



JOSEPH PRIESTLEY

*By Rembrandt Peale*

*Courtesy of the New York Historical Society*

## THE RELIGION OF JOSEPH PRIESTLEY

BY IRA V. BROWN\*

THAT Joseph Priestley should be known primarily for the discovery of oxygen is somewhat ironic; he regarded his work in chemistry as an avocation, not the serious business of his life. His time and his energies were devoted primarily to religion, not to science. He held a series of pastorates during a period totaling over twenty years, and his theological writings eventually ran to more than twenty volumes. He was the central figure in the formation of English Unitarianism, and he anticipated many of the viewpoints of Protestant liberalism in general. Like the great Newton before him and other distinguished scientists after him, Priestley saw no incompatibility between religion and science. There was a natural partnership, he insisted, between the "word" and the "works" of God.

The stages of Priestley's theological development represent in microcosm the evolution of Protestant thought as a whole. He was brought up a Calvinist, toyed briefly with Arminianism, moved on to Arianism, and finally became a Socinian. Though often attacked as a radical, he clung throughout his life to some orthodox doctrines, and these loomed larger in his later years. His chief importance was as an advocate of free inquiry. He properly holds an honored place among those who gave us the intellectual liberty which the Western World enjoys today. Whether the field was science, politics, or religion, Priestley was convinced that truth could only prevail in a free market of ideas.

Born in the hamlet of Fieldhead near Leeds, Yorkshire, in 1733, Joseph Priestley was the son of a clothmaker. This area of England was a center of the woolen industry and of Nonconformity. Joseph's mother died when he was only six years old, but not be-

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fore she had taught him the Westminster Catechism. His upbringing was then entrusted to an equally Calvinistic aunt, who gave him devoted care until he went away to school. The atmosphere of his childhood was one of austerity. Sunday was kept with unusual strictness, and swearing was looked upon with special horror. His teachers were local Dissenting ministers, and he early acquired a good grounding in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, as well as theology. In his teens he began showing "heretical" tendencies, and he was refused membership in the Independent Chapel because he was considered unorthodox. By the age of eighteen he had rebelled against Calvinism, although he had "by no means rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, or that of Atonement."<sup>1</sup> In this youthful period he classed himself as an Arminian.

In 1752, at age nineteen, Priestley entered the Daventry Academy. Since Oxford and Cambridge were closed to Dissenters, the non-Anglican churches had founded a number of academies. These schools were of collegiate level and in the eighteenth century actually offered an education superior to that of the universities.<sup>2</sup> Priestley found his three years at Daventry an exciting and rewarding experience, both intellectually and spiritually. The atmosphere here was conducive to free inquiry, and one of his tutors was a Calvinist while the other was inclined toward liberalism.

In my time [Priestley recalled] the academy was in a state peculiarly favorable to the serious pursuit of truth, as the students were about equally divided upon every question of much importance, such as Liberty and Necessity, the sleep of the soul, and all articles of theological orthodoxy and heresy.<sup>3</sup>

Here Priestley advanced to the mild form of Unitarianism known as Arianism. This doctrine was widespread in eighteenth-century England, among both Anglicans and Dissenters.<sup>4</sup> Arianism modified orthodox trinitarianism by holding that Christ was a created being not co-eternal with the Father, but pre-existing before ap-

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Memoirs*, in *Life and Correspondence of Joseph Priestley*, ed. by John T. Rutt (London, R. Hunter, 1831), I, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Irene Parker, *Dissenting Academies in England* (Cambridge, The University Press, 1914).

<sup>3</sup> Priestley, *Memoirs*, *loc. cit.*, I, 23.

<sup>4</sup> James H. Colligan, *The Arian Movement in England* (Manchester, The University Press, 1913).

pearing in the flesh. The more radical Socinianism, to which Priestley later subscribed, maintained that the Saviour was a mere man.

