

**STUART ANDREWS**

**Transatlantic Theology:  
How Scottish Unitarianism Was Transplanted to America**

William Christie is hardly a household name, even in Scotland. Yet his claim to have bridged the great divide comes from his presiding not only over the first avowedly Unitarian congregation in Scotland, but also over the first in Philadelphia. Christie was born at Montrose in 1748, into a wealthy merchant family. His elder brother, Alexander, was Provost [Mayor] of Montrose, like his father before him; and his father's first cousin was Rector [Headmaster] of Montrose Grammar School, where William was well-grounded in classical languages. Beyond his schooling at Montrose, William Christie was self-educated. After some years in the family business, the Christies' wealth allowed William to stop practising as a merchant and to devote himself to biblical and theological study.

His Unitarian views are best expressed in his own account of the beliefs of the Montrose congregation which first opened its doors in August 1781: 'This little church takes the scriptures alone for its guide, and acknowledges no human articles or confessions of faith whatever.' What he called the 'doctrine of a triune Deity', which was held by all Protestant churches including the Church of Scotland, was considered by Christie to be 'derived from that mother of abominations the Church of Rome'. Having (as he put it) 'maturely and deliberately considered the subject', he found he could 'no longer with a good conscience remain in the communion of a church where a false Popish deity was acknowledged'.<sup>1</sup>

The leading English Unitarian, Joseph Priestley, used the term 'Rational Christian' interchangeably with 'Unitarian'. Yet Priestley, discoverer of oxygen and writer on electricity and optics, uncompromisingly based his antitrinitarianism squarely on Scripture. As he wrote in his *Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity*, first published in 1770: 'Be not backward or afraid, my brethren, to make use of your reason in matters of religion, or where the Scriptures are concerned. They both of them proceed from the same God and Father of us all...' But he added: 'Do not think that, by recommending the use of reason, I am about to decry the Scriptures.'<sup>2</sup> And he later told a correspondent that he believed 'in a God, a providence and a future state, in the divine mission of Christ and the authority of the Scriptures'.<sup>3</sup> Priestley appealed to revelation as much as to reason, and was heir to the Protestant tradition famously expressed in the words: 'The Bible and the Bible only is the religion of Protestants.'<sup>4</sup>

The best-known of Priestley's antitrinitarian writings were published after the opening of the Montrose Unitarian church,<sup>5</sup> but Priestley had encouraged Christie's initiative. And shortly before the Montrose congregation opened its doors, Christie wrote to Priestley explaining that no Church of Scotland ministers would baptise his two children, and asking that 'some person of Unitarian principles in the North of

England' might be persuaded to travel to Montrose to perform the ceremony.<sup>6</sup> Priestley chose Caleb Rotheram, minister of Kendal Presbyterian Church, which was Unitarian in all but name. Rotheram accepted the commission, travelling to Montrose at Christie's expense. Priestley was soon writing to Rotheram: 'Mr Christie, indeed, seems to be a most excellent man, and certainly he has great fortitude in entering with so much spirit on the scheme I ventured to recommend to him.'<sup>7</sup>

Priestley represented the Nonconformist origins of English Unitarianism, rooted in the Dissenting Academies, and increasingly prevalent from the mid-eighteenth century among English Presbyterians and General Baptists. (Particular Baptists and Congregationalists tended to remain orthodox Trinitarians.) But the first self-consciously created Unitarian chapel at Essex Street, London, in the 1770s, was built by an ex-Anglican, Theophilus Lindsey. It was Lindsey who had collected signatures for the petition, vigorously supported by Fellows of Cambridge colleges, requesting Parliament to free Anglican ordinands from the requirement to subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles. The very first of those articles not only asserts belief in 'one living and true God everlasting', but also affirms that 'in unity of the Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power and eternity; the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost'.<sup>8</sup> Lindsey's Essex Street congregation, which used a service book from which all Trinitarian references had been removed, would count among its members not only the radical bookseller Joseph Johnson, the Duke of Grafton, Chancellor of Cambridge University, and (occasionally) John Adams, future President of the United States, but a young medical student, Thomas Christie. This was William's nephew (Alexander Christie's son) who would found the *Analytical Review*, and write one of the early ripostes to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.<sup>9</sup>

