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Clerical Perspectives on Deism

Paine's *The Age of Reason*
in Virginia

JAMES H. SMYLLIE

THOMAS PAINE has not always enjoyed the best press. Theodore Roosevelt labeled Paine a "filthy little atheist." This attack epitomizes much misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the eighteenth-century Deist by Americans. Recent attempts to explain him and his approach to religion have not altogether cleared the air.¹ However, the clergy who attacked Paine after the publication of *The Age of Reason* have not themselves enjoyed a favorable press. These pious men of the cloth have been accused of accumulating lies about Paine and slandering him as an infidel and blasphemer. It is with this group of public-opinion makers in Virginia that the following remarks have to do.

Secondary accounts of ecclesiastical combat with eighteenth-century infidelity do not flatter the clergy. G. Adolf Koch traced the "triumph of fidelity" over the deistic clubs, lectureships, and newspapers which attempted to popularize infidelity. He maintains that the religious controversy became "wretchedly abusive and vulgar" after the publication of *The Age of Reason*.² Herbert A. Morais, who has given most attention to the opposition to *The Age of Reason*, asserts that works "masquerading under the pretentious titles of Answers" were nothing but "emotional diatribes directed against its author."³ More recently, Martin E. Marty has analyzed *The Infidel* as a "foil" for the maintenance of the orthodox order by men like

¹ See, e.g., William E. Woodward, *Tom Paine: America's Godfather, 1734-1809* (New York, 1945); also Harry Hayden Clark, "An Historical Interpretation of Thomas Paine's Religion," *University of California Chronicle*, 35 (January 1933), 56-87.

² G. Adolf Koch, *Republican Religion, The American Revolution and the Cult of Reason* (New York, 1933), p. 250.

³ Herbert M. Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America* (New York, 1934), p. 164.

Timothy Dwight and as an “ally” in the dissenter’s fight against establishments in the states.⁴ Richard Beale Davis, in his recent study of *Intellectual Life in Jefferson’s Virginia, 1790–1830*, mentions Paine’s *Age of Reason* in a cursory manner.⁵ The clergy have been dismissed in these writings too unceremoniously or without a sufficient hearing of their apologetics. It is not the purpose of this paper to praise the clergy. Its intention is rather to explore the reasons why *The Age of Reason* provoked a “present crisis” in Virginia in the last decade of the eighteenth century. What apologetic did the clergy offer against Paine? Why did they succeed or fail in their opposition?

Writings of Virginia clergy make an interesting case study. This analysis has to do with four anti-deistical tracts written and circulated by Old Dominion apologists. Andrew Broaddus, young convert from the Episcopalians to the Baptists, met Paine in a pamphlet entitled suggestively *The Age of Reason and Revelation*, in 1795.⁶ James Muir, Scottish immigrant and long-time pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, wrote *An Examination of the Principles Contained in the Age of Reason* in the same year.⁷ In 1797 the Presbyterian Moses Hoge involved himself in a more ambitious and weighty refutation. Hoge, who was president of Hampden-Sydney College as well as professor of theology in that institution, published what he entitled *Christian Panoply* in order to provide the Christian with a full suit of armor.⁸ For breastplate he reprinted the Anglican bishop

⁴ Martin E. Marty, *The Infidel, Free-thought and American Religion* (Cleveland and New York, 1961), Chs. i, iii, iv.

⁵ Richard Beale Davis, *Intellectual Life in Jefferson’s Virginia, 1790–1830* (Chapel Hill, 1964).

⁶ Andrew Broaddus, *The Age of Reason & Revelation* (Richmond, 1795). Broaddus (1789–1848) was born in Caroline County, Virginia. Although his father intended him for an Episcopal minister, Broaddus fell under the influence of Baptists and was ordained a Baptist elder in 1791. He preached in the counties of Caroline, King and Queen, and King William and seems to have been popular among Baptists to the north. For a short while he was assistant pastor in the First Baptist Church of Richmond (*Annals of the American Pulpit*, ed., William Sprague, 9 vols. [New York, 1857–1869] VI, 290–96; and *The Sermons and Other Writings of the Rev. Andrew Broaddus*, ed., Andrew Broaddus, Jr., with a memoir of his life by J. B. Jeter [New York, 1852]).

⁷ James Muir, *An Examination of the Principles contained in the Age of Reason* (Baltimore, 1795). Muir (1757–1820) was born in Scotland, studied theology in Edinburgh, and was ordained by “Dissenting Ministers in the City of London and neighborhood” in 1781. After teaching and preaching in Bermuda he came to the United States where he accepted a call to the Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1789 (*Annals of the American Pulpit*, III, 516–21).

