



Enlightenment and Dissent

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philosophy and morals and to replace them with a secular, scientific understanding of moral and social life' (270). It would have been interesting to have Hume's *Essays, moral and political* and his six-volume *History of England* included more fully in that assessment, but those writings are beyond the purview of the book under review. Asking 'Was Hume an "Atheist"?', Russell answers with a degree of ambiguity. The term he uses most often to describe Hume's intentions is 'irreligious'; however he also suggests that Hume in the *Treatise* develops a 'godless worldview' which may be thought of as 'atheism'. Hume's mission was 'to persuade his more enlightened readers of the narrow limits and weaknesses of the human understanding, and, thereby, to turn their attention and energies to matters of "common life", where *real remedies* for improving the human condition can be found'. Interestingly, while Russell claims that mission could 'only be accomplished in social circumstances or conditions where there *already* exists a tolerable degree of liberty (as was more or less the case in mid-eighteenth-century Britain)' (296), many of Hume's own disappointments and troubles in life, as well as the published responses to his thought, might be seen as evidence to the contrary. Russell's book will be requisite reading for all Hume scholars, but it will also be of great interest to many other readers of *Enlightenment and Dissent*.

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Robert E Schofield, *The enlightened Joseph Priestley: a study of his life and work from 1773 to 1804*, Pennsylvania State University Press University Park, Pennsylvania, 2004, ISBN 0271024593, £40.95; \$58.00.

Was there an Enlightenment in eighteenth-century England? The question is far from straightforward. If there was, then the multi-talented Joseph Priestley epitomised it, or one form of it. Yet Priestley came to think that England was, in crucial respects, anti-Enlightenment. One of its most 'enlightened' cities, Birmingham, rejected him violently, in riots that the Prime Minister, Pitt, called 'an effervescence of the popular mind'. Many of his contemporaries reviled him. The Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford, said of him: 'Long have you been the Danger of this country, the Bane of its Polity and Canker-worm of its Happiness'. Priestley doubted

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‘whether any person in England (the prime minister for the time being excepted) ever had so much of what is commonly called abuse’ as he had experienced.

Yet his first forty years, up to 1773, which Robert E Schofield charted in *The enlightenment of Joseph Priestley* (1997), had been largely free of public controversy. The central theme of that period was his gradual conversion from Calvinist orthodoxy to Unitarianism - a form of liberal Christianity, based on the historical reality of the Resurrection, that for the most part he had had to fashion for himself. His life had been a story of successes on various fronts. By 1773, he had become an author of college textbooks, a teacher at Warrington Academy, a member of the Royal Society, an admired historian of science, a recipient of an honorary doctorate, a leading political thinker, and a friend of many in both London and provincial scientific and liberal circles.

Schofield has now completed the story of his next three decades, aptly entitled *The enlightened Joseph Priestley: a study of his life and work from 1773 to 1804*. It is a story of perpetual controversy, set in a time of political and intellectual upheaval. The ‘Enlightened’ Joseph Priestley suffered very mixed fortunes. The younger Priestley had forged a philosophy of steady reform and progress. The older man had to battle with forces unforeseen by his Enlightenment self-education. His way of enlightenment antagonised the Anglican clergy, the conservative part of the aristocracy and monarchy, some of his fellow scientists, and some of his fellow intellectuals.

In 1773 Priestley moved from Leeds to work with and for Lord Shelburne in Calne and in London, thereby strengthening his national prominence. Disputation surrounded him not just on the religious and political fronts. His name is today best-known for his discovery of oxygen in 1774-75, yet even this achievement stands at the centre of what was a very turbulent ‘chemical revolution’. In fact what Priestley discovered was dephlogisticated air. He himself never referred to it as oxygen, the term invented by Lavoisier that signified ‘acid-maker’. The two had met in Paris in 1774, when he demonstrated his new discovery. Priestley never accepted the theoretical basis for Lavoisier’s redescription, and continued to present his side of the argument up to his death. The question of how to conceptualise this and the other newly-found gases was gradually won by Lavoisier and his followers. Priestley’s remarkable further work on

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gases, photosynthesis, respiration and the composition of water was not enough to entirely rescue his ultimate reputation. Schofield's final word on the problem is startling: 'Priestley was never a chemist; in a modern, and even a Lavoisian, sense, he was never a scientist. He was a natural philosopher, concerned with the economy of nature and obsessed with an idea of unity, in theology and in nature' (193–94). This seems to say that science within a theological framework is not science.

