Spring 1969

Joseph Priestley: An Eighteenth Century Unitarian

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JOSEPH PRIESTLEY: AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY UNITARIAN

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A thesis presented to the Department of History of
Old Dominion College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in History

OLD DOMINION COLLEGE

May 26, 1969

This thesis was prepared by Carol Lynn Knight under the direction of the chairman of the candidate's supervisory committee, and has been approved by all members of that committee. It was submitted to the Dean of the School of Arts and Letters and to the Graduate Council, and has been approved as partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

May 26, 1969

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CHAPTER I

THE MAN AND HIS AGE

Joseph Priestley was an eighteenth century theologian whose life and works mirrored the primary controversies of his age. In order to understand how he reflected his society, it is necessary to review the major intellectual currents that affected Englishmen of the eighteenth century. Three schools of thought above all sparked their intellectual activity: the Newtonians and their system of physics, the Lockeans with their special combination of philosophy and psychology, and the Latitudinarians in the field of religion.

Newton had a profound influence on the intellectual activity of the eighteenth century. Everyone is familiar with his work on gravity as expressed in his Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica (Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy), but almost as important was his method. He attempted to find the proper method of scientific of philosophical inquiry. In the tradition of Francis Bacon and the English empiricists, he began with a multitude of factual data and deduced a general observation from them.[1]

Equally as important as Newton's physics and his method was his theism. He maintained that the orderliness of the

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[1]Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), p. 7.

universe suggested a supreme intelligence who had both contrived it and kept it in motion. This was very different from the notion of a watchmaker God who was only required to start the world in motion and then retired to the position of an uninterested observer who never interfered with his creation. The implications of the difference between the two systems were clear. The watchmaker God was so relatively unimportant to his system that it became easy for philosophers to discount his role in it at all; thus it led easily to atheism. On the other hand, the Newtonian system, in which the hand of God was clearly visible, could be said to have encouraged determinism.

Locke took Newton's method and applied it to philosophical inquiry. He questioned the way man came to know certain facts and how he drew from these facts broad generalizations. In his psychological analysis of man he concluded that there was no such thing as an innate idea, or an idea that a man had at the time of his birth, but that all knowledge came from the senses and that generalization was not a creative process but merely the mechanical addition of like properties of specific objects.[2]

An element of skepticism crept into Locke's work which also prevaded the century. If all knowledge came from the senses, and one recognized that the senses were often deceived, then one might ask how valid man's knowledge of things was. This skepticism was developed by Hume and fully exploited by

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[2]John Locke, "Essay Concerning Human Understanding," in Lewis Beck, ed., Eighteenth Century Philosophy (New York: The Freeman Press, 1966), pp. 31-32.

Berkley. The key significance of Locke, however, was that he injected both skepticism and empiricism into non-scientific realms, where they were to play a major role in shaping the methods of inquiry in the eighteenth century.

The third major influence, Latitudinarianism was a reaction to militant puritanism and the religio-political struggles of seventeenth century England. It was an attempt to broaden the doctrinal basis of the Anglican church so that it could encompass almost every shade of Christian thought. In this way all religious controversy would be eliminated, and those who found themselves outside the liberalized church could rightfully be branded as dissenting troublemakers. The English were tired of religious controversy. Latitudinarianism was their way of maintaining peace in the church and hopefully peace at home.[3]

Priestley's interests closely paralleled those of his contemporaries. Although most of his life and efforts were devoted to religious endeavors, he also participated in other spheres of activity. One such interest was science. While Priestley was a tutor at Warrington Academy, in approximately 1766, he spent a considerable amount of time in London, where he met John Canton and Benjamin Franklin, two scientists well known for their work in electricity. Priestley agreed to write a historical account of the work done in that field, and in 1767 he published his History and Present State of

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[3]Maurice Ashley, England in the Seventeenth Century (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 109.

Electricity.[4] Priestley not only described the experiments of Canton and Franklin, including the latter's famous kite experiment, but also vividly expressed his belief that progress was possible through the study of science. The work also included some of his own experiments. Priestley looked upon his scientific endeavors as an avocation and said that "the history of electricity is a field full of pleasing objects, according to all the genuine and universal principles of taste, deduced from a knowledge of human nature. Scenes like these, in which we see a gradual rise and progress on things, always exhibit a pleasing spectacle to the human mind."[5]

Priestley shared his century's interest in history, and its derision of medieval contributions to his age. The history he wrote was providential. His aim was to demonstrate how God's plan for man had unfolded through the ages. He became interested in the subject while he was at Warrington and there compiled a series of lectures on the history of England, its foreign policy and its laws and constitution. His Lectures on History and General Policy[6] were published in 1788. In this work he expressed the purpose of history as he saw it. Priestley said that history had some general

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[4]Joseph Priestley, "History and Present State of Electricity," ed. by Ira Brown, Joseph Priestley: Selections From His Writings, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962), (Hereinafter cited as Brown, ed., Joseph Priestley).

[5]Ibid., p. 191.

[6]Joseph Priestley, "Lectures on History and General Policy," ed. by Brown, ed., Joseph Priestley.

uses which could be described under three main headings. "1. History serves to amuse the imagination and interests the passions in general. 2. It improves the understanding. And, 3. It tends to strengthen the sentiments of virtue."[7] By far the most important of these reasons was the last. Anne Holt, Priestley's spiritual biographer, said that Priestley studied history "to strengthen the sentiments of virtue by the variety of views in which it exhibits the conduct of Divine Providence and points out the hand of God in the affairs of man."[8]

Priestley had an intense interest in England's educational system. The six years he spent at Warrington led him to consider the subject and to develop an educational philosophy that was to remain with him. He felt that a course of study should include the general subject now known as social studies. He felt it wrong that education was still oriented toward the production of good clergymen. He said that it was "a defect in our present system of public education, that a proper course of studies is not provided for gentlemen who are designed to fill the principal stations of active life, distinct from those which are adapted to the learned professions."[9] He felt that the study of politics and history illustrated the

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[7] Ibid., p. 103.

[8] Anne Holt, A Life of Joseph Priestley, (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 32.

[9] Joseph Priestley, "An Essay on a Course of Liberal Education for Civil and Active Life," in Brown, ed. Joseph Priestley, pp. 79-80.

political errors of the past so that they might be avoided in the future.[10]

Priestley was a savant. He was largely self taught, with a wide variety of interests, though no real proficiency in many of them. It must be remembered, however, that religion was Priestley's prime concern and all other considerations were secondary. He studied science so that he could better understand the works of God. He investigated psychology to see how God effected his plan for the world through the minds of men. He wrote history to demonstrate the unfolding of God's plan for the world, and he was interested in education because he knew that only the rational mind could truly comprehend God's scheme.

The two dominant religious groups in England could be generally classified as the Latitudinarians and the non-conformists. The Latitudinarians were members of the Church of England. In direct opposition to this establishment were the non-conformists. As their name implied, they could not accept the doctrinal tenets or the religious practices of the Church of England. While some of the non-conformists were Catholics and some were Unitarians, the majority of them were Calvinists of one denomination or another. Puritans and Presbyterians formed the largest group of dissenters. They stayed outside the Anglican church because they felt it was too Catholic in orientation and too worldly. In addition, there were three

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[10] Ibid., p. 80.

smaller religious groups whose influence was felt in England. They were the Arminians, the Arians and the Methodists.

The Arminians were a liberal Protestant group who followed the teachings of Arminius, a Dutch reformer. They attacked the Calvinist doctrines of the total depravity of man and of predestination, producing a milder struggle for toleration.[11]

The questioning of the fundamental beliefs that resulted from the Enlightenment and led to Deism also led to the reappearance of fourth century Arianism in the person of Samuel Clark, Rector of St. James, Westminster. In 1713 Clark published The True Scripture Doctrine of the Holy Trinity in which he maintained that Jesus Christ was only divine because divinity had been communicated to him by God. This made him properly the Son of God rather than God the Son. The Holy Spirit was assigned an inferior position to both God and Christ.[12] This doctrine opened the door to Unitarian or Socinian questioning. It can be said that out of the Arian controversy, both Unitarian and Deist positions were formed, as both sects undertook to challenge Christ's divinity. The last group, the Methodists, were largely a reaction to the rationalistic theology which circulated among the intellectual community. John Wesley and his followers tried to bring

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[11]Roland Stromberg, An Intellectual History of Modern Europe, (New York: Appeton-Centory-Crofts, 1966), pp. 67-68.

[12]James A. Hastings, ed., Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, I, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 786.

Christianity down to the essentials of faith, relying on emotionalism rather than reason to propagandize their view.

On the far left of the non-conformist spectrum were the Deists. They contended that reason alone, without revelation was sufficient to insure the proper understanding of God and morality. By the eighteenth century, most Deists had dispensed with the Christian teachings and relied solely on reason to evolve a natural religion. Deists asked if the world was an elaborate machine, as Newton had suggested, and if motion was a property of matter, why did there have to be a supreme being to set the world in motion or to keep it running? This line of questioning led some Deists to Atheism. Such skepticism was fed in France by the abuses of the Catholic church which was in league with the Ancien Regime to suppress the liberties of the French people. In countries where established churches were not as oppressive, militant deism did not usually develop into full-blown atheism. Such was the case with England.[13] In between the Deists and the more orthodox dissenters stood Unitarianism.

Priestley's theology shared tenets with almost all of the various sects. Like the orthodox and the Calvinists he accepted the concept of providence and the validity of revelation. No one believed more firmly that God's hand was evidenced by every event that had taken place in the history of the world or in the history of individual men. Priestley

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[13]Cassirer, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, p. 175.

was a determinist and as such felt that man's actions were controlled by the laws of cause and effect. In his Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Priestley asked how it could be possible that God could not have forseen the results of his own creation. He concluded that man's will was determined necessarily by the laws of cause and effect and by God who placed man in a given situation at the time of his birth and allowed those laws to operate. If this was not so then there would be no logical foundation for "Divine Providence, and moral government, as well as all foundation of revealed religion, in which prophecies are so much concerned."[14]

That revelation was valid, was unquestioned by Priestley who shunned every attempt by the Deists to persuade him that the scriptures were contradictory and therefore unsound. Priestley maintained that this was impossible as the scriptures all came from one God and Father; thus could not be contradictory. It was the misinterpretations of them that led to confusion, not the writings themselves.[15]

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[14]Josoph Priestley, The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated Being an Appendix to the Disquestions Related to Matter and Spirit to which is Added an Answer to the Letters on Materialism, and on Hartley's Theory of the Mind. (London: J. Johnson, 1777). (Hereinafter cited as Priestley, The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity.)

[15]Joseph Priestley, An Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity on the Following Subjects VIZ. I. The Use of Reason in Matters of Religion; II. The Power of Man to do the Will of God; III. Original Sin; IV. Election and Reprobation; V. The Divinity of Christ and; VI. Atonement for Sin by the Death of Christ; to which are added, A Concise History of the Rise of those Doctrines; and an Account of the Trial of Mr. Elwall, for Heresy and Blasphemy, at Stafford Assizes. (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1794). p. 2. (Hereinafter cited as Priestley, An Appeal to the Professors of Christianity.)

Priestley also shared Arminian contempt for the doctrine of the depravity of man and of the concept of absolute predestination. Regarding the former he maintained that the Orthodox position that man did not have the inherent power to do the will of God was a grievous error. He said that if a man did not have the capacity to do the will of God, why would God have continually requested man to perform good acts or repent for his sins.[16] As for the doctrine of predestination, Priestley felt that a merciful God would have put a stop to the propagation of such sinfilled creatures rather than to have allowed them to be born into a condition that the greater part of them must suffer eternally.[17]

To these traditional dissenting arguments Priestley added the Socinian doctrines of the unity of God and the humanity of Christ. He also incorporated a theory of determinism developed out of Lockean-Hartley psychology and a theory of materialism to round out his theology. It was clearly a religious view that could only have developed in the eighteenth century for every aspect of it mirrored the influences and ideas of the age.

Not only did Priestley reflect the influences, ideas and interests of the eighteenth century, but he also mastered the techniques of the period. In his attempt to reform the established church, Priestley repeatedly expressed the need for the use of reason. He maintained somewhat the same position

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[16] Ibid., p. 7.