Lindsey met William Christie in October 1783, when he wrote to a correspondent commending Christie's 'open carriage and character', as well as his 'well-directed zeal in the cause of gospel truth'. Lindsey continued:

The very great variety of learning he is master of, and his great reading, would be remarked upon in one who made it his principal pursuit, but is very extraordinary in a man of business. He has good presence of mind, and a ready elocution...<sup>10</sup>

Lindsey perhaps saw Christie as a Scottish outpost of Essex Street's distribution network for books and pamphlets—though that role would soon be assumed by Thomas Fyshe Palmer's Dundee congregation.<sup>11</sup>

The year that Lindsey and Christie met, Palmer, an Old Etonian and Fellow of Queens' College, Cambridge (and one of the petitioning clergy against the Thirty-nine Articles) wrote to Christie at Montrose, complaining of the Anglican Church: 'I consider her liturgy corrupt and anti-christian, and her articles to be not only an injurious violation of the liberty wherewith God and Christ have made us free, but a jumble of absurdity.' Having refused to subscribe again to articles 'which I believe to contain so many gross and shocking falsehoods', Palmer considers that Christie's Unitarian congregation would offer temporary asylum, where 'I could worship the Father of mercies according to my conscience'. He concludes: 'May the Father of mercies smile upon your little society; may it be the nursing mother to the whole kingdom, to bring it back to the long-lost truth—the worship of *only Him*.'<sup>12</sup>

Palmer stayed with Christie at Montrose for only two years, moving to Dundee in 1785 where he established one of the few Unitarian congregations in Scotland to outlast the 1790s. They were difficult times for Unitarians. Palmer himself was charged with sedition, and, on conviction, was confined in the Thames hulks. He was then transported to Botany Bay, together with his four fellow convicts: Muir, Skirving, Margarot and Gerrald. Palmer's body was eventually conveyed to America and buried in a Boston cemetery. All five 'Scottish martyrs' are commemorated in Edinburgh by an obelisk in Old Calton Hill Burying Ground. In contrast, Christie steered clear of active politics and, while at Montrose, wrote two works expounding his theological position. The first, *Discourses on the Divine Unity*, was published at Montrose in 1784 in so poorly produced an edition that the author felt compelled to apologise 'for the indifferent manner in which his book is printed' (*Discourses* xviii).

The preface to the *Discourses* points to the incompleteness of the Protestant Reformation. Although the sixteenth-century reformers swept away many medieval superstitions, they left behind what Christie called 'the source and cause of the whole disorders, a Trinity of divine co-equal persons or intelligent agents, the deity of Christ, and his equality with the God and Father of all, and the incarnation of God in human flesh'. In contrast, Christie's own Montrose congregation believed

that there is but one God, the Father supreme over all; that Jesus is the Christ [that is Messiah] the Son of God and Saviour of the world, that the mercy and benevolence of the Deity our heavenly Father, is not restricted and confined to the few, but extends to all his rational offspring [in opposition to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination]; that there shall be a resurrection from the dead, a general judgement and a future state, in which men shall be rewarded or punished. (*Discourses* xv)

Neither the Socinian form of Unitarianism—the denial that Jesus was God—nor the Arian form, which held that Jesus was a subordinate deity, was in itself a political threat, though under William III's unrepealed Blasphemy Act of 1698, it was technically a civil offence to deny the Trinity. But what earned Priestley the nickname of 'Gunpowder Joe' was his claim, in the printed version of a Guy Fawkes' Day sermon of 1785, that Unitarians were laying grains of gunpowder 'under the old building of error and superstition'—which critics assumed to mean the established church.<sup>13</sup> Christie's *Essay on Ecclesiastical Establishments in Religion* (1791) is directed at the same target. He begins by asking how it had come about 'that a Religion so philanthropic, so mild and humane [as Christianity] should have become the spring of so many evils—should have filled the world with war, bloodshed, persecution and devastation'. Christie's answer is that 'the principal cause of these evils, I apprehend to be, the Union of the church with the State'. The Presbyterian Church of Scotland is, Christie concedes, less objectionable than an episcopalian establishment, but he argues that the fact of establishment does the damage: 'An establishment is wedded to the power of this world, and therefore cannot be the spouse of Christ. Church and State, tho' echoed by a thousand Burkes, will never do upon the plan of Christianity.'<sup>14</sup> Such words had a more ominous political resonance.

