When *The Temple of Reason* printed its last issue on 19 February 1803, it promised its readers that a new periodical would soon take its place. Unhappily, logistic and financial problems delayed the appearance of its successor, *Prospect; or, View of the Moral World*, for almost a year. But the new weekly was well worth the wait. When the inaugural issue finally appeared on 10 December 1803, it was clear the publication was a cut above *The Temple*. The reason for the *Prospect*’s superiority was not hard to discern: It was edited and for the most part written by the tireless and brilliant Elihu Palmer.

The *Prospect*’s first issue declared that “the period has at length arrived in which the civilized world has recognized the necessity of moral principles to regulate the conduct of intelligent beings,” and it proudly announced that the paper’s primary goal would be to elucidate the foundations and nature of those principles. It was as good as its word. Until it ceased publication on 30 March 1805, the *Prospect* ran articles on religion, biblical criticism, ethics, natural philosophy, politics, economics, and literature that for the most part revolved around the themes of moral progress and human improvement. The necessary conditions for such improvement were rational standards of behavior as well as thought. These standards in turn, so the *Prospect* assured its audience, were derivable from the investigation of natural philosophy, or science. Reason, “the highest and noblest faculty of man,” had the power to throw off the “shackles of prejudice” and the “trammels of superstition.” As such, reason was not merely a tool for the promotion of commerce, social utility, and the conquest of nature. It also served as the catalyst for human liberty, freedom of conscience, rational religion, and moral perfection. As Palmer so eloquently says in “Moral Philosophy” (31 December 1803), “The true point of wisdom is to regulate conduct by principle, to control passion by reason, elevate the mind above common prejudices, to discard superstition, to love truth, and practice an incorruptible virtue.”

The *Prospect*’s acuteness, diversity, and sheer readability quickly earned it a circulation far surpassing that of *The Temple*. Subscription agents in New York, Newburgh, Philadelphia, and Baltimore were kept busy throughout the paper’s sixteenth-month history. Although the number of paid subscribers
ultimately proved insufficient to keep the weekly afloat, Palmer’s words were undoubtedly read and discussed by thousands of nonsubscribers. When he boasts in the 16 June 1804 issue that there were “thousands and tens of thousands of deists in the United States and Europe,” he may have been guilty of hyperbole. But it is more than likely that the Prospect was followed with interest by what for the times represented a huge readership. In quality as well as popularity, then, the Prospect was the most successful of all Early Republic deistic papers.

The Prospect was also the most militant of the deistic newspapers. It repeatedly denounced the “double despotism” of church and state—one of Palmer’s favorite themes—claiming that oppressive political structures worked hand-in-hand with ecclesial authority to encourage fear, superstition, ignorance, and social tractability. It ran a series of devastating textual analyses of Scripture, written completely by Palmer and covering Genesis and Exodus in minute detail, which underscored logical and ethical inconsistencies and absurdities in Holy Writ. It was unashamedly anticlerical, arguing that “the clergy have always found it to their advantage to keep the people in utter ignorance, and it has been a part of their profession from those of Apollo to the present day” to inflict “misery and distress ... upon the human race” (25 February 1804, 28 January 1804). And it continuously reaffirmed, in both prose and poetry, the superiority of deism’s rational religion over the supernaturalist dogma of traditional Christianity. Unlike many of the earlier “moderate” deists, Palmer was convinced that the lay reader was intelligent and emotionally stable enough to throw off the orthodox “shackles of prejudice” without succumbing to despair and nihilism, and the straightforward militancy of the Prospect reflects that confidence.

In the selections from the Prospect included here, Palmer criticizes traditional Christian doctrines such as faith, miracles, and revelation by claiming that they are either unjust or irrational and hence unworthy of both humans and the divine: “God will not reveal that which is unjust, and to reveal that which is unintelligible would be of no use” (7 April 1804). In “Laws of Nature” (28 April 1804), he defends a Baconian model of inferential generalization, arguing that observation of experience and the logical deduction from it of uniform patterns is an appropriate methodology for the human as well as the physical sciences. In “More of Human Reason” (28 July 1804), he suggests that Christianity’s insistence that human reason is corrupt and thus insufficient as an epistemological standard is self-contradictory and absurd. If human reason is too corrupt to rationally assent to the proposition that reason is untrustworthy, then humans cannot properly believe it; if the proposition can be rationally grasped, then reason is not corrupt. Instead of attempting to replace reason, “Heaven’s best gift to man,” with theological sophisms that deny its sufficiency, humans would be better served if, like “The Indian Stu-
dent” (24 November 1804), they bowed only to “Nature’s God” by trusting both their experience of physical reality and their logical deductions from it. To decry reason and instead rest content on emotionalism is to sink into the subjectivistic trap of “enthusiasm” (2 February 1805), a surrender that breeds intellectual passivity as well as doctrinal dogmatism.

Especially interesting are two articles criticizing church and state relations: “Remarks” (25 January 1805) and “For the Prospect” (30 March 1805). The first piece is a blast against secular antiblasphemy laws. In a discussion reminiscent of Volney’s comparative analysis of creetal differences, Palmer argues that blasphemy is contextually defined: What constitutes an instance of it depends on the religious perspective to which a particular sect subscribes. Let each person look to his or her own conscience as a guide, and “let legislators look to the morals, the science, and the virtues of society—with theology they have nothing to do.”

In “For the Prospect,” Palmer assails the legal requirement of oath taking as a necessary condition for testimony in courts of law. When confronted with the obligation to swear to tell the truth “so help me God,” a potential witness who is also an unbeliever is forced either to pretend allegiance to a God in which he or she does not believe, or to refrain from participating in the legal process. Both options, Palmer claims, constitute unwarranted coercion and are founded on a bigoted assumption by the establishment that non-Christians are innately untrustworthy. But, as Palmer so eloquently argued in Principles of Nature, ethics has no necessary foundation in religious belief. For the state to presume otherwise is to dangerously allow ecclesial superstition to poison what are properly secular proceedings. Such a move is not only ethically unacceptable but also, in the truest sense of the word, blasphemous, attempting as it does to usurp in the interests of the state what are rightly matters of private conscience.

