhetoric and with the terminology just discussed still nearly two centuries away, Thomas Paine was unmatched in his appropriation of his period’s most potent ideographs, emblazoning them on the titles of his most popular works: “Common Sense,” “Rights,” “Reason.” These socially sanctified “God words” appear hundreds of times in his voluminous works, as do assignations and insinuations of their opposites, “devil words” like “nonsense,” “tyranny,” and “absurdity” damning rival positions wherever he could make such labels stick. In Paine’s anti-religious writings, his appropriation of the term “Reason” helps account for his rhetoric of ridicule, through which he made Christianity’s counterclaims to rationality seem laughably absurd. Paine’s language was a dynamic of appropriation and contestation. It wasn’t that his positions were inherently more reasonable than that of his opponents; instead, like earlier rationalists, he “made rather more use of the word” than his rivals. Drawing on Franklin’s wry admission that claiming rationalism “enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do,” one scholar defines this dynamic as “an unarticulated battleground in Enlightenment thought: conflict is determined by who first defines and then exercises reason.” Thomas Paine beat his rivals to the punch, largely by beating them to the punchline.⁴⁰

By trademarking Reason® and Common Sense®, so to speak, Paine was laying sole claim to self-evidence and rationality. This zero-sum game then left his opponents to be branded by one of the three remaining possibilities that Voltaire had suggested for reason’s enemies: those who “reason wrongly,” those who do not “reason at all,” and those who “persecute those who do reason.” A generation later, the editor of a Freethought periodical in Poughkeepsie, New York, did Paine one better by combining the two terms, naming his paper *The Herald of Reason and Common Sense*. Against such

³⁹ Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, xvi ; Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, 212, 222; Sidney E. Mead, “Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America,” *Church History* 23, no. 4 (December 1954): 307–08; Noll, *The Bible in American Public Life*, 268; Palmer quoted in Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels*, 107.

⁴⁰ John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660–1750* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 14; Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment*, 157.

incontestable labels, previously well-entrenched titles such as king and queen, priest and pastor, even prophet and apostle, were meant to fall by the wayside—an ideographic God word being leveraged against the word of God. With no little irony, in his bid to unseat political and religious despots Paine handed the scepter to rhetorical tyrants of his own.⁴¹

By the 1790s, invoking “reason” was as ingenious as claiming “common sense” had been two decades before, for reason was the self-congratulatory watchword for that proudly enlightened age. Even without the training of those experts in rhetoric who speak of “ideographs,” historian Carl Becker spoke of “magic words” that “unobtrusively” define or even conquer particular periods of history. In a description that would make a rhetorical scholar proud, Becker states, “If we would discover the little backstairs door that for any age serves as the secret entranceway to knowledge, we will do well to look for certain unobtrusive words with uncertain meanings that are permitted to slip off the tongue or the pen without fear and without research; words which, having from constant repetition lost their metaphorical significance, are unconsciously mistaken for objective realities.” Becker himself suggests “reason” as one of those “magic words” in the eighteenth century, and other scholars agree. John Redwood noted the word “reason” being “eulogized, apostrophized, invoked and venerated,” “never omitted [but] rarely defined.” Sophia Rosenfeld, who informed much of our discussion of common sense, observed that by the end of the Revolutionary period—precisely the time Paine wrote *The Age of Reason*—Reason® had “stepped into the place” that Common Sense® had held as the period’s “great epistemological foundation.” As usual, Paine was ahead of the curve.⁴²

Whether wearing the crown of “common sense” or arrayed in the robes of “reason,” the Enlightenment had almost unbounded confidence—we might even call it “blind faith”—in rational self-evidence. John Locke held that “the truth certainly would do well enough if she were once left to shift

⁴¹ Voltaire quoted in Bergler, *Laughter and the Sense of Humor*, 141.

⁴² Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 47; Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion*, 197; Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 194.

for herself” and Paine went to great lengths to make his writings appear independent, indisputable, and in need of neither external nor internal support. As quoted already, he used the same phrase himself in describing *Common Sense* as an “orphan” left to “shift for itself,” but Paine’s manipulative rhetoric belies his confidence in the self-evidence of his positions. What he did have confidence in, however, was rhetoric’s ability to hide its own tracks, a trick for which the rhetoric of ridicule was particularly well-adapted. That confidence prefigures Tocqueville’s observation that “it can be guaranteed that if, in the end, you introduce the audience to a subject which moves them, they will not concern themselves about the route you have taken.” They will have forgotten the path in their fervor over the destination. Furthermore, Tocqueville continued, “They will never reproach you for breaking the rules if you have aroused their emotions,” a truth that holds even if one of those rules is against emotional arousal. This is what made Paine’s rhetoric doubly designing: by invoking “reason” he not only made his position seem self-sufficiently reasonable (Locke’s point); he also disguised his emotional appeals behind a façade of pure rationality (Tocqueville’s point). Readers were being drawn into agreement before they even opened the book’s cover. Once inside, most would be shocked by what they read.⁴³

CONCLUSION

When we began this chapter, Paine was facing imprisonment in Paris and writing frantically to complete a work he hoped would somehow find its way to a waiting world. For the next ten months he felt forgotten and feared those words might be his last. However, as we recounted in this chapter, neither Paine’s life nor his life’s work would come to an end in that prison. Instead, he would live to leave his jail cell, and his words would live to leave their mark. *The Age of Reason* crossed the English Channel and the Atlantic Ocean while Paine was confined to crossing a courtyard. After his release, he fanned the flames the book’s first part kindled by adding an even more strident second part, and he went to his

⁴³ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*; trans. William Popple (1689; reprint, Huddersfield: J. Brook, 1796), 48; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 571.

grave still at work on a third. *The Age of Reason* was the last and most controversial of Paine's counter-conservative *tours de force*; together with *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man* it constituted a "triple threat" to the status quo, and of the three, many considered *Age* the most threatening. To begin with, people needed only to glance at its cover to want to peek inside. The name of its author ensured public interest, and the promise of "Reason" gilded its contents with an alluring Midas touch. But this was ideographic alchemy, a "magic word" that had readers seeing self-evidence where there was none, a trick that Paine played repeatedly in his writings. In a revealing admission, in the same essay in which he asserts that the point he was making "requires but a single glance of thought to see" (the self-evidence of Reason®), he also admits—*only one page earlier!*—that "It is seldom that our first thought, even upon any subject, is sufficiently just" (he had made the same admission in *Common Sense*). With this acknowledgement, Paine concedes the contestability of common sense and suggests the reasoning behind his rhetoric: the fact that common sense often needs a nudge, a hint, to help it find its way.

Who better to help shape that common sense than the pseudonymous *Common Sense* himself? Primed by the names on the cover, readers of *The Age of Reason* were poised to enter, unsuspecting, a rhetorical battlefield having already lowered their defenses, since Paine had denied any real danger. Once inside, their ostensibly objective guide would proceed to present his arguments as axioms, foregrounding rationality, though with emotion's subtle hand upon the wheel. As we now enter *The Age of Reason*, we will see that it was Paine's ever-present rhetoric of ridicule that constituted that invisible hand, subtly policing the porous borders of Reason. Opening the cover and turning past the title page, readers would soon be swept up in Paine's masterful powers of persuasion, entranced by what a reviewer for the Boston *Mercury* called a "strange mixture of sense and nonsense, learning and ignorance...satire and impious ridicule."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Paine, "The Eighteenth Fructidor," in *Writings*, 3:346–347; *Common Sense*, in *Writings*, 1:96; "Observations on Several Paragraphs in Mr. Paine's 'Age of Reason,'" *The Mercury* (Boston), March 13, 1795.

CHAPTER IX

RIDICULE IN *REASON*

In our digital age of mass media, instant access, and a 24-hour news cycle, it is hard to imagine the type-setting, hand-pressing print culture of the late eighteenth century. Add to that modernity's infatuation with "stars" and the clicking of cameras that follow them, and a "cult of personality" two and a half centuries removed seems equally difficult to fathom. But strive to overcome the historical distance and empathize with ancestors who were just as interested as we are in hearing—and spreading—the news of the day, and we begin to envision the type of buzz that would have accompanied rumors that presses were churning out something new from the pen of Thomas Paine. If evangelist George Whitefield, only twenty-two years Paine's senior, can be considered "Anglo-America's first modern celebrity," and if Benjamin Franklin (or perhaps George Washington) likely comes in second, an argument could be made to rank Thomas Paine a close third—if not higher—in a very tight heat. And since his was a rhetorical charisma rather than a personal one, his writings would have been as eagerly gushed over and gossiped about as any visit from the Divine Dramatist, the Sage of Philadelphia, or the American Cincinnatus. At a time when technologies of communication and transportation were just beginning their exponential rise, when news of world events could filter into country hamlets an ocean away, a new word from Citizen Paine would have been an international media event, with eager eyes, itching ears, and profit-hungry presses ready to pounce on every page.

By the time *The Age of Reason* appeared, its successful spread would have been ensured by the popularity of *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man*. The first had spread across America (and in translated form across Europe) with astonishing speed, until Paine's was a "voice heard round the world" to accompany the shots fired in Lexington and Concord. In the latter's case, *Rights of Man* sold 50,000 copies in England in its first three months alone, and this at a time when non-fiction print-runs averaged 750 copies. Each installment of Paine's libertarian Trilogy outsold its prequel and with *The Age of*

Reason that streak would continue, but this time its continuing popularity owed as much to outrage as to interest, and spread on the back of controversy more than current events. One man's reaction to *Rights of Man* perfectly captures what awaited readers of *The Age of Reason*, since it too "ought to be read with some degree of caution." Paine's rhetoric, after all, was meant to "tear away the bandage from the public eye; but in tearing it off there may be some danger of injuring the organ."¹

Injury-prone or bravely unblinking, the eyes trained on *The Age of Reason*, as discussed in the last chapter, would have been drawn first to the author's name, and then to the book's title, eager to echo Paine's paeans to their nobly enlightened age. Thus primed by their common sense self-confidence and reassured by their ideographic identification, they would have opened the book, already expecting to agree with its author. What this chapter will explore is what they would have experienced inside. Drawn into sharing Paine's perspective through his subtle manipulations—a revised lexicon, a pricked conscience, an anesthetizing comic frame, a figurehead *logos*, and a normalizing appeal to shame—readers would continue to be pulled and persuaded by what a pair of scholars called Paine's "strategies of subtle self-authorization."²

OPENING ARGUMENTS

Paine wasted no time in initiating such subtleties. Even the book's dedication was ingeniously designed, drawing the ire of many of his American critics who saw it as a ploy to imply public patronage and general agreement with his views. Whereas *Common Sense* had been "Addressed to the Inhabitants of America" and signed merely by its anonymous "AUTHOR," in *The Age of Reason* Paine attempted to be much more ingratiating. He dedicated it "to my fellow citizens of the United States of America" and signed it, "Your affectionate friend and fellow citizen, THOMAS PAINE." By then, of course, Thomas Paine and *Common Sense* were synonymous, a mental association he would exploit throughout the

¹ Nelson, *Thomas Paine*, 202, 269.

² Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 35.

work, despite the fact that what he was encouraging was an upheaval of the commonsense assumptions of the majority of his readers. Admitting as much, he spoke directly to his “fellow citizens” and said that he was placing *The Age of Reason* “under your protection”—protection he knew it would need. He asked readers to remember his strenuous support for “the Right of every Man to his opinion,” knowing his would be unpopular, and hinted that anyone unwilling to change his mind had made “a slave of himself to his present opinion,” an unpardonable abdication of a person’s intrinsic right to change his mind.³

Only one paragraph into the work and this friend of freedom had already ingratiated himself to his intended audience, appealed to their sense of loyalty to a “fellow citizen” in need of their protection, and planted the suggestion that changing one’s mind was not a sign of error or indecision but an exercise of one’s inalienable rights—all under the aegis of Reason, the most popular patron of the day. The dedication then ends with the aforementioned assertion that Reason is the “most formidable weapon against error” and Paine’s outrageous claim that “I have never used any other, and I trust I never shall.” With that seemingly innocuous dedication behind him, he could then turn to a topic that was, like his earlier writings, fraught with “difficulties,” but one that had pressed upon his mind “for several years.” It would be his “last offering,” presented with an unquestionable “purity of...motive”: Thomas Paine’s “thoughts upon Religion.” In some editions, even this was framed by a reassuring heading, announcing that what followed was not a confession of doubt but rather “The Author’s Profession of Faith.”⁴

More than innocuous, Paine initially presents himself as being on true religion’s side, engaged in the defense of “morality, of humanity, and of the theology that is true,” which he saw jeopardized by “the general wreck of superstition, of false systems of government, and false theology,” occurring in revolutionary France. In defense of truth, therefore, he presents his personal articles of faith in a mere two sentences, echoing the final paragraphs in *Rights of Man*. The first reflected his deism in standard form: “I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life.” The second

³ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Complete Writings*, 1:463; Schlereth, *Age of Infidels*, 51–52.

⁴ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:21.

reflected his egalitarian humanism: “I believe the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow creatures happy.” Had he stopped there he could have printed a broadside instead of a book, and his reputation would have remained untarnished. Bible believers would have embraced him as their own, recognizing in his second statement a well-known biblical verse, Micah 6:8, which reduces to three the duties humanity owes to God: “to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.” But even that essentially nontheological passage—his final bow to the Bible before systematically dismantling it—had not passed through his hands undiminished, for it was not humility before God that would characterize the rest of Paine’s volume. No, it was the pride of human independence, freed of allegiance owed to any religious body or book. With that he shifts from apologetics to polemics, with all that follows—everything beyond those first five paragraphs—dedicated to “the things I do not believe,” most notably the Bible.⁵

Paine does not begin with the Bible. He starts instead by expressing disbelief in the creeds of any church outside of his own internal *ecclesia*: “My own mind is my own church.” From creeds he turns to churches, dismissing them all as “human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit,” political and economic entities (his usual targets) disguised as religious organizations. His next two paragraphs extol intellectual honesty and moral integrity, redefining “infidelity” in terms of hypocrisy rather than heterodoxy to defuse the word’s usual connotation and distance himself from its pejorative weight. It was not disbelief, but “mental lying” that was the real problem, a problem he then called “prostitut[ing] the chastity of [the] mind,” deftly calling both the seventh (“Thou shalt not commit adultery”) and ninth (“Thou shalt not bear false witness”) commandments to his side. A later critic reminded Paine of this conflation of Infidel and Hypocrite and said that, based on his use of the Bible in *Common Sense*, “Mr. Paine may take his option for the honor of both [titles], or either.”⁶

⁵ Ibid., 4:21–22.

⁶ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:22; A Protestant Lay-Dissenter, *Remarks on a Pamphlet, entitled The Age of Reason, being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology, by Thomas Paine, author of The Rights of Man* (Dublin: P. Byrne, 1795), 4–5.

Extending for one more paragraph the theme of immorality (nudging “infidelity” still further from a theological context), he speaks of the “adulterous connection of church and state” and suggests that the long-standing liaison can only be broken by upending both parties one by one. As early as 1776, he claims, he foresaw “the exceeding probability that a revolution in the system of government would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion,” and tried his hand in fomenting both, the first through *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man* and the second through *The Age of Reason*. And with that, after a mere eleven paragraphs, Paine begins in earnest to dislodge the keystone in the arch of every “national church or religion”: the “pretend[ed]...special mission” that “God communicated to certain individuals,” which was subsequently enthroned in “certain books which they call *revelation*, or the Word of God.” He would state his position most clearly in a later letter (“I believe that all are impostors who pretend to hold verbal communication with the Deity. It is the way by which the world has been imposed upon.”), but the sentiment underwrites all he would say in *The Age of Reason*. Whether Jews, Christians, or Turks (Muslims); whether Moses, Jesus, or Mahomet; whether Old Testament, New Testament, or Koran—Paine “disbelieve[d] them all.”⁷

A WAR OVER WORDS

In *The Age of Reason*, Paine the former staymaker would turn the Bible inside out, revealing its interior seams and stitches to expose Christendom’s socially constructed inner lining. He intended to replace revelation with reason, exchange Christianity for Deism, and trade the Bible for the natural world, all in pursuit of liberating humanity from their bondage to “the church human,” having already freed them from “the state tyrannic.” Long accustomed to storming what he called “Bastilles of the word,” this would be his most intrepid attack, and as in earlier offensives, this “General of the Headstrong War” would breach the well-guarded walls through the rhetoric of ridicule.⁸

⁷ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:23; Paine, “An Answer to a Friend,” May 12, 1797; in *Writings*, 4:197.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4:190; Keane, *Tom Paine*, xi.

To attack the Bible, Paine first had to pry it out of the almighty hands of God. As a modern rhetorical scholar observed, “God’s word does not invite rebuttal; it terminates debate,” so Paine would have to resituate those words into the mouths of fallible mortals. Only then could they be discussed and eventually dismissed, though that step of discussion should not be passed over lightly. Bourdieu described *doxa* (as in *orthodoxy*) as “the realm of the ‘undiscussed’” and therefore unexamined, but once examined, even *doxa* becomes contestable terrain. Even before being bloodied by any battles, contested ground, even examined ground, ceases to be unanimously accepted as holy ground. Horace Bushnell suggested this when he warned that “an immense overdoing in the way of analysis often kills a sermon, if it does not quite kill the preacher,” and the same could be said of the usual source of those sermons, the Bible itself. Anticipating what E. B. White said about dissecting humor, Bushnell concluded, “nothing ever comes out of the analyzing process fully alive.”⁹

Death follows life, however, so ironically, Paine had to resuscitate the text before he could preside over its death-by-analysis. That is, he needed to move his audience beyond a vague belief in scriptural *principles* to an actual examination of the biblical *text*. Only then could he hope to wean them off the faith-filtered and clergy-curated volume they accepted uncritically, and lead them to view the book through the more skeptical lens he was offering instead. Of course, the more subtly he could do this, the more independent and objective his readers would feel, as if they were reading for the first time an unfiltered Bible with untampered eyes, something their commonsense epistemology encouraged. In grammatical terms, he could pretend to present unadorned nouns, but do so in such a way that readers would attach their own adjectives, which with Paine’s help would be decidedly derogatory. Sometimes he even provided those adjectives himself: “the *whimsical* account of the creation—the *strange* story of Eve, the snake, and the apple—the *amphibious* idea of a man-god—the *corporeal* idea of the death of a god—the *mythological* idea of a family of gods.” Adding math to his anti-Christian curriculum, he could

⁹ See Philip Wander, “The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory,” and Raymie E. McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis,” both in Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson, eds., *The Routledge Reader in Rhetorical Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 611, 491; Horace Bushnell, *Building Eras in Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1881), 188.

mock “the christian system of arithmetic, that three are one, and one is three.” The French version was even less subtle: “the Christian system of arithmetic” was rendered “ce *nonsense* arithmetique.”¹⁰

Once Christians began to read their cherished-but-unexamined Bibles, Paine believed, they would see scripture in its true colors and be shocked into skepticism by what they beheld—provided they read it in the way that Paine intended. Feigning innocence, he claimed he could defeat the Christian clergy by “com[ing] on their own ground, and oppos[ing] them with their own weapon, the Bible.” In this he anticipated a later opponent of orthodoxy, Unitarian William Ellery Channing, who held that “false and absurd doctrines” (notice again the mention of absurdity) “when exposed, have a natural tendency to beget scepticism in those who received them without reflection,” which in Paine’s mind described most Christian believers. “None are so likely to believe too little,” concluded Channing, “as those who have begun with believing too much.”¹¹

But returning to Paine’s grammar lesson, for readers to supply the adjectives he intended, Paine would have to plant seeds of doubt that would subtly slant their minds in the direction of disbelief. And to do so he redefined several nouns he knew would stand in his way. “Infidelity” became “hypocrisy” rather than “disbelief,” as noted already; “revelation” became “hearsay” for all but the original recipient; and “the Christian system” (itself a step below “the Christian faith”) became nothing more than a plagiarism of “the heathen mythology.” The New Testament Evangelists were mere “historians” (and dishonest ones at that); theologians were “mythologists,” and the “story” of the resurrection had more of “fraud and imposition” than of faith and inspiration. Moreover, to barricade the apologists’ usual escape routes, he took command of “the three frauds” most often used “to impose upon mankind”: “*mystery*, *miracle*, and *prophecy*.” The first was “a bar to all questions, inquiries, and speculations”; the second was a “crutch” meant to hide the “lameness or weakness in the doctrine that is preached”; and the third

¹⁰ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:58; italics added.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4:93; William Ellery Channing, “Objections to Unitarian Christianity Considered” (1819), in *The Works of Wm. Ellery Channing*, volume 2 (Glasgow: James Hedderwick & Son, 1835), 480.

was an invitation for “the ingenuity of posterity” to turn a thousand-mile miss from a thousand-year-old bow into a perfect bulls-eye from “point-blank” range.¹²

Paine’s reframing of prophecy is particularly revealing. “Prophets” he rebranded “poets” to shift the object of analysis from scripture to literature, from history to fiction, and from the words of God to the musings of men. Then, drawing upon one of the rare biblical instances in which prophesying is accompanied by music, he turned the exception into the rule, labelling *all* prophets musical poets and asserting that “we have lost the original meaning of the word *prophecy*”—that is, his own. Paine even acts as if there were no counterevidence to his claim (“were there no other passage in the book, called the Bible, than this”) and that the one passage cited is sufficient proof (“this alone would be sufficient”) for passing judgment on the traditional meaning. This was not the case, but isolating and elevating the passage in question was key to his reformulation’s intent, for it cast all related passages in the least positive light. By redefining prophets as poets and then making musical instruments a requirement for their role, Paine was able to downgrade Saul’s calling “among the prophets” (1 Samuel 10:9–12) into a “concert” of sorts; he could dismiss both “the greater and the lesser prophets” by pretending that the difference between them entailed the quality of their rhymes instead of the quantity of their writings; and even further afield, he could deny that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were prophets at all, since no mention is ever made “that they could either sing, play music, or make poetry.” In each instance prophets were stripped of their aura of authority by using a definition that Paine pretended was the Bible’s own, and that he applied indiscriminately to dismiss the whole. “The axe goes at once to the root,” he boasted, “and consequently all the inferences that have been drawn from those books...are not worth disputing about.” The case was closed, with no chance for cross-examination, so Paine skips out of court tossing a backhanded compliment behind him: “the writings of the Jewish poets deserve a better fate than that of being bound up...with the trash that accompanies them, under the abused name of the word of God.”¹³

¹² Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:22–24, 50–66, 74, 153, 92, 116–18, 159, 28–32, 40–41, 27, 183, 77, 81, 79.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4:35–38.

In this instance, Paine’s choice of texts—like his usual reframing of them—is revealing of his larger design: “The manner in which it is here used strips it of all religious meaning.” This statement is key to understanding Paine’s delegitimizing project. The more he could present the Bible on his own terms and thus denude it of its sacred vestments, the more he could draw it out of the sanctuary and into the ring. Dressed in different clothing, the same face could pass for prince or pauper, or as Paine would present the Bible, a jester could be made of one who once reigned as king.¹⁴

But if stripping the Bible of its sanctity was one goal, another was stripping tradition of its aura of authority. David Hoffman noted Paine’s practice of “perceptual framing” in *Common Sense* and singled out his use of “prejudice” as his case in point. In Paine’s political works, Hoffman argues, he removed the weight of a hallowed past by reframing it as a passing fancy—a habit, not a heritage. He “uses ‘prejudice’ to spur them into epistemological reflection,” which ends (with his help) in a rejection of long-held but perceptually distanced beliefs. Paine’s does the same in his antireligious writings, recasting belief as no deeper than a birthmark, as changeable as mindless routine. “You believe in the Bible from the accident of birth,” he wrote an apologist, “But leaving the prejudice of education out of the case, the unprejudiced truth is” that a cradle Christian’s belief in the Bible is as socially constructed as the “Turks believ[ing] in the Koran.” Neither has empirical evidence to support them, but neither is aware of its absence, much less its need. They simply “availed themselves of prejudice instead of proof.” Even worse, not knowing the precariousness of where they stood, they were also blind to the danger of the path that lay ahead, for as Paine wrote later, “The prejudice of unfounded belief, often degenerates into the prejudice of custom, and becomes at last rank hypocrisy.”¹⁵

Ironically, just as it is habit and prejudice that have bound people to the Bible, he says elsewhere that “it is habit and prejudice that have prevented people from examining [it],” since mental inertia

¹⁴ Ibid., 4:37.

¹⁵ Hoffman, “Paine and Prejudice,” 393; Paine, “An Answer to a Friend,” in *Writings*, 4:199; Paine, “A Letter to Mr. Erskine,” in *Writings*, 4:223; Paine, *An Examination of the Prophecies*, in *Writings*, 4:357.

keeps questions at bay. “They read [the Bible] from custom,” but he would have them read it critically, until deliberate disbelief replaced accidental faith. Paradoxically, by reframing prejudice—simultaneously magnifying its dangers and minimizing its strength—and then reframing religious belief as prejudice, Paine softens the edge of his own iconoclasm, which, after all, is simply a correction of vision, like the bifocals invented by his good friend Ben. As he writes in *The Age of Reason*, disagreements over “religious opinions” result from nothing more than “mistake and prejudice,” reducing charges of infidelity to simple differences of taste. Seen in this light, unorthodoxy (Paine’s) is no cause for alarm, and orthodoxy (theirs) has no claim on conviction. Better to overcome your own religious prejudices by reframing the prejudices of others—simply “put the best construction upon a thing that it will bear.” He had just done that himself, providing skeptics with an easy justification for their difference of opinion, and providing believers with an “easy out” from their unintentional but unfounded views. Still, selective with his own advice as always, a “best construction” approach was certainly not what he would take with the Bible. Deconstruction required a much more negative spin.¹⁶

This would be a war of word against Word, and as Paine knew from his previous rhetorical battles, the advantage belonged to whomever gained control of the key semantic battlegrounds—ideographs like “common sense” and “reason” being essential objectives. “Men fall out with names without understanding them,” he said in *Common Sense*, so he manipulated language to ensure that the “names” he used were understood in the way he intended. Beyond redefining certain words, he played with his vocabulary’s borders, at times taking advantage of a word’s multivocality and at other times denying that such flexibility even existed. He often took great pains to “fix...a standard signification” to a particular word, wanting to be “clearly understood in my definition of it.” But he also knew that some words could “be made to mean any thing and nothing” and frequently took advantage of this fact, especially when it came to the Bible. As he wrote to a “friend” who tried to prooftext him into biblical belief, “the Bible decides nothing, because it decides any way, and every way, one chooses to make it.”

¹⁶ Paine, “A Letter to Mr. Erskine,” in *Writings*, 4:222; Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:187.

Paine would press this interpretive flexibility to his own advantage. “After all,” he wrote earlier, “who can say what was the precise meaning of terms and expressions so loosely formed, and capable of such a variety of contradictory interpretations?” Who decides? Whomever presents his case most convincingly.¹⁷

Paine had reason to believe that his words could win the day, and his facility with the rhetoric of ridicule would bring a tactical advantage. He was such a master of language that he was once able to argue *for* taxation in such a way that taking a position against it seemed downright unpatriotic, and this in a nation that had gone to war (among other things) over taxes it refused to pay. In that instance Paine lamented that an otherwise innocuous word, *taxation*, had become so execrable that it could no longer serve the cause of liberty and independence. “We have given to a popular subject an unpopular name, and injured the service by a wrong assemblage of ideas.” Opponents could thus “take shelter under the name,” and “conceal the meanness he would otherwise blush at.” In *The Age of Reason* Paine would employ similar tactics, giving an unpopular subject like religious skepticism a popular name like “reason,” and conversely, turning an object of veneration, the Bible, into an object of disgust. He would shift the “blush” from the cheeks of unbelievers onto the faces of the faithful. But before he could do this, he would need to reassure his readers that in this fight he was not the aggressor. Rather, as in previous revolutions, he was a voice for the victims, “proclaim[ing] liberty to the captives” (Isaiah 61:1), as any messiah should. That his book would “wound the stubbornness of a priest” was unavoidable, but among believers struggling to disentangle fact from fiction, it would “relieve and tranquillize the mind of millions.”¹⁸

PRICKING THE CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

In taking on the Bible (as when taking on the Crown), Paine was attempting nothing short of a reversal of centuries of received assumptions, and to do so, he had to make the unthinkable appear

¹⁷ Paine, *Common Sense*, in *Writings*, 1:83; *Rights of Man*, in *Writings*, 2:309; “Public Good,” in *Writings*, 2:34, 45, 42; “An Answer to a Friend,” May 12, 1797; in *Writings*, 4:196.

¹⁸ Thomas Paine, “The Necessity of Taxation,” in Eric Foner, comp., *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 312–13; *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:113.

indisputable and the conventional seem absurd. As much as he wished that reason alone would suffice as a weapon, to a degree unmatched by other writers of his day Paine knew that such a reversal was possible only if rhetoric came to reason's aid. He anticipated modern sociologists in perceiving that one's individual "reality" is largely a social construct, one that rests on what Peter Berger called "plausibility structures" that give it a sense of objective reality. As Berger observed, however, "all socially constructed worlds are inherently precarious" and thus require continual legitimation, especially when stresses to the social order, whether internal or external, threaten to call into question its typical taken-for-grantedness. Paine intuited this precariousness in both politics and religion and sought to leverage it to topple the existing order. He recognized, to borrow Berger's words, that "the subjective reality of the world hangs on the thin thread of conversation," and he intended to break that thread by initiating a common-sense, common-man conversation of his own.¹⁹

Unfortunately for Paine, there was nothing thin about the thread that bound western civilization to the Christian Bible, and cutting it was obviously not without its dangers. Because prevailing opinion at the time credited religion with supplying society with needed morality and order, Paine, to gain an audience for his ideas, would have to tear out the foundation without toppling the superstructure, a delicate task the French Revolution had made to seem impossible. The trick for Paine would be to navigate three narrow channels: between iconoclasm and anarchy, between deism and atheism, and between anti-Christianity and being branded the anti-Christ (a label his detractors affixed nonetheless). Of the first he maintained that it was only false religion, not true morals, that he opposed, thus drawing a clear distinction between religion and morality to disassociate what in most minds were synonymous terms. Of the second, Paine claimed that his initial intention in writing was to steer the French *away from* the atheism they were headed toward. He affirmed his belief in "one God" at the beginning of his work, and added near the end that "it is the fool only, and not the philosopher, or even the prudent man, that would live as if there were no God." Of the third, he insisted that "nothing that is here said can apply,

¹⁹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 29–31, 45–50, 17.

even with the most distant disrespect, to the *real* character of Jesus Christ.” His teachings may not have been unique (“similar systems of morality” had been expressed “by many good men in all ages”), but he was “a virtuous and an amiable man” and his personal morality was “of the most benevolent kind.” In fact, as presented in *The Age of Reason*, it was of Paine’s own kind: Jesus preached “the equality of man” (Painism’s central creed), inveighed “against the corruptions and avarice” of a persecuting priesthood (Paine’s enemies), and was a “reformer and revolutionist” (as was Paine).²⁰

Personal parallels aside, with this last, the character of Christ, Paine knew he was on particularly sacred ground, so he chose to tread lightly (at least for now). He used rhetoric the way Jefferson used his pen-knife—to cut away the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history, paying homage to the morals of the second to minimize the doubts he was raising about the divinity of the first. Neither blasphemer nor infidel, Paine protested, it was precisely because he had “too much respect for the moral character of Christ,” that he found it impossible to believe all that the Bible attributed to him. The same was true of God. Such irrationalities as miracles were particularly “degrading [to] the Almighty” in that they turned God into “a show-man, playing tricks to amuse and make the people stare and wonder.” It was thus his duty to “vindicate the moral justice of God against the calumnies of the Bible.” Far from removing the old landmarks, Paine affirmed that he was in fact protecting both the morality of society and “the character of the divinity” from a book he called “the most destructive [force] to morality...that ever was propagated since man began to exist.” In a stunning reversal, Paine was portraying himself as God’s ablest defender and the Bible as God’s greatest calumniator. To honor the one, he had to dishonor the other.²¹

Paine was driving a wedge between God and the Bible to protect Deity from defamation. “It is impossible to conceive a story more derogatory to the Almighty,” he said of the Bible’s message of Fall and Redemption. The entire book is “scarcely anything but a history of the grossest vices, and a collection of the most paltry and contemptible tales, [and] I cannot dishonour my Creator by calling it by

²⁰ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:189, 26–28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4:80, 79, 96, 184–85.

his name.” “To believe therefore the Bible to be true,” he warned, “we must *unbelieve* all our belief in the moral justice of God,” and that was infidelity of a far darker dye than what skeptics were accused of. Framed in this way, it could not be blasphemous to speak against the Bible when the Bible was “a book of lies, wickedness, and blasphemy” itself. His anti-biblicism echoed the deistical “prayer” of Voltaire: “I am not a Christian, but it is to love you more.”²²

As in *Common Sense*, where he portrayed the king’s crimes against liberty as more egregious than his own treason against the crown, in *The Age of Reason* Paine likewise turned his target into the real aggressor, making his message appear far less revolutionary than it really was. Furthermore, by demonizing the Bible Paine could reverse the polarity of belief and disbelief, making the former seem more impious than the latter. He had already done this in “The Forester’s Letters” when he accused fence-sitters of “hav[ing] not virtue enough to be angry.” By taking anger, a sin the Bible condemns, and “dignif[ying] it with the name of Virtue,” Paine could play to the masses’ natural inclinations and applaud them for giving those feelings vent. In *The Age of Reason* a similar reversal was at work, and most importantly it seemed to be working. Sir Leslie Stephen was correct, then, in perceiving that “Paine’s appeal was not simply to licentious hatred of religion, but to genuine moral instincts.” Even with “all his [rhetorical] brutalities,” that is, Paine “had the conscience of his hearers on his side.”²³

Stephen’s statement should shock us into reflection: *The Age of Reason* as an *appeal* to Christian conscience? Because the volume’s *effect* was so obviously anti-Christian, the typical association between religion and morality leads to the assumption that its intention was to blunt the conscience, not to arouse it. But prick the conscience it did. As one disbeliever declared after reading the book, “Tom Payn had more just notions of God than the great mass of Christians have.” By calling attention to “the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with

²² *Ibid.*, 4:30, 38, 90, 103; Voltaire quoted in Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt*, 144.

