

Benjamin Franklin's Letter to Thomas Paine

Benjamin Franklin (1706-90) was a printer, author, inventor, scientist, philanthropist, statesman, diplomat, and public official. He was the first president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery (1774); a member of the Continental Congress (1775-76) where he signed the Declaration of Independence (1776); a negotiator and signer of the final treaty of peace with Great Britain (1783); and a delegate to the Constitutional Convention where he signed the federal Constitution (1787); Franklin was one of only six men who signed both the Declaration and the Constitution. He wrote his own epitaph, which declared: *“The body of Benjamin Franklin, printer, like the cover of an old book, its contents torn out, stripped of its lettering, and gilding, lies here, food for worms. But the work shall not be lost; for it will, as he believed, appear once more in a new and more elegant edition, revised and corrected by the Author.”*

Benjamin Franklin was frequently consulted by Thomas Paine for advice and suggestions regarding his political writings, and Franklin assisted Paine with some of his famous essays. This letter ¹ is Franklin's response to a manuscript Paine sent him that advocated against the concept of a providential God.

TO THOMAS PAINE.

[Date uncertain.]

DEAR SIR,

I have read your manuscript with some attention. By the argument it contains against a particular Providence, though you allow a general Providence, you strike at the foundations of all religion. For without the belief of a Providence, that takes cognizance of, guards, and guides, and may favor particular persons, there is no motive to worship a Deity, to fear his displeasure, or to pray for his protection. I will not enter into any discussion of your principles, though you seem to desire it. At present I shall only give you my opinion, that, though your reasonings are subtle and may prevail with some readers, you will not succeed so as to change the general sentiments of mankind on that subject, and the consequence of printing this piece will be, a great deal of odium drawn upon yourself, mischief to you, and no benefit to others. He that spits against the wind, spits in his own face.

But, were you to succeed, do you imagine any good would be done by it? You yourself may find it easy to live a virtuous life, without the assistance afforded by religion; you having a clear perception of the advantages of virtue, and the disadvantages of vice, and possessing a strength of resolution sufficient to enable you to resist common

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temptations. But think how great a portion of mankind consists of weak and ignorant men and women, and of inexperienced, inconsiderate youth of both sexes, who have need of the motives of religion to restrain them from vice, to support their virtue, and retain them in the practice of it till it becomes habitual, which is the great point for its security. And perhaps you are indebted to her originally, that is, to your religious education, for the habits of virtue upon which you now justly value yourself. You might easily display your excellent talents of reasoning upon a less hazardous subject, and thereby obtain a rank with our most distinguished authors. For among us it is not necessary, as among the Hottentots, that a youth, to be raised into the company of men, should prove his manhood by beating his mother.

I would advise you, therefore, not to attempt unchaining the tiger, but to burn this piece before it is seen by any other person; whereby you will save yourself a great deal of mortification by the enemies it may raise against you, and perhaps a good deal of regret and repentance. If men are so wicked with religion, what would they be if without it. I intend this letter itself as a proof of my friendship, and therefore add no professions to it; but subscribe simply yours,

B. Franklin

Paine later published his *Age of Reason*, which infuriated many of the Founding Fathers. John Adams wrote, "The Christian religion is, above all the religions that ever prevailed or existed in ancient or modern times, the religion of wisdom, virtue, equity and humanity, let the Blackguard [scoundrel, rogue] Paine say what he will."² Samuel Adams wrote Paine a stiff rebuke, telling him, "[W]hen I heard you had turned your mind to a defence of infidelity, I felt myself much astonished and more grieved that you had attempted a measure so injurious to the feelings and so repugnant to the true interest of so great a part of the citizens of the United States."³

Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration, wrote to his friend and signer of the Constitution John Dickinson that Paine's *Age of Reason* was "absurd and impious";⁴ Charles Carroll, a signer of the Declaration, described Paine's work as "blasphemous writings against the Christian religion";⁵ John Witherspoon said that Paine was "ignorant of human nature as well as an enemy to the Christian faith";⁶ and Elias Boudinot, President of Congress, even published the *Age of Revelation*—a full-length rebuttal to Paine's work.⁷ Patrick Henry, too, wrote a refutation of Paine's work which he described as "the puny efforts of Paine."⁸

When William Paterson, signer of the Constitution and a Justice on the U. S. Supreme Court, learned that some Americans seemed to agree with Paine's work, he thundered, "Infatuated Americans, why renounce your country, your religion, and your God?"⁹ Zephaniah Swift, author of America's first law book, noted, "He has the impudence and effrontery [shameless boldness] to address to the citizens of the United States of America a paltry performance which is intended to shake their faith in the religion of their fathers."¹⁰ John Jay, an author of the *Federalist Papers* and the original Chief-Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court, was

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comforted by the fact that Christianity would prevail despite Paine's attack, "I have long been of the opinion that the evidence of the truth of Christianity requires only to be carefully examined to produce conviction in candid minds." ¹¹ In fact, Paine's views caused such vehement public opposition that he spent his last years in New York as "an outcast" in "social ostracism" and was buried in a farm field because no American cemetery would accept his remains. ¹²

Endnotes

1. Jared Sparks, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, (Boston: Tappan, Whittemore, and Mason, 1840), Vol. X, pp. 281-282. ([Return](#))
2. John Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, Charles Francis Adams, editor (Boston: Charles Little and James Brown, 1841), Vol. III, p. 421, diary entry for July 26, 1796. ([Return](#))
3. William V. Wells, *The Life and Public Services of Samuel Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1865), Vol. III, pp. 372-373, to Thomas Paine on November 30, 1802. ([Return](#))
4. Benjamin Rush, *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, L. H. Butterfield, editor (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), Vol. II, p. 770, to John Dickinson on February 16, 1796. ([Return](#))
5. Joseph Gurn, *Charles Carroll of Carrollton* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1932), p. 203. ([Return](#))
6. John Witherspoon, *The Works of the Reverend John Witherspoon* (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1802), Vol. III, p. 24, n. 2, from "The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men," delivered at Princeton on May 17, 1776. ([Return](#))
7. Elias Boudinot, *The Age of Revelation* (Philadelphia: Asbury Dickins, 1801), pp. xii-xiv, from the prefatory remarks to his daughter, Mrs. Susan V. Bradford. ([Return](#))
8. S. G. Arnold, *The Life of Patrick Henry of Virginia* (Auburn and Buffalo: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1854), p. 250, to his daughter Betsy on August 20, 1796; *see also*, George Morgan, *Patrick Henry* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1929), p. 366 n; and Bishop William Meade, *Old Churches, Ministers, and Families of Virginia* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1857), Vol. II, p. 12. ([Return](#))
9. John E. O'Conner, *William Paterson: Lawyer and Statesman* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1979), p. 244, from a Fourth of July Oration in 1798. ([Return](#))
10. Zephaniah Swift, *A System of Laws of the State of Connecticut* (Windham: John Byrne, 1796), Vol. II, pp. 323-324. ([Return](#))
11. William Jay, *The Life of John Jay* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1833) Vol. II, p. 266, to the Rev. Uzal Ogden on February 14, 1796. ([Return](#))
12. *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. "Thomas Paine."

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