Competency of the Human Powers (10 December 1803)
A survey of the infancy of man and of the imbecilities to which he is subjected, seems to form in some measure an objection against the admissions of an opinion pre-eminently important in the general improvement of the world. If superstition be permitted to depreciate human energy and calumniate its character for activity, it will by this coalition, with native weakness, form an insurmountable barrier to the progress of knowledge among the nations of the earth. The strength of our faculties is diminished by fear or augmented by moral encouragements, when impressions are frequently made unfavorable to the right as well as the real exercise of rational powers; it creates in individuals a consciousness, or rather a belief of self-sufficiency. This becomes the generating cause of a thousand subsequent mischiefs; for when a man is once impressed with an idea that he is either weak or foolish, or that it is a crime to bring his faculties, small as they are, to bear upon the high sounding topics of
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theological doctrines, he trembles at the idea of intellectual efforts, and cries out in the language of revealed theology, Lord, what is man! It is a point of policy in the hierarchy to cherish this submissive temperament, and cultivate in the soul of man the divine virtue of humility. If the enemies of truth and free discussion upon religious subjects, have discovered an interest in human degradation, philosophers and philanthropists have recognized in the exaltation of human power, man restored to his true dignity and in the full possession of those moral pleasures to which his nature and his station in existence furnish so indisputable a claim; the zeal and exertions of great and good men during the last century, were directed to the important subject of giving a new elevation to the powers of man; they directed him to contemplate his organization, to mark the slow but certain expansion of his faculties, to take a retrospective and comparative view of what he was in early life, and what relation his intellectual properties bore to the whole visible universe. In this train of instruction and reflection, he learnt duly to appreciate the energies of his existence, he saw the whole moral and physical world subjected to the electric movements of mind, the revolution of the planets were calculated, their relative distances and magnitudes ascertained, and the universal harmony of the solar system disclosed for the contemplation of an astonished world! But the full recognition of human competency did not result solely from these splendid and majestic facts;—another circle of science more circumscribed it is true, but more important to the real interests of society, gave fresh testimony in favor of the strength and all-sufficiency of our mental powers. The double despotism of the world had taught man the shameful maxim that his mind and body might be rightfully held in subjection by others; the power of thought revived the discriminative considerations essential to moral science, and society witnessed a new era in the history of its existence. The rules, principles, laws, customs, and constitutions necessary to peace and social happiness, were demonstrated to result from the inherent character, and to be essentially interwoven with the rational constitution of intelligent beings. Superstition declared that man could accomplish nothing; experience taught him that he could accomplish every thing necessary to his real felicity, and that if it were not for the institutions of supernatural theology, he might have seen himself surrounded with more comforts, and his life abundantly more tranquil. —When reason, the highest and noblest faculty of man, asserted the right of moral decision upon questions of vast importance, the church and its coadjutors issued a writ of proscription and combined ecclesiastical and military power for the completion of their iniquitous design. The history of the church in Europe furnishes ample verification to this remark. Galileo, who only asserted that the earth is round, together with an hundred other philosophers bold in the cause of truth, suffered imprisonment or death under the vindictive cruelty of clerical domination. But if St. Paul, who is a great stickler for the incapacity of man, for he says of ourselves we
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336 can do nothing, together with thousands of adherents to christianity, should labour to demonstrate the incompetency of human powers, let it be remembered that the period is past for this doctrine to obtain celebrity—the realization of the fact is an ample refutation to such destructive calumnies. The arts, the sciences, all the comforts of human life, bear testimony to the solemn truth, and if we still suffer evils the fault is our own—it ought not to be charged upon nature or nature’s God.

Explanation of the Principles of Deism (17 December 1803)

Principles, opinions, and doctrines are frequently considered in a destructive point of light, because they are not well understood. It is a duty which the mind owes to the dignity of its character, to examine and discriminate previous to an ultimate decision, by which sentiments are to be condemned or applauded. Deism is a word which sounds terrible in the ears of those who have been accustomed from early life to contemplate theological opinions, of a nature entirely opposite. Prejudices are in some measure unavoidable appendages of imperfect powers, and when reiterated efforts are made for the purpose of exciting a rancorous spirit against any particular opinions, the mind loses that just equilibrium which leads to fair inquiry, and honest judgment. It hence becomes necessary in developing the principles of a subject that has received any considerable share of popular odium, to state with simplicity, and delineate with correctness the prominent features of such principles. With a view to this point, we proceed to explain the properties of a subject, which has so often excited in christian minds such extreme abhorrence—in doing this there is no intention to impose a creed upon men whose sentiments are similar—we know that among those who believe that the religion of nature is the only true religion, there are shades of difference in their opinions, but these differences are inconsiderable—less, much less, than those which are every day exhibited in every part of the christian world. Be this as it may, however, we have an unquestionable right to state our ideas upon this interesting subject, conceding to all others the same right. “Deism declares to intelligent man the existence of one perfect God, creator and preserver of the universe—that the laws by which he governs the world, are like himself immutable, and of course, that violations of these laws, or miraculous interferences in the movements of nature, must be necessarily excluded from the grand system of universal existence—that the creator is justly entitled to the adoration of every intellectual agent throughout the regions of infinite space—and that he alone is entitled to it, having no copartners who have a right to share with him the homage of the intelligent world. Deism also declares that the practice of a pure, natural, and uncorrupted virtue is the essential duty, and constitutes the highest dignity of man.

That the powers of man are competent to all the great purposes of human
existence—that science, virtue and happiness are the great objects which ought to awake the mental energies, and draw forth the moral affections of the human race.

These are some of the outlines of pure Deism, which Christian superstition so dreadfully abhors, and whose votaries she would willingly consign to endless torture. But it is built upon a staunch foundation, and will triumphantly diffuse happiness among the nations of the earth, for ages after Christian superstition and fanaticism have ceased to spread desolation and carnage through the fair creation of God.”

**Aphorisms (17 December 1803)**

Man is born ignorant—it is the expansion of his intellectual powers that constitutes his glory and his happiness.

Science is the sun of the moral world; when its rays shall have penetrated the darkness of every understanding, a new era will be commenced in history, and man will become universally the friend of sensitive existence.

Superstition has shed the blood of millions—she must answer for her crimes at the bar of reason, and there she will receive a condemnatory sentence—depart ye cursed and trouble the world no more.

If the murders which have been committed in the name of religion could be placed distinctly before the minds of believers, it would at least induce this interrogatory—is that religion holy and divine whose effects have been so destructive among the human race?

The energy of thought will one day teach fanaticism that her native home is hell!

War is the curse and scourge of the world—yet revealed religion has generated more wars than any other cause by which they have been produced.

We look at all mankind through the mirror of history—but he who reads history without discriminative reflection, might as well pass away his existence under the influence of the morphhean God.

Why does superstition calumniate philosophy? Answer, because philosophy teaches the purest morals.

Philosophy labors to convince by mild and peaceful means—religious fanaticism by fire and faggot.
Philosophy teaches that belief must be founded upon evidence—christianity destroys this moral axiom, in the sentence, he that believeth not shall be damned.

If meekness consist in murder, then was Moses a meek man.

Human merit is in proportion to talents and virtues—celestial merit cannot be transferred from heaven to earth.

“The unjust man shall perish in his rapacity, and the tyrant in his usurpation.”

