**Conviction and Apocalypse in Joseph Priestley’s Writing**

The idea of an enlightenment based only on the French encyclopaedists and marked by atheism has become so outmoded that the phrase “the religious enlightenment” may be not so much a description of a subsidiary movement as simply a pleonasm. B.W. Young has described “England’s experience of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment” in particular as “uniquely clerical”.[[1]](#footnote-1) All the same, it is difficult to escape a Whiggish tendency to stress only those elements of the past of which we can see contemporary reflexes, so underrating the pervasiveness of religion or seeing it as of only antiquarian interest. For a figure such as Joseph Priestley, being a Unitarian minister and theologian was sometimes difficult to reconcile with also being a natural philosopher and political controversialist – but not because religion was antithetical to those discourses.

Recent scholarly stress on a multifarious print culture substantiating the continued dominance of religion can help overcome the sense of an opposition, as several essays in this volume attest.[[2]](#footnote-2) That can lead to other oppositions, and to ideologically opposed positions. On the one hand, evidence of a continued adherence to Anglicanism can be the basis for an insistence on a rigid social hierarchy, essentially structurally unchanged by wars and revolutions abroad until the reform acts of the 1830s.[[3]](#footnote-3) On the other hand, a scholarly attraction to “dissent” can be a romantic attraction to the evidence of opposition to such hierarchy and may be predicated wholly on political grounds.

The truism that everything is political can mean no more than that things occur in a context and may be construed in different ways. Especially in the 1790s, all kinds of heterodox speculation might be construed as a threat to the state, no matter how girded round with professions of loyalty. Those who attacked and destroyed Priestley’s house and laboratory in 1791 must have construed his writings as seditious, or those who incited them must have. It is not blaming the victim to observe that Priestley himself, theologian and scientist, was no politician and might offer his theological writings as a challenge or corrective to opponents and not always conceal his contempt for them: Thomas Belsham wrote that “Dr Priestley … expresses his sentiments upon this subject, as upon all others, unequivocally, and without disguise; and certainly, though not with intention to give offence, yet without any precaution to guard against it”.[[4]](#footnote-4) Stephen Toulmin, however, reminded us not to confuse dissent with dissidence, and Marilyn Butler described religious dissenters occupying a position of “pacific dissidence”.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Priestley’s overarching theological interests are worth attending to not only for historical reasons — because they give us a more accurate sense of the period and of enlightenment — but also because those interests are pursued in texts that require to be read in unfamiliar ways, not least because his writing tends to juxtapose political and scientific argument with discourses not necessarily subject to criteria of observation, experiment and proof. It is not anachronistic for the reader to feel discomfited since contemporaries too saw an uneasy fit between his theological writings and the others.

To *philosophes* in the Paris salons, Priestley was “the only person they had ever met with, of whose understanding they had any opinion, who professed to believe Christianity”.[[6]](#footnote-6) J**o**hn Adams recalled Joseph Priestley averring that all his hopes for Revolutionary France were founded “on revelation and the prophecies”; Priestley had explained “that the ten horns of the great beast in revelations, mean the ten crowned heads of Europe: and … the execution of the king of France is the falling off of the first of those horns; and the nine monarchies of Europe will fall one after another in the same way". “Such”, the former United States President commented, “was the enthusiasm of that great man, that reasoning machine”.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Priestley’s theology and even his millenarian prophecies of the 1790s were not necessarily at odds with natural philosophy, but seemed to be to the *philosophes* and Adams, and may seem so to us. That is what this article considers in its four parts: the first considers Priestley as a writer and the second as a reader of the Bible; then its third section considers the politics entailed by religious beliefs and the consequent refusal to conform, even where politics had to be avowed as separate from religion. The fourth and final section of the article is concerned with an area where religion and politics came into dangerous proximity: some of the millennial prophecies of the 1790s to which Adams refers interrupt narratives of secular improvement, partly by bringing together (or even confusing) the theological and the secular.

1. **Priestley as writer**

Priestley published more than 200 books, pamphlets, sermons and essays, was correcting proofs on the day he died, and the 26 volumes of his works in the standard edition exclude most of the works on optics, electricity or chemistry but include much theological and political controversy. “My natural infirmity ... is a too great promptness to write”, Priestley confessed (*Works* 19.305), and an opponent inferred that “the public is to believe that he is greater than other men, because he writes faster; and that he writes unanswerably because he writes *without end*”.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The kind of writing he produced can be evident from a single sentence. Let us take a sentence from the start of the preface to *Additional Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, published in Birmingham for Joseph Johnson in 1783:

I myself have no opinions that I wish to shelter behind any *authority* whatever; and should rejoice to see the time (and that time, I doubt not as the world improves in wisdom, will come) when the civil powers will relieve themselves from the attention they have hitherto given to all matters of speculation, and religion amongst the rest; an attention which has proved so embarrassing to the governors, and so distressing to the governed; and when no more countenance will be given to any particular mode of *religion*, than is given to particular modes of *medicine*, or of *philosophy*.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This is a long sentence, semi-colons marking what Coleridge would call its landing-places; its argument takes it from the rational first-person individual to a prophecy of reason eventually triumphant over all.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Each of those argumentative clauses iterates an important principle for Priestley, for which the term article of faith seems right: a distrust of authority; a conviction (embedded in the parenthesis) that progress has an unstoppable momentum; that the confounding of political with religious authority is tyrannical and must end; and an irenic outcome following logically from the ineluctable evidence of progress. Priestley’s initial claim to be able to proceed on the basis of no authority whatsoever looks like a particularly bold statement of an enlightened credo.[[11]](#footnote-11) Other principles are repeated – only a few pages later, where he writes that “calling in the aid of a magistrate to suppress heresy” is the characteristic of a “weak christian”.[[12]](#footnote-12)For Priestley, knowledge is not synthetic and encyclopaedic but serial and narrative; however it is not dialogic.[[13]](#footnote-13) His long sentences, such as this one quoted, tend to be discursive rather than iterative, each clause arguing an important principle or article of faith, not least the contention that progress is inevitable and will not be thwarted.

The individual sentence, then, if not as distinctive as Rousseau’s paradoxes or Paine’s rhetorical questions, is marked by a similarly insistent cussedness and could have similarly negative political consequences for its writer. The graphic tradition of Gillray and others suggests that Priestley’s provocations were to be feared almost as much as Paine or Rousseau, since he was sometimes represented alongside them, but there is a difference in kind.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Priestley himself claims that the writing is always only instrumental: He would not, for example, assume the character of another, even to make a point ironically. Although he did adopt pseudonyms (Clemens, Ebionita, Liberius, Paulinus, Photinus)in print – for reasons of prudence, when being provocative in his periodical the *Theological Repository* – he recorded a “great aversion” (*Works* 1. 38) to such fictional devices, never consciously deviating from the puritanical denial that writing might be play, display, or anything other than a medium for arriving at conviction or agreement. Boasting that “few men write more intelligibly than I do”, Priestley was proud to assert that his writings communicated without interruption from any medial noise.[[15]](#footnote-15)

As such, his writing is actually opposed to the fictive. Although Priestley says in the memoir he began in the 1780s that “in the early part of my life I was a great versifier”, and his first published work was actually a poem (*Works* 1.i. 54), he also recalls having had the puritan’s “great aversion” to fiction from childhood, priggishly throwing away the book of chivalric tales his brother was enjoying. Like Rousseau’s Émile, the young Priestley read only *Robinson Crusoe*, before progressing to David Hartley’s *Observations on Man* as a book suitable for grownups (*Works* 1.i. 19).