⁸ *Christian Panoply*, ed. Moses Hoge (Shepherd’s Town, 1797). Moses Hoge

Richard Watson's *Apology for the Bible*, addressed to the second part of *The Age of Reason*, Watson's *An Address to Scoffers at Religion*, and William Paley's *A Brief View of the Historical Evidences of Christianity*. The argument of the Lord Bishop of Llandaff, Watson's official title, was already much in demand in Virginia according to the intrepid Mason Weems. Weems had informed Mathew Carey in 1796 that he could put "much money" into the printer's coffers if he would publish a large edition and set the price low.⁹ Perhaps Hoge had already discovered this. To Watson's breastplate he added a lance of his own forging entitled *The Sophist Unmasked*, over the unsubtle pseudonym "Philobiblius." An anonymous theologian, "Common Sense," printed nine articles attacking Paine in the *Virginia Gazette and Richmond Chronicle*, beginning 10 March 1795 and running to 5 May 1795.¹⁰ While this author may not have been a clergyman, several aspects of his apologetic are worth keeping in perspective. Meanwhile Episcopal clergy, still suffering from the shock of revolution and disestablishment, apparently allowed Watson to champion their cause against Paine.



The dispute with Christianity exposed in *The Age of Reason*, Parts One and Two, must first be analyzed as background for a study of the Virginia clergymen's controversy with Tom Paine. Dissatisfaction with Christianity as enunciated by Paine was nothing new in the United States, as the studies of Deism clearly indicate. Colonel Ethan Allan, hero of Ticonderoga, had written *Reason, The Only Oracle of Man* in 1784.¹¹ Fire, providentially started, according to clerical con-

(1752–1820) was born at Cedargrove, Frederick County, Virginia. He studied at Liberty Hall Academy (Now Washington and Lee University) and was ordained by the Hanover Presbytery in 1782. In 1807 he was inaugurated as president of Hampden-Sydney College where he taught theology (John Blair Hoge, *Life of Moses Hoge*, ed. Henry M. Brimm [Richmond: Union Theological Seminary Library, 1964]).

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ "Common Sense" in *The Virginia Gazette and Richmond Chronicle*, beginning 10 March 1795, and ending 5 May 1795, microfilm in Union Theological Seminary Library, Richmond, Virginia.

¹¹ Ethan Allan, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (Bennington, Vt., 1784).

temporaries, kept the volume by the “Great Clodhopping oracle of man” from wide circulation.¹² Later Elihu Palmer attempted to reap the harvest of religious discontent by aggressively and aggravatingly organizing the rationalist movement.¹³

Paine had trumpeted his message on both sides of the Atlantic in *Common Sense*, published in 1776, and *The Rights of Man*, beginning in 1790. In these he championed revolutions by attacking monarchy and despotism. The popularity of *Common Sense* among Colonists has won for the English pamphleteer the accolade “America’s godfather.”¹⁴ Paine was in France during the French Revolution. His opposition to the violence made his support of the Revolution appear ambivalent. He was incarcerated. While in prison he turned his attention to theology in an attempt to defend “true” against “fabulous” religion. It was his intention to save the revolutions of the eighteenth century by promoting Deism against the atheism which he believed was fostered by Christianity. Part One of *The Age of Reason* was published in 1794 by Joel Barlow while Paine was still in prison. Part Two was published just after Paine had cheated the guillotine in 1795.¹⁵ These attacks stimulated Paine’s “Infidel Internationale.” At the risk of distortion several aspects of Paine’s controversy should be emphasized.

Positively, the international citizen professed his own faith. He was not an infidel, according to his own definition. He defined the infidel as a person who professes to believe what he did not believe in actuality (I, 6). His credo contained two articles:

¹² Timothy Dwight, *The Triumph of Infidelity* (Printed in the World, 1788), p. iii.

¹³ Koch, *American Revolution*, Chs. ii and iii. Somewhat later Paine made a reference to Palmer and his work. To an unknown friend he wrote: “Mr. Livingston brought me a book from N. York. It is a collection [of] discourses preached by Elihu Palmer. He was a priest, but is now one of my converts, and has opened a meeting house at New York, to expose the lies of the Bible and show it is a forgery” (Thomas Paine to ———, Autograph Letter [1801], in *Washington-Madison Papers, collected and preserved by James Madison*, comp. Stan V. Henkels [Philadelphia, 1892], p. 264).

¹⁴ Woodward, *Tom Paine*.

¹⁵ The editions of Paine’s writings cited in this essay are as follows: *The Works of Thomas Paine*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: James Carey, 1797); *The Age of Reason*, Part I, is found in II, 1–54. *The Age of Reason*, Part II, is found in *The Theological Works of Thomas Paine* (Boston, 1851), pp. 71–152. A third part of *The Age of Reason* was published just before Paine’s death in 1807. References to part and page will follow the quotations.

