

Rediscovering Thomas Paine and the Sacred Text of Nature

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There is no better time, in this age of global warming and mass extinction of species, to rediscover the liberating thought of Thomas Paine, which recalls that of mystics and poets of many ancient cultures. In his iconoclastic *The Age of Reason*, published in 1794, Paine transfers the locus of the sacred from religious texts to the material Book of Nature, since “it is in this word, which no human invention can counterfeit or alter, that God speaketh universally to man” (*Age* 29). With these words, Paine anticipates the emergent romanticism of his times by envisioning religion as an imaginative force that restores us to a living universe.

Paine became a leading figure of the American Revolution after he denounced the institution of monarchy and King George III in *Common Sense* (1776). In that pamphlet, Paine advocated the independence of the American colonies while underscoring the universality of the ideas therein. Shortly after publishing a defense of the French Revolution in *Rights of Man* (1791-92), Paine went to France where he was granted honorary citizenship and elected to the national assembly. During the Reign of Terror, Paine spent a year in prison and barely escaped execution.

It was during that period that he wrote *The Age of Reason*, in which he denies the status of the *Bible* as divine revelation. Paine argues that human language could never be a “means of unchangeable and universal information,” since language is a construct whose meaning is contested and in constant flux (*Age* 7-8, 29-30).¹ It is in Nature that one glimpses the divine:

It is only in the CREATION that all our ideas and conceptions of a word of God can unite. The Creation speaketh a universal language, independently of human speech or human language... It is an ever-existing original, which every man can read. It cannot be forged; it cannot be counterfeited; it cannot be lost; it cannot be altered; it cannot be suppressed. It does not depend upon the will of man whether it shall be published or not; it publishes itself from one end of the earth to the other. It preaches to all nations and to all worlds; and this *word of God* reveals to man all that is necessary to know of God. (*Age* 30).

This spiritual shift has profound implications, for if the creation is indeed the word of God, how could one pollute the lakes and rivers? How could one chop down forests for timber or remove mountaintops for mining? How could one butcher animals for food or sport? Paine rejects the wrathful deity of the *Old Testament*, recognizing in his stead a merciful and humble God who is indis-

tinguishable from Creation, whom saints and poets such as Kabir recognize:

*God is the tree in the forest that
allows itself to die and will not defend itself in front of those
with the ax, not wanting to cause them
shame.*

(Kabir 226)

Paine foresaw that his views on religion and God would prove controversial, particularly his challenge to Biblical authority. In *The Age of Reason*, Paine explains that he had reserved the writing of that book for old age (*Age* 71). Indeed, after its publication, clerics and politicians slandered Paine so much that barely half a dozen people attended Paine’s funeral in 1809. An English reformer, William Cobbett, disinterred Paine’s remains and transported them to England. Paine’s body was stored in an attic, and then disappeared after Cobbett’s death in 1835. A famous nursery rhyme conveys the complete neglect that befell Paine:

*Poor Tom! there he lies:
Nobody laughs and nobody cries.
Where he has gone or how he fares
Nobody knows and nobody cares.* (Walker 51)²

Nonetheless, Paine helped lay the foundations of religious pluralism and tolerance in the United States. *The Age of Reason* continues to provide a moral basis and an intellectual foundation for the separation of church and state. Even now, Paine’s syncretic thought undermines the notion, currently in vogue, that religions are doomed to endless conflict. Paine despised petty creeds that condemn the believers of other faiths to hellfire, preferring the free exchange of ideas to coercion.

Paine summed up his creed as follows: “I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy” (*Age* 5-6). These ethical precepts are shared by believers of many faiths. Paine rejected religions that monopolize truth, preferring in their stead a direct and personal experience of God: “I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of.

My mind is my own church” (*Age* 6). In this fashion, Paine implies that we all reflect the divine, however dimly or brightly.

Paine wanted a revolution in religion, namely, a “return to the pure, unmixed and unadulterated belief of one God” (*Age* 7). This return to origins would synthesize monotheistic religions into a single belief system that seeks an unmediated intuition of the divine. Paine believed that God could be understood through the application of reason to the natural world rather than through miraculous tales. He sensed unseen worlds, both diminutive and immense, and was humbled by the knowledge that our species is but one of many millions on earth.

For Paine, science and religion could never be at odds, for the laws of the physical universe enclose the mystery of God. Jack Fruchtman points out that although he is generally regarded as a deist, Paine might be properly considered a pantheist, since he believed that God inheres in the creation itself (3). Paine’s cosmic vision recalls ancient belief systems such as that of the classical Chinese who, as Roger Ames observes,

believed that the power of creativity resides in the world itself, and that the order and regularity this world evidences is not derived from or imposed upon it by some independent, activating power, but inheres in the world. Change and continuity are equally ‘real’. The world, then, is the efficient cause of itself. It is resolutely dynamic, autogenerative, self-organizing, and in a real sense, alive (49-50).

