

A History of the Corruptions of Christianity: Considerations in evidence that the apostolic and primitive church was Unitarian.

By: Amtul Q Farhat

Dr Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), was a British Scientist, Natural Philosopher and Theologian who first discovered Oxygen gas. As a Unitarian Theologian, Dr Priestley wanted to return Christianity to its "primitive" or "pure" form by eliminating the "corruptions" which had accumulated over many centuries.

One of his major works *the Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religions* first published in 1771 shocked and appalled many readers, primarily because it challenged basic Christian orthodoxies such as the divinity of Christ. *The History of Corruptions of Christianity* was initially added as the fourth part of this book. It became so voluminous that he had to issue it separately. First published in 1782, Dr Priestley believed that *The History of Corruptions of Christianity* was "the most valuable" work he ever published.

The two volume book has various sections tracing history of distortions and corruptions in all the major doctrines of Christianity such as Trinity, Atonement, Baptism, Grace, Original Sin, Veneration of saints, angels and relics, State of Dead and the Lord's Supper to its origins. Dr Priestley retrieves the sequential details of history as to how the corruptions were gradually incorporated in to a monotheistic religion of Jesus; both unintentionally and intentionally. The work is original and the evidence has been taken either from New Testament or from the writings of scholars and theologians of the apostolic age and around 500 years after that. It contains more than 1800 original quotes regarding unity of God alone. Dr Priestley writes:

"----- I have taken a good deal of pains to read, or at least look carefully through, many of the most capital works of the ancient Christian writers, in order to form a just idea of their general principles and turn of thinking, and to collect such passages as might occur for my purpose". ---- (p-xii Vol 1)

Some of his excerpts regarding Trinity and Atonement are presented here.

The Doctrine of Trinity:

The doctrine of the Trinity is commonly expressed as: "One God, three Persons". The word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible and does not make philosophical sense. It was first used by Tertullian (c.155-230). The doctrine was formally defined in the Nicene Creed, which declared Jesus to be: "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." Dr Priestley viewed Jesus as a *mere man* and nothing more.. He argues that that the Trinity Doctrine has not been commanded like the Doctrine of Unity of God which has been commanded repeatedly and forcefully and linked to severe punishments in the scriptures:

He writes:

"Why was not the doctrine of the Trinity taught as explicitly, and in as definite a manner, in the New Testament at least, as the doctrine of the divine Unity is taught in both the Old and New Testaments, if it be a truth? And why is the doctrine of the Unity always delivered in so unguarded a manner, and without

any exception made in favour of the Trinity, to prevent any mistake with respect to it, as is always now done in our orthodox catechisms, creeds, and discourses on the subject?" (P-321 Vol 1)

Dr. Priestly writes that the original apostles and Gentiles considered Jesus only a man and the Promised Messiah. He writes:

"----Not only do we find no trace of so prodigious a change in the ideas which the apostles entertained concerning Christ, as from that of a man like themselves, (which it must be acknowledged were the first that they entertained,) to that of the most high God, or one who was in any sense their maker or preserver, that when their minds were most fully enlightened, after the descent of the Holy Spirit, and to the latest period of their ministry, they continued to speak of him in the same style; even when it is evident they must have intended to speak of him in a manner suited to his state of greatest exaltation and glory". (P-1 Vol 1)

The doctrine was incorporated gradually even though it is claimed that it was taught by early apostles. The first step in this direction was the personification of Logos. However, before the council of Nice when the Divinity was added to the status of Jesus Christ, supremacy was always ascribed to the Father. He writes:

"There is a pretty easy gradation in the progress of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ; as he was first thought to be a God in some qualified sense of the word, a distinguished emanation from the supreme mind, and then the logos or wisdom of God personified; and it was not till near four hundred years after Christ that he was thought to be properly equal to the Father. Whereas, on the other hand, it is now pretended, that the apostles taught the doctrine of the proper divinity of Christ; and yet it cannot be denied that, in the very times of the apostles, the Jewish church, and many of the Gentiles, held the opinion of his being a mere man" (p-318 Vol 1)

Dr Priestly reveals that a crucified man was considered an obstacle for propagation of Christianity and that image had to be nullified. He writes:

"--- All the early heresies arose from men who wished well to the gospel, and who meant to recommend it to the Heathens, and especially to philosophers among them, whose prejudices they found great difficulty in conquering. (P 8 Vol 1).....

