



Dr. Joseph Priestley Discovering Oxygen [ChatGPT-4]

Unitarian and Radical Immigrant,
A Sermon by Jim Caldiero, 8/6/2023

Good morning.

I was born and raised in New York. On any day I could step down into that cavernous wonder of the modern world – the subway – and zip to the tip of Manhattan, peer across the harbor to see the same welcoming copper-green statue my ancestors saw when they arrived from Europe, listen to a grand chorus of the world’s languages and enjoy the aromas of a hundred cuisines. If any place is multicultural, it is New York City, where people from lands and traditions different from your own accept you and enhance your acceptance of others, of pluralism, as our UU principles affirm.

Yet, New York and the rest of the United States were not always that accepting. Even New York’s revered Founding Father, John Jay, grandson of Huguenot religious refugees from France, first Chief Justice of the United States, co-author of the *Federalist Papers* with another New York immigrant from the West Indies, Alexander Hamilton, said, “We should build a wall of brass around the country,” referring to what he called “Catholic alien invaders.”

But let us not just “pick on” New York. “Few of their children learn English...The signs in our streets have inscriptions in both languages...Unless the stream of their importation could be turned, they will soon so outnumber us that all the advantages we have will not be able to preserve our language...,” said Benjamin Franklin about German immigration to Pennsylvania.

Although Franklin might have abhorred the prospect of German-speaking immigrants, he was content to accept those from the mother country. He was, for example, instrumental in the immigration of Dr. Joseph Priestley to American shores.

Joseph Priestley, whom the UUA once honored by giving his name to the mid-Atlantic district of UU congregations that included Channing, was an English Unitarian clergyman, religious thinker, scientist, political theorist, discoverer of oxygen.

Born in 1733 in Yorkshire into a financially comfortable middle-class family of wool merchants, he studied at the Dissenting Academy of Daventry. Dissenters were so named because of their unwillingness to

conform to the Church of England and were thus statutorily prohibited, along with Catholics and Jews, from entering English universities.

Priestley, nonetheless, received an outstanding education and became a religious free thinker embracing rational Unitarianism and thus rejecting the Trinity “as an irrational tenet of unquestioning faith.” [[Priestley, Joseph | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy \(utm.edu\)](#)] In 1762 he was ordained a Dissenting minister in Lancashire, married, and in subsequent years fathered four children, supporting his family as a minister, schoolmaster and author.

Traveling regularly to London, he met the outstanding men of science including lifelong friend Benjamin Franklin who encouraged his scientific pursuits, one of which was the publication of Priestley’s first book *The History and Present State of Electricity*, one of more than 150 books he authored that not only enhanced his reputation as a scientist but made him a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1766.

During his employment as librarian and tutor to the Earl of Shelburne’s children, Priestley had the opportunity to continue his scientific research,

discovering on August 1, 1774, a gas that was “five or six times as good as common air.” He called his discovery “dephlogisticated air” – what his friend and colleague, French chemist Antoine Lavoisier later called oxygen.

While Priestley and Lavoisier were producing a revolution in chemistry, across the Atlantic, his other scientific colleague, Benjamin Franklin, was participating in a **political** revolution. Priestley was vociferous in his support for the American Revolution and continued to express unorthodox religious views. In his book *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, he insisted that Unitarianism was consistent with a rational reading of the Bible. He argued that early Christians were Unitarians, that the trinity lacked biblical foundation and that Jesus Christ was wholly human, who did not die as an atonement for inherently sinful humanity, but lived to exemplify the perfect moral life that all people could potentially attain. [[Priestley, Joseph | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy \(utm.edu\)](#)]

In addition to his religious beliefs, Priestley delved into politics with *An Essay on the First Principles of Government* arguing that science demanded freedom of speech, worship, education and free markets. Government, he wrote, had to be judged in terms of the welfare of the individual.

The English press and government decreed Priestley's support for the American Revolution and his political and theological ideas seditious. Lord Shelburne terminated his employment.

In 1780, he accepted a preaching job with a liberal congregation in Birmingham.

The Revolution across the Atlantic had ended but it fueled another much closer in France. Priestley openly applauded the end of the Bourbon monarchy for which he was awarded French citizenship. English authorities and many citizens considered his support for the revolution along with his continued attacks on trinitarian doctrine heretical and subversive, eventually threatening his safety. Provoked by a dinner Priestley held in 1791 celebrating the fall of the Bastille, a drunken mob

burned down his church, home and laboratory and led to three days of attacks on other religious dissenters in Birmingham. [[Joseph Priestley | Science History Institute](#)] [[Explaining the Priestley Riots - Revolutionary Players](#)]

After these riotous attacks upon his home and person, Priestley's friend, Benjamin Franklin helped him settle in Pennsylvania in 1794, where he co-founded the First Unitarian Society of Philadelphia and where he preached to both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams and with whom he continued lifelong correspondence.

The French Revolution had split our country, too. Jefferson's and James Madison's Republican party favored the French Revolution as a natural extension of our own while Hamilton and the Federalists, abhorred the French Reign of Terror and favored the British. Poor Unitarian President John Adams was stuck in the middle, wanting peace with France, but attacked from both sides by newspapers that served as the public battleground. It was an 18th century version of Fox versus MSNBC.