[17] Ibid., pp. 8-9.

in this regard as did the Deists and the French philosophes. The eighteenth century extolled reason, and made something of a dogma of it. Priestley was not as guilty of excesses in this respect like some of his contemporaries were. In his work An Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity, he urged theologians to apply reason to their inquiries. He maintained that they had nothing to fear from using reason to examine the scriptures. Without the use of reason, how could a man distinguish one religion from another, a true religion from a false one?[18]

In his Letters to the Young Men who are in a Course of Education for the Christian Ministry, at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge he urged the young men, that in a matter of such consequence as religion, they should let no man do their thinking for them. He said that they were responsible for judging for themselves, honestly and fairly, because God had made them all individually responsible for the use of their faculties. He requested that they remember the dangers of acquiescing in the authority of the established church without full examination of the doctrine involved. For, he said, in just the same manner as they acquiesced in the Church of England, someone in France or Spain would acquiesce in the Pope in Rome.[19]

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[18] Ibid., p. 2.

[19] Joseph Priestley, Letters to Dr. Horne, Dean of Canterbury; to the Young men who are in a course of Education for the Christian Ministry, at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. To Dr. Price and To Mr. Parkhurst; On the Subject of the Person of Christ, (Birmingham: Pearson and Rollason, 1787), p. 50. (Hereinafter cited as Priestley, Letters to Dr. Horne.)

He urged his colleagues to distrust anyone who decried human reason, like so many clergymen did. He maintained that once the establishment has made them accept this idea, "they can lead you whither they please and impose upon you every absurdity which their similar view may make it expedient for them that you embrace."[20]

Priestley did not censure those Christians who had been misled, or those who misled others on doctrinal matters as a consequence of their own misinformation. He stated that "every allowance should be made for all those who offend through ignorance, though they be carried away, even to the most violent acts of persecution. . . ." However, he warned that the wrath of Christ would fall upon those who profited from the prejudices of mankind, or used them for self-gratification or to promote their own worldly interests and ambitions; and especially upon those who sought to exploit those prejudices for their own personal aggrandizement.[21]

Just as important as the use of reason, was the method of applying it to religious inquiry. Priestley used a Newtonian

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[20]Priestley, An Appeal to the Professors of Christianity, p. 3.

[21]Joseph Priestley, Considerations on Differences of Opinion Among Christians with a Letter to the Reverend Mr. Venn, In Answer to his Free and Full examination of the Address to Protestant Dissenters on the Subject of the Lord's Supper, (London: J. Johnson & J. Payne, 1769), p. 3. (Hereinafter cited as Priestley, Considerations on Differences of Opinion.)

method when he studied scriptures. He gathered his material from the scriptures and then drew general observations and correlations from them. When he was studying the letters of Paul he noticed that there seemed to be some inconsistency in Paul's reasoning and that some of his conclusions were ill-supported. Priestley proceeded to write out under different subject headings all of the arguments Paul presented. He correlated these lists and noted all of the inconsistencies. It was this type of internal biblical criticism that stamped Priestley as a rational theologian.[22]

Priestley also employed the methods of propaganda which were developed in the beginning of his century. In the early eighteenth century writers were freed from the necessity of having a patron in order to publish. Works were now written for a specific audience with the hope of both pleasing and persuading that audience. An example of a publication of this nature was the Theological Repository. This occasional publication was begun by Priestley and some of his closest associates. The Theological Repository was an attempt to bring public attention to contemporary biblical criticism and theological disputes. It was hoped that such a publication would spark rational dialogues among England's dissenting theologians and that such considerations would bring about new opinions on the articles of faith questioned by the century.

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[22]Joseph Priestley, The Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley, ed. by John T. Boyer, (Washington: Bancroft Press, 1964), pp. 30-31.

Many of Priestley's own works were first published in this periodical.[23]

During the eighteenth century Christianity was placed on trial by the new concepts of the enlightenment. Some felt that the new science and philosophy had made religion unnecessary. In order for an eighteenth century theologian to adequately defend the faith, he had to use its tools. This inevitably led to a change in what he felt true Christianity was. Priestley considered himself an apologist for the faith. But his concept of the true Christian religion was in fact an eighteenth century Christianity, not the faith of the orthodox. Priestley's age was searching for a new formula to explain the ways of God to man. To do this he affected a synthesis between the faith of the orthodox and the reason of the unbeliever. This reconciliation took the form of Unitarianism which developed during the first forty years of his life.

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[23] Ibid., p. 50.

CHAPTER II

THE EVOLUTION OF A UNITARIAN THEOLOGY

Priestley was not born a Unitarian, nor was he always a determinist or a materialist. It took the first twenty years of his life for him to adopt a determinist position, ten more to become a Unitarian and another ten to become a materialist. These three elements became equal parts in Priestley's evolving theology, and it was not until he had passed forty that he arrived at the system of rational dissent which he was to defend for nearly thirty years.

Priestley's life was a series of small triumphs and staggering defeats. On the face of it, Priestley was unsuccessful in his ultimate goal, which was to point the way for eighteenth century man to think of God. At the end of his life Priestley was a disappointed man. He felt that he had failed. It was only after his death that Unitarianism took root in America and the violent struggle between the orthodox and the unbelievers came to an end.

All of his life, Priestley courted public disfavor by espousing unpopular views. He died estranged from his beloved England and in an uncertain relationship with his adopted America. In seeking to establish a rational middle

path between the faith of the orthodox and the philosophical unbelief of the atheist, he antagonized almost every sect between these two poles. To the more orthodox, he was a materialist and an atheist. To the deist he was a defender of an antiquated and vicious scriptural force.

Perhaps this was inevitable. Just as Priestley's theology could only have been formulated in the eighteenth century, the events of the century made the acceptance of a middle path impossible. Priestley was an academy student at the time when orthodox and deist views were beginning to polarize. He became a materialist when the Church and the philosophers were beyond reconciliation. He espoused his trilogy - Unitarianism, determinism, and materialism - at a time when Europe was torn by the French Revolution, when every man had to take a side and no half-way position was tolerated. One was either one of the faithful, fully armed against the sword of the unbeliever or he was a rationalist who worshipped at the altar of Reason. Europe was to settle its conflicts and look for a more mediating religious position. Never again would orthodoxy hold such sway over the public, and never again would atheism be as militant. History was to prove Priestley's views farsighted, and clearly an approach to reconciliation. But in 1804, when he died, such a reconciliation had not yet happened.

Joseph Priestley was born near Leeds in England in 1733 of Calvinist parents. His early years were dominated by two

opposing religious forces: the faith of his father and his aunt, both of whom accepted Calvinist doctrine without reservation; and the religious views of the more liberal dissenting ministers in the neighborhood who congregated frequently at his aunt's house. These men had a profound influence on the young man causing him to question the orthodoxy of the church on numerous occasions. He later dedicated his Disquisitions on Matter and Spirit to one of them, a Mr. Graham of Halifax.[1]

Priestley soon experienced the type of difficulty that many second-generation Calvinists encountered. Whereas most first generation Calvinists were converted to that faith because of a personal experience of God in their lives in which he had revealed to them that they were among his elect, their children who were born into the church often had to struggle to capture this feeling. They could not accept communion, and be full members of the church, until they had experienced personal salvation. For many, this experience never came.

Being a sickly child, Priestley had read widely in books of "experiences" and believed that his "new birth" or regeneration depended upon the immediate agency of the Spirit of God. He could not satisfy himself that he had such an experience and said of his subsequent anguish, "I felt occasionally such distress of mind as it is not in my power to

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[1]Priestley, Memoirs, pp. 12-13.

describe, and which I still look back upon with horror."[2] In his memoirs, Priestley commented that his early discomfort had not been entirely devoid of value, in that it led him to intensively contemplate God and a future state and made him appreciate the peace of mind the rational christian had whose faith was not dependent on such personal experiences.[3]

Priestley underwent his first significant crisis of conscience when he tried to become a communicant in the church he had always attended. Membership in the church and admission to the Lord's Supper was granted only to those with a regenerate soul. He was refused membership by the elders of the church on the grounds of unorthodoxy. Priestley could not accept the doctrine that the whole human race was accountable for the sins of Adam. Thus he found himself to be an Arminian, questioning the Calvinist doctrine of absolute predestination and the depravity of man and maintaining that real salvation was possible for all men. Priestley's Arminianism was an important step in the formation of his future beliefs. For in rejecting the premise that man was essentially evil, Priestley attacked a basic tenet of all christian churches.

Priestley's family had intended for him to go to the Calvinist academy at Mileend, but as he was an Arminian, and as he felt that he could not "subscribe his assent to the ten

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[2] Ibid., p. 14.

[3] Ibid., p. 15.

articles of strictest Calvinistic faith, and repeat it every six months," he went, instead, to Daventry one of the more liberal dissenting academies.[4]

Shortly after Priestley entered Daventry in 1751 he became an Arian and subscribed to the doctrine of necessity. Arianism was a theological movement initiated by Arius in the fourth century. Arians believed that Christ, the Logos, or emanation from God, was pre-existent but not eternally real and was a created being and thus not a God in the fullest sense of the word. As a creator of all secondary creatures, however, he could properly be regarded as a subject of worship as a secondary deity. The acceptance of Arian beliefs was important in that it opened the door for an anti-trinitarian position, because it professed that Jesus was a created being and therefore not equal with God.[5]

The most influential idea that Priestley encountered at Daventry was determinism. In his work The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity, he questioned whether man made free choices among various alternatives or whether God had predetermined what alternative would be followed. Priestley's determinism was largely based on the theory of associations of ideas as put forth by the deist David Hartley in his Observations on Man. According to this theory, physical objects by

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[4] Ibid., p. 20.

[5] Hastings, ed., Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, I, p. 786.

actual experience beginning in infancy became associated with pleasure or pain, and man thus became attracted to things (objects) associated with pleasure and rejected things (objects) associated with pain. Because these associations are cumulative each new "choice" is made on the basis of past experience with things (objects) and the associated pleasure or pain aroused. Thus "choice" are determined by the sum of past experience.[6]

This doctrine of philosophical necessity held that a man in any given situation would always make the same choice because at the moment of choice he believed that he was choosing the most desirable alternative. Priestley felt that there was a constant and necessary determination of the will according to the motives presented to it and that there was a necessary connection between all things past, present and future. God, he believed, determined man's volitions when he placed man in a particular set of circumstances. God determined each man's actions in order to allow each man to fit into his grand beneficent scheme for mankind. Priestley succinctly summarized the theory when he wrote "the scheme of Philosophical Necessity has been shown to imply a chain of causes and effects, established by infinite wisdom, and terminating in the greatest good for the whole universe. . . ."[7]

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[6]Priestley, The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity, pp. 7-8.

[7]Ibid., pp. 150-51.

Priestley explained in his memoirs how important the acceptance of this doctrine had been to him. He stated that the doctrine had "greatly improved that disposition to piety which I brought to the academy and freed it from that rigour with which it had been tinctured."[8] He maintained that he did not know whether the theory "contributes more to enlighten the mind or improve the heart; it effects [sic] both in so super-eminent a degree."[9]

During the years following his formal education, Priestley's philosophy continued to evolve through the influence of his reading. Throughout his pastorate at Needham, Priestley undertook detailed studies of the scripture. His New Testament studies of the writings of the apostle Paul and the major commentaries on Paul's writings led him to the conclusion that Paul's reasoning was inconsistent and hence could not be validly used to prove the Calvinist doctrine of atonement. He also came to reject the idea of divine inspiration of scriptural writers although he did retain the belief that God sometimes revealed himself to man through the vehicle of miracles.[10]

In connection with the question of scriptural interpretation, Priestley embarked upon a rather arduous comparison of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the writings of the prophets with the content of the New Testament. He concluded that all of the prophecies in the Old Testament had

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[8]Priestley, Memoirs, p. 22.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid., p. 33.

been more than fulfilled by the miraculous occurrences in the New Testament.[11]

In 1758 Priestley left Needham, because the congregation objected to his Arianism, and went to a more liberal congregation at Nantwich in the same year, and in 1761 decided to accept a position as an instructor at Warrington, the chief liberal dissenting academy in England. In 1767 he left Warrington to take a pastorate at Leeds.