The Montrose congregation seems to have used Lindsey's *Hymns and Psalms for Public Worship* (designed for Essex Street, but reprinted in Dundee in 1783).

Christie himself subscribed to the Unitarian Book Society, based on Essex Street, which distributed his sermons through Lindsey's provincial network. And after Christie had moved to Glasgow in 1794, he wrote a belated acknowledgment of Lindsey's offer to send one of his own works and several of Priestley's, which were soon despatched to Glasgow by sea. Besides reporting on a new course of lectures on the Unity of God, which were later published in Philadelphia, Christie announced: 'I entertain the audience at our evening meeting with lectures on the Revelation, which of late have been very well attended.' After detailing arrangements to repay £17 of the £20 that Lindsey had lent him, Christie concludes:

I am happy to find from the American and other papers that Dr Priestley has met with so hearty a welcome on the shore of liberty and equality. Pray is he comfortably settled, and where, and does he do anything in the theological line? The Americans have a Government. What have we? Public affairs look extremely black.... I rejoice, however, that English Juries [as opposed to Scottish] have in some degree retrieved the credit of their country. Hardy, Tooke and Thelwall are glorious instances.<sup>15</sup>

Within the year Christie himself, at the age of 47, would follow Priestley across the Atlantic in search of political asylum.

The various testimonials of welcome which had greeted Priestley on his arrival at New York in 1794 had come from such bodies as the Democratic Society, the Associated Teachers of the City of New York, the Republican Natives of Great Britain and Ireland resident in New York, and David Rittenhouse's American Philosophical Society. But William Cobbett, then in Philadelphia, heaped ridicule on Priestley as 'one of those who entertain hopes of bringing about a Revolution in England upon the French plan.' Describing Priestley as one of those 'system-mongers' for whom 'time, place, climate, nature itself must give way', Cobbett questions whether he 'would not with pleasure see the massacre of all the human race'.<sup>16</sup> No wonder Priestley found American pulpits barred against him.

Priestley's frustration at being unable to do anything in what Christie had called 'the theological line' is revealed in his correspondence. Priestley had hardly landed in America before writing to Lindsey: 'Here is a great field for rational Christianity, and many labourers will soon be wanted.'<sup>17</sup> In spite of the rapturous addresses, no one invited him to preach in New York, and similarly in Philadelphia: 'Nobody asks me to preach, and I hear there is much jealousy and dread of me.' Yet he still thought that 'a respectable Unitarian society' could be formed in Philadelphia, adding rather too optimistically: 'I stand so well with the country in other respects, that I dare say I shall have a fair and candid hearing.'<sup>18</sup> Two months later, he wrote again to Lindsey: 'When a few of my unitarian friends are come we shall build a unitarian chapel and probably have a *College*.'<sup>19</sup> He even pictured the Hackney tutor, Thomas Belsham, coming out to be head of the projected college: 'We could take our walks along the banks of the Susquehannah and ramble as I often do, in the woods, as we used to do about Hackney. Here we should have no apprehension of powder sugar being mistaken for gunpowder or metaphorical gunpowder for real.'<sup>20</sup>

Thomas Cooper's proposed settlement on the Susquehanna, which Priestley hoped 'would be an asylum for my unitarian friends', and which so appealed to the

Unitarian Coleridge and his fellow Pantisocrats, quickly failed. The Priestleys had settled at Northumberland to be near Cooper's settlement, and made only occasional visits to Philadelphia. In July 1795, Priestley was still lamenting his lack of opportunity 'to appear as a public preacher of Unitarian Christianity'.<sup>21</sup> But in that year Christie and other Unitarian reinforcements arrived from Britain. Besides Christie himself, there were Ralph Eddowes and John Vaughan (both Warrington pupils of Priestley) from south of the border, and in June 1796, thirteen Unitarians (including Christie) assembled at Philadelphia, in a room at the University of Pennsylvania. They continued to meet regularly until 1800.

