

Transatlantic Theology: How Scottish Unitarianism Came to America

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William Christie, Scots-born and largely self-educated, presided over the first avowedly Unitarian congregation in Scotland. It was to this Montrose congregation that Thomas Fyshe Palmer came in 1783, having resigned his Cambridge Fellowship, in protest at obligatory subscription to the 39 Articles. Inviting himself to Montrose, he hoped that Christie's congregation might become 'the nursing-mother to the whole kingdom, to bring it back to the long-lost truth - the worship of *only Him*.'

Christie's sermons to his Montrose congregation were published in 1784 as *Discourse on the Divine Unity*. Ten years later he would move to Glasgow, but he soon abandoned his new flock. Palmer had been transported to Botany Bay for alleged sedition, and Christie decided it was time to emigrate. (He had other radical connections. His nephew, Thomas Christie, had founded London's *Analytical Review*, and had answered Burke's *Reflections* in an early riposte, published (like the *Analytical*) by the Unitarian Joseph Johnson.)

William Christie was only one of several Unitarians who sought asylum in the new America, following Joseph Priestley's emigration to Pennsylvania. Gunpowder Joe's Unitarianism was thought too subversive for Philadelphia pulpits. But Christie, assisted by Ralph Eddowes (one of Priestley's Warrington students) established a regular Unitarian meeting at Philadelphia, in a room at the University. After a hiatus of several years in the wake of the 1797 yellow fever epidemic, Christie's Unitarian congregation was re-established, and soon had its own church building and a programme of Winter Evening Lectures.

Christie cannot be credited with importing antitrinitarian theology into the United States. As early as 1785, James Freeman's King's Chapel, Boston, adopted a liturgy that eliminated reference to the Trinity. But Freeman's sermons to his Boston congregation were not published until 1812. By then Christie's *Dissertations on the Unity of God* (Philadelphia, 1810) had unambiguously set out the Socinian insistence on the 'proper humanity' of Christ. It would be 1818 before William Ellery Channing provoked pamphlet warfare by preaching his own brand of Unitarianism. By then Unitarian congregations were well established in Boston and Philadelphia, and in 1822 Thomas Jefferson would predict that Unitarianism would become 'the general religion of the United States'.

Jefferson's prediction was unfulfilled, but only seven years later Ralph Waldo Emerson followed his own father into the Unitarian ministry.