Later, Priestley was unashamed that his book on electrical experiments was a “hasty performance” because, he said, “My object was not to acquire the character of a fine writer, but of a useful one” (*Works*, 1.i. 56-57). Fine writing can indeed be a cloak for a dangerous, even atheistical suspension of certain knowledge, as is evident from the eleventh of his *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, in which Priestley criticises David Hume “as a mere *writer* or *declaimer*”. What he calls the “wire-drawn” style of Hume”s essays is a medium of elongation or suspension rather than a medium through which conviction can be achieved; and at worst it is the vehicle of an irresponsible scepticism: “Mr Hume seems to have had nothing in view but to amuse his readers, which he generally does agreeably enough; proposing doubts to received hypotheses, leaving them without any solution and altogether unconcerned about it”.[[16]](#footnote-16) Hume’s style is fuelled by the desire “to amuse” rather than being a quest for “solutions”; what is needed, Priestley insists, is new certainty and not speculations.

The other characteristic of the instrumentalism of Priestley’s writing is that it hardly varies according to the audience he is addressing. Of course he is most explicit about the disabilities Dissenters suffered when addressing fellow Dissenters and is only explicit about the disastrousness of Britain’s policy towards the United States when he is living there, but aside from what might be seen only as expediency, not much alters when Priestley addresses different audiences: his *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1782)*,* for example,makes few concessions to the child readers at whom it is ostensibly aimed.[[17]](#footnote-17)

That Priestley’s writing should have been similar no matter who the audience addressed was perhaps the result of a hopeful conviction that those addressed were basically similar. The number of readers was not large; Priestley’s brother Timothy recalls asking Joseph if he had twenty readers who shared his principles: “he answered ‘have I eight? Only two buy my pamphlets and I sometimes find them not cut open at the mouth’s end’”.[[18]](#footnote-18) It is a truism that a relatively homogeneous group of readers produced earlier in the century by *The Spectator* or for Richardson’s novels; and the educated minority culture of dissent growing up throughout the century constitutes an alternative reading public. Priestley’s appeals to a disinterested but sympathetic readership invoke an imagined reforming consensus. His confidence in such an imagined consensus can enable him to smuggle in contentious assertions such as the claim – again in the *Institutes* – that association of ideas rather than, say, the moral sense is the originating faculty of the mind: neither taste nor even conscience is innate, but each is a product of association.[[19]](#footnote-19) Priestley claims association as the basis of all his speculative work, just as it is the basis for all our knowledge of the world (a case he argued most cogently against the common-sense philosophers at the start of his 1774 *Examination* of their works).

Association as developed by Hartley in his 1749 *Observations on Man* ascribes a material basis to actions and events, all of which discernibly proceed from simple to complex in series. As we have seen, the upward momentum of an individual sentence depends on being animated by associational links that turn the iteration of its clauses in to something discursive. In Hartley’s associationism the series itself must culminate in the spiritual, and for Priestley, faith is consistent with knowledge arrived at by the repeated and eventually habitual connection of ideas to propositions – or, in logical terms, of a subject to a predicate. In recounting his experiments with “fixed air” and the process of trial and error they involved, Priestley observes that the method of association would have led to connected discovery; that it did not is down to the force of prejudice which “biasses not only our *judgement* … but even the perceptions of our senses”, so that even the apparent failures of association can themselves be attributed to association.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Priestley’s language is consistently directed at collaborative rational inquiry and claims no incompatibility of faith with the kinds of proof that his experimental work demanded. “[T]he only proper evidence of … God, as the author of nature, “he wrote, “is an exhibition of something which he alone is capable of performing” (*Works*, 16.117). Adducing “evidence” as a criterion suggests materialism and faith may not be antithetical, although they may fissure a language for the numinous in ways more typical of the propositional scepticism of literary language. He took up the compatibility or otherwise of theology with metaphysics and natural philosophy in the prefatory and supplementary matter of his *Disquisitions on Matter and Spirit*, in which he wrote that natural philosophy ‘relieve[s] the severity of these more serious pursuits’ (*Works* 3. 200) and affirmed in a letter to the Dutch natural philosopher Martin von Marum that “a philosophical and rational Christian is a character on which I set the highest value”.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The aesthetic realm too is given some kind of exceptional status. Elizabeth Kingston has demonstrated that Priestley’s *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* were a unique exception to the largely Lockean associationist system he defended.[[22]](#footnote-22) The aesthetic realm may tacitly be afforded certain privileges that mean it does not in the end have to be susceptible to rational questioning, although it is a status that also depends on its performative impotence – or at least Priestley never returns to aesthetics with the patient disciplinary attention he pays it in those lectures. Kingston sees the place of the aesthetic within Priestley’s associationism as troubling but also perhaps foundational; even if it is unique there are implications for the system he upholds as a whole, that the aesthetic is, as he comes to acknowledge himself there, not a mere decoration for propositional thought.

**II. Conviction.**

In the preface to the *Institutes* *of Natural and Revealed Religion* Priestley told his young readers that he aimed at “Conviction” (*Works* 2. xx), which is a rhetorical effect, or the end of a series of such effects. He bases his movement to “conviction” on the reasonableness of an appeal to readers who are posited as similarly reasonable and who weigh the balance of probabilities. However, his is a different kind of rational procedure from Benjamin Franklin’s or that of another friend, Jeremy Bentham – it is about probability and the reliability of witnesses. That is evident in the way Priestley undertakes to explain the realms of natural and revealed religion – the works and the word of God – in his *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion* of 1772-4.

Natural religion is that which is everywhere about us, while revealed religion is what the Bible reveals and thus is anterior, already mediated and needing further exposition, or what might be called hermeneutic support. The reason the Bible might be in need of support was that the claims of Priestley and others for rational religion could not depend on the same kind of rational test as in experiments with electricity or gases. The *Institutes* is a primer of doctrine, aimed at younger readers. Arguing against atheists and sceptics, it has to do different work from Priestley’s later *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782) which, in anatomising what he saw as heresies and doctrinal accretions upon primitive Christianity, caused more controversy.

Priestley’s *Institutes* were among the works he recommended to Franklin in a failed bid to convert him from a Deism that Priestley worried was effectively atheism (*Works* 1.i. 212). Priestley tends to keep separate the “philosophy” and the politics – there is a rare instance of scientific metaphor when he cites Franklin’s experiments to argue that if the court were to intervene to protect dissenters it would “be like throwing a few drops of Dr. Franklin’s oil upon the waves, [and] will make their troubled waters as smooth as a looking-glass” (*Works* 19. 170).[[23]](#footnote-23) The elicitation of theological from philosophical principles (from materialism and necessitarianism) was more controversial. The goal of Priestley’s arguments was always to secure “conviction” and in that sense there is more than an analogical relation to Bentham’s employment of similar arguments to secure convictions in legal cases.[[24]](#footnote-24) The applicability of the language and methods of experimental science to ethical schemes was not, however, always obvious. Neither Coleridge’s aspiration to “Transfer the proofs of natural to moral Sciences” nor Franklin’s “project of arriving at moral perfection” was ever achieved.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The basic criterion for experiments that they be reproducible could not be adduced in examining what for Priestley were “historical” phenomena such as the Resurrection and other biblical miracles, in the cases of which he adopted several strategies, asking how many accounts there were, what the witnesses might have had to gain, and so on. The forensic approach employed in the second volume of the *Institutes* – weighing the evidence for divine interposition – rests on a presumption about testimony that can be tested by asking questions. How many of the gospels report an event? Who is the source? What might have been their motives? (It is evident how quickly the interpreter would be obliged to go from questions about the number of testimonies to questions about the intentions of the witnesses.) For example, the absence of any foundation in nature for a resurrection is evidence for it to be believed because of the number of witnesses who attested to it and because Christ’s insistence on so counter-intuitive a notion suggests him to have been divinely inspired – what other motive could he possibly have had (*Works* 2: 158)?