**Moral Philosophy (31 December 1803)**

The conduct of human beings ought to be regulated by principles just and useful. The source of these principles is essentially interwoven with the character of man; his moral position in life, his powers and the general properties of his existence constitute the fundamental basis of enquiry and deduction. Theological superstition has taught lessons of dreadful heresy—it has instructed man to believe that he ought to depart from the present world to procure for himself joys suitable to the character of his present existence. The philosophy of which we speak has provided for man a variety of comforts in his present predicament, and this philosophy instructs him to diminish by intellectual exertion, the force of evil by which his life is afflicted. It teaches him that the ills of life are not always real but frequently fabricated from causes of a trifling nature. There is not perhaps on earth a human being who does not make more of his misfortunes than he ought—there is not one who does not magnify beyond the reality!—The human imagination is always awake, it is perpetually active, and to its combinations, conjectures, and anticipations, there seems to be no fixed termination. An evil apprehended, but not yet realised, often assumes a shape as terrific as the most dreadful calamity, which has already burst in thunder upon the world. Earthquakes and volcanos sometimes happen—they happen really in the order of the universe—but how much more frequent are they in the imaginary apprehensions of human beings. The true point of wisdom is to regulate conduct by principle, to control passion by reason, elevate the mind above common prejudices, to discard superstition, to love truth, and practice an incorruptible virtue.

**Religious Self-Conceit (21 January 1804)**

The very worst effect of an excessive self-love is the overweening conceit of one’s self, relatively to devotion, and the punctual discharge of religious duties. This is sure to declare itself in a contempt of every one who does not make the same parade of sanctimony. Not a day passes in which people of this cast do not...
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sacrifice some innocent victim at the altar of their malignant passions. Surmise is their very food, slander their delight, altercation the whetstone of their wit, rancour the fire which animates their discourse, and revenge the mobile of their actions. For gluttony, impiety, avarice, and cruelty, they are noted—the loss of a dollar sets their soul in an uproar, and under the cloak of devotion they trample on common probity. But they indeed distinguish themselves by a strict attendance on divine service, and their preparations at the approach of high festivals. The word Christianity is perpetually on their tongues—in visiting the sick they affect an agonizing tenderness—they pay a most profound respect to the clergy, and sigh and groan about the spread of infidelity: but after all their hypocrisy, these hypocrites deceive their own consciences more than the world—they are the detestation of the truly good, and men of common understanding laugh at their farcical sanctimoniousness.

On the Christian Religion (28 January 1804)
The Christian System, from the day of its birth, appears to have opened to the world a new and melancholy scene of contention, animosity and bloodshed. During its three first centuries it was frequently and severely persecuted, even to the destruction of millions of its devotees. Either from state policy, or otherwise, about this time it began to be encouraged and was afterwards embraced by the Roman emperors, who then gave laws to all the Christian world. Thus were the Christians reconciled to their enemies and relieved from former sufferings: having now no external persecutions, the system soon furnished the means of converting friends into enemies—they split and were divided by its mysteries, and the sword of enthusiasm was drawn to explain them. So great were the massacres, carnage, and distress occasioned thereby, that even in the days of the greatest superstition it was made a question, whether their existing notions of religion had not done the world more harm than good: and a great defender of Christianity has long since acknowledged, that the mischiefs attending the Christian system had cost the lives of fifty millions of the human race. Oh! that the cause had never existed—these horrid effects could not have taken place. Ambition, intrigue and fanatical madness in the priests, and bigotry and superstition in the people, led on these dreadful and savage barbarities which distracted and almost desolated the Christian world.

It is well known that priestcraft is an imposition of early date. Cato, the great Roman orator was surprised that two priests could possibly meet without bursting into fits of laughter—but tears of blood would not have atoned for the misery and distress they brought upon the human race. Dark and mysterious things are the essence of imposition. The craft and secrecy practised by the clergy of Rome, served to obscure the avenues of light, to encourage superstition and religious bigotry, and became a lasting source of corruption, imposition and pious fraud. Hence, the sale of pardons and dispensations, the forgiv-
ing of sins, and praying the souls of the dead out of purgatory: besides public worship was at all times administered in a foreign language. None were permit­ted to read the bible, and to be detected with it, in their known language, was a criminal matter in the people. Hence, they became the ignorant dupes, the slaves, and mere sport of the priests; and thus the priests became superior to check restraint or responsibility—fraud, tyranny, and imposition appears to have reigned triumphant!

The privilege of forgiving sin, must have been a most sublime acquisition to these holy fathers. Hence, were they deified by the very means adopted for their lucrative purposes, their lust, and ambition:"Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them—and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained." John, xx. 23. The Sovereign Ruler of the universe gave being to man, he called forth the globe we inhabit, and gave existence to numerous worlds that surround us; directing their order and course, all firmly supported without visible agency or apparent foundation; yet permanently secure, and free from clashing or confusion. —The author of such wisdom and power could not act inconsistently: we know that he gave us reason for our guide; consequently, we cannot know, nor ought we to believe, that he gave us this system of religion which in fact is diametrically opposite to reason. His wisdom and power must have been competent to the support of his rational creation, able to affect their ultimate and lasting good, without the necessity of a miraculous conception, divine suffering, or the eternal damnation of any individual.

The common opinion of christians in these matters is nothing more, than the result of that pride and prejudice, which originated in deception and intrigue. They have no foundation in nature or reason, and ought to be rejected as inconsistent and contradictory to the wisdom, the power, and justice of the great and eternal Source of Nature.

The supposed Saviour must either have been of the divine essence or of the human. If of the divine essence, it was impossible he could have suffered, and being of the human, it was equally impossible that his sufferings should redeem the sins of the world, or the sins of any part thereof:—God could not have suffered, nor could man have redeemed us.

We are told in Scripture, that not many wise, not many mighty are called; that God has chosen the weak things to confound the strong, and foolish things to confute the wise. "I thank thee, O Father! Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes." These texts, thus disguised, are the great support, the joy, and comfort of the bigot—but divest them of mystery and they appear less flattering, viz. the weak and foolish things are the most suitable objects of craft and imposition, they can believe every thing that is inconsistent with reason, that radical and powerful enemy of revelation.

The wise and prudent, when divested of prejudice and interest, will recur
to reason as their safest guide. They must be fairly convinced before they assent to matters of importance. They have no interest in deceiving or in being deceived: they endeavor to avoid the one and guard against the other. They see, they know, and regret, that mankind have been long duped and imposed upon. They consider the inhabitants of the whole world as one great family of the deity, and that the precepts necessary for one part extend universally to all. They regret that the pretended holiness of religion is frequently made a pretext for war. That this idle pretence has quietly excused for the murder of millions of the human race.—“And truly the Son of Man goeth as it was determined, but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed.” Thus it was decreed by God that Jesus should be betrayed by a certain man, and that as a reward for performing the divine will, this man was doomed to eternal punishments. “Those that thou gavest me have I kept, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition, that the scriptures might be fulfilled.”

