

# Unitarianism

Joseph Priestley

*The scientist and Protestant minister Priestley was one of the founders of Unitarianism, which bears a striking intellectual kinship to deism. The creed, here called Socinian, would attract others like Jefferson. The selection is from Priestley's Letters to Dr. Horsley of 1783.*

Having been educated in the strictest principles of Calvinism, and having from my early years had a serious turn of mind, promoted no doubt by a weak and sickly constitution, I was very sincere and zealous in my belief of the doctrine of the trinity; and this continued till I was about nineteen; and then I was as much shocked on hearing of any who denied the divinity of Christ (thinking it to be nothing less than impiety and blasphemy) as any of my opponents can be now. I therefore truly feel for them, and most sincerely excuse them.

About the age of twenty, being then in a regular course of theological studies, I saw reason to change my opinion, and became an Arian; and notwithstanding what appeared to me a fair and impartial study of the scriptures, and though I had no bias on my mind arising from subscribed creeds and confessions of faith, etc. I continued in that persuasion fifteen or sixteen years; and yet in that time I was well acquainted with Dr. Lardner, Dr. Fleming, and several other zealous Socinians, especially my friend Mr. Graham. The first theological tract of mine (which was on the doctrine of atonement) was published at the particular request, and under the direction of, Dr. Lardner; and he approving of the scheme which I had then formed of giving a short view (which was all that I had then thought of) of the progress of the corruptions of christianity, he gave me a few hints with respect to it. But still I continued till after his death indisposed to the Socinian hypothesis. After this, continuing my study of the scriptures, with the help of his *Letters on the Logos*, I at length changed my opinion, and became what is called a Socinian; and in this I see continually more reason to acquiesce, though it was a long time before the arguments in favor of it did more than barely preponderate in my mind.

I was greatly confirmed in this doctrine after I was fully satisfied that man is of an uniform composition, and wholly mortal; and that the doctrine of a separate immaterial soul, capable of sensation and action when the body is in the grave, is a notion borrowed from heathen philosophy, and unknown to the scriptures. Of this I had for a long time a mere suspicion; but having casually mentioned it as such, and a violent outcry being raised against me on that account, I was induced

to give the greatest attention to the question, to examine it in every light, and to invite the fullest discussion of it. This terminated in as full a conviction with respect to this subject as I have with respect to any other whatever. The reasons on which that conviction is founded may be seen in my *Disquisitions on Matter and Spirit*....

Being now fully persuaded that Christ was a man like ourselves, and consequently that his pre-existence, as well as that of other men, was a notion that had no foundation in reason or in the scriptures, and having been gradually led (in consequence of wishing to trace the principal corruptions of christianity) to give particular attention to ecclesiastical history, I could not help thinking but that (since the doctrine of the pre-existence of Christ was not the doctrine of the scriptures, and therefore could not have been taught by the apostles) there must be some traces of the rise and progress of the doctrine of the trinity, and some historical evidence that unitarianism was the general faith of christians in the apostolical age, independent of the evidence which arose from its being the doctrine of the scriptures.

In this state of mind, the reader will easily perceive that I naturally expected to find, what I was previously well persuaded was to be found; and in time I collected much more evidence than I at first expected, considering the early rise and the long and universal spread of what I deem to be a radical corruption of the genuine christian doctrine. This evidence I have fairly laid before the reader. He must judge of the weight of it, and also make whatever allowance he may think necessary for my particular situation and prejudices.

I am well aware that it is naturally impossible that the evidence I have produced should impress the minds of those who are Arians or Athanasians, as it will those of Socinians; nor are men to be convinced of the proper humanity of Christ, by arguments of this kind. They must begin, as I did, with the study of the scriptures; and whatever be the result of that study, it will be impossible for them, let them discipline their minds as they will, not to be influenced in the historical inquiry, as I was, by their previous persuasion concerning the subject of it. If, however, they should be so far impressed with the historical arguments, as to think it probable that the christian Church was, in a very early period, unitarian, it will, no doubt, lead them to expect that they shall find the doctrine of the scriptures, truly interpreted, to be so too.

With respect to myself, I do not know that I can do anything more. Being persuaded, as I am, from the study of the scriptures, that Christ is properly a man, I cannot cease to think so; nor can I possibly help the influence of that persuasion in my historical researches. Let other persons write as freely on their respective hypotheses as I have done on mine, and then indifferent persons, and especially younger persons, whose minds have not acquired the stiffness of ours, who are turned fifty, may derive benefit from it.