The second controversial front was metaphysical. Priestley abandoned Calvinist predestination early in life, but he at all times defended determinism on the grounds that belief in free-will contradicted the doctrine of universal causation. In the 1770s he abandoned 'the hypothesis of the soul', including its modern version, Cartesian dualism. This story also had French connections. In Paris he had met Baron d'Holbach, the principal exponent of atheistic materialism. Priestley thought materialism the appropriate metaphysic not for atheists but for rational Christian theists. In the subsequent controversies, his antagonists were his friend Richard Price and, more distantly, Thomas Reid. His debate with Price was a model of good-tempered Enlightenment dialectics. Price and Reid demonstrate how deeply entrenched dualism had become in their version of Enlightenment philosophy. Priestley's challenge to dualism found very few followers. Schofield's account gives his philosophical enterprise a fair hearing; it is perhaps the aspect of his thought least well-explored in the secondary literature. His account fails to note Reid's unpublished preoccupation with Priestley's materialism, but he does point out the curious connection with the voluminous works of Lord Monboddo, who aspired to be Priestley's metaphysical antithesis.

The third set of controversies broke out in the 1780s, about the definition and formation of orthodox Christian doctrine. Priestley set himself the task of rewriting the history of his religion, to demonstrate that Unitarianism was the norm in the earliest church and that subsequent doctrinal development was driven by Platonic and Gnostic influences. On this front his antagonists were, on the orthodox side, Bishop Samuel Horsley, and, following a very different agenda, Edward Gibbon. Priestley took the Trinitarian position to be internally incoherent; he used his materialism to support his denial of Christ's pre-existence; and he argued his case historically, from the text of the New Testament and the evidence of early Jewish Christianity.

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Schofield's research in the literature of theological history fails to find any recognition of Priestley's extensive (though repetitive) contribution to this field, and he expresses his surprise at this anomaly. The standard narrative passes straight from the English deists to the German scholars Semler and Michaelis, with no mention of their English contemporary's output of a dozen books and 15,000 pages. In Schofield's view, a century after Priestley's death his arguments had become 'part of generally accepted ideas among liberal philosopher-theologians' (238).

There is a fourth theme pervading Priestley's works. He set himself to defend theism and the basics of Christianity as he understood it against the 'infidels' or 'philosophical unbelievers' — d'Holbach, David Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, d'Alembert, Thomas Paine, Volney and Dupuis. These apologetic writings run through the whole of his later career. He saw no good reason why Enlightenment should entail atheism. He supposed the opposite, that advances in science and liberty suggest all the more grounds for belief in a good Providence. Curiously, few of his Christian contemporaries (before William Paley, at least) joined him in fighting this good fight in defence of 'the rational doctrines of revelation'.

Priestley's career of controversies culminated in the great debate over the French Revolution with Edmund Burke, and continued on a much lower plane later in America with the young William Cobbett. His *Essay on the first principles of government* of 1768 had articulated with notable clarity the distinction between civil and political rights, in a very moderate statement of Enlightenment political philosophy. He was no democrat, being mainly concerned to separate religion and government. But by the 1790s the political world had changed, and he and his friend Price were at the centre of the storm.

His *Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* of 1791 were admired by one contemporary as 'by many degrees the ablest and most masterly' of the many replies to Burke (278n). Schofield wastes no sympathy on Burke; his political inclinations are with Priestley, even when he is only paraphrasing his position. He dubs the trial of the Birmingham rioters 'a travesty' (288), and observes that a proposal for a government inquiry into the riot was finally defeated in the House of Commons 189 to 46, a mark of the ill-will felt towards 'the great heresiarch'.