Priestley's first pastorate was at Needham Market in Suffolk, where he served from 1755 to 1758. It was not a happy experience. He had inherited a speech defect which was not conducive to success in the pulpit, a tendency to stammer. His advancing heterodoxy caused further difficulty; it was about this time that he abandoned the doctrine of the vicarious atonement. His bachelor status was also embarrassing. In 1758 he moved to his second pastorate, at Nantwich in Cheshire, where the congregation was small but friendly. Here also he opened a school. This work prepared the way for his third appointment, as a tutor in the Warrington Academy, which occupied him from 1761 to 1767. While hired to teach languages, he was soon pioneering in the teaching of history and "natural philosophy." Visits to London during these years brought introductions to Richard Price and Benjamin Franklin, who stimulated Priestley's later intellectual progress. Our knowledge of Franklin's famous kite experiment comes from Priestley's *History and Present State of Electricity*, published in 1767. Franklin must have told him the story.<sup>5</sup>

While he found the work at Warrington congenial, Priestley was happy to re-enter the ministry, when, in 1767, he was offered the pulpit of the strong Mill Hill congregation at Leeds, near his childhood home, where he served for six years. This change brought him a better income and the opportunity to renew his theological studies. Particularly influential at this point was Nathaniel Lardner's *Letter on the Logos*, which converted him from Arianism to Socinianism.<sup>6</sup> Priestley was also much influenced by his friend Theophilus Lindsey, whom he met in 1769. Lindsey led a secession from the Church of England and founded the Essex Street Chapel in London, the first English church distinctly known as Unitarian. At Leeds Priestley started *The The-*

<sup>5</sup> Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, Viking Press, 1938), 164, 356.

<sup>6</sup> Nathaniel Lardner (1684-1768) was one of the foremost theologians among the eighteenth century Independents. The *Letter on the Logos*, written in 1730 but not published until 1759, asserted that "there is one God, even the Father, and that Jesus Christ is a man with a reasonable soul and a human body." See Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England, and America* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1952), 264-265.

*ological Repository*, the earliest Unitarian periodical. In 1768 he married and began raising a family.

In 1773, on the recommendation of Benjamin Franklin and Richard Price, Priestley was appointed librarian to Lord Shelburne, at a salary of £250 a year and a house, a post which he held for seven years. He was really a "literary companion" to Shelburne and had a great deal of free time for his studies in science, metaphysics, and theology. In 1774 he accompanied his patron on a tour of the Continent. The same year he discovered oxygen.

The years with Shelburne got Priestley started on his long career of theological writing. His first important book in this field was *Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit* (1777), which developed the metaphysical system underlying his later theology. It was a curious work combining elements of scientific skepticism with religious faith—an assertion of philosophic materialism and a vindication of the Christian doctrine of resurrection. Priestley's doctrine of materialism was borrowed largely from David Hartley's *Observations on Man* (1749), which had attempted to explain all mental phenomena on physical grounds. While earlier Priestley, "like the generality of Christians in the present age," had taken it for granted that man had a soul distinct from his body, he was now convinced that we are "entirely unauthorized to admit anything in man besides that *body* which is the object of our senses."<sup>7</sup>

Sensation and thought had generally been held to be incompatible with the inertness and impenetrability of matter. Priestley insisted that matter was not inert and not impenetrable. "That the component particles of the hardest bodies do not actually touch one another," he suggested, "is demonstrable from their being brought nearer together by cold, and by their being removed farther from each other by heat."<sup>8</sup> Powers of attraction and repulsion were inherent in these particles of matter, and their cohesion might be broken. Was Priestley foreshadowing atomic science?

Sensation and thought, the attributes of "soul" in Priestley's definition, he regarded as products of the material substance of

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, in *Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, ed. by John T. Rutt (London, G. Smallfield, 1817-1832), III, 201-202.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 227.

the brain. Damage to the brain would damage one's mental and emotional faculties. "Likewise, as the mind is affected in consequence of the affections of the body and brain, so the body is liable to be reciprocally affected by the affections of the mind, as is evident in the visible effects of all strong passions, hope or fear, love or anger, joy or sorrow, exultation or despair."<sup>9</sup> Was Priestley anticipating psychosomatic medicine?