Voltaire and others had argued against miracles, but Priestley’s unnamed antagonist is likely to be Hume, whose shrewd assertion in the *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding* that his argument against miracles “may serve to confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the *Christian religion*, who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason” might have been aimed at Priestley were it not much too early.[[26]](#footnote-26) Hume begins by asserting that where there is no sensuous testimony, everything is second hand and, testimony is like anything else in that it has to be tested by our “experience”. He recommends a kind of customary credulity – “[t]he reason why we place any credit in witnesses and historians, is not derived from any connexion, which we perceive a priori, between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a conformity between them” (113). Hume weighs the account of the miracle against the person giving the account, weighing “the one miracle against the other” and “If the falsehood of this testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion” (116).

For Priestley, association was the route by which religious faith is acquired, and in many respects religious faith is of the same order as any other kind of knowledge: the next step is the syllogism by which, for example, the doctrine of the resurrection is true because Christ has asserted it and Christ is the instrument of divine truth (*Works* 3. 17-18). Here Priestley uses the word “faith” rather than “truth” or “knowledge” and later seems to concede that it is only probable that objects exist externally to the mind – as the common sense philosophers had contended they did not – and cannot be proved: “the Divine Being leaves us to be governed by a kind of faith far inferior to mathematical certainty in things of infinitely more consequence” (*Works* 3. 42).

The concession, and the change of vocabulary there is telling and is at odds with the more belligerent claims he made elsewhere for the uniformity of natural or sensuous and religious knowledge. In the *Lectures on Oratory* published three years later Priestley insisted that there was no difference in the objects of knowledge nor of the means of acquiring it: “Truth whether geometrical, metaphysical, moral, or theological, is of the same nature, and the evidence of it is perceived in the same manner by the same human minds” (*Works* 23. 288).

For Priestley, historical propositions too (by which he means, occurrences for which our evidence is the testimony of others) are assented to by means of association. Testimony itself can (and should) be weighed and tested by rational criteria. There is a kind of utilitarian criterion for Scriptural “facts” – the evidence for miracles is overwhelming because attested to by so many witnesses (*Works* 2. 113-20; 16.34). In general, the evidence for revelation should be tested by appeal to the veracity of those who report it and the ascription to them of motives for doing so: “That testimony so copious, and so particularly circumstanced, given by such numbers of persons, who had the best opportunity of being informed, and who were so far from having any motive to impose upon the world, should notwithstanding, be given to a falsehood, cannot be admitted, without supposing all those persons to have been constituted in a manner quite different from other men” (*Works* 2.197). This stress on the reasonableness of many of the accounts of divine intervention is avowedly based on what is probable and is accompanied by the concession that other stories must be “fables”. The questions to be put to the scriptures are similar to those that might be posed to any historical testimony (*Works* 2. 197).

The fallibility of witnesses is in fact further evidence for contending the biblical accounts to be rational. “Marks of human imperfection” in the stories are far from being proof that the Bible was not divinely inspired. Rather, the mistakes demonstrate that their writers were also too imperfect to be up to fabricating a supernatural scheme. (If they had been making it up, he suggests, they would have got their stories straight.) In any case, the incidentals may be different or be given more or less emphasis from account to account (for example, only Matthew mentions the wise men but all the gospels give an account of Christ”s death and resurrection), just as in ancient history: “different historians agree in their accounts of the principal things only; but as certainly differ in their accounts of lesser circumstances” (*Works* 2. 218).

“Conviction” is different from a claim for truth because capable of being serially revised. Introducing his scientific rival Antoine Lavoisier to the minister David Jones, Priestley praises Jones for being “open, as we all ought to be, to conviction as new facts present themselves to us”.[[27]](#footnote-27) Conviction, then, is a point of rest rather than a fixed point, and is also teleological rather than inferential, proceeding from a prior faith in the Bible as the word of God: Priestley asking “why is it true?” already has a different starting point from the atheist’s question “is it true?” In the end the alternatives are still binary – miracles and other phenomena are either true or not – although latitude can be afforded those who have mediated those accounts to us.

**III. Theological Principles and Politics**

The relationship of religion to politics was therefore less abstract and with more evident material consequences than the relationship of reason to faith. Even where it did not issue in violence as it did against Priestley and other dissenters in Birmingham, that relationship was bound to be particularly uneasy for those economically and politically disadvantaged because they were unable to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles. The arguments of Bishop William Warburton in the 1730s for ‘the hegemony of the Church of England’ (in Jonathan Clark’s term) were revived with a new urgency in the 1760s and then following the loss of the American colonies, and while such arguments had to acknowledge that doctrinal differences might be tolerated it was also imperative not to allow toleration of difference to override Anglicanism as an institution; the Church could expect allegiance, Clark says, “because its establishment was expedient, not because its doctrine was true”.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In Priestley’s case, the uneasy relationship was because, as a dissenter, his avowals of allegiance to the Crown themselves might look merely expedient. Hisley’s writings of the 1770s and 80s, as well as local provocations, made him a target in the 1791 riots, especially the often exuberantly historicising refutations of such Anglican dogma as the Trinity or the doctrine of atonement or the Lord’s Supper in the Institutes and History of the Corruptions. Other works too suggested that religion and politics were mutually involved and that their involvement was almost inevitable.

Although Priestley himself was obliged to deny it, the establishment of the Church of England made dissent a political position, so politics needs to be quite broadly defined – more broadly than in Peter N. Miller’s excellent edition of Priestley’s *Political Writings* for Cambridge University Press (1995), which is a surprisingly thin volume, containing just the *Essay on the first Principles of Government* (1768) and *The Present State of Liberty in Great Britain and America* (1769). Priestley himself does suggest such a broad definition: he could show his audiences the workings of natural phenomena, revelations of nature which were superior to manifestations of temporal authority, declaring, in a much-quoted phrase from the Preface to his *Experiments on Air* that “the English hierarchy has equal reason to tremble at an air pump or an electrical machine.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

Of course the explicit connection Priestley drew between scientific innovation and a threat to the class-structure, was also made in violent terms by the mob that smashed up his laboratory in 1791. More abstractly, that such connections can be drawn shows that similar principles could be seen to underlie apparently different sets of phenomena, or what were apparently different disciplines. However, analogy is merely a heuristic device and a basis in similar principles was far from meaning homogeneity: Priestley would always confirm that the power of nature was greater than that of mere politics. In the *Essay on the First Principles of Government* he claimed that the same principle actuated his political as his theological work; that, specifically, the principle of the happiness of the greatest number of the members of a society is shared by any system of politics with the divine being.[[30]](#footnote-30) God too was a utilitarian and experiment was equally the condition of progress in the organisation of states and of progress in scientific knowledge: “All civil societies, and the whole science of civil government, on which they are founded, are yet in their infancy. Like other arts and sciences, this is gradually improving; but it improves more slowly, because opportunities for making experiments are fewer” (108).

Although Priestley’s politics and his theology share a set of principles they continue to occupy discrete domains: although God never instituted civil power and does not support any now existing, there are inferences to be drawn from natural theology that fuse secular and religious understanding of the processes of enlightenment. The very first principle in the *Essay on the First Principles of Government* is that awareness of other times is what distinguishes humans from animals. For Priestley, this testifies to a concern with futurity as continual improvement; he assumes the momentum of progress to be unstoppable: “If things proceed as they have done ... the earth will become a paradise” (*Works* 2.8). Progress is a power akin to a natural force that can be harnessed but that operates outside the established channels.