Priestley's position at Warrington was that of a tutor and he devoted much of his time to pursuits such as the study of history, experimentation with electricity, and the development of an educational philosophy. Upon his return to the ministry at Leeds he began to consider Socinianism by reading Dr. Lardner's* Letter on Logos which was concerned with the refutation of the Arian hypothesis of the pre-existence of Christ. Socinianism is a term applied to a theological movement of the past reformation decades. It was named after Fausto Paolo Sozzini whose writings proposed a rationalistic Christian doctrine with a clear anti-trinitarian orientation. It was a species of Unitarianism, and was generally called Unitarian by the eighteenth century.[12]

Dr. Lardner accepted such doctrines as the miraculous birth, miracles, and the resurrection as evidence of Christ's

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[11] Ibid., p. 42.

[12] Hastings, ed., Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, XI, p. 651.

*Nathaniel Lardner D. D. (1684-1768), non-conformist divine, biblical and patristic scholar.

mission on earth. His thesis was that Christ had a human soul, but became the Son of God and was exalted above all other created beings as a reward for his sufferings on earth.[13] Priestley generally agreed with Lardner's thesis. He said, "I became what is called a Socinian. . . and after giving the closest attention to the subject, I have seen more and more reason to be satisfied with the idea of its importance."[14]

Priestley came to believe in the unity of God and the humanity of Christ. Who was Christ, if he was not God? Priestley felt that "Jesus of Nazareth was a man approved by God, by the miracles and wonders and signs which God did by him and whom God raised from the dead."[15]

It was after Priestley had become a Unitarian (Socinian and Unitarian can be used interchangeably) that he began to write propaganda with the aim of showing that the orthodox trinitarian stand was as illogical as it was ill-founded. He also tried to prove that human reason was capable of investigating scripture and ascertaining the nature of true Christianity as expressed by the Apostles and early Christians. He maintained that the primitive Christians, the Apostles and the church fathers, were all Unitarians and that the trinitarian error in the faith had been produced through the accretions

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[13]Holt, A Life of Joseph Priestley, p. 43.

[14]Priestley, Memoirs, p. 50.

[15]Priestley, An Appeal to the Professors of Christianity, p. 14.

of platonic philosophy. Finally, he tried to show that most Englishmen were actually Unitarian or would be happier with a Unitarian liturgy than with a trinitarian one, if given the choice.

Priestley's writings were largely an attempt to cleanse Christianity from the corruptions and non-sequiturs which had tarnished it. As a rational Christian he wanted to preserve the faith by purifying it, that is, seeking the original form of the faith as conceived by God and accepted by the Apostles. As long as he only questioned or challenged the prevalent creed he was respected by his fellow teachers and clergymen. His scientific achievements had won him a large measure of fame, and his religious idiosyncrasies were overlooked and in some instances applauded. This was to end however, when he began to attack organized Christianity in a manner which it could not easily ignore.

In 1772 for a variety of reasons, Priestley left the church at Leeds, where he had been eminently happy, and took the position of secretary to Lord Shelburne.[16] In this position he was able to travel to the continent where he met some of the French philosophes. Having been informed that they were anti-Christian, Priestley was not shocked by their professed unbelief or their avowed atheism. He presented himself

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[16]William Petty, First Marquis of Lansdowne, 1737-1805. Member of Grenville's Ministry. President of the Board of Trade and Foreign Plantations. In 1766 Secretary of State for the Southern Department.

on all occasions as a Christian and was told that he "was the only person they had ever met with, of whose understanding they had any opinion, who professed to believe in Christianity."[17] Priestley questioned them on the subject and decided that they had not given proper attention to it and did not know what Christianity really was. He felt that his explanations and defenses of the faith might have helped to temper their atheistic positions.[18]

When he returned to England, he decided to put his continental experience with unbelievers to good use. He felt that he would be able to combat their prejudices sufficiently well to cause them to change their opinions. With this end in mind he wrote the first part of his Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever which contained a proof of the existence of God and of providence. At this stage of his life Priestley still saw himself as a Christian who could say, "the greatest satisfaction I receive from the success of my philosophical pursuits arises from the weight it may give to my attempts to defend Christianity, and free it from those corruptions which prevent its reception with philosophical and thinking persons."[19]

While he was with Lord Shelburne, Priestley finished and published the third and final part of his Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion. He used the preface to this

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[17]Priestley, Memoirs, p. 65.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid., pp. 65-66.

work to attack Hume's idea of common sense, which he felt precluded all rational inquiry into the subject of religion. He also reaffirmed his admiration for David Hartley's theory of the human mind.

Priestley used the occasion, as he had many others, to demonstrate his belief in the doctrine of philosophical necessity. He believed that the subject required further treatment, and he therefore published the part of Hartley's Observations on Man which related to the doctrine of the association of ideas and prefixed it with three dissertations which explained Hartley's whole system.

In one of these dissertations Priestley expressed some doubt of the immateriality of the sentient in man. He was persuaded "that man is wholly material, and that our only prospect of immortality is from the Christian doctrine of resurrection."[20] Once he had digested his thoughts on the subject he published his Disquisitions Relating to Matter ans Spirit.[21] He felt this doctrine of materialism was closely connected with the doctrines of philosophical necessity and Unitarianism, and he also wished to show how these doctrines would dispell both orthodox and Arian religious sentiments.[22]

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[20] Ibid., p. 69.

[21] Priestley, Joseph, Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit. To which is Added the History of the Philosophical Doctrine concerning the Origin of the Soul, and the Nature of Matter; with its influence on Christianity, especially with Respect to the Doctrine of the Pre-existence of Christ, (London: J. Johnson, 1777), (Hereinafter cited as Priestley, Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit.)

[22] Priestley, Memoirs, p. 69.

Priestley anticipated that the public reaction to this work would be unfavorable and feared it would bring public odium on his patron, but he believed he was "engaged in the cause of important truth, and so I proceeded without regard to any consequences."[23]

Priestley's Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit was a materialistic treatise intended to illustrate the fallacy of the Arian and orthodox hypothesis that Christ's sould was pre-existent. It also contended that Christ was not a God. In the introduction to a later edition of this work, Priestley summarized the relationship between the doctrines of necessity, materialism and Unitarianism. He believed that the traditional division of man into matter and spirit was a fallacy. Traditionally man's body was said to be composed of matter but perception, thought and will were supposed to be relegated to the spirit, which was intimately linked with the body. Higher orders of intelligent beings, particularly God, were said to be wholly immaterial or wholly spiritual.[24]

Priestley maintained that neither matter nor spirit had been properly defined. Matter was not so nearly devoid of powers as it had been assumed to be. Priestley defined matter as having the powers of extension, attraction and repulsion and stressed that their definition could be confirmed by scientific observation. Since it had never been proven that the powers of sensation and thought were inconsistent with

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Brown, ed., Joseph Priestley, p. 263.

extension, attraction or repulsion. Priestley maintained that there was no reason to suppose that man's nature was divided into two distinct spheres. Priestley also felt that the doctrine that two substances having no common property, such as matter and spirit, were capable of mutual action was not rational.[25]

He tried to show that the concept of an immaterial soul was Greek in origin and that when it had been adopted by the early Christians it had led to the basic corruption of Christianity, the concept that Christ was a God. Only the acceptance of the idea that man was wholly material could provide the proper basis for appreciating the humanity of Christ. For if no man had a soul distinct from his body, then Christ could not have had one either. If there was no distinct soul, none could have pre-existed in Christ or any other man; thus Christianity would be freed from Platonic philosophy.[26]

The three doctrines of materialism, determinism and Unitarianism formed equal parts of one system. One could consider each part by itself as well as their inter-relationships without finding any inconsistencies in them. Moreover, each doctrine was separately defensible and demonstrable.[27]

By coming out so forcefully with these materialistic views Priestley made himself the object of the wrath of both

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[25] Ibid., p. 264.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., p. 265.

the orthodox and the liberal dissenting groups. His previous questionings of dogma, such as the divinity of Christ, had been within the realm of traditional Protestant inquiry, but his theory of materialism was looked upon as a rejection of the basis of the Christian religion. He became the object of censure. Fear of the doctrine of materialism was so intense that rational examination of the rest of Priestley's theology all but ceased. He was branded as a materialist and an atheist and spent most of the remainder of his career defending himself and purified Christianity.

In the works of public outrage over Priestley's new book, Lord Shelburne requested that Priestley resign his position, but arranged to pay him a small annuity for the rest of his life. Priestley found a position as minister to a Birmingham congregation. He was troubled by the angry reactions to his theories but was able to maintain a personal serenity.

The following passage from his memoirs demonstrates how Priestley's necessarianism helped him overcome his personal disappointment at the poor reception his theology received.

> Though my readers will easily suppose that in the course of a life so full of vicissitude as mine has been, many things must have occurred to mortify and discompose me, nothing has ever depressed my mind beyond a very short period. My spirits have never failed to recover their natural level, and I have frequently observed, at first with some surprise, that the most perfect satisfaction I have ever felt has been a day or two after an event that afflicted me the most, and without any change having taken place

> in the state of things. Having found this to be the case after many of my troubles, the persuasion that it would be so, . . . has never failed to lessen the effect of its first impression, and together with my firm belief of the doctrine of necessity (and consequently that of everything being ordered for the best) has contributed to that degree of composure which I have enjoyed through life, so that I have always considered myself as the happiest of men.[28]

While in Birmingham, he wrote that he was extremely happy to live in a country and in an age where he was at liberty to investigate and propagate religious truth. However the antagonism against Priestley's theology and his support of the French revolution made him one of the focal points of the Birmingham riots of 1791. In the riot and ensuing fire he lost his house, his books and much of his optimism for his future in England. In 1794 he emigrated to the United States. There he found a warm reception in Philadelphia tempered only by some suspicion of his religious views.

The riot began on Thursday, July 14, with an attack by reactionary mob on Thomas Dadley's Hotel, Temple Row, where the "constitutional society" of Birmingham was having a dinner to commerate the fall of the Bastille. Priestley was supposed to be at the dinner, but had decided not to go. When the rioters found the dinner party broken up they raged through Birmingham for three days burning and looting the property of their opponents.

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[28]Priestley, Memoirs, pp. 87-88.

For the first year his lectures on theology and the corruptions of Christianity were widely attended. But after a time the novelty wore off and his lectures were less widely attended. He was discouraged by his failure to establish a Unitarian place of worship in that city. He spent his last years writing, completing his memoirs and making short trips to Philadelphia to deliver lectures and visit friends. One of the last entries in his memoirs, indicates the bitterness and disappointment Priestley felt at the end of his life. Writing from Northumberland about the ostracisism he had experienced in England, he said:

> It might have been thought, that having written so much in defense of revelation, and of Christianity in general, more perhaps than all the clergy of the Church of England now living, this defense of a common cause would have been received as some atonement for my demerits in writing against the Civil establishment of Christianity, and particular doctrines. But had I been an open enemy of religion, the animosity against me could not have been any greater than it is. Neither Mr. Hume nor Mr. Gibbon was a thousandth part so obnoxious to the clergy as I am; so little respect have my enemies for Christianity itself, compared with what they have for the emoluments of it.[29]

He never was naturalized as an American citizen, but he applauded Jeffersonian politics. He thought frequently of returning to England, or re-visiting France in 1800, but never did. His theology was not altered during his American residence, and he increasingly grew more feeble, until he gave up his laboratory work entirely. He died on February 6, 1804, a lonely and somewhat disappointed man.

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[29] Ibid., p. 109.

Priestley's theology was not at all popular with his contemporaries, yet he never wavered in his faith in it and in himself. He felt that only if the Christian community could adapt itself to the philosophical and scientific achievements of the eighteenth century would it have any chance of surviving.

Priestley, as every theologian, had to explain the relationship between God and man, for this is the essence of religion. Priestley's formula for this relationship was extremely complex. It was not completed until he had passed his fortieth year in 1775, and was advocated for the remaining thirty years of his life. The writings and incidents that are dealt with in the remaining chapters concern these last thirty years.