Communication on Science from “A Subscriber”  
(25 February 1804)

Science gives activity to the human mind, expands the intellect, raises and exalts the understanding: the scientific character is placed above all vulgar prejudice, he surveys the wonders of creation with an inquisitive eye—he beholds the order and regularity of the different planets—studies the laws by which they are governed, and admires the wisdom of the great author of nature, displayed in all his wondrous works. ’Tis owing to science that men are enabled to throw off the shackles of prejudice, divest themselves of the trammels of superstition, and erect the religion of nature on the firm basis of truth. To science we owe the dissipation of error, the extension of human happiness, and the consequent prevalence of liberty. ’Tis the object of tyrants to keep their subjects in blindness, to make ignorance the subject of panegyric, and science that of contempt. They endeavour to create prejudice in all minds against it; the literati they hold up as men devoid of principle or of virtue, for well do they know that as soon as the mind is enlightened their power receives a deadly blow. The annihilation thereof is the consequence they expect if men are suffered to think for themselves, to investigate the conduct and motives of their rulers. If we examine history, if we study the progress of mankind from the barbarous to the civilized state, we shall immediately discover that as men are involved in ignorance and superstition, they are subjected to the uncontrolled force of tyrannic sway: a tyrant rules them with a rod of iron or thunders over their heads the terrors of excommunication and eternal misery: —The imposters who have governed mankind, were well acquainted with this. Zoroaster, Mahomet, and Christ, owe their success to the universal prevalence of Ignorance. The power of the Pope depended altogether upon the ignorance and superstition of the people, it was owing to this cause that he could denounce
vengeance against his enemies, and hurl his anathemas and excommunications against both the princes and their subjects. The catholics were buried in the profoundest ignorance, believing that if he pronounced judgment upon them, their eternal doom was fixed, that his was the power to exalt them to heaven, or make them undergo eternal misery. The clergy have always found it to their advantage to keep the people in utter ignorance, and it has been a part of their profession from those of Apollo to the present day; but happily for mankind they have not been latterly so successful, learning has revived, philosophy has burst asunder the bands of prejudice, dissipated error, promoted happiness, and enabled the votaries of science to behold with astonishment the degradation of their species.

Many and important advantages have been derived therefrom—it was owing to science that the enlightened mind of Columbus gave to the astonished eye of Europe the western hemisphere, his expansive mind was thereby capacitated to conceive and execute a design that has changed the condition and situation of half the inhabitants of the globe. 'Tis owing to science that mankind are enabled to draw down the lightning from the clouds and conduct it harmless to the earth—to it we owe the extension of commerce, the progress of civilization and the increase of humanity—by it we are enabled to assume almost a portion of the divinity to create earthquakes, to decompose and recombine, to pursue our way over the pathless ocean, and to ride on the wings of the wind.

Miracles (31 March 1804)

Suppose for instance, that a miracle-monger and a dexterous juggler both perform alike things to appearance, though the one be real, and the other delusory, while the evidence of the facts seems to be equal on both sides; who but those that are skilled in the one, or the other, can distinguish the one from the other? How many juggling tricks of Heathen and Popish priests are recorded in history for miracles; and other impositions for the wonderful works of their Gods and Saints, all for the honour and glory of religion, and sometimes to subdue men's minds to virtue: Are they capable of the same evidence as other historical facts? How easy is it for a pious soul to be induced to believe notorious frauds, that have the face of piety, and seem done to promote it; are the reports of strange things, which they are not in a condition to make a true judgment of, equal to those of other historical facts? Tho' all historical facts recorded are not true, yet there is a vast difference between the probable and improbable. If a man tells me he came over Westminster bridge to day, it may be true, though a little objection may be against it, because it is not quite finished, which may occasion some further questions, in order to be better satisfied of the truth of it; but if he tells me he took a running jump, at low tide, and leapt it over just by the bridge, I know it to be impossible, therefore a lie,
and enquire no more about it. Is this latter story as credible as the former? no
sure, though I may know the relater, and know him to be an honest man, that
is not used to lie; and tho' it be attested by many others, I ought to have
extraordinary evidence, to induce me to believe extraordinary things, that are
supernatural, which cannot be so credible as ordinary things which are natural.
In cases where there is difficulty and danger in trusting to ones own senses and
judgment, there is much more in trusting to the senses and judgment of oth-
ers, and confiding in their report: therefore such reports are not as capable of
the same evidence, nor as fit to be believed as other historical facts. Since we
are warned against the impositions of false miracles, we have certainly a right
to enquire what are true, and whether any? And therefore we should be most
careful of trusting those that are most capable of deceiving. Not only the
histories of miracles should be cautiously received, but the performer of them;
for as a man possessed of uncontrollable power is not a proper person to be
trusted with any property, neither is such a person proper to be the director of
my judgment, who can by his power play upon my weakness, by his art impose
upon my understanding, and by his tricks deceive my senses: a miracle worker
has it in his power to do all these things. Men are often deceived without a
wonder, but wonders are very capable of deceiving; and therefore a wonder-
working man may be a powerful deceiver; he that can alter things, or the nature
of them in any case, can also alter the appearances of things, by either of which
the rules of truth and certainty are destroyed; because either the observer is
deceived, or there is no trace left for his judgment; for what confounds the
order of nature must confound man's judgment. When a point is to be proved
by miracle, we give up reason to authority, and by the same means, if it can be
done, it may raise any sort of deity, or establish any doctrine. Suppose but the
power and possibility of deception in a miraculous operator, which I think may
be reasonably supposed, and then there is not the same reason to believe a
miracle, as in cases, where no possibility of such power is; for the appearances
of things are more easily changed, than the reality of them. Therefore miracles
are not capable of the same evidence, nor have an equal right to be believed as
other historical facts, let the evidence be reputed ever so credible. Both a
miracle-worker and the reporters of miracles, are of all mankind the least fit to
put confidence in, and the most to be guarded against; because we ought always
to be on our guard against the appearance and possibility of deception;
therefore the miracle-worker, the work, and reporter have not an equal right
to be believed, nor are as credible as other common facts, by those that would
neither be imposed upon, nor impose on others. Common sense teaches us,
that stories probable and improbable are not on the same foundation, nor have
or deserve equal credit. Besides, an easy belief upon hearsay, a surprise, incuri-
ous enquiry, the fondness of novelty, and of telling a surprising tale, loving that
others should believe as we do; add to these downright fibbing for pleasure or
profit, render the stories of miracles, not so credible as other historical facts. It is certain, that nothing has been more pernicious and deadly to the reason, freedom and happiness of mankind, than men's giving up their understandings to the faith of wonderful stories. It has introduced and established spiritual tyranny in teachers, and slavery in believers.

