

Our American Roots: The Revolutionary Unitarian Deists

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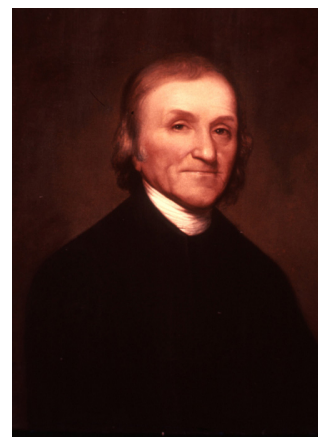
Myths and Stories of UU Origins

When I was attending seminary in Berkely, California , I was told many stories about UU origins in America, but not all those stories were true. Many of my professors at Starr King School for the Ministry (UU) in Berkely, said that Unitarianism began in 1825 when Rev. William Ellery Channing preached on “Unitarian Christianity”. This view was reinforced by many of my colleagues in UU ministry, especially those from large congregations. Imagine my surprise when I learned that 50 years before William Ellery Channing’s famous sermon, Revolutionary Unitarian Deists like Thomas Jefferson, John and Abigail Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Rev. Joseph Priestley were attending, establishing and serving Unitarian congregations while articulating a Unitarian-Deist theology.

My claim today is that Revolutionary Unitarian Deists in the 1770's, 80's and 90's set the cornerstone for American Unitarianism. Many of our traits that are puzzling and difficult to explain to our Christian neighbors and family, shine in a new light when seen as deriving from the Revolutionary Unitarian Deists. Our tendency to look for the sacred in the midst of the secular, our passion for liberty and justice through progressive activism, our faith in reason, science and liberal democracy----all these make perfect sense when we dare to imagine ourselves as descendants of Revolutionary Unitarian Deists who also invented America. At the end of this talk, there are two self-score inventories so you can decide where you and the UU congregations you have known are located on a spectrum between Revolutionary Unitarian Deism and Unitarian Christianity.

Joseph Priestly: minister, scientist and revolutionary

My focus in this talk will be Rev. Joseph Priestley who served as minister, mentor and friend to more famous Revolutionary Unitarian Deists like Thomas Jefferson, John and Abigail Adams and Benjamin Franklin. This dynamic minister, scientist and American revolutionary is, I say, a founder of American Unitarianism. I will limit myself to three 3 questions about Joseph Priestley as an exemplar of our UU faith : What did he accomplish? What character traits helped him do so much ? How does the faith of Revolutionary Unitarian Deists like Priestley set the tone for 21 st century Unitarian Universalism?



What did Joseph Priestly accomplish?

As my Millennial students, nieces and nephews say “a ton”. In surveying the works of Joseph Priestley and his companions, I feel like an ant gnawing at the base of a giant redwood---trying not to do too much damage but to take good notes.

1. He is the author of at least 150 publications. Some of these are books, some are letters, some are even sermons or collections of sermons, but his written output is still staggering. So was his scope: he wrote about Unitarian theology, Biblical interpretation, he composed grammar textbooks for his students, tracts for instilling virtues in youth, volumes of scientific experiments, essays concerning political and religious liberty, law, government and ethics.

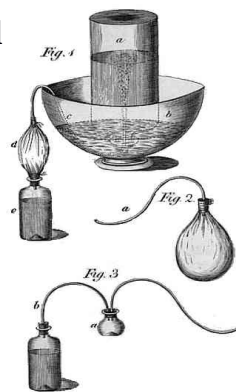
2. He was an intellectual and spiritual leader of English “Dissenters” which evolved into English and American “Unitarianism”. He engaged in public debate, voluminous correspondence, wrote letters to the editor and religious/political tracts.

3. He was a fierce defender of American and French Revolutions which meant that he was calling into question the interlocking authority of the British Crown and the Church of England.

4. He was a philosophically gifted advocate for increased political and religious liberty. Like many American Unitarian Deists, Priestley was well acquainted with Europe's tragic religious wars and was therefore ardent in supporting a strict separation between Church and State.

5. He was a friend, theological mentor and coconspirator with American Founders like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. With their help, Priestley became a founding minister of First Church Unitarian in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

6. Priestley is often credited with being a **co-discoverer of oxygen**. More practically, Priestley was the **inventor of “carbonated water”**. Whenever we open a can or bottle of “carbonated water” or “soda”, we could say “*Thank you Joseph!*”



7. Priestly was a dedicated and skillful life-long educator. When he taught writing in England and discovered there was no uniform grammar text, he wrote one. He also composed tracts to help English and American Unitarians articulate their faith and see to the moral education of their children. He also advised his friend Thomas Jefferson on the founding of the University of Virginia--- one of the most successful experiments in early American higher education.