CHAPTER III

OF GOD AND MAN

Since the central characters in any theology are God and man. Priestley had to consider them most carefully. The orthodox Christian view held that man was innately evil. Man's initial sin and his continued turning away from God illustrated that. Man's senses were not to be trusted and his emotions or baser instincts could incline him toward evil. The only way man could achieve true virtue and true knowledge was by accepting God's grace.

The orthodox also taught that God was infinitely good. He had created man, forgiven his first fall and offered salvation through the sufferings of Christ. Without God's grace, man was corrupt and therefore destined to eternal suffering for his sins. Although individual sects differed on the precise formula for salvation, some saying that grace was given freely to all who atoned for their sins and others promising salvation to only a select predestined few, there was no disagreement on the basic premise that man was essentially evil and God was necessarily good.

A new school, represented by eighteenth century philosophers viewed both man and God differently. In the first place, the philosophers and scientists had exalted

man. He was good, he was capable of forming workable governments and his reason was more than sufficient to explore both the mysteries of the universe and the mysteries of faith. Moreover, man's knowledge was shown to depend on his senses, which were generally acknowledged to be reliable. Man, therefore, was not and could not be innately evil.

As to God, the men of the eighteenth century were less inclined to view him as thoroughly beneficient, than their predecessors had been. One prevalent view of God was that He had placed man in his world and then left him to do as he would. He did not play an intimate role in man's affairs. Later in the century attacks on God became more severe as man questioned the justification for evil in the world.

One view that accounted for evil was expressed by Leibnitz. He maintained that God in his infinite wisdom had chosen from all the possible worlds, the best possible world. This world was the one with the maximum number of compossible virtues. If there was evil, it was because no lesser amount of evil could exist, but as the world was continually improving, the amount of evil would continually diminish. Although Voltaire and others ridiculed Leibnitz's best possible world, they did not attack his optimism too severely until the Lisbon earthquake. That natural disaster brought the question of good and evil into a new perspective. What kind of God, people asked, would allow such a thing to happen? Surely if God was infinitely powerful and infinitely good

he could have prevented such a senseless disaster. Some felt that if God in fact existed, then he must surely be evil.

Priestley synthesized the two modes of thought when he maintained that both God and man were essentially and necessarily good. He also felt that the nature of the relationship between God and man was that of a playwrite, and demonstrated that this relationship operated on the principles of determinism and materialism. Priestley felt that the orthodox view of sin inhibited a clear understanding of man's ability to carry out God's plan and he explained the orthodox view of original sin in the following manner. "It is said that by his first offense, our first parent Adam, and all his posterity, lost all power of doing anything acceptable to God. . . that when he sinned we all sinned; and, every sin being an offense against an infinite God, we all became. . .liable to punishment."[1]

He argued that the doctrine could not be found in the scriptures, for the Bible stated that sinners shall die. Centuries after the transgression of Adam, God was continually calling upon man to cease to do evil and learn to do good. This, Priestley said, was the most positive sort of evidence that man could fulfill the will of God.[2]

Priestley felt that even if certain orthodox premises were accepted, the final conclusion would not be consistent

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[1]Priestley, An Appeal to Professors of Christianity, p. 4.

[2]Ibid., p. 7.

with the orthodox concept of a beneficent God. They believed that mankind was held responsible to eternal damnation for the sin of one man. Even though God in his mercy had decided to save some from this plight by arbitrary decree, the vast majority of mankind were left to suffer damnation. What kind of God was this? Would not a merciful, beneficent God have put a stop to the propagation of such sin-filled creatures rather than allow them to be born into such a condition that the greater part of them must suffer eternally, Priestley asked.[3]

Arguing from the position of a traditional Protestant dissenter, he maintained that if the doctrine of absolute reprobation had absolute election were true, what motive would any man have for trying to flee from the wrath to come? Why would he strive for eternal life, when nothing in his power would enable him to attain it, or escape it, depending upon his predestined lot? Predestination, he said, was a doctrine of licentiousness, not godliness.[4]

Priestley also felt that the orthodox view of a beneficent God could be shown to exclude the necessity of Christ. Christians had been taught that if Christ were not God, he could not have made infinite satisfaction for the sins of mankind. Priestley asked, where did one learn or how did

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[3] Ibid., pp. 8-9.

[4] Ibid., p. 9.

he decide that the pardon of the sins of a finite creature required an infinite satisfaction, or any satisfaction at all, save the sinner's own repentance. One could read in the scripture that man was freely justified by the grace of God. What kind of free grace was there in God, if Christ in fact gave full price for our justification, and suffered, in place of mankind, the whole weight of divine wrath and punishment?[5]

It was true, Priestley maintained, that a sinner could not be justified by his works alone. We all stood in need of grace and mercy freely given by God. But it was a great mistake to suppose that this mercy came from any other source than that which God could provide with his own essential goodness.[6]

Priestley went on to consider the nature of God at some length. Before he could attempt to prove the essential benevolence of the deity however, he had to prove that such a being existed at all. In his Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, which Priestley wrote to convince deists in France, England and America of the validity of revealed religion, he examined the nature of the evidence that supported the position that God existed, and then went on to prove that he did.[7]

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[5]Ibid., p. 17.

[6]Ibid., p. 18.

[7]Joseph Priestley, Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I (Birmingham: Pearson and Rollason, 1787), p. 35.

The arguments Priestley used here were largely analogies. Priestley felt that one could not live long in the world without readily apprehending that man made tables and chairs, built houses, and wrote books, and that these things could not be made without man. He said, "whenever we see a chair, a table, a house, or a book, we entertain no doubt, though we did not see when or how they were made, and nobody gives us any information on the subject, yet that some man or other did make them."[8] Man assumed that the table was the effect and the table-maker was the cause and that all effects must have their adequate causes for he could see nothing that had come into being any other way.

Priestley concluded that this kind of evidence was irrefutable. "This reasoning," he wrote, "wherever it may lead us, I do not see how we can possibly refuse to follow, because it is exactly the same that we set out with, arising from our immediate experience."[9] It led to the concept that the human species must have had a cause, just as all of the brute animals, the world they belonged to and indeed the entire visible universe must have had a cause.

Moreover, the cause of the world must have been a designing force as distant from and superior to the world as the tablemaker was from the table. This conclusion was

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[8] Ibid., p. 35.

[9] Ibid., p. 40.

based on the strongest possible of analogies, our own experience.[10]

Priestley believed he had proven that God existed. In many ways his proofs were traditional ones. They were typical of the eighteenth century only in the stress they laid upon the validity of sensory experience. In the manner of all traditional theologians, Priestley now had to prove the powers of God. The proofs of the enumerated powers are traditional arguments, reminiscent of Aquinas and the scholastic theologians Priestley so much disliked. Yet, like Aquinas, Priestley refused to believe that the existence of God was self-evident, thus set forth to demonstrate that he existed. If he was to have a God capable of producing the physical universe studied by the eighteenth century man and capable of producing man himself, he had to describe and substantiate the powers God must have to produce these effects.

The first observation of the nature of God that Priestley made was that he had to be infinite. That he was infinitely intelligent was indisputable, for he must be capable of knowing all that could be known. That he was infinitely powerful was also indisputable because he had to be capable of producing all that actually existed as well as all that could possibly have existed.[11]

In addition to being infinite in both power and intelligence, he must have been omniscient and occupied all space,

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[10] Ibid., p. 42.

[11] Ibid., p. 60.

though this attribute of the deity was incomprehensible to man, just as infinite power and infinite intelligence were. But that God must be present to all his works was a necessary conclusion, if one admitted that no power could act save where it was present.[12]

Moreover, he argued, that a being which was infinitely intelligent and infinitely powerful was not capable of remaining inactive a whole eternity, which must have been the case if the creation had a beginning in time. An eternal creation, being the act of an eternal being, was not any more incomprehensible than that the eternal being had been in the first place. Priestley said that both were incomprehensible, but one, the latter, was the natural consequence of the other.[13]

Another conclusion which Priestley felt was necessarily drawn about God was that he could not change. He said that this infinite being had existed without change from an eternity. "The natural necessity by which he always has existed, must, of course, prevent any change whatsoever. Besides, if any cause of change had existed, it must have operated a whole eternity that is already past."[14]

Finally, Priestley reasoned that there could not have been more than one divine being, for if there had been two

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[12] Ibid., p. 63.

[13] Ibid., p. 64.

[14] Ibid., p. 65.

such beings, each having the attributes he described, they would have had to perfectly coincide. And one could clearly apprehend that there could not be two infinite spaces.[15]

Having proven that God existed, Priestley set out to demonstrate that God was good. He said that when he saw a plant in its vigour or an animal in its proper size and form, he concluded that all was right in the world. Health, he felt, was a state of enjoyment for those beings capable of enjoyment and sickness or disease was a diminution of that enjoyment. He concluded, therefore, that "since the obvious design of the animal economy was health and not sickness, is it not evident that the intention of their maker had been their happiness and not their misery?"[16]

It was not clear, and it actually did not matter, whether the supreme being made man happy for his own self-gratification or merely out of a disinterested regard for him. What was clear, he said, was that "the happiness of the creation was intended by the author of it, is just as evident as that the design of the mill wright was that the wheels of his machine be kept in motion."[17]

Priestley used a further argument to prove the general benevolence of the deity. He said that pain and evils tended

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[15] Ibid., p. 65.

[16] Ibid., p. 75.

[17] Ibid.

to check themselves and pleasures extended and propagated themselves without limits. Pain was an affliction of sentient beings who were armed to cope with it by avoiding it. Man tended to shun pain and the causes of it. As the knowledge and power to avoid pain increased with experience man should be able to eventually avoid pain and attain full happiness.[18]

Man was the most important part of the creation and corporeal pleasure was of the least consequence to his total happiness. Intellectual gratification was of infinitely more value to him. On the whole man was quite happy. For the few who really suffered from remorse of conscience, many more thought well of themselves and their conduct. Acts of kindness far exceeded acts of cruelty, moderation was far more common than excess; the very notice we gave to the excesses illustrated that. On the whole Priestley felt that virtue seemed to bear the same proportion to vice as happiness did to misery or health to sickness in the world.[19]

Priestley was the complete optimist, as his view of man's nature clearly indicated. In this way he was fully in the tradition of Leibnitz. He not only felt that his was the best possible world but that it was constantly improving. The eighteenth century and Priestley were thoroughly imbued

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[18] Ibid., p. 77.

[19] Ibid., pp. 79-80.

with the idea of progress and man's perfectability. These concepts were a negation of the orthodox view that man was innately evil. The fact that Priestley joined modern, eighteenth century concepts with traditional arguments serves to illustrate the synthesis he was trying to effect. Thus, it was most significant that Priestley incorporated these views into an argument which in so many ways was traditional.

In his discussion of the specific reasons for the infinite benevolence of the deity, Priestley tried to answer some of the objections to that thesis. The most important of them was that death itself was unnecessary and an unhappiness which God could have prevented. Priestley answered by saying that death was God's way of making room for a succession of creatures of each species. Especially with regard to man, it was preferable that he should die than that he should live forever unless his whole nature was changed. Each generation learned wisdom from the foibles of the old, which would have grown more inveterate every year. In this manner the whole species was able to advance quickly to maturity.

Supposing it were possible for God to have created man with all the feelings and ideas that were acquired in the course of a painful and laborious life, would this have been desirable? Priestley said no.

> If we consider the human race as the most valuable of the divine productions. . . and intellectual happiness as the most part

> of his happiness; this world, with all its imperfections. . .is the best possible school in which they could be thus trained.[20]

In all of his definitions of God and man and his discussions of their attributes and capabilities Priestley did not stray very much from traditional concepts and arguments. When he challenged doctrine, he did so in the tradition of Protestant dissent. Even the concept of the trinity, the doctrine of atonement and predestination had all been previously questioned by Christians. Indeed there would have been little new in Priestley if he had ended his observations here. When he undertook the explanation of the relationship between God and man, however, he injected two views previously felt to be inconsistent with Christian thought. They were his determinism and his materialism. Moreover, his attempt to synthesize these views with the traditional part of his theology was at once his contribution to eighteenth century thought and the source of his inconsistencies.

Priestley felt that man's actions were determined by God. Determinism was the way each man was made to conform to God's scheme for the total happiness of the world. He introduced his determinist argument by acknowledging that man had "all liberty or power that is possible within itself. . .which is the power of doing whatever they will, or please. . .uncontrolled by any foreign principle or cause. . ."[21] The only restriction that he placed on man's liberty was that of self-

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[20] Ibid., p. 97.