By then, thanks to Cobbett, Priestley had acquired fresh notoriety. Letters, written to him (and to Benjamin Vaughan) by the Unitarian manufacturer John Hurford Stone were published in London, and then by Cobbett in Philadelphia. The letters, which Cobbett denounced as treasonable, expressed sentiments hostile to the British government and sympathetic to the French Directory. Priestley was already in danger of being deported, having riled his former admirer, President Adams, by attacking the centralizing and undemocratic tendencies of Adams's antijacobin administration. And goaded by Cobbett, Priestley had perhaps unwisely published his defence in *Letters to the Inhabitants of Northumberland* (1799). He reminds his readers that, five years before, 'success to the arms of France' had been a regular toast on public occasions, and that French principles were then 'universally considered as the principles of general liberty, and the same with *American* principles'.<sup>22</sup>

Priestley had probably been sincere in originally promising to keep out of American politics. But as he wrote revealingly to Lindsey: 'Being shut out from everything in the way of theology, I see no reason why I should not endeavour to be useful in any other way.'<sup>23</sup> Jefferson's election as President in 1801 ensured that Priestley could devote his last three years to theology rather than politics. In 1801 Christie still had 22 years to live. He was now in Northumberland, living under Priestley's roof, 'to try whether he can raise a grammar-school in this place', as his host explained. Christie's earlier exertions at Winchester, Virginia, had come to nothing, and Priestley had to admit that 'as yet not much progress is made by any of us', though he added: 'It is more than could have been done if we had not come, and a little leaven may in time leaven the whole lump.'<sup>24</sup>

What of American home-grown Unitarianism? Christie did not introduce Unitarian theology into America. James Freeman's nominally Episcopalian Boston congregation had severed its links with the diocese and adopted a liturgy which, as early as 1786, Belsham described as 'reformed nearly upon the plan of that which had been adopted at Essex Street and perfectly Unitarian'.<sup>25</sup> Like Belsham and Christie, Freeman was Socinian in theology, through the influence of an English friend of Priestley, the elder William Hazlitt, briefly resident in Boston from 1783 to 1785. Freeman expressed his antitrinitarian views in a series of explanatory sermons to his King's Chapel congregation, but the sermons were not published until 1812—two years after the Philadelphia edition of Christie's *Dissertations on the Unity of God*.<sup>26</sup> One may question whether the historian of King's Chapel is justified in claiming that 'the first Episcopal Church in New England became the first Unitarian Church in the New World'.<sup>27</sup> But even before Christie arrived in America, Freeman was writing to tell Lindsey that two counties on the Massachusetts Bay seaboard had preachers who 'openly opposed the doctrine of the Trinity'.<sup>28</sup>

There was, however, some doubt whether they were 'Unitarians in Mr Belsham's sense of the word' (Belsham 181). Like other Massachusetts Bay liberal Dissenters—including Freeman's friend Joseph Stevens Buckminster and William Ellery Channing—the two preachers were probably Arians rather than Socinians. What is undoubted is that Christie, who in 1804 preached at Priestley's graveside, was from February 1807 in charge of a revived Unitarian congregation in Philadelphia, meeting in the city's Universalist Church. In 1809, Buckminster could still complain to Belsham that 'except in Boston and its immediate vicinity, the most bigoted Calvinism prevails among the regular part of the clergy', while 'the Presbyterian churches in New York are not less narrow and intolerant than the most despotic portion of the original Kirk of Scotland'.<sup>29</sup> Yet only weeks before Buckminster's letter, Christie's Philadelphia congregation launched a programme of winter evening lectures, while in 1810 Christie finally published in a Philadelphia the *Dissertations* which he had written in Glasgow and thought of publishing before leaving for America.<sup>30</sup> In 1811 work began on a new building for the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, dedicated in 1813.