²³ Paine, “The Forester’s Letters,” in *Writings*, 1:144, 128; see Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment*, 113–14; Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 1 (1876; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 463.

which more than half the Bible is filled,” Paine could convince conscientious readers that “it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon, than the Word of God.” Seen in that light, as “a history of wickedness, that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind,” the Bible deserved not reverence but contempt, and Paine should be applauded rather than censured for affirming, “I sincerely detest it, as I detest every thing that is cruel.”²⁴

It is this sensitization to the *immorality* that hides behind (or within) religion that Dominic Erdozain labels “the *soul* of doubt,” as opposed to the *mind* of doubt, which emphasizes religion’s perceived irrationality. The latter decries faith’s lapses of logic, the former its lapses of love, and Paine would leverage both in his effort to uproot the Christian Bible. In establishing self-identity and preserving self-respect, humor can function as both sword and shield, policing respectability’s borders even as it helps define respectability itself. At the same time, ridicule can batter the citadels of consciousness and conscience alike. Thus Paine couples “absurdity and profaneness” on several occasions, the first aimed at the head and the second targeting the heart, with rough equivalencies to the laughter of incongruity and the laughter of superiority, respectively. As Paine presented it, the Bible could only maintain its hold on people who “stubbornly shut [their] eyes” (the mind) “and steel [their] hearts” (the soul), so both must be awakened. Erdozain quotes the early twentieth-century British social reformer Beatrice Webb who reflected that “with most people it is the sense of what is *morally* untrue which first shakes your faith in Christianity”; the rational questions then follow. Christians must therefore be careful to “force no man into doubt by the unloveliness of our faith,” as one particularly self-reflective minister cautioned, echoed by another who worried that “if religion is seen to be immoral, its reign is over.”²⁵

Condemnation of religious violence was of course not new among people familiar with Europe’s interminable wars of religion, especially among Protestants raised on *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* or dissenters facing persecution from an area’s dominant faith. But Paine aimed far deeper than intolerance,

²⁴ Quoted in Schlereth, *Age of Infidels*, 168; Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:34.

²⁵ Paine, *Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:31, 115; Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt*, 4–7, 210–11.

dogmatism, or anticlericalism, foreclosing the usual excuses that such abuses were sins *against* religion, exceptions to the Bible's good and golden rules. Providing no such easy escape routes, Paine condemned Christianity's biblical "foundation, [thereby] to overthrow at once the whole structure of superstition raised thereon." Rather than censure fallen humanity, he attacked the story of Humanity's Fall, which "damned all mankind by the eating of an apple." Instead of chastising the unregenerate, he mocked the central doctrine of redemption, that a being "at once both God and man, and also the Son of God, [would be] celestially begotten on purpose to be sacrificed." The book was such an affront to the conscience, Paine declared, that "to read the bible without horror, we must undo every thing that is tender, sympathising, and benevolent in the heart of man." As he said of the Flood in a later publication, "It is impossible to think of the whole human race—men, women, children, and infants, except one family—deliberately drowning, without feeling a painful sensation. That heart must be a heart of flint that can contemplate such a scene with tranquillity."²⁶

By maximizing the Bible's immoralities and then questioning the Christian conscience, Paine was able to stake a claim to higher moral ground, territory that had always been denied religious skeptics. Examples abound in *The Age of Reason*, but he explains his thinking most clearly in a letter to a friend written a few years later. "It is from the Bible that man has learned cruelty, rapine and murder," he explains, "for the belief of a cruel God makes a cruel man." In the Flood God "mak[es] a world and then drown[s] it"; during the conquest of Canaan God "stop[s] the course of the sun till the butchery should be done." Elsewhere Paine would mock this story as an example of absurdity (a nod to incongruity), but here he decries it as an example of brutality (a nod to moral superiority), with "all our ideas of the justice and goodness of God revolt[ing] at the impious cruelty of the Bible." In this way he could say, "It is not a God, just and good, but a devil, under the name of God, that the Bible describes," recasting biblical belief as diabolical. Confronting his friend directly Paine concludes, "You, by taking the Bible for your standard, will have a bad opinion of God; and I, by taking God for my standard, shall have a

²⁶ Paine, *Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:132, 29–30, 90; "A Letter to Mr. Erskine," in *Writings*, 4:217.

bad opinion of the Bible.” Reversing the traditional ethical hierarchy, *The Age of Reason* proves of one of Erdozain’s central claims: “The Bible continues to justify its critics.”²⁷

From the perspective of his clerical opponents, Paine was committing the same kind of reversal that Isaiah condemned, “call[ing] evil good, and good evil,” switching sweet for bitter and darkness for light (see Isaiah 5:20). Paine went so far as to call “the christian system” a “species of atheism,” a compound with more “man-ism” than “deism” that constitutes “a sort of religious denial of God.” What he repeatedly (and derogatorily) labelled “the christian system” anathematized learning, “laid all waste,” and ushered in “the age of ignorance”; its overthrow would inaugurate the Age of Reason.²⁸

Paine’s portrayal of religion as the staunchest foe of morality, divinity, and education was intentionally hyperbolic, even leading him on occasion to draw upon cultural beliefs he did not share. For example, though he did not believe in the devil, he asserted that it would be “better, far better,” were “a thousand devils to roam at large, and to preach publicly the doctrine of devils,” than to allow “one such impostor and monster as Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and the Bible prophets, to come with the pretended word of God in his mouth and have credit among us.” On one hand, such hyperbole threatened to overstate Paine’s case against the so-called morality of revealed religion, but on the other it helped to minimize the perceived immorality of Paine’s anti-religious attacks. In short, by drawing readers’ attention *toward* the Bible’s alleged war on God and society, Paine’s exaggerated rhetoric served to shift it *away* from his own more radical war on the Bible itself.²⁹

BATTLING THE BIBLE IN THE COMIC FRAME

If hyperbole magnified one war in order to minimize indirectly the other, it was not the only rhetorical device Paine employed to make his assault upon religion seem like no contest. As in earlier

²⁷ Paine, “An Answer to a Friend,” May 12, 1797, in *Writings*, 4:196–99; Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt*, 5.

²⁸ Paine, *Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:50, 60, 61.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4:185.

writings, Paine turned to apophasis to say what he claimed to be avoiding, usually to feign disinterest, cover his rhetorical tracks, or introduce ridicule without having to admit he was going beyond his confidence in pure reason. He claimed to be conducting a sober examination of the Bible, for example, “putting aside everything that might excite laughter by its absurdity, or detestation by its prophaneness,” even though he made this statement only moments after making the Fall seem ridiculous and the Virgin Birth seem immoral, and only a page before specifically mentioning “the absurdity and prophaneness” of the crucifixion. He repeated this practice later in the book, “putting...aside” the “outrage” of the substitutionary atonement and the “loose morality and low contrivance” of the Incarnation. “Putting, I say, those things aside,” he reemphasized (as if pained to mention something he brought up repeatedly in his book), “it is certain, that what is called the Christian system of faith...[is] irreconcilable” to scientific knowledge and “the divine gift of reason.” Carefully placing another apophatic feint in a footnote, he left the clergy, who are “very fond of puzzling one another,” to explain a particularly confusing scriptural passage—one he pretended not to dwell on but couldn’t bring himself to ignore.³⁰

If Paine seemed to be denying his engagement with the Bible in the first part of *The Age of Reason*, he began the second part by denying his engagement with the Christian apologists who were answering him. Despite the deluge of angry responses from opponents who questioned his logic and refuted his claims, Paine explicitly denied that his subsequent second part was “written as an answer to them.” Instead, he again downplayed the seriousness of the conflict, refusing to dignify his opponents by acknowledging the force of their rebuttal. “If the authors of these can amuse themselves” by penning responses to his work, Paine allowed nonchalantly, “I shall not interrupt them.” They may as well “spin their cobweb over again” since “the first [was] brushed away by accident.” “Cobweb” was a metaphor Paine had used before, dismissing the “cobweb artifice of [royal] courts” in an early piece, the “cobwebs, poison and dust” that slowed independence in another, and in his most sustained explanation, linking it to prejudice, which Paine “denominate[s] the spider of the mind.” By invoking this metaphor,

³⁰ Ibid., 4:30, 31, 58, 36.

Paine not only dismisses his opponents' pro-biblical apologetics, but reduces their prejudiced minds to the level of a loathsome pest. It likewise reduces to insect-level those still caught in the web of biblical belief, victims of the spider's cunning or of their own unthinking flight. As Paine's statement opening the second part of *The Age of Reason* reveals, his antagonists' arguments were weak ("cobweb"), required no intentional refutation ("accident"), and were more entertaining than consequential ("amuse"). But if others wanted to keep having their fun, he was willing to join in the game.³¹

And a game it seemed to be for Paine. He poked fun at the "Christian Trinitarian scheme" by describing it as including one part "dying man" and one part "flying pigeon." Or why not "goose" he added in a footnote, since any kind of fowl would be just as "nonsensical" as the dove mentioned in the Gospels. He had similar fun with the Spirit's "cloven tongues" as described in the book of Acts: why not "cloven feet" he joked, "such absurd stuff is only fit for tales of witches and wizards." Christianity, as Paine portrayed it, was nothing but a "strange fable" made up of "wild adventures" and "obscene nonsense," leaving the "mind of man [as] bewildered as in a fog." But as he wrote elsewhere, "Reason is recovering her empire, and the fog of delusion is clearing away." No more than ordinary reason was needed; in fact, even that might be overkill. Logically combating such absurdities would be beneath him, Paine insinuates; common sense "renders the Christian system of faith at once little and ridiculous, and scatters it in the mind like feathers in the air." Whether dove feathers or goose feathers did not matter.³²

There is a certain artfulness in treating lightly the enemy one takes most seriously, for it allows one to engage in conflict while denying that one's opponent is worthy of the fight. In Paine's case, such a strategy allowed him to argue without seeming argumentative, attack without appearing offensive, and remain fully engaged while maintaining a condescending aloofness. Best of all, implying that the Bible had so little rationality that there was little use debating it on rational grounds, Paine could claim victory in the very act of surrender: "I become so tired of examining into its inconsistencies and absurdities that

³¹ Ibid., 4:88; "The Dream Interpreted," in *Writings*, 1:50; "Letter to the Abbé Reynal," in *Writings*, 2:106, 105.

³² Ibid., 4:190, 31, 189, 66; Paine, Letter of April 21, 1803; in *Writings*, 3:429.

I hasten to the conclusion of it in order to proceed to something better.” A key to Paine’s strategy of engaged unengagement appears buried in a footnote: “This book, the Bible, is too ridiculous for criticism.” But based on Paine’s rhetoric throughout *The Age of Reason*, this statement seems more prescriptive than descriptive: the more Paine could make the Bible *seem* ridiculous, the less it would have to be seriously critiqued. Examples of this strategy will be treated at length shortly, but their cumulative effect was to make religion seem more pitiable than overpowering. Paine could thus position himself more as casual critic than anxious antagonist, disputing at length over issues that, as he described them, were “not worth disputing about.”³³

Both indirectly through his feigned avoidance of engagement and directly through his rhetoric of ridicule, Paine’s critique of revealed religion assumes a Burkean comic frame, the ideal approach when a writer “is seeking simultaneously to take risks and escape punishment for his boldness.” The laughter it produces is a declaration of emotional independence, a psychological role reversal that allows one to mock what had previously been an object of awe, respect, or fear. To those fears humor says (in Freud’s words), “Look here! This is all that this seemingly dangerous world amounts to. Child’s play—the very thing to jest about!” Such humor lets off the laughter of relief, minimizing the discomfort one feels when a former friend is placed in the pillory; he’s only getting what he deserves. Whether in sympathetic laughter speaking “kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego,” or in scornful derision mocking the groundless objections of an impotent figurehead, the laughter judges its former jailor, overrules the calls of conscience, and vetoes what had previously passed as the unimpeachable voice of God. The Bible, once the object of awe and reverence, is laughed into humble subservience, no longer ordering one’s existence, but becoming subject to one’s rejection, relativization, or neglect.³⁴

With Paine’s attack on the Bible assuming the comic frame, the other conflict in question—religion’s alleged attack on society—was left to assume a tragic frame, encouraging readers to engage in

³³Paine, *The Age of Reason*, 4:41, 137, 37.

³⁴ Elliott, *The Power of Satire*, 265; Sigmund Freud, “Humour,” *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 9 (1928): 5.

this latter conflict while safely ignoring the former. Paine’s humor invoked the carnivalesque, or more accurately, inverted it to restore the day to Reason, ending Christianity’s centuries-long irrationalization that enabled jesters to play kings. As Bakhtin describes the concept, Carnival reverses reality. It “liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power.” While “seriousness terrorized, demanded, and forbade,” laughter emboldened, ransomed, and endorsed. In the language of humor theory, Carnival is a time when superiorities are inverted, when incongruities are overturned, and when safety valves of relief and release are opened to the full—life-affirming laughter all across the spectrum.³⁵

Furthermore, a carnivalesque comic frame suspends the risks of real time, allowing explorations of territory normally off-limits. Bakhtin credits laughter with “the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it.” Could there be a better description of intellectual deconstruction, or of the kind of “higher criticism” the Bible was already facing in certain circles? Paine was collapsing that distance still further, bringing the Bible down from the minister’s pulpit or out of the scholar’s study, into the hands of commoners, dirty fingernails and all. Having overcome respectful distance, Bakhtin explains, “laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object,” and delivers it “into the fearless hands of investigative experiment”—precisely Paine’s plan for the Bible.³⁶

Combining honey and gall, ridicule can occupy both the comic and the tragic frames, for it transgresses the boundary between them. Paine could light-heartedly laugh at the Bible’s absurdities at

³⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 11, 89, 93–94.

³⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 23.

one moment and derisively mock its breaches of civility and virtue in another, minimizing its influence at the same time he maximized its threat. Christie Davies has noted this duality at work in the kind of disparaging humor often aimed at ethnic groups, which tends to occur in contrary pairs: stupid and crafty, or cowardly and militaristic, even though the two stereotypes seem mutually exclusive. By both raising and lowering the perceived threat, humor simultaneously steels the nerves and calms the fears of the intended audience, as it teeters on the border of the comic and tragic frames. Humor blurs those psychological boundaries even as it polices the protective boundary it is placing around its audience.³⁷

Paradoxically, to engage both frames simultaneously Paine would have to make religion seem ominous in one context and laughable in the other—a hegemonic force to be resolutely opposed, while simultaneously an object of scorn too absurd to be defended. To negotiate this paradox Paine directed the bulk of his criticism at the Bible, turning it into an object of ridicule easily dismissed, and only made dangerous as employed by an ecclesiastical hierarchy that was “set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.” By setting up religion-as-enemy and Bible-as-tool, Paine could proceed to disarm the first by neutralizing the second. And by using humor to turn the Bible on itself, he could appear innocently above the fray. “Should the Bible...fall” under such an investigation, Paine protested, “it is not I that have done it.” Of course it *was* Paine that had “done it” on page after page of *The Age of Reason*, but as we shall see in the next section, through his rhetoric of ridicule he could insist that the text had simply collapsed under the weight of its own absurdity.³⁸

THE ABSURDIFICATION OF THE BIBLE

If Paine’s employment of the comic frame was one means of minimizing the revolutionary character of his claims, his professed reliance on common sense was a way to further normalize them. As discussed at length in chapter three, and reviewed in the last chapter’s discussion of ideographic

³⁷ Christie Davies, “Ethnic Jokes, Moral Values and Social Boundaries,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 33, no. 3 (September 1982): 383.

³⁸ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:22, 182.

Reason®, Paine used a weaponized common sense—and the insinuation of its absence in the Bible—to push revealed religion into the realm of the ridiculous, leaving Paine’s Deism standing alone on Reason’s holy ground. Call it an act of “commonsensification.” I may have invented the term, but Paine practically invented the process. A more established term would be “rationalization,” meaning the process of making something rational, which Paine’s title, *The Age of Reason*, was intended to effect. But as we are discovering here, Paine was not mainly reasoning; he was “reasonizing”—engaging in a normative task of making his position seem self-evident. And just as often, he was engaging in the opposite process, of “irrationalizing” the Bible. To multiply our neologisms, instead of engaging in “commonsensification” alone, he could pursue “nonsensification” as well. By “absurdifying” the Bible Paine led his readers to assume that common sense and reason were solely on his side. And with the deck thus stacked in his favor, he could deny having a hand in the outcome. Instead, he could innocuously claim that he simply “arranged [the] evidence in a point of light to be clearly seen and easily comprehended,” and was then willing to “leave the reader to judge for himself.”³⁹

For Paine it came down to a contest of authority—not the authority of kings or clerics to enforce their arbitrary will, but the authority of individuals to think for themselves based on self-evident truths that nature made universally available. In Aristotelian terms, the Enlightenment’s emphasis on reason enthroned *logos* as the preeminent rhetorical appeal. *Pathos*, by comparison, was largely unnecessary and *ethos*, even worse, was apt to deceive. No wonder Paine had to hide his hand in the controversy and pretend to nothing more than restatements of fact. The Christian clergy, by comparison, aware that theirs was “a system against which reason revolts,” were left with authority alone, at best nothing more than the hearsay of “one credulous man telling [things] to another” and at worst, an *ethos* of “the sword...and the stake and the faggot too.” Having “contempt for human reason” since reason threatened its power, the Church “cut learning down to a size less dangerous to [its] project,” and thus effected “a religious, [that is] an irreligious, eclipse of light” that put “the whole orbit of reason into shade.” The dark “age of

³⁹ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:182.

ignorance commenced with the Christian system,” Paine lamented, and it was time for the age of reason to say, “Let there be light.”⁴⁰

The challenge for Paine would be to question religion’s authority without appearing to exercise any authority of his own. Were Catholicism his only enemy, this would have been fairly straightforward, since (as he suggests in *Common Sense*) Popery in religion was no different than monarchy in government and could be opposed by the same means. But Protestantism presented a different challenge. Its *sola scriptura* biblicism placed authority in the word of God, and though interpreted by mortal ministers who could be made to look fallible (the usual tactic of rival polemicists), the Bible itself assumed in Western civilization nearly the same level of unquestioned self-evidence that Paine had placed in nature and was marshalling to his side. Thus the contest would be—outside authorities aside—“the Bible of the creation” against “the stupid Bible of the church.” It would not be enough for Christians to rest their arguments on Biblical texts; it was “the Bible itself [that] must be proved to be true.” And since Christians were unable to argue on the grounds of reason alone, Paine insinuates, “I will therefore come on their own ground, and oppose them with their own weapon, the Bible.” Having identified the Bible as both weapon and target in his war on religion, Paine dedicates the majority of *The Age of Reason* to a refutation of its authenticity and authorship, convinced that once the keystone of revealed religion is removed, the rest of the structure would crumble.⁴¹

As with the larger issue of religion itself, in order to be dismissed, the Bible would first have to be questioned, and before it could be questioned, it would have to be lowered from the realm of divine inscrutability to the level of mortal investigation. In short, heaven would have to be brought down to earth. Modern scholars label this process demythologization, and Paine, having already humanized King George III and the British Empire in *Common Sense*, had proven himself a master of the art. In *The Age of Reason*, Paine’s most direct means of demythologizing the Bible was, oddly enough, to mythologize

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4:44, 119, 185, 58, 50, 60.

⁴¹ Ibid., 4:192, 89, 93.

it. Comparing the longevity of the antediluvians to “the immortality of the giants of the Mythology” for example, or the incarnation to “any of the amorous adventures of Jupiter,” Paine intended to show that “the Christian Church sprung out of the tail of the heathen mythology.” As he saw things, the Church Fathers were nothing more than “Christian Mythologists,” and not even very talented ones at that. “For absurdity and extravagance,” he wrote, their “fable” was “not exceeded by anything that is to be found in the mythology of the ancients.” Indeed, even the supposed wisdom of Solomon was, in Paine’s eyes, “inferior in keenness to the proverbs of the Spaniards, and not more wise and economical than those of the American Franklin.” On the other hand, at least the Jewish writers showed some measure of creativity. Had the Creation story been left to a listless Quaker to concoct, “what a silent and drab-colored creation it would have been!” Either way, Paine suggests, the ancient writers should not be blamed for their attempt; since every primitive society has developed its mythic folklore, “the Israelites had as much right to set up the trade of world-making as any of the rest.”⁴²

In case “world-making” was too lofty a description of what the “Christian Mythologists” had done in penning the Bible, Paine compared their text to other fictional works of obviously human invention, including “the book of Homer” and “Aesop’s Fables.” Isaiah’s repeated “burdens”—“the burden of Babylon,” “the burden of Moab,” etc.—were in Paine’s mind no different than fairy tales: “the story of the Knight of the Burning Mountain, the story of Cinderella, or the glassen slipper, the story of the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood, etc., etc,” itemized in the same way he listed Bible stories in an 1806 letter: “the tale of the Garden of Eden, the Talking Serpent, the Fall of Man, the Dreams of Joseph the Carpenter, the pretended Resurrection and Ascension,” and other “imaginary things.” Once divested of its supposed inspiration the Bible became in Paine’s hands little more than “an anonymous book of stories, fables, and traditionary or invented absurdities, or of downright lies.” The irrationality of many of its stories “drops to a level with the Arabian Tales” with only one difference: at least Sinbad’s stories were “entertaining.” Even if some of the Bible’s tales were rooted in historical fact, Paine allowed, it did

⁴² Ibid., 4:102, 153, 25, 28–30, 35, 66, 34.

nothing to change the fanciful nature of the book. “*It may be so, and what then?*” he shrugged, “almost all romantic stories have been suggested by some actual circumstances; as the adventures of Robinson Crusoe, not a word of which is true, were suggested by the case of Alexander Selkirk.”⁴³

If one of Paine’s methods of demythologizing was to tie the Bible’s account of history to other man-made, fictional pasts (mythic, folkloric, or literary), another was to drag it unceremoniously into the present, playing with time the way humor often plays with size, whether in Gulliver’s Lilliput or Alice’s Wonderland. Either practice took what was deemed an ahistorical and otherworldly Bible and brought it crashing into human temporality. Through the first practice, the Bible was seen as primitive; through the second, the intrusion of modern terms within ancient narratives made the Bible seem absurd. Eighteenth-century Christians could uncritically “read of prophesying with pipes, tabrets and horns” without issue, for example, but “were we now to speak of prophesying with a fiddle, or with a pipe and tabor, the expression...would appear ridiculous.” In the parallels Paine drew, prophesying was “fortune-telling,” proverbs were “jest-books,” and prophets were “poetical, musical, conjuring, dreaming, strolling gentry.” It was only the baseless authority of the Church that had invested such stories with misplaced historical and theological truth and “bound [them] up...under the abused name of the Word of God.” Just as “imagination” could take “a windmill just visible in a fog” and “distort [it] into a flying mountain, or an archangel, or a flock of wild geese,” superstition, in the hands of the Church, had done the same to the Bible’s idle tales. For instance, “Solomon’s Songs are amorous and foolish enough,” Paine allowed, but “wrinkled fanaticism has called [them] divine.” Far from denying the possibility of revelation (he allowed that God had the power, but denied that it had ever been used), Paine was simply correcting “the absurd misapplication of that term” and returning a set of trumped up texts to their original status.⁴⁴

And for Paine, as should already be obvious, that original status was decidedly low. The book of Ruth, for instance, was “an idle, bungling story, foolishly told”; the historical books were “a jumble of

⁴³ Ibid., 4:101, 130, 102, 152; Thomas Paine to Andrew Dean, August 15, 1806, in *Complete Writings*, 2:1485.

⁴⁴ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:36, 141, 127, 38, 193, 128–29, 183.

fable and of fact”; and the book of Revelation was a “book of riddles that requires a revelation to explain it.” The book of Jeremiah was “a medley of detached unauthenticated anecdotes, put together by some stupid book-maker,” and the book of Isaiah was simply “prose run mad.” As a whole, the Bible was nothing but “grovelling tales” and “gloomy doctrine,” “doubtful jargon” marked throughout with “fraud and imposition stamped upon the face of it.” Even the New Testament fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy—ministers’ favorite piece of internal evidence for the Bible’s unity and inspiration—was nothing but “old locks and pick-lock keys” being “industriously rummaged up and fitted together,” such that Isaiah’s famous prophecy that “a virgin shall conceive” had, in Paine’s opinion, “no more reference to Christ and his mother, than it has to me and my mother.” It was simply a “lying imposition” that was “made to serve as a winder up.” Since to a credulous Christian “everything unintelligible was prophetic, and everything insignificant was typical,” then even “a blunder would have served for a prophecy; and a dish-clout for a type.” No wonder the clergy preached such “stupid sermons”—all they had to base them on were the Bible’s “stupid texts.”⁴⁵

To further reduce biblical heroes, Paine often resorts to *ad hominem* attacks, as when he calls Solomon “a worn-out debauchee” in “the honey-moon of one thousand debaucheries,” dismisses Ruth as “a strolling country-girl creeping slyly to bed to her cousin Boaz,” or condemns Moses as either “one of the most vain and arrogant coxcombs” or a man “truly ridiculous and absurd.” Either way, Moses could be chief “among the detestable villains that in any period of the world have disgraced the name of man.” St. Paul, Protestantism’s most venerated theologian, was no one special. When he distinguished between animal bodies in his discussion of the Resurrection, “a cook could have said as much,” and his ranking of heavenly bodies amounted to “nothing.” In Paine’s summary, “All this is nothing better than the jargon of a conjuror, who picks up phrases he does not understand to confound the credulous people who come to have their fortune told. Priests and conjurors are of the same trade,” making Paul into “what he says of others, *a fool*.” Preempting objections, Paine protested that such vilification was hardly

⁴⁵ Ibid., 4:110, 113, 32, 138, 130, 192, 177, 179, 27, 175, 132, 81–82, 194.

libelous; he was simply “putting the stor[ies] into intelligible language.” The Incarnation, for example, was the moment when Mary, “to speak plain language, [was] debauched by a ghost.”⁴⁶

Paine’s invocation of “plain” and “intelligible” language, like his professed reliance on reason alone, was of course more artful than accurate, but he knew the intended effect of his ostensible objectivity. “When told in this manner,” he remarked after his earthy explanation of the Incarnation, “there is not a priest but must be ashamed to own it,” shame being precisely the author’s aim. As noted already, Paine had suggested “putting aside everything that might excite laughter by its absurdity, or detestation by its profaneness, and confining ourselves merely to an examination of the [Bible’s] parts,” but the rhetoric that followed steered the opposite course. He accused apologists of having “wrapped up” the Bible’s obscenities in more dignified dress, lest its stories “run...into ludicrous interpretations.” Yet it was precisely this ludicrousness towards which Paine’s comic undressings were racing.⁴⁷

Much of Paine’s rhetoric of ridicule took the form of wordplay meant to reduce the Bible to the absurd. This treatment seemed only fitting to Paine, for if the Bible was “interlarded with quibble, subterfuge, and pun,” then it was deserving of similar treatment in return. “The sublime and the ridiculous are often so nearly related,” Paine noted, “that it is difficult to class them separately. One step above the sublime makes the ridiculous, and one step above the ridiculous makes the sublime again.” With absurdity sandwiched between levels of sublimity in Paine’s mind, he could nudge the Bible into ridiculousness from either direction, lowering its dignity with a touch of bathos or raising its readers’ incredulity with a witty turn of phrase. Depending on whether his ridicule were more damning or more dismissive, he could move readers toward indignation or apathy, the Bible losing ground either way.⁴⁸

Examples of Paine’s *reductio ad absurdum* approach are abundant. What good is “a battle in heaven” if “none of the combatants could be either killed or wounded”? Why kill a God merely because

⁴⁶ Ibid., 4:127, 129, 110, 94, 102, 180, 152–53.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 4:153, 30.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 4:41, 107.

“Eve in her longing had eaten an apple”? If Christ came to earth to die, Paine wondered, then why is crucifixion any more momentous than dying “of a fever or of the small pox, [or] of old age?” And if Christ’s death is essential to the world’s salvation—despite the fact that people seemed to be dying “faster since the crucifixion than before”—then what of other worlds God may have created? If “every world...had an Eve, an apple, a serpent and a redeemer,” then the Son of God “would have nothing else to do than to travel from world to world, in an endless succession of death, with scarcely a momentary interval of life” in between. Of the account of “the devil flying away with Jesus Christ” to show him all the kingdoms of the world Paine asked, “How happened it that he did not discover America? or is it only with *kingdoms* that his sooty highness has any interest?” And if Joshua could command the sun to stand still, then why couldn’t he have “put the sun and moon, one in each pocket, and carried them as Guy Faux carried his dark lanthorn” instead? Moses’ unknown burial was reduced to a child’s game of peek-a-boo, and the story of the bears who attacked the youth who mocked Elisha was lowered to the level of a popular comic ballad (“...and at one sup he ate them up...”) about the legendary “Dragon of Wantley.”⁴⁹

As with Paine’s artificial aloofness discussed in conjunction with his employment of the comic frame, his reduction to the absurd also evinces a certain smug standoffishness. If “Madam Esther thought it any honour to offer herself as a kept mistress,” Paine notes in passing, then “let Esther and Mordecai look to that, it is no business of ours, at least it is none of mine.” Nor did Paine deign to weigh in on why the historical books of the Old Testament failed to mention most of the minor prophets who were supposedly ministering at the time. Instead, he would “leave it to priests, and commentators, who are very learned in little things, to settle the point of *etiquette* between the two; and to assign a reason, why” such prophets would be treated “with as much degrading silence as an historian of the present day would treat Peter Pindar.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid., 4:29, 30, 40, 41, 74, 80, 107, 96, 143; Guy Fawkes, famous for his role in the unsuccessful “Gunpowder Plot” to assassinate King James I, was, at the time of his discovery and arrest, in possession of a “dark lantern” that was able to conceal or reveal its light by rotating an inner cylinder.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4:123, 118. Peter Pindar was the pseudonym of John Wolcot, an English satirist and contemporary of Thomas Paine.

By reducing Israelite prophets to the level of contemporary satirists—and dismissing them both—Paine maintains his innocence as a playful onlooker. Why argue seriously over what amounts to the patently absurd? Why quibble over the impossibility of Elijah being caught up to heaven, when a more scientific question would be how his mantle survived the chariot of fire without bursting into flame? Never mind, Paine confesses, “we may suppose if we please that it was made of salamander’s wool.” Thus the miraculous could be absurdified through questions over details. When Matthew’s Gospel mentions saints arising from their graves at the crucifixion, Paine simply wonders “whether they came out naked, and all in natural buff, . . . or whether they came fully dressed, and where they got their dresses.” Come to think of it, once the revived finished their fun, did they go “back to their graves alive and bur[y] themselves”? No matter, Paine implies; we have more important things to consider. Perhaps “these saints were made to pop up, like Jonah’s gourd in the night, for no purpose at all but to wither in the morning.” And with that he casually turns away: “Thus much for this part of the story.”⁵¹

Twisting the Bible into tangled knots of absurdity and illogic, and then walking away as if the jumble were inherent in the text, Paine was able to question the Bible’s authority without having to assert any authority of his own. Some arguments he could avoid altogether. Seriously examining the Old Testament’s so-called “minor prophets,” for example, was wholly unnecessary. “Hav[ing] already shown that the greater are imposters, it would be cowardice to disturb the repose of the little ones. Let them sleep, then, in the arms of their nurses, the priests, and both be forgotten together.” Though his rhetoric of ridicule relied heavily on *pathos*, it masqueraded as *logos* even while intentionally avoiding it, and suggested its own unquestionable *ethos* throughout.⁵²

Like common sense, its more affirmative counterpart, ridicule enabled Paine to lay sole claim to reason by reducing religion to the absurd. It masked the mean-spirited, subject-created laughter of superiority behind the light-hearted, object-induced laughter of incongruity, allowing the reassuring,

⁵¹ Ibid., 4:169–70, 160.

⁵² Ibid., 151.

reality-reordering laughter of relief to take Bible-based restraints and fears and cast them to the wind. As with Jesus' well-known parable (see Matthew 13:24–30), Paine, under cover of comedy, “sowed tares among the [Bible's] wheat (or drew pointed attention to the tares that had always been there) and then merrily “went his way,” knowing that growth would inevitably follow. Hopelessly intertwined by harvest time, the field's mongrel mix would leave believers struggling to separate the rational from the absurd in hopes of salvaging the crop, would convince unbelievers to give up on the grain and abandon the field altogether, and would nudge the neutral to take the path of least resistance. An outraged Christendom would curse, “An enemy hath done this,” and that enemy was an impish Thomas Paine.