[21] Joseph Priestley, The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity, p. 2.

contradition. By this he meant that if a man were placed in the same situation twice, with all previous circumstances precisely the same, this man would act the same way the second time as he did the first.[22]

Priestley felt that when a man exercised his will he did so because the particulars of the case made a certain choice seem desirable. Thus, he maintained, there was some fixed law of nature that governed the will and that the will was never determined without a cause foreign to itself or without some motive. These motives influenced us in "some definite and invariable manner; so that every volition, or choice, is constantly. . .determined. . .by what proceeds it."[23] Thus there was a constant determination of the mind according to the motives presented to it. There was a necessary connection between all things past, present and future and this connection was in the form of cause and effect. The chain of cause and effect, established by God, existed and could not be broken. One could not have an effect without a cause, because everything in nature must have a sufficient reason.[24]

If the laws of cause and effect did, in fact, operate, then one's life was determined by God who created man as well

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[22] Ibid., p. 7.

[23] Ibid., p. 8.

[24] Ibid., pp. 9-10.

this process operated. Whenever a man made a choice there were two elements involved. The first was the previous disposition of mind, and the second the view of the objects to be chosen from. One should assume that every choice was subject to the same rules, therefore every choice was determined by motives. Not only were man's choices determined by motives, but the intensity of action depended on the intensity of motive.[27]

A child developed a predisposition for certain things through experience. When a child was born all objects were alike to it, but as it acquired experience in making decisions, some objects became associated with pleasure and others with pain. The sensation of pleasure was always accompanied by an attempt to secure the source of such pleasure.[28]

Not all actions arose from the exercise of the will. Some were merely automatic. When the child was first born, the motions of his fingers were automatic ones. Soon enough however, these motions became associated with ideas of pleasure or pain and at that time became volitions.

A common attack on this determinist position was that if a man's actions were determined by his previous dispositions and his own experience, how could a man be held responsible for his actions? And what would be the use of a system

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[27] Ibid., p. 29.

[28] Ibid., p. 37.

of rewards and punishments? Priestley used a hypothetical situation to answer these objections.

Priestley used the hypothetical case of two children, A and B. A's mind he presumed to operate on the principle of necessity, and the other's on the principle of liberty. Child A, whose mind operated on the principle of necessity, made his decisions on the basis of motive and previous dispositions. Child B made each choice without regard to previous dispositions and unpredictably. In this hypothetical situation, he assumed himself to be the father of these two children.

As the father, Priestley's aim was to make these children happy and virtuous and toward that end he used a system of rewards and punishments. Now with Child A, the presenting of good would incline him toward good and the fear of evil would deter him from it. But with Child B where motive did not operate there was no way in which he could insure proper behavior.[29] Priestley wrote:

> In short, where the proper influence of motives ceases, the proper foundation of praise and blame disappears with it; and a self-determining power, supposed to act in a manner independent of motive and even contrary to every thing that comes under that description, is a thing quite foreign to every idea that bears the least relation to Praise or Blame.[30]

The only difficulty with the theory was that one might assume that all fathers might not be as well intentioned as

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[29] Ibid., pp. 75-76.

[30] Ibid., p. 82.

Priestley and that some might reward evil and punish good. Then one might ask, can the child of such a father be held responsible for his ill acts?

Priestley said that a man had more incentive through the praise-blame system to improve his moral character than not to improve it. Thus he felt that it was justifiable that the individual be held responsible for his actions. Men being what they were, they would hold such an ill-taught child accountable for his vices. Priestley admitted that the true necessarian would not hold such a child responsible, but rather would place the blame on God. Yet he could not bring himself to accept this conclusion. He could not blame God for an aberration in his scheme, as he felt that the whole structure of God's moral system was so thoroughly good that such un-planned evil should not happen. This argument was an inconsistency in Priestley's determinism.

Priestley then asked to what extent was God the author of evil? His answer was largely Leibnitzian. He admitted that God was the author of sin, but that this sin was serving the purpose of producing a greater good. Thus God could not be said to have undertaken sinful acts, as sin was defined according to the predisposition of the mind at the time of the act. Since God was the author of the system, he could determine which evils would produce the desired results, but man, lacking God's infinite knowledge could never commit an evil in the hope of producing a good.[31]

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[31] Ibid., pp. 115-21.

Finally, Priestley undertook a comparison of the necessarian system with the Presbyterian belief in predestination. The author stated the case for each succinctly.

> The scheme of Philosophical Necessity has been shewn to imply a chain of causes and effects, established by infinite wisdom, and terminating in the greatest good of the whole universe. . .on the other hand, the consistent, the moderate and the sublapsarian Calvinist, supposed that God created the first man absolutely free to sin or not to sin, capable of sinless obedience to all the commands of God; but that without being predestined to it he fell from this state of innocence.[32]

Priestley saw no resemblance between the two systems. The essential difference between them was one of responsibility. For the necessarian there was no doubt but that he, through his dispositions and actions, regulated though they were, was responsible for his future happiness. For the Calvinist, Priestley saw no need for attention to moral conduct, as he was passive in the action of his own regeneration, before which time all actions were necessarily good.[33]

This was a traditional objection to the doctrine of predestination. The importance of Priestley's determinism was that it removed an important foundation from the doctrine of original sin. In order for man to be guilty of that first fall, he had to be free to choose evil over good. Just as after the fall he had to be free to choose God's grace or to reject it. According to Priestley's system man was neither

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[32] Ibid., pp. 150-51.

[33] Ibid., pp. 153-54.

free to sin in the first place, nor was he free to accept grace and salvation. This meant that God as the ultimate determiner had either planned the world so that some men would sin and others would not or he had organized the world so that no one would sin. Priestley with his concept of the beneficent God would surely have chosen the latter of the two alternatives, which would mean that God designed the world so that some men would be good and others would appear to do evil, while in reality they would be effecting some greater good that only God himself could understand.

Priestley felt that the reason that so many people did not properly understand the relationship between God and man was because they did not comprehend the true nature of man. The orthodox view of man was that he was composed of two substances, a material one for the body, and an immaterial one for the soul. Priestley felt that man was wholly material. His opening arguments which questioned the immateriality of the soul stated the premise that "the faculty of thinking necessarily depends, for its exercise, upon a stock of ideas about which it is always conversant, will hardly be questioned by any person."[34] He said that there was not a single idea

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[34]Joseph Priestley, Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit, To Which is Added the History of the Philosophical Doctrine concerning the Origin of the Soul, and the Nature of Matter; With its Influence on Christianity, especially with Respect to the Doctrine of the Pre-existence of Christ, (London: J. Johnson, 1777), p. 33. (Hereinafter cited as Priestley, Disquisitions related to Matter and Spirit.)

which the mind used that could be proven not to have come from the senses. This could be shown by the fact that one could have no idea of color without the eyes.[35]

The orthodox and most philosophical schools prior to the eighteenth century had maintained that the mental faculty was immaterial, thus immortal, and that all of its faculties including the senses must be so too. Now Priestley said one could see that every faculty of the mind was capable of impairment or even cessation before death, such as the faculty of the eyes or any of the other senses. Since it could be seen that the faculties of the mind were individually perishable and mortal, one must assume that the substance in which they existed and of which they were a part was mortal too.[36]

Priestley then maintained, that if we granted the medieval metaphysicians their premise that the soul was immaterial and the body material, we must grant that neither the generation nor destruction of the body can have any effect upon the soul. The material system, on the other hand, made it unnecessary to be concerned with a place for the souls of the dead, which must be rewarded or punished in a suitable manner, even before the day of judgment. Such a place had been called purgatory by traditional christian theologians.[37]

Priestley also tried to show that even though thought and matter were two completely different substances, thought

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[35] Ibid., pp. 33-34.

[36] Ibid., p. 36.

[37] Ibid., p. 50.

could, in fact did, arise from matter. He maintained that as different as the properties of sensation and thought were from matter, they did inhere in the same substance and could not be proven to be entirely incompatible with one another. Moreover there was no more resemblance among the properties of thought than there was between the properties of thought and matter. Consider the senses of hearing and seeing. They were completely different yet they existed in the same mind.[38]

Priestley noted that John Locke and others had observed that all ideas were actually particulars and all abstractions were merely considerations of the differences or common properties of a number of particulars. He felt that since it was a fact that reasons, whatever they were, ultimately did move matter, it was much more logical to assume that they were a manifestation of or related to matter than it was to assume that they had nothing in common with matter.[39]

It was also commonly held that the soul could not be material and divisible because the principle of consciousness which encompassed the whole of thinking power was necessarily simple and indivisible. Priestley felt that those who had written about the concept of consciousness had expressed no clear or distinct idea as to what it was. It was said, as a decisive argument against materialism that the consciousness of existence could not be a property of the whole brain as a system while the individual parts of it were unconscious or

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[38] Ibid., p. 82.

[39] Ibid., p. 84.

material. The whole brain, being but a collection of parts could not possibly be more powerful than the parts of which it was composed. Priestley maintained that any system may have a unity separate from its components, as a triangle and a separate unity from its sides. He said, "if the perceptions that we call consciousness. . .necessarily consist in, or depend upon, a very complex vibration, it cannot possibly belong to a single atom, but must belong to a vibrating system, of some extent."[40]

Another objection Priestley discounted concerned the materialism of God. If the principle of thought in man was a material substance, then must not the divine being himself be a material substance? Yet the divine being was universally believed to be wholly spiritual. The deity was referred to in the scriptures as an immaterial substance incapable of local presence, and the sacred writers did not ever refer to him as a substance.[41]

Priestley refuted it by stating that there were some things about which we could not speak save through a description of their powers. Such things were attraction and repulsion. Our ideas of things that possessed such powers did not go beyond their manifestations. Thus, "when we attempt to form anything of an idea of the substance of matter,

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[40] Ibid., p. 87.

[41] Ibid., p. 103.

exclusive of the powers it has, and exclusive of the impenetrability which it has not, all ideas vanish from the mind and nothing, absolutely nothing, is left for an object of contemplation."[42] The powers of the deity were all encompassing. Thus divine power was radically different from human power, and so it must follow that divine nature was radically different from human nature.[43]

Priestley maintained that there must be some common property in all created or finite beings, or they could not interact with one another. There was no evidence that the divine being had to be composed of only those substances shared by created beings.[44]

Priestley felt that if mankind had been created of two substances, a physical part and a spiritual part, and if the spiritual part had, in fact, been the significant part and the material only subservient to it, there would have been some mention of this in the scripture.[45]

However, he pointed out that the story of creation was succinctly told in Genesis ii. 7. It described the creation in the following manner: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostril

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[42] Ibid., p. 105.

[43] Ibid., p. 106.

[44] Ibid., p. 107.

[45] Ibid., p. 114.

the breath of life, and man became a living soul." Priestley commented that we could see in the scripture that the whole man was made of the dust of the ground. The scripture made no mention of any part of him being composed of a higher or different material. After God had formed the whole man he turned this lifeless creature into man by causing him to breathe and live. It was evident then, that the only difference between unanimated earth and a living soul was the circumstance of breathing.[46]

Priestley also considered that portion of the scripture that described the mortality of man. In Genesis ii. 17, it was stated "of the tree of knowledge, of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eat of it thou shalt surely die." Priestley maintained that there was no equivocation in that statement. The scripture did not say that only part of man should die, but that the whole man should die. He felt that the clear meaning of the sentence was that whenever this event should take place, whatever was alive in man would cease to live and he would return to the state of lifeless earth.[47]

Finally, Priestley demonstrated that man's materiality had nothing to do with a doctrine concerning God. Priestley intended to show that our knowledge of God did not relate at all to our knowledge of man. God must be different from man

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[46] Ibid., p. 115.

[47] Ibid., p. 118.

in the same manner that the tablemaker was different from the table. He added that this statement would be a sufficient answer to Spinoza who maintained that God was no more than a spirit which permeated all things. This meant that the universe was not composed of an eternal succession of finite beings, for example man, none of whom having any more knowledge or ability than the rest. Thus he was brought back to his original conclusion regarding the nature and powers of God, unaltered by the concept of the materiality of man.

