

# Tom Paine goes to church, then builds his own



**Thomas Paine** CHRIS HIGHLAND/SPECIAL TO CITIZEN TIMES



## Highland Views

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Completing a six-week course I teach on “Thomas Paine in our age of un-reason,” I come away with radical ideas – again. Each time I read “The Age of Reason,” Paine’s 18th Century book presenting his “opinions on religion,” I’m amazed by his prescient perspectives. Freethinkers who do not believe in a deity might be uncomfortable with Paine’s deistic “natural religion.” On the other hand, freethinkers who go to church (or any “sacred sanctuary”) might want to check to see what bricks are missing each time Paine drops in for a visit. More on that in a minute.

“My own mind is my own church,” so saith old Tom Paine (1737-1809), the revolutionary writer and thinker who gave us, one might argue, a nation. I’ve heard him called “The Father of the Founders,” which is an exaggeration, but not wildly so. Assumed by generations of Americans to be an atheist, the truth is that he wrote one of the most powerful arguments for believing ever written.

It seems quite natural that this son of a Quaker fa-

ther and Anglican mother would help create a new kind of nation by writing a little pamphlet called “Common Sense,” only to follow it some 20 years later with “The Age of Reason” that would help create a new kind of religion. At least the potential was there. Just as we’re still trying to figure out how to craft a country from a secular constitution, we continue to struggle with the shape of religious faith that flourishes under that “ungodly” document (no mention of God therein).

Paine told the painful truth and it caused “paine-demonium” among the fearfully-faithful who seem to believe in a deity that for some unexplained reason needs defending. Paine’s God is an Almighty Creator whose sheer immensity in the universe puts a whole lot of what we think of as Big Religion to shame. His “paine-theist” God needs no defending, let alone clergy, holy books, rituals, traditions, creeds, churches or religion itself.

Then how can he call that a religion?

At the conclusion of “The Age of Reason,” Paine clearly spells it out:

“The Bible of Creation is inexhaustible in texts. Every part of science, whether connected with the geometry of the universe, with the systems of animal and vegetable life, or with the properties of inanimate mat-

**See PAINE. Page 3D**