To Priestley, nature and the author of nature were permanent and universal whereas politics were local and evanescent: “The wisdom of one generation will ever be folly in the next. And yet, … we persist in the absurd maxim of making a preceding generation dictate to a succeeding one, which is the same thing as making the foolish instruct the wise” (*Essay*, 114). He does not need to appeal to Newton or Hartley to demonstrate that a notion that improvements proceed iteratively without altering that which they improve can only be absurd. On the contrary, the statement of belief in a progress which renders every reform certain to be superseded becomes the basis for a political claim: that citizens cannot be obliged to honour contracts made by the dead. The realms of the earthly life and the life after death are to be kept distinct and the “civil magistrate” should legislate only for the former. Not to tolerate dissent from an established Church was therefore an abuse of civil power, as he tells dissenters: “Religious liberty, indeed, is the immediate ground on which you stand, but this cannot be maintained except on the basis of civil liberty”.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Politics may also be resistant to the disinterested scrutiny of the inquirer. Priestley appealed not to rationalism but rather to “fact and experience” in the question of the state’s authority to interfere in religion. Political liberty is the “natural guard” of civil liberty but the two are distinguished.[[32]](#footnote-32) Priestley stressed proliferation and diversity, preferring Athens to Sparta, a preference that received its programmatic version in the *Essay*. He argued that two institutions were crucial and that both required liberty: these were religion and education, both of which would be better provided by individuals than by the state.[[33]](#footnote-33)

It is suggested later that the individual has a conscience, where the collective may not; and conscience is not a faculty to be gainsaid by a collective: “the voice of conscience is, in all cases, as the voice of God to every man” (*Essay*, 64; 67-8). Priestley advocates an expansion of the private realm into areas unjustly colonized by the collective bodies of Church and State – just as if the state were to choose spouses for its citizens or direct the education of their children, that too would be tyrannical (p.47). Education is like husbandry, architecture or shipbuilding: “In all these cases we have a practical problem proposed to us, which must be performed by the help of data, with which experience and observation furnish us” (p.42).

In a later (1791) sermon concerned with how best to prepare the students of the dissenting academy at Hackney for public life, Priestley claimed that the political situation had been better for the primitive Church, that he and his audience were in a state similar to that the apostles had been in and that the world needed to be “re-christianized”. In the early Church the demands of public good could be served immediately by private individuals but in modern Britain the state enjoys a suffocating monopoly: “Monasteries, universities, and pub[l]ic libraries … were established and endowed in the most splendid manner by the munificence of individuals, without the interference of public authority: and wretched has been the state of Christianity where it has been otherwise”.[[34]](#footnote-34) The established Church was dependent on tithes paid by all, whether or not they subscribed to the doctrines of the Church, so the argument against paying tithes is like Smith’s in *The Wealth of Nations* that those only who use the services ought to pay the taxes levied for them. Freedom of the market is for Priestley a civil liberty, and his opposition to centralised state provision is also an opposition to any restraints on economic activity; a re-christianized world would be governed equally by the laws of God and the laws of the market.

Questions of policy in the *Essay* are of less moment than the imperatives for experiment and toleration. Should those dependent on the state be allowed the franchise, should we have annual or septennial parliaments? No matter, the answer comes back: “it is not of much consequence … since a considerable degree of perfection in government will admit of great varieties in this respect”.[[35]](#footnote-35) Toleration of those differences and the admission of temporal schemes alongside the dominant are the only means to maintain an original equilibrium: “the only method of preserving the balance, which at present subsists among the several political and religious parties in Great-Britain, is for each to provide for the education of their own children” (*Essay*, p.51).

Priestley’s willingness to stress the common ground there might be between a rationalised Christianity and the faiths of Jews and Catholics is demonstrated in letters — “I do not see any danger we are in from the Papists”, he writes to Thomas Hollis in 1768, “and I cannot think we are authorized to molest them merely because they are disaffected to us” (*Works*, I, 97) – by a series of pamphlets, and by his meetings with scholars from both groups. ForPriestley, Jews and Christians were older and younger “brethren, in the great family of God” (*Works*, 20, 249). Priestley’s support for such extended toleration – for what David Ruderman calls “a kind of syncretistic faith” – led to his being ridiculed by some more orthodox Anglicans.[[36]](#footnote-36) A satirist purporting to reply on behalf of the Jews in 1787 asked whether Priestley had not “acted a very unwise part in inviting us to be of a religion which it does not appear you have adopted yourself” and concluded with an exhortation that he “Try to become a Turk or if desperate, circumcise yourself!”.[[37]](#footnote-37) Priestley’s overtures could be rejected not only by defenders of Anglicanism but also by Jewish intellectuals on similar grounds. As Rudeman summarises it, Priestley was taunted that “the logic of his conversion to Judaism, makes more sense than the Jew’s conversion to an inauthentic version of Christianity”.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Priestley was, however, clear in the *Essay* that toleration put him on the side of history, wryly noting, after dismissing the anti-Hutchesonian John Balguy, that the spirit of the age was against his antagonist: “toleration, very fortunately, happens to be the fashionable doctrine at present; and it must be incorporated into every system, how ill soever it may connect with it” (*Essay*, 102). Priestley was writing in the 1760s but, arguing for an essential principle, his advocacy of both ecumenicalism and toleration remained consistent throughout his career.

Political toleration will also be the means of ensuring stability, he says in his *Appeal to the Public* following the Birmingham riots: “By this gentle and generous proceeding, no convulsion will ever happen in any state”.[[39]](#footnote-39) He can reassure readers of his second, more self-justifying *Appeal to the Public* that they have less to fear from him than from the reactionary conservatism of someone like John Brown, whose advocacy of a kind of degree-zero state in which Britain could imitate Sparta he attacked in the *Essay*. By contrast to Brown, Priestley would be pragmatic in advocating reform: “though I might now recommend a very different form of government to a people who had no previous prejudices or habits, the case is very different to one that has; and it is the duty of every good citizen to maintain that government of any country which the majority of its inhabitants approve, whether he himself should otherwise prefer it, or not.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

**IV. The future**

The trajectory of Priestley’s thinking might well eventually have drawn him to atheism if he had lived longer, but the events of the 1790s both tested his commitment to progress and were instances and signs of the millennium. In 1791, before the outbreak of war with France, he anticipated a providential outcome:

If the condition of other nations be as much bettered as that of France will probably be, by her improved system of government, this great crisis, dreadful as it appears in prospect, will be *a consummation devoutly to be wished for*, and though calamitous to many, perhaps to many innocent persons, will be eventually most glorious and happy.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The allusion to *Hamlet* suggests a resolution of political crisis not as the accomplishment of revenge nor even as mutually assured destruction but as an apocalypse. A later passage sees religious and secular kinds of enlightenment as consonant:

By the light of revelation we have the pleasing prospect of the gradual improvement of the whole human race, in their progress from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, and from a state of barbarity and perpetual hostility, to a state of universal peace, virtue, and happiness, in which we are assured that this world is to terminate.[[42]](#footnote-42)

The first of these passages from the 1790s sees betterment coming out of an immediate crisis, while the other sees “gradual improvement” in familiar enlightened terms. However, on looking more closely, the two kinds seem more alike: the imminent “calamity” in the first passage presages the apocalypse and the millennium in the longer *durée* of the second.

A third passage shows how the one may impinge upon the other: in it, Priestley is addressing the Rev. Edward Burn of Birmingham in 1790: “having an immortal state hereafter in continuall prospect, our hearts will be loosened from all improper attachments to this world, all inordinate desires will be suppressed, all undue resentments stifled, and we shall rejoice in nothing so much as the pursuit of truth, and the uniform practice of virtue” (*Works*, 19.340).[[43]](#footnote-43) As it turned out, there was soon to be a different outcome for Birmingham from what Priestley had expected in addressing his Anglican antagonist.