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. (I, 5)

Paine did not deny that there was a revelation, that God had “immediately” communicated with man (I, 7). God was the “Creator,” (I, 19, 23, 24) the “great mechanic of the creation,” the “first philosopher and original teacher of all science” (II, 151). God the Creator had given to man the “choicest gift . . . *the gift of reason*” (I, 23). God, Paine’s “Almighty Lecturer,” (I, 31) spoke his word to man’s reason in His creation. Paine exalted creation as God’s revelation. The beauty of this revelation is that through creation God spoke “universally to man.” Creation could not be made counterfeit or altered by human invention (I, 23–24). Moreover, creation could be preached to “all nations” and, what is more, “to all worlds” (I, 24–25). God’s revelation in creation, Paine conceded, was conveyed in the Scripture in some places. For example, he found it described in the Book of Job and in the nineteenth Psalm (I, 25, 28). Not having a copy of the Bible with him when he wrote Part One, Paine quoted favorably and fervently Addison’s famous paraphrase of the Psalm. Addison began his hymn:

The spacious firmament on high
With all the blue ethereal sky,
And spangled heavens, a shining frame,
Their great original proclaim,

and concluded with this ringing confession,

In reason’s ear they all rejoice
And utter forth a glorious voice,
Forever singing, as they shine,
The hand that made us is divine.

In a negative mood, Paine turned against Christianity (I, 26). It had inaugurated the “age of Ignorance” (I, 35). In keeping with his own conception of revelation, he attacked the Christian’s concept as circumscribed and fickle. The Christian believed revelation was me-

diated through the written word. Therefore, it was a changeable and parochial language (I, 7, 18). Revelation must be unalterable and universal. To be revelation, it must be “communicated *immediately* from God to man,” and not strained through another man’s tongue (I, 7). In the second place, Paine attempted to undermine the authority of Christian revelation by undercutting the Scriptures. The Old and New Testaments were false, in part because they suggested that God was fickle in his dealings with man (I, 19). They consisted of fabulous mythology fabricated by mythologists (I, 8–9). This could be exposed in the stories about Creation, the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and the Resurrection of “Jesus Christ,” and his inclusion in a “trinity of God” (I, 19–21). Jesus was a philanthropist, a teacher of “the belief in one God” and the practice of “moral virtues” (I, 19). In Part One Paine kicked savagely at the Christian crutches of “Mystery, Miracle, and Prophecy,” employed to support befogged and befuddled religion (I, 47–54). By the time he wrote Part Two Paine had obtained a copy of the Bible. He found it to be “much worse” than he had imagined (II, 75). He despised the “paltry” tales he read therein which Christians had the audacity to call the word of God. Turning biblical critic he continued his attack by questioning the authenticity of authorship on which the Christian based his case. Moses did not write the Pentateuch and Isaiah did not write Isaiah. The books were forgeries (I, 13, 19). In support of these claims Paine cited two of the most important biblical scholars of the early critical movement, Abenezra and Spinoza, the former a Jewish exegete, the latter the Jewish philosopher (I, 102–103).¹⁶

In the third place, standing on his creed of ethical conviction and full of moral indignation, Paine accused Christians of accepting the authority of a book which was full of wickedness and productive of evil in man’s life. The Bible was a “history of wickedness,” which had corrupted and brutalized mankind (I, 15). Christianity, according to Paine, was a compound “chiefly of Manism with but little Deism.” It was as near to “atheism as twilight is to darkness” (I, 27–28). As an engine of power, it served despotism. As a means to wealth, it served the avarice of priests. And what was most important and worst, Christianity opposed the use of reason and the development of sci-

¹⁶ These references indicate Paine was in touch with the early critical movement. But the author of *The Age of Reason* shows slight appreciation of the problems these scholars raised about the Bible.

ence. It opposed the study of creation, the “Bible of the Deist,” and of rational man (II, 148).

Paine’s own positive profession and his negative broadside against Christianity were not new. His arguments were twice-told, as old as seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Deists, e.g., Tindal against revelation, Conyers Middleton against Christian mythology, Morgan against the Old Testament, Woolston against miracles, and Chubb against Christian morality.¹⁷ But since anti-deistical writers had not succeeded in answering these attacks satisfactorily, *The Age of Reason* came as a fresh broadside demanding response. Since anti-deistical writers had succeeded in confining deistical speculations about Christian revelation to the polite parlors and coffee houses, *The Age of Reason* landed as a bombshell. As Leslie Stephen suggests, while the arguments were the same, the voice was different, and the context of the discussion had shifted.¹⁸ With vehement spirit and vigorous English, apparently unaware of his own plagiarisms, Paine moved the debate out into the street.



It is not clear when Paine’s *The Age of Reason* arrived in Virginia but by 1795 there were followers of “Mr. Paine’s Reasonable Age.”¹⁹ Parson Weems was instructing Mathew Carey that he would help the Philadelphia publishers in the “affair of Master Tommy Pain” provided they would print Paine with Watson’s reply.²⁰ By 1798 the affair was hot. Weems, from Virginia, complained to Carey that if he peddled Paine without Watson’s defense of Christianity the “Bishop & Lords spiritual would tear” him to pieces.²¹ This paper does not have to do with the reception of Paine in Virginia, as interesting as that bit of publishing history may be. Rather, what was the reaction of clergymen to the case Paine presented against Christianity?

