

**Correspondence  
Between Thomas Paine  
and  
Samuel Adams  
Regarding God, Deism  
and Religion**

**With a concise introduction by Bob Johnson**

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# Introduction

Thomas Paine and Samuel Adams were both indispensable for the birth and success of the American Revolution and Republic and the progress and freedom the Revolution made and makes possible; progress and freedoms we enjoy today which we too often take for granted. It's interesting and pathetic that both of these heroes of liberty are largely overlooked and ignored by history. Most people think of beer when they hear the name Sam Adams and too few people know the debt we owe to Thomas Paine for getting enough people on Sam Adams' side to actually start the American Revolution with his book *Common Sense* as well as what we owe him for keeping them in the fight when all looked hopeless and they wanted to quit with his powerful series of pamphlets called *The Crisis*.

Sam Adams worked for years virtually alone in his efforts to spark a revolution and to overthrow the government and to replace it with a republic. He was so dedicated to this cause and purpose that he let his family business, a brewery, fall into disrepair to the point that it went out of business. Like all of the Founders of the American Republic, he placed much more value on freedom and what is right than he did on his career and money.

Thomas Paine likewise valued doing what is right much more than advancing a career and making money. He came from a financially poor family and when he made his first significant amount of money through the sale of *Common Sense* he donated his proceeds to the Continental Army.

Religiously Sam Adams and Thomas Paine were at opposite ends of the spectrum. Sam Adams was a devout Christian Congregationalist. He believed the Protestant Bible was the word of God and Jesus was the Son of God. Thomas Paine on the other hand was an active Deist who believed in God based on the application of his reason on the laws and designs in Nature (the study of which is science). As a Deist Paine also rejected claims which our reason can't accept like the Bible being the word of God and Jesus being the Son of God.

After Thomas Paine made his Deism public knowledge with the publication of [The Age of Reason](#), he encountered opposition not only from the clergy, but also from fellow fighters in the American Revolution. Patrick Henry was upset by Paine's book *The Age of Reason* because he believed it was irreligious. As Jacob Axelrad mentions on page 281 of *Patrick Henry – The Voice of Freedom*, Henry even wrote a rebuttal to *The Age of Reason* but realized it was based too much on emotion and not enough on reason and facts to be a successful counter to Paine's work so he destroyed it much to the disdain of his family.

Sam Adams also took issue with Paine's Deistic work *The Age of Reason* from a Christian perspective. Adams wrote a letter to Paine critical of Paine's Deism and book and, as so often happens regarding Deism, mistakenly confused Paine's Deism with Atheism/infidelity. Paine wrote back to his friend, Samuel Adams, regarding what Deism really is and making very clear that he was attacking man-made religion and not attacking God. This e-Booklet contains Paine's explanation of why he was having the exchange with Sam Adams published in a newspaper as well as the interesting exchange of ideas on God, Deism and religion which made up their correspondence with each other.

Progress!

Bob Johnson  
Founder and Director, World Union of Deists

# CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE HON. SAMUEL ADAMS

**To the Editor of the National Intelligencer,**

**Federal City**

**By Thomas Paine**

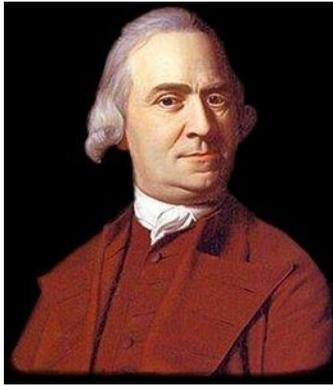
Toward the latter end of last December I received a letter from a venerable patriot, Samuel Adams, dated Boston, November thirtieth. It came by a private hand, which I suppose was the cause of the delay. I wrote Mr. Adams an answer, dated January first, and that I might be certain of his receiving it, and also that I might know of that reception, I desired a friend of mine at Washington to put it under cover to some friend of his at Boston, and desire him to present it to Mr. Adams.

The letter was accordingly put under cover while I was present, and given to one of the clerks of the post-office to seal and put in the mail. The clerk put it in his pocket-book, and either forgot to put it into the mail, or supposed he had done so among other letters. The postmaster-general, on learning this mistake, informed me of it last Saturday, and as the cover was then out of date, the letter was put under a new cover, with the same request, and forwarded by the post.

I felt concern at this accident, lest Mr. Adams should conclude I was unmindful of his attention to me; and therefore, lest any further accident should prevent or delay his receiving it, as well as to relieve myself from that concern, I give the letter an opportunity of reaching him by the newspapers.

I am the more induced to do this, because some manuscript copies have been taken of both letters, and therefore there is a possibility of imperfect copies getting into print; and besides this, if some of the Federalists printers (for I hope they are not all base alike) could get hold of a copy, they would make no scruple of altering it, and publishing it as mine. I therefore send you the original letter of Mr. Adams, and my own copy of the answer.

