

Roots of Tom Paine's View of Religion and Society

from John Keane, Tom Paine: A Political Life (1995)

“Growing up in a mixed-religion household [Anglican mother and Quaker father], Paine was taught his first lessons in the task of combating bigotry in circumstances of diversity. Paine’s family life introduced him to the paradoxical rule, vital for any political community enjoying civil and political freedoms, that antagonistic religious groups can coexist peacefully only if they agree to disagree by cooperating within a secular political system—that is, accept a form of government and society that safeguards the religious preferences of all citizens by establishing nonreligious spaces of compromise, which in turn encourages at least some citizens to take advantage of these zones of compromise by rejecting organized religion per se.

Paine himself took this path ... His moral capacities ultimately had religious roots. They developed within and around his home ... in the cross fire between Anglicanism and a Quaker community that together were to have a lasting impact on his later life and, eventually, the political shape of the modern world.

Trapped in the field of tension between state and non state religions, each convinced of its own Truth, Paine eventually doubted both Anglicanism and Quakerism and opted for neither, all the while absorbing some of their moral teachings and pleading for toleration of all religions and the secularization of state institutions. The militant and witty attacks on organized Christianity for which he later became internationally famous are surely traceable to his early introduction to two fundamentally opposed species of Christianity."