

P

Priestley, Joseph



Alan M. S. J. Coffee
King's College London, London, UK

Introduction

Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) was an influential and versatile British thinker who made a lasting contribution to several disciplines. He published important works in several areas of philosophy and politics, as well as in science and theology. Priestley was an influential but controversial figure, especially regarding his nonconformist theology, antiestablishment politics, and support for the French Revolution. For this reason, his political ideals were more readily accepted abroad, especially in the United States where his nonconformist and millenarian theology, republican politics, and support for laissez-faire economic policies found a sympathetic audience.

Background and Life

Priestley was born near Leeds in the north of England. Though raised in a strict Calvinist family, he had early doubts about this doctrine and went on to study at the dissenting college, Daventry Academy. There, Priestley became acquainted with the work of David Hartley (1705–57), whose psychological and

epistemological philosophy was to be one of his greatest intellectual influences.

Between 1773 and 1780, Priestley worked as a librarian and advisor for the future British Prime Minister, the Earl of Shelburne, before moving to Birmingham to take up a post as dissenting minister. In 1791 he fled the city when his house was ransacked and destroyed by a violent religious and politically motivated mob during the “Church-and-King” riots.

Shortly afterward, Priestley moved to the United States. He was a close friend of presidents John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Following the rift between Adams and Jefferson, Priestley sided with Jefferson. Jefferson acknowledged his intellectual debt to Priestley, referring to him as “one of the few lives precious to mankind” (Jefferson 1801).

Natural Science and Theology

Though without formal scientific training, Priestley made important contributions to several fields, including electricity and chemistry, where he is credited with the discovery of oxygen in 1774. Though science and theology are distinct disciplines today, Priestley considered them to be part of a single research program, within which theology was the more important. For this reason, writes Robert Schofield, “one cannot understand Priestley *as a scientist* without also investigating

his theology, and his metaphysics which links the two" (1983, 70).

Theologically, Priestley was a "Socinian," considering Christ to be merely human. This placed him at the center of the growing eighteenth century Unitarian movement. Priestley applied the same rational and empirically based approach to theology as in his science. He had a materialist and causally deterministic outlook, which led to controversial conclusions including the rejection of Christ's divinity, the doctrine of atonement, and human free will.

Priestley's theology was also millenarian, interpreting historical and current political events in light of the scriptural accounts concerning the Christ's second coming. Priestley interpreted the French Revolution, for example, as indicating that the millennium was imminent. Underpinning his millenarianism was a belief in human progress and perfectibility, such that as knowledge and understanding improve, so societies will be better governed and happier (Fruchtman 1983).

Legal and Political Philosophy

Priestley's theory of the law and government follows from his beliefs about human progress. Society and government, are the "great instrument" placed in the hands of individuals working collectively to bring about a state of perfection (1993, 9, 10).

The protection and mobilization of human thought are the fundamental basis of government. This is best achieved through free enquiry, public debate, and a principle of religious toleration (*An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, 1768). Priestley took the limits of toleration much further than others such as Locke. "Should free inquiry," he argued, "lead to the destruction of Christianity itself, it ought not, on that account, to be discontinued," since religion is valuable only if it is true and can stand the test of free scrutiny (*Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion: A Sermon*, 1775, xxiv).

Priestley's politics should be understood within the republican tradition, an approach that includes other radicals and Dissenters of his time,

such as James Burgh, Catharine Macaulay, Thomas Paine, Richard Price, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Government is regarded as being legitimate insofar as it upholds an ideal of individual and collective freedom as independence from arbitrary controlling power. Laws that uphold freedom are those that reflect the common good of the people, where the common good is determined by the people themselves through public debate rather than being imposed according to some prejudice or factional interest. Such a community is committed to a principle of equality among the citizens as well as a willingness to support the common good rather than some private advantage.

In contrast to some other republicans – such as his great friend and fellow radical dissenter, Price – who held freedom to be of intrinsic worth, Priestley sees its value instrumentally, regarding it as the surest means to progress and truth. "By freedom of debate," he writes, "and writing, the minds of the bulk of any people would in time be enlightened, and their general voice alone would, in a well-regulated state, both command any real useful regulation, and enforce the observance of it when it was made. If the constitution was not a good one, this perfect freedom of debate would be the best method of making it to be so" (*Letters of Advice in Works*, vol. XXII, 455, and Miller 2008, 338).

With the principle of equality, Priestley gives a similarly instrumental account of its application. While the interests of all citizens should be equally represented, it is not necessary that everyone should have a vote. If a person's circumstances – such as poverty – prevent them from being independent, then their judgment cannot be trusted and they would not be allowed a voice in the election (*Present State of Liberty in Priestley* 1993, 134).

Conclusion

Priestley is a versatile and penetrating thinker with a vast range. He made lasting and meaningful contributions to several fields, though he considered these all to be part of a single overall project

of enquiry. He was a significant cultural and political figure in his lifetime. Though he has been neglected in comparison to his intellectual peers, such as David Hume and Adam Smith, his work remains relevant and appreciated by those who study it.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Bentham, Jeremy](#)
- ▶ [Jefferson, Thomas](#)
- ▶ [Macaulay, Catharine](#)
- ▶ [Price, Richard](#)
- ▶ [Wollstonecraft, Mary](#)

References

- Fruchtman J (1983) The apocalyptic politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley. *Trans Am Philos Soc* 73(4)
- Jefferson T (1801) "From Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, 21 March 1801," *The papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 33, 17 February–30 April 1801, Oberg B (ed). Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2006, pp 393–395. Available on Founders Online, National Archives. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-33-02-0336>
- Miller P (2008) *Defining the common good*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Priestley J (1768) *An essay on the first principles of government, and on the nature of political, civil, and religious liberty, including remarks on Dr. Brown's code of education, and on Dr. Balguy's sermon on church authority*. J. Johnson, London
- Priestley J (1775) *The importance and extent of free inquiry in matters of religion: a sermon, preached before the congregation of the old and new meeting of Protestant dissenters at Birmingham*. M. Swinney, Birmingham
- Priestley J (1817-31) *The theological and miscellaneous works of Joseph Priestley*. Rutt JT (ed), 25 Vols. London
- Priestley J (1993) *Political writings*. Miller P (ed). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Schofield R (1983) Joseph Priestley: theology, physics and metaphysics. *Enlightenment Dissent* 2:69–82