¹⁷ See I. Woodbridge Riley, *American Philosophy, The Early Schools* (New York, 1907), Chs. vii and viii.

¹⁸ Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London, 1881), II, 458.

¹⁹ Cf., Robert Michie to David Watson, 9 May 1795, as quoted in “Letters from William and Mary, 1798–1801,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 29 (April 1921), 134–35.

²⁰ Weems, *His Words and Ways*, pp. 297–98.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Why did *The Age of Reason* cause consternation among Protestant clergy in Virginia? Actually, Paine had made himself persona non grata among some Virginians in 1780. He had called upon Virginia to give up to the Union claims to vast western lands.²² This was years before the publication of his tract, but when he printed his appeal to the “public good” he made Virginians angry. In 1796 he levelled an attack upon the “Father of his Country” in his *Letter to George Washington*.²³ This bit of berating appeared after the publication of the Broaddus and Muir pamphlets and after the articles by “Common Sense” had been published in the *Virginia Gazette and Richmond Chronicle*. While these subversive attacks on Virginia’s interests and Virginia’s first citizen may have aggravated the debate neither was mentioned in the anti-Paine material. The chief aggravations and incentives came from other causes according to intimations in the pamphlets themselves.

In the first place, the clergy were concerned because Paine, the political revolutionist, author of *Common Sense* and *The Rights of Man*, a person of great influence, had turned against them. This was particularly troublesome because they had supported the revolution and spirit of 1776 with enthusiasm. Paine dedicated Part One to his “Fellow Citizens of the United States of America,” thus recalling the camaraderie of the past (I, 3). The storm which Paine loosed in France, where, according to Hoge, religion was in a “state of wreck,”²⁴ could not but buffet clergymen in Virginia who had endorsed Paine’s political philosophy.

Secondly, Paine’s attack was, at least implicitly, against Protestantism. Though *The Age of Reason* was written in a Roman Catholic country, Paine directed his heaviest fire at the Bible. For the Protestant the Bible was the only rule of faith and practice, and Paine’s attack came as a particular shock to Virginians and other Americans, primarily Protestant in orientation, primarily biblical in outlook. Confusion was compounded because Paine had employed the Bible to support his case against tyranny in his political pamphlets. America’s aristocratic elite had shown sympathy with many

²² Thomas Paine, *Public Good, being an examination into the claims of Virginia to the vacant western territory* (London, [1780] 1819).

²³ Thomas Paine, *Letter to George Washington, President of the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1796).

²⁴ Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked* in *Christian Panoply*, p. 252.

Deist ideas. They did not mind the “superstition,” as they saw it, of the Christian elect; it was, presumably, good for morality. Now Paine, once an esteemed political pamphleteer, raised questions concerning the beneficial moral effect of Christianity.²⁵

A third matter must be considered. The Baptist Broaddus included a long footnote at the conclusion of his pamphlet urging the abolition of the remnants of establishment in Virginia and elsewhere in the United States. Dissenters had allied themselves with Deists in the struggle against what Broaddus called “spiritual tyranny and oppression.” Continued use of the power of the state to sustain Christian faith and life gave Paine “weapons against Christianity,” according to Broaddus. In *The Age of Reason* Paine displayed utter disregard for doctrines of Christianity revered by dissenters. The old alliance began to show signs of disrepair. Broaddus urged the Christian community to repudiate coercion, to arouse itself, and to rob the infidel of this cause for offense.²⁶ Moreover, the dissenter now had to take seriously his own evangelical contention that the true weapons of Christianity were spiritual and the church would emerge victorious after a persuasive commendation of the gospel itself.

Protestant ministers were most concerned with Paine, the blasphemer,²⁷ who in his arguments was as much a punner and quibbler

²⁵ See Davis, *Intellectual Life in Virginia*, p. 123. Also Broaddus, *The Age of Reason and Revelation*, Sec. 1, Introductory Remarks. In an extended footnote the author maintains: “Any person who reads *Common Sense* and *The Age of Reason*, will easily discover that Mr. Paine dwells more on Scripture (in a favorable way) in the former, than he does on our eternal state in the latter, tho’ this seems to be his book of Divinity.” Allowing for a change in mind he cautiously asks, “Who would have thought, from reading *Common Sense*, that Mr. P. considered ‘the Bible a system of wickedness, which had served to corrupt and brutalize mankind?’” Then Broaddus cites several passages from Paine the politician in which Paine uses the Bible as a revelation against government by kings. Actually Paine had intimated his hostility to certain aspects of Christianity in his political writings.

