

TEXT 5: Age of Reason, Part First, Section 1 by Thomas Paine

Background: Thomas Paine communicated the complex ideas of the Enlightenment--and how they inspired the Founding Fathers to revolution—to average Americans. His essay The American Crisis thoroughly explained his position on American freedom and why it was necessary to break free from Britain. His life was not without controversy, however. His radical views on religion and faith left him few friends. Such was the impact of his views that his writings fell out of favor. His funeral was sparsely attended.

5 IT has been my intention, for several years past, to publish my thoughts upon religion. I am well aware of the difficulties that attend the subject, and from that consideration, had reserved it to a more advanced period of life. I intended it to be the last offering I should make to my fellow-citizens of all nations, and that at a time when the purity of the motive that induced me to it, could not admit of a question, even by those who might disapprove the work. [. . .]

[NOTE: Paine uses the extracted section here to mention how France is going through a religious crisis having recently abolished its national religion. FRANCE!]

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.

10 But, lest it should be supposed that I believe in many other things in addition to these, I shall, in the progress of this work, declare the things I do not believe, and my reasons for not believing them.

I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church*, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.

15 All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

I do not mean by this declaration to condemn those who believe otherwise; they have the same right to their belief as I have to mine. But it is necessary to the happiness of man, that he be mentally faithful to himself. Infidelity* does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe.

20 It is impossible to calculate the moral mischief, if I may so express it, that mental lying has produced in society. When a man has so far corrupted and prostituted the chastity* of his mind, as to subscribe his professional belief to things he does not believe, he has prepared himself for the commission of every other crime. He takes up the trade of a priest for the sake of gain, and in order to qualify himself for that trade, he begins with a perjury. Can we conceive any thing more destructive to morality than this?

25 Soon after I had published the pamphlet Common Sense in America I saw the exceeding probability that a revolution in the system of government would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion. The adulterous connection of church and state, wherever it had taken place [. . .] had so effectually prohibited by pains and penalties, every discussion upon established creeds, and upon first principles of religion, that until the system of government should be changed, those subjects could not be brought
30 fairly and openly before the world; but that whenever this should be done, a revolution in the system of religion would follow. Human inventions and priestcraft would be detected; and man would return to the pure, unmixed and unadulterated belief of one God, and no more.

35 Every national church or religion has established itself by pretending some special mission from God, communicated to certain individuals. The Jews have their Moses; the Christians their Jesus Christ, their apostles and saints; and the Turks their Mahomet*, as if the way to God was not open to every man alike.

Each of those churches shows certain books, which they call revelation, or the word of God. [. . .] Each of those churches accuse the other of unbelief; and for my own part, I disbelieve them all.

40 As it is necessary to affix right ideas to words, I will, before I proceed further into the subject, offer some other observations on the word revelation. Revelation, when applied to religion, means something communicated immediately from God to man.

45 No one will deny or dispute the power of the Almighty to make such a communication, if he pleases. But admitting, for the sake of a case, that something has been revealed to a certain person, and not revealed to any other person, it is revelation to that person only. When he tells it to a second person, a second to a third, a third to a fourth, and so on, it ceases to be a revelation to all those persons. It is revelation to the first person only, and hearsay to every other, and consequently they are not obliged to believe it.

50 It is a contradiction in terms and ideas, to call anything a revelation that comes to us at second-hand, either verbally or in writing. Revelation is necessarily limited to the first communication — after this, it is only an account of something which that person says was a revelation made to him; and though he may find himself obliged to believe it, it cannot be incumbent* on me to believe it in the same manner; for it was not a revelation made to me, and I have only his word for it that it was made to him.

55 When Moses* told the children of Israel that he received the two tables of the commandments from the hands of God, they were not obliged to believe him, because they had no other authority for it than his telling them so; and I have no other authority for it than some historian telling me so. The commandments carry no internal evidence of divinity with them; they contain some good moral precepts, such as any man qualified to be a lawgiver, or a legislator, could produce himself, without having recourse to supernatural intervention.

Jewish Church = Judaism Roman Church = Catholicism Greek Church = Greek Orthodox Religion Turkish Church = Islam Protestant Church = All other forms of Christianity	infidelity (18): not having faith or not being true to something	chastity (21): purity
Mahomet (35): archaic spelling of Muhammad, prophet of Islam	incumbent (51): necessary	Moses (53): In the Old Testament, Moses was given the Ten Commandments by God on stone tablets