Materialism, Priestley argued, was attested by the Bible as well as by reason:

The doctrine of Scripture is that God made man of the *dust of the ground*; and, by simply animating this organized matter, made him that living, percipient and intelligent being that he is. According to revelation, *death* is a state of rest and insensibility, and our only, though sure hope of a future life, is founded on the doctrine of the *resurrection of the whole man*, at some distant period; this assurance being sufficiently confirmed to us, both by the evident tokens of a divine commission attending the persons who delivered the doctrine, and especially by the actual resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is more authentically attested than any other fact in history.<sup>10</sup>

Death was decomposition, "and whatever is *decomposed* may be *recomposed* by the Being who first composed it."<sup>11</sup> This Priestley confidently expected in the fullness of time. The Scripture doctrine, then, was resurrection of the body, not immortality of the soul. The common opinion of the soul's surviving the body had been "introduced into Christianity from the Oriental and Greek philosophy, which in many respects exceedingly altered and debased the true Christian system."<sup>12</sup>

If no man had a soul distinct from his body, Christ, "who in all other respects appeared as a man, could not have had a soul which had existed before his body."<sup>13</sup> Thus the Arian hypothesis of the pre-existence of Christ could not be correct. Priestley's views on this subject were elaborated in later works.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 244.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Priestley, *The History of the Philosophical Doctrine Concerning the Origin of the Soul*, in *Works*, III, 386.

<sup>11</sup> *Matter and Spirit*, in *Works*, III, 332.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 329.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 220.

A corollary to Priestley's doctrine of materialism was the principle of "philosophical necessity," which he developed in an appendix to the *Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit*. "If man . . . be wholly a *material*, it will not be denied but that he must be a *mechanical* being," he reasoned.<sup>14</sup> Every human will, he asserted, was subject to certain fixed laws. "A particular determination of mind could not have been otherwise than it was, if the laws of nature be such, as that the same determination shall constantly follow the same state of mind, and the same views of things."<sup>15</sup> As Priestley understood it, the doctrine of "necessity" was not a pessimistic one. The chain of causes and effects had been established by the infinite wisdom of God and would terminate in "the greatest good of the whole universe."<sup>16</sup> Even apparent evils and sufferings might be instruments of good. This belief contributed to the serenity and optimism which carried Priestley through serious adversities without bitterness. The theory was not unique with Priestley. He had learned it originally from Anthony Collins and had been confirmed in it by Hartley's *Observations on Man*. Some critics charged that Priestley was returning to Calvinism, but there was an important difference. While Calvin emphasized the sovereignty of God, Priestley emphasized God's goodness. His faith in divine benevolence apparently made him in essence a Universalist: "No Necessarian . . . supposes that any of the human race will suffer eternally. . . ."<sup>17</sup>

Among those critical of Priestley's doctrines of materialism and necessity was his good friend Richard Price. Did Priestley not, "by maintaining God to be the source of all the motions in the world, allow a *soul* to the *world*, though he will not to men?"<sup>18</sup> Price, a philosophical idealist, denied that matter could think and argued for a soul separate from the body. Price also defended free will. On one point they were in agreement; they both looked forward to resurrection and the last judgment. The debate between the two men was published in 1778, under the title *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism and Philosophical*

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Priestley, *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, in *Works*, III, 453.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 464.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 532.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism, and Philosophical Necessity, in a Correspondence Between Dr. Price and Dr. Priestley*, in *Works*, IV, 63.

*Necessity, in a Correspondence between Dr. Price and Dr. Priestley.* The debate demonstrated, Price wrote, "that two persons may differ totally on points the most important and sacred, with a perfect esteem for one another."<sup>19</sup> Priestley's views, he added, gave striking proof of "a truth, which, could it be stamped on every human mind, would exterminate all bigotry and persecution," the truth that "worth of character, and true integrity, and consequently God's acceptance, are not necessarily connected with any set of opinions." Priestley was equally charitable:

He who can have, and truly *enjoy*, the society of such men as Dr. Price . . . cannot envy the condition of princes. Such fellowship is the true balsam of life; its cement is infinitely more durable than that of the friendships of the world, and it looks for its proper *fruit*, and complete *gratification*, to the life beyond the grave.<sup>20</sup>

In 1780 Priestley resumed his ministerial career by accepting the pastorate of the New Meeting, one of two Unitarian congregations in Birmingham, which he held for the next decade. This was the most liberal pulpit in England, and Priestley was unanimously chosen to fill the position. The atmosphere was congenial, and Priestley was given time to continue his researches in chemistry and in theology. Here he revived the *Theological Repository*, which had been suspended for some years, and made it a vehicle of some new views at which he had arrived. Among these was the conviction that Jesus was completely human, with human frailties, and that He was the son of Joseph and Mary.<sup>21</sup> Priestley thus clearly stamped himself a Unitarian.