***Thomas Paine***  
Federal City



**Samuel Adams (September 27, 1722 - October 2, 1803)**

**Boston, November 30, 1802**

Sir:

I have frequently with pleasure reflected on your services to my native and your adopted country. Your "Common Sense" and your "Crisis" unquestionably awakened the public mind, and led the people loudly to call for a declaration of our national independence. I therefore esteemed you as a warm friend to the liberty and lasting welfare of the human race. But when I heard that you had turned your mind to a defense 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.

The people of New England, if you will allow me to use a Scripture phrase, are fast returning to their first love. Will you excite among them the spirit of angry controversy, at a time when they are hastening to unity and peace? I am told that some of our newspapers have announced your intention to publish an additional pamphlet upon the principles of your "Age of Reason."

Do you think that your pen, or the pen of any other man can unchristianize the mass of our citizens, or have you hopes of converting a few of them to assist you in so bad a cause? We ought to think ourselves happy in the enjoyment of opinion without the danger of persecution by civil or ecclesiastical law.

Our friend, the President of the United States, has been calumniated for his liberal sentiments, by men who have attributed that liberality to a latent design to promote the cause of infidelity. This and all other slanders have been made without a shadow of proof. Neither religion nor liberty can long subsist in the tumult of altercation, and amidst the noise and violence of faction.

Felix qui cautus.

Adieu. *SAMUEL ADAMS.*



**Thomas Paine (January 29, 1737 -  
June 8, 1809)**

**MR. THOMAS PAINE.**

**MY DEAR AND VENERABLE FRIEND SAMUEL ADAMS:**

I received with great pleasure your friendly and affectionate letter of November thirtieth, and I thank you also for the frankness of it. Between men in pursuit of truth, and whose object is the happiness of man both here and hereafter, there ought to be no reserve. Even error has a claim to indulgence, if not respect, when it is believed to be truth.

I am obliged to you for your affectionate remembrance of what you style my services in awakening the public mind to a declaration of independence, and supporting it after it was declared. I also, like you, have often looked back on those times and have thought that if independence had not been declared at the time it was, the public mind could not have been brought up to it afterwards.

It will immediately occur to you, who were so intimately acquainted with the situation of things at that time, that I allude to the black times of Seventy-six; for though I know, and you my friend also know, they were no other than the natural consequence of the military blunders of that campaign, the country might have viewed them as proceeding from a natural inability to support its cause against the enemy, and have sunk under the despondency of that misconceived idea. This was the impression against which it was necessary the country should be strongly animated.

I come now to the second part of your letter, on which I shall be as frank with you as you are with me.

"But (say you), when I heard you had turned your mind to a defense of Infidelity I felt myself much astonished, etc." - What, my good friend, do you call believing in God infidelity? for that is the great

point maintained in the "Age of Reason" against all divided beliefs and allegorical divinities. The Bishop of Llandaff (Doctor Watson) not only acknowledges this, but pays me some compliments upon it (in his answer to the second part of that work). "*There is (says he) a philosophical sublimity in some of your ideas when speaking of the Creator of the Universe.*"

What then (my much esteemed friend, for I do not respect you the less because we differ, and that perhaps not much in religious sentiments), what, I ask, is this thing called infidelity? If we go back to your ancestors and mine three or four hundred years ago, for we must have had fathers and grandfathers or we should not be here, we shall find them praying to Saints and Virgins, and believing in purgatory and transubstantiation; and therefore all of us are infidels according to our forefathers' belief. If we go back to times more ancient we shall again be infidels according to the belief of some other forefathers.

The case, my friend is, that the world has been over-run with fable and creeds of human invention, with sectaries of whole nations against all other nations, and sectaries of those sectaries in each of them against each other. Every sectary, except the Quakers, has been a persecutor. Those who fled from persecution persecuted in their turn, and it is this confusion of creeds that has filled the world with persecution and deluged it with blood.

Even the depredation on your commerce by the Barbary powers sprang from the crusades of the Church against those powers. It was a war of creed against creed, each boasting of God for its author, and reviling each other with the name of infidel. If I do not believe as you believe, it proves that you do not believe as I believe, and this is all that it proves.

There is however one point of union wherein all religions meet, and that is in the first article of every man's creed, and of every nation's creed, that has any creed at all: I believe in God. Those who rest here, and there are millions who do, cannot be wrong as far as their creed goes. Those who choose to go further may be wrong, for it is impossible that all can be right, since there is so much contradiction among them. The first therefore are, in my opinion, on the safest side.

I presume you are so far acquainted with ecclesiastical history as to know, and the bishop who has answered me has been obliged to acknowledge the fact, that the books that compose the New Testament were voted by yeas and nays to be the Word of God, as you now vote a law, by the popish Councils of Nice and Laodicea about one thousand four hundred and fifty years ago. With respect to the fact there is no dispute, neither do I mention it for the sake of controversy. This vote may appear authority enough to some, and not authority enough to others. It is proper however that everybody should know the fact.

With respect to the "Age of Reason," which you so much condemn, and that I believe without having read it, for you say only that you heard of it, I will inform you of a circumstance, because you cannot know it by other means.

I have said in the first page of the first part of that work that it had long been my intention to publish my thoughts upon religion, but that I had reserved it to a later time of life. I have now to inform you why I wrote it and published it at the time I did.

