

## JOSEPH PRIESTLEY: MINISTER, SCIENTIST, TROUBLEMAKER!

Rev. Scott W. Alexander  
UU Fellowship of Vero Beach, Florida  
Sunday, September 26, 2010

It was in the middle of the evening of July 14, 1791, and the Rev. Dr. Joseph Priestley -- a leading Unitarian minister and scientist in England -- was having a quiet summer evening at home with his wife and children at his home on Fair Hill, a mile outside the city of Birmingham, when a frantic knock came at the front door:

*"Dr. Priestley!...Dr. Priestley!...there is an angry mob headed this way, intent on doing you and your family harm...flee now for your lives!"*

Just moments before the angry Royalist mob -- incensed by Priestley's radical religious writings and his outspoken support of the ideals of the French and American Revolutions -- arrived to ransack and burn down his home, destroying both his extensive library and chemistry lab filled with valuable instruments. Dr. Priestley and his family were driven by carriage to safety at the home of a friend. Later that same evening -- with both Unitarian meeting houses in the city of Birmingham also ransacked and burned to the ground by mobs -- the fugitive Priestley family had to flee once again to safety -- this time to his daughter's home some 15 miles away.

Two days later, still fearing for his safety because the vengeful mob was still looking for him, Priestley fled to London, never to return to Birmingham, his home of the past eleven years. King George III, soon realized he needed to restore order in Birmingham, but could not (as the titular head of the Church of England) resist attacking the renowned Unitarian leader Priestley. In authorizing his Secretary of State to send troops to Birmingham to quell the violence, the King wrote, *"I cannot but feel better pleased that Priestley is the sufferer for the doctrines he and his party have instilled [in the land] and that the people see them in their true light."*

During the following months, Priestley was verbally attacked in the House of Commons, burned in effigy on the streets, portrayed negatively in published caricatures, denounced in pulpits and subjected to threatening letters. Finally, on April 17, 1794, he and his wife Mary sailed to America, two weeks after Priestley's 61<sup>st</sup> birthday, and settled in Philadelphia.

Thus it was that Joseph Priestley -- controversial minister and renowned scientist -- came to America, spreading Unitarian ideas and founding the first openly named "Unitarian" congregation in the United States, the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia (which exists to this day), and settled his family in Northumberland, Pennsylvania -- a small, rural town where another Unitarian Universalist congregation, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the

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Susquehanna Valley, thrives to this day. Today, in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, there are 65 congregations in the Joseph Priestley District of the UUA (of which my former congregation River Road is a member), which is our denomination's way of honoring this great man who played such a pivotal role in the development of our liberal faith.

But I fear I have gotten ahead of myself, dear friends, in telling you this dramatic part of the amazing – and inspiring – story of Joseph Priestley and the pivotal role he played in helping establish Unitarianism not only in his native England, but here in America as well. So let's go back to the beginning, shall we?

Joseph Priestley was born in 1733, in a little hamlet of some six miles outside the English town of Leeds (where today, incidentally, you can take classes at Joseph Priestley College, one of two institutions of higher learning in England named after this scholarly man). Joseph was the eldest child of Jonas Priestley, a rather poor "finisher of cloth" and his wife, Mary Swift. His mother Mary died when he was only six, and, although as a boy he attended an "independent" or "dissenting" church (as the Unitarian and other non-traditional churches were called in those days), he was largely raised after that by an Aunt who was (as one historian put it) "*a strict, but loving Calvinist.*"

But importantly in his intellectual development, Priestley's early teachers were dissenting ministers, liberal clerics who had rejected the rigid doctrines of the Church of England and Calvinism, and so had formed their own modest academies throughout England where they could freely express their unorthodox religious ideas with a measure (just a measure!) of freedom. Historian Earl Morse Wilbur writes that young Priestley "*was a precocious youth, [and] showed an eager an inquisitive mind, was deeply interested in religious matters, was an omnivorous reader, and looking toward the ministry became well grounded [not only fluent in the French, German and Italian languages but also] in Latin, Greek and Hebrew [as well].*"

By the time this bright and eager student was ready to advance his education at an academy (which we would today call college), he refused to subscribe to the articles of traditional faith the Calvinistic schools demanded, so he attended a liberal academy, Daventry, in Northhampton where, again quoting Wilbur, "*Entire freedom of inquiry was encouraged...students were encouraged to study the arguments on both sides of disputed questions, and to discuss them freely; wherein Priestley found himself in nearly every case taking the heretical [or Unitarian] side.*"

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Priestley became what was known at the time as a “rational dissenter” who “completely rejected religious dogmatism and mysticism, and emphasized instead the rational analysis of the natural world and the bible.” [Wikipedia] With the completion of his college studies – despite “an [unfortunate] tendency to stammer [badly] in public speaking” – Priestley entered the ministry (which he once described as “the noblest of all professions”) as a poorly paid but much appreciated assistant minister at a “dissenting” church in Suffolk.

