

Arian Politics

By T.E. Wilder

Political Writings, by Richard Price (Cambridge University Press, 1991) ed. D.O. Thomas, xxiv, 199 pages, index.

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Richard Price was educated by Isaac Newton's sidekick John Eames, became an Arian and a rationalist, entered the Presbyterian ministry, embraced radically contractarian political theory, and was a friend and correspondent of some of the framers of the U.S. Constitution, whom he knew personally. He was a link between two eras and two nations. He was also the foil for Edmund Burke's conservatism. Price's writings are an important example of radical English (and American) political thought in the late 18th century.

This volume is the latest publication in the Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. The introduction by the series's editors accurately states its accomplishment: "The series is intended to make available to students the most important texts required for an understanding of the history of political thought. The scholarship of the present generation has greatly expanded our sense of the range of authors indispensable for such an understanding, and the series will reflect those developments."

Students of political thought are no longer limited to texts drawn from the liberals' tradition, for the series is heavy with Christian thinkers. As is standard for the series the editor prepared a substantial introduction to Price's life and work, and a chronology of his life. This volume also has biographical notes on individuals mentioned.

Richard Price was born in 1723 at Tyn-ton in the parish of Llangeinor in Glamorgan. The son of a Dissenting minister who "was a strict Calvinist who maintained an austere discipline in the home. Richard, however, rebelled against his father's theology at an early age, and though he upheld the puritan values inculcated by his parents, his religious beliefs became much more liberal and much more rationalist." (p. vii) How typical! The rebel retains enough of the virtues of his orthodox upbringing to make him an energetic and effective enemy of orthodoxy.

Upon the death of his parents when he was about seventeen, Price went to London to his uncle Samuel Price, an assistant to Isaac Watts.

Price was entered at Coward's Academy in Tenter Ailey, Moorfields, where he came under the instruction and the influence of John Eames, who had been a friend and a disciple of Isaac Newton. It was at the Academy that he was prepared for the ministry.... It was at this Academy, too, that he received the training in mathematics that enabled him to make important contributions to the theory of probability, to actuarial science and to the growth and development of insurance. (p. vii)

For several years, until his patron died, Price was a private chaplain. He then married, took the pulpit at a Presbyterian chapel, and shortly published his classic "A Review of the Principal Questions and Difficulties in Morals". Various publications, political and financial, followed throughout his life, many of them concerned with his opposition to debt financing of government.

Price relates his own influences as Bishop Butler's Analogy of Religion—"I reckon it happy for me that this book was one of the first that fell into my hands."—and next the writings of Samuel Clarke. "And I cannot help adding, however strange it may seem, that I owe much to the philosophical writings of Mr. Hume, which I likewise studied in early life. Though an enemy to his scepticism, I have profited by it." (p. 142)

In 1769 he was awarded a Doctor of Divinity by Marischal College, Aberdeen, in 1776 the Freedom of the City of London, in 1778 The Continental Congress invited him to become a citizen of the United States. 1781 brought a LL.D. from Yale, in 1782 he was elected Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences at Boston, and in 1785 a member of the American Philosophical Society at Philadelphia. He died in 1791, the same year that he retired from the ministry at Gravel Pit, Hackney. He was succeeded in that pulpit by his friend, the even more radical Joseph Priestly, a materialist and Socinian.

Price met Benjamin Franklin during his stay in England from 1757 to 1762, when they were both members of the Royal Society and the Club of Honest Whigs. From that time they corresponded frequently. He was also a friend of John Adams, who often attended Price's services at the Gravel Pit Meeting House during the time Adams was Plenipotentiary to the Court of St. James.

Price saw himself as a reformer in morals, politics, science, and religion. Great accomplishments of the preceding several generations had brought enormous improvement in all these fields, especially in Britain, but there was a great distance yet to go.

The principles of liberty have been thoroughly explained among us. We well know that Christ is the only law-giver of Christians, that there can be no such thing as human authority in religious matters and that the office of the magistrate is not to interpose in any religious differences, but to keep peace, to secure the civil rights of men, and to protect and encourage all good subjects of all sects and persuasions.... The researches of learned men among

us have been pushed farther than ever they were in any nation. An absolute and unbounded scope is given to enquiries of all kinds: and the consequence of this has been, that the greatest improvements have been made in all the sciences, and that we are now become the Fountain-head of knowledge. and the Instructors of the world.