SHAMED IN THE COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION

The genius of attacking the Bible by reducing it to the absurd is that an absurdified book could take its readers down with it. Paine's laughter, that is, did double duty—insinuations of incongruity on the Bible's part generating feelings of inferiority on the part of its erstwhile believers. As discussed in chapter two, the pull of social mobility in a newly egalitarian and quickly democratizing nation simultaneously increased the value of reputation and the weight of public opinion, making Paine's America particularly susceptible to the shaming potential of ridicule. None wanted to appear undeserving of the self-determination afforded him, nor unable to recognize what “everyone” considered “common sense.” In short, no one, then as now, wanted to be laughed at.

As attuned to popular opinion as anyone of his day, Paine ridiculed his rivals' position to shame his readers into agreement. His rhetoric was constitutive of a public that was reasonable, clear-headed, and commonsensical—or who desperately wanted to be seen that way—even if it required that imagined audience to discard religious beliefs they may never have questioned before. What reasonable individual would naively accept a religion so “repugnant to reason” and so “contradictory in itself” as the faith Paine so ruthlessly disparaged? “Too absurd for belief, too impossible to convince, and too inconsistent for practice,” Paine declared, Christianity “renders the heart torpid, or produces only atheists and

fanatics.” Seen in this light, the name-calling Paine directed at the Bible can more correctly be seen as aimed at those who still believed it. If the books of Moses were in reality “written by some very ignorant and stupid pretenders to authorship,” one would have to be equally ignorant and stupid to accept them. If the book of Matthew was penned by “an exceedingly weak and foolish man,” only fools and weaklings would trust what it said. The writer of Jeremiah “was in a state of insanity,” and one would have to be crazy to treat him as sane. By calling religion an “absurd subterfuge” and an “amphibious fraud,” Paine insinuated that believers had been deceived and defrauded. Confessing belief was playing the fool.⁵³

Paine’s treatment of the story of Jonah—one of his favorites targets of abuse—is illustrative of an even subtler tactic. He calls it “a fit story for ridicule, if it was written to be believed; or of laughter, if it was intended to try what credulity could swallow; for if it could swallow Jonah and the whale, it could swallow anything.” Paine chooses the latter course and treats his readers as if they too would rather laugh than be laughed at. Surely the story was “written as a fable,” he tells them, “to expose the nonsense, and satirize the vicious and malignant character, of a Bible-prophet, or a predicting priest.” In a remarkable turn, Paine makes the Bible a satire of itself, a cautionary tale that argues its opposite, complete with a self-contained corrective for anyone who might fall for the fable. The book of Jonah is the key to the farce—Paine calls it “the winding up of the satire, and the moral of the fable”—for it pushes the limits of credulity beyond the breaking point and reveals the true purpose of the text: not to confirm miracles and mystery, but to refute them; not to elevate prophets and priests, but to expose them. As with Swift’s “Modest Proposal” from earlier in the century, certainly no one would take literally what was so clearly written in jest. The joke could only have been more obvious “if Jonah had swallowed the whale.” As history, Jonah is absurd (the whale) and immoral (the eagerly awaited destruction of Nineveh), but as satire the work is ingenious, striking against the Bible’s “indiscriminate judgments” and the “supposed partiality” it assigns to Israel’s God. Seen satirically, Paine affirms, it is of a piece with “the chapter that Benjamin Franklin made for the Bible, about Abraham and the

⁵³ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:190, 93, 163, 138, 134, 25.

stranger,” a story meant to depose “the intolerant spirit of religious persecution,” which many contemporary readers wrongly assumed was in the Bible. “Thus much for the book Jonah.”⁵⁴

If the book of Jonah was salvageable as satire, the story of Joshua and the captain of the Lord’s host likewise “has a great deal of point” if seen “as a story of humour and ridicule” invented “by some Jewish humourist.” Seen in this light, not only did the story “ridicule...Joshua’s pretended mission from God,” but it did so by mocking the humiliating way he was required to show deference to a supposed superior. Ever the champion of the self-governing common man, Paine implies that it was an insult to Joshua’s dignity (but befitting a demeaned servant of the church) to have been brought to his knees at sword-point and commanded to take off his shoes before an alleged authority from God. The angel “might as well have told him to pull up his breeches.” Even the New Testament could be read satirically, though compared to the lengthier Old Testament it was merely “a farce of one act.” With its abundance of miraculous impossibilities, the Gospels must similarly have been meant “to render the belief of miracles ridiculous, by outdoing miracles, as Don Quixote outdid chivalry.” If not intended satirically, the Bible’s pretended prophecies must have been either some sort of “cypher, or secret alphabet” devised as a “disguised mode of correspondence,” or perhaps “a fanciful way of wearing off the wearisomeness of captivity,” the way old-timers pass the time by spinning yarns. “If they are not this,” Paine concludes, “they are tales, reveries, and nonsense,” anything but the so-called word of God.⁵⁵

Framing the Bible as satire (and not merely satirizing the Bible) was arguably Paine’s most ingenious way of laughing at those who took the scriptures seriously, for it suggests that *his* approach to the text, not the clergy’s, mirrored the intent of its original authors. The real purpose of the “Bible-makers,” as Paine liked to call them, was to inflate immoralities and impossibilities so absurdly that readers, sharing the bloated belly of Jonah’s incredible whale, would end up vomiting back what was never meant to be safely (or sanely) digested. Evidently their satire was simply too well hidden—or their

⁵⁴ Ibid., 4:146–47, 149–50, 80.

⁵⁵ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:121, 153, 80, 145.

readers too far gone—to work independently, so Paine simply helped them along, explaining the humor for those too slow to get the joke. Itself the butt of much of Paine’s mockery, once the Bible became a joke in its own right, the butt became those who believed. They had missed the point of the humor and been fooled into taking fable for fact. “What a fool do fabulous systems make of man!” Wiser ones would see the Bible’s original comic intent, and share in the shock that such silly tales were “ridiculously erected into things called prophecies, and applied to purposes the writers never thought of.” Either way, reducing the Bible to the absurd reduced its believers to idiocy alongside it.⁵⁶

Whether the clergy were idiots was another matter, for Paine insinuates that they were in on the joke all along. “When a priest quotes” scripture, Paine explained, “he unriddles it agreeably to his own views, and imposes that explanation upon his congregation as the meaning of the writer.” This is the “wax nose” malleability of scripture mentioned earlier, but in Paine’s rendering it looks more like the red-ball nose of a clown, meant to be honked and hooted at as an obvious jest upon the face. “Unriddled,” after all, suggests that the original was intended as a playful puzzle to be solved, not a rule to be enforced. Adding prurience to play, and suggestive of rhetoric’s reputation as the “harlot of the arts,” Paine then compares the Bible’s pliable passages to “the *whore of Babylon*,” who has become “the common whore of all the priests,” with each “accus[ing] the other of keeping the strumpet; so well do they agree in their explanations.” Seen in these terms, it is the Church, the so-called Bride of Christ, that has become the strumpet, and its “infidelity,” not Paine’s, in need of repentance. Paine was simply “unriddling” the Bible in the way its satirical writers intended.⁵⁷

There is a certain smug, patronizing condescension in Paine’s tone—part of his rhetoric of ridicule—whenever he expresses disbelief that others have been so slow to see the truth. He wrote the first part of his refutation without even having a Bible to refer to (“I keep no Bible,” he proudly protested), and when he finally obtained a copy to write the second part he found it “much worse...than

⁵⁶ Ibid., 4:123, 125, 192, 81, 150.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 4:150–51.

[he] had conceived.” If anything, he confessed, he was too easy on the Bible in the first part, so he made up for it in the second. Yet with Bible or not, he considered his critique unanswerable by any believer, “though writing at his ease, and with a Library of Church Books about him.” One cannot read such statements and not think of the childhood bully who boasts he could beat any challenger with one hand behind his back. But to Paine, it really was child’s play. As when he compared the burdens of Isaiah to well-known fairy tales, or parenthetically called a miracle narrative “a tale fit only to amuse children,” Paine was assigning childishness to Christian belief and suggesting that it was time to grow up.⁵⁸

Paine related that the Bible had already breached his own credulity by the time he turned “seven or eight,” and that he had determined the whole “Christian system” to be “a strange affair” as soon as he was “capable of conceiving an idea, and acting upon it by reflection”—in short, once he reached “the age of reason.” And he assumed that all but the willfully ignorant or hopelessly immature would follow his path to intellectual adulthood. His first impressions of incredulity “occurred to me at an early part of life,” and “I doubt not” that similar suspicions “have occurred in some degree to almost every other person at one time or other,” whether child prodigy or slow to the punch. Either way, he concluded, “Any system of religion that has any thing in it that shocks the mind of a child, cannot be a true system.”⁵⁹

In recounting his childhood skepticism, Paine denied that his rejection of Christian dogma “had any thing in it of childish levity,” an interesting admission since levity so frequently defined the approach he took to scripture as an adult. But however hypocritically, throughout *The Age of Reason* he went to great lengths to portray the Bible as beneath the credulity of a child, “as if parents of the christian profession were ashamed to tell their children any thing about the principles of their religion.” If the book of Isaiah, for example, was such an “incoherent, bombastical rant” that “a school-boy would scarcely have been excusable for writing such stuff,” then certainly reasonable adults would do better than invest it with meaning. Paine similarly dismisses the Gospel of Mark, which ends “as a school-boy

⁵⁸ Ibid., 4:49, 88, 86, 107.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 4:64, 62, 65.

would finish a dull story.” If the purported author evidently grew “tired of romancing, or ashamed of the story,” then surely self-respecting readers should blush or grow bored with it as well. As a whole, the Bible was nothing more than a “romantic book of school-boy’s eloquence,” a fable that had gradually grown into fact. At least this would be “find[ing] a charitable reason” for the Bible’s longevity instead of “indulg[ing] in a severe one.” If any modern writer were to attempt a similar stunt, he would be guilty “at least of romancing” if he weren’t “accused of *lying*” instead.⁶⁰

In insinuating the Bible’s childishness (and through it, its believers’ immaturity), Paine takes aim at two deep-seated emotions. The first was what he elsewhere called “manly pride,” intended for those who agreed with him, and the second was childish shame, directed at those who did not. Compared to the priests and parents just mentioned, too afraid to disabuse others of their naïve belief in childish fairy tales, Paine’s rhetoric passed for mature and masculine bravado. As he explained in an 1802 letter, he assumed that his readers would prefer unvarnished truth to sugar-coated falsehood, so he treated them like men, not as “babies in leading strings.” He cared nothing for “the puny judgment of others,” assumed his audience felt the same, and wrote with “boldness” as a way of paying “a compliment to the judgment of the reader. It is like saying to him, *I treat you as a man and not as a child.*”⁶¹

Those content to remain gullible children deserved to feel the opposite emotion, not the pride of bold investigation but the shame of clueless gullibility. Shame was one of Paine’s favorite emotional targets, a bullseye made all the broader by the elements of American culture discussed in chapter two. In a democratized society, it was shameful to be dependent; in an egalitarian society, it was shameful to be inferior; in a society of rising fortunes and boundless prospects, it was shameful to be tied down or held back. In sum, in a society barreling toward adulthood, it was shameful to remain a child. Express that sentiment before a crowd in Paine’s day and Paul’s well-known words would come to mind in believer and disbeliever alike: “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a

⁶⁰ Ibid., 4:65, 130, 166, 131, 169, 117.

⁶¹ Paine, “Letter Addressed to the Addressers,” in *Writings*, 3:62; Paine, “Letters to American Citizens,” in *Writings*, 3:404.

child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 Corinthians 13:11). Kant’s definition of Enlightenment—“man’s release from his self-incurred immaturity”—thus carried normative rhetorical weight. Mocking Bible stories as nursery room tales made belief seem childish and naïve. This was an offense to one’s vanity, at once the most superficial and deep-seated of human emotions. As a well-known superiority theorist said, “the wounds [one’s vanity] receives are never very serious, and yet they are seldom healed.” As such, exegetical intricacies and erudite apologetics would stand mute before a derisive anti-biblical sneer. By treating the Bible with stinging contempt or frivolous condescension, Paine appealed to the pride of his readers. Americans were on the rise, and the Bible was simply beneath them. Eventually it would be said (taking Le Bon’s words more literally than he intended), “The masses repudiate to-day the gods which their admonishers repudiated yesterday and helped to destroy.”⁶²

In Paine’s America, opinion “from above” was a siren song to which few were fully deaf, especially among society’s lower classes. Jonathan Swift compared opinion to fashion, “always descending from those of quality to the middle sort, and thence to the vulgar, where at length they are dropped and vanish.” Revealingly, Swift was here referring to religion, a “system” that “the common people,” he wrote only half-jokingly, “are now grown as much ashamed of...as their betters.” The sneers of English Deists and French *Philosophes*, whose ridicule Paine transposed into a lower key, proved incredibly convincing. As the *Spectator* observed, “The Rabble of Mankind” are especially susceptible to such mocking, “being very apt to think that every thing which is laughed at with any Mixture of Wit, is ridiculous in it self.” Even among fellow Christians, sometimes the more seriously they took their Bible, the less seriously they were taken by their peers. What Charles Taylor said of the “dry, ironic wit” of Edward Gibbon applies just as well to the brash, sarcastic mocking of Thomas Paine: his “tone tells us: We no longer belong to this world; we have transcended it.”⁶³

⁶² Bergson, *Laughter*, 172; Le Bon, *The Crowd*, xii.

⁶³ Jonathan Swift, “An Argument against Abolishing Christianity,” in Thomas Sheridan, ed., *The Works of the Rev. Jonathan Swift*, 19 volumes (London: J. Johnson, et al., 1801), 2:382–83; *The Spectator*, no. 291 (February 2, 1712); Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 301.

Belittling belief as “childish” (or “charmingly rustic” as Europeans would say of America) also played into the popular progressive stage model of Auguste Comte, the so-called “Father of Sociology” who was born in France during the period Paine lived there. So enticing to later secularization theorists, the model posited that societies evolved through various ideological stages (the Theological, the Metaphysical, and the Scientific or Positive) like a steam train moving from station to station. In terms of the Bible, this meant that society would eventually outgrow its primitive belief, their perspective maturing from Bible-as-Sacred-History, to Bible-as-Inspiring-Literature, to Bible-as-Ancient-Artifact from a less enlightened past. The terminology alone—*progress, evolve, mature, scientific*—would prove intoxicating in the American context, with the theory’s name, “Positivism,” working rhetorical magic as well. It made it seem like society was moving inexorably forward, and ridicule made believers *feel* they were being left behind. The Good Ship Progress was pulling out of port.

What Paine had earlier said when mocking monarchy applied even more directly to the Bible: “A people who can bow down in honor of a silly thing is a debased people.” Knowing that no self-respecting reader would want to be debased, he deployed ridicule to make the Bible look as “silly” as possible. Whether described using today’s acronym “FOMO” (fear of missing out) or the ever popular “peer pressure,” this type of shaming was one of Paine’s most frequent rhetorical ploys. We noted earlier his remark that if the Bible were rendered in “plain” or “intelligent language,” there would “not [be] a priest but must be ashamed to own it,” and it wasn’t the clergy alone that should blush at their biblical belief. The scriptural writers themselves, had they been in a court of law “would have been in danger of having their ears cropt for perjury, and would have justly deserved it.” No wonder Moses left his name off the so-called books of Moses: he “was too good a judge of such subjects to put his name to that account.” Not the first to question the Mosaic authorship of Genesis, Paine was unique in suggesting that Moses would have been embarrassed by the book’s attribution, spreading embarrassment to the book’s believers as well. As a derogatory label, the word “absurd” (and its derivatives) appears in *The Age of Reason* over twenty times, scattered amidst a sampling of “stupid,” “ignorant,” “fool,” and

“downright idiotism.” All implied what Paine elsewhere said directly: “We ought to feel shame at calling such paltry stories the word of God.”⁶⁴

Paine’s appeals to shame are most intense in the few instances where they are both gendered and sexualized (a tactic he used in *The American Crisis* whenever “seduction” is mentioned). Religion reduces divine truth from “a beautiful innocent” to “the hag of superstition.” Anyone who succumbs to her seduction has “prostituted the chastity of his mind.” Most vividly, those who resist reason’s natural corrective to absurdity are “strangling in the womb of the conscience the efforts it makes to ascertain truth. We should never force belief upon ourselves in anything.” Taken together, these metaphors are graphic in their intensity. Religious belief is debasement and harlotry. Denying reason is abortion and rape. Worst of all, in this violation of reason’s undefiled state, the perpetrator is his or her own victim, leaving us, as Paine said elsewhere, both “shocked at the crime, [and] wounded by the suspicion of our compliance.”⁶⁵

Given the intensity of these metaphors, as well as the less graphic but more frequent suggestions of mental incapacity, it is important to note that Paine intended his readers to feel shame, not for having *ever* believed in the Bible, but for *continuing* to do so in the face of what he presented as overwhelming objective evidence of its absurdity. They could not be blamed for their prior state, for having been “brought up in habits of superstition, they take it for granted that the Bible is true,” especially when “the head of every chapter, and the top of every page, are blazoned with the names of Christ and the Church, that the unwary reader might suck in the error before he began to read.” Moreover, the heartwarming idea of divine, sacrificial love no doubt left some unwary souls “so enthusiastically enraptured” as to keep them “from examining into the absurdity and profaneness of the story.” With others caught in the spreading delusion, the ignorant accept the Bible as God’s word simply because “we are told” it is.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Paine, “Anti-Monarchal Essay,” in *Writings*, 3:107; Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:152–53, 162, 34, 104, 33.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:51, 22, 181; Paine, *The American Crisis*, in *Writings*, 1:353.

⁶⁶ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:103, 131, 31, 32.

Regardless of the cause, Paine sympathized, “credulity is not a crime.” But to persist in believing “such glaring absurdities, contradictions, and falsehoods, as are in those books” is a willful rejection of common sense only possible to those who stubbornly deny the irrefutable. Such a man, Paine affirmed, “commit[s] himself on an ocean of improbable, irrational, indecent and contradictory tales” and “despises the choicest gift of God to man, the GIFT OF REASON.” It is that gift which elevates humans above the animal kingdom, and without it, one might as well read the Bible “to a horse as to a man.” And yet unthinking humans read it themselves! “How, then, is it that people pretend to reject reason?” More directly, how could they reject *The Age of Reason*? Its author had “gone through the Bible, as a man would go through a wood with an axe on his shoulder, [to] fell trees,” and each book of the Bible lay in pieces behind him. “Here they lie,” Paine said in final judgment, “the priests, if they can, may replant them.” They could “stick them in the ground” that is, “but they will never make them grow.”⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

The invective, condescension, and *reductio ad absurdum* demythologization seen in this chapter is only a representative portion of the rhetoric of ridicule that permeates *The Age of Reason*. Admittedly, the points made here—that Paine’s humor softened his radical iconoclasm, concealed his appropriation of authority, reversed the ethical hierarchy, and shamed his audience into agreement—could have been illustrated with fewer examples from the text. But here as elsewhere in this study, perhaps this “embarrassment of riches” can be excused because it allows us to get a fuller sense of Paine’s irascible humor, revealing that this cosmopolitan political philosopher, friend to presidents and enemy of kings, never fully outgrew his earlier identities: the Headstrong Club hero, the battlefield trash-talker, the playful heckler, the irreverent wag. Moreover, the quantity of quotations reproduced here suggests at once the impossibility of Paine’s task and the subtlety of his plan to accomplish it. Considering the eighteen hundred years of Bible-based Christianity he would have to uproot, Paine was attempting the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 4:31, 167, 156, 44, 47, 151.

rhetorical equivalent of moving a mountain (a scriptural phrase he mocked early in his text). Against this monolith each stinging insult and every snide remark was a swing of the hammer, a chip dislodged from the rock of revelation that might cumulatively cause a landslide. Only by altering ingrained ideology could Paine achieve his objective, and he strove to introduce doubt one laugh at a time.

Wherever Paine worked along humor's wide attitudinal spectrum (and he ranged across it all), ridicule required a reaction: one either took offense, which was itself laughable as it suggests that one lacks the flexibility or conviviality to take a joke, or one ended up laughing (however uncomfortably) in presumed agreement. Either way, one lost ground. Arthur Berger saw in humor's ability to marshal support an example of what Umberto Eco called "open texts," texts which force specific interpretations upon their readers. As Berger explained, humorous texts "try to create the kind of model readers they want—people who will respond with smiles, laughter, and related feelings to a text," whether that text is humor's source or its target. With Paine it was meant to be both—a cue to laugh *with* his *Age of Reason* and then to laugh *at* the Christian Bible. We might call this identification through alienation, ridicule ensuring that the second pressures people into the first. Laughter may be even more effective at eliciting agreement than rational argument, since identification seems to be humor's default setting. As Bergson realized, "Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo," and listeners are generally prone to provide one, whether or not they fully agree or even fully understand the joke's meaning or intent. Regardless of content, humor generates connection, spurring some level of identification almost automatically. It would be more of a decision *not* to laugh, a conscious act of "unlaughter" as Michael Billig labels it, which itself would be a rhetorical act of opposition, complete with disciplinary potential within the social sphere. Either way, "laughter is a powerful sorter," separating source from target, agreement from disagreement, identification from alienation, and in many minds, the sociable from the anti-social. As Paine would have it, it would separate the right from the wrong and the strong from the weak.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Berger, *Blind Men and Elephants*, 6; Bergson, *Laughter*, 5; Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 175–99; Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter*, 229.

After nearly two hundred pages of carefully crafted rhetoric made to seem like common sense, Paine pretended to walk away from his argument as if his case were clearly won. “I here close the subject on the Old Testament and the New,” he wrote conclusively. “I leave the evidence I have produced...to be refuted, if any one can do it.” In *The Age of Reason*’s aftermath, many tried and, as far as his logical arguments were concerned, largely succeeded. But what of his rhetoric of ridicule? How does one restore to unquestionable seriousness what has already become the butt of a joke? How does one wipe the smile off of someone else’s face? In the end, it was not simply “the evidence” that Paine left with his readers. It was “the ideas that [were] suggested” that Paine wanted to “rest on the mind of the reader.” Those ideas, he knew, would elicit a wry smile and a hesitant second thought, and thus the seeds of skepticism were sown. Ever the ironist, Paine was just as guilty of the rhetorical trickery he accused the clergy of using: “one [part] lingo; the other [part] legerdemain.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:181, 194–95, 77.

CHAPTER X

DOUBTING THOMAS

At a New York dinner party hosted by Dr. Nicholas Romayne some time after Paine's inauspicious return to America, the merchant and philanthropist John Pintard, himself a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, broached the topic of religion with the much older Paine. "I have read and re-read your *Age of Reason*," Pintard said good-naturedly, "and any doubts which I before entertained of the truth of revelation, have been removed by your logic. Yes, sir, your very arguments against Christianity have convinced me of its truth." Whether affably or sarcastically (it can be hard to tell with Paine), the iconoclast responded, "Well, then, I may return to my couch tonight with the consolation that I have made at least *one* Christian."¹

However many Christians Paine unintentionally "made" through his anti-religious writings, the much larger number of Christians that *The Age of Reason* unmade was of far greater concern, even to some of his oldest friends. We saw Sam Adams's curt letter of censure at the beginning of this study, and Benjamin Rush, who had read Paine's draft of *Common Sense* and suggested its ultimate title, refused even to see him when he returned to the United States. "His principles avowed in his 'Age of Reason' were so offensive to me that I did not wish to renew my intercourse with him." Joel Barlow, to whom Paine had delivered the manuscript for *The Age of Reason* on his way to prison, intentionally left out Paine's name in his wildly popular pro-American epic poem "The Columbiad," afraid Paine's theological opinions would injure sales. To an outraged Paine admirer (who liked Barlow's poem but liked Paine even more), "omitting the name of Mr. Paine in the history of America," poetic or otherwise, was "like omitting the name of Newton in writing the history of his philosophy, or that of God when creation is the subject." Something of a poet himself, he identified the place where Paine's memory should be inserted and even provided a few couplets, including, "Drew forth his pen of reason, truth, and

¹ John Wakefield Francis, *Old New York: or, Reminiscences of the Past Sixty Years* (New York: Charles Roe, 1858), 140.

fire, / The land to animate, the troops inspire” (a nod to *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis*), and “To this immortal man, to Paine ‘t was given, / To metamorphose earth from hell to heaven.” Praise for his politics notwithstanding, many felt he had gone from heaven to hell for *The Age of Reason*.²

Not all his old friends abandoned him, but even some who shared his religious views tried—unsuccessfully—to keep him from voicing his opinions. When an old friend paid him a visit during his final months in Paris, the aged patriot remained a jovial conversation partner, “laughing” as he spoke of current events and musing at the “hubbub” it would cause “to see Tom Paine presented” at the English court. “All the bishops and women would faint away,” he chuckled, “the women would suppose I came to ravish them, and the bishops, to ravish their tythes. I think it would be a good joke.” When Paine’s friend mentioned *The Age of Reason*, however, and said it had hurt Paine’s reputation in Britain, Paine became “uncommonly warm at this remark” and defended his work as an attempt to shield the true nature of God against the “villainous imposture” of biblical religion. When a subsequent dinner party conversation turned to the subject of religion, despite having been warned to avoid the topic at all costs and promising “*to be discreet*” should someone else mention it, Paine “broke out immediately,” calling Moses a liar and raging against traditional belief “with unabated ardour.” His host, worried that “it was not fair to wound so deeply the opinions of the ladies,” attempted valiantly to change the subject, trying “every artifice” from inviting Paine to sing (something he had never heard Paine do before) to “attacking with vehemence” Paine’s cherished political principles (always a dangerous act). But after every distraction Paine returned to “his favourite topic” more ardent than before. As his friend explained, “Every time he took breath, he gained fresh strength, and on he went, with inconceivable rapidity, until the ladies gradually stole unobserved from the room, and left another gentleman and myself to contest, or rather to leave him master of the field of battle.” When it came to attacking revealed religion, his friend concluded, “nothing could stop him.”³

² Quoted in Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 55, 132–34.

³ Yorke, *Letters from France*, 2:345, 360–63.

But innumerable people tried, and this chapter will try to make sense of their efforts. It will focus on the published responses to *The Age of Reason*, of which there were many, spreading across the United States and Great Britain in a desperate race to undo the damage of Paine's infamous work. Their length, tone, and intended audience differ as much as the makeup of their authors—from clergy to laity, and from erudite to uneducated—but they shared the same aim, to counter Paine's efforts to delegitimize the Bible. Most significantly, if there is a single thread that seems to be most common among them and most prominent within them, it is their focus not on Paine's reasoning but on his rhetoric, specifically, his rhetoric of ridicule, which they answered with everything from playful derision to furious scorn. Their cherished Bible could bear investigation, even its controversial passages could be logically explained. But they could not stand it being laughed at. This chapter asks the question Why.

REACTING TO REASON

By Paine's own admission, the storm of criticism that came in *The Age of Reason's* wake was no surprise to its author, though he had attempted to forestall opposition even in the book itself. "I know that this bold investigation will alarm many," he wrote, "but it would be paying too great a compliment to their credulity to forbear it upon that account." Instead, it was their incredulity he was complimenting, flattering his readers into seeing themselves as brave fellow-questioners, free-thinkers (in the best sense of both parts of that term) ready to put their Bibles to the test. The "suspicion" of its falsehood was "becoming very extensive in all countries," Paine bandwagoned, and the United States could not afford to lag behind their European counterparts at the Enlightenment's leading edge. "To see the subject freely investigated" was no cause for alarm; instead, it should come as "a consolation to men staggering under that suspicion, and doubting what to believe and what to disbelieve."⁴

Reassurances notwithstanding, Paine's prediction of alarm proved to be as prophetic as it was downplayed. In pulpit and pew alike, believers simultaneously worried about the rise of deism and the

⁴ Paine, *Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:32.

demise of the Bible and only doubted whether it were better to respond to Paine with rancor or with ridicule of their own. Some would have gladly turned Elisha on this ill-mannered mocker of the prophets, calling out the she-bears to tear their opponent apart. Boston's *New England Palladium* dismembered him verbally, calling him a "lying, drunken, brutal infidel, who rejoices in the opportunity of basking and wallowing in the confusion, devastation, bloodshed, rapine, and murder, in which his soul delights." The Baltimore *Republican; or Anti-Democrat* was even cruder, cursing Paine directly: "Thou lilly-livered sinical rogue, thou gibbet inheriting slave, thou are nought but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pander, and the son and heir of some drunken she-devil."⁵

Opposition appeared in more palpable forms as well. Mobs gathered in protest, children taunted him with demeaning rhymes, and once he was accosted by a band of musicians who gathered to play "the Rogue's March" in his (dis)honor. A stagecoach driver refused him passage, explaining, "Last year my horses wuz struck by lightning and killed and I ain't taking no more chances." An old friend refused to shake the hand that had written *The Age of Reason*, and for failing to do likewise one Baptist minister was dismissed from his New York pulpit and another acquaintance was suspended from psalm singing for three months by his horrified Presbyterian congregation. Attempts were even made on Paine's life.⁶

Others took the opposite tack, pretending apathy or benign resignation. One old man turned his opinion of Paine into praise for the Lord, who "is merciful, or the earth would open and swallow up that wretch." Some supporters tried to downplay *The Age of Reason's* popularity in hopes of rehabilitating Paine's former reputation. William Duane, for example, hoped to minimize the perceived impact of the text by claiming that "the book itself is now thrown by among other lumber," though this was hardly the case. Most would have sided instead with another author who compared the book to a different type of refuse, joking that American agriculture stood to gain from Paine's return, if only he could be used as manure. An unrelated "Thomas Paine," son of Robert Treat Paine, a signer of the Declaration of

⁵ Quoted in Koch, *Religion of the American Enlightenment*, 132–33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 130–46.

Independence, petitioned the Massachusetts State legislature in 1801 to have his name legally changed to Robert Treat Paine, Jr. (the name of his recently deceased older brother), “assigning as a reason, that he was desirous of being known by a *Christian* name.”⁷

Behind their warnings, words, and wisecracks lay real fear of social unrest, spawned by the union of religious infidelity and political democracy, which seemed to Federalists and the faithful alike to be two sides of the same coin. The combination found its embodiment in the “three doubting Thomases” (Jefferson, Cooper, and Paine), who represented the anti-Christian movement’s political, scientific, and social aspects, respectively), but it was Paine who was widely considered “the most notorious of them all.” One writer traded the least famous of the three for a more ignoble replacement, but Paine’s rank remained undiminished. In the “Trinity of Evil” consisting of “Tom Paine, Tom Jefferson, and the Father of Lies,” not even Satan himself could unseat *The Age of Reason*’s author. For what he did to the Bible, even in that company “Thomas Paine stood first.”⁸

Most alarming to Paine’s respondents was not the *What* of his writings, but the *Who* (his audience) and the *How* (his rhetoric). In Paine the two were one and the same. By targeting the lower classes, Paine was moving the theater of war from the coffeehouse to the tavern and from the *salon* to the street. With his political writings, this was a boon at best and a necessary evil at worst, since those with more noble “lives,” more significant “fortunes,” and more recognizable “honor” to pledge could never have achieved the independence they declared without the eager engagement of those supposedly lesser lives who had little fortune or honor to speak of. Shifting from the Declaration to the Constitution, it would be “We the people” who would have to sever the “ties of...common kindred,” fill the ranks of revolutionary armies and navies, and shoulder the unanticipated burdens of self-governance, and it would take a voice like theirs to rouse them to action and spur them on to enduring engagement. Even

⁷ See Keane, *Tom Paine*, 456–80; William E. Woodward, *Tom Paine: America’s Godfather, 1737–1809* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1945), 319; Knudson, “The Rage Around Tom Paine,” 34–63.

⁸ Daniel Dorchester, *Christianity in the United States from the First Settlement Down to the Present Time* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1889), 523–24; “Thomas Paine’s Second Appearance in the United States,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 4, no. 21 (July 1859): 9.

then, Federalists, conservatives, and many of the political, social, and economic elite wrung their uncalloused hands over the dangers of democracy, and often expressed a certain buyer's remorse at having ousted King George only to see the unwashed masses enthroned in his place.⁹

If this was a necessary evil when it came to politics, it seemed an *unnecessary* evil in the realm of religion, and an evil in much more than the spiritual sense. Conventional wisdom held that religion ought to be maintained for the good of the nation, since popular religion seemed the only force strong enough to restrain popular passions from making a wreck of the social contract. But emphasis was on the word *popular*, since it was the populace that most needed restraint. One detects a note of unease and even snobbery in the statement of John Adams that the U.S. Constitution “was made only for a moral and religious people,” but it was the Constitution, not the church, that he was most anxious to protect, and it was the common citizenry, not the “Officers” and “Gentlemen” whom he was addressing, against whom it needed that protection. Education and etiquette—good breeding, they would have called it—provided the aristocracy with what religious indoctrination and clerical oversight would have to supply to the rank and file. Thus it was lower class religion that was most needed as a bulwark, since it was the lower classes who seemed to possess the most recalcitrant wills. Any disruption of religion *there* threatened a disturbance of society in the upper ranks, and that could not be countenanced.¹⁰

Paine recognized this concern, as well as the commotion surrounding his name, and sometimes had a bit of fun with both. After hearing that at a federal dinner in Washington someone had raised the toast, “May they never know pleasure who love Paine,” he responded in a poem to President Jefferson, recreating the scene in his mind. Blasting petulant Federalists and hypocritical Jeffersonian Democrats alike, he mused that at the mere mention of Paine's name,

...a mighty noise arose among
This drunken, bawling, senseless throng:

⁹ See Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt*.