The more philosophical part of them, stumbled the most, was the doctrine of a crucified Saviour. They could not submit to become the disciples of a man who had been exposed upon a cross, like the vilest malefactor. Of this objection to Christianity we find traces in all the early writers, who wrote in defence of the gospel against the unbelievers of their age, to the time of Lactantius; and probably it may be found much later. He says, "I know that many fly from the truth out of their abhorrence of the cross."1 "We, who only learn from history that crucifixion was a kind of death to which slaves and the vilest of malefactors were exposed, can but very imperfectly enter into their prejudices, so as to feel what they must have done with respect to it. The idea of a man executed at Tyburn, without anything to distinguish him from other malefactors, is but an approach to the case of our Saviour.

The apostle Paul speaks of the crucifixion of Christ as the great obstacle to the reception of the gospel....." (P 8 Vol 1).....

The doctrine went through conflicting opinions throughout and even at the Council of Nice. Dr Priestly writes:

"Thus, according to Lardner, Oerinthus, one of the first of these philosophizing Christians "taught one Supreme God, but that the world was not made by him, but by angels;" that Jesus " was a man born of Joseph and Mary, and that at his baptism, the Holy Ghost, or the Christ, descended upon him;" that Jesus "died and rose again, but that the Christ was impassable." On the other hand, Marcioh held that Christ was not born at all, but that " the son of God took the exterior form of a man, and appeared as a man; and without being born, or gradually growing up to the full stature of a man, he showed himself at once in Galilee; as a man grown." All the heretics, however, of this class, whose philosophy was more properly that of the East, thought it was unworthy of so exalted a person as the proper Christ to be truly a man, and most of them thought he had no real flesh, but only the appearance of it, and what was incapable of feeling pain"----- (p-10 Vol 1)

Divinity of Christ was advanced by admirers of Plato. Dr Priestly writes;

"The divinity of Christ was first advanced and urged by those who had been heathen philosophers, and especially those who were admirers of the doctrine of Plato, who held the opinion of a second God. Austin says, that he considered Christ as no other than a most excellent man, and had no suspicion of the word of God being incarnate in him, or how "the catholic faith differed from the error of Photius," (the last of the proper Unitarians whose name is comedown to us,) till he read the books of Plato; and that he was afterwards confirmed in his opinion by reading the Scriptures. Constantine, in his oration to the fathers of the Council of Nice, speaks with commendation of Plato, as having taught the doctrine of "a second God, derived from the supreme God, and subservient to his will." (P-318 Vol 1)

Trinity as it unfolded in Athanasian Creed is calculated as a mathematical contradiction. Dr priestly writes:

"Now I ask, wherein does the Athanasian doctrine of the Trinity differ from a contradiction? It asserts, in effect, that nothing is wanting to either the Father, the Son, or the Spirit, to constitute each of them truly and properly God; each being equal in eternity and all divine perfections ; and yet that these three are not three Gods, but only one God. They are, therefore, both one and many in the same respect, viz., in each being perfect God. This is certainly as much a contradiction as to say that Peter, James, and John, having each of them everything that is requisite to constitute a complete man, are yet, all together, not three men, but only one man. For the ideas annexed to the words God or man cannot make any difference in the nature of the two propositions" (p-321 Vol 1)

Dr Priestly makes a general appeal to get rid of complex, mystic and contradictory Trinity Doctrine which is in accordance with the Scriptures:. He writes:

"Why, then, should you be so desirous of retaining such a doctrine as this of the Trinity, which you must acknowledge has an uncouth appearance, has always confounded the best reason of mankind, and drives us to the undesirable doctrine of inexplicable mysteries. Try, then, whether you cannot hit upon some method or other of reconciling a few particular texts, not only with common sense, but also with the general and the obvious tenor of the Scriptures themselves. In the meantime, this doctrine of the Trinity wears so disagreeable an aspect, that I think every reasonable man must say, with the excellent Archbishop Tillotson, with respect to the Athanasian Creed, " I wish we were well rid of it." This is not

setting up reason against the Scriptures, but reconciling reason with the Scriptures, and the Scriptures with themselves” (p-321 Vol 1)