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Despite all this, Priestley's virtues did not go unrewarded. For all his intellectual intensity, he made and kept many friendships, including Richard Price, Benjamin Franklin, Theophilus Lindsey, Josiah Wedgwood, Thomas Bentley, Joseph Johnson, Matthew Boulton, James Keir, James Watt, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and Thomas Cooper - an impressive assortment. He epitomised the Enlightenment ideal of intellectual sociability. Burke's was one of the few friendships he lost. He had correspondents from all over Europe, and was a member of every major scientific society. His idea of human progress and perfectibility was widely shared. For a time, the younger generation looked up to him as a guide and sage.

Schofield's two volumes are the only full-scale biography of their subject ever attempted, and they now form the only such biography that will ever be needed. Little about Priestley cries out for psychological analysis. A less eccentric personality would be hard to imagine; equanimity was his trade mark, even in the stresses of the 1790s. Yet he is not an easy subject to portray. Schofield's great achievement is to have not been daunted by Priestley's polymathic complexity. He has not been unnerved by the task, though it has taken up a large part of his career. The work exhibits the meticulous scholarship and indefatigable archival research characteristic of all his writings. It is a 'Life and Letters' biography - the man and his works, as seen especially through a blow-by-blow account of his controversies.

Such an exact narrative is invaluable in itself. On almost every page I found interesting new details, even in areas familiar to me. His footnotes often link to older scientific and theological scholarship well worthy of mention. But the question inevitably arises of the wood and the trees. His account is of course well organised. Even so, do the details overwhelm the overall story? Does he have a general view of what makes Priestley count as "Enlightened"? Why was Priestley so detested by at least some of his social superiors? What does this up-and-down career tell us about his times? I would have liked Schofield to have left us a biographer's 'general scholium', but that is not his style, and perhaps it can't be done well for a subject so multifaceted.

At the centre of all Priestley's controversies - as Schofield observes - is his faith that controversy generates more light than heat. Schofield calls it a dialectical faith. One well-known statement puts it this way: 'No

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maxim may be more depended upon than that, whatever is *true* and *right* will finally prevail, and the more violent the opposition, the more firmly will it be established, in the end; because opposition excites attention, and this is all that is necessary to the perception of any truth, in minds free from prejudice; and in time one prejudice will so balance another, that true candour will prevail in the world'. However, this particular version, though it sounds so Priestleyan, may not be authentic; it comes from *A political dialogue* of 1791, and Schofield questions its authorship.

We can see the heat that nearly caused Priestley's destruction (and that actually caused Lavoisier's), but how much of his light endured? Writing of his scientific career he commented that 'like a meteor, it may be my destiny to move very swiftly, burn away with great heat and violence, and become as suddenly extinct'. The metaphor has little application to his scientific reputation, but it seems fairly apt for his other intellectual enterprises. His theistic materialism came to nothing. His Unitarianism remained at most a minority denomination, not a new kind of mainstream Christianity. Schofield suggests that the legalisation of Unitarianism in 1813 was 'quite as much a belated apology for a political wrong as an acknowledgment of Priestley's achievement in theological opinion' (263). Priestley's political liberalism came to fruition, he thought, in America, which had a constitution in which 'every evil incident to society is, to appearance, as well guarded against as human wisdom could devise'. Yet French attempts to create a counterpart constitution had ended very differently.

Priestley's life, though filled with disputation, is not itself very controversial from a biographical standpoint, but we have never before been able to see all its dimensions. With Schofield's guidance, we can now do what Augustus Toplady proposed: 'Give me the person whom I can hold up as a piece of crystal, and see through him. For this, among many other excellencies, I regard and admire Dr Priestley'. The questions that remain mysterious about him are of a different sort; they are questions not so much about his life as about his 'enlightened' times, in which he was both able to flourish so remarkably and made to suffer hostility and injury also so remarkably.

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