¹⁰ “From John Adams to Massachusetts Militia, 11 October 1798,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-3102>.

Some said that common sense was all a curse,
That making people wiser made them worse—
It learned them to be careful of their purse,
And not be laid about like babes at nurse,
Nor yet believe in stories upon trust,
Which all mankind, to be well governed, must...

Blasting the buyer's remorse that had arisen in certain circles since achieving independence, Paine mocks the Washington elite for questioning his (and the people's) "common sense." It was his unchanging aim to wean suckling "babes" from wetnurses intent on keeping them in submission using any instrument at hand. As the last lines quoted here suggest, the Bible remained their instrument of choice, for even without mentioning it, Paine knew his opponents would recognize the target of his well-aimed hint. Believing "mankind" (or at least the masses) must be cowed into compliance, they "governed" them not with visible acts of oppression (this had been Britain's folly), but with scriptural "stories" meant to be taken "upon trust."¹¹

Voltaire, siding with Paine's skepticism but sharing his opponents' concern, had said as much when he famously endorsed religion for his lessers while saving none for himself. Paine, meanwhile, ever the populist, saw no upper-class attainment but what the common man deserved. He thus urged freedom from religion for every order of society, and his rhetoric reflects this. Sir Leslie Stephen noted the difference in his own comparison of Paine and Voltaire, considering the former guilty of "coarser brutalities" than the Frenchman's urbane wit, an indication of the coarseness of Paine's intended audience. Like them, he "car[ed] for no disguise to his sharp, savage earnestness" and thus took full advantage of his "fine vigorous English," the "gift of a true demagogue." Whereas "the early deists wrote for educated men," Stephen explained with a hint of condescension, "Paine is appealing to the mob" and successfully inflaming them. In *The Age of Reason*, for the first measurable time in America, "democracy and infidelity have embraced, and scepticism has flashed out into sudden explosion."¹²

¹¹ Thomas Paine, "A Federalist Feast," in *Writings*, 4:493.

¹² Stephen, *History of English Thought*, 237, 458.

Wise to trace Paine's influence to his English, Stephen correctly identified that the roots of his rhetoric sprang out of ridicule. Admitting that *The Age of Reason* "sometimes amuses" even his lofty sensibilities, he recognized that the book would have been particularly "effective...with popular readers," especially those "who regarded every letter of the English version as directly dictated by the Holy Ghost." In this Paine was an echo not of Voltaire but of Thomas Woolston, whom Stephen called "a mere buffoon jingling his cap and bells in a sacred shrine." Though Stephen's critique of Paine is far less disdainful, it likewise centers on the author's humor. With the uneducated masses, Paine's "brutal tones" capture the attention, his "keen mother-wit supplies many deficiencies," and his reasoning, "though defaced by much ribaldry," "loses little by not being smothered in masses of erudition." As Stephen surmises, "Paine's peculiarity consists in the freshness with which he comes upon very old discoveries, and the vehemence with which he announces them"; it "is simply the translation into popular language" of the polemics of "more accomplished critics." *The Age of Reason* could thus be easily refuted by Paine's betters, but by its resonance among the lower orders, his words "amounted to a proclamation that the creed no longer satisfied the instincts of rough common sense any more than the intellects of cultivated scholars." In Stephen's summary, "The history of Paine's mind is the history of thousands. It expresses the revolt of rough common sense against the brutal theology by which coarse preachers appeal to dull imaginations."¹³

Preachers, of course, had spiritual reasons for denouncing *The Age of Reason*, and the less coarse among them were likewise alarmed by Paine's populism as much as by his blasphemy. The "learned ministry" would long have known of chinks in the Bible's armor—"blots," as Stephen calls them—most having studied apologetics as part of their clerical training, and many having confronted deism whether in person, in print, or from the pulpit. They would not have been unaware of the anti-biblical polemics that Paine was repeating, but among the educated, a more nuanced, contextualized, or allegorical view of scripture protected most from the kinds of attacks to which the literalist and inerrantist perspectives

¹³ Ibid., 231, 458–63.

were most vulnerable. These could thus dismiss Paine's work as derivative and unoriginal, a rehashing of tired complaints and old objections. But they could not keep the lower orders from paying attention to what Peter Gay called "higher criticism on a low level." As is so often the case in stratified societies (and as already suggested by Swift), the aristocracy's hand-me-downs soon became the lower classes' fashions, and it was Paine the former corset maker who resized them all to fit.¹⁴

Again, it was this downsizing that most alarmed conservatives and clergymen alike. A popular patriot was putting a "Reader's Digest rendering" of Enlightenment irreligion into the hands of the common man.¹⁵ Worst of all, Paine was not simply reducing Enlightenment arguments to the ground level; he was reducing revealed religion to the absurd. More than repeating timeworn arguments, he was regurgitating them in the truest sense of the word, chewing them up and spitting them out to make previously inaccessible ideas automatically digestible through the acid of his acerbic wit. Like Ethan Allen before him, but to much broader circulation and much grander effect, Paine was making a mockery of the Bible, spreading disbelief on the peals of low-brow laughter. Whether the Goddess Reason was man's "only oracle" in Allen's case, or embodied the Spirit of the Age in Paine's, she went hand in hand with the Goddess Folly, and it was Folly, not Reason, who typically pulled the strings.

A PAIR OF ANGRY ADAMSES

"The age of reason could perhaps more eloquently and adequately be called the age of ridicule," wrote one historian of the English Enlightenment, while another, surveying the Augustan writers, observed that though they "insist[ed] that they offer[ed] nothing but reasoned argument and perspicuity of style," still they "engage[d] in the most elaborate exercises in wit, innuendo, and ironic indirection." Spilling across the Atlantic from both England and France (two of Paine's three homelands), this was the type of "Reason" that Paine promoted in America, though many of his critics recognized its

¹⁴ Stephen, *History of English Thought*, 459; Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, volume 1, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966), 385.

¹⁵ Lepore, *The Story of America*, 67.

European antecedents. As already quoted, James Muir traced its lineage the furthest, linking Paine to “the Devil..., [who] first turned God’s word into ridicule.”¹⁶

Opponents, of course, could not stand idly by and let the devil do his work, nor could they allow such a consummate wordsmith as Paine to place the linchpin of social order and spiritual truth between his merciless hammer and anvil. So with responses of their own, they tried to match strike with strike, hoping to muffle both the sound of Paine’s hammer and the laughter it produced. What is most striking about their critiques—and most indicative of Paine’s reliance on ridicule—is the fact that they typically singled out his rhetoric as most deserving of criticism. While some might accuse them of side-stepping the Bible’s historical and doctrinal difficulties, they felt that it was Paine’s humor that was doing the real obfuscation, and they blasted it every chance they could.

A helpful introduction to the world of anti-Painite rhetorical criticism comes from one of the first families of the Republic: the Adamses of Braintree, Massachusetts. We have seen some of the enmity (and envy) of John Adams already, but that was only a small installment in a much larger body of complaint. Already quoted is his description of *Common Sense* as a “crapulous mass,” but more telling in this context is Adams’s focus on Paine’s rhetoric. In that Revolutionary pamphlet, “not a fact nor a reason” was revolutionary; it was Paine’s “phrases” that resonated with the “temper and wishes of the people.” Paine’s rough and tumble language was “suitable for an emigrant from Newgate” (a beggarly part of London most famous for its prison), “or one who had chiefly associated with such company” (an apt description of Paine in 1776), and this is what had made the difference. It was Paine’s rhetorical “delicacy,” Adams said sarcastically, that “had as much weight with the people as his arguments,” his “ribaldry” and “profligate effusions” exciting the masses. Adams included Paine by name among the “demagogues and popular orators” he labeled “aristocrats” (since “Mobs never follow any but aristocrats”), but Paine’s was an aristocracy of rhetoric, not of reason. As Adams confided to their

¹⁶ Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion*, 196; Lund, *Ridicule, Religion and the Politics of Wit*, 21; Muir, *An Examination of the Principles Contained in The Age of Reason*, 9.

mutual friend Benjamin Rush, Paine “understood neither government nor religion,” leaving him as mute on the rational aspects of both spheres as his “virulent declamations” were meant to keep his more cultured opponents. His rhetoric, coupled with the “enthusiastic fury” that it fueled, “intimidated all men...from answering as [they] ought.” Paine relied on “billingsgate” (another seedy part of London, famous for its foul-mouthed fishmongers), “stolen from Blount’s Oracles of Reason, from Bolingbroke, Voltaire, Béranger, &c.,” which he then sent spewing out of his own “malignant heart.” Bad enough to repeat these writers’ skepticism, Paine echoed their scurrility as well.¹⁷

At times Adams seems almost haunted by the ghost of Paine’s rhetoric of ridicule. Jefferson could describe it calmly, comparing Paine’s “ease and familiarity of style, [his] perspicuity of expression, [his] happiness of elucidation, and [his] simple and unassuming language” to that of Benjamin Franklin, also known for the common touch and comic wit he was able to put into the mouths of Silence Dogood, Anthony Afterwit, Alice Addertongue, Busy Body, and “Poor” Richard Saunders. But Adams seemed to vent his anger at Paine whenever occasion would permit. In a comment about a book on Napoleon, for example, he spoke of “the science of Idiocy,” a bottomless abyss of inanity that even “the divers in the Dunciad” could not fathom. He described its “bathos” that was “taught in the school of folly” and listed such “great masters of that academy” as Franklin, Turgot, Rochefoucault, and Condorcet,” but “alas!” even these merely served “under Tom Paine.” Hinting yet again at the nonserious nature of Paine’s rhetoric, Adams compared the “disciples of Mr. Thomas Paine” to “a troop of spirits the most mischievous from fairy land.” Thankfully for the future of American morals, Adams asserted, Paine’s antibiblical ridicule “will never discredit Christianity, which will hold its ground in some degree as long as human nature shall have any thing moral or intellectual left in it.” Invoking morality and intellect as bulwarks in the battle, Adams insinuates that Paine had claim to neither trait.¹⁸

¹⁷ Adams, *Autobiography*; in Adams, *Works*, 2:509; John Adams to John Taylor, April 15, 1814; in Adams, *Works*, 6:483; Letter XXVII, in Adams, *Works*, 6:508; John Adams to Benjamin Rush, January 21, 1810; in Adams, *Works*, 9:627.

¹⁸ Thomas Jefferson to Francis Eppes, January 19, 1821; online at <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01->

The antipathy of the senior Adams aside, a (slightly) less subjective window into Paine's rhetoric comes from his son, John Quincy Adams, who occupied the Boylston chair of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard before he occupied the White House. As a much younger man and writing under the penname Publicola, the junior Adams took Paine to task over *Rights of Man*, critiquing the work with words that mirror later outrage over *The Age of Reason*. For example, Adams accused Paine of inventing absurdities where none existed, thereby creating discrepancies that disappear once "the paradox ceases, and no more involves an absurdity." Paine was guilty of "magnifying trivial imperfections into capital crimes" and of drawing examples unfairly, "always [choosing] his own ground of comparison." Beyond this, Adams charged, Paine puts words into his opponents' mouths and then "proceeds to show that the answer which he whispers for [them] is very ridiculous." He sets up a straw man, in other words, and then acts as its ventriloquist, making the absurdity seem inherent rather than introduced. Paine himself thus becomes his rival's invented "representative," one who "certainly never had from him any authority to misrepresent him so palpably." Unfair but effective, this tactic excused Paine from having to refute his opponent's position, a handy trick since Paine "probably thought it easier to refute his own."¹⁹

These rhetorical devices were all examples of what Adams called the "feeble resource[s] of the satirist" and he urged the public not to "take misrepresentation for reason, nor invective for argument." In Adams's view, it was one thing for Paine to avoid the "spouting rank of high-toned exclamation" (Paine's characterization of Burke), but Paine refused to even confine himself to "the delicate sallies of elegant comedy." Aiming lower on the ladder of laughter proved effective in Paine's case, since to inflame the masses "the eccentric vivacity of a madman is infinitely better calculated than the sober coolness of phlegmatic reason." Far from rational, Adams called *Rights of Man* "satirical" and warned its author against "adopting the malignity of a political satyr, by converting the sallies of wit into the

02-1778; Adams, *Works*, 6:403; John Adams to John Marshall, August 11, 1800; in Adams, *Works*, 9:72; John Adams to Benjamin Rush, January 21, 1810; in Adams, *Works*, 9:627.

¹⁹ John Quincy Adams, "Letters of Publicola"; these letters, eleven in total, were originally published in Boston's *Columbian Centinel* from June 8 to July 27, 1791; references here come from Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, vol. 1, 1779-1796 (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 65-110; John Quincy Adams, "Letters of Publicola," 94, 78, 99, 100.

maxims of truth or justice.” He protested that he should have given his readers “sober reasoning and not flippant witticisms,” and lamented that Paine’s polemic consisted of “much wit and no truth.” Rhetorical injustices aside, according to “Old Man Eloquent,” as John Quincy Adams was later known, one had to experience Paine’s words to understand their persuasive effect. At one point this future professor of rhetoric and composition even waved a white flag in the face of Paine’s unanswerable writing style: “It is utterly impossible for me to do justice to the wit of Mr. Paine.”²⁰

CRITIQUING THE RHETORIC OF *REASON*

Unlike John Quincy Adams, those who responded to *The Age of Reason* had little interest in “doing justice” to Paine’s wit, since it was precisely his wit that had done such injustice to the Bible. But like Adams, they blasted Paine for his deceptive, manipulative, and obfuscatory rhetoric and particularly bristled at his reliance on ridicule rather than the Reason he professed. On both sides of the Atlantic, roughly six dozen writers rushed to the Bible’s defense, Christian and Jew, clergy and laity, educated and lowly alike. The sheer quantity of derisive name-calling, witty one-upmanship, icy sarcasm, and envenomed mock-praise which they recognized in Paine and returned upon his head could—and did—fill volumes. In literally hundreds of ways, Paine’s critics called him out for his rhetoric of ridicule, and most of them responded in kind, giving vent (the laughter of relief) to the spiritual pain, the wounded pride, and the righteous zeal they felt at seeing their Holy Bible mocked in effigy. Drawing attention to the contemptible irony that a book parading “Reason” would be so full of absurdities, inconsistencies, and lapses of logic instead (the laughter of incongruity), and cackling that such a renowned propagandist had proved such a clownish ignoramus when it came to the book he derided (the laughter of superiority), they took turns moving Paine from the pillory to the post, determined to make *The Age of Reason* a laughingstock of its own. Surveying their responses reveals yet more proof of the point we have been arguing here, that in the battle over the Bible, ridicule played a central if (to us) unsuspected role.

²⁰ Ibid., 104, 110, 82, 69, 78, 100, 80, 103.

Watson's *Apology*

Evidence appears almost everywhere. First to the witness stand should be Richard Watson, whose *Apology for the Bible* was the response against which all others were measured. (Paine himself kept a well-marked copy, and though he considered it “an Apology...for priestcraft” more than an apology for the Bible, he “regretted that in all controversies among men a similar temper was not maintained.”) Watson, often known simply as “the Bishop of Llandaff,” was also Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, and “the success with which he combated the sublime Gibbon on the same subject, made him the fittest person to enter the lists with the celebrated Paine,” or so said the pugnacious preface to the *Apology*'s American edition, eager for a fight. By the time that edition appeared in New York in 1796, the volume had already gone through four 4,000-count editions in England, and it would soon be sent across America as antidote to Paine's poison. As Watson's title suggests, his priority was to defend the Bible, and more than most of Paine's critics, he did an admirable job of avoiding direct reflections on Paine's character, which he praised whenever possible. Instead, he used reason to refute Paine's arguments, drew attention where applicable to Paine's logical fallacies, and pointed out earlier writers who raised the same objections, only to be answered by other apologists. Watson's tone throughout remains dignified and respectful (though occasionally a hint of righteous indignation appears), and, ever the minister, he sometimes interrupts his commentary to preach a mini-sermon of sorts. Being less focused on rhetoric than most of the others, and for the most part being more positively apologetic than negatively polemic, in some ways Watson's *Apology* is the least interesting for our purposes; still, it bears consideration because when the stately Bishop does reflect on Paine's style instead of his substance, it is his obfuscatory rhetoric of ridicule that most draws his ire.²¹

In the beginning of his volume, for example, Watson admits his disappointment over Paine's habit of “introduc[ing] railing for reasoning, [and] vulgar and illiberal sarcasm in the room of argument.”

²¹ Yorke, *Letters from France*, 361–62; Richard Watson, *An Apology for the Bible, in a series of letters, addressed to Thomas Paine* (New York: John Bull, 1796), iii.

Later he wonders if he is “disputing with a deistical philosopher, [or] with an atheistic madman.” At one point he can’t help but explode in righteous indignation, invoking Paul’s denunciation of Elymas the sorcerer to excoriate his opponent: “O full of all subtilty and of all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?” He quickly regains his composure but does not excuse his outburst; rather, he explains that “coolness would be a crime” in the face of “so gross a misrepresentation” of God’s word. Watson’s word “misrepresentation” is significant, as it suggests that it was Paine’s manipulative reframing of the Bible that angered him—his distortions even more than his defamations. “In many places,” Watson writes to Paine directly, you are “fighting a phantom of your own raising.” Elsewhere you jump from premise to unsupported conclusion in such a way that “your friend Euclid would have been ashamed of it,” with humor being used to cover your tracks. “You ridicule” certain stories but “your mirth...[is] misplaced”; “your wit...originates, I think, in your ignorance.” You call the book of Proverbs a jest book, but “Do you perceive any jest” in it? Does it really “make you merry” or did you turn wise Solomon into “a witty jester” with conscious design? Watson refuses to accuse Paine of “deliberate wickedness,” but he does hold him guilty of foul play (emphasis on “play”). “What I blame you for is this,” he states clearly, “that you have attempted to lessen the authority of the Bible by ridicule, more than by reason; that you have brought forward every petty objection which your ingenuity could discover, or your industry pick up,” enough to win “the palm of scurrility” from such earlier heavyweights as Bolingbroke and Voltaire.²²

What Bishop Watson was describing is key to deconstructing Paine’s rhetoric of ridicule, and it was detected by other critics both before and after, as we shall see. What concerned him was the way in which Paine manipulated the *perceptions* of his readers, showing them the Bible through a funhouse mirror but labelling that mirror “Reason” to pass off his fabrications as straightforward facts. Problems imagined, invented, and introduced into the Bible through Paine’s “ingenuity” and “industry” would then seem inherent in the text, and readers could dismiss the Bible thinking they had given it an

²² Ibid., 19, 48, 54–55, 73, 58, 89, 90, 97–98, 103–04.

objective examination, which is exactly what Paine had promised. Watson compared this to “a corrupted judge, previously determined to give sentence on one side,” the equivalent of Lady Justice tipping her scales and brandishing her sword, all while peeking out from under her blindfold.²³

To ensure his courtroom victory, Watson accuses Paine, you “carefully...select[] for your observations such particularities as are best calculated to render, if possible, the prophets odious or ridiculous in the eyes of your readers.” Thus hoisted with their own petard, whether morally (“odious”) or intellectually (“ridiculous”), the Bible’s prophets (or “poets” as Paine would have it) sink in the estimation of Paine’s readers, guilty of abuses or absurdities largely of the author’s own creation. Through your “great fertility of invention,” Watson continues, you take biblical stories and “dress them up” in comical clothes, the better to shamelessly strip them. You “discover...obscenit[ies]” in your own “imagination” and place them in an angel’s mouth, an act of diabolical ventriloquism if ever there was one. Admitting that the Bible did contain some “real” “difficulties” (a point few clergymen were willing to concede, and for which Watson was excoriated by several other respondents), Watson accused Paine of “hunting after” as many of those difficulties, real or imagined, as he could find. “These you have endeavoured to magnify into insurmountable objections to the authority of the whole book.” By “ridicul[ing] things held most sacred, and calumniat[ing] characters esteemed most venerable; you have excited the scoffs of the profane; increased the scepticism of the doubtful; shaken the faith of the unlearned; suggested cavils to the ‘disputers of this world’; and perplexed the minds of honest men who wish to worship the God of their fathers in sincerity and truth.” But it is not the Bible they are doubting, but Paine’s misrepresentation of it. “No, Sir, no,” Watson fumes, “this profane doctrine, this miserable stuff, this blasphemous perversion of scripture, is your doctrine, not that of the New Testament.”²⁴

Watson knew that Paine’s writings were deliberately “calculated to mislead common readers,” who would “get rid of their nursery faith” and fail to reconstruct it through “sober investigation,” being

²³ Ibid., 119.

²⁴ Ibid., 119, 140–41, 132–33, 218.

too shallow in their scriptural understanding and too weak in their spiritual desire to pay the price of study required them. Watson doubted that his book would “make any impression” on Paine, but did “indulge an hope, that it may not be without its effect on some of [Paine’s] readers” (he was correct on both counts). Still, the Bishop did harbor one significant fear. Watson’s faith assured him that the Bible would “not fall by [Paine’s] force” of argument, but he knew “that the scar of calumny is seldom wholly effaced, it remains long after the wound is healed.” Consequently, Paine’s “abuse of holy men and holy things will be remembered” long after his “arguments against them are refuted and forgotten.” In short, Paine’s argumentative arrows might be withdrawn from the shield of faith, but the lingering poison of his ridicule remained potent. Once the clamor of battle subsided, the echo of laughter would remain.²⁵

Wakefield’s *Examination*

Gilbert Wakefield shared similar concerns, and wrote two responses to *The Age of Reason* (one for each of the book’s two parts) that were arguably second in significance to Watson’s alone. Bible translator, scholar, and fearless controversialist himself, Wakefield’s Unitarianism allowed him to concede several of Paine’s points of contention early on, but the further we read, the “fewer occasions of approbation and coincidence” we find. Instead, Wakefield begins to wonder when “plain sensible *Thomas Paine*” turned into “a tumid and hypertragic declaimer.” He accused Paine of supplying “*conceit for knowledge;...sophistry for argument, and dogmatism for intelligent conviction,*” but it was not the “hypertragic” alone that offended him. Reflecting more of the hypercomical, Wakefield notes “a sarcastical reflection, with which [Paine’s] fancy seems not a little tickled,” a sensation Wakefield did not share. Though he did indulge a smile at Paine’s treatment of “the story of *Jonah* and the *Whale*, which Paine “descants with a tolerable share of merriment,” even that was too much of an admission and he had it stricken from subsequent editions. Instead, he complained of Paine’s “literary profligacy” and his “desultory and unsubstantiated allegations,” and found himself chastising Paine for his “weakness

²⁵ Ibid., 190, 239, 211–12.

and absurdity,” his “effrontery, and insipidity,” and even his “stupidity” and “imbecility.” Wakefield tried to provide answers to “every objection, not completely puerile,” but those were not as numerous as he had hoped. In a telling insight, Wakefield wonders why Paine would lob artillery shells at “monstrous doctrines” that higher criticism had already “exploded.” “Alas!,” he sighs, “our *Deist* has fancied himself in stout combat with genuine *Christianity*, whilst he was buffeting a mere phantom of ignorance and superstition! So easy is declamation against folly!”²⁶

But that was the point. It was not high but low criticism that Paine indulged in, not “genuine Christianity” but a strawman scripture he attacked. For this reason Paine arrayed his biblical stories in comically undignified dress. A caricature carries less weight than a portrait, and a prophet is more easily laughed at as soon as you pull down his pants (as Paine had done to Joshua). As an Irish layman observed, Paine was “put[ting] invention to the rack, to find matter for raillery and derision,” presenting biblical stories in whatever pose would “afford him a fairer field for exercising his talent for ridicule.” His was not an honest investigation; rather, he “studied to understand [the Bible] only in such a way as would most fully suit his turn for ridicule.” Paine was tampering with the evidence, leading the witness, and slanting the jury to ensure they viewed the case in the most damaging light. In the words of another respondent, “Surely an accuser ought to come into court with clean hands!”²⁷

Wakefield was right that declamation against folly was easy, but that was what Paine hoped to provide for his readers, an easy victory against an absurdified Bible, a desacralized scepter in the hands of a delegitimized Church. Christians with any degree of flexibility in their faith (and Wakefield’s Unitarians were about as flexible as Christians could be) would bend the Bible around Paine’s polemic, but those with a simpler, more brittle belief would find their Bible irreparably broken. As Wakefield added in his book’s second edition, “*Mr. Paine* truly would require a *Cherub*, bestriding a cloud and

²⁶ Gilbert Wakefield, *An Examination of the Age of Reason, or an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology*, by Thomas Paine (London: Kearsley, 1794), 6, 7, 8, 33, 20, 55, 38, 39, 40, 53, 41, 34–35.

²⁷ A Protestant Lay-Dissenter, *Remarks on a Pamphlet, entitled The Age of Reason*, 89, 97, 102; I. Padman, Jun., *A Layman’s Protest against the Profane Blasphemy, False Charges, and Illiberal Invective of Thomas Paine, author of a book, entitled “The Age of Reason, part I. and II. Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology”* (London: Hughes and Walsh, 1797).

perching on the table, to superintend the pen of every scriptural scribe, to direct his hand with unfailing accuracy in points and commas!" Only inerrancy would satisfy Paine, but this was because inerrancy served his cause best. It allowed him to hold the Bible to a standard high as heaven, making it all the easier to blacken it with hints of hell. Again from Wakefield's second edition, "nine-tenths of the *Christian* world...are fully persuaded, that a much more awful personage" had helped Paine with his writing. Not the "Cherub" beside the Bible's penmen, but "no less a coadjutor than the DEVIL himself, was seated at *his* elbow, and prompted *his* invention, when he indited the *Age of Reason*."²⁸

As damning as a dance with the devil might be, nothing Wakefield says about Paine in his first response compares to the blistering fire of his second. In his "examination" of *The Age of Reason*'s more positive pro-Deistical first part, Wakefield hesitated to descend to Paine's rhetorical level, but after reading part two, which (by Paine's admission) takes a wit-whetted axe to each biblical book, Wakefield "replies" to Paine more directly, taking off the gloves and throwing down the gauntlet. Though many come close, no single response tries as hard to match Paine's rhetoric of ridicule, and the result is no gentlemanly duel but a fistfight in the mud. A revised edition of Wakefield's three-volume *Translation of the New Testament, with Notes* appeared the same year as the second part of Paine's *Age of Reason*, and while his theology was not completely orthodox, his knowledge of the Bible was surpassed only by his love for it. Bringing the Bible to its own defense, this erudite and eloquent scholar quoted Proverbs 26:5—"Answer a fool according to his folly"—and then joined his challenger in the ring.²⁹

The title page alerts us to what is coming, foregrounding what follows with a quotation from a "Minute Philosopher": "Whoever digs in the mine of truth, I look on as my fellow-labourer" (the approach Wakefield took in his reply to part 1); "but if, while I am taking true pains, he diverts himself with teasing me, and flinging dust in mine eyes, I shall soon be tired of him." Wakefield then warns his readers about the character of his adversary ("a silly blockhead, blind with ignorance, and besotted with

²⁸ Wakefield, *An Examination of the Age of Reason*, 59.

²⁹ Gilbert Wakefield, *A Reply to Thomas Paine's Second Part of the Age of Reason* (London: H. D. Symonds, 1795), 2.

conceit, foaming out his own shame upon subjects infinitely beyond his acquirements”), and admits that “more than once have I blotted out expressions, from an apprehension of too great harshness,” only to “restore[] them to their place, out of a pure respect for truth, rectitude, and proportion.” With this more gentlemanly version of “he started it,” Wakefield then proceeds to match Paine rhetoric for rhetoric, which, revealingly, ends up being ridicule for ridicule.³⁰

Wakefield’s reply to Paine’s second part of *The Age of Reason* may be the most rhetorically focused of any of the responses to Paine. His attacks on Paine’s rhetoric and logic (or lack thereof) are typically longer than any refutation of his arguments or assertions. And as the verse in Proverbs suggests, it would be folly mocking folly. Wakefield’s approach is essentially two-fold: he sarcastically vaunts Paine for his pretended erudition (his claim to “Reason”), and then reduces his words to the absurd, exploding his pretensions in volleys of scornful derision. This is essentially what Paine had done to the Bible, raising it in mock solemnity and holding it to perfection’s standard, only to make its collapse all the more spectacular once ridicule brought it crashing back to earth. For Wakefield, as for his opponent, it was a matter of juxtaposing “boisterous pretensions and small performances,” the forced incongruity resulting in laughter even Shaftesbury would endorse.³¹

Wakefield pays Paine mock homage with a list of sarcastic titles that is almost endless: “our child of *reason*,” “our wonder-working logician,” “this phenomenon of polemic chivalry,” “this sententious sage, this paragon of oracular instruction,” or “*Thomas Paine*, that profound scholar! that accurate antiquary! that painful traveller! that candid judge!” Though past skeptics were “to the present champion, like meridian suns to the faint glimmerings of the nightly taper,” Wakefield continually reverses those rankings to make Paine’s pretensions seem comically absurd. The way he writes, an awed Wakefield rhapsodizes, one would think “that a most profound scholar, who had devoted his life to historical and antiquarian researches, was preparing to divulge with magisterial solemnity some grand

³⁰ Ibid., i, vi, vii.

³¹ Ibid., 17.

discoveries, that have eluded the diligence and sagacity of all the learned, from his professional chair.” What a shame that Paine would “not condescend to let the sun of [his] intellect shine out upon the world, for the illumination of us darkling mortals, who are compelled to grope for truth, amidst the obscure glimmerings of twilight.” Mocking his subject’s title as well as its author, he exults, “This is the great illuminator of the times! the bright ornament of his age of reason! the glorious example of rationality! Come, ye sons of reason! ye disciples of true philosophy! come, and imbibe the sentiments of truth from his venerable lips! Hear him, ye deaf! and all ye blind, behold!”³²

Though Wakefield prays in mock solemnity, “Let the whole choir of Phoebus and the Muses rise up and pay this Coryphæus of erudition their respectful homage!” he confesses that such accolades were more likely to come “from the giddy, the thoughtless, and unintelligent.” Paine’s head might not “brush[] the very stars of heaven in their courses” after all. To ensure this impression, Wakefield intertwines his mock-heroic praise with derisive jibes drenched in bathos. Here his list of epithets is even longer: “our boisterous and rash adventurer,” “our swaggering polemic,” “our noisy coxcomb,” “our present vain glorious and empty blusterer,” “our hypertragical declaimer,” “our puny adversary,” “this miserable pop-gun.” In producing “such a crude farrago of impertinence and stupidity,” Paine was guilty of “the most impenetrably stupid and futile braggadocio.” He was a “blind harper upon [a] hum-drum string,” an “unblushing ignoramus!” or as Wakefield bursts out with a single word, “Nincompoop!” Gentler terms are undeserved by “such a hardy renegado,” chief of the “race of lying cavillers, witless coxcombs, and unblushing blockheads,” “the most tremendous of all possible deistic dunces!”³³

Between the incessant name-calling, Wakefield chastens Paine for his “rhodomontade impertinences,” his “insipid jocularities,” and “his occasional sallies of humour.” He blasts him for trusting too much in “the poignancy of his wit,” which more reasonable minds would “condemn [as] buffoonery.” This was not “solid and sober reasoning”; it was “parade and puffing,” “throwing the dust

³² Ibid., 3, 54, 44, 41, 13, 4, 17, 24, 51.

³³ Ibid., 34, 43, 25, 6, 16, 19, 25, 26, 47, 32, 42, 35, 51, 57.

of big-sounding words, and contemptuous insinuation, in the eyes of his readers.” Collapsing under the weight of its own demerits, *The Age of Reason* was “worthless stuff, interlarded with nauseous collops of self-applause, highly seasoned with virulent abuse, and profanely decorated with the prostituted name of *Reason*[.] Oh! *Thomas! Thomas!*”³⁴

As Wakefield makes clear, Christianity is unafraid of a fight, but it prefers a more evenly matched opponent. “If we must perish, let us perish by the hands of some noble adversary, and not by vermin!” As it was, Wakefield was willing to “enter the slaughter house again; all blood, and no brains!” casting behind him “a benevolent wish” for his challenger’s sake: “the application of a cooling plaister...to the poor writer’s pericranium.” With the philosopher who prefers banishment and hard labor over pretending to applaud “the insipid verse of a minor king,” Wakefield would rather have said, “Humph!...Let me alone: I AM GOING TO THE MINES AGAIN!” better to avoid the encounter altogether. In the end, after leaving “the filth and gloom of this Augean stable,” Wakefield could calm the frayed nerves of anxious Christians with a single doggerel couplet: “Our Bible was not made to suffer / By such a braggadocio huffer.” As another unimpressed reader of *The Age of Reason* had said of Paine, “After having withstood the roarings of the *Lion*,” it is sad to see Christianity “insulted by the brayings of an *Ass*.”³⁵

Priestley’s Answer

In a third example of criticism from a well-informed and well-known source, Joseph Priestley wrote a series of letters in response to *The Age of Reason*. Most famous for his discovery of oxygen, Priestley helped fuel Paine’s passion for science and shared many of his political views, but was decidedly against what appeared in his anti-religious writings. In the preface to Priestley’s *Answer*, editor Theophilus Lindsey noted that Paine “possesses the talent, perhaps above all other writers, of arresting the attention of his readers, and making them pleased and desirous of going on with him,

³⁴ Ibid., 19, 23, 11, 22, 33.