At Birmingham Priestley completed his most famous theological work, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (2 volumes, 1782), which surveyed the history of Christian dogma and church government. This study entitles him to a place among the founders of the modern discipline of intellectual history. The "corruptions" of Christianity for Priestley included most of what had been generally considered its fundamental doctrines: the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, original sin, predestination, the vicarious atonement, and plenary inspiration of Scripture. It was these corruptions, he

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 16.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Wilbur, *loc. cit.*, 301-302.

felt, which prevented the universal acceptance of Christianity. The best way to win this acceptance was to expose the falsehood of what had so long passed for Christianity and to demonstrate what Christianity truly was.

To consider the system (if it may be called a system) of Christianity *a priori* [he wrote], one would think it very little liable to corruption, or abuse. The great outline of it is, that the Universal Parent of mankind commissioned Jesus Christ to invite men to the practice of virtue, by the assurance of his mercy to the penitent, and of his purpose to raise to immortal life and happiness all the virtuous and the good, but to inflict an adequate punishment on the wicked. In proof of this he wrought many miracles, and after a public execution he rose again from the dead. He also directed that proselytes to his religion should be admitted by *baptism*, and that his disciples should eat bread and drink wine in commemoration of his death.<sup>23</sup>

The cause of the later corruptions Priestley found in "the established opinions of the heathen world, and especially the philosophical part of it."<sup>24</sup>

The greatest of the corruptions, he believed, was the doctrine of the Trinity, to which he gave much attention not only in this book but also in other works. He found "nothing like divinity ascribed to Christ before Justin Martyr, who, from being a philosopher, became a Christian, but always retained the peculiar habit of his former profession."<sup>24</sup> The divinity of Christ was first taught by those who had been "heathen philosophers, and especially those who were admirers of the doctrine of Plato." There was "a pretty easy gradation in the progress of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ; as he was first thought to be a God in some qualified sense of the word, a distinguished emanation from the supreme mind, and then the *logos* or wisdom of God personified; and it was not till near four hundred years after Christ that he was thought to be properly *equal to the Father*."<sup>25</sup>

While the "idolatry" of the Christian church had begun with

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, in *Works*, V, 480.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 481.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 29. Justin Martyr lived in the second century A.D.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 506-507.

the deification of Jesus Christ, it had ended with the adoration of a great hierarchy of saints and angels which reminded Priestley of the heroes and demigods of the pagans. The use of holy water, incense, and candles in worship Priestley also traced to heathen influences. The Roman Catholic Church, he believed, was "the principal seat of that anti-Christian corruption, of which so much is said, and against which we are so earnestly cautioned, in the books of the New Testament."<sup>26</sup>

Priestley was not alone among eighteenth century thinkers, or indeed among Protestants in any period, in questioning the divine right of Catholicism. Most Protestant groups claimed, like the Unitarians, that they were returning to the "pure" gospel of the New Testament.<sup>27</sup> And rationalists joined forces with pietists in a battle for religious freedom and the separation of church and state.

Priestley expanded his analysis of the Trinitarian "corruption" in *An History of Early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ, Compiled from Original Writings; Proving That the Christian Church Was at First Unitarian* (4 volumes, 1786). The first basis of his argument for the Unitarian position was "from the general tenour of the Scriptures."<sup>28</sup> The Unity of God, he claimed, was the doctrine not only of the Old Testament but also of the Synoptic Gospels. The second basis of his argument was reason; Trinitarianism to him implied a logical contradiction. Through a study of the writings of the Church Fathers, he undertook to trace the gradual development of Arian and Trinitarian interpretations. His chief conclusion was that the majority of Christians were Unitarian until the time of the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325). "A little reflection . . . one would think, might satisfy any person, that a doctrine which was unknown in the Christian church till the fourth century, could be no genuine doctrine of Christianity."<sup>29</sup>

Priestley's *History of Early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ* is also notable for his discussion of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, the truth of which he had come to question. He suspected that it was not a part of the earliest gospel narratives. The Gospel

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 448.