..... Christianity has been cleared among us of a great deal of that shocking rubbish, which has been thrown upon it by Popery. And, perhaps, there never was a time, since that of the Apostles. in which the nature and design of the Gospel were so well understood. and its evidences and excellency so well explained, as in the present age and kingdom. (p. 4-5, *Britain's Happiness, and the Proper Improvement of It*, 1759)

This accords with his secular non-covenantal postmillennialism.

Meliorist Postmillennialism

'Meliorism' denotes the promotion or expectation of steady improvement in the condition of mankind—a nonrevolutionary optimism. This contrasts, on the one hand, to revolutionary doctrines, usually with occult or gnostic undercurrents, which demand a cathartic upheaval or bloodbath in society, and on the other hand to a covenantal understanding of history that sees progress not as the automatic result of the diffusion of knowledge and the implementation of reforms, but as God's blessing for faithfulness to his covenantal law-order. Price's meliorist postmillennial views are most clearly expressed in *The Evidence for a future period of Improvement in the State of Mankind* (1787). They are a window into the state of eschatological controversy in his day.

Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. These words, being a part of the Lord's prayer, must be perfectly familiar to you. It is evident that by the kingdom mentioned in them is meant, not that absolute dominion of the Deity by which he does *whatever he pleases in the Armies of Heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth*, but that moral kingdom which consists in the voluntary obedience of reasonable beings to his laws and, particularly, that kingdom of the Messiah which our Saviour came to establish....

This kingdom is described in the prophecy of Daniel under the character of a kingdom which the God of heaven was to set up in the time of the fourth temporal kingdom upon earth (or the Roman empire) and which was *to heaven to the Son of Man, and to increase gradually till it broke in pieces all other kingdoms, and fulfilled the whole earth....*

This petition, therefore, in our Lord's prayer referred primarily to the introduction of the Christian religion among mankind.... We cannot express

before the Deity any desires that are more reasonable and important...I cannot be of the opinion of those of our dissenting brethren who scruple using this prayer, from an apprehension that the words (thy kingdom come) cannot be used with propriety now the kingdom of Christ is come and the grace of the Gospel is known to men. The truth is that there is a kingdom of Christ still to come.

Hitherto, the kingdom of the Messiah has been in its infancy. The most glorious period of it is yet future. His religion is now confined to a few nations. It will hereafter extend itself over all nations. It is now dishonoured by much contention, superstition, and wickedness. Hereafter, it is to be cleared of these evils and to triumph over all false religions. Hitherto, it has caused the will of God to be done but very imperfectly. Hereafter, it will cause the will of God to be done on earth, as it is done in heaven. (pp. 152-154)

The evidence for this view Price found “partly from tradition and scripture, and partly from reason and the necessary tendencies of things”. (p. 154) He has two pages mentioning the Scriptural proofs.

Price argues that the natural manner of development is gradual growth and maturation, and that this is also true of human affairs. His view of the history of culture is evolutionary. Here he breaks with Newton's medieval regard for primeval knowledge, and turns to the Episcopal tradition of human autonomy and a contractual social order. Like Richard Hooker, Price thought history began in a primitive savage state. “At the first establishment of civil society man was an animal, naked in body and mind, running about the woods or tending cattle, destitute of arts and laws and ideas.” Gradually and in an irregular manner advances were made. These gathered momentum so that “an age of darkness and barbarism has been succeeded by ages of improvement more rapid than any that preceded them.” (p. 157) The best illustration of this progress, Price says, is natural philosophy. Price's history betrays the Enlightenment's disdain of earlier times as “dark ages”, and of older forms of science as nonsense.