³⁵ Ibid., 13, 37, 26–27, 36, 49–50, 39; Bradford, *Mr. Thomas Paine’s Trial*, 54.

which, with many, is one step towards convincing them.” Priestley largely agreed, and noted “the same vigor of mind and strength of expression” in *The Age of Reason* that he had valued in Paine’s other works. However, here Priestley suggests that Paine’s style was a façade to mask his ignorance (or avoidance) of the subject, meant to “impose upon the ignorant and unwary.” Paine’s “great confidence in his own opinion, and contempt of that of others” were “undisguised” in *The Age of Reason*, but what was disguised was the artifice of Paine’s rhetoric of ridicule. Like others before him (Hume and Gibbon, specifically), Paine attacked belief “not directly, but only in an artful insidious manner,” one that likewise owed much of its effectiveness to humor. Consequently, and contrary to Paine’s insinuations, it was not the Bible but *The Age of Reason* that was “burlesque writing,” “the most curious romance I have ever met with.” Paine’s intention throughout was to “discredit revelation, by turning it into ridicule,” a charge Priestley repeats at least three times. “It looks as if Mr. Paine was pre-determined to load Christianity with every term of reproach that occurred to him,” so nothing was sacred. Priestley doubted he had ever seen a tract with “more confident assertions, or a looser mode of arguing.”³⁶

Recognizing the intelligence shown in Paine’s political works, Priestley suspects that in many instances Paine’s combination of scriptural literalism and exegetical ignorance is more “affected” than “real,” a result of “art” as much as “want of better information.” He accuses Paine of writing “from documents existing in his own brain only,” and inventing misinformation that “never existed but in his own single imagination.” When speaking of Biblical Christianity, “he loads the system with all the absurdities, which he might easily have known, have long been discarded by intelligent christians.” But that assumes that “intelligent christians” were Paine’s intended audience. Priestley was closer to the truth when he said that Paine’s writings might “make an impression on those who are as ignorant as himself,” which was precisely the purpose behind Paine’s everyman rhetorical persona. By confining

³⁶ Joseph Priestley, *An Answer to Mr. Paine’s Age of Reason, being a continuation of letters to the philosophers and politicians of France, on the subject of religion; and of the letters to a philosophical unbeliever*, with a preface by Theophilus Lindsey (Northumberland Town, NY: 1794; reprint, London: J. Johnson, 1795), xiv, 27–28, v, vi, 36, 45, 46, 78, 39, 63, 77, 86, 89, 88.

himself to a common sense hermeneutic and a forced allegiance to scriptural inerrancy (the populist biblicism of his day), he was able to make the Bible look as unpolished as he was pretending to be.³⁷

“What scholar will not smile” at Paine’s animadversions, chuckled Priestley, knowing the educated would know better than to follow the lead of Paine’s illogic. But Paine was aiming lower than Priestley’s imagined academic. It was to the shopkeeper, not the scholar, and the plowman, not the professor, that Paine hoped to bring a smile—and not the smile of condescension, but the smile of comprehension, of agreement, of Burkean identification. As if to follow Paine’s descent, Priestley later affirms, “Any person who only looks into his Bible, must smile at Mr. Paine’s palpable mistake[s],” but here again Paine’s punches land below the line of Priestley’s reasoning. Though Priestley may have been right that “any person who will take the trouble may easily know a great deal more” than Paine did about biblical apologetics, Paine was willing to take the risk. He was counting on his audience *not* taking that trouble, secure in the admission that they did not know any more than Paine, and for that matter, didn’t need to, since reaching beyond “common sense” was overreaching anyway. “It is sometimes amusing to follow him,” Priestley admitted, and that was precisely the point.³⁸

UNMASKING THE RHETORIC OF RIDICULE

Watson, Wakefield, and Priestley were the heavyweights among the Bible’s defenders, but they were far from alone in recognizing Paine’s patterns of rhetorical manipulation. Many of their fellow respondents (including the far less educated) knew exactly what Paine’s ridicule was meant to accomplish and drew attention not only to its ubiquitous presence, but to its insidious purpose, which was “often more calculated to deceive than to instruct.” Detecting Paine’s hypocrisy, one observed that “he is not always so *mentally faithful* to himself, as he would wish us to believe,” precisely the kind of “infidelity” Paine himself had condemned when he redefined the word as hypocrisy. But why scold Paine for

³⁷ Ibid., 77, 79, 68, 69.

³⁸ Ibid., 66, 91, 74, 79.

stretching the truth? After all, “Mr. Paine had an hypothesis to establish; and what is truth compared with an hypothesis? Mr. Paine’s whole book is a monstrous overgrown one; truth lies bleeding at the foot of every page: in some pages she is at her last gasp.” All quips about “Doubting Thomas” aside (and there were many), it was Paine’s readers that should find themselves doubting Thomas.³⁹

Some critics credited *The Age of Reason*’s humor to laziness—both its author’s and its readers’—for why endure the labor of logical argumentation when laughter is both faster to raise and more fun to digest? In the first place, “It is a much easier task to make witty remarks on the story of Jonah, or Samson” than to prove rival theologies of his own. In the second, as Paine takes great care “to render [his] books as entertaining as possible, they are read with avidity, . . . whilst the dry, sober appeal to reason and facts which the defender of Christianity adopts, is thrown by neglected.” As another critic noted, “Mr. P’s merriment . . . will doubtless give more pleasure to many of his readers, than sound argument would have done,” later announcing sarcastically that “Mr. P. perhaps afraid lest his readers attention should flag, has prepared a new fund of amusement”!⁴⁰

Humor’s lightness helped Paine avoid weighty rationalization, distracting the enemy so that he could retreat from logical combat whenever outright victory seemed impossible, and “cover[ing] that retreat by unveiling the shield of ridicule; the dazzle of whose delusive brightness he well knew was fully adequate to blind and confound the uninformed, the misinformed, and too often the well-informed multitude.” Dazzling as shield, humor also disheartened as sword, making “scurrility and ridicule” the “two weapons” most able “to remedy any deficiency either in argument or information,” the flash of their steel keeping most enemies from actually engaging. “There is scarcely a page of his book wherein he has not brandished these weapons without mercy,” and no wonder; they are the arms most quickly “caught up to defend weak reasoning.” Hiding behind the empty bluster of his ridicule, Paine acts “like

³⁹ Thomas D. Hincks, *Letters Originally Addressed to the Inhabitants of Cork, in defence of Revealed Religion, occasioned by the circulation of Mr. Paine’s Age of Reason, in that city*, 2nd ed. (Cork and London, 1796), 3, 28; Padman, *A Layman’s Protest*, 68–69.

⁴⁰ Hincks, *Letters*, 39, 40; Thomas Scott, *A Vindication of the Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, and of the Doctrines contained in them* (London; reprinted in New York by G. Forman, 1797), 22, 90.

the cowardly, arrogant bully, who can browbeat a number of peaceable people that wish not to meddle with him; though perhaps any one of them could beat him if they would make the attempt.” So much for the “hectoring method” of Thomas Paine.⁴¹

Others saw in Paine’s ridicule an intentional fictionalizing of faith, an unraveling of the Bible’s reality to weaken its hold on believers’ hearts. “Mr. Paine knew the advantages of proceeding immethodically,” Irish minister William Jackson surmised. “By representing the relations in the Jewish and Christian books as ridiculous fables; and, vulgarly descanting on their absurdity, he artfully endeavoured to predispose the multitude in favor of the opinions he was about to inculcate, that his weak objections might the better pass for unanswerable arguments.” Paine denies revelation, for example, but instead of giving evidence to prove his point, he turns “the whole story of Judaism and Christianity” into a “romance” (a novel), making it all the easier to undermine. He cares little for objectivity, accuracy, or staying true to the Biblical text, for “what are a few blunders, when the object in view is the entire overthrow of every religious system under heaven? The greatness of the end should excuse all inaccuracies in the means.” Aware of Shaftesbury’s famous dictum, he (as did others) states that Paine “adopt[s] the maxim, that ridicule is the test of truth, [and] tries his hand at the business,” but subtly stacks the deck in doubt’s favor. Paine’s strategy throughout consists of “arming himself with ridicule at all points,” and aiming them at the Bible to suggest that it was written “out of a frolic to laugh at mankind.” It could then be dismissed with a smile.⁴²

Reframing the Bible as a fictional novel—and a tragi-comic one at that—was an ingenious ploy on *The Age of Reason*’s part. The tragic frame magnified the Bible’s perceived immorality, played upon the reader’s conscience, and allowed Paine to indulge in the scornful side of his ridicule. Simultaneously, the comic frame magnified the Bible’s perceived absurdity, played upon the reader’s

⁴¹ Padman, *A Layman’s Protest*, 40–41, iv; James Tytler, *Paine’s Second Part of the Age of Reason Answered* (Salem: Thomas Cushing, 1796), 32–33.

⁴² Rev. William Jackson, *Observations in Answer to Mr. Thomas Paine’s “Age of Reason”* (Dublin: G. Folingsby, 1795), 2–3, 9, 11, 12, 13.

“common sense” and “reason,” and allowed Paine to indulge in the frolicsome side of his wit. The Bible was exposed on either flank, and Paine targeted them both incessantly. One critic thought Paine so adept at this type of fictionalization that he suggested he take up work at “a puppet-show,” replacing “PUNCH, the veteran hero of the artificial comedies.” Another asked why Paine would attack the Bible if it was as low a farce as Paine was pretending. “Nobody thinks of answering the *New Atalantis*, *Satan’s invisible world*, *Jack the Giant-killer*, or *Tom Thumb*.” But that was Paine’s point: nobody thinks of believing such stories either.⁴³

The fictionalization of the Bible stripped it of its dignity, the way Paine had called King George his “Madjesty” to make the crown seem out of place upon his famously unwell head. It was mocking Elisha’s baldness or cutting Samson’s hair. At a time when titles were prized and one’s name was a badge of honor, portraying the Bible as anything less than God-breathed scripture was the equivalent of calling Abraham “Old Abe” or making a “Jim” of St. James. It was exactly what many of Paine’s detractors were doing whenever they called him “Tom,” a name he never used for himself, and one which Leslie Stephen called an expression of “disgust” that “still warns all men that its proprietor does not deserve even posthumous civility.” His defenders recognized the tactic and condemned it, as when a British blacksmith in the 1840s blistered at the mention of “Tom Paine” and thundered his refusal to “hear that great man reviled....There is no such person as Tom Paine. Mister Thomas Paine, if you please.” But his enemies thought the name fitting, for it was just what he had done to the Bible itself.⁴⁴

Others saw Paine’s reframing of the Bible as a kind of “novelization” as well (“novel” as noun, not as adjective). Reverend Jackson compared Paine’s description of Christianity to “Swift’s description of the inhabitants in Lilliput,” a diminution of comic disproportions, invoking the laughter of degradation.

⁴³ Rev. John Anketell, *Strictures upon Paine’s Age of Reason; into which are incorporated a few observations upon a Belfast edition of remarks upon Paine’s pamphlet, by a person subscribing himself a citizen of the world* (Dublin: William Porter, 1796), 101; [James Tytler], *Paine’s Age of Reason, with remarks, containing a vindication of the Doctrines of Christianity from the Aspersions of that Author. By a Citizen of the World* (Belfast: n.p., 1794), 57.

⁴⁴ Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1881), 458; Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society, 1850–1960* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 81.

More frequent were comparisons to Cervantes, whose mock-heroic champion, Don Quixote, colored anything he touched with shades of absurdity bordering on insanity. Paine himself had used this trick to mock Lord Sandwich in *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, aristocracy in *Rights of Man*, and miracles in *The Age of Reason*, but here it was his turn to be cast as the laughable knight. A Scotch layman, himself a former infidel, called Paine a “politico-religious Quixote” who made windmills of scripture and then battled them not with “argument” but with “ungrounded and insolent assertions,” the better to prey upon “weak and unguarded minds.” This made *The Age of Reason* (“the weakest and most flagitious of all pamphlets”) less a publication and more a “performance,” and of the “most daring” and “most contemptible” kind. A Reverend Thomas Meek, not quite living up to his last name, accused Paine of being “more extravagant than the knight of *Mancha* when he encountered the wind-mill,” and described *The Age of Reason* as “not equalled in point of extravagance by DON QUIXOTE himself.” Closer to Rocinante, or in this case Sancho’s donkey, Meek adds that Paine is “as ignorant as a mule of the art of logic,” which explains his reliance on ridicule instead. Of the Bible’s teachings on the Fall and the Redemption, which Paine inflates to place an Eve, an apple, a serpent, and a Redeemer on every planet in the universe, Thomas Williams protests, “Here is Don Quixote and his windmill, with a witness!”⁴⁵

Even with this, these men were not done excoriating Paine’s Knight of the Woeful Countenance. Meek adds other comparisons: “Goliath of the Philistines” for his blasphemy, “a clown” for his inanity, “a merry Andrew” for his ribaldry. Acknowledging the “intoxicating influence” of Paine’s rhetoric, and confessing that it is difficult not to “admire his ribaldry for a little,” still he chides Paine for leaning so heavily on “artful insinuations,” “folly and stupidity,” and all “the hodge podge, the low, pitiful puns, and the childish quibbles he advances.” Excusing himself for having descended somewhat to Paine’s level, he confesses, “In publications of this kind, it is almost impossible to stand clear of ridicule.

⁴⁵ Jackson, *Observations*, 36; A Layman [James Wardrop], *A Discourse occasioned by the death of Alexander Christie, Esq. of Townfield, late Chief Magistrate of Montrose; containing some observations on the progress of religious knowledge in Scotland, and on Mr. Paine’s ‘Age of Reason’* (Glasgow, 1795), 21, 20; Meek, *Sophistry Detected*, 45, 12; A Layman [Thomas Williams], *The Age of Infidelity; in answer to Thomas Paine’s Age of Reason*, 3rd edition (Worcester, MA: Isaiah Thomas, 1794), 32.

Horace must laugh, and Juvenal must frown. I have smiled when the subject would permit me, but the satire in general is here rather pungent.” Leaving the Roman satirists to Meek, our Scotsman channeled the Bible instead. Wondering aloud how anyone could be duped by detestable subtleties “from so polluted a pen,” he exclaimed in mock admiration, “*O Painites, great is your faith!*”⁴⁶

INVENTING ABSURDITIES

Of all the respondents’ complaints, the most angrily and often repeated (with the possible exception of Paine’s habit of supplying assertions in the place of arguments) condemned the deliberate misrepresentation of scripture, as noted by Watson, Wakefield, Priestley, and others. As Daniel Humphreys described it, “The plan...appears to be, to go briefly through the Bible, in order to discredit and reproach it, under a pretence of finding at every little stage of his progress, improper unworthy things, which according to his ideas of propriety could not have place in the word of God.” At first glance this hardly seems insightful; with his axe-swinging analogy Paine had basically said as much. But with a word like “pretence” and a phrase like “according to his ideas of propriety,” Humphreys picks up the ruse. It is Paine, not the Bible, that sets the criteria, and it is Paine’s strawman, not the scriptures, that predictably falls short. Paine “labour[s] to magnify differences into inconsistencies,” and therefore seldom has trouble finding them.” He “collect[s]” his examples “with the anxiety of a man who wishes to find fault at all events;” he “industriously endeavours to pervert to an opposite purpose.” As another critic said, “If a man cannot find contradictions, he may manufacture them at pleasure.”⁴⁷

Examples of their anger could be multiplied *ad nauseum*, which is exactly what Paine’s duplicitousness caused in his critics, sickened that he would “vomit such trash upon the bosom of the public.” “What is attacked is not Christianity,” one minister protested. “It is an unwieldy, cumbrous

⁴⁶ Meek, *Sophistry Detected*, iii–iv, 14, 35, 7, 5, 9, 15, 46–47; [Wardrop], *A Discourse occasioned by the death of Alexander Christie*, 23, 21. The verse the author is parodying is Matthew 15:28.

⁴⁷ Daniel Humphreys, *The Bible Needs no Apology: or Watson’s System of Religion Refuted; and the advocate proved an unfaithful one, by the Bible itself* (Portsmouth, NH: Charles Peirce, 1796), 4, 73, 74; Tytler, *Paine’s Second Part*, 24, 25; Scott, *A Vindication of the Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures*, 121.

dress which has been put on the fairest form that ever was exhibited to the world; a dress which totally conceals her beauties.” *The Age of Reason* was nothing but “buffoonery and palpable misrepresentations,” complained another, “surely [Paine] did not believe what he himself asserts.” An Irish curate asked, “Who can refrain from laughing, and that heartily too, at hearing our Author express his detestation for the profaneness of a story of his own invention?” Of course Paine would deny biblical mysteries; “he seems not to relish any riddles except those of his own making.” As another observed, the rules of debate forbade quoting an opponent with “partiality, misrepresentation, or wilfully concealing any part in order to cast ridicule upon the rest.” Yet throughout *The Age of Reason* ran “a marked line of wilful misrepresentation, and such shameful want of candour, that were any man to show as much in the common affairs of life, he would be stigmatized as one void [of] honour or honesty.” Seeing Paine’s mangling of 1 Corinthians 15 he wondered if Paine “had read [it] with his eyes shut!” Such willful misrepresentation “would certainly endanger the posteriors of any school-boy that should follow his example.”⁴⁸

Many critics sounded the same alarm repeatedly in their responses. What Paine was doing was “fighting with his own shadow; and encountering a phantom of his own imagination,” wrote one layman. In instance after instance, “Mr. Paine has foisted his own chimæras upon divine revelation; or, as an ingenious author observed, ‘dressed it up in his own fool’s coat, in order afterwards to laugh at it.’” Paine is “stretching his curiosity upon the rack, and putting his imagination to the torture,” but it is a “false gloss which he has been putting upon the doctrines of the Bible.” Paine should be “ashamed of such little mean subterfuges and artifices, to mislead the ignorant and unwary.” And it was precisely the uninformed and unsuspecting that were most exposed to the trap. As James Tytler asked, “For what end was the book written?” Accosting “believers of the Bible, with a downright LIE [he was one of the few to use the term explicitly], is not the way to convert us,” for we “would easily detect the falsehood.”

⁴⁸ Wakefield, *A Reply to Thomas Paine’s Second Part of The Age of Reason*, 34; John Prior Estlin, *Evidences of Revealed Religion, and particularly Christianity, stated, with reference to a pamphlet called The Age of Reason* (Bristol: N. Biggs, 1796), 13; Miers Fisher, *A Reply to the False Reasoning in the “Age of Reason” ...by a Layman* (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1796), 40, 25; Anketell, *Strictures upon Paine’s Age of Reason*, 77, 93; Tytler, *Paine’s Second Part*, 4–5, 36–37, 85, 57.

Even nonbelievers would notice Paine’s manipulations if they opened the Bible to see. “There is such monstrous concealment of circumstances necessary to elucidate the matter, and such horrid misrepresentation and buffoonery, that it is impossible to think he intends any thing else than to *deceive*.” But deceive whom? Only among those unfamiliar with the original would Paine’s counterfeit go undetected. “The whole therefore must be written for those who have not the opportunity of reading the Bible, and with a view to prevent them from ever seeking after, or thinking of, it....The author of these pamphlets...endeavours to enslave them to his own opinions, by filling their minds with prejudices, and misrepresentations of doctrines they never read!” Ridicule instead of reason was bad enough, “but when to railing we add misrepresentation, the crime becomes a kind of treason against the whole human race; and thus, I am sorry to say, that now I look upon Mr. Paine, whom I once so much admired, to be a traitor to the cause of truth and virtue!”⁴⁹

Michael Nash agreed, and demonized Paine for it. “Infidels may jeer” and skeptics might “ridicule all Revelation,” but if “Mr. Paine” had the “sense” he so frequently applauded, he would not go about “like a madman casting about firebrands, arrows, and death.” With “levity” and “impertinence” Paine “banTERS,” he “ridicul[es],” he indulges in “satire.” He “sacrifice[s] all verity to indulge a vein of humour,” and Paine is not the only one left grinning. “To indulge a vein of satire,” Nash warned, Paine “blasphemously banTERS all sacred truth in a strain that makes old satan grin a ghastly smile.” Worst of all, Paine only “pretend[s]” to examine the Bible’s “internal evidence.” In reality he simply ignores all evidence to the contrary and supplies “only just such anecdotes...as divert his humour,” confident they would tickle his readers as well. In this way, “he endeavours to throw a mist before his readers, and envelope himself and his deception in the froth of wit.” But this is mere “subterfuge,” a strategy of “artful evasion,” learned from “the cunning of his master satan, who suggested [it] to him.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Padman, *A Layman’s Protest*, 24, 74, 92–93, 121, 197; Tytler, *Paine’s Second Part*, 86–89.

⁵⁰ Michael Nash, *Paine’s Age of Reason Measured by the Standard of Truth. Wakefield’s Examination of, and a Layman’s Answer to the Age of Reason, both weighed in the balance, and found wanting* (London: [printed for the author], 1794), iii, 3,

Nash knew of what he spoke. He too had been an infidel, moved “by a similar train of thinking with Paine, [until he] utterly lost all idea of the scripture being any thing more than a cunning devised fable.” Even when thoughts of atheism scared him back to the Bible, its words “appeared in their literal sense as trifling as the story of Tom Thumb and Jack the Giant Killer,” precisely the kind of fictional frames into which Paine was forcing its stories. What rescued Nash from infidelity was “the dignity and majesty which I found through the whole,” which eventually brought such an effusion of “peace and joy” to his soul that his “eyes gush[ed] out with tears of gladness that was too great to vent itself in mirth.” Nash’s experience is revealing in that it highlights Paine’s strategy in reverse. It was “mirthful venting” that kept back “tears of gladness”; it was mockery that obscured the Bible’s “dignity and majesty”; it was pointed jabs at isolated passages that obscured one’s view of “the whole”; and it was confining the Bible to its “literal sense”—which Paine masqueraded as “common sense”—which reduced the book to childish tales. As James Turner observed in his history of American unbelief, “By 1800, Protestants in general and Evangelicals in particular read the Bible with a flat-footed literalness unparalleled in the annals of Christianity.” For Paine, this was the fulcrum of laughter’s lever.⁵¹

Resigned to *The Age of Reason*’s tactics and seeming somewhat amused with its author himself, Thomas Williams saw in Paine a misguided wordsmith doing little more than making sport. Paine “much diverts himself” with the farrago he makes of spirits and demons. He “pleasantly sneers” at what he said of Samson, and becomes “so prophanelly merry” in mocking the story of Jonah, that the only improvement possible would be to reverse things and have Jonah swallow the whale instead, “as it would certainly afford more ample room for merriment.” By his overall tone, Williams seems largely unconcerned when Paine “provokes the risibility” of his readers, but he hoped they would do the work to get Paine’s jokes. Once better informed about the Bible, “if the reader sees any thing laughable in this system, whether true or false, let him indulge his levity; only let him know what it is he laughs at.”

9, 23, 22, 28, 30, 51, 52, 58.

⁵¹ Ibid., 65, 68, 71; Turner, *Without God, Without Creed*, 144.

Confident in the result, what had once been a subject of “sport and ridicule” would then be the grounds of “hope and comfort.” But there would still be room for laughter. As Michael Nash had said in his anti-Paine rejoinder, “Here let the Ishmaels mock; but they have the most cause to laugh *who win*.”⁵²

PLANTING PREJUDICE

Paine’s respondents were nothing if not confident they would come off conqueror. Samuel Stilwell dismissed *The Age of Reason* as “the offspring of ignorance” and questioned the effectiveness of Paine’s “great absurdities”—“as if we were to be sneered out of the truths of our religion.” Stilwell refused (for the most part) to even lower himself to Paine’s level, promising to treat “the ludicrous parts” of Paine’s volume “with the silent contempt they deserve,” which made for a very thin, pocket-sized pamphlet. Rhode Island Congregationalist William Patten promised victory in a much angrier tone (and in a much longer volume), damning Paine as a “deluded *worm!*” and asking him, “Do you not know that the system you attack has survived the power and policy of the world to extirpate it?” But in Paine’s mind, “power and policy” were the wrong approach altogether. As he would later observe in a second, non-theological debate with the Bishop of Llandaff, “An army of principles will penetrate where an army of soldiers cannot; it will succeed where diplomatic management would fail...it will march on the horizon of the world, and it will conquer”—especially, he could have added, when camouflaged in humor.⁵³

As if startled by the sound of Paine’s mustering rhetorical forces, Patten does hedge his bets at one point, though only slightly. Worried that with “prejudice and enmity it is impossible” for people to see the Bible’s “consistence and truth,” he admits, “The gospel does not require a credulous temper; but one that is impartial is indispensable.” Belief, that is, does not require an unfair advantage, but the deck must not be stacked in favor of disbelief. A fellow minister echoed this thought, admitting that “if you

⁵² [Williams], *The Age of Infidelity*, 32, 34, 41, 37, 36; Nash, *Paine’s Age of Reason*, 43.

⁵³ Samuel Stilwell, *A Guide to Reason, or an examination of Thomas Paine’s Age of Reason, and Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* (New York: John Buel, 1794), 3, 14, 22, 17; William Patten, *Christianity the True Theology, and only perfect moral system; in answer to “The Age of Reason:” with an appendix, in answer to “The Examiners Examined”* (Warren, RI: Nathaniel Phillips, 1795), 172; Thomas Paine, “Agrarian Justice,” in *Writings*, 3:342–43.

read the word [while] prejudiced against it, and determined to turn it into ridicule, you cannot expect that God will open your eyes.” Even God, by this admission, is powerless against one’s prejudice. That chink in the armor was the target of Paine’s aim, an aspect of humor that made it such a valuable weapon, as its tendency to induce identification and alienation can shift allegiances without calling attention to the act. Recall Bishop Watson’s analogy of the “corrupted judge,” whereby he accused Paine of operating “under the dominion” of just this type of “prejudice.” One respondent addressed his critique specifically to the “unprejudiced reader” (as opposed to the “would-be-critics, and witlings”), fearing that, among others, his message was doomed from the start.⁵⁴

It was “prejudice” that John Prior Estlin identified in a 1795 Christmas sermon as “the great and formidable enemy which [Christians] have to combat,” and he had *The Age of Reason* in mind when he said it. “Prejudice has hitherto been in favour of religion, under some form or other,” he said, but “there is reason to apprehend, from a variety of causes which are now operating, that prejudice, with respect to a great part of mankind, will shortly be against it.” Estlin worried that too many people do not think for themselves, whether before or after a change of perspective. We simply “reject former opinions altogether” and then “take up another set of prejudices in the room of those which we had dismissed.”⁵⁵

Each of these men expressed concern over “prejudice,” a favorite term of Paine’s. It was prejudice he targeted in *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man*, and prejudice he called “the spider of the mind” in his letter to the Abbé Reynal. In those earlier contests he had tried to disabuse his readers of the political prejudices that tied them to the past, and in the second part of *The Age of Reason* he had mocked the “cobweb” spun by clergymen to keep pro-biblical prejudice in place. In each case what went unadmitted and largely undetected (hiding behind claims of “common sense” and “reason”) was exactly what Estlin described, the fact that Paine was spinning cobwebs of his own, trying to prejudice his readers against the views that he opposed, so that they would “pre-judge” the Bible and make the impartiality Patten

⁵⁴ Muir, *An Examination of the Principles*, 51; Watson, *An Apology for the Bible*, 119; Fisher, *A Reply*, v.

⁵⁵ Estlin, *Evidences of Revealed Religion*, 8.

demanded nearly impossible to come by. Perhaps Patten had this mental “spider” in mind when he wrote that Paine “is full of prejudice, and under forms of philosophic ease and pleasantry [that is, using humor], still shows a temper peculiarly inimical to the christian scheme, and is in this sense a mere *tarantula*.” In Patten’s view, it was Paine who was leveraging prejudice, using humor to spin doubt’s entangling web.⁵⁶

CONCLUSION

It is tempting to go on. Digging through the avalanche of replies to *The Age of Reason* is like watching a roast, “Playing the Dozens,” or listening to a pair of wits square off in verbal combat similar to the fits of ludic flyting that were popular in the centuries leading up to the eighteenth-century pamphlet wars. Indeed, their tedious apologetics aside, these responses are often so entertaining that it is understandable that scholars sometimes seem to pay them more attention than the work they were critiquing. Many are incensed and match folly with folly, others are angry but show a cooler head. Some are pained and others are pitying, and a few even show a pastoral care and compassion that is genuinely moving. One went so far as to pay Paine the underhanded compliment of offering him an insanity plea, wondering if a work “so weak, so silly, and so uncandid” could really have been penned by Paine himself, and suggesting that if it was, it is “such a piece of nonsense as would tempt us to think the author *non compos*.” The poorly named *Age of Reason* was so “nonsensical” in this man’s opinion that he wondered if Paine “ha[d] yet any grains of COMMON SENSE remaining,” or if “his whole stock” was exhausted in writing the more aptly-titled pamphlet of that name.⁵⁷

As well-educated as many of Paine’s critics were, and with rhetoric a central component of education during the period, they probably knew their Cicero (Paine knew him a little as well), including his distinction between rhetoric’s direct approach (*principium*), considered noble, and its indirect

⁵⁶ Patten, *Christianity the True Theology*, 132, viii.

⁵⁷ On flyting, see Ward Parks, “Flyting, Sounding, Debate: Three Verbal Contest Genres,” *Poetics Today* 7, no. 3 (1986): 439–58; see Patrick W. Hughes, “Irreligion Made Easy: The Reaction to Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason*,” in Cleary and Stabell, eds., *New Directions in Thomas Paine Studies*, 109–31; Smylie, “Clerical Perspectives on Deism,” 203–20; [Tytler], *Paine’s Age of Reason*, 14, 46, 24, 56, 37, 38, 4, 50, 19, 28, 20, 35, 33, 47, 44, 55, 74, 7, 57.

approach (*insinuatio*), considered less proper, useful only when one's position was weak or disreputable. They would have recognized the latter in Paine's polemic, and thus shared the anger and exasperation that rhetoricians feel when their rivals resort to ridicule. Protofeminist Mary Astell, a contemporary of England's Augustan Wits, called the practice "as cowardly and foul, as to stab a Man in the Back, whom you dare not meet with Sword in Hand." Paine's opponents called him out for precisely this offense. George Washington, more pragmatist than philosopher, had spoken of *Common Sense*'s "unanswerable reasoning," but this was precisely what Paine's more intellectual opponents complained of: Paine's reasoning only seemed unanswerable because so little reasoning had actually taken place.⁵⁸

Paine's rhetoric, in literary scholar Roger Lund's words, "assumes the outlines of axiomatic truth, the better to frustrate refutation." And frustrate his refuters it did. Because his rhetoric was "affirmative rather than demonstrative," as was later said of Emerson, he likewise proved elusive, "and the more he eluded, the more he exasperated." As Michael Dummett explains, "an assertion is a kind of gamble that the speaker will not be proved wrong," but within the realm of religion, in which truth claims are neither provable nor disprovable, that gamble seemed worth the risk. So Paine took it, confident his humor would carry the day. But his reliance on ridicule also exposed him to the ridicule of others who saw through his rhetorical trickery. As a *Gentleman's Magazine* mockingly rhymed:

Tom Paine's deistic trash and treason
His impudence proclaims Right Reason,
Or Reason's Age; but Tom should know
He is *Right Reason's* mad-brained foe;
And that, compar'd with Sacred Writ,
His *inch* of philosophic wit
Is but a taper to the sun;
Right Reason's ridicule and fun.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Mary Astell, *Bart'lemy Fair: Or, An Enquiry After Wit; in which Due Respect is Had to a Letter Concerning Enthusiasm, to my Lord* (London: R. Wilkin, 1709), 109; see Lund, *Ridicule, Religion, and the Politics of Wit*, 53, 144; George Washington to Joseph Reed, January 31, 1776; in *Reprint of the Original Letters from Washington to Joseph Reed, during the American Revolution*, comp. William B. Reed (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1852), 56.

⁵⁹ Lund, *Ridicule, Religion, and the Politics of Wit*, 210; Antczak, *Thought and Character*, 118; Michael Dummett, "What is a Theory of Meaning? (II)," in G. Evans and J. McDowell, eds., *Truth and Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 84; "On Reading Thomas Paine's Age of Reason," *Gentleman's Magazine* 65, no. 1 (July 1795): 598.

More sympathetic to Paine's cause, historian Herbert Morais complained that most of the apologetic works "masquerading under the pretentious titles of Answers" were nothing more than "emotional diatribes directed against its author," but the excuse of many of these writers was that Paine's own emotionalism left them nothing rational with which to engage. As we have seen repeatedly throughout this chapter, those who responded to *The Age of Reason* were even more outraged by Paine's ridicule than by his irreligion, which explains much of what Leslie Stephen called their "inarticulate shrieking." Most were unfazed by his arguments but felt that Paine had given them nothing substantive to refute. From the Bishop of Llandaff to the lowliest layman, they decried Paine's obfuscatory rhetoric of ridicule: his novelization and decontextualization, his setting up of strawmen and banking on his readers' ignorance or laziness, his invention of absurdity and planting of prejudice. It was nothing but smoke and mirrors, they fumed, but for a skilled magician to fool an eager audience, such tricks are usually enough. The key to avoid such deception, therefore, was to see through the mirrors and wait till the smoke cleared. "There is little difficulty in answering our author's *reasonings*," wrote a London hospital chaplain whose work was reprinted in New York, "but his confident assertions, plausible declamations, and smart *repartees*, are exceedingly suited to impose on the understanding." How to overcome them? Readers should "pause from time to time," recover from the effect of Paine's "eloquence or wit" (which no doubt had "carried [them] away"), and soberly "ask himself, what argument it contains?" Paine's rhetorical spell broken, reason could then recover from ridicule.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America*, 164; Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 464; Scott, *A Vindication of the Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures*, ix.