<sup>27</sup> Sidney E. Mead, "Denominationalism: the Shape of Protestantism in America," *Church History*, XXIII (January, 1955), 297.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ*, in *Works*, VI, 13 ff.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 180.

of Mark did not contain it, and Priestley suggested that Matthew and Luke did not include it in their earliest versions. He thought the introductions to these gospels were later interpolations.<sup>30</sup> The earliest certain mention of the Virgin Birth he found in the writings of Justin Martyr, a century after the time of Christ. Priestley was not inclined, however, to proceed from this beginning to doubt of all the New Testament miracles. The great bulk of them he believed to have been well authenticated; the very cornerstone of his faith was belief in the resurrection.

His relative conservatism in handling Biblical miracles set Joseph Priestley sharply apart from more thoroughgoing skeptics such as Edward Gibbon, David Hume, Voltaire, and Tom Paine. These he undertook to refute in several works, notably his *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (1787). Priestley was convinced that the Jewish and Christian revelations as set forth in the Bible were in general authentic and relatively contemporary historical narratives of actual facts:

We may . . . safely conclude, that since the history of the miracles, the death and the resurrection of Christ, and also that of the miracles wrought by the apostles, were received as true by such numbers of persons in the age in which they were published, and the account was never confuted, but Christianity kept gaining ground from that time to the present, the great *facts* on which its credit stands were unquestionably true.<sup>31</sup>

To the orthodox, however, Priestley's liberalism was dangerous indeed. The most active of his opponents was Samuel Horsley, an Anglican clergyman, who engaged him in a long and acrimonious theological controversy. Horsley was able to point out minor inaccuracies in Priestley's work and thus to create the impression that his entire argument was unsound. The result of this debate was to sharpen the lines of hostility between Anglicans and Dissenters. Priestley was, of course, opposed to the Established Church itself as well as to the system of doctrine prevailing in the Established Church. This fact accounts in considerable degree

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 57 ff. Here Priestley comes close to anticipating the Higher Criticism, which flowered a century later.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, in *Works*, IV, 477-478.

for the misfortune that now befell him, the persecution which led him to leave his native land.

It was not entirely a matter of religion; politics was involved, too. Priestley, like many English liberals, was a defender of the French Revolution. He was among those who wrote replies to Edmund Burke's famous *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790). Two Anglican clergymen of Birmingham charged him with sedition against church and state. The controversy suddenly turned into mob violence on July 14, 1791, the second anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. Friends of the Revolution were observing the occasion with a dinner, though Priestley did not himself attend. Incited by the conservative clergymen, a mob was organized to break it up. The dinner was already over when the mob arrived, and in the end their fury was turned against the Unitarian chapels and against Priestley's home. Priestley and his family escaped in the nick of time, quickly abandoning a game of backgammon, but his house, his library, and his laboratory were destroyed.

He was able eventually to recover £2500 in damages from the government, but he felt it was not safe to return to Birmingham and now transferred his residence to London. Before long he was invited by the Gravel Pit Meeting at Hackney to succeed to the pastorate left vacant by the death of Richard Price. His situation in England, however, remained somewhat precarious. He was burned in effigy along with Tom Paine; politicians inveighed against him in the House of Commons; his old associates in the Royal Society shunned him; and he received countless threatening letters. When England went to war with France, the prospect of treason charges loomed. In 1794 he decided to emigrate to America, where his sons had already settled. The last ten years of his life were passed in Northumberland, Pennsylvania.

Here he completed his six-volume *General History of the Christian Church*, which he had begun in Birmingham. The last four volumes were printed in Northumberland by Andrew Kennedy,<sup>22</sup> were published in 1802-1803, and were dedicated to Thomas Jefferson. The cost was largely subscribed by Priestley's English patrons. This work was quite similar in tone to the *History of*

<sup>22</sup> On Kennedy see Francis G. Burrows, "Early Newspapers of Northumberland County," *Proc. Northumb. County Hist. Soc.*, III, 1931, 56-57.



THE PRIESTLEY HOUSE IN NORTHUMBERLAND

*Now owned by the Borough of Northumberland*

*Courtesy The Pennsylvania State University*

*the Corruptions of Christianity*. Nothing could be more absurd, he concluded, than "the doctrines which were, in a course of time, received as articles of Christian faith by what was called the *Catholic Church*; nor were any rites more disfigured by superstition than those of Christian baptism and the Lord's supper."<sup>33</sup> He did not regard the story as entirely depressing, however, for he was convinced that a new day was dawning. He was thankful that he lived in an age "in which we see the gradual diffusion of intellectual light, and a better aspect of things in a moral respect than has ever appeared in the world before."<sup>34</sup>

The most interesting phase of Priestley's later theological work is his preoccupation in the last decade of his life with Bible prophecies and the second advent. He became persuaded that the cataclysmic events associated with the wars of the French Revolution had been forecast in the books of Daniel and Revelation. "I expect the downfall of all the states represented by the *ten*

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Priestley, *General History of the Christian Church*, in *Works*, X, 532.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, 17.

