

Learning from a Unitarian Forebear: Joseph Priestley
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Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snaveley

Many years ago, Unitarian Universalist minister Jane Rzepka wrote,

“I grew up in one of those Unitarian fellowships in the Midwest. And that little religious community really left its mark on me.

“For one thing, the grown-ups there believed we ought to use our heads. They encouraged us to ponder the big questions of beginnings and endings and anger and love and what was before and what comes next and what helps and what hinders. They thought we were smart kids, they listened to our ideas, we believed we were good thinkers. Now of course I know that the use of reason is a cornerstone of our long religious heritage, but then I just thought it was the way we did things at the Unitarian Church.

“And then in another mode we planted daffodils, we looked at the stars, we searched for guppies, we held a worship service at the river. These days we call it spirituality I suppose or earth-centered religion, but then we called it ‘miracle’ and ‘wonder.’ And that rootedness is in my blood as a Unitarian.

“Finally, back then, we children knew that we were a part of a congregation that loved us. They taught us Sunday School. They doled out the cookies at coffee hour. They chaperoned the Youth Group. They wanted to know what we would do after graduation. They wrung their hands; they clapped their hands – for us, for one another. Now we call it community; now we call it connection. But, for me, back then, it was just Unitarianism.”

The Unitarianism that Rzepka knew in her childhood was different from the very Christian Unitarianism of Joseph Priestley, but one can see his influence. From 1772 to 1774 Priestley published a three-volume work titled, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*. In it he said that “the only revealed religious truths that could be accepted were those that matched one's experience of the natural world,” [Joseph Priestley - Wikipedia](#). I expect that Priestley would resonate with our current seventh principle and fifth source, “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. The living tradition which we share draws from many sources (including) humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit,” and with the interdependence value and covenant statement and the inspirations statement in the proposed change to our bylaws, “Interdependence. We honor the interdependent web of all existence. We covenant to cherish the Earth and all beings by creating and nurturing relationships of care and respect. With humility and reverence, we acknowledge our place in the great web of life, and we work to repair harm and damaged relationships.... As Unitarian Universalists, we use, and are inspired by, sacred and secular understandings that help us to live into our values. We respect the histories, contexts and cultures in which they were created and are currently practiced. These sources ground us and sustain us in ordinary, difficult, and joyous times. Grateful for the religious ancestries we

inherit and the diversity which enriches our faith, we are called to ever deepen and expand our wisdom.," [Microsoft Word - UUA Bylaws 2022 - v.3 5-22-2023.doc Article 2 Package.pdf \(uua.org\)](#).

According to the article on Priestley in Wikipedia, "In demanding that his readers apply the logic of the emerging sciences and comparative history to the Bible and Christianity, he alienated religious and scientific readers alike—scientific readers did not appreciate seeing science used in the defence of religion and religious readers dismissed the application of science to religion."

Priestley did have at least one rather famous supporter of his writings, "In 1782 (Priestley) published the fourth volume of his Institutes, An History of the Corruptions of Christianity, describing how he thought the teachings of the early Christian church had been "corrupted" or distorted.... The text addresses issues ranging from the divinity of Christ to the proper form for the Lord's Supper. Priestley followed up in 1786 with the provocatively titled book, An History of Early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ, compiled from Original Writers, proving that the Christian Church was at first Unitarian. Thomas Jefferson would later write of the profound effect that these two books had on him: 'I have read his Corruptions of Christianity, and Early Opinions of Jesus, over and over again; and I rest on them ... as the basis of my own faith. These writings have never been answered,'" [Joseph Priestley - Wikipedia](#).

Priestley sought a base for his religious faith that would not be in conflict with his rational and scientific understanding. Many a Unitarian Universalist today resonates with that search.

Priestley also was a defender of those whose beliefs differed from the standard of his day. Again, from Wikipedia, "Many of Priestley's political writings supported the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, which restricted the rights of Dissenters. They could not hold political office, serve in the armed forces, or attend Oxford and Cambridge unless they subscribed to the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. Dissenters repeatedly petitioned Parliament to repeal the Acts, arguing that they were being treated as second-class citizens.