Revelation (7 April 1804)

If we examine the component parts and the structure of human existence, it will not be difficult to perceive the source and inlets of all our ideas and all our knowledge. The powerful agents that surround us, the universe which we behold, act with constancy and with force upon the senses of men. It is the relationship subsisting between sensitive and intelligent life on the one part, and the material world on the other, that forms the natural basis of all science, and the diversified improvements which society has been capable of exhibiting. Religious fanaticism, is, however, never contented to see things as they are, but possesses an eternal desire for moral and theological distortions. Bigots always pretend to hate the world in which they live, they sigh and groan for some unknown paradise, of which, however, they can give but an imperfect account, but where, however, according to their dreams and visions, they are to live in a continual state of idleness, and sing loud Hallelujahs to the Lord forever. This enthusiastic spirit by which supernaturalists are so much influenced, blinds the human understanding to all clear views of the nature of man, and the causes by which his faculties are expanded. The maxim in the scripture, set your affections on things above and not on things upon the earth, has turned the heads of thousands and withdrawn the human attention from those objects to which it ought to have been devoted. Whoever lives perpetually in the clouds will never do any good upon earth. Wherever the holy spirit absorbs all the tender and sympathetic affections, it is not to be expected that such a being will be capable of benevolent emotions to his species. If man would study his own nature, and understand his true predicament in life, he would cease to wander after phantasms, he would reject with just indignation religious impositions, whether they came in the name of Jesus or Mahomet, whether they were sanctioned by the bible or the koran, the Sadder or the Zendavesta. Revelation is a system of juggling, in which each dexterous imposter plays off a game of folly or fanaticism to accumulate interest, or gratify the enthusiastic feelings of the heart. Among inspired idiots there is also more of pride than is generally imagined, he who elevates himself to the third heavens, and there holds divine conversation with God himself, must have no contemptible opinion of his own dignity; but sometimes in the delirium produced by religious enthusiasm, he sinks as much below the standard of manhood, as his fancy had taught him to believe he had been raised above it. There is an intellectual insanity attached to those who run after religious ideas of a supernatural kind.
If the matters contained in the old and new testament be brought to the true criterion, it would be found that they do not partake at all of the character of revelation. An excellent writer, (Paine) has more than once observed in his writings, that history is not revelation, for as he very justly observes, if a man has said or done a thing, it requires no revelation to tell him that he has said or done it; if the knowledge of the fact be communicated to others down through successive generations, this transmission can never be considered in the light of revelation from God,—it is mere historical detail, and however dignified with the name of holy writ, must forever remain at the standard of its own true character.

The greater part of the Old Testament, is a mere jumble of stories, bloody stories, too many of them by far too bloody, to possess the sanction of the most high God; intermingled with these scenes of human carnage, are several love intrigues, such as those of David and Solomon. These two royal wretches, these splendid debauchees of antiquity, have been dignified by the christian church with appellations of the most honorable nature, the one is said to be the wisest man, and the other a man after God’s own heart; their transactions, however, with their female companions, are destitute of all the features of divine revelation. In short, the whole class of facts and of falsehoods contained in the old testament, sinks into nothing, when we reflect that a revelation is something communicated from the Creator to man, by means of divine or supernatural power.

The precepts contained in the bible, whether immoral or moral, are surely not entitled to the name of revelation; no one will contend in favor of the first class, that is the bad precepts, and as to the second class, that is the good precepts; these are also destitute of all the characteristic features of a supernatural communication from the creator.

Moral principles are plain, simple rules, by which the conduct of man ought to be regulated; they grow out of the powers and relationships of human beings, they are deducible from the structure of man’s existence, and reason is the power by which they are discovered and applied to the important purposes of human life. But there is a third class of ideas contained in the christian religion, to which believers especially annex the name and character of revelation; in this are included all the mysterious doctrines of the new testament, such as atonement, regeneration, doctrine of the trinity, etc. The answer to those who contend us in this ground is very short and easy. The doctrines are all either unjust or unintelligible, and in either case they cannot be called divine revelation. God will not reveal that which is unjust, and to reveal that which is unintelligible would be of no use—it would be a revelation unrevealed, it would be a revealed mystery which is no revelation at all. But it will perhaps be said that the position which has been laid down is wrong, that these doctrines are neither unjust, nor unintelligible; but we affirm that the doctrine of the
atone the doctrine of the trinity, christians themselves do not pretend to understand, they only pretend to believe it, because they think it is heresy not to believe it; the doctrine of regeneration is as little capable of being understood, it is a mysterious change that nobody can give any account of; Jesus himself was puzzled with it, for when Nicodemus asked him how a man could be born again, he evades the enquiry, by saying, the wind bloweth where it listeth. . . .

Laws of Nature (28 April 1804)
It is by long observation, that man discovers the true character of the laws, by which the world is governed, the united experience of nations and ages bears such ample testimony, to a general, universal and immutable establishment, that doubts in the present case, seem tantamount to a willful attack upon the mass of evidence, which is calculated to work general conviction in the human mind; where Phenomena are constant and uniform, they ought most undoubtedly to become the basis of the highest confidence. If it were possible for a single individual, to possess all the rational powers, with a knowledge of one solitary fact, that the sun has risen in the Eastern hemisphere, he could not affirm that there existed a certainty of his ever beholding the same phenomenon again: from a single case, no general deduction can be drawn, but from thousands and thousands of cases, conclusions may be made, against which nothing but folly and fanaticism could be induced to make any opposition. When the Bible asserts that the sun stood still, or that the regular operations of the laws of nature were suspended in the planetary system, the universal observation of mankind, the experience and the testimony of ages are against the assertion: to say that it is a lie, is perfectly consistent with all those rules of judging, by which the reason of man ought to be regulated; nay, further, in all other cases where religion is not concerned, men of common understanding would be ashamed to acquiesce in decisions of a similar nature. When the New Testament affirms that Jesus turned water into wine, we know or ought to know, that the assertion is false; first, because the practicability or possibility of such a thing is denounced by the nature of the case,—by the reason and experience of mankind; secondly, because the science which man has acquired, has exposed innumerable impostures of this kind, and so many detections have thrown a coloring of suspicion over all the rest. Credulity, however, and especially religious credulity, seems to be a leading property to which the imbecility of man has exposed his existence. In proportion as the human mind becomes improved and enlightened, it becomes less credulous, less disposed to swallow absurd and marvellous doctrines. The sublime and elevated power of contemplation excludes all credulity, and surveys with steadiness, the character of different beings or objects; it enquires with patient perseverance, and never suffers itself to be thrown off from that well balanced position, which takes in all the
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points and bearings of any given portion of Physical existence. Intellectual precipitancy leadeth to error; it is the character of the mind in search of truth, to move in an easy and happy medium of doubt—always disposed to be influenced by the greatest opacity of evidence which the nature of the case presents to view, when a man in a state of intellectual finity reads in holy writ, the story of Jonah and the whale, or in other words the big fish; it is scarcely possible to refrain from a burst of laughter. If religious superstition were not blinded by the inherent nature of her own character, she would be ashamed of the gross attempts to impose upon men, such miraculous tales, for a system of truth and genuine theology; but nothing will tend to destroy superstition, more than a persevering attention to the laws of nature; no man who understands these laws, and who perspicuously surveys the immutable properties which they possess, can possibly believe in the hobgoblin stories of antiquity. It may be objected here that Newton was a good philosopher;—that he understood well the laws of nature, and yet, that he was a believer in the christian religion; in the first place, it is uncertain in what respects he was a believer, or how far in his own mind he might have rejected certain absurd and ridiculous parts of the Old and New Testament: It is well known, that he did not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, and his knowledge of the solar system, must have elevated him above any kind of credence in the following declaration in holy writ, Sun stand thou still upon Gideon, and thou moon in the valley of Agalon; but if we concede what has generally been considered as a fact, that he was a christian upon a graduate scale, it will prove nothing in the present case. A correct knowledge of the laws of nature, includes something more than mere mathematical calculation, or demonstration; it includes something more than planetary revolutions, eccentricity of comets or magnitude of celestial bodies; that important and useful science, which embraces all the operations of the human mind, and on which in fact the welfare of the intelligent world depends, was not well understood by Newton; he understood physical nature, but with the moral science he was much less conversant; he had not compared the operations of the understanding, with the doctrines and opinions contained in the Bible. From such a comparison made without prejudice, deductions must have followed hostile to the sentiments of the church, and to that system of religion, from which the church has drawn its tenets; these tenets must eventually give way to a thorough knowledge of moral and physical existence.