The highest state of philosophical and astronomical knowledge was, at the beginning of this century, that which is had attained by the discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton. But it had been the work of many ages to prepare mankind for these, and to bring the world to a capacity of understanding and receiving them. To a few wise men above two thousand years ago there appeared some glimmerings of this philosophy, but they were disregarded and soon lost. A barbarous philosophy, called the Peripatetic, prevailed after this for a long period. The inventor of it (like the Pope in the Christian church) was set up as an universal master, and the most wretched jargon was received implicitly for true science. It is scarcely possible to describe the state of darkness with respect to the knowledge of nature in which the world was involved during this whole time. About two centuries ago a glimmering of light again

appeared, and a more rational philosophy began to gain ground. The light gradually increased. One great genius rose after another, and one discovery produced further discoveries. A Bacon was followed by a Boyle. and a Boyle by a Newton.... (p. 158)

As in science so in religion, “Till the time of our Saviour the world had been too much in its infancy to be capable of admitting more of the knowledge of Christianity than could be communicated by obscure hints, and a succession of dark preparatory dispensations.” (p. 159)

Much progress had been made in religion since the days of the reformers, just as there had been much progress in science since the time of Newton. This progress, Price insisted, must be carried forward. It is only with irony that we now read Price's description of the new age opening before him.

I might...proceed to recite many other important circumstances in the state of the world which are preparations for that revolution in favour of human happiness which is the object of this discourse. Such as the alleviation of the horrors of war occasioned by the spread of the principles of humanity, and the encouragement arising from hence...to expect a time when nation shall no more lift up a sword against nation. The softened spirit of Popery, and the visible decline of the papal power. The extinction of the order of Jesuits, and the demolition of convents and monasteries. The shutting of the doors of the infernal inquisition, and the ceasing of acts of faith. The extended intercourse between the different parts of the world and the facility of the diffusion of knowledge created first by the invention of the art of printing, but now carried farther than ever by the increase of commerce and the improvements in the art of navigation. The establishment at this moment going forward, of an equal representation of the different provinces of France, and the tendencies to it in some of the other countries of Europe. All these circumstances (and many more might be mentioned) render the present state of the world unspeakably different from what it was. They shew us man a milder animal than he was, and the world outgrowing its evils, superstition giving way, anti-christ falling, and the Millennium hastening. (p. 162)

Price was embroiled in a pamphlet controversy with Edmund Burke, who proved more accurate in his assessment of the new age then unfolding in France, whose character has engulfed our own century.

In the following section Price explains how this progress is the result of the operation of Providence. In spite his contractual views of social order, Price believed in God's superintendence of history and also God's judgements on societies.

Civil Contractualism

Price has a strongly contractual view of government. There were, he said, “two accounts, directly opposite to one another, which have been given of the origin of civil government.”

One of them is that “civil government is an expedient contrived by human prudence for gaining security against oppression, and that, consequently, the power of civil governors is a delegation or trust from the people for accomplishing this end”.

The other account is that “civil government is an ordinance of the Deity, by which the body of mankind are given up to the will of a few, and, consequently, that it is a trust from the Deity, in the exercise of which civil governors are accountable only to him”.

If the former account is right, the people...are their own legislators. All civil authority is properly their authority. Civil governors are only public servants, and their power, being delegated, is by its nature limited. On the contrary, if the later account is right the people have nothing to do with their own government. They are placed by their Maker in the situation of cattle on an estate, which the owner may dispose of as he pleases. Civil governors are a body of masters, constituted such by inherent rights, and their power is a commission from Heaven, unbounded in its extent and never to be resisted. (*Two Tracts*, 1778, p. 15)

Freedom, in Prince's view, is only possible when authority flows upwards from man to the state he creates. Any theory of divinely constituted civil authority is inherently tyrannical. This claim by Price is universally held by liberals today. Price drew from the contractual political theory of Richard Hooker both directly and as mediated by Locke. But unlike Hooker and Hobbes, Price does not consider that government merely originated in the free contract of autonomous human agents. Political rights are the rights of human nature and must continue to be exercised through participation in government. There are two requirements for just law and government, “government by law, is or is not liberty, just as the laws are just or unjust; and as the body of the people do or do not participate in the power of making them.” (p. 17)