Joseph Priestley's Character and Resources

This staggering and partial list of accomplishments leads to an interesting question: how did Priestley do all that? *Where did his abundant energy come from?*

1. Priestley was “resilient” in the face of tragedy. When his father died, he made his peace with his stepfather. When a childless uncle & aunt offered to adopt him and pay for an impeccable upper class education, he accepted their generous offer.

2. He weathered the full force and rigors of an upper class English education . By the age of 7 he had memorized the 107 questions and answers of the standard Anglican catechism. By his late teens he could read Greek, Latin and Hebrew, had studied the rudiments of “Natural Philosophy” and was beginning to experiment with both chemistry and theology.

3. He was made lasting friendships with important people. He initially befriended Benjamin Franklin because of their shared experiments with electricity. He became the friend and Unitarian mentor of Thomas Jefferson based on their shared interest in Unitarianism, religious liberty and political revolutions. When his home and laboratory were burned in Leeds, England he accepted the generous help of both Franklin and Jefferson in moving to America where he became minister to the First Church Unitarian of Philadelphia.

4. He married well. His beloved wife (Mary Willkinson) strengthened his social position as a leader of the Dissenter Intelligensia and took total and effective care of the family and home. Together they maintained friendly relations with progressives in England and America.

5. He was an active political and religious Dissenter, who knew which lines not to cross. He never directly challenged the authority of the English Crown or the Church of England. Nor did he resist pay taxes to both pillars of English society.

6. Priestley rode the waves of Scientific/Industrial/Democratic Revolutions.

If you're still feeling in awe of Priestley and his accomplishments, welcome to the club.

It wasn't until I stepped back from the details of Priestley's life and asked my imagination for a guiding image that I got it. Joseph Priestly, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were born into an era of monumental changes. As they entered into young and prolific adulthood, they learned to ride the waves of the three most important revolutions of the last three centuries. The Scientific Revolution provided new tools and technologies for building a tested and coherent body of knowledge that was not dependent on blind faith or the authority of the Church.

Science and technology combined to create an Industrial Revolution which multiplied human power and, in the course of a few generations, shifted the center of economic activity from agriculture to industry. The Democratic Revolutions which began in American in 1776 and France in 1787, made the benefits of science and industry to be shared more broadly. Joseph Priestly with his friends Franklin, Jefferson and others were artful surfers who rode the waves of ScientificIndustrialDemocratic Revolutions into a new era of which they were the active co-creators and energetic beneficiaries. Together they rode the optimistic waves of “Modernism” or “Liberalism” that was a rising ideological tide of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Joseph Priestley: Architect of Revolutionary Unitarian Deism

1. Like many of his contemporaries, **Joseph Priestley was relentlessly OPTIMISTIC** about the powers, potential and future of humankind. His groundbreaking study, The History of Electricity, reveals how one scientific discovery builds upon another so that, over the course of generations, a larger body of theories grows into a field of testable knowledge. As an ardent supporter of the French and American revolutions, he also felt a deep optimism of what human beings could accomplish once they were freed from the yoke of monarchy and state religion. Like his contemporary Thomas Paine, he seems to have believed that “we have it in our power to begin history over again.” Taken together this optimism about the growth of knowledge and the betterment of humankind through science and technology meant that Priestley, like Jefferson, Franklin and many others, helped succeeding generations IMAGINE a better future.



Joseph Priestley and his co- conspirators helped invent the idea of Progress. (See The Invention of Air). It was no accident that many Unitarian churches in the late 19 th century concluded their services by affirming “*the progress of Hu/mankind onwards and upwards forever*”. For Priestley and his generation of American Founders, Progress “onwards and upwards” may have seemed inevitable.

2. Priestley's optimism about Human Nature shaped his theology.

Like most Unitarians, Jews and Muslims, he rejected the idea that Jesus was a god. Because Jesus was understood as fully human, Priestly also rejected the idea that the death and resurrection of Jesus could magically save us from our sins. Instead, he argued that the only way to overcome sin was through personal repentance and personal reform. Hidden behind this polite but heretical facade is an idea that would shake some forms of Christian orthodoxy to its core: *human beings not gods incarnate are the architects of our lives!* We have much to learn from ethical and spiritual teachers like Jesus and Socrates, but they cannot save us from our selves. (See Jesus and Socrates Compared). Priestley's understanding of Jesus as fully human encouraged Thomas Jefferson to take a scissors to the New Testament during his second term as president. The result was Jefferson's Bible a revolutionary view of a fully human Jesus which is strangely in accord with some of the recent discoveries of the Jesus Seminar (see Marcus Borg's Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings and John Dominic Crossan's Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography.)