In this way Priestley proved that man was good and that God was beneficent and had a plan for the world. He described the relationship between God and man and showed that this relationship was premised upon man's being wholly material. It was most unusual for one to believe in God and adopt materialist view of man. However, Priestley saw no inconsistency in this synthesis. For him matter, as structured in man, acquired all the properties of the soul. While individual atoms did not have the power of sensation, man, a vibrating system, did. In this way materialism served to rid Christianity of such elements as the soul and the angels which Priestley thought were unnecessary and illogical. This was a most unusual position. In effect Priestley synthesized the orthodox view of God - with Unitarian modifications - and the eighteenth century view of man. It remained for him to propagandize this view and subject it to the test of contemporary criticism. He was sure that his theology would both

allay the superstitions of the orthodox and the reservations of the unbeliever.

CHAPTER IV

PRIESTLEY: ADVOCATE OF RATIONAL DISSENT

Joseph Priestley's theology was a synthesis of reason and faith. He had accepted traditional views about the benevolence of God and had incorporated eighteenth century conclusions and observations about man. He retained the traditional view that God had a plan for man but used the enlightened mechanics of determinism and materialism to describe the nature of the God-man relationship and the way it functioned.

This synthesis Priestley had achieved by the time he went to Birmingham. He spent much of the rest of his life in an effort to carry his message to the English people. To do this he needed allies willing to help him continue the reformation of the Christian church. Thus he tried to establish a common bond between himself and the English dissenters of the century. In A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters as Such Priestley pleaded that dissenters had more in common with each other than they had differences and maintained that they should unite in their attacks on the establishment, by which he meant the papists and the Church of England. He asked if it would not be better for men to forsake Christianity altogether than to continue to

remain in established churches.[1]

Because he saw state meddling in Christian affairs as a primary cause of the evils of established Christianity, was of the opinion that "all the service they can do to religion is not to intermeddle with it."[2]

Many dissenters felt that they could best reform the church by remaining within its fold. Priestley advised them that if they believed in one true God and maintained the purity of the Gospel, they should refrain from joining the services of the established Church. As dissenters they would incur much personal uneasiness if they remained, and they would be joining forces with those who opposed the reformation. He did not feel that the church was capable of self-reformation.[3]

He added a stricter admonition against Unitarians worshiping in established churches. He felt that Unitarians were the most sophisticated rational dissenters. It would be heresy for them to continue to countenance orthodox anti-Christian errors by worshiping them. Such action would be taken as a form of approval for traditional errors.[4]

There was a certain amount of personal danger in proclaiming the principles of rational dissent too loudly or

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[1]Joseph Priestley, A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters As Such (London: J. Johnson, 1771), p. 19.

[2]Ibid., p. 19.

[3]Ibid., p. 35.

[4]Ibid., p. 125.

frequently. Priestley was yet to realize how violent this danger could be. He received much verbal and written abuse and suffered from the loss of jobs and prestige. But Priestley felt that there was no place in the Christian scheme for a timid dissenter. The true glory of the dissenter was his attack upon the establishment. If he failed to make such an attack he had relinquished his Christian duty. Priestley gave no thought to personal danger and could not understand why others should.

It took an unfortunate experience for him to realize the extent of the danger to a rational dissenter. One of Priestley's closest friends, Theodolphus Lindsey, was a dissenter who remained in the Anglican pulpit of Catterick, a small place in England. Lindsey had told Priestley that he was growing increasingly dissatisfied with his position in the church and was thinking of leaving it. Priestley did not encourage Lindsey to leave. He told him instead to be frank with his congregation about his opinions and let them fire him if they were so inclined. Yet Lindsey finally left of his own accord. The circumstances in which the Lindseys were placed after they left Catterick underscored for Priestley the severity with which society still dealt with dissenters. He said of their difficulties:

> The opposition made to it by his nearest friends, and those who might have been expected to approve of the step that he took. . . .was one of the greatest. . . . He left Catterick where he had lived in

> affluence idolized by his parish and went to London without any certain prospect; there he lived in two rooms on the ground floor.[5]

Priestley urged every dissenter to proclaim loudly the true unity of God and the fairness of his moral government, and to shout down tritheism. Dissenters were urged to proclaim their right to dissent. He said: "Let us claim for ourselves and others that equal liberty, to which we have a natural and divine right, of thinking and acting for ourselves in all matters whoever they may be that would abridge us of it."[6]

Despite his ardor for an active campaign against the establishment, he urged prudence. He had suffered numerous attacks which ridiculed him and his cause. Priestley felt most strongly that such tactics had no place in a rational dialogue. He warned his colleagues to carefully avoid insulting those with whom their opinions differed. He maintained that one must be especially mindful of this if he himself had once held those same opinions. He realized that many a scholarly argument, however solid, was discounted because of its tone, without its contents ever being fully examined.[7]

Priestley also demonstrated a remarkably tolerant attitude toward those of more orthodox beliefs when he said that

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[5]Priestley, Memoirs, p. 60.

[6]Priestley, A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters, p. 57.

[7]Ibid., p. 99.

"every allowance should be made for all those who offend through ignorance, though they be carried away, even to the most violent acts of persecution. . . ."[8] He emphatically warned that the wrath of Christ would fall upon those who profited from the prejudices of mankind, or used them for self-gratification or to promote their own worldly interests and ambitions.[9]

He felt that it was most unfortunate that Christians were divided into so many sects and factions. However, he firmly believed that this division had been foreseen and established by God, and that though it might have temporary ill-effects, it would be shown to serve the best interests of the Christian scheme. Thus he saw it the duty of every Christian to endeavor to subdue and alleviate the ill-effects of such temporary evils, until such time as God provided for the proper unification of Christians.[10]

He also warned fellow Christians against assuming that those who held erroneous positions were excluded from the favor of God. He asked them to be particularly careful in

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[8]Joseph Priestley, Considerations on the Differences of Opinion Among Christians with a Letter to the Reverend Mr. Venn, In Answer to his Free and Full Examination of the Address to Protestant Dissenters on the Subject of the Lord's Supper (London: J. Johnson and J. Payne, 1769), p. 3 (Hereinafter cited as Priestley, Considerations on Differences of Opinion)

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid., p. 11.

presuming that their positions were so correct that they might never fall from God's favor.[11]

Priestley's position regarding other dissenting groups was also very tolerant. England was by far the most liberal European nation in its treatment of dissenters, to a large degree the result of the religio-political wars of the seventeenth century. It was true that toleration was usually the cry of the minority sect, which attempted to attain equality with the dominant religious forces of the country, and Priestley was indeed representing a minority position. But most minority groups were not tolerant of other dissenting groups in society and Priestley was. It may be, however, that he held that position because he was a Unitarian and Unitarians and Catholics were still operating under severe limitations in England, so that he could best afford tolerance. Nevertheless it must be recognized that his position was a remarkably liberal one for a man who felt as strongly about his opinions as Priestley did.

There was a fear among both the orthodox and the upper class dissenters in England that if the articles of religion were questioned by the lower classes, the result would be an increase in their immorality and disorderliness. They felt that religion preserved society, thus it must not be questioned too severely. Priestley challenged this view. He felt that orthodoxy was not the preserver of morality. He said: "I do

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[11] Ibid., p. 12.

and men can easily persuade themselves that what they do not see is actually there.[14]

Another cause of partisan differences he cited was the profusion of labels which men applied to their beliefs and factions. Priestley called upon Christians to stress their points of unity rather than their differences. He said by calling each other Calvinists, Arians, Socinians and the like they were apt to forget that these were only different denominations of the Christian religion and might tend to count the other denominations among the anti-christians or even non-christians.[15]

Priestley urged that in all disputes about different tenets of the faith, his colleagues took care not to loose sight of the grand scheme of Christianity in general. The basic tenet that united Christians was the belief that Christ came to bless mankind, in turning them away from their iniquities; to redeem. . .us from all iniquity, and to purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works."[16] With this kept in mind, Christians of whatever denomination could achieve the unity of purpose intended by God and strive toward the day when all factional dissonance would be quelled by him.

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[14]Priestley, Considerations on Differences of Opinion, p. 24.

[15]Ibid., p. 29.

[16]Ibid., p. 30.

Priestley felt that denominational differences and orthodox Christian corruptions all stemmed from mistaken ideas concerned the nature of Christ. He attempted to alleviate factional dissonance and to purify Christianity by demonstrating the falsity of orthodox opinions and describing the true nature of Christ.

According to Priestley, the first basic error in Christianity occurred when men stopped considering Christ as a man and made a God out of him. This process, by which Christ's nature changed so drastically, was complex. In the first place, early Christians were attacked because of the lowly origin and nature of Christ. When compared to the nature of other deities worshiped at the time, Christ seemed almost unworthy of worship. Then too, he felt that early Christians believed in the platonic philosophical tenet of the pre-existence of the soul. They felt that the souls of every being, including Christ, were emanations from God. Because Christians, like their contemporaries felt that crucifixion was a lowly way of dying, they were ashamed that Christ had suffered such a death.[17]

Thus it was easy to explain what happened to pure Christianity. First, the early converts assigned a superior position to Christ's soul in its pre-existent state, making him a rank above other men when he died. Then they concluded that during his life Christ had a physical body in

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[17]Priestley, An Appeal to the Professors of Christianity, p. 25.

appearance only, but that in reality his nature was wholly spiritual. This meant that when he was crucified he did not suffer.

Soon Christ's soul was given divine attributes, and Christ became an agent and a part of God. "They said that Christ was originally in God, being his reason or logos, which came out of him and was personified before the creation of the world, in which he was an immediate agent."[18] Thus it was logical that Christ should become the agent through which God spoke to man. It was not for several centuries after the crucifixion that the divinity of Christ was established in Christian theology. The addition of the Holy Spirit to the trinity did not occur before 325 A.D. at the Council of Nicea.[19]

Priestley described how the error of defining Christ led to others. From it splinter heresies arose, each ascribing different powers and nature to Christ than the others. The Arians, for example, "besides placing Christ in a department which belonged only to God, when they made him creator of the world, ascribe too much to him when they suppose, or seem to suppose, that it was in consequence of his own proposal, that he became incarnated and undertook the scheme of our redemption."[20]

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[18]Ibid., pp. 25-26.

[19]Ibid., p. 28.

[20]Priestley, Letters to Dr. Horne, p. 30.

In his attempt to explode the errors of orthodox Christianity and propagandize his Unitarian theology, he relied upon the opinions of the early Christians, as he interpreted them, for support. Most members of the Church of England would take issue with the validity of his interpretation of these opinions. Dr. George Horne, the dean of Canterbury,* however, took up Priestley's challenge to examine them.

In one of Horne's first letters to Priestley, he stated that he laid stress upon the scriptures and did not undervalue the opinions of the early Christians. He said: "If the doctrine of our Lord's divinity be not the doctrine of the scriptures and of the Primitive Church. . .it matters not how, when or by whom it was afterwards introduced. It should not have been received, and ought not to be retained."[21]

With this much granted, Priestley replied that if it could be proven by independent evidence that the great body of primitive Christians were Unitarians, then one of the greatest bastions of established Christianity would fall, leaving others in serious danger.[22] Priestley said that whatever the opinions of the primitive Christians were, they believed that they were supported by the scriptures. This was so because these Christians constantly referred to them to support their

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[21] Ibid., p. 7.

[22] Ibid.

*George Horne, Bishop of Norwich, Dean of Canterbury (1781), (1730-1792).

views. The he said that the scriptures which supported their views were not trinitarian. Nowhere in the scriptures could one find a clear explanation of the trinity, thus the early Christians could not have entertained this position.[23]

Priestley also said that every possible definition of the doctrine of the trinity contained an absurdity; that the idea of a trinity in unity may exist in some manner or other, but that every conceivable method of achieving it implied an impossibility. Thus the thing itself must be impossible.[24] He reminded Horne, moreover, that he had to rely on a very few texts in the New Testament to support the doctrine of the trinity and to teach the doctrine of transubstantiation. Priestley knew that Horne did not fully accept the doctrine of transubstantiation and tried to show that the reasoning used to support the trinity was just as faulty as the reasoning that supported transubstantiation.

