Thomas Paine And His Ulterior Motives For Revolution

Writer and revolutionary Thomas Paine is most famous for his effort in initiating fervor for revolution in the hearts of 18th century Americans. From the outside, Paine is seemingly the embodiment of American spirit and disdain towards the exploitative actions of. However, a curious fact leaves one in ponderance of Paine's true motives for contributing to the Revolutionary War: Thomas Paine himself was.[footnoteRef:0] This simple reality in and of itself further leads one to question, did Paine have a different motive for his involvement in America or had he simply a similar contempt for just as the colonists did? With the success of his pamphlet Common Sense known throughout the world, it is a shock to most that he died with much controversy surrounding his life, as many disliked him.9 This point of contention lies within one piece of writing: The Age of Reason and the radical ideas he presented within it. One must first discover what lead him to his progressive stances on religion and desire to share it nationwide, and finally come to the conclusion that Thomas Paine did not fight for the American cause only because of his sympathy for their plight, but he rather wanted to insight a religious revolution by first starting a literal revolution. [0:]

Thomas Paine, born in Thetford, United Kingdom in 1737, grew up during a time of prominent Quakerism, thought to have influenced his ideology.3 A chief idea of the Quakers is that the "relation between Christ and man is an organic one, meaning that the Quakers had a powerful sense of social responsibility."[footnoteRef:1] [footnoteRef:2] The Quakers believed in peace and that "every human being . . . possesses the same inner light . . . thus making all men equal in the eyes of God."2 Though this was a quiet period in Quakerism, many still fought against common social ideas and acted "as pioneers in various social causes."2 Paine's upbringing as a Quaker, specifically witnessing this type of "revolution" against social ideas, laid the foundation for his own revolutionary nature and reformist ideas. What pushed Paine into American culture was his move to Lewes wherein, from 1768-1774, he was exposed to the convictions of the Whig party and became grounded in its ideology.2 In addition, witnessing hunger and labor riots being conducted in London led him to support a Commonwealth ideology, a movement embraced by "unprivileged, unenfranchised, and unpropertied members of English society."[footnoteRef:3] With this idea ingrained into his mind, along with a religious background that emphasized similar concepts, Thomas Paine felt an obligation to the lesser people. As indicated by his writing, no one else at the time "emphasizes equality, simplicity, and pacifism as strongly as does Paine."2 [1:] [2:] [3:]

When analyzing reasons for the creation of the Declaration of Independence, it is first essential to note that many of the first migrants to the New World left England due to the incapability to practice one's own beliefs that did not coincide with the government, which established America as a land of freedom founded on the basis of faith.[footnoteRef:4] In January of 1776, Thomas Paine published his infamous pamphlet Common Sense, one that, influenced by his own ideas of Commonwealth, called for independence of the American people from Britain. This work is known as one of the catalysts that helped fully ignite the flame of the American Revolution, eventually leading to the creation of the Declaration of Independence.[footnoteRef:5] Within the section titled "Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession," Paine asserts his belief in equal right of all men, writing, "[a]s the exalting one man so greatly above the rest cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature, so neither can it

be defended on the authority of scripture.”[footnoteRef:6] This declaration again affirms the influence of his religious beliefs on his political ideology, as he emphasizes the same ideas of human equality held by the Quakers. One sees stress placed on spiritual values, as he mentions, “[f]or myself, I fully and conscientiously believe, that it is the will of the Almighty, that there should be diversity of religious opinions among us: It affords a larger field for our Christian kindness,” in reference to the diversity of religion in the American colonies and the importance of freedom of religious expression.6 5 Throughout Common Sense, Paine leaves inklings of religious importance on his thinking, demonstrated by his numerous references to religion, the Bible, and God.[footnoteRef:7] He appealed to the masses with patriotic ideas and a call for action, and though he was truthful in his support for the American cause, he simultaneously laid the basics for his ultimate writing, The Age of Reason. Thomas Paine planted seeds of his theological ideas, fueled by the Revolution, for the zeal of revolution itself to hopefully allow these seeds to sprout, grow, and spread across America. [4:] [5:] [6:] [7:]

As Thomas Paine returned to Europe in 1787, he witnessed the Americans’ passion for revolution spreading to France and, seeing a new opportunity to incite revolution just as he had in America, wrote Rights of Man, which defended the “republican principles of the French Revolution with a scathing critique of Burke and the oppressive political system.”[footnoteRef:8] As of the publishing of Rights of Man, Paine inserted himself into two separate revolutions. His reasoning for doing so is, like with the American Revolution, based on his obligation to ensuring the equality of all men and his use of the popularity of a revolution to further his own agenda. Within the content of Rights of Man, one sees yet another glimpse into Paine’s evolving view of religion’s responsibility to humanity, as he writes, “[i]ndependence is my happiness, and I view things as they are, without regard to place or person; my country is the world, and my religion is to do good.”[footnoteRef:9] This statement reveals Paine’s true thoughts on religion’s place in his life; it exists for him to do good unto others. Summing up his ideals, and in respect to different branches of religion, Paine states that “if everyone is left to judge of his own religion, there is no such thing as a religion that is wrong; but if they are to judge of each other’s religion, there is no such thing as a religion that is right; and therefore all the world is right, or all the world is wrong.”10 He describes his perception of the flawed nature of institutionalized religion, wherein, because of its current state, either all of the world is correct in their distinct religious beliefs, or none of them are. Thomas Paine’s Quaker history is highlighted in Common Sense, but comes to full fruition in Rights of Man as he becomes increasingly adamant on pushing his message, his only obstacle now being to convey that message fully. [8:] [9:]