These passages are not just about the way the future is invoked, but also about the way it becomes possible to talk about a state after time or when time is cancelled. For Priestley the present is insufficient and so the conduct of those who do not prepare for the afterlife “is much more inexcusable than that of the atheist, who not believing in futurity, minds only what is present”.[[44]](#footnote-44) Perhaps the terms are time-bound as well as temporal: they became crucial in the 1790s. Priestley and others claimed there to be an unbreakable analogy between historic and eschatological time and the relation between those states is obviously crucial to the relation between his religious and secular investments.

While to some the 1790s betrayed signs of leading to the last days, for Priestley on the other hand, natural philosophy testified to a concern with futurity as continual improvement; he assumed the momentum of progress to be unstoppable and what was in prospect remained benign, inevitable, proving God to be a kind of enlightened Whig with a vested interest in progress, as in the second passage above. One contradiction is to do with representations of time: on the one hand, Priestley’s research in chemistry and other fields of natural philosophy repeatedly derives evidence of progress. (For some, such as John Gray, such an insistence is definitive of all claims for enlightenment.)[[45]](#footnote-45) On the other hand, Priestley insists that historical events as interpreted by Revelation showed that the world was hastening to an apocalyptic calamity. Coleridge saw a similar happy confluence of natural philosophy and the millennium in a notebook entry of 1796:

Millennium, an History of, as brought about by a progression in natural philosophy — particularly, meteorology or science of airs and winds —

Quaere — might not a Commentary on the Revelations be written from late philosophical discoveries?[[46]](#footnote-46)

Priestley noted that thunderstorms and earthquakes in the prophetic books signified political overturning.[[47]](#footnote-47) If these were part of a weather forecast for Britain they might be perceived as seditious. If, that is, these were interpreted as signs of the imminent overthrow of the monarchy, such an interpretation would be treasonable, so a great deal centres on whether Priestley had a conviction of the literal truth of millennial prophecy.

Priestley told Thomas Belsham, fewer than twenty years his junior, that Belsham would live to see the Second Coming and the restoration of the Jews, having “inferred from the state of the world, compared with the language of prophecy that the second personal appearance of Christ was very near at hand” – within twenty years in fact.[[48]](#footnote-48) However, not only expediency but also rationality protected Priestley’s own writings from prosecution. Priestley did not require of prophecy (nor of miracles) the proofs that are required by natural philosophy, but he did need to demonstrate that nature and politics obeyed analogous laws.

This apparent relaxation of the protocols of philosophical investigation and the process of “conviction” was too much for some who had sympathised with the religion of the dissenters and the disabilities they had suffered because of it. John Adams was still exasperated enough by what he saw as the gulf between Priestley”s rationality and his confidence in revelation to reproduce verbatim nearly twenty years after Priestley”s death the conversation quoted at the start of this article, which he had held with Priestley nearly thirty years earlier. As Adams remembers it, the two had breakfast together soon after the execution of Louis XVI, when Adams was Vice-President – although it must have been in the United States and so in 1794 or later; Priestley averred that all his hopes for France were founded “on revelation and the prophecies” and Adams pressed him:

At last I asked the Dr. do you really believe the French will establish a free democratical government in France? He answered: I do firmly believe it. Will you give me leave to ask you upon what grounds you entertain this opinion? Is it from anything you ever read in history —is there any instance of a Roman Catholic monarchy of five and twenty millions at once converted into as free and rational people? No, I know of no instance like it. Is there anything in knowledge of human nature derived from books or experience that any nation ancient or modern consisting of such multitudes of ignorant people ever were or ever can be converted suddenly into materials capable of conducting a free government especially a democratical republic? No, I know of nothing of the kind. Well then, Sir, what is the ground of your opinion? The answer was, my opinion is founded altogether on revelation and the prophecies; I take it that the ten horns of the great beast in revelations, mean the ten crowned heads of Europe: and that the execution of the king of France is the falling off of the first of those horns; and the nine monarchies of Europe will fall one after another in the same way. Such was the enthusiasm of that great man, that reasoning machine.[[49]](#footnote-49)

This conversation had made enough of an impact for Adams to have already recalled it to Jefferson once before, in a letter, ten years previously when he was reading two prophets from Virginia of whom he opined that “though they are evidently cracked … they are not much more irrational than Dr. Priestley”. He concluded that “I shall never be a Disciple of Priestley. He is as absurd, inconsistent, credulous and incomprehensible as Athanasius”.[[50]](#footnote-50) In Adams’ later version quoted above, the disparity between Priestley’s capacities for “enthusiasm” and his mechanical “reasoning” is resolved a little by Adams securing from Priestley the admission– on which Adams withholds comment but would surely have regarded as only slightly less “evidently cracked” – that he wouldn’t kill kings but “would shut them up like the man in the iron mask, feed them well, give them as much finery as they pleas’d until they could be converted to right reason and common sense”.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Extracts from Priestley’s 1794 fast sermon hadbeenincluded in an anthology, *Wonderful Prophecies* published the next year by Richard Brothers, the former naval officer who had become a cause célèbre when, having proclaimed himself the “Prince of the Hebrews”, he prophesied “destruction” for London and apparently predicted the overthrow of the British monarchy by the revolutionary armies of France.[[52]](#footnote-52) Brothers was arrested and examined by the Privy Council to see if there was a case of treason to answer. They found it not to be the case that Brothers’ prophecies of the overthrow of the monarch or the defeat of his armies revealed republican or Revolutionary sympathies and instead he was declared insane and confined to a private asylum. Other prophecies, however, might be construed as seditious. For Brothers, the imminent restoration of the Jews to their “Promised Land” would be the prelude to a renewed Jerusalem and the Second Coming of Christ; although Priestley too saw that this event would portend the millennium, he tends to be seen as belonging to a rational fringe.

The respectability of Priestley’s kind of prophecy has a class basis, at least in part. Even Brothers’ patron and supporter, the MP Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, called attention to Brothers’ want of grammatical correctness and elegance, “in the style of a peasant exalting himself above the mightiest of princes”, so that the danger was, as a correspondent shocked by Halhed’s declaration to the House of Commons wrote to the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, that his prophecies were “written for the understanding, and adapted to the purchase of the lower class, the bulk of the people, whose minds in these days do not need disquiet”.[[53]](#footnote-53) Brothers claimed his revelations were direct, in the form of visions, rather than being derived from study of the scriptures as was the case with Priestley, who thought Brothers no more than a “curiosity” (*Works*, 1.ii. 312).

“It is sometimes difficult”, Morton Paley observes, “to discriminate between the discourses of millenarianism and those of secular radicalism”; and John Barrell has shown the overlap between them, at least in the eyes of the authorities, who would determine in a given instance whether the conditions of publication or utterance made a piece seditious.[[54]](#footnote-54) For Brothers, the function of prophecy was “To warn the guilty, console the afflicted, and confirm the dubious, with prophetic views of futurity”.[[55]](#footnote-55) Of the items in this list, only confirming the dubious might be controversial. What distinguishes Brothers, who allots himself eight pages of *Wonderful prophecies*, from Defoe, Addison, Smollett and others along with Priestley is his explicitness about dates and names (since 1789, and Pitt, Pulteney and others).[[56]](#footnote-56) One benefit of speaking in prophetic or allegorical terms is that it might keep the prophet from a charge of treason: because there is no explicit reference to contemporary politics the speaker can always claim to be talking not about the political future but about the eternal. Priestley is placed in an interpretative bind in which his writing must negotiate two different kinds of future, the eschatological time appropriate to the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world whose present incumbent was George III. He felt obliged to sift prophecies that could be read as “literal” from those that were “figurative”. The reflexes in the mundane or diurnal world of that move into an ideal one would be open to question since visionary language might be construed to have political reference. Although Priestley managed to avoid prosecution, he was of course the victim of direct action from the public.