On Christian Faith (12 May 1804)
The nature of human credence as it relates to common objects, is a matter extremely clear and intelligible, it is an assent of mind to the truth of a proposition when that proposition is supported by sufficient evidence; but christian faith assumes quite a different character: it is wild extravagance and pretends to a thousand things, to the performance of which it is totally incompetent. In the
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New Testament it is said if a man have faith like a grain of mustard-seed, he shall
say to yonder mountain, remove hence and it shall be removed! Now every
christian that has common sense knows, that there is not a word of truth in this
declaration. I say to one, do you believe in the christian religion? he answers in
the affirmative, speak then to the Allegheny Mountain to march beyond the
Mississippi and I will believe too. The mountain does not move—I press him
for the evidences of his faith. He stands and either looks like a fool or grows
angry. Will you start the mountain?—I cannot. Then you have no faith—I
have. Then the book tells a lye, and so you must either prove the truth of the
book by your faith, or I will prove the book is not entitled to credit. Believer
how canst thou escape from this dilemma? The signs or evidences of christian
faith are specifically stated in the last chapter of Mark, verse 17, 18. And these
signs shall follow them that believe: in my name shall they cast out devils; they
shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any
deadly thing it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick and they
shall recover. Now we challenge the whole phalanx of christian believers to
verify the scriptures by exhibiting the above mentioned signs. They know that
they cannot do it, and yet they say they believe every word contained in the
Old and New Testament. It is a pity that the Reverend the Clergy, of all
denominations, who make so much noise about infidels and infidelity, will not
be so very obliging as to give at least one of these signs as proof of the sincerity
of their faith. Take, for instance, that which would be most useful in yellow
fever times—they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover. Surely
if they had faith they would have humanity enough to exercise that faith in behalf
of their distressed friends and neighbours destined to death by the raging in­
fluence of Yellow Fever. But no, they can give us no such testimony—they
make false the sacred word of God in which they pretend to believe. They have
faith that the country air is purer than that of the city—away they run, in this
they are right enough, but how does this conduct comport with their pre­
tended faith in divine revelation and the signs which this revelation ascribes to
their faith. Such inconsistencies denounce the divinity of the book, and pro­
strate it in silence before the throne of reason.

More of Human Reason (28 July 1804)

"Reason," says a believer to an infidel, "is a deceitful and blind guide, and in
spiritual concerns will infallibly lead to destruction." "How are you assured of
it?" says the other—"to which of my faculties is this addressed? Does reason by
exercising its own powers discover its own treachery? If so, does it not in the
act of communicating give the lie direct to the sentiment? If your reason can
so clearly discern that it is obscured, it cannot surely be that very blind guide
you would represent it—If it cannot so discern, the assertion is evidently made
at random, and requires examination."—"I am enabled (replies the believer) to
see spiritually, and you only carnally—your mind is not yet endued with divine grace, and until an inward change is effected, which cannot be wrought but by God himself, you cannot perceive the force of what is addressed to you. —Be not however led astray by the subtle and specious arts of sophistry; but believe, and trust in God to work the change in your heart at his own good pleasure.”

Now one of these beings makes a serious and solemn assertion which the other verily disbelieves and denies. —Supposing them both equally honest and sincere (for the unbeliever cannot surely be censurable for not using that which the believer tells him he has not and cannot have till God sends it) how is their difference of opinion to be canvassed, and the error corrected? With what mental powers are they respectively to set about the inquiry? Is the truth of the question to be on both sides—examined by the help of reason or without it, or with some other and what faculty? Or is one party (who has nothing better) to exercise his single talent on the occasion, while the other opposes to it a power which to reason is declared incomprehensible. If the carnal man and the spiritual are conveying their thoughts through a different medium, how can they ever come to a point? and where is the utility of the latter’s sowing where nothing can be reaped, or in other words, of casting pearls before swine? For the spiritual man says, the carnal one cannot understand him when he speaks the truth spiritually, though according to his own account, he is at the same moment opposing to a mere human faculty, one that partakes of the divine.

If a book called profane be put into the hands of a stranger, it will be admitted that he is to examine it with his natural understanding; but how is he to act when the bible is produced to him, particularly when informed by the human producer, that it is a divine communication and not to be examined like productions merely human? How is he to set about considering that to the proper examination whereof his reason is declared incompetent? Is he with his unassisted faculties to examine and judge of it as well as he can until he hears express from heaven with better, or is he to rely implicitly on human intelligence which accompanies it, and lay down or lock up the book till celestial optics are given for the purpose? The contents of the bible being first received through the same channels as those of any other work, can the reason of a believer, like the stops of an organ, be shoved aside and the faculty fitted for this occult study introduced at pleasure into its room? —The canonical books of the Old and New Testament must no doubt be read with the spiritual faculty and the uncanonical apocrypha with the natural, but how suddenly to convey the matter of these respective works through the eyes and ears of their readers to the appropriate powers of the mind is the difficulty. —Is there in the bible (dictated as is said by God) any passage signifying that the understanding of its readers shall not take cognizance of its sentiments, and if such should (upon spiritualizing something for the purpose) be found in it how can reason, while
it reads, avoid controverting the position and refusing to knuckle to a usurper?  
—To what faculty of the human mind is the bible supposed originally to have been addressed? How can it be a revelation to man, if it must steer clear of his reason as a ship avoids a shoal? If it be not intended to be examined by the faculty which distinguishes man from brute, why is it not as fit to be addressed to brutes as to men? If the prime and essential quality of man is not to meddle with it, why is it addressed to man in particular? —We are not it is said, to examine a divine communication with a human and imperfect understanding. How then must it be examined? We cannot do it with anything divine, and if not cognizable by human reason, why must it be examined with something inferior to reason which is still human? —If there be any fault in examining a divine present with human powers, with whom do believers contend that such fault originates? It is said to have been revealed for the benefit of human sinners, who nevertheless are declared incapable of reading it to any purpose until they can send to Heaven for spectacles. —If the book is not to be examined by unassisted human faculties, why has the supposed revelation been made to human beings, or why did not a divine key or glossary accompany it? 