²⁶ See Broaddus, *Age of Reason*, pp. 68–69. “When we consider that the adulterous connection of Church and State, or the Establishment of Churches, and every degree of spiritual tyranny and oppression, seem to have furnished Mr. P[aine] with weapons against Christianity, how can we refrain from wishing that every vestige of such oppression were extirpated from the earth, and how can we, without lamenting, reflect that this is not the case, even in our favored America?” Broaddus was actually attacking the Episcopal Church, referring particularly to glebes still held by that church after its disestablishment in Virginia. In 1796 a statute sequestrating glebes was passed.

²⁷ Muir, *An Examination of the Principles contained in the Age of Reason*, p. iv; Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 314.

as he accused the Apostle Paul of being.²⁸ If their language appeared abusive, as historians have suggested that it was, the clergymen were after all repaying Paine in kind for the names he had called them and Christianity. Moreover, in their view he was exactly what they called him. But in measuring the abuse heaped upon Paine it should be noted that the Virginia clergy handled him with far more politeness than did Uzal Ogden, the first American to answer Paine, in his *Antidote to Deism*, subtitled *The Deist Unmasked*.²⁹ Following Bishop Watson the Virginians tried to remember Paine's humanity.³⁰ They moderated their language. Muir answered without opposing "scorn to scorn"—Muir scorn for Paine scorn.³¹ Broadus considered Paine's genius "unhappily applied" in *The Age of Reason*.³² He suggested that what Milton said about Lucifer might be accommodated to describe the philosopher. He paraphrased *Paradise Lost* substituting genius for archangel.³³

Nor appeared
Less than a *genius* ruined, and th' excess of glory obscur'd.

With this reference he intended to pay Paine a compliment.

What were the Virginians' arguments against Paine? The clergy attempted to use reason to turn Tom against Tom. Paine had proclaimed, "My own mind is my own church" (I, 6). The clergy intended to show him that this church was built on shifting sand and not on solid rock. Reason might be pilloried on its own terms. This is the significance of the apologist's pseudonym, "Common Sense," and the quotation from the Bible on the title page of Hoge's *The Sophist*

²⁸ Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 306.

²⁹ Uzal Ogden, *Antidote to Deism: The Deist Unmasked* . . . 2 vols. (Neward, 1795), I, 16n. Paine, according to Ogden, was a drunkard, to reason with whom would be like the casting of pearls before swine. There is an interesting parallel between the subtitle to Ogden's pamphlet and the title of Hoge's apology, *The Sophist Unmasked*.

³⁰ Richard Watson in his *Apology for the Bible* did not condescend to ridicule. He spoke of Paine's sincerity and ability, the philosophical sublimity of portions of Paine's work, and proceeded to discuss the issues with great seriousness. See Watson's *Apology for the Bible*, in Hoge's *Christian Panoply*, p. 5.

³¹ Muir, *Examination of Principles*, p. iv.

³² Broadus, *Age of Reason*, p. 5.

³³ *Ibid.* Milton's lines run as follows:

nor appeared
Less than Arch-Angel ruined, and th' excess
Of Glory obscur'd.

Unmasked, “Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee.” Broaddus recalled that David cut off Goliath’s head with the giant’s own sword.³⁴ Assuming that the best apologetic was a vigorous offense, the clergy ventured into Deist territory on the Deist’s own terms. Although the arguments in the end were somewhat stale, warmed over from the earlier anti-deistical literature, Paine’s earlier popularity, the poignancy of his attack upon the source of Christian faith and life, and the context of “religious liberty” in Virginia gave to the debate a dimension of renewed urgency.

In the first place, the clergy attacked Paine’s view of revelation. According to him, God revealed himself in Creation. Creation was reason’s book, God’s immediate communication to the Deist. Here Paine, according to the clergy, committed his first error. Taking him at his word, the clergy pointed out that God’s creation was not the immediate revelation for which he had argued. Creation itself was a medium God used for communication with man. In this manner the clergy were able to accentuate what Muir called the “instrumentality of the creation.”³⁵ Thus, to their own satisfaction, they opened the way for a consideration of the written word as a possible instrument for the self-disclosure of God. Paine had boldly asserted that Adam, if there ever were such a man, was “created a Deist” (I, 54, 28f.). But the clergy, troubled by Paine’s true and reasonable revelation, wondered why it had not been and was not common to all men. Why had it been only lately revealed to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Deists? Moreover, if the revelation of God was so simple and uncomplicated that it could be ascertained by the simplest “untutored savage,” why did Paine place an accent on “trigonometry,” upon “levels . . . wheel and axis . . . orreries . . . telescopes . . . triangles, sine, tangents, and secants, etc.”³⁶ These would certainly complicate and confuse God’s revelation in creation. His trigonometry was every bit as intricate as the Christian’s trinitarianism which Paine could not abide. Paine tried to tell his Christian reader that language was a tricky vehicle for the expression of truth and the burden of Christian claims. The clergy reminded Paine that he was not free from this problem even in the exaltation of creation as revelation. He too was

³⁴ Broaddus, *Age of Reason*, p. 9.

³⁵ Muir, *Examination of Principles*, pp. 30–31; cf. also Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 274.