Priestley delivered the sermon anthologised by Brothers, *The Present State of Europe compared with Ancient Prophecy*, just before eventually immigrating to America in 1794. (His farewell sermon followed only a month later.) It was published with a Preface that provides a kind of apologia and attempts to put in a longer historical context the riots in Birmingham that destroyed his home and laboratory and caused him to flee at first to London and ultimately to the United States. If the Gordon Riots of 1780 had “checked” anti-Catholicism, the Birmingham riots had no such effect, in preventing people from “insulting and abusing the Dissenters”; rather, “there prevails an idea, well or ill-founded, that tumultuary proceedings against Dissenters will not receive any effectual discouragement” (*Works*. 15.522). At the same time, Priestley is clearly still outraged, both by insinuations about his own motives and by the failure of the Government and of local authorities to compensate him for his losses. “I never preached a political sermon in my life”, he insists (525). In the sermon proper, his acknowledgement that Christ”s reply to the Romans, “My kingdom is not of this world”, was merely expedient suggests that this may have been disingenuous.

The exclamatory syntax of his summary of the previous four years is apocalyptic rather than analytic:

What could have been more unexpected than the events of any one of the last four years, at the beginning of it? What a total revolution in the ideas and conduct of a whole nation! What a total subversion of principles! What reverses of fortune, and what a waste of life! In how bloody and eventful a war are we engaged! How inconsiderable its beginning, how rapid and wide in its progress, and how dark with respect to its termination! At first, it resembled Elijah’s cloud, appearing no bigger than a *man’s hand*; but now it covers and darkens the whole European hemisphere!’ (550-51).

What is Priestley referring to? Does he mean the abolition of aristocracy and monarchy and execution of the king of France? Britain and other European nations going to war with the new republic? The apparent reticence is a product of inwardness with its audience. The questions are rhetorical and the exclamations remark on events that go unstated because there was no need to specify them to this audience, whereas there was good reason for being unspecific. Priestley’s audience here is the Hackney congregation he had inherited from his friend Richard Price and they would have made the inference, and might also have seen an allusion to Priestley’s own history since the riots in 1791, which were what had brought him to Hackney. The biblical allusion (1 Kings 18:44) has a suggestion of a human scale but also connotes forthcoming menace. After three years of drought, Elijah sees the cloud and hears “the sound of an abundance of rain”; so the biblical cloud carried a promise as well as a threat. The dark cloud louring over Europe might have presaged inundation, but it is also a harbinger of ultimate relief.[[57]](#footnote-57)

In the *Institutes* Priestley had distinguished eschatology from politics: he distinguished, that is, events in which we are interested as individuals (resurrection, judgement, retribution) from those “in which we are interested as members of civil societies”. There he had read the language of the Book of Revelations as figurative (*Works*, 2. 364-6).[[58]](#footnote-58) If in prophecies “day” tends to mean “year”, Priestley works out that “year” must mean something that has to be multiplied by 365, so calculating that the millennium will be delayed. However, he is also convinced that events such as the destruction of Babylon or the coming of Christ were foretold in Biblical prophecy (*Works*, 8.204). The examples he gives of those things in which we are collectively interested as members of civil society include the return of the Jews to their homeland and the millennium.

In the 1794 sermon Priestley mentions the figurative nature of prophecy again in relation to the prophecy of the restoration of the Jews, but the restoration must be preceded by an apocalypse: “Every description, figurative or otherwise, of this great revolution, clearly implies violence, and consequently great calamity” (*Works* 15. 535). “Calamity” is the term several contemporary sermons use for a public or historic disaster visited on a nation as in a sermon by William Steadman, “The safety of true penitents in a time of public calamity” (1795), or in another the next year by William Holcombe, *Self-correction a duty we owe to our country in times of public calamity*. The titles of these sermons are like Priestley’s in evincing ‘calamity’ as the occasion for a recall to religion. “Calamities” are natural disasters foreseen by God and evidence of Providence (*Works*, 17.43). Priestley has a footnote quoting his own *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782) which was also one of the sentences quoted by Edmund Burke in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* on the “calamitous” consequences of confounding divine with civil power (*Works* 15.548-9, f/n). In his reply to Burke Priestley insists that he was referring to the Catholic states of Europe although he concedes that “the interpretation of prophecy ought to be free to all” (*Works* 25.397) and that the separation of state from church need be “attended with no calamity” (*Works* 22.229). In an Appendix to the 1794 sermon he also quotes Hartley: “The downfall of the civil and; ecclesiastical powers … must both be attended with such public calamities as will make men serious; and also drive them from the countries of Christendom into the remote parts of the world”. The fulfilment of this prophecy for Brothers, when he quotes it in his *Wonderful prophecies* (1795), is that Priestley himself has now gone to “the remoter parts of the world” by joining his sons in the United States.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Priestley cannot say when calamity will end and the kingdom of Christ begin: “It is enough for us to know the certainty of these great events, that our faith may not fail on the approach of the predicted calamity, confident that it will have the happiest issue in God”s own time” (543). Priestley there has the accents of the DJ on an evangelical radio station, and he is clear about that which is not figurative. It is the promise made to the disciples that Christ will re-descend in the same way he had earlier ascended (549). (In the same year, but on a different continent, Priestley wrote from Philadelphia that the liberality of an atheist such as Thomas Paine is to be resisted partly by dire warnings that we may have entered the last days [*Works* 16.10].) Confident that apocalypse must be succeeded by millennium, the viewer of present calamities could afford to be sanguine: “What … should hinder our contemplating the great scene that seems now to be opening upon us, awful as it is, with tranquillity, and even with satisfaction, from our firm persuasion, that its termination will be glorious and happy?” (551).

The kingdom of heaven that was at hand for the apostle Matthew “is not yet come, but much nearer than it was in their time”. The supersession of the kingdoms of the world by the kingdom of Christ is presaged in general terms by “the present disturbances in Europe”, which are unprecedented and are “the beginning of those very calamitous times” (*Works* 15.533). Although Priestley again insists that the language of Revelations is figurative, its relevance to Europe was because the prophecies showed that the heaviest judgements would fall on those nations “which have been subject first to the Roman empire, and then to the see of Rome (542), in an “earthquake” that was already convulsing the former Papal dominion of France.

That is not a reading of prophecy that was going to disturb the British wartime government because such prophecies had other functions. First, they had to console those fellow Dissenters, whose activities within institutions parallel to the dominant ones may, in time of war, no longer be tolerated, who might now have found that those institutions were not being as generously funded as they had been, who might not (like Priestley himself) have been compensated for injuries they received and who had found that resentment against them had increased. Second, Priestley based his prophecies on observation of natural religion (of historical events) as well as of research in revealed religion (by reading scripture). An account of progress has to satisfy him that it is consistent with his research into natural philosophy.[[60]](#footnote-60) Priestley saw the Christian account as exemplified in the world but not as identical to it. Prophecy relies on allegorical understanding: whether elements of the allegory are translated or merely represented, it relies on recognising two levels of representation. If a figure such as Brothers wants to collapse one into the other – wants, that is, to collapse “symbolic” and “literal” levels – for Priestley that literal level comprises not only political events but also the workings of nature, which show God’s plan in operation.