He further adds that Trinity is the most radical corruption added to Christianity and therefore deserves renunciation in an unequivocal manner. He writes:

“I therefore think it of the greatest consequence to Christianity, that this doctrine of the Trinity, which I consider as one of its most radical corruptions, should be renounced in the most open and unequivocal manner by all those whose minds are so far enlightened as to be convinced that it is a corruption and an innovation in the Christian doctrine, the reverse of what it was in its primitive purity; and that they should exert themselves to enlighten the minds of others”. (P-321-322 Vol1)

Dr Priestly invites establishments to correct the Doctrine of Trinity. He writes:

“----- I have taken the liberty, which I hope will not be thought improper, to endeavour to call the attention of unbelievers to the subject of the corruptions of Christianity (being sensible that this is one of the principal causes of infidelity), and also that of those who have influence with respect to the present establishments of Christianity, the reformation of many of the abuses I have described being very much in their power”. (P-xi Vol 1)

The Doctrine of Atonement

According to the Doctrine of Atonement Jesus was crucified to pay ransom for sins of Humanity. Innovation of such a doctrine gave *satisfaction for justice* to the Church as to why God chose his loved one to die on the cross.

Such meanings of sacrifice were derived from an abuse of the figurative language of Scripture just as the doctrine of transubstantiation (the bread and wine at the Eucharist become blood and body of Jesus) did. However for several centuries these figurative expressions were understood and applied in a manner very different from what they are implied these days.

According to Dr Priestly, the whole doctrine of *atonement*, with every modification of it, has been a departure from the primitive and genuine doctrine of Christianity:

“As I conceive this doctrine to be a gross misrepresentation of the character and moral government of God, and to affect many other articles in the scheme of Christianity, greatly disfiguring and depraving it; I shall show, in a fuller manner than I mean to do with respect to any other corruption of Christianity, that it has no countenance whatever in reason, or the Scriptures; and, therefore, that the whole doctrine of atonement, with every modification of it, has been a departure from the primitive and genuine doctrine of Christianity”. (P-51-52 Vol 1)

According to Dr Priestly the concept of Atonement was a consequence of Divinity concept and he explains it as follows:

“This corruption of the genuine doctrine of revelation is connected with the doctrine of the divinity of Christ; because it is said that sin, as an offence against an infinite Being, requires XD infinite satisfaction, which can only be made by an infinite person, that is, one who is no less than God himself. Christ,

therefore, in order to make this infinite satisfaction for the sins of men, must himself be God, equal to the Father. The justice of God being now fully satisfied by the death of Christ, the sinner is acquitted. Moreover, as the sins of men have been thus imputed to Christ, his righteousness is, on the other hand, imputed to them; and thus they are accepted of God, not on account of what they have done themselves, but for what Christ had done for them." (P-51 Vol 1)

According to Scriptures, *repentance over sins and conversion to a pious life alone* are sufficient to recommend us to the divine favour. Dr Priestly writes:

"Is it not surprising, then, that, in all the books of scripture, we nowhere find the principle on which the doctrine of atonement is founded? For though the sacred writers often speak of the malignant nature of sin, they never go a single step farther, and assert that, "it is of so heinous a nature, that God cannot pardon it without an adequate satisfaction being made to his justice, and the honour of his laws and government." Nay, the contrary sentiment occurs everywhere, viz. that repentance and a good life are, of themselves, sufficient to recommend us to the divine favour. Notwithstanding so many notorious sinners, particular persons, and whole nations, are addressed by inspired persons, and their conduct strongly remonstrated against in the course of the sacred history, none of them are ever directed to anything farther than their own hearts and lives. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, is the substance of all they say on these occasions". (P-52 Vol-1)

Dr Priestly writes that according to the Old and New Testament the Doctrine of Atonement has not been practiced by God even in times His men committed the worst of the sins. He gives example of the *Golden Calf of the People of Moses* here:

