

JEFFERSON AND PRIESTLEY: ORIGINS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN AMERICA

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CAST

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NARRATOR

Before we hear from our famous guests from history, I'd like to begin with one of the most remarkable sentences in political history, the first amendment to the US Constitution: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.*

40% of Americans attend religious services in a typical week, compared with 14% in Great Britain and 12% in France. This disparity is true now, and true around the time the country was founded. How much is due to our political framework which untangled the long-standing European relationship between government and religion? How much to the type of people who settled here? And how much to individuals such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison?

Madison carried the ball in getting the first amendment adopted in 1789, but the religion phrase had its roots in the *Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom*, written by Jefferson in 1785 at a time when Virginia had one of the most oppressive set of laws about religion in all the colonies.

JEFFERSON

We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no way diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

NARRATOR

This evening we will take a brief look at the ideas about religion

on both sides of the Atlantic in the persons of two of the most revolutionary of 18th century figures, Joseph Priestley and Thomas Jefferson, whose paths crossed late in the century to their mutual benefit. As we touch far too quickly on their lives and accomplishments in their own words, focusing primarily on their religious ideas, see if you agree with me that they were remarkably similar men.

Joseph Priestley was born in a village near Leeds, England, in 1733. His mother died a few years later, and his father was unable to manage the large family. So he was raised by his widowed aunt, who had been left sufficient property to be comfortable. More important, her attitude was his first piece of good fortune.

PRIESTLEY

She was truly Calvinistic in principle, but was far from confining salvation to those who thought as she did on religious subjects. Being left in good circumstances, her home was the resort of all the Dissenting ministers in the neighborhood, without distinction; and those who were the most obnoxious on account of their heresy, were almost as welcome to her, if she thought them honest and good men, as any others... Thus I was brought up with sentiments of piety, but without bigotry.

NARRATOR

At 19, he enrolled at a Dissenting Academy at Daventry, the first student. This was his second good fortune.

PRIESTLEY

In my time, the academy was in a state peculiarly favourable to the serious pursuit of truth, as the students were about equally divided upon every question of much importance, such as liberty and necessity, the sleep of the soul, and all the articles of theological orthodoxy and heresy, in consequence of which, all these topics were the subject of continual discussion. Our tutors also were of different opinions... one on the orthodox side, and one on heresy, though always with the greatest modesty.

The tutors... indulged us in the greatest freedoms, so that our lectures had often the air of friendly conversations... We were permitted to ask whatever questions, and to make whatever remarks we pleased, and we did it with the greatest, but without any offensive, freedom.

NARRATOR

Following Daventry, he became a minister in three churches and then got an appointment at a Dissenting academy in Warrington. There he met and married Mary Wilkinson at age 29. This was another piece of good fortune, such that one might wonder whether

he made his own good luck or was guided somehow by providence. They had a long and good marriage, and a strong partnership in today's terms. It is said that the two of them played two games of chess every evening after dinner. And, just as important for his career, Mary's two brothers, new industrialists who started Wilkinson Swords and supplied the British Navy with its cannons, became important financial backers for years. Other supporters, whom he met at this time, were Josiah Wedgwood, who built the well known business in china and pottery, and Erasmus Darwin, the famous physician and botanist of the Midlands. Incidentally, these two men became the grandfathers of Charles Darwin. You could hardly pick a better place to establish a career for a bright, dissenting minister.

During this time, Priestley was developing his strong interest in scientific experimentation along with his theology. The latter would continually create conflict with the authorities for the rest of his life, although he had excellent rapport with his parishioners. For example...

PRIESTLEY

I had, in consequence of much pain and thought, become persuaded of the falsity of the doctrine of atonement, of the inspiration of the authors of the books of Scripture as writers, and of all idea of supernatural influence, except for the purpose of miracles. But I was still an Arian... and contented myself with seeing the absurdity of the Trinitarian system.

NARRATOR

Arians were those who believed in the views of Arius, an early Christian, that were condemned by the Council of Nicaea. It was later that Priestley became a Unitarian, acknowledging the humanity of Jesus.

We will return to Priestley but first, let's trace Jefferson's first 30 years, which started in 1743. His father, Peter, was a surveyor in Virginia who left him the land known as Shadwell, where Monticello was started by Thomas at age 26. Jefferson also had a good classical education with private tutors, although it was in his teen years that he developed his strong rebellion to the established Anglican Church that lasted his lifetime. His studies continued at the College of William and Mary, and then an apprenticeship studying law. He served in the Virginia House of Burgesses from 1769 to 1776, and married, also at age 29 to Martha Wayles Skelton, a young widow, who died in 1782.