By then Christie, hailed in Scotland as 'the first minister of the first permanent congregation in America that was called Unitarian',<sup>31</sup> had decided (in his sixties) that he could more profitably occupy his Sundays in private devotion and personal study of Scripture, leaving 'the useful and necessary duty of public speaking on the Lord's Day to others *greener in years and firmer in strength*'.<sup>32</sup> When Christie finally died in 1823, aged 75, the *Monthly Repository* regretted that 'his habits were so much those of a recluse'.<sup>33</sup> By 1823 William Ellery Channing (minister of Federal Street Church, Boston, since 1803) had sparked a pamphlet war by preaching against the Trinity, and Jefferson had predicted that Unitarianism would 'become the general religion of the United States'.<sup>34</sup> In 1827 it was claimed that Boston could boast no fewer than 14 Unitarian places of worship,<sup>35</sup> to one of which, two years later, came the newly ordained minister Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson, like Longfellow, has been dubbed a 'Channing Unitarian'—perhaps more a literary than a theological description. Channing defined literature as 'the expression of a nation's mind in writing', and, deploring imitation of English models, called for a literary Declaration of Independence.<sup>36</sup> But if Unitarianism was a prominent thread in the American mind of the 1820s and 1830s, William Christie, through his avoidance of political controversy and his clear and uncompromising articulation of Socinian principles, can claim some of the credit.<sup>37</sup> In the 1790s, the first Scottish Unitarian congregation numbered only 10 among more than 6000 registered worshippers in Montrose and district,<sup>38</sup> and Christie's first Unitarian congregation in Philadelphia numbered a mere 12. Yet Scotland's 'transatlantic leaven' had triggered the fermentation that would produce a 'made-in-America' Unitarianism.

## NOTES

1. W. Christie, *Discourses on the Divine Unity; or a Scriptural Proof and Demonstration of the One Supreme Deity of the God and Father of all, and of the subordinate Character and inferior Nature*

- of our Lord Jesus Christ; with a Confutation of the Doctrine of the Co-equal and Consubstantial Trinity in Unity; and a full reply to the objections of Trinitarians* (Montrose, 1784), xiv–xv.
2. J. Priestley, *An Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity* (1770), 1791 edn in J. T. Rutt, *Theological and Miscellaneous Writings of Joseph Priestley, LL.D., F.R.S., etc.* 25 vols (Sterling VA and Bristol, 1999: reprinted from London edn 1817–31), II, 384.
  3. J. Priestley to J. Whitehead, June 1778 in Rutt IV, 144–50.
  4. W. Chillingworth, *The Religion of the Protestants a safe Way of Salvation* (1638).
  5. See especially *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (Birmingham, 1782), *The Importance and Extent of Free Enquiry in Matters of Religion* (London and Birmingham, 1785), *History of Early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ...* (Birmingham, 1786), *A General History of the Christian Church to the Fall of the Western Empire* (Birmingham, 1790), *Defences of Unitarianism* (Birmingham, 1788, 1790).
  6. J. Priestley to Rev. C. Rotherham, 30 March 1781 in Rutt I. 1. 352–53.
  7. J. Priestley to Rev. C. Rotherham, 12 October 1782 in Rutt I. 1. 363–64.
  8. *Book of Common Prayer*.
  9. T. Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France, and on the new Constitution established by the National Assembly: occasioned by the Publications of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, M.P. and Alexander de Calonne, late Minister of State* (Johnson, 1791).
  10. T. Lindsey to W. Turner Jr, 18 October 1783 in W. Christie, *Unitarian Christianity: the Doctrine of Jesus Christ* (Montrose and Dundee, 1890), 2, being the preface to *Discourses* (1790 edn) revised and edited by H. Williamson, Minister of Dundee Christian Unitarian Church.
  11. See S. Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism: Political Rhetoric 1770–1814* (Palgrave, 2003), 137–38.
  12. T. F. Palmer to W. Christie, 14 July 1783 in W. Turner [Jr], *Lives of Eminent Unitarians; with a Notice of Dissenting Academies* 2 vols (Unitarian Association, 1840), II, 218–19.
  13. See J. Priestley, *The Importance and Extent of Free Enquiry in Matters of Religion: a Sermon preached before the Congregations of the Old and New meetings of the Protestant Dissenters of Birmingham, 5 November 1785 to which are added Reflections on the Present State of Free Inquiry in this Country...* (London and Birmingham, 1785). Rutt prints the sermon, but not the additional *Reflections* containing the gunpowder image.
  14. W. Christie, *An Essay on Ecclesiastical Establishments in Religion, shewing their hurtful tendency, and that they cannot be defended, either on principles of Reason or Scripture* (Montrose, 1791), 1–2, 8–9.
  15. W. Christie to T. Lindsey, 12 December 1794 [Dr Williams's Library MS].
  16. W. Cobbett, *Observations on the Emigration of Dr J. Priestley, and on the several addresses delivered to him on his arrival in New York* (London and Philadelphia, 1794), 6, 29, 36.
  17. J. Priestley to T. Lindsey, 5 July 1794 in Rutt I. 2. 270.
  18. J. Priestley to T. Lindsey, 24 June 1794 in Rutt I. 2. 263–66.
  19. J. Priestley to T. Lindsey, 24 August 1794 in J. Graham, *Revolutionary in Exile: The Emigration of Joseph Priestley to America 1794–1804* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1995), 61.
  20. J. Priestley to T. Belsham, 27 August 1794 in Rutt I. 2. 272.
  21. J. Priestley to T. Belsham, 30 August 1795 in Rutt I. 2. 316.
  22. J. Priestley, *Letters to the Inhabitants of Northumberland and its Neighbourhood, on subjects interesting to the author and to them* (Northumberland PA, 1799) in Rutt XXV, 119.
  23. J. Priestley to T. Lindsey, 29 May 1800 in Rutt I. 2. 434–36.
  24. J. Priestley to T. Lindsey, 19 June 1800 in Rutt I. 2. 440.
  25. T. Belsham, *Memoirs of the late Theophilus Lindsey MA including a brief analysis of his works; together with Anecdotes and Letters of Eminent Persons, his Friends and Correspondents; also a general view of the progress of Unitarian Doctrine in England and America*, centenary edn (Williams & Norgate, 1873), 248n.
  26. Published as *Sermons on Particular Occasions* (Boston, 1812). See also *Eighteen Sermons and a Charge* (Cambridge, Mass., 1829).
  27. F. W. P. Greenwood, *A History of King's Chapel* (Boston, 1833), 165.
  28. T. Belsham, *Memoirs of Lindsey*, 162. On Freeman's Unitarianism see *Monthly Repository* VII (March 1812), 200.