³⁶ Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 253.

conditioned in his description of the universe by the language of his own time. Moreover, the clergy noticed his reliance upon Biblical terminology in his own presuppositions. Paine had boldly denied the Bible was the word of God, and had then actually appropriated from Biblical language more of his revelation about true religion and religious duties, (e.g., his reference to Micah 6:8 in his credo) than he was willing to acknowledge.³⁷

In the second place, the Virginia clergy attacked Paine for his exclusive claim to the use of reason and his uncritical commitment to Reason's cause. Christianity had never been opposed to the use of reason. Christians considered reason the crown of man's capacity; that which raised man above "mere animal nature," made him capable of "receiving valuable knowledge," and advanced him in the "scale of being."³⁸ Paine had only cited obstacles which had been erected as blocks to the work of Vigilus and Galileo. He had failed to mention (an inexcusable omission, according to Broaddus) that the masters of reason, "ornaments" of the human race, were champions of Christianity. Broaddus engaged in some indiscriminate name-dropping as he lumped together Grotius, Bacon, Newton, Milton, Boyle, Locke, Addison, and Lyttelton.³⁹

Wiser than Paine's approach was the Christian's cautious use of reason. Christians recognized reason's limitations and human insufficiency.⁴⁰ The Christian objected to the improper conception of reason which placed Reason "on the throne of God" and allowed man to worship it as a "deity" of his own creation.⁴¹ The Christian's account of the "fall" was more reasonable and had more to commend it than the Deist's fabulous denial of man's sinfulness and proneness to irrationality.⁴² In beginning his chapter on "The Use of Reason in Religion," Muir quotes from Paine's favorite biblical work, Job:

³⁷ Broaddus, *Age of Reason*, p. 65; Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 291. Paine's own religious creed contained a reference to Micah 6:8. "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly before God."

³⁸ Muir, *Examination of Principles*, p. 114.

³⁹ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, Part I, p. 34; Broaddus, *Age of Reason*, pp. 60-61, 53; Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 297.

⁴⁰ Muir, *Examination of Principles*, pp. 113-14.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 119. See also Broaddus, *Age of Reason*, pp. 13-15; Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 301. Hoge asserts that there was no argument in Paine's "scoff" and "sneer" about the fall.

“For vain man would be wise, though man be born like a wild ass’s colt.”⁴³ Broaddus brought to his composition a bit of doggerel.

Wrong not the Christian; think not Reason yours,
’Tis Reason our great Master holds so dear;
To give lost *Reason* life, he pours his own.⁴⁴

It was this ambiguity in reason that made the great “Masters of reason” remain Christian, and interweave the “golden woof of Revelation” with the “silver ways of Nature.”⁴⁵ Pressing home the point, Muir suggested to Paine an object lesson. The French Revolution proved the Christian point and the validity of the biblical revelation. He commented in Pauline terms about the French: “Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools; and changed the glory of the uncorruptible man.”⁴⁶ The “wild tumult of passion and folly” manifested through the years deserved to be known as the “Age of Revolution” rather than the “Age of Reason.” Muir was seconded by Broadus and Hoge.⁴⁷

In the third place, the clergy attacked Paine for falsely attributing the ills of the world to Christianity. Paine made much of the evil described in biblical literature, and condemned the history of Israel as the “history of wickedness.” He was incensed particularly at Old Testament tribalism, cruel retaliation, and arbitrary destruction, all in the name and at the command of God. Hoge did not help matters much when he suggested that God used his chosen people to punish the “enormous” criminality of others.⁴⁸ He did remind Paine, however, of another aspect of biblical history which the Deist neglected: the Bible was descriptive. It contained “a history, or, at least, some very instructive sketches of the history of human nature.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, when the Christian read the Deist’s bible of nature he saw in it the problem of evil. For example, Hoge asked Paine if he would consider it unjust if the jaws of the earth had swallowed up all of Canaan.

⁴³ Muir, *Examination of Principles*, Discourse VIII. The quotation is from Job 11:12.

⁴⁴ Broaddus, *Age of Reason*, p. 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴⁶ Muir, *Examination of Principles*, pp. 112–13; Romans 1:22–23.

⁴⁷ Muir, *Examination of Principles*, pp. 115–16; cf. Broaddus, *Age of Reason*, p. 13; and Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 310.

⁴⁸ Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 291.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 292–93.

