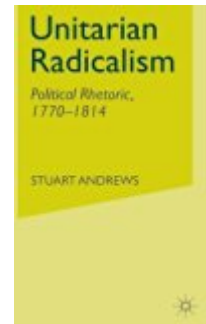


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Unitarian Radicalism

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Stuart Andrews presents an intriguing study of the connection between Unitarianism and political radicalism in his 2003 book *Unitarian Radicalism: Political Rhetoric, 1770-1814*. Andrews, a long-established historian and author of several other books including *The British Periodical Press and the French Revolution, 1789-99* and *Eighteenth-Century Europe*, comes directly to his central concern in the preface to his latest work: “Was Unitarian Radicalism significant as a potentially destabilizing force? This study tries to answer that question by examining the confrontational rhetoric of Unitarians and the political establishment, as reflected in pamphlets, published sermons and parliamentary debates” (p. ix). In large part because they were prolific and contentious writers, Unitarians (often called antitrinitarians by Andrews, thus reflecting a central focus of his study) left behind a large collection of written documents which Andrews explores. Because they were “standing firmly within the Protestant biblical tradition, the Unitarians’ outspoken hostility to the church establishment—inflamed by government refusal to ease their civil disabilities—reignited earlier anticlerical debates” (pp. ix-x).

Andrews foreshadows the main combatants in the book’s frontispiece by including quotations from the Reverend Doctor Joseph Priestley’s *Reflections on the Present State of Free Enquiry in This Country* (1785) and Edmund Burke’s *Speech on the Petition of the Unitarians* (1792). Perhaps Burke and others did not “play the pa-

triotic card” against the Unitarians, but Andrews goes to considerable lengths to defend Unitarian Joseph Priestley, the most prominent of the Unitarian polemicists, at least in this study, against attacks of that sort. Priestley was a millennialist who unwisely summoned up memories of Guy Fawkes when he made references to using gunpowder to eradicate error and superstition, but Andrews sets out to show how “wildly inappropriate the smear of ‘Jacobin’ is, when applied to men whose arguments were rooted in Scripture, and who were primarily concerned with questions of Christology and eschatology” (p. x). Moreover, by examining the War of 1812 and the passing of the Unitarian Relief Bill of 1813, the author seeks to demonstrate that the beliefs and concerns of the Unitarians extended beyond the 1790s when Priestley and many of his “coreligionists” took advantage of favorable circumstances and emigrated to the United States.

The source of Unitarian radicalism was, as Andrews outlines in his introduction of the same title, “unequal toleration.” According to the author, “the Toleration Act of 1689 did not extend to Unitarians” (p. 1). To be sure, all Dissenters had to take an oath of allegiance and supremacy, and subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles, but at least partial relief was available, by 1779, to Dissenters who believed that the revealed will of God was contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as commonly practiced in Protestant churches. The previous year the Catholic Relief Bill was passed, giving a greater measure of religious toleration to English Catholics. These measures left Unitarians out in the cold, for by rejecting the Trinity, they stood outside of the

mainstream of English Christian belief and, at least theoretically, subject to prosecution and persecution. Moreover, Burke and others would paint Dissenters, particularly Unitarians, as levellers, traitors, and French Jacobins. Obviously, many in the English government rejected Charles Fox's notion when he asked in 1790: "Of what consequence is it to the State whether a man is a Unitarian or a Trinitarian; a believer in transubstantiation or the real presence; an advocate for infant baptism or for adult baptism? To abandon general principles upon the ground of partiality is a procedure which cannot be defended" (p. 5). In other words, toleration in England in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries was neither equal nor total. In the face of this fact, Unitarians, not a separate denomination until the nineteenth century but rather an increasingly cohesive group with common theological assumptions, became more and more united in protest against religious mistreatment generally, and English foreign policy particularly.

Andrews divides *Unitarian Radicalism* into five distinct sections plus an epilogue. The first, "Grains of Gunpowder," examines Unitarian religious beliefs. It is divided into three chapters that examine Unitarian denial of the Trinity, opposition to subscription to the Anglican Thirty-nine Articles, and Unitarian millennial expectations. The second section, "Pulpit-Politics," details the efforts of Unitarian ministers to bring their version of Christianity to their congregations. In this section's first chapter, Andrews is concerned with the famous Essex Street Chapel and its leaders: Theophilus Lindsey, John Disney, and Thomas Belsham. The second chapter treats the efforts of Richard Price at the Old Jewry meeting-house and Belsham at the Hackney (Gravel-Pit) meeting-house. Price particularly infuriated leaders like Burke because he combined the English, American, and French revolutions as part of a single progressive movement for the betterment of society, and because he believed that "Next to the introduction of Christianity among mankind, the American revolution may prove the most important step in the progressive course of human development" (p. 58). Andrews concludes the second section with a chapter titled "Fasts and Thanksgivings."