He never said much about the early development of his religious ideas. He was quite careful to keep it obscure, always sensitive to his position as a public figure.

JEFFERSON

I not only write nothing on religion, but rarely permit myself to speak on it, and never but in a reasonable society.

NARRATOR

In fact, he kept his library at Monticello under lock and key. Nonetheless, like Priestley, he was a voracious reader. Also like Priestley, he was strongly influenced by the works of John Locke and Isaac Newton. Locke's ideas about "natural rights" and Jefferson's experience with the Anglican Church are apparent in Jefferson's exciting new ideas for government while involved with the state of Virginia as representative and then Governor. An even greater milestone was his writing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, at age 43. In 1781, he wrote the lines in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that were used the rest of his life to show he was an atheist:

JEFFERSON

But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.

NARRATOR

We left Priestley in the early 1760's at Warrington. During the next ten years or so, his scientific explorations took off, he got an honorary doctorate from Edinburgh, he took a new parish in Leeds, and he became friends with Ben Franklin, who spent much time in England. Franklin suggested to Priestley that he write a text on electricity and magnetism. So he did, the first text on these subjects, half of which were accounts of his own experiments over a year's time. He also discovered carbon dioxide, invented carbonated water, and discovered photosynthesis. He also isolated oxygen, but insisted to the end of his life that it was "dephlogisticated air", his one big scientific error.

He admired Franklin greatly, so he was especially disappointed in his inability to get him interested in religion.

PRIESTLEY

Franklin had not given so much attention as he ought to have done to the evidences of Christianity, and desired me to recommend to him a few treatises on the subject, such as I thought most deserving of his notice, but not of great length, promising to read them, and give me his sentiments on them. Accordingly, I recommended to him Hartley's evidences of Christianity in his Observations on Man, and what I had then written on the subject in my Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion.

NARRATOR

Elsewhere he said...

PRIESTLEY

I was distressed to discover that a man of such general good

character and great influence should have been an unbeliever in Christianity, and also have done so much as he did to make others unbelievers.

NARRATOR

Probably the most important work on religion encountered by Priestley was written in 1749 by David Hartley, a Methodist minister (and fellow Dissenter), titled *Observations on Man*. It was a work that tied together theology and Newtonian science. To simplify Newton greatly, his legacy was that the world is completely predictable and understandable if we can discern the physical laws underlying it all, laws that can be stated mathematically for the most part. That notion still is held by most of the educated world to this day, although it is being challenged on a number of fronts. It was exactly what drove Priestley in his scientific work, which he called "philosophical" work -- his quest to find how God made the world. This was not an attempt to explain the world, but to fill in the details, as it were.

Priestley had remarked on Hartley:

PRIESTLEY

I expressed some doubts of the immateriality of the sentient principle in man; and the outcry that was made on what I casually expressed on that subject can hardly be imagined. In the newspapers and most of the periodical publications, I was represented as an unbeliever in revelation, and no better than an Atheist.

This led me to give the closest attention to the subject, and the consequence was the firmest persuasion that man is wholly material, and that our only prospect of immortality is from the Christian doctrine of a resurrection. I therefore digested my thoughts on the subject, and published my Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit.

NARRATOR

In 1780, Priestley moved to a parish in Birmingham, leading to eleven more happy and productive years, until he stirred up enough trouble with his support of the French revolution and his anti-establishment writings that a mob burned his laboratory and library and drove him out of town. In 1791, for example, he wrote a pamphlet comparing the established religion to a fungus that grows on the state and eventually destroys it. For this, he gained the nickname of Gunpowder Joe.

He settled in London for three years, and then decided to follow his sons to America in 1794 at age 61. He settled in Northumberland, Pennsylvania where a son had gone, hoping to form a congenial colony. Jefferson was quite disappointed, as he wanted

to lure him to Virginia. Priestley spent enough time in Philadelphia to start the First Unitarian Church there. He died in 1804 at age 71.

Returning to Jefferson, he served as Ambassador to France for his new country, then Secretary of State, then Vice President under John Adams. In the 1790's, he became a partisan politician, at odds with the Federalists and Alexander Hamilton over the centralization of the new government. He fought a number of political battles such as his opposition to the Alien and Sedition Acts. In 1800 he became our third President, serving two terms, during which he oversaw the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition. Quite astoundingly, he continued his heavy reading program and philosophical writing during this period, while trying to keep Monticello solvent. In subsequent years he founded and designed the University of Virginia, assembled his private Bible, invented one thing after another, and renewed his long friendship with John Adams, estranged for over 10 years. He died on July 4th, 1826, the same day as Adams.