The truth is, that this same thing called a revelation, is, according to the believer’s own account of it, not a thing revealed or made plain; but something placed by God in the sight of man requiring abundance of explanation, which nevertheless cannot be had—without further supernatural assistance. This same supernatural assistance, too, of which (though said to be given for the important purpose of expounding God’s word to his creatures) no proof has ever been exhibited, causes its pretended possessors to put different and contradictory constructions upon the same divine passages (thereby increasing the difficulty) and in effect to charge each other as madmen or imposters. —They are unanimous only (where they cannot help it) in failing to produce evidence of their authority, and yet arrogantly claim from their fellow mortals a blind and passive assent to all their jarring and inconsistent assertions, taking fire even at the expression of a doubt. A system of religion thus aiming to subvert Heaven’s best gift to man, and involved in such a budget of absurdity, is at war with every attribute of divinity and deserves the solemn reprobation of every upright mind.

Superstition (24 November 1804)

It is by the slow progress of the human understanding that the evils of human life can be diminished or destroyed. Superstition presents a formidable obstacle to the diffusion of science and the augmentation of human happiness. Nothing important can be done for the benefit of man, without a development of the moral energies of his nature; but superstition holds him fast, tells him it is a crime to think, and frightens him almost out of his senses with spiritual spectres that have no real existence. Thousands of gods, ghosts and
devils have been fabricated with vast variety of characters on purpose to terrify weak and deluded man. A subordinate class of spiritual lackeys have also been created and sent as Missionaries over the whole earth to frighten women and children. Of this sort were the witches, the fairies and the sprites of former days, and which, even now, form the basis of universal terror in many countries. The Bible sanctioned these incongruous ideas, and gave to nonentity the form, character and effect of real existence. The clergy declare to the people that this is the best book in the world; they found their discourses upon the incoherencies therein contained, and the people are swallowed up in a gulph of superstition from which they know not how to escape. Ye spiritual instructors of a lost and wicked world! read over once the Books of Genesis and Exodus, and ask yourselves the question, whether you would think it any honour to yourselves to be the authors of such a production? Would you not blush for many of the sentiments therein contained, and do you imagine that such composition would render your names illustrious in the great republic of letters? Superstition and interest have combined to create and perpetuate an attachment to the sacred writings of the Jews and Christians. The age of happiness must be that in which all theological conceptions shall be centered in the Theism of Nature, or the belief of one God. This God must be destitute of all irascible passions and malignant attributes of every kind; he must be a very different being from the God of the Old Testament, for the belief in such a God produces the most destructive consequences. Superstition has always ascribed to the divinities in whose existence she has placed confidence, a surplus of properties, and these properties were generally of a pestilential and contagious kind. The disease thus caught was worse than the yellow fever; it spread desolation and death to all around; it carried conflagration and carnage over the whole earth; it shook to the foundation the tranquility of the world. Man, cultivate thy reason and truth; virtue and happiness will be the necessary consequences.

The Indian Student; or, Force of Nature
(24 November 1804)

From Susquehanna’s farthest springs
Where savage tribes pursue their games,
(His blanket tied with yellow strings,)
A shepherd from the forest came.

Not long before, a wandering priest
Express’d his wish, with visage sad—
“Ah, why,” he cry’d, “in Satan’s waste,
Ah, why detain so fine a lad?
"In white man's land there stands a town
Where learning might be purchas'd low—
Exchange his blanket for a gown,
And let the lad to college go."

From long debate the council rose,
And viewing Shalum's tricks with joy
To Cambridge Hall, o'er wastes of snows,
They sent the copper-colour'd boy.

One generous chief a bow supply'd,
This gave a shaft, and that a skin:
The feathers, in vermillion dy'd,
Himself did from a turkey win:

Thus dress'd so gay, he took his way
O'er barren hills, alone, alone,
His guide a star, he wander'd far,
His pillow every night a stone.

At last he came with foot so lame,
Where learned men talk heathen Greek,
And Hebrew lore is gabbled o'er,
To please the Muses,—twice a week.

A while he writ, a while he read,
A while he conn'd their grammar rules—
(An Indian savage so well bred
Great credit promis'd to the schools.)

Some thought he would in law excel,
Some said in physic he would shine;
And one that knew him, passing well,
Beheld, in him, a sound divine.

But those of more discerning eye
Even then could other prospects show,
And saw him lay his Virgil by
To wander with his dearer bow.

The tedious hours of study spent,
The heavy moulded lecture done,
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He to the woods a hunting went,
Thro' lonely wastes he walk'd, he ran.

No mystic wonders fir'd his mind;
He sought to gain no learn'd degree,
But only sense enough to find
The squirrel in the hollow tree.

The shady bank, the purling stream,
The woody wild his heart possess'd,
The dewy lawn, his morning dream
In fancy's gayest colours dress'd.

"And why (he cry'd) did I forsake
My native woods for gloomy walls;
The silver stream, the limpid lake
For musty books and college halls:

"A little could my wants supply—
Can wealth and honour give me more
Or, will the sylvan god deny
The humble treat he gave before?

"Let seraphs gain the bright abode,
And heaven's sublimest mansion see—
I only bow to Nature's God—
The land of shades will do for me.

"These dreadful secrets of the sky
Alarm my soul with chilling fear—
Do planets in their orbits fly,
And is the earth, indeed, a sphere?

"Let planets still their course pursue,
And comets to the centre run—
In him my faithful friend I view,
The image of my God—the Sun.

"Where nature's ancient forests grow,
And mingled laurel never fades,
My heart is fixed;—and I must go
To die among my native shades."
He spoke, and to the western springs,
(His gown discharg'd, his money spent,
His blanket tied with yellow strings,)  
The shepherd of the forest went.