In part 3, "Undermining Establishments," Andrews recounts Unitarian opposition to English governmental officials and policies. Comprised of three chapters, "Censuring Pitt," "Challenging Burke," and "Campaigning for Peace," this section examines the challenges Unitarians such as Priestley, William Frend, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge brought to the policies adopted or maintained by official England. College subscription tests, the role of

government with respect to religion, the French Revolution, and the British declaration of war on France were the most hotly contested issues. "Challenging Burke" is a very interesting chapter because in it Andrews pits the two most forceful opponents—Burke and Priestley—in literary battle.

Part 4, "Sparks of Sedition," examines Unitarianism and its political ideology in geographical terms. Chapter 10 examines the "National Networks" set up. Andrews makes the point that the Presbyterians, Baptists, and Independent/Congregationalists—the so-called old Dissenting denominations—had cooperated as far back as the 1730s, but "an effective Unitarian network dates from 1790" (p. 111). The new Unitarian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and the Practice of Virtue held its inaugural meeting in February of 1791. It held Christian objectives and defined Unitarian core beliefs in its statement of aims: "The fundamental principles of this society are, That there is but ONE God, the SOLE Former, Supporter, and Governor of the universe, the ONLY proper object of religious worship; and that there is one mediator between God and men, the MAN Christ Jesus, who was commissioned by God to instruct men in their duty, and to reveal the doctrine of future life" (p. 111). Moreover, Unitarians took the lead in leading Dissenting opposition to Britain's foreign policies. The next three chapters look at Unitarian efforts in specific geographic locales: chapter 11 examines "Midlands and the North," chapter 12 looks at "Norwich, Bristol, and the South West," and chapter 13, "Scottish Convict, Irish Exile," surveys the Unitarian radicalism of Archibald Hamilton Rowan and Thomas Fyshe Palmer. Clearly, in Andrews's view, Unitarianism and its political radicalism were spreading around the turn of the nineteenth century.

Section 5 is titled "Explosive Echoes" and is comprised of two chapters, "'Jacobin' Journalism" and "Confronting Napoleon." In the first, Andrews examines the literary warfare between Unitarian and anti-Unitarian journals. As the chapter title indicates, many of those opposed to Unitarians believed them to be subversive; one journal, the *Antijacobin Review*, was established to counteract the various Unitarian journals. In the second chapter of this section, Andrews offers some insight into Unitarian responses to Napoleon Bonaparte in the early-nineteenth century. Long opposed to Britain's war with France, Unitarians continued to oppose war with Napoleon, in large part because they saw Napoleon as a "model of religious toleration" (p. 163). Indeed, according to Andrews, Unitarian religious views would be central to their views on Britain's foreign policy: "as in the

1770s and 1790, the Unitarians' sympathy for Britain's enemies was prompted by their admiration for the guaranteeing of religious freedom" (p. 164). However, with the passage of the Unitarian Relief Bill in 1813 and the demise of Napoleon's empire, the major impetus for Unitarian protest was removed.

Andrews concludes his monograph with an epilogue that considers "transatlantic perspectives." Joseph Priestley had high hopes for America; Andrews quotes him as saying, soon upon his arrival in the United States, that "here is a great field for rational Christianity, and many labourers will soon be wanted" (p. 173). While Unitarians might not have found the warmest of welcomes in America during the anti-French years of the 1790s (a situation alleviated, as Andrews points out, by the election of Jefferson as president), for Priestley the United States offered a welcome change: "Happily in this country, the church has no alliance with the state, every person being allowed to worship God in whatever manner he pleases, or not to worship him at all, if he be not so disposed, without being liable to any civil disobedience" (p. 174). Writing two decades before the Unitarian Relief Bill was passed in England, Priestley found the religious toleration in the United States that he sought in England.

Unitarian Radicalism is a useful study. In it Stuart Andrews draws out the connections between Unitarian theology or religious beliefs and political ideology and rhetoric. The study, though relatively brief, demonstrates Andrews's command of the issues. Moreover, his use

of primary sources such as parliamentary debates, pamphlets, journals, and published sermons is impressive. Other strong points of the work include the author's discussion of Unitarian beliefs in section one, his analysis of the geographic strengths of Unitarianism, the tug and pull between Burke and Priestley, and his coverage of "Jacobin Journalism."

Despite significant strengths, however, there are areas where improvements are warranted. Organizationally, the book is solid except that the discussion of national networks, chapter 10, might be moved to the front of the book to early demonstrate the connections between Unitarians. Furthermore, the chapter on fasts and thanksgivings, coming in at a scant eight pages, could be put to better use. Also, the book lacks a context for discussing Unitarianism as a Dissenting ideology; a discussion of Unitarian belief within the Dissenting tradition would better ground this work. For example, is there any way to analyze the extent of the Unitarian contribution to the Dissenting tradition? What were other Dissenters doing while the Unitarians were challenging the establishment? How were Unitarians generally viewed in England? Andrews lets us know what people like Burke believed, but to what extent was Burke's view typical? Finally, what role did imported Unitarians like Priestley play in planting Unitarian beliefs in the former British colonies? These are some of the questions that come to mind when perusing Andrews's book. Andrews has provided solid groundwork on which future scholars might build.

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