Much of the intellectual exchange among the American and European leaders around 1800 was by letter, and our collection of Jefferson letters is among the largest in existence. There seemed to be a special community of interest among Jefferson, John Adams, Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, Priestley, and a few others. Rush was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, Washington's Surgeon General, and an early Universalist. He established the first hospital for the mentally ill in America, and organized the first anti-slavery society.

In contrast with almost all subsequent political leaders, Jefferson was exceptionally concerned with the religious foundation of life. It certainly played a large role in his philosophy underlying his approach to government. He found that Priestley articulated his ideas on Christianity and material progress better than any other writer; this was a very strong bond between them. Two works of Priestley were particularly influential: the *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* and *Socrates and Jesus Compared*. Let's listen to a few excerpts from letters and other writings.

Shortly before coming to America, Priestley traveled to Paris, where he was warmly received not only as a supporter of the revolution, but as a renowned philosopher and scientist. In his account, he said:

PRIESTLEY

I found all the philosophical persons to whom I was introduced at Paris to be unbelievers in Christianity, and even professed Atheists. As I chose on all occasions to appear as a Christian, I was told that I was the only person they had ever met with, of

whose understanding they had any opinion, who professed to believe Christianity... But I soon found that they had given no proper attention to it, and did not really know what Christianity was...

Having conversed so much with unbelievers, at home and abroad, I thought I should be able to combat their prejudices with some advantage... With this view, I wrote the first part of my Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, in proof of the doctrines of a God and a Providence, and the second part, in defense of the evidences of Christianity... I can truly say that the greatest satisfaction I receive from the success of my philosophical pursuits, arises from the weight it may give to attempts to defend Christianity, to free it from those corruptions which prevent its reception with philosophical and thinking persons...

NARRATOR

About 1793, Jefferson said about Priestley's *History of Corruptions*:

JEFFERSON

A system of morals is presented to us, which, if filled up in the true style and spirit of the rich fragments he left us, would be the most perfect and sublime that has ever been taught by man.

NARRATOR

And in a letter to Rush, 1803:

JEFFERSON

To the corruptions of Christianity I am indeed opposed, but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian, in the only sense he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to him every human excellence; and believing he never claimed any other.

NARRATOR

In a letter to John Adams, 1814:

JEFFERSON

The doctrines which flowed from the lips of Jesus himself are within the comprehension of a child; but thousands of volumes have not yet explained the Platonisms engrafted on them; and for this obvious reason, that nonsense can never be explained.

NARRATOR

Shortly before Priestley died, Jefferson asked him to expand on the paper on Socrates and Jesus:

JEFFERSON

While on a short visit lately to Monticello, I received from you a copy of your comparative view of Socrates and Jesus.. I acknowledge the pleasure I had in its perusal, and my desire to

see you take up the subject on a more extensive scale...

I would proceed to a view of the life, character, and doctrines of Jesus... This view would purposely omit the question of his divinity... To do him justice, it would be necessary to remark the disadvantages his doctrines have to encounter, not having been committed to writing by himself, but by the most unlettered of men... when much was forgotten and much misunderstood... Yet such are the fragments remaining as to show a master workman... His system of morality was the most benevolent and sublime that has ever been taught... His character and doctrines have received still greater injury from those who claim to be his special disciples...

NARRATOR

Priestley died soon afterwards, and it was left to Jefferson to complete his excerpts from the Gospels that are now known as the *Jefferson Bible*.

On materialism and scientific progress, there was considerable overlapping of views, but not entirely. A century later, Thomas Huxley, not unkindly, said that Priestley had made the clearest case for Materialism in the English language. Priestley wrote his *Lectures on History* in 1781. From that work:

PRIESTLEY

All true history has a capital advantage over every work of fiction. True history, being an exhibition of the conduct of Divine Providence... is an inexhaustible mine of the most valuable knowledge... Real history resembles the experiments made by the air pump, condensing engine, and electrical machine, which exhibit the operations of nature, and the God of nature himself, whose works are the noblest subject of contemplation to the human mind.

NARRATOR

In an 1800 paper on the doctrine of phlogiston, he said:

PRIESTLEY

My philosophical friends must excuse me, if, without neglecting natural science, I give a decided preference to theological studies... I apply myself with so great satisfaction to the study of nature, not so much on account of the advantage we derive from it at present, though this is very considerable, as from its being a delightful field of speculation, barely opening to us here, and to be resumed to far greater advantage in a future state... No discovery in philosophy bears any proportion in real value to that of bringing life and immortality to light... None of our experiments, or observations on the course of nature, could have given us the least glimpse of this.

