

2. Thomas Paine (The origins of secularism & the National Secular Society)

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5hjCmow76k>

0:00:12.380,0:00:17.260

Hi. Bob Forder here.

0:00:17.260,0:00:26.860

Thomas Paine

9 February 1737 to the 8 June 1809.

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Knowing where to start in any attempt to explain the emergence of a secularist

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radical tradition is bound to be controversial,

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but I've got to start somewhere.

I've decided to start with Thomas Paine,

0:00:45.240,0:00:53.100

not because he was entirely original, but because it was he who first articulated

0:00:53.100,0:01:02.460

ideas to a mass audience in ways they could understand and relate to.

0:01:03.530,0:01:11.240

While briefly explaining and outlining his life and career, my main purpose is

0:01:11.240,0:01:18.820

to make an assessment of his importance and his huge legacy.

0:01:19.830,0:01:25.100

Here we have a portrait of Paine by Dabos.

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Payne was born in Thetford, Norfolk on 9 February 1737.

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He received some education at Thetford Grammar School, and served an apprenticeship

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as a staymaker, making the thick rope stays used on sailing ships.

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In 1759 he married, but was soon struck by disaster as his business collapsed

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and his wife and child both died.

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He then became an excise man and in 1772 joined other excise officers

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in asking for better pay and conditions, and wrote what proved to be his first

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political work - a 12 page article entitled "The Case for the Officers of Excise".

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In 1773 he was dismissed as an excise officer, and separated from his second wife, Elizabeth.

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He moved to London where he was introduced to Benjamin Franklin,

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who persuaded him to emigrate to the American colonies.

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Consequently on 30th November 1774,
Paine arrived in Philadelphia and

0:02:51.150,0:02:57.380
soon found employment as editor of the
Pennsylvania Magazine

0:02:57.380,0:03:07.460
at a time when the American Revolution
was erupting, with Philadelphia at its very
heart.

0:03:07.720,0:03:19.800
In January 1776 Paine wrote a work called
Common Sense which crystallized sentiment

0:03:19.800,0:03:24.820
for independence, and sold
about half a million copies.

0:03:24.830,0:03:33.080
Paine made the case for independence,
republicanism and divorce from corrupt,

0:03:33.080,0:03:47.600
tyrannical and hereditary monarchy. His
critique
of the British King, George III, was eviscerating.

0:03:47.680,0:03:54.650
Paine wrote in a style
ordinary people could understand

0:03:54.650,0:04:05.920
and his ideas spread through public readings.
His voice was the voice of revolution.

0:04:06.459,0:04:16.260
Soon after, in 1776, Paine published
the American Crisis series of pamphlets

0:04:16.260,0:04:24.730
to inspire Americans.
General George Washington had it read

0:04:24.730,0:04:31.710
aloud to his soldiers - remember many of
those soldiers were illiterate.

0:04:34.480,0:04:40.740
This is what he wrote:

"These are the times that try men's souls:

0:04:40.740,0:04:49.320
The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot
will,
in this crisis, shrink from the service of their
country;

0:04:49.320,0:04:54.820
but he that stands it now, deserves the
love and thanks of man and woman.

0:04:54.820,0:05:01.320
Tyranny, like Hell, is not easily conquered;
yet we have this consolation with us,

0:05:01.320,0:05:08.220
that the harder the conflict,
the more glorious the triumph."

0:05:08.380,0:05:15.560
In 1787 Paine returned to London where he
soon found himself in controversy,

0:05:15.570,0:05:21.960
defending the French Revolution
from Edmund Burke.

0:05:23.130,0:05:28.800
To this end he published Rights of Man,
a broad political manifesto

0:05:28.800,0:05:34.580
advocating representative government,
wide-ranging social programs and

0:05:34.580,0:05:41.679
progressive taxation.
At its heart was the tenet that

0:05:41.679,0:05:49.899
governments exist to serve their citizens.
Citizens do not exist to serve

0:05:49.899,0:05:55.179
monarchical and aristocratic masters.

0:05:56.300,0:06:04.610
Paine had become the great bogeyman.
The British establishment was terrified

0:06:04.610,0:06:10.130
of the French Revolution and
everything it represented.

0:06:10.130,0:06:18.840
Paine was indicted for seditious libel
and government agents instigated mobs,

0:06:18.840,0:06:25.240
hate meetings and burnings in effigy.

0:06:25.240,0:06:29.920
It became quite a sport

0:06:30.040,0:06:36.520
Paine was chased out of the country,
in fear of his life,

0:06:36.520,0:06:44.520
He crossed the channel and arrived in France a
hero
where he was granted honorary citizenship

0:06:44.520,0:06:51.620
and elected to the National Convention
Quite a contrast!

0:06:51.620,0:06:58.620
Despite his support for the Revolution,
Paine was increasingly viewed with suspicion,

0:06:58.620,0:07:03.540
particularly by Robespierre, and
particular after he pleaded for clemency

0:07:03.540,0:07:13.600
for Louis XVI, suggesting he should be
exiled to the United States, rather than
executed.

0:07:13.740,0:07:19.780
Paine tried to keep his mind off the
spreading Terror by writing.

0:07:19.780,0:07:31.000
He had long planned to write on religion
and now he wrote The Age of Reason.

0:07:31.060,0:07:38.740
I quote from the early pages:

0:07:38.800,0:07:45.080
"I believe in the equality of man, and I
believe that religious duties consist in

0:07:45.080,0:07:51.300
doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring
to make our fellow-creatures happy.