To give further context, Thomas Paine was strategic in the marketing of his ideals to the American people, as mentioned. He knew that revolution was extremely popular across the country, and utilized the effect of it to put him in a position of power wherein he could eventually implant a religious revolution into the hearts of people across the world. Common Sense itself sold over 500,000 copies, making it infamous among citizens.6 With his intellectual authority known, it is no surprise that his next major work, Rights of Man, included many references to his revolutionary ideas. As it gained attention from the French people, even to the point that he was viewed as a hero and received an honorary French citizenship, Paine became more active in French politics and finally turned to writing about religion.9 Paine was in, what he perceived to be, the perfect position of influence to publish what he had wanted to from the beginning; an essay of his criticisms against the Christian doctrine. In 1807, Thomas Paine published the Age of Reason, a document that would forever tarnish his reputation and leave him to die detested for his denial of Christianity.9 [footnoteRef:10] [10:]

Paine opens The Age of Reason with a simple confession, revealing that “[i]t has been my intention, for several years past, to publish my thoughts upon religion,” proving speculation that his previous famous writings were the beginnings of his path to write this piece.[footnoteRef:11] Ascertaining the unrightful power that religion held on people, and due to his egalitarian upbringing, Thomas Paine had begun work on his ultimate goal of religious reformation as early as Common Sense. The contents of this writing coincided with his personal beliefs of equality and the liberties of man, affirming that “I believe the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy.”12 His humanitarian field of thought helps set up the reasoning for his following statements, where he denounced the creeds of the Greek, Jewish, Roman, Turkish, and Protestant churches, stating then that these institutions were formed in order to terrify mankind and grow in power.12 Paine was not against religion, as he himself believed in God, but opposed the actuality that numerous religions attempted to control the lives of people and abuse their powers as organizations that many devoted their lives to. The atrocities laid upon the French and American people opposed the significance of Commonwealth and fairness in Paine’s principles, and thus, his commitment was to people who he felt were being oppressed by an institution that claimed to aid those it was oppressing. Beginning with Common Sense, Paine truly wanted to fight for the American colonists due to his morals, but when his concerns with religious institutions increased, as did his fame and influence, he realized that he could tackle both problems at once. In The Age of Reason, Paine gives an answer as to his motives, writing, “[s]oon after I had published the pamphlet Common Sense, in America, I saw the exceeding probability that a revolution in the system of government would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion.”12 His life’s work became his obligation to the protection of people against abusive organizations, but hope of a religious revolution in his time, and with his ideas at the forefront, was halted due to his extremely radical ideas. Within The Age of Reason, Paine discounts essential facets to Christianity, disregarding Jesus Christ as the Son of God and debating Mary’s perpetual virginity.12 His writing, though created with good intentions, became repulsed, even with President Theodore Roosevelt going so far as to call him “that dirty little atheist.”11 With a recent-century figure such as Roosevelt expressing disdain for Thomas Paine’s writing, it is clear to see why 19th century Americans held contention with it. [11:]

Thomas Paine, though often a forgotten founding father, was a visionary and egalitarian, devoting himself to protecting the rights of others. Evidenced by his first two major writings, being in support of the American and French revolution, Paine’s heart was with the subjugated and against the oppressors, and he defended his beliefs even if it caused animosity between him and others. His early life, though he later identified as a deist, built a foundation for his vehement belief in equal rights among all men and the unwavering protection of those rights.9 Like the other founding fathers, Paine held a strong belief in liberty. Unlike the founding fathers, his ideals led most to believe him a “nearly atheistic radical.”11 His strong convictions allowed for continual controversy within the final years of his life, of which he always defended himself.9 Paine recognized potential corruption within religious institutions and, with the interests of people in mind, sought to reform these organizations as to build a better future. He was not an atheist, nor anti-religion, as many believed him to be, but he was an intelligent person who wanted to simply fix a problem that had influenced so many others’ lives in a negative way. The issue of religious organizations purposefully striking fear into the souls of their patrons was abhorrent to him, as he states, “[o]f all the tyrannies that affect mankind, tyranny in religion is the worst; every other species of tyranny is limited to the world we live in, but this attempts to stride beyond the grave, and seeks to pursue us into eternity.”12 To Paine, due to the immense impact and sheer amount of involvement of spirituality on innumerable citizens’ lives’ , tyranny

in religion is one of the worst possible injustices, as it attempts to take full control of a person in a negative way. He asserted that religion should be a force of good in one's life, not an overpowering force that inhibits one from attaining one's full potential and contributing to the wellbeing of the world.12 Thomas Paine had the unfortunate circumstance of being born before his time, where the world was not ready to consider his criticisms yet. At his core, Paine was an intellectual and somewhat abrasive, yet sympathetic soul, who resisted opposition and asserted the rights of man, whether it be physical, social, political, or spiritual.

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