Remarks (26 January 1805)
The subject of Blasphemy has been viewed in different points of light, in different countries; and the opinions of individuals in the same country have been so diversified, that an enquiry into the nature of the case, and the character of Blasphemy, seems to have become extremely necessary. The ignorance, the timidity, and the superstition of man, have created a thousand spiritual phantoms which have no positive or real existence in nature; these frightful productions of the human imagination are, however, very highly estimated by their legitimate progenitors. The more distorted the object of adoration is, the more it seems to excite the pious affection of its devoted victim. Fanaticism and folly are always the concomitants of false religions; and when once the human mind is subjugated and placed completely under the dominion of superstition, reason loses all the energy of its character, and the moral world becomes a chaos of ignorance, vice, and misery. It is amidst this general darkness that hot-headed, religious enthusiasm sets about the business of protecting the phantoms of its own creation. This must be done either by civil or ecclesiastical law, annexing a terrifying penalty to each violation. But who is this law to protect? The answer to this would be different in different countries; and even among the sectaries professing substantially the same religion. Among the Christians, the Trinitarians would contend for a law which should cover over the sublime and mysterious doctrine of the Trinity, and guard the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost against human outrage and profane obloquy. Among Arians and Socinians, the law would go only to protect Jehovah himself, leaving the Son and Holy Ghost to shift for themselves, and defend their character in the best manner they can. We do not mean to insinuate here that the Arians and the Socinians have no regard to the character of Jesus; on the contrary, it is true that the Arians ascribe to him a superangelic nature; and the Socinians consider him as a mere man, endowed with extraordinary gifts and graces, and both view him as an agent from God, to restore a lost world to Divine favour. These sectaries do not wish for a law to protect the character of Jesus against Blasphemy, and as to the Holy Ghost, they have dismissed him entirely and thrown him out of their spiritual service. Thus Christians themselves would be unable to agree upon the persons or beings whose character the law of Blasphemy ought to protect. The most numerous and ruling sectaries, however, regulate this matter as they please; and subjecting, at the same time, all other sectaries to the unjust criminations of their spiritual tyranny. In countries not professing the Christian religion, another and distinct class of spiritual idols are set up as
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objects of adoration, and of course, all these Blasphemous laws, as they ought to be called, go to the point of guarding their character, such as it is, against the slanderous insults of all those who come under their jurisdiction. The character of Mahomet is as sacred in Turkey, as that of Jesus is among the Christians. Zoroaster commands the adoration of the Persian world, and his character there is profoundly sacred. Penetrate into the Indies, and you will find the sacred name of Fot, commanding the adoration of millions, and it would be blasphemy there to speak against his Divinity. The same remark, in spirit and principle, will apply to all the sublime and dignified phantoms of all the other nations of the earth. But the advocates for the laws of Blasphemy will say, that there is one supreme God, and that his character ought to be protected, whatever may be said concerning the inferior Divinities. But it may be answered, who gave to legislators on earth, the right and the power of making laws concerning the character of the Creator? Is he not fully competent to protect his own character, without recourse to the malignant and persecuting arm of human flesh? Yes, and there is no man, or set of men, on earth, that has a right to make laws respecting the religious opinions of individuals—let those opinions be what they will. The laws should take cognizance only of immoral actions, leaving to each individual the absolute right of modifying his theological ideas according to the best judgment which human reason can form upon the subject. Whoever is not sufficiently civil to the Divinity he adores, must look to that matter himself, and settle the dispute in the best manner he can. Let legislators look to the morals, the science, and the virtues of society—with theology they have nothing to do; it is beyond the sphere of their jurisdiction.

Enthusiasm (2 February 1805)

Immediate revelation being a much easier way for men to establish their opinions and regulate their conduct than the tedious and not always successful labour of strict reasoning; it is no wonder that some have been very apt to pretend to revelation, and to persuade themselves that they are under the peculiar guidance of heaven in their actions and opinions, especially in those of them which they cannot account for by the ordinary methods of knowledge and principles of reason. Hence we see, that in all ages, men in whom melancholy has mixed with devotion, or whose conceit of themselves has raised them into an opinion of a greater familiarity with God, and a nearer admittance to his favour, than is afforded to others, have often flattered themselves with a persuasion of an immediate intercourse with the Deity, and frequent communications from the Divine Spirit. God, I own, cannot be denied to be able to enlighten the understanding by a ray darted into the mind immediately from the fountain of light. This they understand he has promised to do; and who then has so good a title to expect it as those who are his peculiar people, chosen by him, and depending on him?
Their minds being thus prepared, whatever groundless opinion comes to settle itself strongly upon their fancies, is an illumination from the Spirit of God, and presently of Divine authority; and whatsoever odd action they find in themselves a strong inclination to do, that impulse is concluded to be a call or direction from heaven, and must be obeyed; it is a commission from above, and they cannot err in executing it.

This I take to be properly enthusiasm; which, though founded neither on reason nor divine revelation, but rising from the conceits of a warmed or overweening brain, works yet, where it once gets footing, more powerfully on the persuasions and actions of men, than either of those two or both together: men being most forwardly obedient to the impulses they receive from themselves; and the whole man is sure to act more vigorously, where the whole man is carried by a natural motion. For strong conceit, like a new principle, carries all easily with it when got above common sense; and freed from all restraint of reason and check of reflection, it is heightened into a divine authority in concurrence with our own temper and inclination.

For the Prospect (30 March 1805)
The Law of this State, the Constitution of which professes to secure the free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference, to all mankind, declares, in regard to oaths, that any person who believes in a Supreme Being, and a future state of rewards and punishments, shall be admitted to give testimony in its courts, and in order to discover (when occasion requires it) whether a person produced as a witness be or be not competent to be admitted, it has been the practice of Judges to propound to the individual, questions relative to his or her belief, for the express purpose of ascertaining by answers, given when not under oath, whether such witness will speak the truth when sworn. The same law, by annexing a penalty to perjury, virtually admits the possibility of false swearing, and the uncertainty of an oath. If, then, it be evident that a person after swearing, can yet violate the oath which he has taken, and declare what is false, by what reasoning is it inferred that the answers of the same person, before he is sworn, to questions relating to his right to be examined, can be a correct or infallible standard, whereby to regulate its exercise? Is a simple promise to execute an obligation, more sure and sacred than the instrument itself, when sealed? Or, can the preliminary engagement be held inviolable, while the final query is insecure? As well might the effect of a muzzle upon a mastiff be tried, by first turning the animal loose amongst crows, or Jupiter’s belts be looked for, with the naked eye, in order to ascertain whether they be discoverable by a telescope, as the bare word of a man, under such circumstances, be taken as a criterion whereby to measure his attachment to an oath. If two Universalists, or other unbelievers, are called as witnesses on the same occasion, one of whom in obedience to
the law professes to believe what in reality he thinks false, while the other honestly declares his disbelief, what is the consequence? The testimony of the latter, who, by his scrupulous adherence to truth, has proved himself deserving of the highest credit, is rejected, with a stigma into the bargain, upon his candour; while that of the timid or time-serving hypocrite is received without hesitation, and even with comparative applause. The character of this law . . . savours highly of spiritual domination. The true definition of the word orthodox, as it respects religion, when simplified and examined, will in every country be found to be neither more nor less than uppermost; and the law in question, framed by legislators whose individual bible opinions might for the time being have the ascendency, operates as far as it goes as a religious establishment or direct preference of one sect over others, and so far from leaving to each the free exercise and enjoyment of its own profession, as intended by the constitution, leaves only the exercise, but robs and deprives some of their most valuable and inherent rights and enjoyments; viz. the benefit of a good name and reputation, until lost or strained by immoral conduct. Shame! that a republican legislature should attempt thus to domineer in affairs of conscience, and prove themselves incompetent to discriminate between the different duties owing to their Creator and their constituents. A person of the strictest integrity and veracity may, by operation of this law, have his credit impeached without fault of his own, if he does not happen either to embrace a creed chalked out for him by his neighbours, or in default consent to play the hypocrite; while a profligate and abandoned wretch, who for interest or convenience can make and alter his professions at pleasure, may raise his reputation upon the other’s misfortune. Such a proceeding is both in principle and practice in direct and open violation of the constitution, and iniquitously aims to usurp to man prerogatives pertaining exclusively to God.