The apocalyptic turn came late in Priestley’s career, of course precipitated by the incursion of public events into his family life. Perhaps his own interrupted domesticity was refigured as millennial “calamity” rather than redemptive reward; nevertheless, it is difficult to see that apocalyptic turn as anything other than giving up on the historical – or conservatively reversing the terms of Gramsci’s famous dictum so that it was optimism of the spirit, pessimism of the will.[[61]](#footnote-61) Perhaps the fatalism of Priestley’s convictions as much as the fundamentalist interpretation on which they depended was what worried John Adams. Taking that discourse seriously (although not literally) would lead to a gain in understanding that period but also give us a way of confronting the apparent collision or incompatibility of discourses that Adams also observed.

An unintended consequence of the apocalyptic discourse is to undo a progressive narrative that could be adapted to religious or secular purposes. Priestley did not have to deal with that consequence; he did not have to construct an alternative narrative that might accommodate difference and dissent, despite his piecemeal and sometimes quixotic attempts to do so, let alone one that might answer the demands of his co-religionists that it should also be of practical utility. Instead, taking an enlightened narrative of improvement apparently sanctioned by scripture and re-applying it to the political world, as Priestley did, is the kind of manoeuvre that may be best explained in terms that are essentially neither political nor religious, for all that they are terms that he would himself have rejected: in aesthetic terms, such as in Blake’s 1790s proverb imagining a history guided by the poets rather than dominated by the priests: “what is now proved was once only imagined”.[[62]](#footnote-62) A consummation devoutly to be wished for might have been occurring inevitably, regardless of human agency.

1. B. W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 15. (Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2004], p24, cites Horkheimer claiming there were two kinds of enlightenment – a theory of knowledge and an animus against superstition and error.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A thorough account building on Robert Darnton’s famous work on the Société typographique de Neuchâtel, is by Simon Burrows, in database form and in *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe II: Enlightenment Bestsellers (*London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017). For Britain, see especially Isabel Rivers ed.), *Books and Their Readers in Eighteenth*-*Century England* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1982), and the forthcoming *Vanity Fair and the New Jerusalem*.

   Even in the aftermath of the Birmingham riots he could defend print culture against the conservative jeremiad about its influence; he argued that proliferation of texts may diagnose the illness rather than itself being the illness and therefore went on to argue against proscription of free speech. The Revolution in France had shown censorship and suppression to be counter-productive: in a “state of restraint” of print “private conversation ... did more mischief than any books whatever”, Joseph Priestley, *An Appeal to the Public, On the Subject of the Riots in Birmingham* (Birmingham: J. Thompson, 1791), 91). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I am thinking principally of J.C.D. Clark, *English Society 1688-1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice During the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thomas Belsham, *Memoirs of the Late Reverend Lindsey* (London, 1812), 232-3. Belsham is discussing Priestley’s denial of the doctrine of the immaculate conception in the *Theological Repository* in the 1780s. A few pages earlier he has said ‘as his generous mind was above courting popularity, he took no pains to avoid offensive language in expressing his ideas’ (226). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ### Stephen Toulmin, Thomas Jefferson Lecture, March 24, 1997, ‘ A Dissenter's Life’, The Center for Multiethnic and Transnational Studies, College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, University of Southern California. <http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/CMTS/docs/dissent.html>; Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 13.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, edited by John Towill Rutt, 26-volumes (1817-31), 1.i, 199. Page references are to this, subsequently twice reprinted in facsimile, which remains the standard edition of Priestley, hereafter cited in the text as *Works*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Adams to Jefferson, August 15 1823. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *A Small Whole-length of Dr Priestley, from his Printed Works; or, A Free Account … of his Style* (London: F, and C. Rivington, 1792), 16.

   Priestley was able to publish so much partly thanks to his mastery of Peter Annet’s system of shorthand learned at Batley Grammar School and his own ‘mechanical methods’ of composition and memory. A former student reported how Priestley could be so prolific: ‘From minutes in short-hand, he dictated to each student, by turns, ... who copied after him in long-hand. From this copy the Doctor told me they were printed, with some additions only, relative to subsequent events’ (*Works*, 1. 51n). He confessed in a letter from Leeds that for him (as for Wordsworth), ‘writing long hand is irksome, and indeed painful to me’, so in Birmingham he employed an amanuensis three hours a day. To Theophilus Lindsey 30 May 1770 (*Works*, 1.i. 115). This letter is among the selection of letters between Priestley and Lindsey edited by Simon Mills at the Dr Williams’s Centre for Dissenting Studies. See http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/drwilliams/pubs/JP%20letters; *Appeal to the Public*, 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Additional Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (Birmingham: Joseph Johnson, 1782), v – vi. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In the fourth essay of his 1809-10 periodical *The Friend*, Coleridge explains a term he will use for the summary reflections that will punctuate subsequent essays in the series; ‘landing places’ are the wide landings on the spiral staircase of a great house he remembers from childhood; he describes their import in rather Hegelian terms: ‘from the last and highest the eye commanded the whole spiral ascent with the marble pavement of the great hall from which it seemed to spring up as if it merely used the ground on which it rested’. *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, 2 volumes (London and Princeton: Routledge / Princeton University Press, 1969), I 148-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It is also not hard to see the bolder claim as overstated: a title page states his materialist credentials for countering the ‘philosophical unbeliever’ whom he addresses in his preface: Priestley is ‘Honorary member of the Academy of Sciences at Petersburgh, and of the Royal Academy of Medicine at Paris’. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Additional Letters*, xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In recounting the experiments, the narrator is the experimenter. See Jan Golinski, *Science as Public Culture: Chemistry and Enlightenment in Britain, 1760-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 84-5. See also W.H. Brock on the difference between Priestley’s writing-up of experiments and Lavoisier, ‘Joseph Priestley, Enlightened Experimentalist’, in Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (eds.), *Joseph Priestley, scientist, philosopher, and theologian* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 49-79 [p.60]. As a principle for relating experiments, such a method is elsewhere defended in moral and aesthetic terms: ‘… the recital of the labours of the philosophers in an historical method gives a writer a better opportunity than a systematical method would do, of transmitting them to posterity in such a manner as will operate most powerfully on the minds of readers, and be a motive with them to exert and distinguish themselves in philosophical pursuits’, *History of Discoveries Relating to Vision* [1772], I, vii, cited by Golinski, 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. On graphic attacks, see especially Martin Fitzpatrick, ‘Priestley Caricatured’, in A. Truman Schwartz and John G. McEvoy (eds.), *Motion Toward Perfection: the Achievement of Joseph Priestley* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1990), 161-218. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *An Appeal* Part II, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (Bath: R. Cruttwell, 1780), 106-7. The *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* warn that Hume’s analytic method might blind the reader to logical flaws, so that Hume ‘ought to be read with very great caution’ (*Works* 24. 301).

    Compare Bentham on Blackstone, ‘the harmony of [whose] numbers [is] a kind of merit that of itself is sufficient to give a certain degree of celebrity to a work devoid of every other. So much is man governed by the ear’. Jeremy Bentham, *A Fragment on Government*, eds. J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart, intro. Ross Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 24. For Bentham the alternatives are utility or mischievousness.