The American Revolution

For the American revolution Price had the greatest enthusiasm. “Perhaps I do not go too far when I say that, next to the introduction of Christianity among mankind, the American revolution may prove the most important step in the progressive course of improvement.” He spoke of the 'old prophecies. . . .' that the last universal empire upon earth shall be the empire of reason and virtue, under which the gospel of peace (better understood) shall have free course and be glorified, many, will run to and fro and knowledge be increased, the wolf dwell with the lamb and the leopard with the kid, and nation no more lift up

sword against nation.' ...It is a conviction that I cannot resist that the independence of the English colonies in America is one of the steps ordained by Providence to introduce these times. . . . (from *The Importance of the American Revolution*, 1785, 119)

Religious toleration via the disestablishment of the church was to Price the most attractive feature of the experiment

. . . by our brethren on the other side of the Atlantic. . . . There a total separation of religion from civil policy has taken place which will probably read a lesson to the world that will do it infinite service.... But there is now a conviction prevailing that all encroachments on the right of conscience are pernicious and impious, that the proper office of the civil magistrate is to maintain peace, not to support truth. To defend the properties of men, not to take care of their souls. And to protect all honest citizens of all persuasions, not set up one religious sect above another.

Sentiments so reasonable must continue to spread. They promise an open and free stage for discussion and general harmony among the professors of Christianity. O happy time! (p. 161)

While applauding what America had already done, he pointed out more must be accomplished to bring Americans into the state where “in them all the families of the earth shall be blessed”. First the problem of public debt must be solved. The evils of deficit financing and of unbacked paper were a continual obsession with Price. Second, America must progress beyond the Articles of Confederation to a form of government granting Congress power to enforce its decisions. Third, there must be absolute liberty with no religious establishment or restriction on enquiry or discussion. The civil government must not uphold any religious doctrine. “It is, indeed, superstition, idolatry, and nonsense, that civil power at present supports almost everywhere under the idea of supporting sacred truth and opposing error. Would not, therefore, its perfect neutrality be the greatest blessing?” (p. 126) Repeatedly, Price criticizes Americans for not carrying through disestablishment consistently.

I am sorry to mention one exception to the fact here intimated. The new constitution for Pennsylvania (in other respects wise and liberal is dishonoured by a religious test. It requires an acknowledgment of the divine inspiration of the Old and the New Testaments as a condition of being admitted to a seat in the House of Representatives: directing however, at the same time, that no other religious test shall for ever hereafter be required of any civil officer. This has been, probably, an accommodation to the prejudices of some of the narrower sects in the province, to which the more liberal part have for the present thought fit to yield; and, therefore, it may be expected that it will not be of long continuance.

Religious rests and subscriptions in general, and all establishments of

particular systems of faith, with civil emoluments annexed, do inconceivable mischief, by turning religion into a trade, by engendering strife and persecution, by forming hypocrites, by obstructing the progress of truth, and fettering and perverting the human mind: nor will the world ever grow much wiser, or better, or happier, till, by the abolition of them, truth can gain fair play, and reason free scope for exertion. (p. 19. and note I)

He admired Massachusetts's declaration of rights, "In this state every denomination of Christians demeaning themselves peaceably and as good subjects of the commonwealth shall be equally under the protection of the law, and no subordination of any one sect or denomination to another shall ever be established by law ." Price wished, however that the words, 'all men of all religions' been substituted for the words, 'every denomination of Christians'", adding "I cannot but dislike the religious tests which make a part of several of the American constitutions." (p. 136) "All this is more than is required even in England where, though every person however debauched or atheistical is required to receive the sacrament as a qualification for inferior places, no other religious test is imposed on members of parliament than a declaration against Popery."

Montesquieu probably was not a Christian. Newton and Locke were not Trinitarians and therefore not Christians according to the commonly received ideas of Christianity. Would the United States, for this reason, deny such