3. For Priestley, like Franklin, Jefferson, Adams and many subsequent Unitarians **Reason not blind faith gives us glimpses of “Nature's God”**. Priestley's theology reveals the complexity which one would expect from a heart and mind with great scope. He is sometimes insistent, for example, that all can finite human beings can say about an infinite being like God must be expressed in negative terms: not created, not born, not finite, not mortal. But sometimes, like many of his Unitarian Deists contemporaries he speaks with great enthusiasm for the patterns in Nature which the rational mind can detect.

For Priestley, **God is** understood as the transcendent source of **Good Orderly Design**, the sum total of all natural laws. Like Albert Einstein and Carl Sagan in our time, Priestly and many of his fellow Unitarian Deists believed that the Laws of Nature revealed the “hidden speech of God” (Unitarian physicist Isaac Newton). Though later generations of Unitarians would come to see differences between the God of Nature and the God of Revelation, Joseph Priestley seems to have held them to be deeply compatible and even complementary. His fellow revolutionary Thomas Paine is virtually alone in his generation in trumpeting the disjunction between natural vs revealed religion (The Age of Reason). The Deists discovery of a “God of Nature” known by Reason opens up many possibilities for future generations of Unitarians. Many Humanists deepen Thomas Paine’s skepticism by denying there is any God, either Natural or Revealed. Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson will redraw the boundaries between Divine and Human by pointing to the “Deep Power” and “Wise Silence” which is common ground.

4. Like many of his Revolutionary Deist colleagues, Joseph Priestley believed that **Public Virtue trumps private piety and private charity**. Like the now passing vanguard of the “Greatest Generation”, Priestley and his peers found greater meaning and good in building a just society, than just praying for the poor and dispossessed. They were a generation who found that cultivating virtues within ourselves was futile unless one cares deeply and takes action to create a just society for all. I believe that Priestley and his contemporaries would understand why Unitarians and Universalists in our day find such deep meaning in public witnessing for peace, justice and equality. They would encourage our efforts to create a free faith of “deeds not creeds”. They would encourage us to “stand up for” Liberty and Justice, Reason and Democracy so that future generations are not forced to their knees by tyrants both religious and political.

Summary of Revolutionary Unitarian Deism

1. The “**God of Nature**” is revealed by the “Laws of Nature” understood by Reason and the Scientific Method.
2. **Jesus is fully human but not divine**; he is an ethical teacher like Socrates, Buddha and Confucius.
3. **Human Nature is fundamentally good**.
4. **Liberty, Justice and Reason** help humanity reach its full potential. Democracy and Education are social institutions which help create better people and better societies.
5. **Human Progress is inevitable**; we evolve “onward and upward forever”.



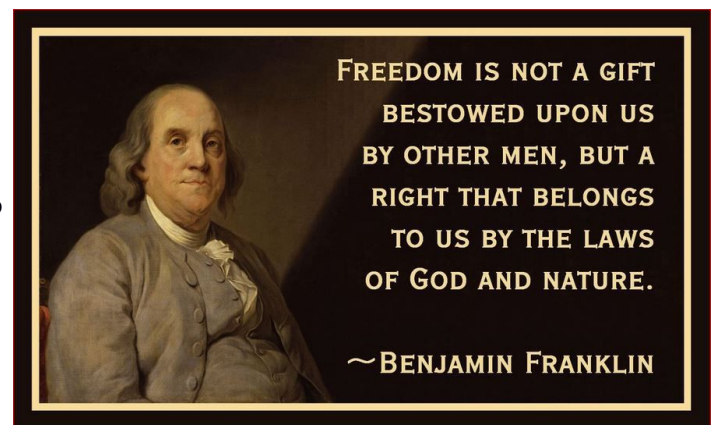
Two Concluding Parables of Revolutionary Unitarian Deism

I want to end with a story, a true story about Benjamin Franklin which reveals from a slightly different perspective many of the values that animated the life of Joseph Priestley and the Revolutionary Unitarian Deists who were his friends and co-conspirators. Benjamin Franklin receive a letter from a small town in Massachusetts that were about to be annexed to Exeter, Massachusetts. They did not want to be annexed so the town elders wrote to Franklin offering to rename their village “Franklin, Massachusetts” if only he would donate enough money to buy a bell for their church steeple. Franklin gave the matter serious consideration and wrote back to them saying that he was flattered by their kind offer and while he did not plan to donate money for a church bell, he would give them something of lasting value. Franklin sent them 116 volumes from his own library so that Franklin, Massachusetts could establish one of America's first public library. Franklin, like many Deists and Unitarians, looks for “the sacred” (what is of “greatest value” or “ultimate concern”) in the midst of secular life. We may entertain views of the “after-life” but they can never be proved or disproved in this life.



