

# BULLETIN

## OF THOMAS PAINE FRIENDS

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### From "A Letter to Mr. Erskine" relating to the prosecution of "The Age of Reason"

A long letter addressed to Thomas Erskine, prosecutor of Thomas Williams, bookseller, London, was written by Paine in Paris in June 1797. It contains several compelling arguments to challenge the contention that the Bible is the "Word of God." Paine concentrates especially on the creation stories and the tale of the great flood and the ark of Noah. A large point with Paine was that God would not be as cruel to his creatures as the Bible depicts and he takes the Bible as a fable, or "fabulous theology." Not surprisingly, the poor bookseller was judged guilty of blasphemy and sentenced to three years in prison.

Printed below are but some concluding paragraphs of the letter which then lead into the Society of Theophilanthropists.

Religion is a private affair between every man and his Maker, and no tribunal or third party has a right to interfere between them. It is not properly a thing of this world; it is only practiced in this world; but its object is a future world; and it is not otherwise an object of just laws than for the purpose of protecting the equal rights of all, however various their belief may be.

If one man choose to believe the book called the Bible to be the Word of God, and another, from the convinced idea of the purity and perfection of God compared with the contradictions the book contains---from the lasciviousness of some of its stories, like that of Lot getting drunk and debauching his two daughters, which is not spoken of as a crime, and for which the most absurd apologies are made---from the immorality of some of its precepts, like that of showing no mercy---and from the total want of evidence on the case---thinks he ought not to believe it to be the Word of God, each of them has an equal right; and if the one has a right to give his reasons for believing it to be so, the other has an equal right to give his reasons for believing the contrary.

Anything that goes beyond this rule is an inquisition. Mr. Erskine talks of his moral education: Mr. Erskine is very little acquainted with theological subjects, if he does not know there is such a thing as a *sincere* and *religious* belief that the Bible is not the Word of God. This is my belief; it is the belief of thousands far more learned than Mr. Erskine; and it is a belief that is every day increasing. It is not infidelity, as Mr. Erskine profanely and abusively calls it; it is the direct

reverse of infidelity. It is a pure religious belief, founded on the idea of the perfection of the Creator.

If the Bible be the Word of God it needs not the wretched aid of prosecutions to support it, and you might with as much propriety make a law to protect the sunshine as to protect the Bible. Is the Bible like the sun, or the work of God? We see that God takes good care of the creation He has made. He suffers no part of it to be extinguished: and He will take the same care of His word, if He ever gave *one*.

But men ought to be reverentially careful and suspicious how they ascribe books to Him as His *word*, which from this confused condition would dishonor a common scribbler, and against which there is abundant evidence, and every cause to suspect imposition. Leave the Bible to itself. God will take care of the sun and the moon, which need not your laws for their better protection.

As the two instances I have produced in the beginning of this letter, from the book of Genesis---the one respecting the account called the Mosaic account of the creation, the other of the flood---sufficiently show the necessity of examining the Bible, in order to ascertain what degree of evidence there is for receiving or rejecting it as a sacred book, I shall not add more upon that subject; but in order to show Mr. Erskine that there are religious establishments for public worship which make no profession of faith of the books called Holy Scriptures, nor admit of priests, I will conclude with an account of a society lately begun in Paris, and which is very rapidly extending itself.

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THEOPHILANTHROPISTS

The society takes the name of Théophilantropes...rendered in English by the word Theophilanthropists, a word compounded of three Greek words, signifying God, Love, Man...lovers of God and man....The society proposes to publish each year a volume, entitled *Annee Religieuse des Théophilantropes*, Year Religious of the Theophilanthropists.

...The first society of this kind opened in the month of Nivose, year 5 (January 1797), in the Street Denis, No. 34, corner of Lombard Street [Paris].

...The society adopts neither *rites* nor *priesthood*, and it will never lose sight of the resolution not to advance anything, as a society, inconvenient to any sect or sects, in any time or country, and under any government.

...The Theophilanthropists do not call themselves the disciples of such or such a man. They avail themselves of the wise precepts that have been transmitted by writers of all countries and in all ages.

The reader will find in the discourses, lectures, hymns and canticles, which the Theophilanthropists have adopted for their religious and moral festivals, and which they present under the title of *Annee Religieuse*, extracts from moralists, ancient and modern, divested of maxims too severe or too loosely conceived, or contrary to piety, whether toward God or toward man.

Next follow the dogmas of the Theophilanthropists, or things they profess to believe. These are but two, and are thus expressed....the Theophilanthropists believe in the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul.

...The principles of the Theophilanthropists are the same as those published in the first part of "The Age of Reason" in 1793, and in the second part, in 1795. The Theophilanthropists, as a society, are silent upon all the things they do not profess to believe, as the *sacredness* of the books called the Bible, *etc.*

It is more than three years since the first part of "The Age of Reason" was published, and more than a year and a half since the publication of the second part: the Bishop of Llandaff undertook to write an answer to the second part; and it was not until after it was known that the author of "The Age of Reason" would reply to the Bishop, that the prosecution against the book was set on foot; and which is said to be carried on by some clergy of the English Church.

If the Bishop is one of them, and the object be to prevent an exposure of the numerous and gross errors he has committed in his work (and which he wrote when report that Thomas Paine was dead), it is a confession that he feels the weakness of his cause, and finds himself unable to maintain it. In this case he has given me a triumph I did not seek, and Mr. Erskine, the herald of the prosecution, has proclaimed it.

--THOMAS PAINE