Hoge undoubtedly had in mind the great Lisbon earthquake of 1 November 1755, which had caused death so indiscriminately and had shaken “enlightened” man to the marrow of his bones. Earthquakes were a part of creation’s history, a part of the will and work of the Deist’s God.⁵⁰ Thus the problem of evil was far more complicated than Paine was ready to admit. The clergy moved in on him at another level. Why should Paine blame Christianity for all the evil done in its name? Broaddus rubbed it in with a little salt. Suppose, he suggested, libertines rose up in the “specious garb of Democracy” and in the name of Paine’s “Common Sense and Rights of Man” turned revolution into anarchy and terror. Would the principles enunciated in Paine’s name be corrupting and brutalizing? No, Broaddus answered.⁵¹ Paine was urged, therefore, to be more considerate in the case of Christianity. He had painted his enemy like an “ugly Hag” and Deism as the “fair Angel.”⁵²

Somewhat more imaginative and impressive was a fourth and last dimension of clerical apologetics. This had to do more with a challenge to Paine’s own basic affirmations in his credo. Clerical argumentation tended to give way to a confession of the central affirmations of Christian faith about life. Correctly, although not always successfully, the clergy attempted to subordinate to these all other aspects of their apologetic. Paine had affirmed in *The Age of Reason* that he believed in “one God and no more.” Presbyterian Hoge challenged, “Can you . . . comprehend the Being and perfections of God your Maker, and explain to us how it is that he is possessed of an independent and underived existence?” If you cannot, he continued, then your religion is also mysterious.⁵³ Broaddus accused Paine of sophistry in arguing his case against mystery. He maintained that the creedal statements of Nicea and Chalcedon were Christian confessions beyond the “comprehension of human reason.”⁵⁴ Paine had also confessed in his creed a hope “for happiness beyond this life.” This universal language expressed in the Deist’s creedal statement gave the clergy an opportunity to indicate Paine’s shortsightedness about human yearning and striving. Undoubtedly referring to Paine’s

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 292. Cf. Watson’s *Apology for the Bible*, p. 10.

⁵¹ Broaddus, *Age of Reason*, p. 57; see also Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 310.

⁵² Broaddus, *Age of Reason*, p. 65.

⁵³ Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 313.

⁵⁴ Broaddus, *Age of Reason*, p. 49.

appreciation of Addison's hymn, Broaddus and Hoge both maintained that man wanted to know more than that "the hand that made us is Divine, is Omnipotent."⁵⁵ Man wanted to know, by Paine's own admission, whether or not God would continue him in a state of existence after death. But, according to Paine's clerical critics, man wanted to know more. He wanted to know whether or not God would pardon sin and if so upon what terms.⁵⁶

This was not Paine's definition of the problem, but the clergy believed they faced the human situation far more realistically than their opponent. The theologians answered their own argument. The Christian had Paine's "first volume" of revelation in creation. They also had the Bible, which Paine to his own detriment and danger rejected.⁵⁷ Broaddus suggested that in the Bible the "enquiring sinner finds that the Hand that *made* us, has redeemed us."⁵⁸ Hoge asked Paine rhetorically, "Will Mercury, or Venus, or Mars, or Jupiter, or Saturn; will the Sun, or Moon, or other luminary, or satellite . . . [will] trigonometry, will astronomy, or natural philosophy . . ." resolve the most important problem of human existence?⁵⁹



Analysis of apologetic literature in Virginia indicates that religious controversy was not as "wretchedly abusive and vulgar" as Koch has held, nor were answers to *The Age of Reason* mere "emotional diatribes," as Morais has averred. Certainly the clergy were able, in the context of the eighteenth century, to hold their own with Paine in erudition and argumentation, wit for wit, without being impaled helplessly on Paine's pole. But the attempt to turn Tom against Tom by the use of reason left chinks in their own armor.

Little imagination was demonstrated by the Virginia clergy in their attempt to convince Paine's readers of the reasonableness of "miracle" and "prophecy" which were asserted as evidence for Christianity.⁶⁰ The clergy continued to base biblical authority upon

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 23; Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 254.

⁵⁶ Muir, *Examination of Principles*, p. 23; Broaddus, *Age of Reason*, pp. 20, 12, 23, 41; Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, pp. 254-57.

⁵⁷ Broaddus, *Age of Reason*, p. 21.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

⁵⁹ Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 254.

⁶⁰ See Broaddus, *Age of Reason*, pp. 31-35; Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, pp. 317-25; Muir, *Examination of Principles*, Chs. iv, v, vi.

the authorship of the biblical books. They insisted that Moses wrote the Pentateuch and that Isaiah was responsible for writing the material which older sources ascribed to him.⁶¹ "Common Sense," writing in the *Virginia Gazette and Richmond Chronicle* in 1795, exposed himself most to his opponent, and was least convincing. Relying upon the old but often reprinted *Short and Easy Method with the Deists* by Charles Leslie, "Common Sense" maintained that matters of fact could not be false. Christianity involved fact; therefore, Christianity could not be false. The argument proceeded something like this. Facts were events which could be measured by man's senses, which were done publicly in the face of the whole world, and which were remembered through some outward action as well as monument. On this basis "Common Sense" established the truth of the Christian's claims about Moses and Jesus. He did not seem to have the "Common Sense" to realize that this pushed the argument back to the biblical witnesses whose authority, credulity, and credibility the Deist was questioning. Moreover, "Common Sense" exposed the failure of Christians to understand the historical nature of Christian faith and life even when they intimated that the Bible was the history of human nature.⁶²

When the clergy attempted to turn reason against Reason they were on an important track. Unfortunately, in their apologetics for Christianity, they constantly appealed to rationality and reduced Christianity to mere reasonableness despite attempts to reassert the dimension of the mysterious. Revelation still remained for them a set of propositions which they believed were ascertained from the Bible. Setting out to prove Christianity they proved too much. Even when they indicated that Christianity was a confession about the awesome mysteries of human life, evil, sin, death, atonement, forgiveness, resurrection, in Christian terms, they began to explain away the mystery. They showed themselves to be children of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment as well as heirs of the Reformation and the Evangelical Awakening.