In the first place, I saw my life in continual danger. My friends were falling as fast as the guillotine could cut their heads off, and as I every day expected the same fate, I resolved to begin my work. I appeared to myself to be on my death-bed, for death was on every side of me, and I had no time to lose. This accounts for my writing it at the time I did; and so nicely did the time and the intention meet, that

I had not finished the first part of that work more than six hours before I was arrested and taken to prison. Joel Barlow was with me and knows the fact.

In the second place, the people of France were running headlong into atheism, and I had the work translated and published in their own language to stop them in that career, and fix them to the first article (as I have before said) of every man's creed who has any creed at all, *I believe in God*.

I endangered my own life, in the first place, by opposing in the Convention the execution of the King, and by laboring to show they were trying the monarchy and not the man, and that the crimes imputed to him were the crimes of the monarchical system; and I endangered it a second time by opposing atheism; and yet some of your priests, for I do not believe that all are perverse, cry out, in the war-whoop of monarchical priestcraft, "What an infidel, what a wicked man, is Thomas Paine!" They might as well add, "for he believes in God and is against shedding blood."

But all this *war-whoop* of the pulpit has some concealed object. Religion is not the cause, but is the stalking horse. They put it forward to conceal themselves behind it. It is not a secret that there has been a party composed of the leaders of the Federalists, for I do not include all Federalists with their leaders, who have been working by various means for several years past to overturn the Federal Constitution established on the representative system, and place government in the New World on the corrupt system of the Old.

To accomplish this, a large standing army was necessary, and as a pretense for such an army, the danger of a foreign invasion must be bellowed forth from the pulpit, from the press, and by their public orators.

I am not of a disposition inclined to suspicion. It is in its nature a mean and cowardly passion, and upon the whole, even admitting error into the case, it is better, I am sure, it is more generous, to be wrong on the side of confidence than on the side of suspicion. But I know as a fact that the English Government distributes annually fifteen hundred pounds sterling among the Presbyterian ministers in England and one thousand among those in Ireland; and when I hear of the strange discourses of some of your ministers and professors of colleges, I cannot, as the Quakers say, find freedom in my mind to acquit them. Their anti-revolutionary doctrines invite suspicion even against one's will, and in spite of one's charity to believe well of them.

As you have given me one Scripture phrase I will give you another for those ministers. It is said in Exodus xxii, 28, "Thou shalt not revile the Gods nor curse the ruler of thy people." But those ministers, such I mean as Dr. Emmons, curse ruler and people both, for the majority are, politically, the people, and it is those who have chosen the ruler whom they curse. As to the first part of the verse, that of not reviling the Gods, it makes no part of my scripture. I have but one God.

Since I began this letter, for I write it by piece-meal as I have leisure, I have seen the four letters that passed between you and John Adams. In your first letter you say, "Let divines and philosophers, statesmen and patriots, unite their endeavors to *renovate the age* by inculcating in the minds of youth *the fear and love of the Deity and universal philanthropy*."

Why, my dear friend, this is exactly my religion, and is the whole of it. That you may have an idea that the "Age of Reason" (for I believe you have not read it) inculcates this reverential fear and love of the Deity I will give you a paragraph from it.

"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."

As I am fully with you in your first part, that respecting the Deity, so am I in your second, that of *universal philanthropy*; by which I do not mean merely the sentimental benevolence of wishing well, but the practical benevolence of doing good. We cannot serve the Deity in the manner we serve those who cannot do without that service. He needs no service from us. We can add nothing to eternity. But it is in our power to render a service *acceptable* to Him, and that is not by praying, but by endeavoring to make his creatures happy.

A man does not serve God when he prays, for it is himself he is trying to serve; and as to hiring or paying men to pray, as if the Deity needed instruction, it is, in my opinion, an abomination. One good schoolmaster is of more use and of more value than a load of such persons as Dr. Emmons and some others.

You, my dear and much respected friend, are now far in the vale of years; I have yet, I believe, some years in store, for I have a good state of health and a happy mind, and I take care of both, by nourishing the first with temperance and the latter with abundance. This, I believe, you will allow to be the true philosophy of life.

You will see by my third letter to the citizens of the United States that I have been exposed to, and preserved through, many dangers; but instead of buffeting the Deity with prayers as if I distrusted Him, or must dictate to Him, I reposed myself on His protection; and you, my friend, will find, even in your last moments, more consolation in the silence of resignation than in the murmuring wish of a prayer.

In everything which you say in your second letter to John Adams, respecting our rights as men and citizens in this world, I am perfectly with you. On other points we have to answer to our Creator and not to each other. The key of heaven is not in the keeping of any sect, nor ought the road to it be obstructed by any.

Our relation to each other in this world is as men, and the man who is a friend to man and to his rights, let his religious opinions be what they may, is a good citizen, to whom I can give, as I ought to do, and as every other ought, the right hand of fellowship, and to none with more hearty good will, my dear friend, than to you.

***Thomas Paine***

Federal City, January 1, 1803.

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