CHAPTER XI

EXTENDING *THE AGE OF REASON*

Despite the angry opposition of his many respondents, and notwithstanding the public antipathy that decimated his reputation, subsequent history suggests that Paine failed to learn his lesson—or more likely he learned it only too well—for his antibiblical ridicule not only continued in *The Age of Reason*'s aftermath, it seemed to intensify. Until 1793 he had disguised his disbelief of scripture behind a utilitarian but hypocritical biblicism, had frequently expressed belief in Jesus Christ and a generically Protestant religion without openly divulging his deism, and had lived a moral and mainly unobjectionable life in selfless pursuit of humanitarian aims; consequently, none but those closest to him would have had cause to doubt his Quaker-based Christian credentials. As early as 1776 he had decided to postpone full disclosure of his true religious views until the end of his life, and only published *The Age of Reason* when circumstances suggested that death was inevitable. But having made his deathbed confession only to outlive it, there was no reason to continue disguising his deism. What he did disguise, as always, was the intentionality of his rhetoric of ridicule, instead weaving his humor throughout his ongoing antireligious writings in such a way that the Bible's absurdity would continue to seem inherent. Paine would keep mocking the Bible till death silenced his laughter, though subsequent skeptics have ensured that its echoes still sound to this day.

Continuing his anti-religious work would be necessary for Paine to achieve his secular goals, for just as *Common Sense* required the ongoing encouragement of the *Crisis* letters, *The Age of Reason* would need frequent reinforcement to keep its initial momentum from being swallowed up by institutional inertia. Revolutions took time, he knew well, and therefore required persistence. During the American Revolution he had told Robert Morris, "I am sensible that he who means to do mankind a real service must set down with the determination of putting up, and bearing with all their faults, follies, prejudices and mistakes until he can convince them that he is right, and that his object is a general

good.” During the French Revolution he had assured Benjamin Rush that “little inconveniences” were “the necessary consequence of pulling down and building up,” and had reminded George Washington, “Little ebbings and flowings, for and against, the natural companions of revolutions, sometimes appear, but the full current of it, is, in my opinion, as fixed as the Gulf Stream.” Now in pursuit of a revolution no less radical, Paine expressed similar confidence and showed the same determination. *The Age of Reason* had the masses questioning the Bible like never before and they simply needed continual nudging, which accounts for his plans for a third part—plans that would keep him writing about religion for the rest of his life. As he had said once he realized that *Rights of Man* (part one) would need a sequel, “I see the tide is yet the wrong way, but there is a change of sentiment beginning.”¹

One more observation from his political years provides insight into Paine’s ongoing religious rebellion. In 1778 Paine wrote that “there are two ways of governing mankind. First, By keeping them ignorant. Secondly, By making them wise.” Traditionally, governments (and as Paine would later add, churches) had always employed the former means, perpetuating “ignorance and superstition” until “the sufferers under them, by constantly looking at them, grow familiar to their absurdities, then reconciled to them, and impose a silence upon themselves which is often construed into consent.” To shift to the latter course, Paine would revoke consent by reversing the process: jolt his readers into a recognition of earlier absurdities, get them discussing new ideas to weaken the mental hold of the ones in need of replacing, and then reconcile them to the new reality by keeping them “constantly looking” at these ideas in a new, more positive light. Humor would help in all of this. The laughter of incongruity would expose unrecognized absurdities, the laughter of relief would ease people into conversation space made more comfortable by the comic frame, humor’s sociable contagion echo effect would keep the subject before them, and the laughter of superiority would bring the hesitant into line. “Error like guilt is unwilling to die,” Paine once lamented, “however...clear the detection, it still disdains to yield, and though defeated

¹ Thomas Paine to Robert Morris, February 20, 1782; Thomas Paine to Benjamin Rush, March 16, 1790; Thomas Paine to George Washington, May 1, 1790; Thomas Paine to John Hall, November 25, 1791; all in *Complete Writings*, 2:1206–07, 1285, 1303, 1321–22.

struggles to survive.” But laughter would silence those death struggles. Paine imagined the Christian as he had the monarchist, as one caught in a circle of “mental servitude that has rendered [the Bible] sacred,” with threats of eternal damnation keeping him from crossing the line. “As long as the terror with which these words have inspired him continues, he will stay where he is,” Paine admitted, “But if, by some lucky accident, he places one foot beyond the line, the other will come after it.”²

In this chapter, we will explore Paine’s ongoing efforts to coax erstwhile believers, tentative questioners, and closeted doubters into taking that second step, of fully crossing the line they were tiptoeing around. Even bolder than his forays in *The Age of Reason*, these later writings echo his earlier arguments but intensify his tone, which becomes more strident, more sarcastic, and more mockingly derisive as time went on. “The hardest chain to break is made of thought,” he once said, so he hammered at popular opinion with the tireless zeal of a prisoner escaping his shackles. Far from being cowed into cautious decorum by *The Age of Reason*’s critics, in Paine’s final decade of anti-biblical ridicule he laughed loudest of all. As he had said of an earlier conflict, “Had not such persons come forward to oppose [my work], I should have doubted the efficacy of my own writings: but those opposers have now proved to me that the blow was well directed, and they have done it justice by confessing the smart.” Indulging in a bolder taunt, he added, “Ye silly swains,...why do you torment yourselves thus?”³

RESPONDING TO HIS CRITICS

Several of Paine’s first responses grew out of the controversy surrounding *The Age of Reason*, which he defended unapologetically. In 1797, Paine wrote “A Letter to Mr. [Thomas] Erskine,” the British lawyer who years before had lost his position as Attorney General for defending (unsuccessfully) Paine’s right to publish *Rights of Man*, but who had just prosecuted (successfully) a London printer for

² Paine, “A Serious Address,” in *Complete Writings*, 2:289–90; Thomas Paine, “Addressed to the Opposers of the Bank,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 7, 1786, in *Complete Writings*, 2:432; Thomas Paine, “Answer to Four Questions on the Legislative and Executive Powers,” in *Complete Writings*, 533–34.

³ Thomas Paine to Sir Robert Smyth, “What Is Love?” (1800), in *Complete Writings*, 2:1101; “Letter Addressed to the Addressers,” in *Writings*, 3:57, 54.

publishing *The Age of Reason*. Erskine's remarks at the trial were published widely in hopes of defending the Bible in the court of public opinion, and Paine's response provided the prosecution a chance to cross-examine the witnesses and question the evidence. On his side, Erskine had chided Paine for his "shocking and insulting invective," which not only mocks the Bible, but by association, "brands with absurdity and folly the state which sanctions, and the obedient tools who cherish, the delusion."⁴ Unrepentant, Paine responded with more of the same.

As he had done in *The Age of Reason*, in his "Letter to Mr. Erskine," Paine targets "tyranny in religion," describes the Bible as an imposition ("first by Jews, and afterwards by priests and commentators"), and then proceeds to shine his suggestive light on the "strange stories...told...in that book." He mentions "Hudibras" in lumping Moses in with other "world-makers," and frames his assertion of multiple accounts informing the Creation story (a mainstay of higher biblical criticism) by describing "the story of the talking serpent and its tête-a-tête with Eve; the doleful adventure called the *Fall of Man*; and how he was turned out of this fine garden, and how the garden was afterwards locked up and guarded by a flaming sword (if any one can tell what a flaming sword is)." Throughout, he describes the evidence in such a way as to prejudice his readers to agree with his verdict: "that the Bible is *fabulous*," the same word he had used in his subtitle to *The Age of Reason*.⁵

By "fabulous" Paine meant "that which is related to fables": the legendary, mythic, and patently unhistorical. The book's learned expositors would not have agreed with him of course, but even the need of such byzantine interpretation from so many "guess-work commentators" was cause to suspect the book's fabrication in the first place. As he said elsewhere, "It is its defects that have caused such a number and variety of tinkers to be hammering at it, and still it goes wrong." Paine thereby turns the Bible's defense into evidence for the prosecution: anything requiring such convoluted justification fails

⁴ *Christianity Vindicated, in the Admirable Speech of the Hon. Tho. Erskine, in the Trial of J. Williams, for Publishing Paine's "Age of Reason," 24th June, 1797*, from the twelfth London edition (Philadelphia: J. Carey, 1797), 6, 7.

⁵ Thomas Paine, "A Letter to Mr. Erskine," in *Writings*, 4:211, 223, 212, 215.

the test of common sense. Furthermore, by calling attention to the “tinkering” of others, he could drown out any hammering of his own, as when he twisted the Bible into compromising positions the easier to roast on his common-sense spit. “What! does not the Creator of the Universe...know how to write?” Poor Tom Paine needed “no commentator to explain, compound, derange, and re-arrange” his writings, but the so-called word of God did? The biblical God must be even lower on the ladder of intelligence than Paine had imagined. He thought it fitting that such a flawed supreme being would inspire such a flawed supreme book. “I can write a better book myself.” In *The Age of Reason* he already had.⁶

As in prior writings, Paine frames biblical belief as mere “habit and prejudice” and then tries to shift that prejudice in the direction of his normalizing common sense. He frames the Flood narrative to question the Christian conscience (a tactic he had employed frequently in *The Age of Reason*), and then describes the story’s “blundering condition” to give an easy out to anyone not wanting to be heartless: “It is a relief to the genuine and sensible soul of man to find the story unfounded.” He does the same with the “*Robespierian precept[s]*” manifest in the conquest of Canaan. Appealing first to common-sense morality he then appeals to common-sense intelligence, observing that if you “tell some country squires of the sun and moon standing still, the one on the top of the hill, the other in a valley,...they will swear it is a lie of one’s own making.” So who is the liar: Thomas Paine or Joshua? Adding scatology to increase the fun, he begs the same question of Ezekiel: “Tell them that God Almighty ordered a man to make a cake and bake it with a t—d and eat it, and they will say it is one of Dean Swift’s blackguard stories.” Then comes the joke’s reveal: “Tell them it is in the Bible and they will lay a bowl of punch it is not, and leave it to the parson of the parish to decide.” Better yet, don’t call the parson. With Paine’s help, those same “country squires” could decide for themselves—and then share in the punch together.⁷

Facetiously Paine admits that “there have been, and still are, those, who...affect to turn [the Bible] into ridicule,” but this is only blasphemous if they profess to believe in the book they are mocking. As with

⁶ Ibid., 220, 223, 216, 222; Thomas Paine, “To Mr. Moore” (1804), in *Complete Writings*, 2:812.

⁷ Paine, “A Letter to Mr. Erskine,” in *Writings*, 222, 217, 218, 223, 229.

his earlier redefinition of infidelity as hypocrisy, blasphemy thus undergoes the same semantic shift. The Bible's real ridiculer is the Bible itself—a self-reflective parody with the fool-proof failsafe that it eventually pops its own pretensions. If only it were fool-proof! Why must believers refuse to get the joke? Place the Bible's own stories before “London merchants” and “country squires” and “an appeal to such juries serves to bring the Bible into more ridicule than anything the author of the Age of Reason has written.” The book is witness against itself; its “confused condition would dishonor a common scribbler.” Paine pretends to have had no hand in the matter and innocently walks out of court, casually calling out behind him, “Leave the Bible to itself. God will take care of it if He has anything to do with it.”⁸

A second polemic was written in response to Bishop Watson's *Apology*, the centerpiece of what Paine hoped would eventually appear as *The Age of Reason* part three. Considered unprintable during Paine's lifetime, those parts that were not lost through what Moncure Conway called the “pious destructiveness” of their caretaker finally appeared in New York's deistical magazine *The Theophilanthropist* in 1810, allowing its author to keep laughing from the grave. In these extracts from “A Reply to the Bishop of Llandaff,” Paine seems less interested in planting seeds than harvesting fruit, so rather than mocking the Eden account and letting shame convince readers to reject it, he shames believers more directly: “What man can be stupid enough to believe that God, acting the part of a gardener, had planted a garden in the east, that the tree of life was a real tree, and that its fruit had the virtue of making those who eat of it live for ever?”⁹

Turning directly to his staid opponent, Paine's letter is remarkably lacking in humorous content, finally preferring reason to ridicule (recall he had expressed respect for Watson's measured tone). But far from disproving Paine's reliance on ridicule, it suggests that when writing for the public, Paine indulged in humor by design. Here, when he points out the absence of a Jewish cosmogony, he dispassionately observes that “it would, either as fact or fable, have been the grandest of all subjects for

⁸ Ibid., 223, 228–29, 230.

⁹ Thomas Paine, Excerpts from “An Answer to the Bishop of Llandaff,” in *Writings*, 4:258, 264.

a psalm,” but then he added, with a hint of sarcasm, “It would have suited to a tittle the ranting poetical genius of Isaiah, or served as a cordial to the gloomy Jeremiah.” Later, revisiting his common argument that the Bible is being facetious with its readers, he complains that the book describes its God “in such a contradictory manner,” that “there would be no knowing when He was in earnest and when in irony,” a fitting description of Paine himself. For the Bible, of course, Paine preferred irony, as it gave a comic, self-defeating twist to its history of debauchery and violence: like those outraged by Swift’s “Modest Proposal,” the ancient Israelites (like modern Christians) were supposed to be shocked into decency, but they had been too obtuse to get the joke. In closing the reply, Paine vents his humor more than earlier, making a crack about Adam’s “leather breeches” and Eve’s “petticoat,” taking a last anti-biblical swipe by calling it “this pretended Word of God, this manufactured book called *Revealed Religion*,” and ending with an undisguised declaration of which Hume would be proud: “all the tales of miracles, with which the Old and New Testament are filled, are fit only for impostors to preach and fools to believe.” By responding to the first group Paine hoped to rescue the second.¹⁰

THE PROSPECT PAPERS

Considering the avalanche of responses to *The Age of Reason* and the heaps of scorn piled on by a derogatory press, other than the above, Paine did very little to counter his critics. Either he thought that by responding to the most notable among them (Erskine and Watson) he was answering his lesser antagonists as well, or as is more likely, his unwillingness to answer them served to prove his common sense persona. Why persist in fighting something that never merited the initial bout? If arguments were unnecessary in the first place, then countering their counterarguments was piling folly upon folly—and Paine could do that without them. Either way, as Paine had said in an earlier conflict, “I am perfectly unconcerned at the mean and snarling ingratitude of little incendiaries.” Even this slight was an insinuation. Paine’s critics were worse than irredeemable; they were ungrateful. In their littleness of

¹⁰ Ibid., 4:266, 275, 288, 289.

mind, they failed to recognize that Paine had done them a favor, using the lightest touch (humor) to help them recover their common sense.¹¹

His critics all but ignored, Paine returns to his usual audience and his trademark rhetoric of ridicule in the so-called “Prospect Papers,” seventeen essays he wrote for *The Prospect, or View of the Moral World*, published by his friend and fellow deist Elihu Palmer, with whom Paine founded New York’s Theistic Society in 1804. But where his earlier humor often functioned as a question mark, expanding doubt by inducing people to question their belief in the Bible, by the end of his life he used it primarily as an exclamation point, confirming doubt by punctuating anti-biblical points he had just raised more directly. In the first essay, for example, he dismisses the Christian doctrine of redemption by putting it in the baldest of terms so that common sense could pass judgment reflexively: “That man should redeem himself from the sin of eating an apple by committing a murder on Jesus Christ, is the strangest system of religion ever set up.” Just in case one was tempted to nuance words like “apple” and “murder,” Paine further reduces the concept to the absurd. What would have happened if “all Jerusalem had been Quakers when Christ lived?” With their aversion to violence, they (and all humanity with them) would have been “damned because they were too good to commit murder.” Put in those terms, Paine’s conclusion seems natural: “The Christian system of religion is an outrage on common sense.” A pinch of shame comes next (“Why is man afraid to think?”) and then a final punchline that trades his earlier joke for its opposite. If Quakers are peaceable fiends for sparing Jesus, Judas and Pilate are accidental saviors for slaying him. As supporting actors in the so-called divine drama, “Judas and Pontius Pilate ought to stand first on the calendar of saints.”¹²

Paine’s scornful laughter reverberates throughout these articles. He paints Samson and Solomon as fools in one and mocks the Tower of Babel in another. He describes the canonization process as going

¹¹ Paine, “Letters to Rhode Island,” in *Complete Writings*, 2:366.

¹² Thomas Paine, “Remarks on R. Hall’s Sermon,” *The Prospect*, February 18, 1804; in *Writings*, 4:308; On Palmer (including his connections to Paine), see Kirsten Fischer, *American Freethinker: Elihu Palmer and the Struggle for Religious Freedom in the New Nation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

through “loads of rubbish” and voting on what junk to keep. After explaining an anachronism that casts doubt on “the absurd story of Noah’s flood,” he dramatizes the absurdity by plying a low pun of his own: when one man asks another “in a drawling tone of voice, ‘Do you believe the account about No-ah?’ the other replies in the same drawl, *ah-no*.” The way Paine presents its stories, the Bible turns “the Almighty [into] a passionate, whimsical Being, continually changing his mind, making and unmaking his own works as if he did not know what he was about.” Who could believe in a God like that? Singling out Micaiah’s story of the Lord putting a lying spirit in the mouths of the prophets, Paine applies that method to the whole: “a lying spirit has been in the mouth of the writers of the books of the Bible.”¹³

Beyond biblical figures and the biblical God, in his Prospect Papers Paine takes aim at larger theological game, impishly tripping up the Fall, crucifying the Resurrection, and comparing the effects of the Atonement to a careless father underwriting the bad habits of his spendthrift son—recasting Christ as an enabler instead of a redeemer to every prodigal son. He minimizes the death of Christ by emphasizing just how brief an interval passed between crown of thorns and empty tomb—so short that “dying” hardly seems a fitting term. This is “rather making fun of death than suffering it,” which turns the Passion into a parody. If our flight through the underworld were this quick, we would consider it “a voyage of curious amusement,” so why take the Bible’s story so seriously? In a later essay, Paine crosses Trinitarianism with the Crucifixion to reduce Christian soteriology to a single head-scratching sentence: “God put *himself to death to satisfy himself, and be revenged on the Devil on account of Adam*.” Priests and commentators (Paine’s usual suspects) were sure to dress it up differently, but “tell the story which way you will, it comes to this at last.”¹⁴

Most shockingly, Paine sometimes even took shots at Jesus, the deepest well of Christian piety—not to question his moral character, but certainly to poke at the questionable morality of his birth. He had mocked the Virgin Birth already in *The Age of Reason*, but here he is even more bawdy. Of Joseph’s

¹³ Thomas Paine, “The Prospect Papers,” in *Writings*, 4:310, 314, 344, 333, 350, 340, 349–50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:319–21, 335.

dream explaining Mary's pregnancy he notes, "It is not every husband, whether carpenter or priest, that can be so easily satisfied." And of Mary's conception he wonders, "Whether Mary was in a dream when this was done we are not told." Either way, combine the two and you have "a comical story. There is no woman living can understand it." Adding one more wrinkle to the joke, Paine feigns offence that Christianity seems to exalt Jesus over God "by putting a *dream-begotten* phantom which you call his son, over his head, and treating God as if he was superannuated."¹⁵

As these examples suggest, Paine's hermeneutic of exploitation takes advantage of whichever lens best lends itself to comic distortion, narratives mockingly shrunk into insignificance or "swelled with such improbabilities as to render [them] distortedly ridiculous like a mite in a microscope." At times he plays fast and loose with a narrative's details, to avoid contextual particularities that might lessen the joke. At other times he is an unbending literalist, "for the purpose of nailing you down to the text," he says to one minister, "that you may not ramble from it, nor put other constructions upon the words than they will bear, which priests are very apt to do." Either way, Paine remains in control of a text's interpretive possibilities, curtailing his opponents' and expanding his own, all while washing his hands of the subjectivity that he lays at his enemies' feet. They must not "ramble," but he can; he is allowed to put words to "other constructions," but they are not. In *The Age of Reason* he condemned "the studied craft of the scripture-makers, in making every part of this romantic book of school-boy's eloquence bend to the monstrous idea of a Son of God, begotten by a ghost on the body of a virgin," and worried that if they were capable of gulling readers into swallowing that (a stretch only surpassable by making Jonah swallow the whale), then "there is no imposition we are not justified in suspecting them of." In their tortuous expositions of scripture, "every phrase and circumstance are marked with the barbarous hand of superstitious torture, and forced into meanings it was impossible they could have." Their torture of scripture then enabled their torture of men, with victims of the first becoming willing victims of (or accessories to) the second. Paine was adamant that this would not happen again, so he

¹⁵ Ibid., 4:333.

wrested control of the Bible from its traditional captors. Try as they might to expound or elucidate, Paine's frames were presented as the only natural fit. The pronouncement just quoted sums it up best: "tell the story which way you will, it comes to this at last."¹⁶

Again, this capture of the enemy's citadel was largely facilitated by the covert operations of Paine's ridicule. With almost unblinking focus and consummate skill, he makes the Bible his target and dips his arrows in wit. These two elements (his focus and his humor), which seem so ill-fitting as co-conspirators, come together in an interesting comment made in one of his Prospect Papers. Speaking of himself in the third person Paine admits, "though he often enlivens [his writings] with touches of wit and humour, he never loses sight of the real solemnity of his subject." Granted, this statement was meant to excuse his humor, but in fact it helps to explain it. He took his humor seriously, precisely because he knew its potential power against an enemy he took seriously as well. To potential unbelievers he urged, "Begin at the root—begin with the Bible itself," and then trained his ridicule upon it unrelentingly. He hammers away with his adjectives—"obscene and vulgar," "idle and profligate," "foolish, [and] inconsistent," "little and paltry"—and then frames the Bible's stories in ways to make those adjectives stick. Even his nouns are often adjectives in disguise: "prophanation [and] folly," "tricks and shows," "fable and falsehood," "downright blasphemy," modifying the Bible's stories before his readers' eyes. They are the type of stories "any designing impostor or foolish fanatic might make"; they are "too ridiculous, even as a fable"; they "have too much the appearance of romance to be believed for fact." If "priests always take care to keep the inconsistent and contradictory parts out of sight," Paine would correct this oversight. In fact, he would overcorrect it.¹⁷

Banishing reason and begging for belief, the Bible (at least Paine's version of it) treats its readers "as if God had given man reason like a plaything, or a rattle, on purpose to make fun of him." Its tales

¹⁶ Paine, "Another Callender—Thomas Turner of Virginia," in *Complete Writings*, 2:986; Paine, "The Prospect Papers," in *Writings*, 4:332; Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Writings*, 4:131.

¹⁷ Paine, "The Prospect Papers," in *Writings*, 4:342, 340, 306, 311, 314, 316, 332, 349, 319, 327, 315.

are “offensive to a serious mind,” so Paine acts as one of the offended. The way he describes biblical beliefs proves his point about them: by making them “shock our reason,” it naturally follows that “man, if he thinks at all, must stifle his reason in order to force himself to believe them.” He is thus putting ridicule in service to reason, to jolt it into responding to the breaches of its borders. Fables and fantasies have their place, Paine would allow, “But there are times when men have serious thoughts, and it is at such times, when they begin to think, that they begin to doubt the truth of the Christian religion; and well they may, for it is too fanciful and too full of conjecture, inconsistency, improbability, and irrationality to afford consolation to the thoughtful man. His reason revolts against his creed.” Here again we see Paine almost denying the seriousness of humor in order to credit seriousness itself for carrying the day. Repeating the thought he affirms, “It is impossible for the mind of man in its serious moments...not to stand still and doubt” the Bible’s stories, especially, he might have added, if his not-so-serious moments help solidify the thought.¹⁸

DREAMS AND DELUSIONS

When Elihu Palmer was forced to suspend the *Prospect* in 1805 for a scarcity of subscribers and a shortage of funds, Paine found other outlets for his anti-religious writings. One suggested a novel “Origin of Free-Masonry,” and though his tone is surprisingly serious throughout (his “constructive” pieces always seem to lack the rancor and ridicule of his more “deconstructive” ones, suggesting Paine’s ridicule came most naturally when he had something or someone to fight), he does indulge in one anti-Christian dig. Comparing Christianity to the controversial fraternal organization, he places the former beneath the dignity of the latter. Both grew out of pagan Sun worship, he affirms, but at least the Freemasons tacitly admit it. “With them the Sun is still the Sun,” emblazoned upon their lodges and dress as a central symbol. Christians, meanwhile, trip up on the symbolism by forgetting what must have been intended as a comical twist. “The christian religion is a parody on the worship of the Sun, in which

¹⁸ Ibid., 4:320, 314, 316, 321, 318.

they put a man whom they call Christ, in the place of the Sun, and pay him the same adoration.”

Elsewhere he called “the fable of Christ and his twelve apostles” a “parody on the sun and the twelve signs of the zodiac,” and once sent a Christmas letter to Thomas Jefferson in which he sent congratulations “on *The Birthday of the New Sun*, now called Christmas Day.” In Paine’s suggestive retelling, early Christians had set out to mock the belief of the Sun *as* God with a ridiculous story of the Son *of* God; unfortunately, posterity took it literally and ended up worshiping what they should have been laughing at instead. As with the story of Jonah, Paine reframes scripture as satire, conviction as comedy, and believers as simpletons who never get the joke.¹⁹

Another was a brief “Essay on Dream,” in which he could revive his vein for ridicule since it was biblical dreaming he wanted to mock. In the essay, he compares the dormancy of one’s rational judgment while dreaming to the absence of a headmaster at school—“the boys are in an uproar.” While sleeping, one’s faculties run “wild,” warping judgment and “counterfeiting memory,” leaving “every person...mad once in twenty-four hours.” Safely confined to slumber, dreams are innocuous, but if allowed to control our waking hours, we would soon “be confined for a lunatic,” unable to separate somnolent fictions from wide-awake facts. Freud, with his description of “dream-work,” would be at home with Paine’s next two steps, for he too links it to “wit-work,” and then puts them both to doubt-work. “How absurd it is to place reliance upon dreams,” Paine states, almost innocently. It is the second half of the sentence that is more barbed: “and how much more absurd to make them a foundation for religion.” Citing the Bible’s “childish stories” of Joseph’s dreams about Mary’s pregnancy and Jesus’ semi-nomadic childhood, Paine concludes that Christianity “stands on the foolish story of an old man’s dream.” Bad enough for Joseph to live as if he were sleep-walking; unfortunately, “this story of dreams has thrown Europe into a dream for more than a thousand years.”²⁰

¹⁹ Thomas Paine, “Origin of Free-Masonry,” in *Writings*, 4:293; Thomas Paine to Andrew Dean, August 15, 1806, in *Complete Writings*, 2:1484; Thomas Paine to Thomas Jefferson, December 25, 1802; in *Complete Writings*, 2:1432.

²⁰ Thomas Paine, “An Essay on Dream,” in *Writings*, 4:362–64. The essay was published in full in Paris in 1803; it appeared in the United States in its shorter, safer, edited form in 1807, as an introductory chapter to his “Examination of the Prophecies.”

American readers would have been shocked enough to read Paine's conclusion, but the French who read the uncensored version had much more to laugh at. What Americans were missing (roughly a third of the piece) went from dreams to delusions, mocking the Holy Ghost and the biblical God, but especially having fun with biblical angels. "These winged gentlemen" are conspicuously absent for the earth's first two thousand years, but by Abraham's day, "they hop about as thick as birds in a grove." Extending the metaphor, he wonders what these "birds of passage" do with the food they eat on earth. The Bible tells of them eating but is silent about the rest. So Paine, ever the conscientious expositor, satisfies the curious by filling in the blanks. Leaving some of the scatology to his readers' imagination he wonders, "Perhaps they do as the birds do, discharge it as they fly; for neither the scripture nor the church hath told us there are necessary houses for them in heaven."²¹

Having reduced angels to absurdity, Paine then reduces God to immorality, again skewering the Bible on the twin pikes of common sense and conscience. Paine turns the Old Testament God into a Jewish Mars or Hercules, but then drags him down from Olympus to make him a lowly "rat-catcher" drowning Egyptians in the Red Sea. Backtracking to take in the plagues, Paine turns it into a contest of deities: tied after three rounds, but Jehovah "obtain[ing] the laurel" in the fourth. When the Egyptian magicians fail to match the plague of lice, Paine puns, God rejoices in his "lousy triumph." Still not done, Paine describes the biblical God as "the Pluto of the lower regions," as a cook "salt[ing] up Lot's wife like pickled pork," and as a mischievous fairy "pass[ing] like Shakespeare's Queen Mab into the brain of their priests, prophets, and prophetesses," to "tickle them into dreams" and to "play all kinds of tricks" on them. Worst of all, it is not Paine forcing God into these ridiculous poses (so he says); it is the writers of the Bible. This was Paine's point all along. As he says clearly amid the ridicule, "This is [the] trash that the church imposes upon the world as the WORD OF GOD; this is the collection of lies and contradictions called the HOLY BIBLE! this is the rubbish called REVEALED RELIGION!" "The story of Jack the giant-killer is better told!" Having "*put to shame the Bible*" in the way he described it, Paine was sure to shame its believers

²¹ Ibid., 4:365.

along the way. “One would think that a system loaded with such gross and vulgar absurdities as Scripture religion is could never have obtained credit; yet we have seen what priestcraft and fanaticism could do, and credulity believe.” Sacred only to the insane or insensitive, “how paltry must the tales of the Old and New Testaments, prophanelly called the word of God, appear to thoughtful man!”²²

EXAMINING THE PROPHECIES

Paine continued leveraging the nonrationality of dreams in his last-published major writing, an extended “Examination of the Prophecies,” which appeared in New York in 1807. Having already taken his axe to the three main roots of Christianity’s rational epistemology—miracles, mystery, and prophecy—in the first part of *The Age of Reason*, here he picks up the blunted blade, sharpens it with an even keener edge of wit than before, and continues hacking at the peskiest of the three: Old Testament prophecies that find their fulfillment in the New Testament Christ. In *The Age of Reason* he had compared prophecy and fulfillment to “old locks and picklock keys” and now he was ready to dismantle them one by one. For nearly eighteen hundred years (starting at least with the writing of the Book of Matthew, who calls attention to fulfilled prophecy as often as occasion permits), Christians had been drawing spiritual strength from—Paine calls it being “amused by”—the fact that they could find their Savior prefigured in the words of ancient prophets. But fact to them was fable to Paine, and in this essay he set out to prove it. Though “thousands of sermons have been preached, and volumes written, to make man believe it,” Paine felt he could laugh them out of that belief in a single essay. So one by one, as he had done with the books of the Bible in the second part of *The Age of Reason*, he examined “all the passages in the New-Testament, quoted from the Old, and called prophecies concerning Jesus Christ.” To help his readers see the end from the beginning, he announces his conclusion from the start: “I find no such thing as a prophecy of any such person, and I deny there are any.”²³

²² Ibid., 4:365–66.

²³ Thomas Paine, “An Examination of the Prophecies concerning Jesus Christ,” in *Writings*, 4:357.

So far, so straightforward. He continues in this rational vein for the rest of the preface, grounding so-called prophecies of the Christian future in events of the Jewish past, promising to limit himself to the biblical text alone, and lamenting that “the prejudice of unfounded belief, often degenerates into the prejudice of custom, and becomes at last rank hypocrisy,” the final result of being caught in the mental spider’s web. Paine blames this hypocrisy for all the “trick and deceit” of those “professors and pretenders to religion” who have “unship[ped] the helm of their morality” and can thus deal unjustly with others. True to form, Paine sees the injustices of his day, roots them in a hypocritical religious authoritarianism, and traces that back to an uninformed biblical belief. Concluding his preface, he affirms that the “motive and object” of his political works was to “give man an elevated sense of his own character, and free him from the slavish and superstitious absurdity of monarchy and hereditary government,” and that his religious works pursued similar ends, leaving man “unshackled by the fables of books pretending to be *the word of God*.” From there he proceeds to the Bible, using reason to argue it is false, and using ridicule to imply it is fabulous. It would be up to his readers to decide if they agreed with him, and up to us to determine, if they did, how much his ridicule would be the reason why.²⁴

Paine begins with Joseph’s dream, the centerpiece of his earlier essay. Casting the same doubt as before, he describes dreams as a “wonderful and irrational” mental faculty, a nightly farce in which the dreamer himself gets to play every part. But no reality is present, only “what the roving rapidity of his own imagination invents.” Joseph’s dreams, “whether of the fidelity or infidelity of his wife,” thus meant nothing to Paine. “I pay no regard to my own dreams, and I should be weak indeed to put faith in the dreams of another.” But Matthew the Evangelist was just such a gullible weakling, for he cited Isaiah’s words about a virgin conceiving and thought they were pointing ahead. Paine does an admirable job of rooting Isaiah’s words in their original context, and disallows their application at any other time, all while remaining relatively objective. But in dismantling the second prophecy (that of the Messiah being born in Bethlehem), he gives in to his wit, though in a way to deny it. Speaking apophatically

²⁴ Ibid., 4:357–59.