"All the declarations of divine mercy are made without reserve or limitation to the truly penitent, through all the books of scripture, without the most distant hint of any regard being had to the sufferings or merit of any being whatever. It is needless to quote many examples of this. One only, and that almost the first that occurs, may suffice. It is the declaration that God made of his character to Moses, presently after the Israelites had sinned in making the golden calf. Exodus: xxxiv. 6, 7: "And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression and sin." In the New Testament also we are said to be "justified freely by the grace of God." Rom. iii. 24. Tit. iii. 7. Now, certainly, if the favour had been procured by the suffering of another person, it could not have been said to be bestowed freely". (P-52-53 Vol 1)

Christ death is represented as a sacrifice in a figurative sense. However many middle opinions changed its versions. Dr Priestly argues as follows:

"----- I am persuaded, lead many persons to think rationally on this subject, and especially to abandon all middle opinions with respect to it, to observe, as they must do if they give due attention to the language of Scripture, that those particular texts on which they are disposed to lay so much stress, give no countenance to any middle doctrine. For they must either be interpreted literally, according to the plain and obvious sense of the words, which will enforce the belief of proper vicarious punishments, or they must be interpreted figuratively; and then they will not oblige us to believe the doctrine of atonement in any sense, or that Christ died a sacrifice in any other manner, than as any person might be said to be a sacrifice to the cause in which he dies". (P-92 Vol 1)

The *Ransom* was considered to have been **paid to devil by God before the time of Austin**. The fathers after the time of Austin had conflicting opinions about justification of justice of God. Dr priestly writes:

“About two centuries and a half after Austin, we find Gregory the Great, who was the most considerable writer in his time. But he also was far from having any consistent notions on this subject. For, at the same time that he insists upon the necessity of some expiation, he says, that our redemption might have been affected by Christ in some other way than by his death. He says, “The rust of sin could not be purged without the fire of torment; Christ therefore came without fault, that he might subject himself to voluntary torment, and that he might bear the punishment due to our sins.” But he says, “Christ might have assisted us without suffering, for that he who made us could deliver us from suffering without his own death. But he chose this method, because by it he showed more love to us.” (P-82 Vol 1)

Then after Austin Period, there was a twist in the statement. The *ransom* which previously was believed to have been paid *By God to Devil now was believed to have been paid by God to God*. In the Latin Church the doctrine was held as follows:

“The great oracle of the Latin Church was Thomas Aquinas; and his doctrine, we may presume, was that which was most generally received in that church, and retained till the time of the Reformation. The following quotations from his Summa show that his doctrine of satisfaction was a mixed one. He says, that “in consequence of sin man was a debtor to God as a judge, and to the devil as a tormentor. And with respect to God, justice required that man should be redeemed, but not with respect to the devil; so that Christ paid his blood to God, and not to the devil. It was not naturally impossible for God,” he says, “to be reconciled to man without the death of Christ, but this was more convenient, as by this means he obtained more and better gifts than by the mere will of God.” He says, that “ God might have remitted the sins of men by his mere will, but that it is more convenient to do it by the death of Christ”..... (P-84 Vol 1)

After the Reformation time the Doctrine was well established and it was advanced to its current state. Dr Priestly writes:

“But after the reformation by Luther, we find the doctrine of satisfaction, or atonement for sin by the death of Christ, reduced to a regular system, grounded on certain principles, and pursued to its proper extent”. (P-86 Vol 1)

“With them we find a general outline of the doctrine of atonement, in the confession of faith which they presented to the king of France in 1544; in which they say, that “the fathers, to whom Christ was promised, notwithstanding their sin, and their impotence by the law, desired the coming of Christ to satisfy for their sins, and to fulfil the law by himself.” But we find nothing of this subject in their older confessions” (p-85 Vol 1)

Thus all these boasted ancient doctrines are in fact of late date, either having arisen from the principles of heathen philosophy, or from the need to establish one false position with another.

