

Paine

Continued from Page 1D

ter, is a text as well for devotion as for philosophy – for gratitude as for human improvement. It will perhaps be said, that if such a revolution in the system of religion takes place, every preacher ought to be a philosopher ... and every house of devotion a school of science.”

A foretaste of the future of Religion?

Would Paine go to church if he was alive today? Maybe a Friends Meeting (Quaker). Perhaps he'd visit a variety of congregations to see if his vision of true religious liberty was being fulfilled 200 years later.

Most clergy would cringe to see Tom walking through the door. “Here's the guy who asks too many disturbing questions, challenges theologies and creeds, and doesn't seem to pray or read scriptures. He's respectful and generous – a heck of a writer with a particular concern for justice and human rights – but he's always agitating, pushing us to think harder, telling us the pew is as important as the pulpit, asking why we need clergy anyway! Quick, lock the doors and turn off the lights, here he comes!”

If he went to church, Paine might remove a brick each visit. Some piece of the walls, the foundation, would come up missing. Until ... there was transformation, reformation, even some kind of revolution. Would it still be “church”?

Let's imagine what Tom's Church might look like:

■ Sanctuary: A grove of trees, a meadow, riverside or mountainside. Or, a bustling street corner.

■ Welcome: “Commoners, kings and queens – all are welcome here.”

■ Opening prayer: Silence

■ Hymn: His poem “Liberty Tree” set to music

■ Confession: “My country is the world and my religion is to do good.”

■ Scripture reading: Quietly observing the text of Nature around us.

■ Sermon: “Our Latest Discoveries” (Scientists, Philosophers, Educators, Storytellers).

■ Creed: “I believe in a Creator (call it God or Good, Nature or Force), doing good to others and hoping for life after death.”

■ Benediction: “We the People' have the responsibility to make our world a better place. So, let's go do that!”

The Church of Paine would not be painless – not a place to seek comfort and assurance. After all, he gave the tree of liberty a good shake, and it's still shaking.

And, come to think of it, what does Tom want to build with all those bricks?

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.