Price On Oaths

Oaths are expedients to which all states have had recourse in order to obtain true information and ascertain facts by securing the veracity of witnesses. But I know not how to relish that imprecation which always makes a part of an oath. Perhaps there is no such necessity for it as is commonly imagined. An affirmation solemnly made with laws inflicting severe penalties on falsehood when detected, would probably answer all the ends of oaths. I am, therefore, disposed to wish that in the united states imprecatory oaths may be abolished and the same indulgence in this respect granted to all which is now granted to the Quakers. But I am afraid they will think this too dangerous an experiment, and what is of most consequence is to avoid, first, such a multiplicity of oaths as will render them too familiar, and secondly, a slight manner of administering them. England, in this respect. seems to be sunk to the lowest possible degree of degeneracy. Oaths among us are required on so many occasions and so carelessly administered as to have lost almost all their use and efficacy. It has been asserted that, including oaths of office, oaths at elections, customhouse oaths, etc., there are about a million of perjuries committed in this kingdom annually. This is one of the most atrocious of our national iniquities and it is a wonder if we are not to be visited for it with some of the severest of God's judgments.

The Importance of the American Revolution, 1785

men, were they living, all places of trust and power among them? (p. 137)

What seemed most to disturb Price in religious establishments was that they perpetuated old forms in opposition to progress. Price believed the Reformation to be a great improvement over Popery, but only a first stopping point on the road to modern enlightenment.

Messianic Education

Price's next recommendation is for the extension of education. Throughout Price's rejoicings over the great progress made since the "dark ages", the one great exception he makes is the personal conduct of the general populace. There is a lingering corruption of private and public morals. It seemed to him that some key reformation remained to be effected. "So much is left by the author of nature to depend on the turn given to the mind in early life, and the impressions then made, that I have often thought there may be a secret remaining to be discovered in education which will cause future generations to grow up virtuous and happy and accelerate human improvement to a greater degree than can at present be imagined." (p. 137)

The defect Price saw in the education of his day was that it instilled prejudice by teaching false systems, instead of teaching the skills for finding out the truth. "An unoccupied and simple mind is infinitely preferable to a mind warped by systems, and an entire want of learning better than a learning such as most of that is which hitherto, has been sought and admired." (p. 139) Among these Price included theological systems, the study of which, he insisted, had been substituted for the study of the New Testament.

Price's view of the evidence and truth is that evidentialism which Nicholas Wolterstorff says was an innovation of Locke's,¹ but which Locke derived from Richard Hooker, namely that "care should be taken to induce. . . a habit of believing only on an overbalance of evidence. and or proportioning assent in every case to the degree of that overbalance." (p. 140.) Following Locke, he held "The best way, certainly, of attaching men to true principles is to enable them to examine impartially all principles. Every truth that is necessary to be believed and really sacred, must be attended with the clearest evidence." (p. 171) Education "has taught a gloomy and sour, instead of a manly and benevolent, religion, a religion consisting in a blind attachment to rites and forms and mysteries, and not in an impartial enquiry after truth, in the love of God and his creatures...." (p. 167) "It is a narrow and ill managed education that keeps up discord and malevolence, and that produces most of the evils of life." (p. 171) Much good could be expected, he said, from the school for Presbyterian ministers at which he delivered his lecture. He could not include non-Presbyterian dissenters in this his optimism:

1 Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Migration of Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics", in Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright, *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, (Cornell University Press, 1986) p. 38-81.

The whole body of Protestant dissenters consists of a great variety of different sects who have hardly one common principle of dissent. The majority of the very mixed and numerous body are, without doubt, Calvinists and Trinitarians, and therefore cannot dislike the creed of the church, and, at the beginning of this century, the same was true of even the Presbyterian dissenters. A great revolution has taken place in the opinion of this last class of dissenters: but it originated in the church itself with Sir Issac Newton, Clarke, Hoadley Whiston, Sykes, etc. and if from these dissenters the faith of the established church is in danger, it must be more in danger from many of its own members. (p. 168 ft)

Thus the two universities “are fortresses created for the security and preservation of the church of England, and defended for that purpose by tests and subscriptions.” Most dissenting schools were similarly “for making Baptists, Independents, Calvinists, and orthodox believers”. The Presbyterian school, however, aimed at making “good scholars and enlightened philosophers” but above all “good men, upright citizens, and honest and candid believers.” (p. 170) Though “even this seminary was by the founder of it intended to form Independents and Calvinists its trustees and tutors have indeed given it a liberal turn and made it very useful.” (p. 172)

Two hundred years later we are still in Price's shadow.