There was, for example, Benjamin Franklin Bache's newspaper, the *Philadelphia Aurora*, whose pages were filled with pro-French, anti-Federalist articles by Jefferson, Madison and émigré radicals such as Priestley. Bache's vitriolic editorials attacked "old, bald, blind, querulous, toothless, crippled John Adams... mad in his dotage... " elected "by tricks, by frauds, by finesse." The Federalists were not to be outdone. A recent immigrant to American shores, pamphleteer William Cobbett, a discharged Sergeant-Major in the British Army who had fled to Pennsylvania to avoid court-martial after he had charged his superior officers with corruption in a pamphlet entitled *The Soldier's Friend*, and who, as "Peter Porcupine" established the pro-Federalist *Porcupine's Gazette*, stingingly stoked anti-French fanaticism.

Cobbett took particular aim at Priestley in a pamphlet entitled *Observations on the Emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestley*. Cobbett's motivation was a letter Priestley had written from his farmhouse in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, in October 1796, to a friend that was

widely published in Leeds and other English manufacturing towns, intended to encourage emigration, in which Priestley wrote:

“Every account I have from England makes me think myself happy in this ‘peacefull’ retirement, where I enjoy almost everything I can wish in this life.... The advantages we enjoy in this country are indeed very great. **Here we have no poor**; we never see a beggar, nor is there a family in want. We have no church establishment, and hardly any taxes.... There are very few crimes committed, and we travel without the least apprehension of danger, the press is perfectly free, and I hope we shall always keep out of war. I do not think there ever was any country in a state of such rapid improvement as this at present....

Cobbett, incensed by Priestley’s “abominable falsehood,” that “we have no poor,” denounced the letter as “the means of inveigling one thousand people to America...seducing... ignorant Europeans from their homes, to die with hunger and sickness in the woods and swamps of the United

States.... I could fill a volume with the names of the miserable wretches who have been thus ruined in the pace of a very few months.”

Not content to attack Priestley’s immigration advocacy, Cobbett called Priestley’s Unitarianism a “sect that grew out of date [as] with himself when the French Revolution came and gave them a short respite from eternal oblivion.” Cobbett said the sect never rose into consequence and he called Priestley’s Unitarian sermons “inflammatory discourses” of “Parisian propaganda.” (*Observations on the Emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestley*). He went as far as to assert that Franklin’s assistance in helping Priestley immigrate to America was a “Unitarian plot.”

Attacks on Priestley continued. In 1798, as Jefferson’s Republican newspapers like the *Aurora* attacked Adams, the Federalists responded passing the Alien and Sedition Acts that restricted immigration and speech, intended to muzzle pro-French Republican radical immigrants like Priestley. Cobbett exhorted the Federalist government to shut down the pro-French press and to silence immigrant supporters of the French

Revolution, predicting that unless the army was raised "*a civil war is not more than a twelvemonth's distance.*"

Priestley and his friend and neighbor, lawyer and newspaper editor Thomas Cooper soon ran afoul of the Sedition Act after Cooper published a vehement attack against President Adams. Cooper, a naturalized citizen was indicted for defaming the President and was sentenced to six months in jail. Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, a Unitarian, charged Priestley, who was not a U.S. citizen, of aiding and abetting Cooper, of his "unpardonable conduct" and "meddling with our government" and began deportation proceedings against Priestley, but Priestley's friend and fellow Unitarian, Pickering's boss, John Adams intervened. Wrote Adams to Pickering, "I do not think it wise to execute the Alien Law against poor Priestley, at present."

Meanwhile, Cobbett continued his invective against Priestley, immigration and American democracy as "Peter Porcupine," returning to England in 1800 after a libel judgment against him by American physician, Dr. Benjamin Rush, who is considered a founder of the

Universalist Church that as we know merged with the Unitarians in 1961.

Priestley continued his scientific work, corresponding with Jefferson, Adams and Rush. He dedicated his *General History of the Christian Church* to Jefferson, who had included in **his** list of recommended reading three of Priestley's works. Priestley died peacefully at age 70 in 1804.

[*An History of the Corruptions of Christianity, An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ, and Essay on the First Principles of Government*]

In later years, during their famous post-presidential correspondence, Adams wrote to Jefferson "Oh! That Priestley could live again! and have leisure and means. An Enquirer after Truth, who had neither time nor means might request him to search and research for answers to a few Questions." Jefferson remembered Priestley, saying "In religion, in politics, in physics no man has rendered more service."

More than two hundred years later, our country faces similar political and social polarization. Priestley's letter might have been an eighteenth-century version of Emma Lazarus' poem inscribed on that welcoming copper-green statue I could see from the tip of Manhattan, inviting “the tired, the poor ... the wretched refuse” to our shores. Cobbett's responding attack, on the other hand, of “miserable wretches” we hear all too frequently today at protests and rallies. While some might subscribe to Cobbett’s characterization of immigrants as “miserable wretches,” ought we not to find that welcoming the “tired, the poor, the wretched refuse” is at the core of our Unitarian Universalist principles of acceptance and pluralism. Ought we not to strive for a country where “here, we have no poor.”

Blessed be.

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