"Priestley's friends, particularly other Rational Dissenters, urged him to publish a work on the injustices experienced by Dissenters; the result was his Essay on the First Principles of Government (1768). An early work of modern liberal political theory and Priestley's most thorough treatment of the subject, it—unusually for the time—distinguished political rights from civil rights with precision and argued for expansive civil rights. Priestley identified separate private and public spheres, contending that the government should have control only over the public sphere. Education and religion, in particular, he maintained, were matters of private conscience and should not be administered by the state," [Joseph Priestley - Wikipedia](#).

"Priestley also supported the campaign to abolish the British slave trade, and published a sermon in 1788 in which he declared that nobody treated enslaved people 'with so much cruelty as the English', [Joseph Priestley - Wikipedia](#).

Priestley lived long before our current Unitarian Universalist principles were adopted in the 1980s or the current conversation over changing to statements of values and covenants, but he lived out a "respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person" and a respect for Pluralism and Justice. "Pluralism We celebrate that we are all sacred beings diverse in culture, experience, and theology. We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect. Justice. We work to be diverse

multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive. We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions.”

Priestley was not a perfect human. None of us are. He could be wrong. Scientifically he continued to hold to phlogiston theory which suggested that a fire-like element called phlogiston was contained in combustible bodies. The idea was challenged and abandoned before the end of the 18th century, but it was not abandoned by Priestley, [Phlogiston theory - Wikipedia](#). Religiously, Priestley was a millennialist. “Priestley was minister (to the Gravel Pit Meeting Congregation) between 1793 and 1794 and the sermons he preached there.... reflect his growing millenarianism, his belief that the end of the world was fast approaching. After comparing Biblical prophecies to recent history, Priestley concluded that the French Revolution was a harbinger of the Second Coming of Christ. ... He wrote to a younger friend that while he himself would not see the Second Coming, his friend ‘may probably live to see it ... It cannot, I think be more than twenty years [away],’” We are told that “Robert Schofield, Priestley's major modern biographer, describes his first ‘call’ in 1755 to the Dissenting parish in Needham Market, Suffolk, as a ‘mistake’ for both Priestley and the congregation. Priestley yearned for urban life and theological debate, whereas Needham Market was a small, rural town with a congregation wedded to tradition. Attendance and donations dropped sharply when they discovered...” just how far from orthodox in his beliefs Priestley was. [Joseph Priestley - Wikipedia](#).

Even if Priestley thought the end was near, he still helped create institutions for the future. In America “Priestley continued the educational projects that had always been important to him, helping to establish the ‘Northumberland Academy’ and donating his library to the fledgling institution. He exchanged letters regarding the proper structure of a university with Thomas Jefferson, who used this advice when founding the University of Virginia. Jefferson and Priestley became close, and when the latter had completed his General History of the Christian Church, he dedicated it to President Jefferson, writing that ‘it is now only that I can say I see nothing to fear from the hand of power, the government under which I live being for the first time truly favourable to me,’” [Joseph Priestley - Wikipedia](#). Priestley also encouraged the founding of new Unitarian chapels throughout Britain and the United States, [Joseph Priestley - Wikipedia](#).

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley in Northumberland, PA has a short history of Joseph Priestley on their webpage. It concludes, “Joseph Priestley died in 1804 and is buried with his wife and youngest son in the Riverview Cemetery in Northumberland. His oldest son, Joseph, continued to live in the Priestley house until 1811, when he returned to England. Priestley’s grandson, Joseph Raynor, returned to Northumberland in 1819, married a local woman, and with other English settlers in the area formed the Unitarian congregation that eventually built the Priestley Chapel in 1834. The chapel was used for services until 1911, when it was given to the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) in Boston. UUCSV used the chapel from its inception in the 1990s until 2006, when the congregation outgrew the space.

“The UUCSV typically holds a service honoring Priestley in March to coincide with the Priestley House Museum and Priestley Chapel Open House, celebrating Joseph Priestley’s birthday,” [Joseph Priestley – Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley \(uucsv.org\)](#).

What legacy has Priestley left us?- the use of reason in our religious thinking, a sense that all living things are our family, a belief that everyone has basic civil rights, and a commitment to institutions of education and religion. We are his prodigy.

I end with an adaptation of a prayer by Leia Durland-Jones.

“For those who came before us, we offer gratitude and thanks.

May their memories be a blessing.

May we feel surrounded by their love.

...let us be inspired by their courage, their wisdom, and their dreams.

Let us honor them by doing the work (of continuing the sharing of this Unitarian Universalist faith.)

Amen.