Over the ensuing years of his ministry, as his reputation grew, he became increasingly and progressively more radical in his theological and religious thinking and writing, which made him every bit the outsider and rebel in religiously conservative England.

It is important for us to understand (as we recount Priestley’s amazing and prodigious life) that England in the 1700s was not a particularly religiously tolerant or diverse place. Although the last time a person was hanged for denying the Trinity and disagreeing with the dogmas of the Church of England happened in Scotland 26 years before he was born, Joseph Priestley’s England was extremely hostile to and dangerous for the Unitarians and other free-thinking dissenters (who were in fact derisively labeled as “Dissenters” by the established church in an attempt to discredit them). In fact, England was so hostile a place for religious liberals that most Unitarian houses of worship in England at that time (some which still exist as architectural curiosities today) were disguised as ordinary houses – without any exterior signs that they were religious institutions – so as not to draw the ire of angry and intolerant traditionalists.

For the entirety of his 71 year life (Priestley died in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, in 1804) he was a minister, teacher, writer and scholar. But in his early years, his career moved between ministry, teaching, and writing. With a young family to provide for, he needed to supplement his meager ministerial salary as a “dissenting minister” by teaching (both in independent, liberal academies and tutoring private students), on subjects ranging from history, government, grammar, rhetoric, logic, languages and economics...and by writing many books and tracts which he sold.

Appalled at the quality of the available English grammar books, in 1761 Priestley wrote his own, *The Rudiments of English Grammar*, which led 20<sup>th</sup> Century scholars to describe him as “one of the great grammarians of his time.” Indeed, so impressed was the University of Edinburgh with all of Priestley’s lectures and writings that in 1764 they granted him a Doctor of Law degree.

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As if all this weren't enough for one human being – just reading the copious and continuous accomplishments and endeavors of this man is enough to exhaust one – Wikipedia, the on-line encyclopedia, devotes more than 30 pages to his work and accomplishments. [Look it up!] And as if all this weren't enough, Priestley also began during this period of his life to make excursions into chemistry and other scientific pursuits, including extensively studying electricity (one of his books was a prodigious 700 page book, *The History and present State of Electricity...and another of his scientific volumes, Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air*). He also studied human vision, and light – and invented SODA WATER (carbonation), which he did not exploit for commercial gain like fellow Briton J. J. Schweppe did.

It was Priestley's wide-ranging and practical scientific research and writing which, in time, were to gain him his greatest renown and fame. By the time of his death in 1804, Priestley had been made a member of every major scientific society in the world, and had discovered numerous substances in the course of his chemical experiments, all of which he devised on his own. I quote Wilbur again, "He had at the outset very little knowledge of [Chemistry] and was forced to contrive his own apparatus and invent his own processes, and at first he made random experiments out of mere curiosity as to what would happen, and so [as a self-taught scientist] was led from one thing to another. Thus having by accident begun experimenting on AIR, he presently came to unexpected results which led the Royal Society of confer upon him its highest honor, the Copley Metal."

In 1774, he made his crowning discovery of oxygen which, as another historian observes is more-accurately-to-say he was the first scientist "to isolate oxygen in its gaseous state"], and altogether discovered more new gases than all his predecessors together had done thus winning the reputation of being one of the founders of modern chemistry."

On the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Priestley's birth, British scientist Michael Faraday paid him intellectual and scientific tribute by writing, "Dr. Priestley made his great discoveries mainly in consequence of his having a mind which could easily be moved from what it had held to the reception of new thoughts and notions; and I will venture to say that all his discoveries followed from the facility with which he could leave a preconceived idea."

Here, then, was an open and keen and supple mind – a man who insisted on rationally thinking things through for himself, and reaching his own conclusions. But it is important to remember that although Priestly is known as

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one of the “Fathers of Modern Chemistry,” he always thought of himself first and foremost as a minister and theologian. Late in his life, in his personal *Memoirs*, Priestley modestly made light (devoting barely more than one page!) to all his of his notable achievements in the field of chemistry and science – offhandedly describing them as merely the “pastime” of a theologian. Although he once described scientists as the people who promoted “the security and happiness of mankind,” he never bragged about (or made extravagant claims about) his scientific achievements. “Though I have made discoveries in some branches of chemistry,” Priestley wrote, “I never gave much attention to the common routine of it, and know but little of the common processes.”