Firm as my persuasion now is concerning the proper humanity of Christ (a persuasion that has been the slow growth of years, and the result of much

anxious and patient thinking) I do not know that, in the course of my enquiry, I have been under the influence of prejudice more than all other men naturally are. As to reputation, a man may distinguish himself just as much by the defense of old systems as by the erection of new ones; but I have neither formed any new systems, nor have I particularly distinguished myself in the defense of old ones. When I first became an Arian and afterwards a Socinian, I was only a convert, in company with many others, and was far from having any thoughts of troubling the world with publications on the subject. This I have been led to do by a series of events of which I had no foresight and of which I do not see the issue.

The conclusion that I have formed with respect to the subject of this work and my exertions in support of it, are, however, constantly ascribed by my opponents to a force of prejudice and prepossession so strong as to pervert my judgment in the plainest of all cases. Of this I may not be a proper judge; but analogy may be some guide to myself as well as to others in this case.

Now, what appears to have been my disposition in other similar cases? Have I been particularly attached to hypotheses in philosophy, even to my own, which always create a stronger attachment than those of other persons? On the contrary, I will venture to say that no person is generally thought to be less so; nor has it been imagined that my pursuits have been at all defeated or injured, by any prepossession in favor of particular theories; and yet theories are as apt to mislead in philosophical as in any other subjects. I have always shown the greatest readiness to abandon any hypothesis that I have advanced, and even defended, while I thought it defensible, the moment I have suspected it to be ill founded, whether the new facts that have refuted it were discovered by myself or others. My friends in general have blamed me for my extreme facility in this respect. And if I may judge of myself by my own feelings, after the closest examination that I can give myself, I am just the same with respect to theology.

In the course of my life I have held and defended opinions very different from those which I hold at present. Now, if my obstinacy in retaining and defending opinions had been so great as my opponents represent it, why did it not long ago put a stop to all my changes, and fix me a Trinitarian, or an Arian? Let those who have given stronger proofs of their minds being open to conviction than mine has been, throw the first stone at me.

I am well aware of the nature and force of that opposition and obloquy to which I am exposing myself in consequence of writing my *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, the most valuable, I trust, of all my publications, and especially in consequence of the pains that have been taken to magnify and expose a few inaccuracies, to which all works of a similar nature have been and ever must be subject. But I have the fullest persuasion that the real oversights in it are of the smallest magnitude and do not at all affect any one position or argument in my work, as I hope to satisfy all candid judges; and as to mere cavil and reproach, I thank God I am well able to bear it.

The odium I brought upon myself by maintaining the doctrines of materialism and necessity, without attempting to cover or soften terms of so frightful a sound, and without palliating any of their consequences, was unspeakably greater than what this business can bring upon me. At the beginning of that controversy I had few, very few indeed, of my nearest friends who were with me in the argument. They, however, who knew me, knew my motives, and excused me; but the christian world in general regarded me with the greatest abhorrence. I was considered as an unprincipled infidel, either an atheist or in league with atheists. In this light I was repeatedly exhibited in all the public papers; and the *Monthly Review* and other Reviews, with all the similar publications of the day, joined in the popular cry. But a few years have seen the end of it. At least all that is left would not disturb the merest novice in these things. The consequence (which I now enjoy) is a great increase of materialists; not of atheistical ones, as some will still represent it, but of the most serious, the most rational and consistent christians.

A similar issue I firmly expect from the present controversy, unpromising as it may appear in the eyes of some, who are struck with what is speciously and confidently urged. For my own part, I truly rejoice in the present appearance of things; as I foresee that much good will arise from the attention that will by this means be drawn upon the subject, and as I hope I respect the hand of God in everything, I thank him for leading me into this business; as I hope to have occasion to thank him, some years hence, for leading me through it, and with as much advantage as I have been led through the other.

It is, indeed, my firm and it is my joyful persuasion, that there is a wise Providence over-ruling all inquiries as well as other events. The wisdom of God has appeared, as I have endeavored to point out, even in the corruptions of christianity, and the spread of error; and it is equally conspicuous in the discovery and propagation of truth.

I am far from thinking that that great Being who superintends all things, guides my pen, any more than he does that of my fiercest opponent; but I believe that by means of our joint labors and those of all who engage in theological controversy (which is eminently useful in rousing men to the utmost exertion of their faculties) he is promoting his own excellent purposes, and providing for the prevalence of truth in his own due time; and in this general prospect we ought all equally to rejoice.

It becomes us, however, to consider that they only will be entitled to praise who join in carrying on the designs of providence with right views of their own; who are actuated by a real love of truth, and also by that candor and benevolence, which a sense of our common difficulties in the investigation of truth most effectually inspires. A man who has never changed an opinion cannot have much feeling of this difficulty, and therefore cannot be expected to have much candor, unless his disposition be uncommonly excellent. I ought to have more candor than many others, because I have felt more than many can pretend to have done, the force of those obstacles which retard our progress in the search of truth.