29. J. S. Buckminster to T. Belsham, 5 December 1809 in *Memoirs of the late Reverend Thomas Belsham including a Brief Notice of his Public Works and Copious Extracts from his Diary together with Letters to and from his Friends and Correspondents* ed. J. Williams (1835), 596.
30. W. Christie, *Dissertations on the Unity of God...* (Philadelphia, 1810). Extracts in *Monthly Repository* VI (March 1811), 126–38 and (April 1811), 193–201. *See also* W. Christie to T. Lindsey, 12 December 1794 [Dr Williams's Library MS].
31. L. Baker Short, *Pioneers of Scottish Unitarianism* (Narberth, Pembs., [1963]), 48.
32. From preface to *Dissertations* in *Monthly Repository* VI (April 1811), 199. Cf. Ralph Waldo Emerson's remark that in order to be a good minister it was necessary to leave the ministry.
33. Obituary in *Monthly Repository* XIX (June 1824), 363.
34. T. Jefferson to J. Smith, 8 December 1822 in *Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* ed. A. Koch and W. Peden (New York, 1944), 703–04.
35. W. H. Drummond, *The Doctrine of the Trinity founded neither on Scripture, nor on Reason and Common Sense, but on Tradition and the Infallible Church...* (Dublin, 1827; 3<sup>rd</sup> edn 1831), 137–38.
36. *See* entry on W. E. Channing in *Dictionary of American Biography* IV.
37. Christie's obituary in *Monthly Repository* XIX (July 1824), 363 records: 'Few men have possessed the talent of expressing themselves with greater clearness and strength of language... No man could be more inflexible in his adherence to what he deemed the cause of truth...'
38. For the Montrose statistical record of worshippers see C. H. Wicker, *Three Scottish Unitarians—A Study in historical deviance* [Ph.D thesis for the Institute of Advanced Studies, Clayton Missouri (1986), 124–25, Dr Williams's Library].