So Priestley, the great and practical scientific mind, first and foremost understood himself as a minister and theologian – and because of his extreme brilliance as a thinker and diligence as a writer, it should not surprise us to hear that he became the acknowledged leader of the “Unitarian Dissenters” and of the “Nonsubscribing Unitarianism” movement in England, writing widely and expressing his strongly held Unitarian beliefs that challenged the theological orthodoxy of the day. In the 1760s, he founded the “Theological Repository” – a liberal, “dissenting” journal which one historian described as “committed to the open and rational inquiry of theological questions.” As one historian writes, “Priestley strongly believed in the free and open exchange of ideas, [and passionately] advocated toleration and equal rights for religious Dissenters, which also led him to help found Unitarianism in England.”

Priestley regularly wrote widely distributed “dissenting” pamphlets bluntly challenging the prevailing beliefs of Calvinism and the Church of England. One historian writes, “Priestley engaged in numerous political and religious pamphlet wars...he entered each controversy with a cheerful conviction that he was right, while most of his opponents were convinced, from the outset, that he was willfully and maliciously wrong. He was able, then, to contrast his sweet reasonableness to their personal rancor.”

In the 1770s, Priestley also wrote his magnum opus” – a book entitled “Corruptions of Christianity” and a subsequent 4-volume work entitled, “History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ,” in which (as one historian writes) “he used his vast scholarship to demonstrate that primitive [or “original”] Christianity has been Unitarian and that all deviations from that standard [such as the doctrines of the Church of England] must be seen as corruptions.” He once bluntly expressed the opinion that the traditional church (read The Church of England) was little more than “an overgrown fungus on the body of true Christianity.”

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Now, as you can imagine, the leaders of the established churches in England did not take kindly to Priestley's radical religious views, nor being described as a spiritual fungus! They were very alarmed by and hostile to the thinking, writing, and influence of this prominent man...and, as I have already shared, both before and after his home and laboratory and church were destroyed in Birmingham in 1791, Priestley – who was not easily silenced and in no way averse to controversy – was regularly a target for attacks made by the orthodox church and its leaders.

As historian David Bumbaugh writes, "His legacy to English Unitarianism is to be found in the fact that he was instrumental in defining the Unitarian witness as distinct from that of other dissenters. His radical views created an unbridgeable schism between the Unitarians and other forms of dissent. More than this, he bequeathed to them a conviction that Christian doctrine is not fixed, but must continue to develop, requiring a strong commitment to the intellectual process and a reliance on reason."

So, after decades of controversy swirling around him, Priestley fled England in 1794, the victim of religious persecution and hostility. Although his years in America were brief – he only lived another 10 years until 1804, and only enjoyed good health for the first 7 of those years, Priestley (who preached and spoke often in Philadelphia) helped Unitarianism take root in the new land, as well as continued his scientific experiments with the financial help of the American Philosophical Society, located in Philadelphia.

This amazing and prodigious and intelligent and tenacious man cut a deep and wide swath in his life, and leaves a large and lasting historical legacy, not only for liberal religion but also in the field of scientific inquiry. Perhaps the greatest legacy for us – as Unitarian Universalists living today more than 200 years later, to cherish and remember today – is his fierce devotion to reason, tolerance, and free and open inquiry in all matters human.

Beyond his particular ideas (about God and humanity, Jesus and the church, religion and the Bible, ethics and morality) was his lifelong insistence on unfettered inquiry...or (to use the language we Unitarian Universalists of today use (on "the free and responsible search for truth and meaning," which is today one of the 7 guiding principles of our Unitarian Universalist faith. We believe that a free and responsible search for truth and meaning in religion is so important that we print this affirmation every Sunday on the back page of the orders of service.

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Priestley refused to blindly or dogmatically accept what others said was true and good and right in religion, or in science for that matter! For his entire life, he rigorously tested every idea and affirmation (both scientific and religious ones!) with the full and free faculties his own heart and mind...and only took into his deepest self those which he found to be reasonable, valid, worthy and true. Our religion, Unitarian Universalism, insists that each one of us employ a similar intellectual and religious rigor and freedom, as we individually spend our lifetimes building a faith that is true and good and right for us, right where we live in the world. For some, such insistence on religious reason and freedom is a dangerous or unnecessary thing. But to Joseph Priestley, and I pray each one of you, engaging in religious reason and freedom – regularly employing our own hearts and minds as we determine what is real and true and right for us – are the sure foundation upon which we build both our personal beliefs and our lives. This is the great legacy which the life of Joseph Priestley bequeaths to us...this free-thinking minister, scientist, and troublemaker, who reminds us to always USE AND TRUST OUR OWN HEARTS AND MINDS...as we seek truth and meaning in the lives that are ours to live!

AMEN

### **BENEDICTION**

I close today with the words of Joseph Priestley:

“The more we see the wonderful structure of the world, and of the laws of nature, the more clearly do we comprehend their admirable uses, to make all the...creation happy; a sentiment which cannot but fill the heart with unbounded love, gratitude, and joy.” Leave this place in peace, dear friends, and with an active sense of inquiry about this amazing world of ours!