The second story is often told about Benjamin Franklin, but I know of no historical evidence that would confirm it. It's a “secular myth”, intended to transmit values rather than facts. It's said that during the Constitutional Convention when members of the newly liberated 13 American Colonies were debating the new Constitution, that a crowd surrounded several of the delegates. One member of the crowd stepped forward and asked: “What will this new Constitution you are debating give: Monarchy or Democracy”? Ben Franklin, who was rarely at a loss for words, stepped forward and said: “Ladies and Gentlemen, we will give you Democracy---*BUT WILL YOU KEEP IT?*”

May that question still echo in our hearts and minds. We are less than a month away from one of the most important midterm elections in our history. My hope, perhaps even my prayer, is that we will do all within our power to KEEP DEMOCRACY and its institutions viable and safe from the would-be Kings, Demagogues and religious Zealots of our time!



Two Self-Score Inventories

Self-Score Inventory: *Are you a Revolutionary Unitarian Deist?*

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1. The Laws of Nature can be known by the use of Reason and Science.
1 (strongly disagree).....5 (maybe).....10 (strongly agree)
2. The Laws of Nature reveal the organizing principles of Nature's God.
1 (strongly disagree).....5 (maybe).....10 (strongly agree)
3. Knowing the Truth can set us free from the chains of habit and superstition.
1 (strongly disagree).....5 (maybe).....10 (strongly agree)
4. All men (all people) are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. (AdamsFranklinJefferson)
1 (strongly disagree).....5 (maybe).....10 (strongly agree)
5. When Human Rights are protected, life gets better.
1 (strongly disagree).....5 (maybe).....10 (strongly agree)
6. The separation of Church and State and Public Education increases the odds that a free Society and all its citizens will prosper.
1 (strongly disagree).....5 (maybe).....10 (strongly agree)
7. Authority in a just society is not derived from Church or Crown, but from the People.
1 (strongly disagree).....5 (maybe).....10 (strongly agree)
8. Education is a gradual, nonviolent path to a better life.
1 (strongly disagree).....5 (maybe).....10 (strongly agree)
9. When government usurps the power of the people, it is our right and our responsibility to reclaim it.
1 (strongly disagree).....5 (maybe).....10 (strongly agree)
10. When Reason and Faith are in conflict, I usually follow Reason.
1 (strongly disagree).....5 (maybe).....10 (strongly agree)

Liberal Christian / Unitarian Deist Sorting Quiz

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1. In your congregation what **activity** happens more frequently: serving communion or debating public policy?
2. How many of the original **apostles** of Jesus can you name?
How many American **founders**, aka “founding Fathers” can you name?
3. What **signs** are you more likely to see at your local UU congregation: a Cross or an image of the Whole Earth?
4. To what “**larger body**” do you belong: the “body of Christ” or “the body of all life on Earth”?
5. What **activity** is more likely to help build a good life and a good society: taking Christian communion or voting regularly?
6. If you wanted to understand the **nature of the Creator** where would you look first: the life and teachings of Jesus or the laws of Nature discerned by reason?
7. In your life, does **faith** correct reason or does **reason** correct faith or does?
8. What is closer to your own “**first commandment**”: love God with all your heart or use reason to understand the universe?
9. For you where is “**heaven**” located: in a perfect world beyond this world or in moments of seeming perfection in this world?
10. Before an important public meeting in your congregation, what **guiding principles** are you more likely to review: the “Beatitudes of Jesus” or “Robert’s Rules of Order”?

Liberal Christian Score: ____/ 10 = _____%

Revolutionary Unitarian Deist Score: ____/ 10 = _____%

Resources for Further Study

“Deism” [Deism - Wikipedia](#)

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deism>

The Jefferson Bible with introduction by Rev. Forrest Church (UU).

Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography by John Dominic Crossan.

Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings by Marcus Borg.

Jesus and Socrates Compared by Joseph Priestley.

Full text of "Socrates and Jesus compared" - Internet

Archivehttps://archive.org/.../socratesjesuscom00prieuoft/socratesjesuscom00prieuoft_djvu.txt

Revolutionary Spirits by Rev. Gary Kowalski (UU).

Cosmos by Carl Sagan.

The Age of Man and *The Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine.

“*The Humanist Manifestos*”

“*The Religion of Carl Sagan*” and “*The Religion of Einstein*”

sermons by Rev. Ted Tollefson (UU)



Thomas Jefferson's meditation room @ Monticello, aka “The Dome Room”