    John Whale tells me that the centre of wire-drawing in Britain was Warrington. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Preface to *A Particular Attention to the Instruction of the Young Recommended*, *in A Discourse delivered at the Gravel Pit Meeting in Hackney* (London: J. Johnson, 1791) – Priestley used the *Institutes* alongside his *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (viii). Priestley may have claimed to proceed without authorities himself but is reluctant to allow the young similar liberty: he used the *Institutes* as a textbook for the adult class at Hackney, so still required the mediation of an instructor. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Timothy Priestley, *A Funeral Sermon Occasioned by the Death of the Late Rev. Joseph Priestley* (London: V. Griffiths, 1804), 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Simon Mills, ‘Joseph Priestley and the Intellectual Culture of Rational Dissent, 1752 – 1796’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Queen Mary University of London, 2009), 60-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air*, 3 vols (London: J.Johnson, 1774-7), Vol II (1775), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Robert E. Schofield (ed.), *A Scientific Autobiography of Joseph Priestley (1733-1804)* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966), 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Elizabeth Sarah Kingston, ‘”The Language of the Naked Facts”: Joseph Priestley on Language and revealed religion’ (unpublished D.Phil thesis, University of Sussex, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The famously similar idiom apparently derives from Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* rather than the Bible. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. There is, however, nothing in Priestley’s oeuvre much like Bentham’s deconstructive reading of a paragraph from William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* in an unfinished supplement to his 1776 *Fragment on Government*. It is difficult to describe the status of Bentham’s text, partly because of his apparent carelessness about publication, and the collected works are still in the process of being edited. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Kathleen Coburn, 5 vols, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP and London: Routledge, 1957- 2002), Vol I (1957), 100, October 1796); Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography and other writings*, ed. Ormond Seavey (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 84 ff., 92. The latter project was more than half a joke of course, and this and his famous letter to Priestley about “moral algebra” are – to use that fraught word – private communications, not ultimately determined by the requirements to be definitive, to be propositional, or even (although there is nothing close to a joke anywhere in Priestley) to be serious. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, third edition rev. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 129-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Schofield, *Scientific Autobiography*, 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Clark*, English Society*, p.229. (Clark’s chapter significantly concatenates these terms; it is entitled ‘Orthodox Anglican Political Theology’.) [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Joseph Priestley, *Experiments and observations on different kinds of air, and other branches of natural philosophy, connected with the subject*, three volumes (Birmingham, Thomas Pearson  1790), I, xxiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Essay on the First Principles of Government, in Priestley: Political Writings,* ed. Peter Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993*)*, 14. For Isaac Kramnick, the *Essay* ‘is a virtual gloss on Locke’s *Second Treatis*e’ ‘Eighteenth-Century Science and Radical Social Theory: The Case of Joseph Priestley's Scientific Liberalism’, *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Jan., 1986), pp. 1-30 [p.17)]. However, there is an incipient utilitarianism which diverges from Locke (and, incidentally, from the framers of the United States Declaration of Independence). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *An Address to Protestant Dissenters of All Denominations, On the Approaching Election of Members of Parliament* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1774), p.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Political Writings*, 53; 35. In the *Essay* Priestley claims that conquest is a blessing for states that have ceased to progress, but there is a slow, providential progress which, in so far as it needs human intervention, requires that citizens be given ‘liberty’. Priestley claims that the reason the civil magistrate will be concerned with religion but not with medicine for example is because of the power religion has to ‘influence’ (p.75). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Political Writings*, 38. Priestley says that the *Essay* as a whole derives, from his reply to Brown and its fourth section derives directly from that controversy. See Stephen Bygrave See Stephen Bygrave, *Uses of Education: Readings in Enlightenment in England* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2009), Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *The Proper Objects of Education in the Present State of the World: represented in a discourse … to the supporters of the New College at Hackney* (London: J. Johnson, 1791), 19; 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Political Writings*, 16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. David Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key: Anglo-Jewry’s Construction of Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), especially 170-79 [pp.173-175]. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. The first phrase is quoted by Simon Mills, ‘Priestley’s Connections with Catholics and Jews’, *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*, Vol. 24, no. 3 (April 2009), 176-191 [186]. Mills surmises the author of the reply to be the high churchman George Horne. See also MacCalman in Haakonssen. The second phrase is quoted by Ruderman, 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key,* 173-175. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Appeal to the Public*, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Appeal to the Public*, II, 112. Priestley says that the *Essay* as a whole derives, from his reply to Brown and its fourth section derives directly from that controversy. See Stephen Bygrave, *Uses of Education: Readings in Enlightenment in England* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2009), Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, occasioned by his Reflections on the revolution in France* (London J. Johnson, 1791), 151, [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Observations on the increase of infidelity* (1796),53-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Familiar letters, addressed to the inhabitants of Birmingham* (1790), 245-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I (Birmingham, 1787), p.22 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. John Gray, *Enlightenment’s Wake: Politics and culture at the close of the modern age* (1995; London and New York: Routledge, 2007). Liberalism now being the only game in town, the alternative is a mode of thinking that would bypass Kant and the Enlightenment altogether, a kind of ‘agonistic liberalism’, to which Gray himself had, he says, previously subscribed. That is, only if the town is in the West: in Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and maybe even China the free market exists successfully without Enlightenment civil society (127). They are not liberal democracies but they are successful, economically and otherwise. However, they have the same instrumental and exploitative relation (Gray calls it ‘nihilist’) to the earth and its resources as the West. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 2 vols in 1 (London: Routledge, 1957), entry no. 133 (1796), I, . [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Clarke Garrett quotes this passage, noting the ‘long history’ of this interpretation in his *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975), p.190). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Thomas Belsham, *Memoirs of the Late Reverend TheophilusLindsey* (London, 1812), 375. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Adams to Jefferson, August 15 1823. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Adams to Jefferson, March 3 1814. In a letter of July 18 1813 Adams had praised Priestley: ‘This great, excellent and extraordinary Man, whom I sincerely loved esteemed and respected. Was really a Phenomenon; a Comet in the System, like Voltaire, Bolingbroke and Hume’. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Adams to Jefferson, August 15 1823. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1968), 127-9. See Deborah Madden, *The Paddington Prophet: Richard Brothers's journey to Jerusalem* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Emma Major, ‘Fast Sermons of the 1790s’, in *Religion and Enlightenment* special issue, ‘Writing Religion, 1660-1830’, eds. Emma Salgard Cunha and Laura Davies. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Quoted by Garrett, pp. 192; 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Morton D. Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 13; John Barrell, ‘Imagining the king’s death: the arrest of Richard Brothers’, *History Workshop Journal* 37 (1994), 1- 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. *Wonderful Prophecies*, p5. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. As Jon Mee points out, William Frend and others *seek* the power of prophecy whereas Brothers *claims* it: ‘I am the prophet that will be revealed to the Jews’, he writes (*Wonderful Prophecies*, 23) *Wonderful Prophecies* is one of a number of works, the formally heterogeneity of which was an earnest of their democratic potential. See Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, 33-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Thomas Newton, *Dissertations on the Prophecies*, three vols (Dublin, 1773), II, 325.uses the biblical prophecy to apply to the actions of Mohammed and the victories of the Saracens [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Garrett quotes the passage in *Respectable Folly*, p.131, and also quotes the American prophet of the millennium, Elhanan Winchester, writing in his *Course of Lectures on the Prophecies that Remain to be Fulfilled* (1790) that ‘these prophecies must be fulfilled in a plain literal manner or … they might as well not be fulfilled at all’ (p.138). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. David Hartley, *Observations on man, his frame, his duty, and his expectations* (London, 1749), p.377; Brothers, *Wonderful prophecies. Being a dissertation on the existence, nature, and extent of the prophetic powers in the human mind* (1795), 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Coleridge’s notebook entry intuits their connections; and in the prediction quoted earlier that ‘the earth will become a paradise’ Priestley has been talking about agriculture. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. For a complication of this view see Kevin Gilmartin, *Hazlitt: Political Essayist*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 136-147. The likely response to Robert Owen’s utopian schemes in the 1810s would be like the Pittite response to radical millenarianism of the 1790s – as much a rebuke to the socialist as to the Tory Prime Minister, and its reversion to two decades earlier suggesting how those apocalyptic hopes (even if Hazlitt might have shared them) had to be translated into other historical terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-93)*,* in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman, rev. Harold Bloom (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 35-38 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)