Although he found the writing of the apostles in the *New Testament* more suited to that of a cloistered monk than to “any man breathing the open air of the Creation” (*Age* 34), Paine nonetheless cited a passage from *Matthew* 6: 28 which erases the illusory dividing line between the human and natural worlds: “Behold the lilies of the field, they toil not, neither do they spin” (*Age* 34). This passage situates the sacred in an image of nature, much like this verse of Muhammad Iqbal: “The mountains, the sea, the setting of the sun / There I saw Allah without his veil” (Ahktar 78). Joseph Sittler comments that “the word ‘behold’ lies upon that which is beheld in a kind of tenderness which suggests that things in themselves have their own wondrous authenticity and integrity” (Dewitt 47). Despite Paine’s disdain for that book, the *Old Testament* nonetheless affirms the primacy of Nature, as in *Job* 12:

But ask the beasts, and they will teach you;
The birds of the sky, they will tell you;
Or speak to the earth, it will teach you;
The fish of the sea, they will inform you.
Who among all these does not know
That the hand of the Lord has done this?
In his hand is every living soul
And the breath of all mankind. (“Hebrew Bible” 80)

Although he was skeptical towards all religious texts, Paine limited his discussion in *The Age of Reason* to the

Bible, since Christianity was the dominant religion in the United States. And yet other religious texts concur with Paine’s belief in nature as a source of inspiration and divine revelation. The *Qur’an*, in Surah 22: 18, queries, “Hast thou not seen that unto Allah payeth adoration whosoever is in the heavens and whosoever is in the earth, and the sun, and the moon, and the stars, and the hills, and the trees, and the beasts, and many of mankind” (Izzi Deen 165). As Shabbir Akhtar notes,

The Koran constantly emphasises the religious significance of the created natural order. Indeed, it contains ten times as many verses about the signs (ayat; ayah, singular) than it does about religious law – a particularly surprising circumstance in view of Islam’s justified reputation as a law-centred faith. Allah reveals himself through Nature. The divine portents are not typically in the form of miraculous interventions [but rather are found in] the moods of the seasons, the tempers of natural forces and the pregnant silence of the empty space. (78)³

The *Qur’an* displaces humanity from the center of creation as in Surah 40:57: “Assuredly the creation of the heavens and the earth is greater than the creation of humankind; yet most people understand not” (Gottlieb 46).

Indigenous cultures in the Americas also widen the scope of the sacred to encompass Nature. Catherine Albanese notes the abundance of indigenous folk tales in which animals and humans shift shapes, and melt into their mystical doubles in a sacred universe (24-25). Some Christian thinkers in the American colonies also perceived the divine in Nature. Despite his Calvinist obsession with personal evil and original sin (“When I look into my heart, and take a view of my wickedness, it looks like an abyss infinitely deeper than hell” (Marsden 45), Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth century theologian from New England, sensed God’s majesty in Nature: “When we behold the light and brightness of the sun, the golden edges of an evening cloud, or the beauteous rainbow, we behold the adumbrations of His glory and goodness, and in the blue sky, of his mildness and gentleness” (Sleeth 208).

The ideas of the Enlightenment which Paine introduced to the United States remain, even today, a blueprint for a better world. In *Agrarian Justice* (1795), Paine proposed a guaranteed minimum income for landless citizens. Needless to say, this idea never took hold in the United States, where the rich continue to accumulate excessive wealth, and where corporate power continues to corrupt politics and degrade labor and environmental standards.

Paine’s religious thought beckons amidst ecological crisis. The failure of the 2009 Copenhagen summit to compel nations to reduce greenhouse emissions only redoubles the need to free the world from the corporate death grip. In a world seemingly condemned to endless war and destruction, in which basic human needs remain

largely unmet, the time has come to conceive the human as inseparable from the natural world. We have the example of Prhaku Pitak who revived a forest conservation movement in Thailand when he ordained a large tree as a monk and wrapped a saffron robe around it (Gardner 34-35). The tree ordination ceremony underscores the grim fact that deforestation causes twenty percent of atmospheric greenhouse gases (Horta 110).

Such ceremonies are needed to fulfill Paine's prophecy in *Common Sense*: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again" (Berry 41). In more than four hundred coastal areas, fertilizer and pollution have depleted oxygen in the ocean to the point where fish can no longer survive. According to a 2006 estimate by the United Nations Environment Programme, each square mile of ocean contains about forty-six thousand pieces of plastic debris, which cause the deaths of more than a million seabirds and one hundred thousand marine animals each year (Marks). Carbon dioxide emissions have increased the acidity of the oceans by thirty percent, disrupting the web of life (Lean). The levels of rivers have dropped significantly over the past fifty years as glaciers melt due to global warming.

The melting glaciers forebode more than a loss of water for irrigation and drinking. For instance, every fifteen percent loss of the Greenland ice sheet will cause ocean levels to rise one meter which would inundate 14,000 square miles of land in the U.S. alone (McGrath). Thomas Berry concludes that it is time

to cease imposing our mechanistic patterns on the biological processes of the earth, to resist the impulse to control, to command, to force, to oppress, and to begin quite humbly to follow the guidance of the larger community on which all life depends. Our fulfillment is not in our isolated human grandeur, but in our intimacy with the larger earth community, for this is also the larger dimension of our being (xiv).