Priestley quoted Horne's description of the trinity, namely that the "authority of all three persons is the same, their persons undivided and their glory one."[25] Then he tried to show Horne how the same reasoning could be applied to transubstantiation. He argued that if it was true that the sacramental bread could take the substance of flesh and yet retain every other property of bread, the substance of other things could also be changed while their properties

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[23] Ibid., p. 14.

[24] Ibid., p. 27.

[25] Ibid.

remained unchanged. But if no such change could be made believable in any other circumstance, one could justly reject the supposition universally. Thus regardless of what principles were used to defend the trinity, they could also be used to defend transubstantiation. For, if three could be one and one could be three, then a thing could change without appearing to have changed.[26]

Priestley felt that the complexities of metaphysical logic had not been needed in Christian thought until such words as trinity and transubstantiation were invented. The basic objection of the establishment clergy to Unitarianism was fear for the doctrine of their own churches. The God whom the Unitarians worshiped was the God worshiped by the Jews and by Christ and the apostles. "Our Lord describes the true worshipers as those who worship the Father. . .in spirit and in truth. . .and when he prayed as he frequently did, it was always to the same Being, called the Father, whom he represented as the only true God. . . ."[27]

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[26]Joseph Priestley, Familiar Letters Addressed to the Inhabitants of Birmingham in Refutation of Several Charges Advanced Against the Dissenters and Unitarians by the Rev. Mr. Madan, also Letters to the Rev. Edward Burn, In Answer to Him on the Infallibility of the Apostolic Testimony Concerning the Person of Christ and Considerations on the Differences of Opinion Among Christians, Which Originally Accompanied the Reply to the Rev. Mr. Venn, (2nd ed., Birmingham: P. Thompson, 1790), Letter XVII, p. 128, (Hereinafter cited as Priestley, Familiar Letters.)

[27]Ibid.

He asked how the doctrine of the trinity could have existed without the mechanics of metaphysics, which was not available to the early Christians. There were no accounts or evidence of any kind of early Christians having had recourse to metaphysical reasoning until the time of the church fathers, who were the authors of the trinitarian doctrine. It was their doctrine, and not primitive unitarianism which required metaphysics. Had all Christians been content, as Unitarians were, with considering the supreme father as the true God, and Jesus like Moses and the other prophets, as men of God, no nice distinctions would have been necessary. For God and man were very different beings and unless one was trying to reconcile the properties of one with the other he did not require the intricacies of metaphysics.

> When Christ was first represented as an attribute of God the father personified, and then as God equal to the Father, a distinct divine person, that is, and yet not another God, then came in metaphysics, that is, the most subtle distinctions in the one hand, in order to reconcile the most manifest contradictions, and accurate discussion on the other, to shew the insignificance of such distinctions.[28]

Having shown that the trinity could not have been part of primitive Christian doctrine, Priestley proceeded to demonstrate the error of primitive Christian accretions. He felt that by accepting a materialistic system the Christians could remove the foundation of most of the corruptions of the church.

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[28] Ibid., p. 236.

which were a heterogeneous mixture of pagan ideas which were injurious to revelation.

Once these errors had been removed Christ would be worshiped in the same manner as the apostles who lived and worked with him. That Christ would be thought of as "a mere man approved by God, by the signs and wonders which God did by him, . . .who. . .was gone to prepare a place for them in the heavenly mansions and, . .return, . .to raise the dead and judge the world."[29]

Priestley felt he had destroyed the philosophical basis for the trinity. He proceeded to consider the doctrine of resurrection. It must be remembered that Priestley believed in revelation and in miracles. He justified their existence on the grounds that God had made the laws of the universe. If he wanted to he could suspend them. Morally, resurrection was necessary if there was to be any final judgment concerning man's performance on earth. However, by the strict employment of the reasoning he employed against the trinity, Priestley would probably have been forced to relinquish his belief in this doctrine. This however, he could not do. He tried to shore up the arguments for resurrection by falling back on the concept of materialism and the result was a rather confused doctrine of the resurrection of the whole man.

He began his argument by explaining that one of the difficulties the primitive Christians had defending their

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[29]Priestley, Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit, p. 51.

faith was explaining the doctrine of resurrection. It was said that "if all our hopes of a future life rest upon the doctrine of resurrection, we place it upon a foundation that is very precarious."[30] Priestley said that the content of this doctrine was both improbable and literally impossible. Upon death, the scriptures said, the body putrefied. How then could it be resurrected? There was another problem with the doctrine. The identity of a particular individual who had died needed to be preserved. For in a system of rewards and punishments there must be continuity of consciousness if the system was to have any validity. If we knew that a person had died by disease or old age and had lost all memory of his previous actions, we would be somewhat reluctant to punish him for his past offences.[31]

However, there was a more scientific way to preserve the theory of the resurrection of the dead and yet rid it of its inconsistencies. Priestley believed in the doctrine of the resurrection in a literal sense. He felt that death, with its concomitant putrefaction and decomposition of parts was only that, decomposition. Whatever was decomposed or taken apart could be re-composed or restored by the one responsible for the original creation.[32]

This kind of doctrine of resurrection of the dead was compatible with scripture. When St. Paul described the revival

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[30] Ibid., p. 156.

[31] Ibid., pp. 159-60.

[32] Ibid., p. 161.

of a seed that had been sown in the earth and seemingly had died, he was describing the kind of resurrection that Priestley maintained. For the germ did not die, it was only transformed into something else. Priestley contended that this was what happened to man. He mentioned that we might be as different in our future state from what we were in life as the seed was different from the plant.[33]

He then tried to account for the propensity of the primitive Christian to adopting an immaterial system. He explained again the shame that they felt at Christ's crucifixion and how the Greek philosophy allieviated the same. He went on to show that the Greek philosophy had also helped to support the doctrine of resurrection. Priestley maintained that it was the pride of the primitive Christian that pretended that the true Christian resurrection was not the resurrection of the vile body of flesh and blood, which was considered to be only a burden to the soul, "but either a mystical resurrection to a new life, or. . .the glorious time when the soul. . . would join its original nature. . .as a true spiritual body."[34]

He demonstrated that the first place in the New Testament where one could find any indication of the acceptance of platonic philosophy was in St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians. Here Paul mildly chastized the belief of the Thessalonians whose idea of resurrection was more material

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[33] Ibid., p. 162.

[34] Ibid., p. 279.

than Paul allowed, by saying that their opinion on the subject did not deny the true doctrine, but that they had not been rightly informed.[35]

Priestley felt it was tremendously important that the heresies which developed in early Christian thought were due to a lack of agreement about the true nature of Christ. One such heresy was the Nazarene. This group felt that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary and was popular in the apostolic age. Priestley maintained that the notice taken of heresies in general in the New Testament indicated that they were considered quite serious. Thus the fact that the Nazarene heresy was not mentioned at all, would make us think that it was not considered heresy.[36]

Even John who wrote vehemently against small diversions in contemporary thought took no notice of it. Priestley said that John on the contrary, wrote "exactly like a person who considered Christ as a man, who was so far from being of the same substance with the Father, and consequently possessed of any power of his own, that he received all his powers immediately from God."[37]

Priestley found it remarkable that those texts which most stringently expressed the absolute dependence of Christ

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[35] Ibid., p. 281.

[36] Ibid., p. 305.

[37] Ibid.

upon God and which asserted that all of Christ's power and wisdom was emanated from the power and wisdom of the father, chiefly occurred in the Gospel of John. Moreover, the rest of the apostles, instead of taking any direct or indirect notice of what had been considered the capital heresy, constantly used a language which, if anything, supported it. They always spoke of Christ as a man even when they represented him as a person of greatest importance.[38]

It also seemed of tremendous significance to Priestley that the writers of the New Testament made no use of so extraordinary a fact as the union of the superangelic spirit and the body of a man as the Arians suggested. He found that no argument or exhortation was ever grounded upon it, whereas it would have been expected that if so wonderful a thing as this had happened it would at least have been alluded to, if not described in every detail. It seemed particularly significant that such an argument was not used by the first converts to Christianity to inform all hearers of the high rank of their master. In fact, the very texts which are thought by some to contain arguments for the acknowledgment of the pre-existence of Christ, "appear to me to refer to nothing more than the dignity with which he was invested with power from on high, for the important purposes of his mission."[39]

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[38] Ibid., pp. 307-08.

[39] Ibid., pp. 308-09.

In this way Priestley tried to use materialism to dispel what he considers to be the two major orthodox errors. The first concerned the nature of Christ and the second the resurrection of an immaterial soul. He described the humanity of Christ far better than he defeated the resurrection of the soul. If the body was re-created in fact by God at some future date for the purpose of ultimate reward and punishment, then Priestley has created a more cumbersome "heaven" than he has destroyed. Even though the body may be re-created in another form than it existed in life, where would such a re-created body exist? Another problem exists. Even if we grant Priestley that matter, as structured in man has all of the properties of a soul, i.e., consciousness, how is God to retain continuity of consciousness and memory during the time that the body is in a state of decomposition? It would seem that the only way Priestley could have gotten around these difficulties was to acknowledge that the body, or consciousness, at least turned into an immaterial substance after death.

What Priestley tried to do was convince the other dissenters of his age that they shared numerous similar objections to orthodox Christianity. Once he had done that he felt that they would share in the propagandization of purified Christianity. What he failed to realize was that his theology was far removed from the bounds of normal Protestant dissent. Even considering the articles of faith he accepted, like resurrection, his justification of them was so strange that

he alienated more Protestant dissenters than he realized. That part of his propaganda which was supposed to win the support of atheists was not effective either. He accepted that God and a material man were compatible but he could not prove to the true materialist-atheist that God was necessary. His synthesis was very weak here. One cannot doubt that Priestley believed that the synthesis was valid, but to someone who had not already accepted it his arguments were not strong enough to persuade him.

CHAPTER V

THE SYNTHESIS OF FAITH AND REASON

Priestley's purpose as a propagandist was two-fold. He had to demonstrate the fallacies of orthodox Christianity and he had to show that rational Christianity was consistent with science and empirical philosophy. He hoped that once he had shown that true Christianity consisted of only a belief in the unity of God and the humanity of Christ the surge of eighteenth century anti-Christian attacks would stop. He reasoned that since these attacks had been leveled at the same corruptions that he had questioned, they would stop once he demonstrated that true Christianity was devoid of those corruptions. He hoped, too, that the unbelievers who had been alienated from the church because of its corruptions would return to the fold.

Priestley's theology was a synthesis of faith and reason, and nothing demonstrated this fact as well as his attempt to convince the philosophical unbelievers of its merits. He knew that they would be the most difficult to convince and so he tried to use arguments from reason to persuade them instead of falling back upon scripture.

At the top of Priestley's system was God, a beneficent creator who made man out of the dust of the ground, and

showed him how to fulfill his plan through the exercise of his reason. He felt that his theology required only the exercise of reason to be understood. He felt that it was thoroughly consistent with Newtonian theism, Lockean psychology and materialism. In fact Unitarianism was founded on those principles. If eighteenth century man accepted them, how could he deny God and God's plan?

When Priestley described his complete system for the unbeliever he began with the physical world. It consisted of millions of tiny spheres revolving in an orderly pattern, never colliding, never straying off course, thoroughly predictable and operating according to a series of laws. He asked man to consider the natural world too. It also operated on a plan, as evidenced by the seasons and the never-ending cycle of life begetting life. Finally, he said, consider man, the most perfect and the most sophisticated of all of God's creations. Man's singular accomplishment was the exercise of thought. But even man's thinking process could be seen operating according to certain laws.