1000 in the image of Nebuchadnezzar, and the ten horns of the 4th beast of Daniel before the present war be over."<sup>35</sup> This interest is evidenced in several of his lesser publications (e.g., *The Present State of Europe Compared with Ancient Prophecies*, 1794) and in his correspondence. His friend Thomas Belsham recalled a conversation just before he left England in which Priestley expressed his conviction that the second personal appearance of Christ was near at hand. "You may probably live to see it," he said; "I shall not. It cannot, I think, be more than twenty years."<sup>36</sup>

One of the chief evidences for the imminent return of Christ Priestley found in the general prevalence of irreligion in his time. This idea he developed in *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity* (Northumberland, 1795):

The intelligent Christian will also see a valuable purpose answered by the present prevalence of infidelity. It is a striking fulfilment of the prophecies of our Saviour, who, though he foretold that his church should never fail, likewise intimated that, at his second coming, he should not find much faith (or a general belief and expectation of his coming) in the earth. It is likewise a confirmation of what the apostles have written concerning the apostasy of the latter days. In the meantime, the prevalence of infidelity is the most efficacious means of purifying our religion from the abuses and corruptions which at present debase it, and especially of overturning the civil establishments of Christianity in all Christian countries, whereby the kingdom of Christ has been made a kingdom of this world, having been made subservient to the corrupt policy of men, and in every respect the reverse of what it originally was.<sup>37</sup>

While in earlier days Priestley had expected the second coming to be figurative rather than literal, he was now persuaded that there would be a "personal appearance of Christ descending in the clouds of heaven, and coming to exercise his proper king-

<sup>35</sup> *Scientific Correspondence of Joseph Priestley*, ed. by Henry C. Bolton (New York, privately printed, 1892), 156.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Belsham, *Memoirs of the Late Reverend Theophilus Lindsey*, 2nd edition (London, R. Hunter, 1820), 286.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity*, in *Works*, XVII, 104-105.

dom."<sup>38</sup> "This second coming of Christ, and the commencement of the Millenium," he wrote "we are led by a whole series of prophecies to expect immediately after the overthrow of the present European monarchies, which are evidently tottering to their base."<sup>39</sup> The second coming would be accompanied by the return of the Jews to Palestine and by the destruction of the Papacy, which Priestley believed, in company with many Protestants, to be the Anti-Christ of Prophecy. In some passages one is astonished to find how closely the premillennialism of this Unitarian intellectual compares with that of the notorious Millerites of a generation later and Jehovah's Witnesses in our own day.

The calamities accompanying the wars of the French Revolution were, then, but a prelude to the millenium. Priestley's optimism as to the future of human society—his faith in progress, if you will—was an outstanding feature of his thought. The eighteenth century Enlightenment was "a promise of greater improvement in succeeding ages, and of the fulfillment of the prophecies which announce a state of great and permanent felicity in the latter days of the world, when *nation shall not lift up sword against nation*, when *men shall learn war no more* and when the whole earth *shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord*."<sup>40</sup> Whatever was the beginning of the world, Priestley believed, the end was to be "glorious and paradisaical beyond what our imaginations can now conceive."<sup>41</sup> It appears that the modern notion of progress is but a secularized version of Christian millenarianism and to some extent, indeed, a product of Christianity. In Priestley's work we find both the religious theme of Millennium and the secular theme of Utopia.<sup>42</sup>

Another important interest of his later years was the new study of comparative religion, in which Priestley was a pioneer. This interest is reflected in his *Comparison of the Institutions of the Hebrews with Those of the Hindoos and other Ancient Nations*

<sup>38</sup> Compare his *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1772), in *Works*, II, 365, with *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity* (1795), in *Works*, XVII, 103.

<sup>39</sup> *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity*, in *Works*, XVII, 103-104.