NARRATOR

Jefferson wrote Priestley in 1800:

JEFFERSON

The Gothic idea that we are to look backwards instead of forwards for the improvement of the human mind, and to recur to the annals of our ancestors for what is most perfect in government, religion, and learning, is worthy of those bigots in religion and government by whom it has been recommended, and whose purposes it would answer. But it is not an idea which this country will endure.

NARRATOR

In 1798 there was a backlash against some of the religious freedoms written into the new constitution by some associated with the Federalist cause. One result was the Alien and Sedition Acts. Jefferson found himself in a battle. He wrote to Rush:

JEFFERSON

I promised you a letter on Christianity, which I have not forgotten... I have a view of the subject which ought to displease neither the rational Christian nor Deists, and would reconcile many to a character they have too hastily rejected... Recent events had given to the clergy hope of obtaining an establishment of a particular form of Christianity throughout the U.S... They believe that any portion of power confided to me will be exerted in opposition to their schemes. And they believe rightly; for I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against any form of tyranny over the mind of man.

NARRATOR

Priestley was attacked by some of the same people who were opposing the religious freedoms, and he was to be prosecuted under the Alien and Sedition Acts. Jefferson, just elected president, managed to get the charges dropped and wrote to Priestley:

JEFFERSON

I learned some time ago that you were in Philadelphia, but that it was only for a fortnight, and supposed you were gone... Yesterday I received information that you had been very ill, but were on recovery. I sincerely rejoice that you are so. Yours is one of the few lives precious to mankind, and for the continuance of which every thinking man is solicitous... What an effort of bigotry in politics and religion have we gone through! The barbarians... pretended to praise and encourage education, but it was to be the education of our ancestors. We were to look backwards, not forwards, for improvement... this was the real ground of all the attacks on you. Those who live by mystery and charlatanry, fearing you would render them useless by simplifying the Christian philosophy -- the most sublime and benevolent, but most perverted system that ever shone on man -- endeavored to crush your well-earned and well-deserved fame... It is with heartfelt satisfaction that, in the first moments of my public action, I can welcome you

to our land... and cover you under the protection of those laws which were made for the wise and good like you.

NARRATOR

Another subject we have no time to explore is education. Priestley wrote extensively in this area, including publication of an English grammar. Jefferson wrote Priestley around 1800 to try out ideas about curricula at the University of Virginia that were forming in his mind even while he was going about being president. The breadth of interests of these two men is breathtaking.

Jefferson and Priestley were shining examples of 18th century enlightenment. Both were Deists who insisted on a pure form of Christianity. It has been said that if Priestley had settled in Virginia, as Jefferson asked him to do, that Jefferson would probably have immediately joined his Unitarian church.

They both had amazingly wide interests and tried to apply logical reasoning to all their pursuits. They were both amateur musicians. They were often criticized, but managed to keep on track. And they both were incurable optimists. Let's listen one last time to Priestley, in his six-volume *General History of the Christian Church* of 1790. It was dedicated to Jefferson.

PRIESTLEY

We may safely conclude that this natural process, now happily commenced, will proceed till every remaining corruption of Christianity be removed, and nothing will be found in it that any unbeliever... can reasonably object to. And since whatever is true and right will finally prevail, that is, when sufficient time has been given to the exhibition of it, rational Christianity will, in due time, be the religion of the world.

NARRATOR

In 1822, Jefferson summarized his religious beliefs in a letter to Benjamin Waterhouse of Philadelphia:

JEFFERSON

The doctrines of Jesus are simple.

- 1. That there is one only God...*
- 2. That there is a future state of rewards and punishments.*
- 3. That to love God with all thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself, is the sum of religion.*

Compare these with the dogmas of Calvin.

- 1. There are three Gods.*
- 2. Good works or the love of our neighbor are nothing.*
- 3. Faith is everything...*
- 4. Reason in religion is unlawful.*
- 5. God, from the beginning, elected certain individuals to be saved, and others to be damned.*

Had the doctrines of Jesus always been preached as pure as they came from his lips, the whole civilized world would now be Christian... The genuine doctrine of one only God is reviving, and I trust there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian.

NARRATOR

Finally, Jefferson wrote his own instructions for his burial:

JEFFERSON

In the grave a plain die or cube of 3 ft. without any mouldings, surmounted by an obelisk of 6 ft. height, each of a single stone. On the faces of the obelisk the following inscription, and not a word more:

Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, Author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia.

NARRATOR

You can see the obelisk today on his grave in a shady grove just behind his beloved Monticello.

In closing, I would like to ask Mr. Jefferson to repeat the First Amendment, with which we started the program.

JEFFERSON

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

THE END