Order was prevalent in the world. How did one know that order existed? Man was like a complex machine which gathered and assimilated sensory data. The only way man could understand anything was by perceiving similarities. What he perceived about the physical universe was that it was orderly and composed of matter. In this, Priestley followed closely the teachings of the eighteenth century philosopher David Hume who proposed that matter had always existed. Since motion

and subject to those laws are altogether incapable."[2] Surely, Priestley maintained, matter could exist without God, but could matter be designed to fulfill a purpose without a knowledgeable designer? The world appeared to our senses as little more than matter and motion, but we also perceived the world as having order which could not have come without a designer.[3]

Again Hume spoke for the skeptics of the century when he said that evidence of design did not necessarily imply a designer for the principle of cause and effect did not in fact have to operate. Hume maintained that all we could pretend to know concerning the connection of causes and effects was their constant conjunctions. The observation of such conjunctions had led our minds necessarily from one to the other. But there was no proof that just because B has always followed A it will continue to do so. Priestley countered by saying that he had shown that there was nothing in the idea of power or causation that was not derived from the impressions which we had received from the object under scrutiny. A cause was nothing more than the sum of elements present in the effect. Surely the cause did not need to be an unaccountable factor but was only what our senses told us it must be.[4]

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[2]Priestley, Letters to A Philosophical Unbeliever, pp. 162-63.

[3]Ibid., p. 163.

[4]Ibid., pp. 197-98.

Once Priestley had established that God did exist, at least as a first cause, and that God had determined man's actions by his plan for the world, Priestley considered how this plan had been made known to man. He argued that the system of revelation was the way by which God made his scheme known to man. The most effective means God had of making men believe was to interrupt the orderly plan of the universe by which people knew him. This interruption took the form of a miracle.

Priestley first considered the recorded miracles in the Old Testament. He said that pretensions to miracles among the Jews were sure of being rigorously scrutinized so that they would not obtain credit unless the facts were indisputable. This was the case when the object of the miracle was favorable to their religion, so it was certainly the case when the miracle might be detrimental to their beliefs. When Jesus first assumed the character of a person sent from God and empowered to do miracles to prove his divine mission these alleged miracles would have been carefully examined before being accepted.[5]

Moreover, the number of miracles that Jesus performed was far in excess of the predictions of Moses and Elijah. Priestley felt that the sheer number of the miracles was proof that they were valid, because Jesus was so carefully scrutinized. An impostor would never have attempted so many as he would

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[5]Priestley, Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion, (London: J. Johnson, 1794), p. 243.

surely have been exposed in some of them and a single failure would have exploded the whole pretense.[6]

Moreover, Jesus seemed never to have omitted a single opportunity for performing the benevolent miracle of curing diseases of every type, regardless of who requested it of him. Yet not all of his miracles were medical. Some were calculated to demonstrate his power over nature such as his "stilling a tempest, his walking on the sea, his enabling Peter to do the same, and his causing a barren fig tree to wither in the night."[7] There were also miracles which occurred during the life of Jesus of which he did not seem to be the cause. These, such as the three instances of voices from heaven, were proofs that God had designed the life of Christ for a particular purpose.[8]

Of all the miracles, the greatest was Christ's prediction concerning his own death and resurrection within a limited amount of time, together with his ascension in the presence of a great number of disciples. The detail and magnitude of such a prediction would never have been attempted by an impostor for fear that at least some part of it would not be fulfilled.[9]

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[6] Ibid., p. 248.

[7] Ibid., p. 252.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., p. 253.

Also, Priestley considered that the scale on which several of the miracles were performed was much too large to have been falsified. This was easily seen in the case of the feeding of the five and four thousand, and in turning a great quantity of water into wine - more wine than any man could carry. Again, Priestley said no impostor would have attempted such a thing. Finally, Priestley discounted the possibility of collusion between Jesus and the persons on whom he performed miracles. The diseased persons whom he cured presented themselves to him as he passed on his way, and the cure was frequently performed in the presence of his enemies.[10]

Priestley maintained that it was necessary to examine Jesus and his followers in a more general manner and show that in addition to the individual miracles having been valid, that the whole body of miracles were part of a propaganda program established by God to insure the acceptance of a new faith.

If one considered the kind of men that Jesus and his disciples were, he could be assured that they were not impostors. One only had to consider their general education and economic conditions to be convinced that they were not likely to have developed such an ambition as the salvation of all mankind on their own. Neither Jesus nor any of his associates had any more knowledge of nature or philosophy than their neighbors, nor were they men of superior ability. They were

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[10] Ibid., p. 256.

men in a state of ignorance about the world, therefore not likely to think of traveling far beyond their own limited world.[11]

Moreover, he felt the fact that a group of men like Jesus and the apostles should contrive a scheme for the regeneration of the world - a plan which would take ages to effect - was far more miraculous than anything that could be found in the scriptures. But if one considered the first disciples of Jesus as writers not schemers there actions were far more credible and their capacity to put up with ill-treatment much more understandable.[12]

The final proof that God chose the system of revelation to propagandize his scheme for the world was that he did not stop performing miracles after he was resurrected and had ascended to heaven. Without additional miracles the Christian cause might have languished. But, Priestley pointed out, the miracle of the apostles speaking with unknown tongues, made it possible for Christianity to have many additional converts.[13]

The most important miracle in Christ's life was his resurrection and since that miracle was one which applied to every man it behooved Priestley to examine the evidence that led one to accept the existence of a future life. He felt

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[11] Ibid., pp. 260-361.

[12] Ibid., p. 266.

[13] Ibid., p. 279.

that one could accept resurrection whether he believed in God or not. He said both the atheist and the believer accepted the fact of an established order in nature. Not only did nature have a pattern but the pattern was favorable to virtue. Priestley felt that virtue was snyonymous with happiness and that God's plan for man was to make him happy, therefore virtuous. He also maintained that the state of the world was constantly improving - an expression of the eighteenth century idea of progress. Now, if God wanted man to be virtuous he must have had some form of retribution for men who were not. And if the world was constantly improving then there must also be a tendency toward more exact and equal retribution and this conclusion must "produce an expectation that this course of nature will go on to favor virtue still more, and, therefore, it may be within the course of nature that man, as moral agents, should survive the grave, or re-produced, to enjoy the full reward of virtue or suffer the punishment due their vices."[14]

This highly contrived argument would not convince any atheist of the necessity of a life after death because the atheist, who did not accept God, would not accept the necessity for retribution either, as it implied some kind of an ultimate judge. But the root of such an argument is the basic problem Priestley faced when he tried to synthesize the ideas of God and a material universe. Priestley ended up

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[14]Priestley, Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, p. 119.

admitting that the concept of a creation without a creator was a highly farfetched possibility. So he returned to basing his acceptance of both the resurrection and the miracles upon the acceptance of God who did exist apart from the visible universe and who could control the laws of nature and therefore had to be the author of nature.

Moreover, this invisible being who controlled the laws of nature and was equal to their manufacture, persistently announced himself to be the author of nature, so how could a person who accepted the miracles entertain the slightest doubt about the existence of such a creature. "It. . .is evident, therefore, that the miracles recorded in the Old and New Testament are naturally adapted to give the fullest satisfaction concerning the being of a God, as well as of the truth of revelation."[15] And conversely: "If you admit a principle of intelligence, and a power of production and reproduction in nature, you are prepared to admit all the facts on which the system of revelation is founded."[16]

Priestley's materialism is what set him apart from the mainstream of English dissent and created the inconsistencies in his theory. He attempted what could be considered an impossible synthesis. A belief in God was very hard to reconcile with a materialist view of man, and when the belief in God was further complicated by the acceptance of the

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[15] Ibid., p. 281.

[16] Ibid., p. 283.

doctrine of resurrection and the miracles of Jesus, the synthesis became almost impossible.

Perhaps it is easier to understand why Priestley attempted to undertake such a task when one reconsiders how how theory evolved. Priestley was first a Calvinist then a determinist, and finally a materialist. Though he accepted materialism he could not discount the fundamental elements of his Christianity. Where the two conflicted, he was unsuccessful at reconciling them.

Priestley grew up with a faith in God and a faith in the scriptures. The faith in God he could rationalize, and he would probably have retained it even if he had given it the closest scrutiny. But he did not test it as he did other beliefs. Priestley explained the existence of all natural phenomena by saying that they were part of God's plan. He proved God's existence by saying that the plan implied a planner. He never moved outside of his system to examine the cause of or the necessity of God. Perhaps this would have been impossible to do, but his reasoning remained circular.

His faith in the scriptures was less well supported. The scriptures were the basis of all Protestant teachings. The Calvinists above all instilled in their children the belief in the ability of the individual to read and understand the Bible. The obviously irrational errors in scripture Priestley treated as mistakes in translation or interpretation. But the essentials of Christ's life and resurrection

and all of the miracles that were described in the Bible did not dispute. This was a real omission. For the miracles which he claimed to be true were no more reasonable than the immaterial soul which he claimed not to be true. In fact the proofs of the validity of scripture will not stand the tests he established for other doctrines. The reasons he used to say that miracles could happen could have been used to support all the rest of the traditional dogma. He said that miracles happened because God interrupted his laws of nature to make them occur in order to convince man of his existence. Yet when he considered the trinity, he argued that there was no reason to suppose that God would have interrupted the laws of nature to make a trinity in unity occur, when such a thing was obviously unnecessary. By how own account, the scriptures had no more validity than the trinity.

Priestley adopted materialism because he thought it would eliminate the inconsistencies he found in Christianity and thus make that religion more acceptable. He did not fully realize the seriousness of the new inconsistencies imposed by materialism.

His theology was man centered, and for him man was a material being. Man was also good, and the supreme manifestation of a creative force. Man was God's masterpiece and in a sense the sole reason for God. Priestley's belief in man and his capabilities and prospect for self improvement was infinite. Priestley's God was the supreme scientist who

had created man to contribute to the total goodness of the world. Just as the eighteenth century scientist and inventor investigated and created things with a fairly good idea of how they would turn out and with the understanding that their acts would serve a good purpose, God had created the world and peopled it, not for amusement or experimentation, but to produce something good. The production of good could be the only motive for the creation, for every man wanted to produce things that were good in themselves and that contributed to the total sum of goodness and happiness on earth. Just as the artist produced a masterpiece, God was compelled to produce something that would contribute to the total goodness and happiness of his world. God would not have possessed as much power as he had if not to use it to produce the ultimate good.

Thus for Priestley man was the center of everything. The whole world and even God himself had relevance only as they pertained to man. God had to exist because there had to be a greater cause for man and a better ultimate judge of man than man himself.

There was no question that Priestley believed thoroughly everything he wrote. He was so convinced of his rightness that he was, at times, unable to repress his impatience with those who questioned him. This was often expressed in his hurried or sanctimonious arguments. Priestley was often not too careful in his reasoning. There were many instances of

faulty, inconsistent, or even trite rebuttals. He was not always properly informed about the traditional opinions he contested. This was especially evident in his dissertations concerning the accretion of Platonic philosophy of the soul into primitive Christian doctrine. But perhaps this can be forgiven him when it is realized that he was a crusader who often sacrificed accuracy for speed.

Despite the difficulties evident in Priestley's theology it seems only fair to try to see his thesis as he saw it himself. The two critical elements in it were God and man. God, the creator, had of necessity produced something good. His supreme creation was man. Man was complex, systematized matter. While matter in itself did not possess sentient properties, matter organized by God into man did have those properties, as well as all the others formerly attributed to a soul. Man's actions were determined so that he could fit into God's scheme. Because God had determined man's actions, man was theoretically unable to perform evil acts. Those he appeared to commit were in actuality serving some greater purpose in God's scheme.

Jesus of Nazareth was a man approved by God and placed on earth to set an example for man to pattern his life after. In a sense he formed part of the disposition toward virtue that helped determine a man's actions. He was empowered to perform miracles to prove that God and his scheme did exist and that the life of Christ was a suitable pattern for human life.

The resurrection was the time when all men should be born again in one form or another, to reap the final rewards for playing out their role in God's scheme. While Priestley spoke of punishment for evil his theology contained no hell. Thus it can be assumed that all men would be re-created. Moreover, his view of salvation did not exclude non-Christians.

It would, perhaps, have been easier to accept Priestley's theology if he had limited it to his view of the God-man relationship, but this would have meant that he was not a Christian. In order for anyone to synthesize eighteenth century philosophy with Christianity, he would have had to evolve a theology similar to Priestley's. Priestley had undertaken an admirable task. In attempting to resolve the conflict between reason and faith for himself, he pointed the way for a more humanistic Unitarianism which developed in nineteenth century America. Although his early attempts to popularize Unitarianism in America were soon overshadowed by others, his thought undoubtedly contributed to the climate of opinion which made the Unitarian theology eventually acceptable. His synthesis was an almost unique contribution to eighteenth century thought.

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