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1

Infinite Worlds

FOR AMERICAN RELIGIOUS leaders of the late eighteenth century, Thomas Paine could not have had a more apt last name. His many writings created nothing but anguish as they taunted those who believed in Christianity and its merciful God. Having played a pivotal role in popularizing the cause of American independence from Britain through pamphlets such as *Common Sense* (1776) and *The American Crisis* (1776–83), Paine sought to be part of yet another political revolution when he relocated to France in the 1790s. While there, he found time to put pen to paper to argue against the oppressive force of religious belief. In his mind, humanity could only reach its fullest potential by casting off the shackles of Christianity with its misleading ideas and manipulative institutions. In *The Age of Reason* (1794), Paine argued that the time had come to embrace truth as revealed through all-enlightening reason, not blind faith. He maintained that it was only through an uncompromising reliance on reason that humanity had any hope of becoming truly free.

A deist who believed in “one God, and no more” and hoped “for happiness beyond this life,” Paine stood squarely against organized forms of religion that he saw as “human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind.”¹ For Paine, the true conveyer of God’s nature and message to humanity was not found in the Bible but in “THE CREATION WE BEHOLD.”² He believed that our truest glimpse of God’s revelation to humanity was found in the natural world, a sublime text that “no human invention can counterfeit or alter.”³ Through his creation, God made himself legible in a manner “which every man can read.”⁴

Paine's emphasis on God's creation reached well beyond just this world. One of *The Age of Reason's* most pronounced lines of argumentation posited that the Earth was not a singular creation. Paine's God was so massive, so vibrant, so limitless that he most certainly had created an endless "plurality of worlds, at least as numerous as what we call stars."⁵ Paine underlines God's creative character by pointing out that every part of the Earth is "crowded with life, down from the largest animals that we know of, to the smallest insects the naked eye can behold."⁶ Because one finds such abundant life everywhere on the Earth, Paine believed it wrong to suppose "that the immensity of space is a naked void, lying in eternal waste."⁷ For Paine, far from being empty, the universe teemed with life to be found on "millions of worlds."⁸ Such multitudinous forms of life provide the most vivid testimony to God's life-giving character and immeasurable power.

For many New Englanders who boasted of devoutly religious Puritan and Pilgrim forefathers, Paine's belief in a plurality of worlds had horrifying implications. It threatened to make the Earth nothing more than a single "grain of sand" on some infinite cosmic beach.⁹ Paine's planetary plurality led him to denigrate the Earth's central place in the universe. He eviscerated the Earth's pivotal importance as the place where God had sent his only begotten son to redeem its inhabitants from their sinful ways. In positing myriad inhabited planets, Paine made an absurdity of traditional Christian belief as he questioned whether God in his "boundless creation, had an Eve, an apple, a serpent, and a redeemer" for each planet, making it necessary for Jesus to fill every moment of his existence traveling "from world to world, in an endless succession of death, with scarcely a momentary interval of life."¹⁰

The idea of such otherworldly life was hardly a new idea unique to Paine's age. In point of fact, a belief in the existence of other inhabited worlds had a long Western tradition dating all the way back to the pre-Socratic Greek Philosopher Democritus (460–370 BCE). Democritus, along with his teacher Leucippus, founded what came to be known as the atomist school of thought.¹¹ They believed that the world was composed of an infinite number of small particles called atoms that circulated in a larger void. These atoms moved around and combined to form

clusters that in turn composed every material object found in the world. Such atoms might also break apart and disperse again into the void as seen in the inevitable decay of all material objects.

For Democritus, the infinite nature of the atomist theory held implications not only for the everyday nature of his world, but for the greater universe as well. Just as there was an infinite number of atoms combining to make physical objects on Earth, the giant void that one could see surrounding the Earth was filled with an infinite number of stars. These stars were also the result of atoms in a void coming together and forming suns surrounded by their own system of planets.¹² Democritus was not so much focused on life on other worlds as he was on the existence of an infinite number of other worlds (*aperoi kosmoi*), which eventually came to be translated as the term Paine and others would adopt, namely a “plurality of worlds.”¹³ For Democritus, the natural consequence of his belief in an infinite number of planetary systems logically led to the conclusion that there also existed countless inhabited planets amid the infinite number of stars that filled the night sky.

Thomas Paine’s thinking about an infinite number of inhabited worlds was simply an extension of a centuries-long tradition of belief in life elsewhere in the universe dating back to Democritus. To understand the early American engagement with the idea of life on other planets, one must look back much farther than Paine’s *The Age of Reason* to see the extent and rich texture of the belief among early European settlers on the American continent. Far from the religious skepticism engendered by Paine’s view of life on other planets, many early Americans believed there to be life elsewhere in the universe and saw such extraterrestrial life as confirmation of God’s ubiquity, infinite power, and limitless creative energy.

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