0:07:51.300,0:07:58.680
"I do not believe in the creed professed
by the Jewish Church, by the Roman Church,

0:07:58.680,0:08:01.200
by the Greek Church,
by the Turkish Church,

0:08:01.240,0:08:09.120
by the Protestant Church,
nor by any Church that I know of.

0:08:09.260,0:08:16.300
My own mind is my own Church.

0:08:16.720,0:08:24.380
All national institutions of churches
appear to me no other than human inventions,

0:08:24.380,0:08:32.760
set up to terrify and enslave mankind,
and monopolize power and profit."

0:08:32.900,0:08:39.599
I'm going to repeat just one short
sentence from that because

0:08:39.600,0:08:49.820
it is so important to his legacy:
"My own mind is my own church."

0:08:50.060,0:08:53.600
It's important to note that Paine
was not an atheist.

0:08:53.600,0:08:58.600
He was a deist who believed in God but
considered Christianity and invention

0:08:58.600,0:09:06.000
and an intrusion between humankind and the
Deity.

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On 28th December 1793 Paine was arrested and imprisoned in the Luxembourg jail.

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The Terror was in full swing.
Each day prisoners were taken to

0:09:19.880,0:09:24.920

the guillotine and Paine only narrowly escaped.

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The legend is that a chalk mark was supposed to be left by the jailer on the

0:09:29.509,0:09:36.889

cell door of those due for execution.
In Paine's case, the mark had been made on

0:09:36.889,0:09:42.780

the inside of the door because it was open as he had been receiving visitors,

0:09:42.780,0:09:49.660

therefore he was missed next day.

0:09:49.820,0:09:59.700

Soon afterwards Robespierre fell, and after ten months imprisonment Paine was released.

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In 1802 Paine returned to the USA, but memories were short, and his role in

0:10:05.240,0:10:10.290

the War of Independence had largely been forgotten.

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What is more , The Age of Reason horrified many Americans and he was loathed by some of them.

0:10:21.880,0:10:29.600

Thomas Paine died on 8th June 1809.
His body was transported to New Rochelle,

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where he had planned to be

buried in the Quaker graveyard.

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However the Quakers would not allow this so he was buried under a walnut tree on the farm

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he'd been given many years before, due to his contribution to the Revolution.

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His funeral was attended by just a handful of people.

0:10:55.140,0:11:00.560

Few have been more maligned after their death than Paine.

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As soon as he was dead rumors circulated that he'd recanted his religious beliefs.

0:11:07.279,0:11:15.730

It was said he was a foul-mouthed drunk, and Teddy Roosevelt

0:11:15.730,0:11:26.209

called him a "dirty, little atheist".
Three words, each one was wrong.

0:11:26.570,0:11:32.140

So why is Paine so important and what is his legacy?

0:11:32.360,0:11:38.510

Well, first he wrote in colorful and stirring prose ordinary people could

0:11:38.510,0:11:41.740

understand and relate to.

0:11:41.800,0:11:47.980

As I said earlier, many of those who lived during his era were illiterate and

0:11:47.980,0:11:53.290

depended on public readings which needed clear exposition

0:11:53.290,0:11:57.920

and straightforward language.

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Most of Paine's ideas can be found in the writings of philosophers and

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commentators who came before him. In particular Paine was influenced by John Locke.

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But Paine moulded these different writings into a coherent whole

0:12:18.640,0:12:24.320

and really translated them for the ordinary person.

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Second: Paine made out the radical reformist case that was to be echoed

0:12:29.560,0:12:34.720

throughout the 19th century. Richard Carlisle, George Jacob Holyoake,

0:12:34.720,0:12:42.740

Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant all drew inspiration from him.

0:12:43.930,0:12:51.430

He has influenced, either directly or indirectly, all those who in any way

0:12:51.430,0:12:55.700

subscribe to a British radical tradition,

0:12:55.700,0:13:00.520

whether they know it or not.

0:13:00.540,0:13:09.940

Third: Paine championed the idea of the essential equality of humankind.

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This does not mean that he thought all should have equal incomes, although he

0:13:15.040,0:13:21.420

did believe that the state should offer a

sort of basic financial security to its citizens.

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Paine's equality was more about equality of rights, and it's worthy of note that

0:13:28.040,0:13:37.880

the first tract that he wrote when he arrived in America voiced his opposition to slavery.

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Fourth and finally: Specifically Paine pioneered the

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secularist aspiration that government and law-making should be carried out

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not in the name of religion, not for religion, but on rational grounds,

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and that no religious group should have particular privileges.

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Paine challenged religious privilege.

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I like this cartoon by Heston Watson, depicting Paine's great writings as cannons

0:14:23.920,0:14:30.560

destroying superstition and tyranny.

0:14:31.520,0:14:38.400

There are many biographies of Thomas Paine, although my favorite is by John Keane

0:14:38.400,0:14:43.280

"Thomas Paine: a Political Life".

0:14:43.660,0:14:51.370

There are also several memorials to Paine in the UK, of which the most impressive

0:14:51.370,0:14:57.790

is this statue in Thetford, where the town museum also has an interesting

0:14:57.790,0:15:03.120
permanent exhibition.

0:15:03.600,0:15:07.200
Thank you for watching.

0:15:07.200,0:15:18.080
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