<sup>40</sup> *General History of the Christian Church*, preface, in *Works*, IX, 17.

<sup>41</sup> *An Essay on the First Principles of Government* (London, J. Johnson, 1771), 4-5.

<sup>42</sup> For other illustrations of this inter-connection, see Ernest L. Tuveson, *Millennium and Utopia: a Study in the Background of the Idea of Progress* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1949).

(1799), *Socrates and Jesus Compared* (1803), and *The Doctrines of Heathen Philosophy Compared with Those of Revelation* (1804). But Priestley's inquiry into other faiths served only to strengthen his confidence in the superiority of Christianity, as he understood it.

"What would I not give," Priestley exclaimed in 1795, "to have the opportunity to appear as a public preacher of Unitarian Christianity!"<sup>43</sup> This opportunity came in the spring of 1796, when he was invited to give a series of lectures at Elhanan Winchester's new Universalist church in Philadelphia. His topic was "The Evidence of Revelation," published as *The Evidences of Revealed Religion* (Philadelphia, 1796). Among his hearers were Vice President John Adams and Dr. Benjamin Rush. The latter reported that Priestley had shown "in the most striking manner the superiority of the Jewish and Christian revelations over the pagan religions in principles, in morals, and in ceremonial institutions." Next he was to demonstrate the truth of Christianity "from the miracles which accompanied its establishment."<sup>44</sup> According to Rush he had "crowded and respectable audiences" and his sermons were "very popular."<sup>45</sup> "I have never met with so much knowledge," the famous physician continued, "accompanied with so much simplicity of manners."<sup>46</sup> The result of this course of lectures was the establishment of a small Unitarian society, from which is descended the present First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, which was the first church in the United States to bear the Unitarian name.

Priestley's efforts to plant Unitarianism in the Susquehanna Valley were disappointing. Scotch Presbyterianism was firmly entrenched. Unitarian services were held in his home, but few attended. "In this part of the country," he observed soon after he arrived in Northumberland, "I find nothing but the extremes of infidelity and bigoted orthodoxy. Whether I shall do any good here I cannot tell. If I do, it will be slowly and silently."<sup>47</sup> By

<sup>43</sup> Priestley to Rev. Thomas Belsham, August 30, 1795, quoted in *Life and Correspondence of Joseph Priestley*, II, 316.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin Rush to John Dickinson, April 5, 1796, quoted in *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, ed. by Lyman Butterfield (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1951), II, 773-774.

<sup>45</sup> Rush to Griffith Evans, March 4, 1796, *ibid.*, II, 772-773.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Butterfield, *ibid.*, I, 80.

<sup>47</sup> Priestley to Rev. Thomas Belsham, December 14, 1794, in *Life and Correspondence of Joseph Priestley*, II, 283.

1800 the picture was a little brighter. In that year he reported having a class of a dozen young men studying Unitarianism and a congregation of about forty.<sup>48</sup> The Unitarian chapel which now stands in Northumberland was not erected until 1834, a generation after Priestley's death. Priestley, of course, has only an incidental place among founders of American Unitarianism, which stems chiefly from a New England rebellion against Calvinism. Some of the Boston group read his books, but there was apparently no personal contact.<sup>49</sup>

Priestley's Pennsylvania exile was not entirely a happy one. Death soon deprived him of his youngest son and his wife. He was subjected to vicious abuse by another English emigrant, the notorious polemicist William Cobbett. And his health declined visibly as the years went by. He died on February 6, 1804, at the proverbial age of man, three score years and ten. "He had for some time previous," his friend and disciple Thomas Cooper reported, "foreseen his dissolution, but he kept up to the last his habitual composure, cheerfulness, and kindness."<sup>50</sup> The faith, hope, and charity which characterized his life are well illustrated in the epitaph which appears over his grave in Northumberland:

Return unto thy rest, O my soul, for the  
Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee.  
I will lay me down in peace and sleep till  
I awake in the morning of the resurrection.

<sup>48</sup> Priestley to "Mr. Russell," November 13, 1800, *ibid.*, 446.

<sup>49</sup> Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston, Starr King Press, 1955), 215-216.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Cooper to Benjamin Rush, February 6, 1804, quoted in *Scientific Correspondence of Joseph Priestley*, 162.