

Discussion Questions for *The Age of Reason*

Thomas Paine is known primarily as a writer of works that helped influence the American Revolution. His work, *The Age of Reason*, is classified as a document which helped establish the notion of deism. Deism is defined in Webster's Dictionary as: "A movement or system of thought advocating natural religion, emphasizing morality, and in the 18th century denying the interference of the creator with the laws of the universe." In his work, Paine criticized organized religion, and emphasized that the three major religions of the world (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), all claimed to be inspired by God, yet, he claimed, they often ascribed things to God which were morally flawed.

1. Were you surprised that Thomas Paine, who is known for his patriotic works, wrote a book that objected to organized forms of religion?
2. In his book, Paine notes three primary objections to the notion that organized religion imparts truths about God, as follows:
 - a. That the religious works he lists, primarily the *Bible*, impart the words of God to man
 - b. That creation itself (that is, the physical universe) contains the word of God, and not written testimony, i.e. the *Bible*
 - c. Man's moral duty lies in imitating the goodness of God, and that any book or books which contain examples of men harming other men is not to be used as a guide to living one's life.

Do you agree with Paine's views? Why or why not? Do you believe that religious books, such as the *Bible* promote immoral acts, as Paine believes?

3. At one point in the book, Paine indicates that he believes the prophets were poets, and could not prophesy events that were to occur in the future. He also claims that their authority as prophets cannot be verified, since in many cases, he believes that they were not historical personages. Do you agree with Paine's assessment of the role of the prophets? Why or why not?
4. During the work, Paine looks for historical accuracy in the various parts of the *Old Testament*, and makes arguments to show that certain passages in the *Old Testament* are not historically accurate. He goes on to write that since the *Old Testament* is not historically accurate, it lacks authority and truthfulness. Do you agree with Paine's assertions and conclusions? Please provide examples from the text to verify your belief.
5. Paine asserts that the *Bible*, along with other religious books, does not contain the word of God, either as God has spoken directly, or as He has revealed his thoughts to men. His arguments are based on the premise that God's thoughts transcend those of men, and that men's language cannot express God's thoughts accurately. Do you agree or disagree with Paine's argument? Why or why not?
6. Paine attempts to understand the *Bible* through the eye of a scientific man. As a result of this approach, Paine does not seem to give credence to a metaphoric approach to understanding the

Bible, but instead, attempts to understand the *Bible* in a literal manner. Does an understanding of the *Bible* in a literal manner lose sight of its metaphorical and literary elements?

7. One of the interpretations that Paine gives to the *Bible* is that it is an historical record of the Jewish people. He groups this interpretation with that of other ancient societies, such as the Greeks, Romans, etc., and classifies some of these interpretations as fable. Modern scholarship recognizes that some “historical” works do, in fact, incorporate elements of fable into the “historical” records. Do you think Paine recognizes the cultural and psychological aspects of fable, and that all cultures blend fable, history and religious customs together? If not, why not? Should Paine recognize the blending together of these elements in his work?
8. During the course of the work, Paine asserts that priests had a motive for organizing religion, and that motive was the collection of tithes, or offerings to support organized religion and places of worship. Do you agree with Paine’s assertion? Why or why not?
9. Do you agree with Paine’s assertion that God does not inspire people (remembering that the original meaning of “inspire” is to breathe in), but that the idea of inspiration was used to convince men of an arbitrary belief?
10. How do you think Paine’s ideas about deism (see definition above) affected the writers of the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution*? Do you think that Paine’s beliefs led to the separation of church and state that is practiced in the United States? Were the founding fathers deists in the strict sense of the term?