On Berry's advice depends our very survival. Air pollution causes the deaths of 2.4 million people a year, according to an estimate by the World Health Organization (Bhandari). A recent study estimates that twenty four billion pounds of toxins are released into the environment each year in the U. S., causing developmental disabilities and neurological impairment in over 360,000 children in the U. S. ("New Report").

What would Paine have thought of the present defiling of the Sacred Book of Nature? Possibly he would have understood that the ecological crisis will not be solved by appeals for individual self-transformation but by abolishing capitalism, a destructive economic system that Edward Abbey aptly compares to the cancer cell which destroys its host in pursuit of unlimited growth (Reinsborough "Global" 31-32). Corporate greed and destructive consumption threaten the survival of indigenous peoples worldwide. In 2002, the U'wa people forced Occidental Petroleum to withdraw from their lands in Colombia despite military repression and

the murder of indigenous activists (Reinsborough "How" 4-8). Shortly afterwards, the U'wa traditional authorities issued a statement that reads in part:

We all belong to the divine creation, and as such we deserve respect. Mother Earth despite being violated, continues to silently feed and sustain us... She speaks but very few listen to her voice. She cries out insistently but everything continues the same... The money king is only an illusion. Capitalism is blind and barbaric. It buys consciences, governments, peoples, and nations. It poisons the water. It destroys everything. And to the U'wa, it says that we are crazy, but we want to continue being crazy if it means we can continue to exist on our dear Mother Earth (U'wa 3-4).

There is a growing realization that our crisis is more spiritual than environmental, as Lynton K. Caldwell points out:

The environmental crisis is an outward manifestation of a crisis of mind and spirit. There could be no greater misconception of its meaning than to believe it to be concerned only with endangered wildlife, human-made ugliness, and pollution. These are part of it, but more importantly, the crisis is concerned with the kind of creatures we are and what we must become in order to survive. (Dewitt 45)

The *Bible* contradicts the notion that the world was made for the sole benefit and pleasure of humanity. *Leviticus 25: 23* reads, "The land shall not be sold forever; for the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me." If we were to see the earth as if for the very first time, we would regard its creatures as cherished companions. Verse 6: 38 of the *Qur'an* situates us in the natural world: "There is not an animal that lives on earth, nor a being that flies on its wings but forms part of communities like you" (Hope 163).

We would do well to retrieve the ancestral memory of peoples who preserved their bonds with the sacred, for as Berry notes, "we have lost our sense of courtesy towards the earth and its inhabitants, our sense of gratitude, our willingness to recognize the sacred character of habitat, our capacity for the awesome, for the numinous quality of every earthly reality" (Hope 14). The Mohawk Nation begins each meeting with The Thanksgiving Address, in which the Mohawks greet and thank in turn the earth, plants, waters, trees, animals, winds, thunder, sun, moon, stars, and the four spirits known as the Sky Dwellers. Each invocation concludes with the words "Now our minds are one." Paine addresses the sense of oneness with all creation:

Do we want to contemplate his power? We see it in the immensity of the Creation. Do we want to contemplate his wisdom? We see it in the unchangeable order by which the incomprehensible whole is governed. Do we want to contemplate his munificence? We see it in the abundance with which he fills the earth. Do we want to contemplate his mercy? We see it in his not withholding that abundance even from the unthankful. In fine, do we want to know what God is? Search not the book called the Scripture, which any human hand might make, but the Scripture called the Creation. (*Age* 31)

These words echo the conviction of St. John of Damascus, one of the last Church Fathers, that “the whole earth is a living icon of the face of God” (Sleeth 207). Paine’s most lasting legacy would be for us to harness the world’s spiritual heritage for ecological transformation. The time has come for an ecumenical movement that rises to the defense of a world that is wondrously alive, and which heeds Paine’s famous words from *Rights of Man*: “My country is the world and to do good is my religion” (*Rights* 196).

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Notes

1. The Persian poet Hafiz also laments the inadequacy of language to convey the sacred, even though his own language does just that: “I wish I could put the swaying splendor / Of the fields into words / So that you could hold Truth / Against your body / And dance” (“I Wish I Could Speak” *The Gift* 305).
2. The public neglect of Paine’s legacy continues to this day. In 2009, the New York State Attorney General removed the trustees of the Thomas Paine Museum in New Rochelle for malfeasance after they sold valuable museum items on the private market. Thomas Paine, unfortunately, has no grave to turn in.
3. Hafiz is among those who sees those portents, reminding us that “God courts us with the beauty of this world” (Cousineau 178). The Islam of the *Qur’an* and Hafiz and Kabir contradicts the grim and coercive Islam of Saudi monarchs and the Taliban, who have reduced Islam to little more than sundry prohibitions and punishments, as if Islam were defined solely by what Muslims ought not to do. It would be like trying to define a human being by saying that a human is not a dog, an ant, or a tree.