⁶¹ See Broaddus, *Age of Reason*, p. 43; Muir, *Examination of Principles*, Ch. vii; Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, pp. 283–86. Hoge maintained that the Bible was purer than other sources.

⁶² See "Common Sense," *Virginia Gazette*; see also Muir, *Examination of Principles*, reference to Leslie in Ch. vii. Charles Leslie, *A Short and Easy Method with the Deist, Wherein the Certainty of the Christian Religion is Demonstrated* (Philadelphia, 1783), pp. 5–6. Cf., Alan Richardson, *History Sacred and Profane* (London, 1964), Ch. i, and Appended Note I.

The Virginia apologists did not admit that they were failing in argument. Hoge informed Paine that he was probably incapable of understanding because he was so “deep” in skepticism already.⁶³ Muir added to this the accusation that the infidel was so steeped in immorality that he dreaded and therefore rejected the “denunciations of the gospel” against all unrighteousness.⁶⁴ The infidel might respond that the Christian had a neat excuse for his faulty argumentation, namely, the infidelity and the immorality of the one who turned a deaf ear to the case for Christianity. It should be noted that Broadus and Muir accused Christians of un-Christian lives and of being the chief cause of infidelity. Muir attached to his attack on Paine an older sermon—in fact he made it Chapter Ten of his pamphlet—entitled “America Warned.” In the sermon he admonished that immorality was great, and infidelity was deeply rooted in the nation. He urged Americans to flee from the judgment of God by repentance.⁶⁵ In an evangelical spirit indicating that the “Second Great Awakening” was under way. Muir turned sympathetically to Paine. “You quarrel, my friend, with Christianity,” he counseled. “The quarrel I suspect ought to be with yourself. Your heart, perhaps and life, is not right with God.”⁶⁶

While Hoge did not look specifically for the conversion of Paine, he was confident in the ultimate victory of Christianity. “Having, therefore, weathered all the storms,” he wrote, “and sustained without injury, all the assaults of eighteen hundred years, what has she now to fear? . . . The arm of Zion’s king is still able to defend.”⁶⁷ That

⁶³ Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 283.

⁶⁴ Muir, *Examination of Principles*, pp. 138–39.

⁶⁵ Broadus, *Age of Reason*, pp. 67–68; Muir, *Examination of Principles*, “America Warned,” pp. 114 f.

⁶⁶ Muir, *Examination of Principles*, p. 140.

⁶⁷ Hoge, *Sophist Unmasked*, p. 332. The battle continued to rage after Hoge wrote his attack on Paine. Hoge wrote to a friend after he had published his multi-pamphlet answer to Paine: “We ought certainly to do something to counteract the very rigorous exertions now making the world in opposition to our holy religion. I was credibly informed when in Philadelphia that there have been as many as 100,000 copies of that scurrilous and blasphemous production, *The Age of Reason*, disposed of in our country in the space of the last year. And yet I fear, for the most part strangely remiss. The most effectual way to promote the interests of Christianity is I well know, to live a life becoming the sacred character we sustain. And would all who call themselves Christians do this, Christianity would, there is reason to believe, quickly overcome every opposition and make its way to the remotest corners of the heathen world. This however is far, very far from being the case” (Letter from Shepherd’s-Town, ca. 12 August 1799, found in John Blair Hoge, *Life of Moses Hoge*, pp. 97–

Christianity would stand because it has always stood might be unconvincing to Paine and his followers. Hoge's trust was in God. The faithful might take heart. The vigor and wit of clerical response to *The Age of Reason* assisted and assured at least the continuance, if not the "triumph of fidelity" in states like Virginia.

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98). Parson Weems seems to have undergone a marked change in his relation to Paine. In 1800, in his *Washington*, he wrote that Paine had "no other church but the alehouse, and [his] palsied legs can scarce bear him to that sink of vomiting and filth" (Weems, *His Words and Ways*, p. 70). Was the good and pious Episcopalian trying to make amends for the copies of *The Age of Reason* he had distributed for Mathew Carey? Perhaps! Yet he wrote in the same year: "If I had Paine & the Immortal Mentor [Richard Watson] I could metamorphose them into good bank notes by Spring" (Weems, *His Words and Ways*, pp. 297–98). Perhaps Weems still had a good eye for a good sale.