“In Theodoras Abucara, a Greek writer of the ninth century, we find something more like the doctrine of atonement, than in any writer in the Latin Church. Indeed, as far as the extract given us by Grotius goes, it is very express to the purpose. But how he would have explained himself if he had written more largely on the subject, I cannot tell. He says, “ God, by his just judgments, demanded of us all the things that are

written in the law; which, when we could not pay, the Lord paid for us, taking upon himself the curse and condemnation to which we were obnoxious." Again, he says, "Christ, the mediator, reconciled us to God." (P-82 Vol 1)

Many do not believe that such a sacrifice has been accepted by God as a ransom for the sins. Dr Priestly writes:

"There are many who can by no means think that God has, in a proper sense, accepted of the death of Christ in lieu of that of all men, (having no idea of the possibility of transferring guilt, and consequently of transferring punishment,) who yet think that the death of Christ serves to show the divine displeasure at sin, in such a manner, as that it would not have been expedient to pardon any sin without it; and they think that the sacrifices under the law had a real reference to the death of Christ in the scheme of the gospel; while others think the death of Christ was necessary to the pardon of sin, and our restoration to eternal life, in some method of which we have no clear knowledge, being only obscurely intimated in the Scriptures, and therefore could not be intended to produce its effect by any operation on our minds". (P-91 Vol 1)

Conclusions:

According to Dr Priestly, Christianity was a monotheistic religion and Jesus was *mere man* commissioned to be a Messiah as it was prophesised in Judaism. He propagated the practice of virtue to enable men to rise to immortal life and to inflict adequate punishment on the wicked. He did not speak of *atonement* as it is commanded currently.

The doctrine itself was very simple and little liable to corruptions and abuse. Even though Jesus had foretold that there would be a great departure from the truth, and that something would arise in the church altogether unlike the doctrine he preached, the monstrous corruptions in subsequent times were unimaginable to the original followers of Jesus who were truly Unitarians.

Dr Priestly analyses that the causes of the succeeding corruptions already existed in the time of Jesus and his early apostles. These were wholly contained in the established opinions of the heathen world and especially in its philosophical part. When heathens embraced Christianity they mixed their former tenets and prejudices with their new religion and through a natural operation, all the abuses rose to the maximum.

Discussing *Trinity*, Dr Priestly adds that Jesus never claimed to be God or son of God. In actual fact, both Christians and heathens were scandalized at the idea of being the disciples of a man who had been crucified as a common malefactor. Therefore Christians were sufficiently disposed to adopt any opinion that would most effectually wipe away this reproach. The existing concept of soul that it subsisted before and after its union to body was wonderfully calculated to answer this purpose. It enabled the Gnostic Christians to give Christ whatever rank they pleased in the heavenly regions before his incarnation.

Later the philosophizing Christians went upon another principle, *personifying the wisdom of God the Father*. This was mere Platonism and seemed unnatural initially. With passage of time however they naturally believed that Christ was, in power and glory, equal to God the Father himself.

According to Dr Priestly Jesus also directed that proselytes to his religion should be admitted by *baptism*, and that his disciples should eat bread and drink wine in commemoration of his death. However sequential changes were incorporated in the ritualistic practices and meanings of baptism.

From the famous opinion of a soul distinct from the body came the *practice of praying*, first for the dead, and then to the Dead. A long train of other absurd opinions, and superstitious practices followed this concept.

The abuses of the positive institutions of Christianity arose from the opinion of the purifying and sanctifying virtue of rites and ceremonies, which was the very basis of all the worship of the heathens.

The abuses in *the government of the Church* arose due to worldly minded men being ready to lay hold of every opportunity of increasing their power; and in the dark ages too many circumstances concurred to give the Christian clergy peculiar advantages over the laity in this respect.

Dr Priestly thinks that the corruption of Christianity, in every article of faith or practice, was the natural consequence of the circumstances in which it was promulgated and expects that its recovery from these corruptions will also be the natural consequence of different circumstances.

References:

All the reference pages are marked according to the following edition of the book. It was presented to the New York Public Library by Samuel P Avery:

A HISTORY OF THE CORRUPTIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

BY JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, LL.D., F.E.S.,

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CONSIDERATIONS IN EVIDENCE THAT THE APOSTOLIC AND
PRIMITIVE CHURCH WAS UNITARIAN,

EXTRACTED FROM PRIESTLEY'S REPLIES TO BISHOP HORSLEY, THE BENCH OF
BISHOPS, AND OTHERS.

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