(rhetoric's "plausible deniability"), Paine interrupts his rational explanation to say, "I pass over the absurdity of [the wise men] seeing and following a star in the day time, as a man would a *will-o'-the-wisp*, or a candle and lantern at night; and also that of seeing it in the East, when themselves came from the East; for could such a thing be seen at all to serve them for a guide, it must be in the West to them." No, Paine would not mention any of that extraneous material (at least not without framing it in the least rational way). He would "confine [him]self solely to the passage called a prophecy of Jesus Christ."²⁵

Having succumbed to temptation already, from this point not even apophasis could hold back Paine's laughter. In almost every "explanation" he tends to follow a repeating pattern. When explaining how a purported prophecy was nonprophetic, he focuses on the historical context of the Old Testament text to show its immediate applicability and confine it to that time ("All this is historical, and not in the least prophetic," he says of one). There is no hint of allowance for symbolism, dual fulfillments, or the like. All of this, for the most part, is purely rational. But in framing his argument, he often bookends it with ridicule, setting it up with one jibe and then ending it with another. The mind is thus primed to not take the supposed prophecy seriously, and then confirmed in that first impression with a laugh that lingers at the end. At the leading edge, Paine introduces one prophecy with the observation that it is a story "scarcely believed by any body," a second by calling exorcism "the fable of the day," a third declaring it "a most barefaced piece of imposition," a fourth saying "there is no making either head or tail of this incoherent gibberish," and a fifth by quoting Jonathan Swift (whom he cites again later as one of his period's "Freethinkers") and concluding that the story "need[s] only to be seen in order to be hooted as a forced and far-fetched piece of imposition." On the trailing edge, most of Paine's "last laughs" are followed with an "I pass on to the [next]" even before the paragraph ends, not giving the reader a chance to stop and think. Paine is conditioning his readers to approach the text in the same way that he is, but subtly enough that they think that common sense reasoning is informing their thoughts.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid., 4:369–70, 373.

²⁶ Ibid., 4:378, 374, 380, 389, 392, 377.

Ending his discussion of one prophecy, for example, he declares that “Matthew has falsified the text,” keeping some words and deleting others, which is precisely what Paine did often in *The Age of Reason*, the better to make his chosen passages appear ridiculous. In fact, his accusation against Matthew was the complaint of many of his own detractors: “leav[ing] out everything that makes the verse intelligible, and reduc[ing] it to a senseless skeleton.” Paine compares this prejudicial editing to butchering an animal or gutting a fish, complaining, “What gross imposition is it to gut, as the phrase is, a verse in this manner, render it perfectly senseless, and then puff it off on a credulous world as a prophecy.” But before his critics could cry *Hypocrisy!* he “proceed[s] to the next verse.” In another instance, he claims to have “rescue[d Isaiah] from the claws of Matthew, who has torn him unmercifully to pieces” (another instance of gutting). He had just explained to his readers what a supposedly prophetic passage in Isaiah had meant, necessary since “Isaiah is, upon the whole, a wild, disorderly writer, preserving in general no clear chain of perception in the arrangement of his ideas, and consequently producing no defined conclusions from them.” But Paine had a defined conclusion, and in offering it, he had rescued Isaiah, all “by letting Isaiah speak for himself.” Here again Paine denies any involvement, even while admitting that his involvement was required.²⁷

Paine forces these passages into the comic frame in other ways as well. In the absence of every detail, Paine is sure to foreclose rational explanations in the Bible’s favor to suggest irrational ones that cast shadows of doubt. For example, when “pass[ing] on to the fifth passage called a prophecy” (without even taking a breath after crying, “Good heavens! How has the world been imposed upon by testament-makers, priestcraft, and pretended prophecies.”), he introduces it by reporting that “Joseph dreamed another dream, and dreamed of another angel. And Matthew is again the historian of the dream and the dreamer.” He then adds, “If it were asked how Matthew could know what Joseph dreamed, neither the Bishop nor all the Church could answer the question.” While that may be true if one is slavishly confined to the text and disallows anything to happen not explicitly mentioned there (the opposite of

²⁷ Ibid., 4:378, 379.

what he had done in suggesting angelic defecation in his “Essay on Dreams”), chances are that a common reader would not need to ask the Bishop how Matthew learned of Joseph’s dream; like any reporter or historian, he could have heard it from any of the parties involved. But Paine disallows this possibility. In *The Age of Reason* he had already dismissed all second-hand knowledge by branding it mere “hearsay,” so here Matthew’s knowledge would have to come from direct experience, closer even than hearing it from Joseph himself. “Perhaps,” Paine plants the comic thought, “it was Matthew that dreamed, and not Joseph,” and then intensifying the humor, “that is, Joseph dreamed by proxy, in Matthew’s brain, as they tell us Daniel dreamed for Nebuchadnezzar.” Of course, that is not exactly what the Book of Daniel says, but Paine gave his readers no pause to consider that. “But be this as it may,” he hurriedly continues, “I go on with my subject.”²⁸

Some quips needed no introduction, and could be inserted wherever Paine needed to break up an argument or punctuate a point. He puns at one point, “I wonder Matthew has not made the cris-cross-row [the alphabet], or the christ-cross-row (I know not how the priests spell it) into a prophecy.” Elsewhere he jokes that prophecy suggests that the ancients “were never thinking about their own affairs, nor the fate of their own friends, but were continually running a Wild-Goose chase into futurity.” Later he asserts that prophecy and fulfillment “are as remote from each other, as nothing from something.” The only reason people connect them is because they “have been so long in the habit of reading the books called the Bible and Testament with their eyes shut, and their senses locked up, that the most stupid inconsistencies have passed on them for truth, and imposition for prophecy.” When Matthew quotes the verse from Zechariah about the King “sitting upon an ass,” Paine interjects, “Poor ass! let it be some consolation amidst all thy sufferings, that if the heathen world erected a Bear into a constellation, the christian world has elevated thee into a prophecy.” Then again, even this unsuspecting animal endured the humiliation of a forced conversion: “Even the poor ass must not be a Jew-ass but a Christian-ass. I wonder they did not make an apostle of him, or a bishop [perhaps an allusion to Caligula supposedly

²⁸ Ibid., 4:376.

appointing his horse as a consul], or at least make him speak and prophesy [an allusion to the biblical story of Balaam's ass, which spoke]. He could have lifted up his voice as loud as any of them.”²⁹

Paine is particularly fond of this passage, as it provides him an abundance of grist for his mill. He blames Zechariah, of course, for “indulg[ing] himself in several whims,” even while he is the one being indulgent. Interjecting comic commentary within the verse itself, a trespass he never committed openly in *The Age of Reason*, he intrudes repeatedly, leaving laughter behind him with each sudden appearance. This describes his overall approach to biblical criticism perfectly: darting in and out of one's scriptural consciousness, laughing away seriousness and reinserting doubt or shame, quickly to disappear behind the next passage in hopes of not getting caught in the act. One's “reason” thus sits placidly on the throne, pretending not to have seen the jester making donkey ears behind the crown. In this passage, with Paine doing so much interrupting, I will avoid adding a third voice to the mix (the bracketed insertions thus all belong to Paine). Heeding the advice of John Quincy Adams, here we will take Paine's rhetoric and simply experience it:

Zechariah, in the first chapter of his book, indulges himself in several whims on the joy of getting back to Jerusalem. He says at the 8th verse, “I saw by night [Zechariah was a sharp-sighted seer] and behold a man setting on a *red horse* [yes, reader, a *red horse*], and he stood among the myrtle trees that were in the bottom, and behind him were *red horses, speckled and white*.” He says nothing about green horses, nor blue horses, perhaps because it is difficult to distinguish green from blue by night, but a christian can have no doubt they were there, because “*faith is the evidence of things not seen*.”

Zechariah then introduces an angel among his horses, but he does not tell us what colour the angel was of, whether black or white, nor whether he came to buy horses, or only to look at them as curiosities, for certainly they were of that kind. Be this however as it may, he enters into conversation with this angel on the joyful affair of getting back to Jerusalem...

Just in case Paine's humor here was insufficient, when recounting the same story in the Mark account, he turns Jesus into something of a cowboy, since Mark suggests that “the ass had not been broken.” It must have been “*inspired into good manners*” then, since “we do not hear that he kicked Jesus Christ

²⁹ Ibid., 4:377, 381, 383, 386.

off.” He may have kicked “all the four Evangelists,” Paine quips, but since he has no proof, he “pass[es] on from these feats of *horsemanship* performed upon a Jack-ass” and proceeds to his next example.³⁰

Throughout this examination, begun so rationally and pursued in “language full and intelligible,” Paine makes sure his audience is not missing his point. He wants to be clear since he “deal[s] not in hints and intimations,” all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. “Ah, reader,” he addresses them directly, “if thou trustest to the book called the scriptures thou trustest to the rotten staff of fable and falsehood.” In his studied opinion, the whole constitutes “what in vulgar life is called a *thumper*; that is, not only a lie, but a lie beyond the line of possibility.” Common sense is thus all one needs to reject it, and even to reject the possibility of a historical Jesus along with it—“he is merely an imaginary or allegorical character, as Apollo, Hercules, Jupiter, and all the deities of antiquity were.” Paine expresses his disbelief that “there is one word of historical truth in the whole book. I look upon it at best to be a romance,” and based on Paine’s manipulative framing, his readers probably do too. Their shared conclusion? “The moral is in many parts good, and the narrative part very badly and blunderingly written.” Best to hold onto morality (as deists did) and leave the Bible behind. As a parting shot, Paine suggests one other test for the Bible, since it failed the test of prophecy. Turning to Bishop Watson and quoting Jesus’ promise that if true believers “drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them,” Paine suggests that the good Bishop test his “saving and wonder-working faith” and “try those things upon himself. He should take a good dose of arsenick, and if he please, I will send him a rattle-snake from America.” As for Thomas Paine himself, “I believe in God and not at all in Jesus Christ, nor in the books called the scriptures, [so] the experiment does not concern me.”³¹

Other than a brief piece picking apart predestination, which was likely the last thing Paine wrote before his death, this “Examination of the Prophecies” was Paine’s last major contribution in the field of anti-religious rhetoric. Of course, his continual ridicule even in that last gasp polemic proves that he

³⁰ Ibid., 4:386–87, 396–97.

³¹ Ibid., 4:406, 390, 403, 388, 397–98.

maintained the gift of mockery until the grave. A fitting reflection on all he wrote before, Paine dismisses a biblical passage as “presumption and nonsense,” laughs at Paul for “get[ting] himself into what in vulgar life is called a hobble,” and then accuses him of “get[ting] out of it by nonsense and sophistry,” namely, by “putting nonsense in the place of argument,” which is what critic after critic accused Paine of doing in *The Age of Reason*. Near the end, however, Paine gives us what might be his justification for doing so. After railing one last time against the “stupid passages in the Bible, which priestcraft at first, and ignorance since, have imposed upon mankind as revelation,” he makes this cogent declaration: “Nonsense ought to be treated as nonsense wherever it be found; and had this been done in the rational manner it ought to be done, instead of intimating and mincing the matter, as has been too much the case, the nonsense and false doctrine of the Bible, with all the aid that priestcraft can give, could never have stood their ground against the divine reason that God has given to man.”³²

This statement might encapsulate Paine’s rhetoric of ridicule best, fitting, since it was the last explanation he gave for his efforts. As Paine saw it, reason, not revelation, was God’s greatest gift to humanity. So-called revelation, in fact, had been wielded by a selfish and hireling clergy to keep those who would listen to them (and revelation commanded that they should) from using their God-given reason, thereby forging their own mental (and thence political) chains. Some had tried to break those chains in the past, but lacking the means or the mettle, it was left to Thomas Paine to reenthroned Reason in the right and rational way. Ironically, that rational way was by ridiculing whatever opposed Reason’s reign. As one of Paine’s contemporaries, Scottish Realist and rhetorician George Campbell wisely observed, “Those dogmas [that] are beyond the reach of cool reasoning”—and “dogmas” implicate religion from the start—“are within the rightful confines of ridicule.” “Rightful” suggests the appropriateness of ridicule in such circumstances, making it reason’s accessory rather than its opposite. This is exactly what Campbell believed (as did Reid, Hutcheson, Shaftesbury and all those who

³² Thomas Paine, “Predestination,” 4:424–27.

embraced their philosophy). Campbell himself said it most clearly: “When any thing nonsensical is to be assailed by ridicule, the natural ally of reason is wit”³³

With this final piece of wit-allied reasoning in print, Thomas Paine lowered his pen, and sometime later, on June 8, 1809, the “Apostle of Freedom” as some called him, or the “Apostle of Beelzebub” as others preferred, was lowered into the ground before a pitifully small gathering of onlookers. Even in his last will and testament, Paine had distinguished between the rational God of Creation, whom he praised, and the irrational God of biblical invention, whom he rejected. But this distinction was lost on most of his detractors. For them, his life was over, and hopefully his influence. His followers, meanwhile, had other plans. In taking his “final leave...of the world,” he had avowed, “I have lived an honest and useful life to mankind,” and fellow skeptics were determined to see that his usefulness outlived him.³⁴

LAST LAUGHS

Before ending this chapter, however, a few last laughs may be in order, echoes from Paine’s ill-tended grave. Old friends from his Headstrong Club days laughed at his poetry, smiling at the subtle anti-establishment hints in the hanging of Farmer Short’s dog. Near the end of his life, when subtlety no longer restrained him, Paine rekindled that poetic flame, and used it to burn more Bible stories in effigy. To all the anti-religious ridicule we have studied, then, we can add some comic vituperation in verse.

One of these mock-epic poems he called “The Strange Story of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram,” in which “*Numbers, chap. xvi.*, [is] *accounted for*,” though not in the way the clergy would have wanted. To them, the story of the earth opening and swallowing up those who had rebelled against Moses was a cautionary tale warning against apostasy and opposition to God’s chosen servants. But in Paine’s retelling, the roles were reversed, with the titular figures not apostates but patriots, fighting for equal representation

³³ Campbell, *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 30, 34.

³⁴ “The Will of Thomas Paine,” in *Writings*, 4:508–09.

in Israel through an overthrow of unwanted authority. One cannot help but see in this the same kind of perceptual reframing Paine employed in *Common Sense*: Americans not as rebels but as freedom fighters, George III not as aggrieved sovereign but as unjust tyrant; the war not as treason but as glorious revolution. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram might as well have been Washington, Jefferson, and Paine.

Beginning the poem with a nod to the popular Ballad of Chevy Chase (itself a tale of needless slaughter), after which its meter and rhyme scheme are based, Paine alters the story into something more suggestive of the unjust taxation that gave rise to the American Revolution. According to the poem,

‘T was all about old Aaron’s tythes
This murdering quarrel rose;
For tythes are worldly things of old,
That led from words to blows.

Though the Biblical account makes no mention of tithes, Paine pretends the account came from a well-informed source (“a Jew of Venice”), and proceeds to tell of “a widow old and poor” whose flock consisted of “one single sheep.” This is an allusion to yet another biblical story of the violent enforcement of kingly greed: the “Parable of the Ewe Lamb” the prophet Nathan shares with a guilty King David. But here the priest is to blame. Every time the poor widow tries to make use of the lamb to provide for herself, wily “old Aaron” intervenes to enrich himself. When she shears her sheep, Aaron’s “tything man” takes the wool; when the sheep gives birth, he confiscates the lamb; when she kills the sheep in hungry desperation, a limb is taxed for Aaron; and when she finally gives up in sorrow, Aaron takes the rest. In every instance, no matter how she tries to make use of her lamb, the widow is the one who gets fleeced.³⁵

In the poem, it is to avenge the poor widow that “the tribes of Israel rose, / And all the widows, young and old, / Pull’d Aaron by the nose.” But as Paine makes clear, the story itself is pulling its

³⁵ Thomas Paine, “The Strange Story of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram,” in *Writings*, 4:494–96. With this poem no doubt its inspiration, Moncure Conway (see *Writings*, 4:97n) mentioned “an elegant pocket edition of Paine’s Theological Works” published in London in 1822 that included on the title page “a picture of Paine, as a Moses in evening dress, unfolding the two tables of his ‘Age of Reason’ to a farmer from whom the Bishop of Llandaff... has taken a sheaf and a lamb which he is carrying to a church at the summit of a well-stocked hill.” A cartoon to illustrate Paine’s cartooning!.

readers by the leg—the story in the Bible, that is, not the story Paine has made of it. For in addition to condemning the English Crown for fleecing the colonies unfairly, he mocks the Bible for its attempt to pull the wool over its readers’ eyes. In the poem’s abrupt final stanza,

...Aaron called an earthquake up,
And fire from out the sky;
And all the consolation is—
The Bible tells a lie.

In an unexpected twist, Paine reduces the outrage the poem has been building by suddenly reducing the story itself to the absurd, exploding the story’s gravity in a burst of the lighthearted laughter of relief. Of itself, this is an exemplary case of Kant’s definition of laughter as “an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing,” but in the poem’s case it is the Bible whose nothingness is suggested. As Paine frames the matter, the Bible is a case of two wrongs making a right—its violence cancelled out by its dishonesty. Were the Bible to be taken seriously, such a story as this would be seriously troubling, but since “the Bible tells a lie,” this tale can be dismissed as easily as the book that contains it. Believers are thus caught in a double bind: accept the Bible as factual and admit its immorality, or reject its immorality and admit it could not have come from God.³⁶

In “The Strange Story of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram,” it is the poem’s last couplet that turns tragedy into comedy, which is ever the purpose of Paine’s anti-biblical ridicule, since turning the Bible’s tragedies into comedies turns a comedic Bible into a tragedy of misplaced belief. Another anti-biblical poem, “Star in the East,” is comedy from beginning to end. Though Conway confesses that the authorship is uncertain, he admits that it “has long been published as Paine’s,” and Philip Foner includes it in his compilation as authentic Thomas Paine. Retelling part of the Nativity story, one of Christianity’s most cherished New Testament narratives, the poem presents a “Commentary on the Eastern Wise Men” that frames the whole story as farce, its humor heightened by a sing-song meter and jauntily rolling rhymes.³⁷

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4:494–96; Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 223.

³⁷ *Writings*, 4:498.

Unlike the version in the Book of Matthew, or as Paine described it, “the tale the apostles told / Of wise men and their gifts of gold,” these were not “wise men” with gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but “pedlars” with “buckles, buttons, spectacles, / And every thing a merchant sells.” And this was but the beginning of Paine’s bathos. The Star of Bethlehem was no heavenly wonder; “It was no other than a sign / To a public house where pedlars dine, / In East Street, Bethlehem.” The innkeeper did not speak of Mary and Joseph and a heaven-sent baby, but said instead, “Why, there’s one Joseph and a wench, / Who are to go before the bench / About a love affair.” Unperturbed by this alleged immorality, the pedlars come to “pay their birthday compliment,” and here the story ends:

“They then unpack’d their pack of toys,
Some were for show and some for noise,
 But mostly for the latter;
One gave a rattle, one a whistle,
And one a trumpet made of gristle,
 To introduce the matter:

One squeaked away, the other blew,
The third played on the rattle too,
 To keep the bantling easy;
And hence this story comes to us,
Of which some people make such fuss,
 About the Eastern Magi.”

Feigning sobriety, Paine avows that his is the authentic account. The traditional version and all its “fuss” arose because “commentators have mistook, / In paraphrasing on a book / They did not understand.”³⁸

All anti-religious ridicule aside (well, almost all, since he sneaks in a subtle dig at the story of Elijah being caught up to heaven), perhaps Paine’s less polemical view of religion appears in a poem he shared with the wife of Joel Barlow. He had written “against the superstition of the Scripture religion” for so long, and Mrs. Barlow facetiously warned him that he was embracing instead “a religion capable

³⁸ Thomas Paine, “Commentary on the Eastern Wise Men,” in *Writings*, 4:496–98.

of more bigotry and enthusiasm, and more dangerous to its votaries” than even that. In the true spirit of *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, he was “making a religion of Love.” Conceding the point, Paine reflected:

“O could we always live and love,
And always be sincere,
I would not wish for heaven above,
My heaven would be here....

Then send no fiery chariot down
To take me off from hence,
But leave me on my heavenly ground—
This prayer is *common-sense*.

Let others choose another plan,
I mean no fault to find;
The true theology of man
Is *happiness of mind*.”³⁹

CONCLUSION

For Thomas Paine, “happiness of mind” included enjoying the pleasures of a convivial social sphere, coexisting peaceably in a society that treated all people as equal and free, and living in accordance with the dictates of reason, the mental equivalent of an ordered universe overseen by a predictable Providence. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of this type of happiness were inalienable rights in defense of which—in fact, in *pursuit* of which—he spent his literary lifetime, writing against the evils of oppressive political and religious regimes. And because those regimes were so entrenched, Paine hammered away at them incessantly, reinforcing major works with a host of lesser writings. In the religious sphere, as this chapter has shown, this meant echoing the invocations of “The Devil’s Prayer Book” (as one critic called *The Age of Reason*) with a rosary of ridicule that for Paine only ended at death. In this respect, *The Age of Reason* was more than a title and even more than a book. It was an announcement, a trumpet blast ushering in a new era. The Bible prophesied repeatedly of “a new heaven

³⁹ Thomas Paine, “Contentment; or, If You Please, Confession,” in *Writings*, 4:492.

and a new earth” (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1), and Paine intended his political writings to bring about the second while his religious writings were calling forth the first.⁴⁰

But the old heaven was not easily uprooted. As Paine said of another enemy, faith too was “like a breast-work of sponge, it has not substance in it to be knocked down. You may fire through it forever, and kill every man behind it, engineer and all, and still the work...will retain [its] figure.” Therefore, believing that every other aspect of religion “connects itself with the books called the Scriptures,” Paine turned his fire on faith’s foundation and lobbed endless volleys at the Bible, heedless of “the clods of mental dirt” being “flung” at him in return. Throughout his many theological writings, Paine sought to replace the Bible of revelation with the Bible of creation, and to replace Faith with Reason as the ultimate gift of God. Despite Christianity’s claims to be the custodian of Truth, it had become instead the inquisitor of Reason, to which Paine gave sanctuary by reclaiming it exclusively on his side. “Why then do you talk of Reason, or refer to it,” he asked a believer, “since your religion has nothing to do with reason, nor reason with that?” What Paine said of reason’s absence in dreams thus applies to his impression of religion in general: “that faculty whose province it is to keep order is in a state of absence.” So reclaim that faculty, Paine urged his readers, as he had done in claiming it for the age. “Make use of the reason [God] endowed thee with, and cast from thee all such fables” as the Bible contains. When Paine was finished, “fable” is all that the Bible would be.⁴¹

In Paine’s final years he pitted a ridiculed Bible against a copyrighted Reason, knowing that in such a comparison, “the books called the Scriptures stand...in more than a doubtful predicament.” With his help the Bible’s “numberless absurd and bagatelle stories” would bear absurdity on their face, and believers would reject “all this ribaldry, blasphemously called the Word of God.” Paine knew that skepticism could be promoted in a number of rhetorical styles, but he was confident that his was the

⁴⁰ Woodward, *Tom Paine: America’s Godfather*, 254.

⁴¹ Paine, “Six Letters to Rhode Island,” in *Complete Writings*, 2:338; Paine, “Worship and Church Bells,” in *Writings*, 4:247; Woodward, *Tom Paine: America’s Godfather*, 5; Thomas Paine, “To John Mason,” *The Prospect*, August 18, 1804, in *Writings*, 4:335; Paine, “An Essay on Dream,” in *Writings*, 4:362; Paine, “Examination of the Prophecies,” in *Writings*, 4:381.

most effective. Congratulating Elihu Palmer on a similarly “strong and clear style,” he observed, “The hinting and intimating manner of writing that was formerly used on subjects of this kind, produced skepticism, but not conviction.” That is, they tore down, but did not build up; they inched people away from faith, but did not propel them forward into freedom. “It is necessary to be bold,” Paine therefore recommended. “Some people can be reasoned into sense, and others must be shocked into it. Say a bold thing that will stagger them, and they will begin to think.” Here “stagger” is the operative term, and it was this shaking of the ground beneath them that Paine’s ridicule intended. For centuries the Bible had been held only “in a sort of credit among the common class of people,” and that “by art, terror, and persecution.” So Paine turned the tables, destroying the Bible’s common-man credit through the art of invective, the terror of derision, and the persecution of his comically contemptuous pen.⁴²

⁴² Paine, “Worship and Church Bells,” in *Writings*, 4:250; Paine, “Examination of the Prophecies,” in *Writings*, 4:412–13; Thomas Paine to Elihu Palmer, February 21, 1802; in *Complete Writings*, 2:1426.

CONCLUSION

THE PLACE OF PAINE

By the time a bewildered Rip Van Winkle came down from the mountain and returned to his “strange and incomprehensible” home, one wonders what he would have heard about Thomas Paine. Depending on how long ago the sign bearing King George’s face has been repainted to honor General Washington, there could have been two distinct descriptions of Paine floating around the crowd outside the renamed Union Hotel. If Rip had fallen asleep in the early 1770s and had awakened twenty years later, the villagers’ talk about the “rights of citizens” and the “heroes of seventy-six” would no doubt have included praise for the patriot pen that inscribed the unanswerable *Common Sense*. But if his twenty-year nap ended after 1794, the “Babylonish jargon” he was struggling to make sense of would surely have included some pious vituperation of that devil Tom Paine. By then news of *The Age of Reason* would have found its way “into the regular track of gossip,” with the respectable expressing shock over Paine’s blasphemy, and the village atheist, perhaps in boisterous conversation with old Rip’s layabout son, doing just what the villagers had done when they first heard the old man’s story— “wink[ing] at each other, and put[ting] their tongues in their cheeks.” In memory as earlier in life, two types of people gathered around the name of Thomas Paine: “strong friends and violent enemies.”¹

One side of the debate was captured in comic form by Washington Irving himself, a dozen years before he put Rip Van Winkle’s tale in print in 1819, and still two years before Paine’s passing. In his satirical periodical *Salmagundi*, Irving told of Paine’s return to America through the eyes of an invented character, Mustapha Rub-a-Dub Keli Khan, a Muslim traveler writing to the principal slave-driver of “his highness the Bashaw of Tripoli.” Mustapha described the United States as a “logocracy” (a government of words) run by those with “the *gift of the gab*” and a “plentiful stock of verbosity.”

¹ Washington Irving, *Rip Van Winkle* (New York: R. H. Russell, 1897), 19, 26, 33, 31; Thomas Paine to George Washington, July 21, 1791, in *Complete Writings*, 2:1319.

Conflict there consisted of “*wordy-battle*, and *paper-war*,” which carried “horror, abuse, and *ink-shed*, into the very trenches of the enemy”—the theater in which Paine achieved his great victories. But more than their loquacity, it was the Americans’ religiosity that caught the Muslim’s attention. At the time, he reported, the American “bashaw” (Thomas Jefferson) was facing a conspiracy among the higher classes “to dethrone his highness the present bashaw” because he “absolutely refuses to believe in the deluge, and in the story of Balaam’s ass,” since the only ass allowed to speak in a logocracy was the omnipotent “sovereign people.” Framed in this way, the object of Irving’s ridicule is not Jefferson’s heterodoxy, but the people’s intolerance, which was grounded in scriptural inerrantism. In even worse danger than Jefferson was Paine, whom Mustapha described as “a professed *antediluvian*, from the Gallic empire, who illuminated the whole country with his principles—and his *nose*,” and whose return to America was “enough to set the nation in a blaze.” According to Mustapha, Paine found himself amid “a most inhuman war, in which volumes of words have been expended, [and] oceans of ink have been shed.” Conducted by rival editors, “SLANG-WHANGERS,” as Mustapha called them, their “furious attacks on each other” witnessed the discharge of “heavy artillery consisting of large sheets loaded with scoundrel! villain! liar! rascal! numbskull! nincompoop! dunderhead! wiseacre! blockhead! jackass!” In Mustapha’s view, such scurrility was enough to make “your very turban...rise with horror and astonishment.”²

Though most of Paine’s American readers would never live to see a turban, among the faithful, horror and astonishment at *The Age of Reason* was no less remarkable, though their spokesmen did their best to downplay Paine’s influence. James Tytler, who had felt so “pestered” by *The Age of Reason* that he wrote an indignant response to each part, lumped the book’s author with earlier deists and dismissed the lot. “What is become of the works of Spinoza, Hobbes, Woolston, Toland, Herbert, Shaftesbury, &c.?” he asked. “They may exist, but it is only to be neglected, or read with the utmost indifference. A new crop of Deistical writers is ever now and then necessary; the former, like wandering stars, to whom

² Washington Irving, *Salmagundi; or, the Whim-Whams and Opinions of Launcelot Langstaff, Esq. and Others* 1, no. 7 (April 4, 1807): 169–80.

is reserved the mist of darkness, blaze for a little time, and then set to rise no more. Has Mr. Paine any reason at all to imagine that his work shall be more permanent than the rest?" Tytler refused him the honor. "I will venture to foretell not only that the Bible will outlive Mr. Paine's works, but that, before the expiration of half a century, he and his Age of Reason, as well as I and my answers, will be covered with the mist of oblivion."³

Tytler was half right, as his name has indeed been forgotten. But Paine's has not, and as long as unbelievers keep echoing his efforts, *The Age of Reason* will go on existing alongside the Bible, inspiring skeptical smiles. Starting in New York City on January 29, 1825, admirers began gathering to commemorate their hero in an annual Thomas Paine Birthday celebration, a practice that spread to other major population centers like Philadelphia and Boston, from there to smaller cities like Rochester and Cincinnati, on to no-name towns like Brecksville, Ohio and Warrenville, Illinois, and even down to "Private Residence[s]" throughout the nation. These celebrations were typically well publicized and well attended. Just as importantly, they were also well reported, news of these events being trumpeted in a growing number of Freethought magazines, which reprinted addresses, songs, poems, and toasts to Paine's memory, allowing far-flung readers to raise a glass in a virtual community of open unbelief. A resolution adopted at the 1838 celebration in Rochester seemed lifted from the pages of *The Age of Reason* itself: "Resolved, that we have but one fixed and unalterable opinion of the divine authority of the Bible. The proof to us is irresistible that it is a mere combination of Pagan fables, loosely and ignorantly thrown together, without system or order, full of error, obscenity and contradictions; and therefore not entitled to the confidence and belief of a free and intelligent people, and to be cast aside amongst the rubbish and fabled legends of Paganism of a bye-gone world." An 1851 toast reflected Paine's approach perfectly: "[To] fun and philosophy—the best antidotes to theological poison."⁴

³ Tytler, *Paine's Second Part of the Age of Reason Answered*, 90, 74, 75.

⁴ "Paine's Celebration at a Private Residence in Tennessee," *The Beacon (New Series)* 3, no. 16 (March 5, 1842): 121–24; "Celebration of Thomas Paine's Birth-day in the City of Rochester," *Cleveland Liberalist* 2, no. 23 (Feb. 24, 1838): 178–79;

PRAISING PAINE

The spread of these celebrations embodies the spirit of one of the toasts raised in 1831: “[To] our cause—The cause of reason, truth and benevolence—may it never want supporters to defeat the attempts of priests and fanatics to perpetrate mental slavery.” “Supporters” there have always been, and though always a beleaguered minority, they have ensured that *The Age of Reason* would never go out of print or fall out of popularity. In fact, when Tytler’s prophesied “half a century” first passed, one concerned reporter looked back on Paine’s inauspicious return to America in 1802, reflected on the current state of infidelity in 1859, and described the skeptics of his day. “The ‘Age of Reason’ is their manual. Its bold, clear, simple statements they can understand; its shallowness they are too ignorant to perceive; its coarseness is in unison with their manners. Thus the author has become the Apostle of Free-thinking tinkers and the Patron Saint of unwashed Infidelity.” Expressing his own disgust at Paine’s memory (and prefiguring Teddy Roosevelt’s famous denunciation by nearly thirty years) the reporter concluded, “To this generation at large, he is only an indistinct shadow,—a faint reminiscence of a red nose,—an ill-flavored name, redolent of brandy and of brimstone, his beverage in life and his well-earned punishment in eternity, which suggests to the serious mind dirt, drunkenness, and hopeless damnation.”⁵

Were Tytler willing to risk a “double or nothing” wager, the passage of another half century showed no diminution of Paine’s celebrity among nonbelievers. Consider the work of Samuel Putnam, a Paine acolyte who published his mammoth *400 Years of Freethought* exactly one hundred years after the first part of *The Age of Reason* appeared. Putnam’s history begins with a poetic ode to “Freethought—Past, Present, and Future,” that connects “Fair [Giordano] Bruno” (the icon of the past) to Robert Ingersoll (the icon of the present). In the long sweep of history between these luminaries only two other

“The Late Paine Celebration,” *Vale’s Citizen of the World* 1, no. 13 (February 9, 1851): 97–101. For a sampling of newspaper reports of Paine Celebrations, see “Thomas Paine’s Birthday Celebrations,” *Popular Freethought: A Guide to the Periodic Writings of American Infidels, 1825 – 1865*; online at <https://popularfreethought.wordpress.com/browse-by-subject/thomas-paines-birthday-celebrations/>.

⁵ “Anniversary of the Birthday of Thomas Paine, *The Working Man’s Advocate* 2, no. 33 (April 2, 1831): 2; “Thomas Paine’s Second Appearance in the United States,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 4, no. 21 (July 1859): 1–17.

Freethought heroes are mentioned by name (and this in a book that provides biographical “portraits” of nearly 150 noteworthy freethinkers): “Voltaire’s radiant star” and “Paine’s clear luster in the storms of war.” Putnam sings Paine’s praises throughout the book, rooting countless later freethinkers in his thought, but he draws special attention to the “epoch-making power” of *The Age of Reason*, the urtext of the American Freethought movement. No other text and no other writer had so resonated with America’s champions of biblical disbelief.⁶

Putnam was wise to recognize Paine’s rhetorical resonance. He is likely correct that if it had merely been a positive exposition of the principles of deism, it would have been forgotten; it was its “practical attack upon the Bible” that “consigned him to the hell of the theologians.” Putnam credits Paine (with Spinoza) as “the originator of ‘Bible criticism,’ or the ‘higher criticism,’ as it is called.” But unlike the more scholarly thought being imported from Germany’s liberal universities, Paine’s book was a work of “*applied philosophy*” with its power a result of its polemicism. In Putnam’s mind, *The Age of Reason* was “the greatest and most successful attack upon the *authority* of the Bible ever made in human history.” He considered it “unanswerable,” forcing its ultimate acceptance upon a recalcitrant Christianity, as Darwin’s theory of evolution would do less than a century later. Paine wrote “one of the most truthful, learned, and destructive criticisms of the Bible the world has yet seen—valuable to-day, with all the advance made in biblical scholarship, valuable not simply because it is founded upon eternal principles, but because, with surpassing skill, he concentrated those principles into an aggressive force against the strongest practical position of the enemy, and carried it, and the authority of the Bible is now destroyed.” Though Putnam was overly sanguine about the Bible’s demise, he correctly perceived the reason for Christendom’s demolition of *The Age of Reason*’s author. “It is not as a Deist that Thomas Paine is cursed and maligned and slandered by the priesthood, but as a *biblical critic*, as an honest, painstaking and unanswerable revealer of the Bible as it really is, for in doing this he put the shining point of his pen through the heart of the priesthood, as it went through the heart of the king in his

⁶ Samuel P. Putnam, *400 Years of Freethought* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1894), ix, 462.

‘Common Sense’ and ‘Rights of Man,’ and it is for this that Freethought must honor Thomas Paine as one of its most daring champions, who, without doubt, has struck the greatest blow of all against an unscrupulous and despotic priesthood.”⁷

Hyperbole and run-on sentences aside, Putnam was correct that Paine’s polemicism was intentionally focused on delegitimizing the Bible, and consequently, the clergy’s apologetics doubled as a diatribe against Thomas Paine. Yet despite the avalanche of immediate responses and subsequent remonstrances meant to bury Paine’s book in oblivion, *The Age of Reason* has outlived them all, not because it was more reasonable but because it was more memorable. Paine’s readers laughed last, which meant they laughed best, crowned not by Paine’s scholarship but by his sarcasm. Gilbert Wakefield had hoped that Paine would “be gibbeted on the page of immortality...to all future generations,” and he has been, though not “as a warning for audacious blockheads” as Wakefield had hoped. His rhetoric of ridicule instead “gibbeted” the Bible, and future generations have been laughing alongside him ever since. Historian Henry May put it best: *The Age of Reason* “was easy to answer but hard to forget.”⁸

What was it that made *The Age of Reason* so unforgettable to its readers and so infuriatingly irrefutable to its respondents? As this study has argued, it was Paine’s rhetoric of ridicule, which planted seeds of doubt that kept growing even after apologists removed the above-ground argumentative growth. Long after rebuttals of his arguments and objections to his assertions were forgotten, the hint of Paine’s humor remained, leaving underlying emotions that left readers unsettled—the shame of a troubled conscience, the blush of an embarrassing thought, the cognitive dissonance of seeing former assumptions reduced to the absurd. These were the hardest words to unravel, for as another student of polemic once wondered, “How does one refute a joke?”⁹

⁷ Ibid., 461–63.

⁸ Wakefield, *A Reply to Thomas Paine’s Second Part of the Age of Reason*, 12; May, *The Enlightenment in America*, 175.

⁹ Terry Givens, *Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 118.

THE HUMOR AND HUMOURS OF THOMAS PAINE

Of all of Paine's respondents, one of the quirkiest was James Bourk, who answered *The Age of Reason* in 1797. Unlike those critics who logically countered his arguments or sarcastically mirrored his scorn, Bourk seemed more interested in Paine's psychology than his theology, and focused on his "humours" as well as his humor. Full of the pseudo-science of the day, Bourk does call Paine out for his manipulative rhetoric—"your chief art and energy lies in false misrepresentations" meant to "make the greater impression on your readers"—but he tries to make sense of Paine's physiology to explain his rhetorical approach. "I am of opinion, Mr. PAINE," he wrote, sounding like a doctor announcing his diagnosis, "that the fluctuation, variation, and infatuation of your opinions, relative to the aversion you entertain of the Sacred Writings, may be attributed to various causes," the first being "the motion of your humours and constitution of body, which are so great, that you are never of the same humour at two different times of your life." He may have seen the same manic-depressive quality of Paine's personality and productivity that later biographers have identified, but in Bourk's mind this "motion" kept Paine alternating between the melancholic, the choleric, the sanguine, and the phlegmatic, never able to rest peacefully in a single, settled emotion. Misery loving company, this in turn impelled Paine to keep his readers from resting in the spirit of God. The "variety and uncertainty of your temper," wrote Bourk, gave rise to a "spirit of contradiction" that, when coupled with the "great display of your [rhetorical] talents, . . . will not let us quietly enjoy the blessing of the Gospel."¹⁰

As Bourk saw it, Paine's humor was an outgrowth of his "humours." "Your genius hath its frolics," he wrote, "and in those humours and frolics it tramples upon all religion." Bourk complained of Paine's "raillery," "irony," and "low banter," his "home-spun ludicrity" and his habit of "entertaining such groundless whimsies of religion." But these "defects of your mind" were rooted in Paine's physiology as well, a result of the fevers he had suffered in prison and afterward. Thus it was not

¹⁰ James Bourk, *An Answer to a Late Pamphlet entitled, Paine's Age of Reason* (Cork: Joseph Halv, 1797), 17, 27; on Paine's possible bipolar disorder, see Nelson, *Thomas Paine*, 146.

entirely Paine's fault that illness had "plundered your reason" and "materially impaired [*sic*] your judgment." Still, Bourk prescribed, "Necessity requires [you] to curb this flighty genius of your's."¹¹

Because of Paine's "overbearing predominance of humours" (his temperament), laced throughout with his "alloy of folly" (his sense of humor), Bourk concluded that "it is in vain for a man of sound reason to hold a contest with you. The soaring flights of your fancy would obstruct the most settled ideas" and your refusal to "submit to rules" (of either sound reason or gentlemanly rhetoric) gives you "a loose for novelty and innovation" in which most of your opponents refuse to indulge. According to Bourk's diagnosis, Paine's anti-religious rhetoric of ridicule resulted from the "operations of your brain" (which "cannot be of a good composition"), the "organs of your life" (which are "not in any apparent condition to receive revelation"), the "propensity of your will" (which is "guilty of a violent robbery on your understanding"), and the "natural bent of your passions" (which "run...eagerly after every whimsey of your own appetite"). No wonder "you hurry down the stream of accidents and passions; it is not *Reason* but *inclination* that governs you."¹²

Paine, of course, would have laughed at this diagnosis, but Bourk may not have been completely off target in searching for the roots of Paine's anti-religious rhetoric in his temperament and personality. Another respondent called it "an easy business to revile and stigmatize the *Bible*" if one had the right combination of personality traits, which he listed as "a wicked heart, a witty head, and a comfortable flow of scurrilous language." Paine himself dropped a relevant if unintended hint in the preface to his "Examination of the Prophecies" near the end of his life. Addressing his ministerial adversaries directly, Paine began by explaining the nature of his ardent opposition: "to detect and expose delusion and error" is "the duty of every man." What keeps the vast majority from fulfilling that duty, especially when established religion is its target, is a lack of "talent for the purpose" (a failure of "nature") and "a want of disposition or of courage to do it" (a failure of nerve). By describing what keeps others from enlisting

¹¹ Ibid., 30, 35, 34, 31, 32.

¹² Ibid., 29–30, 32, 42.

in the fight, Paine has thus, conversely, given us a self-description of what qualified him for the contest—the convergence of natural talent, personal disposition, and indomitable courage.¹³

This list serves our purpose well. First, being able to engage in witty repartee does require a certain amount of natural talent: mental acuity, facility with language, the ability to recognize incongruities, play with ironies, and exploit them all with comic effect. Though almost no one is willing to admit it in themselves, not everyone has an equal ability, explaining why we speak of a “sense” of humor, something that seems inherent, but is not equally well-developed in everyone. It was this natural talent that made Paine such a welcome conversation partner and dinner party guest. The bent of his mind was such that he saw opportunities for word play almost everywhere, and his personality (the second point) made him want to take advantage of those openings. Especially in humor’s more confrontational aspects, a certain temperament is required, not simply the *ability* to poke holes in others’ arguments but the *desire* to make fun of what one sees. Comedians tend to crave the spotlight and question boundaries, combining a certain showmanship with an iconoclastic bent. And when their target is traditionally unquestioned or controversial, it does require courage (Paine’s third point) to put it in the pillory and begin lobbing insults. Not everyone is brave enough to speak truth to power in a jester’s cap and bells—to be entertaining enough to keep his job, serious enough to keep his inner compass, and deft enough to keep his head. But Thomas Paine was. In him, secularist ambition combined with comic disposition to produce a rhetorical leadership that proved popular and persuasive. Paine combined abilities, attributes, attitudes, and aims to consummate effect.

PAINE’S HEIRS

Notably, and pointing to promising potential extensions of this study, this conglomeration of characteristics also describes the most popular anti-biblical polemicists that followed in Paine’s wake.

¹³ David Simpson, *A Plea for Religion, and the Sacred Writings: Addressed to the Disciples of Thomas Paine, and wavering Christians of every Persuasion* (Macclesfield: Edward Bayley, 1797), 32; Paine, “Examination of the Prophecies,” in *Writings*, 4:356.

Well documented is the anti-religious ridicule of those European wits who preceded Paine—Voltaire and d’Holbach, Shaftesbury and Woolston, Gibbon and Hume, among countless others. But Paine connects Europe to America, elite to commoner, and past to future. As such, he left an intellectual and rhetorical posterity as worthy of attention as his more studied Enlightenment ancestry. While some noteworthy exceptions exist (Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen, for example, seem painfully devoid of humor, which might help explain Freethought’s relative decline in the second quarter of the nineteenth century), the vast majority of Freethought’s most popular champions have shared similar talent, temperament, and temerity, with many being downright Painite in their scathing ridicule or lighthearted jest: Abner Kneeland and Benjamin Offen, Anne Newport Royall and Harriet Martineau, Gilbert Vale and D. M. Bennett, Ernestine Rose and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Ella Gibson and Elmina Slenker, and most famously, “the Great Agnostic,” Robert Ingersoll, and that irreverent mocker of religious “soul-butter and hogwash,” Mark Twain. Still later, the heyday of *The Truth Seeker*, the flagship periodical of late nineteenth-century American Freethought, came in part because of the anti-biblical cartoons of Watson Heston, and an underappreciated witness for the defense in the Scopes Trial of 1925 (more accurately, a witness for the prosecution as the Bible was more truly under indictment) was the combined rhetoric of ridicule of Clarence Darrow and H. L. Mencken. Throughout our history, America’s secular wits have instinctively turned to humor to delegitimize the Bible, leaving exuberant infidels, amused agnostics, and embarrassed but erstwhile believers chuckling in their wake.¹⁴

Far from a strictly historical phenomenon, more recently two of the most visible leaders of “New Atheism,” Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, are as seeped in sarcasm as their nineteenth-century progenitors. The list is so long and the ridicule so common that the unofficial motto of modern anti-biblicism could easily be the clarion call uttered by Richard Dawkins at the 2012 “Reason Rally” (a

¹⁴ See James A. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists: The Discourse of Skepticism, 1680–1750* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997); Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion*; Lund, *Ridicule, Religion and the Politics of Wit*; Twain’s marvelously evocative phrase, “soul-butter and hogwash,” appears in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Victor Fischer and Lin Salamo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 213.

title Paine would have applauded) held in Washington, D.C. Encouraging his listeners to fight religious belief more boldly and unapologetically, Dawkins gave skeptics their marching orders when confronting people of faith: “Mock them! Ridicule them! In public!” Met with loud cheers and enthusiastic applause, Dawkins continued, “Don’t fall for the convention that we’re all too polite to talk about religion. Religion is not off the table. Religion is not off limits. Religion makes specific claims about the universe which need to be substantiated and need to be challenged and, if necessary, need to be ridiculed with contempt.” Thomas Paine would have been among those most enthusiastically cheering.¹⁵

What this long list of names suggests is that to the “saints of doubt, martyrs of atheism, and sages of happy disbelief” that comprised Jennifer Hecht’s broad pantheon of doubters, we would add secular humorists and comic iconoclasts, scoffers at scripture and blasphemous wits, evidence to support Hecht’s observation that “when people think of the origins of modern doubt, now as then they tend to think of the literary and the comic.” To combat the biblical gospel, they relied on what Agnes Repplier called “the gospel of amusement,” which holds that “any writer, preacher, or lecturer, whose smile is broad enough to be infectious, finds himself a prophet in the market-place.” As Emerson once said, “The dull pray,” whereas “the geniuses are light mockers.” They know that “our life in this world is not of quite so easy interpretation as churches and school-books say,” and they boast the courage to face their doubts unflinchingly—“to ferret them out of their holes, and sun them a little.” More often than not, the sun they shine is the light of normalizing laughter, proving the point that this study has been suggesting all along: that the most popular secular humanists have been secular humorists, with Thomas Paine smiling beatifically above them. Exceptions exist, of course, but for every staid and unsmiling skeptic there has been a company of doubters more prone to laughter, ridicule, wit, or scorn. Religious history has enjoyed very little respite from what the Romans called the “ridicularii.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Richard Dawkins, Speech at the “Reason Rally,” March 24, 2012; full video available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dq7rHRplZKU>.

¹⁶ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to*

To state the matter clearly, throughout the nation's history, America's most influential skeptics have been writers, speakers, and artists for whom the rhetoric of ridicule was both a personal proclivity and a tactical priority. By focusing on this reality's early embodiment, Thomas Paine, this study has attempted to explain why. In a nation beholden to panoptic public opinion and attuned to social stigma, the laughter of superiority could shame people away from what was made to seem the immaturity, immorality, and inanity of biblical belief. At a time when a creeping Common Sense Realism gave ideographic "Reason" the Midas Touch, the absurdification of the Bible allowed the laughter of incongruity to force cognitive dissonance into areas where earlier assumptions had been lying undisturbed. And as pressures mounted—social as well as spiritual—the laughter of relief promised to vent unwanted emotions in an explosion of pleasurable mirth. No wonder respondents were so outraged by Paine's ridicule—they were largely powerless to combat it. As one wrote, almost begging his opponent to fight fairly, "Try then what you can do. Exert all your talents. Call forth every latent power of the mind. But—no ridicule! no laughter! no sneers!" Though laughter's leverage worked far more slowly than Paine had envisioned, even against entrenched belief in this most biblical of nations, Mark Twain's devil is proving prescient: "Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand."¹⁷

Ridicule's Rhetorical Weight

Whether or not Paine and his fellow mockers fully grasped the philosophical, sociological, and psychological underpinnings of the politics of humor, they intuited the power of laughter and, more pragmatically, knew how to turn their opponents into laughingstocks. Humor theory went to work from there, however little it was understood or intentionally employed by those for whom it came so

Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), ix, 347; Replier quoted in Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor*, 193; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Montaigne; or, the Skeptic," in *Representative Men. Seven Lectures* (London: George Routledge & Co., 1850), 104–06; Reverend Jeremy Taylor cites the term "ridicularii" in his sermon, "The Good and Evil Tongue," in *The Whole Works of the Right Rev. Jeremy Taylor*, 3 vols. (London: Frederick Westley and A. H. Davis, 1836), 1:741. Thomas Pierce likewise uses the term in *A Decad of Caveats to the People of England* (London, 1679), 138.

¹⁷ Simpson, *A Plea for Religion*, 117; Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger: A Romance* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1926), 141–42.

naturally. As argued in these pages, especially when deployed in ostensibly rational argumentation over nondemonstrable issues, a proactive, subjective, and normalizing laughter is a marvel of obfuscatory rhetoric, whether as superiority shaming its opposition or incongruity drafted in service to a precarious common sense. “Rhetoric conceals as much as it reveals through its relationship with power/knowledge,” wrote one rhetorical scholar (building off Foucault), and often it does this in “silent and non-deliberate ways”—even through laughter, as this study has shown. Under the guise of inherent superiority or objective incongruity, the occasional recourse to ridicule obscures the gravity of the contest, conceals the impossibility of an authoritative verdict, and veils the plausibility of opposing arguments, all while shifting the burden of proof from laughter’s source to its target. Reason may be crowned king, but laughter, as regent, often bears rule. Little wonder, then, that ridicule is so often used in polemic but so seldom singled out for study there. It typically hides behind rhetoric’s nobler arts, darting out and jumping back again, as if only to draw the eye to those more substantial forms standing soberly in the foreground. Be that as it may, ridicule’s role is significant enough in polemic that it has been worth the effort to coax it out of the shadows and ask it to doff its cap and bells.¹⁸

As Paine’s anti-religious rhetoric has shown, in moving an audience or deciding an issue, ridicule does much of the heavy lifting, but tricks us into ignoring its surprising strength. To borrow once again the language of the Aristotelian appeals, laughter seems to yoke humor’s *pathos* to the speaker’s *ethos*—making the rhetor seem superior according to Hobbes, and more sociable according to Hutcheson, though with the same general result: that listeners are drawn to the speaker and thence the speaker’s position.¹⁹ But as we have seen, humor’s *pathos* can also be put in service to *logos*, by questioning a rival’s claim to rationality and thereby appearing the darling of reason oneself, allowing the rhetor to hide his *ethos* behind *logos* as well. More than render service, in fact, ridicule’s *pathos* can

¹⁸ McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis,” 480.

¹⁹ Fredric V. Bogel writes, “the ‘reader position’ projected by the satiric mode is one in which there is a fairly simple assent to the satirist’s ethos and values, that we are expected to endorse both judgment and judge.” *The Difference Satire Makes*, 13.

masquerade as *logos*, drawing an audience into agreement with an argument that has not been adequately proven, or that is not empirically provable. In so doing, ridicule serves reason without drawing attention to its own non-rationality. It simply ratifies proposed norms as if they were the only plausible options—hardly a reasonable assertion, though made to seem reasonable enough.

“Ridicule is never more strong, than when it is concealed in Gravity,” wrote the *Spectator* (Cicero made the same point), and conversely, “gravity” is never more strong than when ridicule is helping it bring a rival’s pretensions down to earth. No wonder Paine foregrounded his adherence to reason in both the titles and contents of two of his greatest works. He made sure that serious argument (or bold assertion) outweighed ridicule as a proportion of his content, often deploying humor as the punctuation mark at the end of a more reasonable-sounding statement. Cicero distinguished between humor and jest, the first referring to the general tenor of a discourse, and the second referring to moments of jocularly that were “pointed and concise.” Most polemic (including Paine’s) is of the latter kind, allowing for “sharp short jests”—just “a sprinkle of salt,” as Cicero called them—but maintaining the more sober demeanor becoming serious subjects. The conciseness of ridicule’s pointed jabs helped Paine maintain his Common Sense persona. It also made his position seem more natural, since when a joke is uttered, as Cicero said, it becomes “fixed in the mind of the hearer, before it appears possible to have been conceived,” thus hiding any hints of artifice. Either way, by departing from reasoned argument only briefly, Paine could make Reason seem the rule, with Ridicule the momentary but momentum-building exception.²⁰

In the end, as loudly as Paine sang the praises of reason and common sense, and as deceitfully as he proclaimed his reliance on nothing else, his rhetoric betrayed his deep if begrudging appreciation—both as understanding of and as gratitude for—the power of emotion. As Paine admitted in his description of the Silas Deane affair, the public “feels first and reasons afterwards.” More personally, while enduring imprisonment and facing the probability of sudden death, in a moment of honest self-

²⁰ *The Spectator*, no. 616 (November 5, 1714); Cicero, *On Oratory*, 143 – 45; the phrase “a sprinkle of salt” is from the translation by E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, as found in Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, eds., *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), 310.

reflection Paine revealed in a letter to a friend that what he had said so forcibly in print was contradicted by something he acknowledged in his heart. When facing despair or death, he wondered, “what, it may be asked, is the best advice, what the best relief?—I answer, seek it not in reason, for the mind is at war with reason, and to reason against feelings is as vain, as to reason against fire.” At such times of despondence, “all reasoning...acts upon us like the reasoning of another person, that, however kindly done, serves but to insult the misery we suffer.... In such cases we must look upon Reason as dispossessed of her empire, by a revolt of the mind. She retires herself to a distance to weep, and the ebony sceptre of Despair rules alone. All that Reason can then do is to suggest, to hint a thought, to signify a wish, to cast now and then a kind of bewailing look, to hold up, when she can catch the eye, the miniature-shaded portrait of Hope; and though dethroned, and can dictate no more, to wait upon us in the humble station of a handmaid.” Ironically, then, even while working on *The Age of Reason*, Paine knew that the age—all ages—ultimately belonged to emotion, at least when facing the ultimate unknowns. Seen in this light, Paine’s emotional appeals through the rhetoric of ridicule seem fitting, in that they “hint[ed] a thought” that Paine hoped would eventually germinate. Rather than ridicule’s jester to reason’s king, perhaps it was emotion as host and reason as handmaid all along.²¹

American emotionalism, too clumsy to remain hidden behind its boasted common sense for long, exposed Paine’s adopted countrymen to the rhetoric of ridicule in significant ways. The cultural upheaval in the early Republic made Americans more anxious for laughter’s psychological release; the spread of democratic political values made them more susceptible to ridicule’s homogenizing sociological impact; and, most profoundly, the influence of Scottish Common Sense Realism made Americans philosophically opposed to anything that could be made to seem absurd. In a contest largely immune to empirical proofs and logical argumentation, the psychological, sociological, and philosophical power of ridicule was a potent force indeed.

²¹ Thomas Paine, “The Affair of Silas Deane,” in *Writings*, 1:395; “Forgetfulness,” in *Writings*, 3:320–21.

Consequently, in much of his polemic, Paine took to heart Francis Hutcheson's advice that "Men have been laughed out of faults which a sermon could not reform." In fact he hoped to laugh them out of sermons altogether. He prefigured the mid-twentieth-century radical who joked about an "American Anti-Bible Society" dedicated to making "a laughing stock of the Christian fetish book" in hopes of "causing people to smile whenever it is named." Whether that smile was the intellectually-informed grin of someone aware of biblical incongruities (Hutcheson), or the socially-superior sneer of someone looking down on those still holding onto childish belief (Hobbes), by assigning nonsense to his opponents, Paine could by human initiative enact an answer to Voltaire's famous prayer: "O Lord, make my enemies ridiculous."²²

As we near the conclusion of our study, and at the risk of upsetting Paine by making a hodgepodge of his writings, might I be excused for ventriloquizing him for a moment, emboldened by the fact that I am not the first to do so. Unlike those professed mediums who gave Paine a voice from beyond the grave, however, I do so neither to provide a posthumous recantation of his living convictions nor to offer postmortem support for views he never held. Rather, I channel Paine to provide a final review of his rhetoric of ridicule, and I do so, unlike earlier ventriloquists, using Paine's actual words, lest he complain once again, "I am made to say what I never wrote." In this final summary, Paine did write these words, and though here they are stripped of their original context (sometimes political, sometimes religious), I have done nothing to alter Paine's ultimate intent.²³

Besides, in training his rhetoric of ridicule on the Bible, Paine became something of a ventriloquist himself, with biblical prophets the ones complaining that he was putting words in their mouths that they never intended. Throughout Paine's anti-religious writings, from the first insult in *The*

²² Hutcheson, *Reflections on Laughter*, in *The Scottish Enlightenment*, 241; *South Carolina Gazette*, 19 September 1741; 9 January 1742; 6 March 1742; 21 June 1742. See Timothy D. Hall, *Contested Boundaries: Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 52. Elizabeth Dilling, *The Red Network: A "Who's Who" and Handbook of Radicalism for Patriots* (Chicago: published by the author, 1934), 106; Voltaire quoted in Nancy McPhee, *The Book of Insults, Ancient & Modern* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 26.

²³ See Patrick W. Hughes, "'I am made to say what I never wrote': Deism, spiritualism, and ventriloquizing Paine, c. 1790s–1850s," in Edwards and Morris, eds., *The Legacy of Thomas Paine in the Transatlantic World*, 35–50.

Age of Reason to “Predestination’s” last sarcastic remark, Paine infused the Bible with self-satirizing absurdity and ironic hypocrisy, turning it into a self-deprecating comedian out to laugh himself off stage. “I am not fond of quoting these old remains of former arrogance,” he would say, nor would he stoop to “pick and cull the Bible for the purpose” of proving its “equivocal state,” though this is precisely what he did. No, he would simply hold up the Bible and “frame” it (in both the Burkean and the perjurious sense), as if the Bible were outing itself. After all, “It is always better policy to leave removable errors to expose themselves than to hazard too much in contending against them theoretically.” The biblical exposé simply needed some minor illumination, the way Judas helped identify Jesus to a squad of Roman soldiers searching in the dark. The same pen that had kissed the Bible in *Common Sense* later pressed against it with malicious intent. Paine knew the scriptures intimately, the way an estranged lover knows his or her partner—well enough to strike exactly where it will hurt the target most.²⁴

In Paine’s mind, the comic kiss was all that was needed for belief to collapse in a cloud of distrust. His antibiblical humor forced apologists into long explanations and complex rationalizations, and even this served him well, as he could turn their “laudable pains” into admissions of guilt, since common sense truths needed no such justification. Scholarly scaffolding thus became proof of an unstable structure, one that laughter could shake to the ground. As has been said (and practiced) by many a debater, “If you’re explaining, you’re losing,” and believers had a lot of explaining to do. “This single reflection, when carried home to the mind, is in itself a volume.” In fact, it was a companion volume to Paine’s written text, but one subconsciously inscribed by his readers themselves. This was the genius of Paine’s rhetoric of ridicule, his deft employment of what he once called “the under-plots of abuse and scurrility” (as usual, in a complaint that an adversary was using the strategy against him). “Under-plots” might in fact be the perfect term to describe ridicule’s obfuscatory tactics. Humor labors just beneath the level of cognition, plotting against an underlying prejudice by “nibbl[ing] it round, like

²⁴ Thomas Paine, “Public Good,” in *Writings*, 2:52; “Letter to Mr. Erskine,” in *Writings*, 4:212; “Letter to George Washington,” July 30, 1796, in *Writings*, 3:214.

Dr. Franklin’s description of a gingerbread cake, till scarcely enough is left to guess at the composition.” When Paine was done “nibbling” at the Bible, only crumbs would remain of biblical belief.²⁵

Ridicule would be Reason’s ally throughout. Whenever “the object is conviction or persuasion,” this master persuader admitted, “more consideration should be given to human passions than even to reason” (and this from the author of *Reason* itself!). Paine thus kept Reason sitting stoically on the throne, but she was simply a figurehead, bearer of a royal seal Paine used as a rubber stamp. After all, if people tend “to applaud before they think,” what better way to circumvent opposing thought than eliciting laughter, which evokes a reflexive, not a reflective, response. What better way to trick people into thinking they were thinking! In Paine’s hands, humor bowed to reason even while transgressing its bounds, leveraging the weight of laughter to pry people away from their biblical beliefs. In terms of the laughter of incongruity, ridicule stood sentry at “the point where sense and nonsense join” (another of Paine’s evocative phrases), keeping the Bible out of Reason’s realm and pushing believers over the edge of incredulity. Simultaneously, in terms of the laughter of superiority, ridicule pushed believers over the edge of embarrassment. Believing that “public sentiment is always worth attending to” (and knowing his impressionable audience felt the same), Paine could create an imagined community of condescending scoffers dangling believers over “the bottomless pit of public contempt,” a sight as frightening to some as the biblical hell. To quote a popular dictum Paine once used—“*those whom God intends to destroy he first renders mad*”—Paine could play God and destroy the Bible by twisting it into such contorted positions that it cannibalized itself in a fit of madness. Knowing faith’s strength (even while deriding its weakness), Paine targeted the Bible and, hidden in comic camouflage, “fought through it under the security of a covert way.”²⁶

²⁵ Paine, “Letter to Mr. Erskine,” in *Writings*, 4:216; ²⁵ Thomas Paine to William Short, November 2, 1791; in *Complete Writings*, 2:1320; Paine, “Peace, and the Newfoundland Fisheries,” in *Writings*, 2:3.

²⁶ Paine, “Answer to Four Questions,” in *Complete Writings*, 526; Paine, “Reflections on the Life and Death of Lord Clive,” in *Writings*, 1:32; Paine, “Prospects on the Rubicon,” in *Complete Writings*, 2:625; Paine, “Constitutions, Governments, and Charters,” in *Writings*, 4:468; Paine, “To Mr. Hulbert, of Sheffield,” in *Complete Writings*, 2:977; Paine, “Remarks on Political and Military Affairs,” in *Complete Writings*, 2:615; Paine, “A Serious Address,” in *Complete Writings*, 2:281.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

What would Thomas Paine have thought of twenty-first century America, seeing steel bridges span the Schuylkill and comparing them to his earlier iron designs? No doubt he would thrill to see the spread of democratic freedom and scientific enlightenment—Rights and Reason as his titles proclaimed—even while smoldering over their absence or curtailment in places. No doubt he would be shocked that we are still being haunted by the specter of racism, as he was one of the first in America to advocate for abolition. No doubt he would applaud the advancements of our liberal democracy, including universal education, health care, women’s rights, and the social safety net, all of which he championed in his day, suggesting that prophecy may be possible after all. No doubt he would revel in the political satire of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, of Trevor Noah, John Oliver, and Samantha Bee, and laugh alongside viewers of Saturday Night Live skits aimed at political, economic, and social reform. No doubt he would be amazed at the power, partisanship, and productivity of the press—“the tongue of the world” as he called it—with the ever-expanding possibilities of the internet allowing memes, blogs, and viral videos to make pamphleteers of the ordinary individual, the champion of all that Paine inscribed. One can only imagine what Paine would have done with a social media feed of his own—a personal printing press, complete with instant availability and infinite reach, held in the palm of his hand. No doubt he would be grateful to see that Jefferson’s wall of separation had kept religion officially on its side of the line, though he would share modern liberals’ concerns about ecclesiastical encroachment. No doubt he would voice his views about public displays of the Ten Commandments, follow closely every Establishment Clause case, and prove a popular whipping boy of the Religious Right. No doubt he would be shocked to see that America still had a Bible Belt, which he would mischievously keep trying to unbuckle.²⁷

However circumstances have changed, the times still call for the kind of activism and altruism that Paine personified, regardless of how one feels about his ultimate choice of target. Put in unadorned

²⁷ Thomas Paine, “An Answer to the Bishop of Llandaff,” in *Writings*, 4:287.

“commonsense” language, the issue is this: Thomas Paine saw people doing hurtful and stupid things to one another. He saw the State doing hurtful and stupid things to its people, and saw the Church justifying and even repeating some of those hurtful and stupid things itself. So when he turned to the Bible, he drew attention to every hurtful and stupid thing he could find, or that he could make to appear. He wanted his readers to revolt against hurtfulness and stupidity itself, so he laughed them into conscience and consciousness.

To the degree that a conclusion provides a narrow opening for a writer to peek out from behind the page, I will admit that I am fascinated by Thomas Paine, both as rebel and writer, revolutionary and rhetorician. As a historian, I find in his life and letters all that is best and worst about that so-called Age of Reason. As a student of the Bible, moved by its message but keen to its complexities, I study the contest between Paine’s polemics and his critics’ apologetics and alternately find myself agreeing and disagreeing with both. As a citizen of a beautifully diverse, wonderfully pluralistic, but deeply divided America (especially where religious issues are concerned), I recognize and rejoice over the contributions of religious communities and secular organizations alike, even while acknowledging the shortcomings and blind spots of each, since the “spider of the mind” weaves its invisible webs within us all. Alternately fascinated and frustrated with Paine’s writings, having pored over the rhetoric in every available word that he wrote, I find myself impressed with the depth of his passion, the strength of his nerve, and the spirit, the subtlety, and the seductiveness of his language. Through his rhetoric of ridicule, I find myself simultaneously offended and laughing along.

Taking a final look at Paine’s antipathy to biblical religion, perhaps his ultimate intent can best be illustrated by embodying the Bible as one of its believers and recounting an event that dramatizes Paine’s attitude toward both. In his final years, the inveterate iconoclast was occasionally visited by zealous Christians intent on extracting a deathbed confession that would save him from the fires of hell (and save the Bible from his posthumous scorn). On one such occasion, an elderly woman managed to gain entrance into Paine’s bedchamber and boldly declared, “I come from Almighty God, to tell you that

if you do not repent of your sins and believe in our blessed Saviour Jesus Christ, you will be damned.” Before she could finish her call to repentance, however, Paine testily cut her short. No stranger to similar warnings on the pages of the book he’d spent the last decade and a half gleefully dismantling, he responded to this self-proclaimed messenger in a way reminiscent of his dismissal of the Bible as a whole. Distinguishing the God of Nature from the words of scripture to the end, he retorted, “Pooh, pooh, it is not true. You were not sent with any such impertinent message.” Propped up on one elbow, Paine summoned his strength, raised a feeble hand, and waved away the woman along with all she represented, snorting a taunt he would have thrown at any of the Bible-makers before her: “Pshaw, [God] would not send such a foolish ugly old woman as you about with His message.”²⁸

²⁸ See Harold E. Dickson, *John Wesley Jarvis: American Painter, 1780–1840, with a Checklist of His Works* (New York, 1949), 101; John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 523–24.

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