RICHARD PRICE, A CONTROVERSIAL EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY UNITARIAN

An address given to Oxford Unitarians by Dr Howard Oliver on 9th October 2011

To start with some geography: if you visit the cemetery of Bunhill Fields on the City Road in London, as well as the notable graves of William Blake and Daniel Defoe, you will find those of the mathematician Revd Thomas Bayes and that of our subject today, the Revd Richard Price.

Richard Price was the son of a dissenting minister and was born in 1723 in Tynton in Wales. After education at a dissenting academy in London, he became a chaplain in Stoke Newington. In 1757, following a bequest, he was able to marry and in 1758 moved to Newington Green as the minister of the dissenters’ chapel there. His block of houses was destined to become a famous address and, built in 1658, is also London’s oldest surviving brick terrace.

In 1770 he became morning preacher at Gravel Pit Chapel in Hackney as well as continuing to deliver afternoon sermons at Newington Green. He also carried out some duties at the meeting house in Old Jewry St in the city.

Such was Price’s status that his house at 54 Newington Green was visited by many famous people, for example: American Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine and John Adams. Politicians, Earl of Shelburne, Earl Stanhope, William Pitt. Philosophers Adam Smith and also David Hume; poet and banker Samuel Rogers.

His immediate neighbours in the terrace included the father of Samuel Rogers, with whom he travelled widely, and the Revd James Burgh, who opened a dissenting academy on the Green and sent his pupils to hear Price’s sermons.

He had frequent contacts with Joseph Priestley – even though they differed in their dissenting beliefs. It was Rogers who gave shelter to Priestley after the Birmingham riots.

Price also played a key role in securing premises for Theophilus Lindsey’s first Unitarian Chapel at Essex Street.

Price is most renowned for his wide range of publications. His published sermons were widely read if not universally found acceptable! He wrote several papers on population and life expectancy. His work on the proper method for calculation the values of contingent reversions (published by the Royal Society) paved the way to modern pensions. He wrote on the national debt, and his work influenced William Pitt the younger. His work on the principal questions in morals includes his ethical theories.

When his mathematician friend Thomas Bayes died, Price found his draft work on solving a problem in the doctrine of chances which contains what has come to be known as Baye’s Theorem. Being a brilliant mathematician himself, Price revised and edited the work and had it published by the Royal Society with his own introduction.
which included a discussion on the work’s relevance to discussions on the existence of a deity.

By far the most high-profile publications were Price’s writings relating to the American and French revolutions. The controversies they caused incidentally had the effect of greatly boosting his congregations!

In 1776, his paper “Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America” sold 60,000 copies in a few days, and a cheaper reprint of a further 120,000 copies had to be quickly produced. John Wesley was among the high-profile respondents to his work.

Price produced a second paper the following year and thus became identified with the cause for American independence. He was actually invited by Congress to move to America and help in the financial administration of the States – an offer that he did not feel he could accept.

In 1781 George Washington and Price were the only recipients of the degree of Doctor of Laws from Yale College.

In November 1789 he preached his last really contentious sermon, “A Discourse on the Love of our Country”, in which he presented his views on the “dawning of the millennium through the spread of liberty and happiness over the world”, especially as seen in the developing events in France at the time. This ignited a heated debate over the French Revolution and an extremely fierce anti-revolution rebuttal by Edmund Burke.

Price had a significant influence on the lives of many people in his congregation, but perhaps one of the most important was that of the early women’s rights campaigner, Mary Wollstonecraft, who moved her school for girls to Newington Green in 1784. Although a life-long Anglican, she attended his sermons. She was encouraged by the approach of rational dissenters, whom she saw as hard-working, humane, critical but uncynical, and respectful towards women. Price probably even gave her some financial support, which helped her to make a public name for herself and her cause.

To end with some anecdotes which show his more human side:

Samuel Rogers described him as slim, rather below normal size but of great physical strength. He lived a simple life, gave a fifth of his income to charity, and was a passionate campaigner against the slave trade.

He was well respected by the poor and rode his half-blind horse through the London markets to the cries of the orange sellers: “There goes Dr Price. Make way for Dr Price!”

He was liked by local children, especially after he won a hopping race across the local meadow against a much more robust and taller opponent! He was also remembered for getting tangled in a bush which he had been challenged to jump over.
He was noted for freeing birds from bird catchers’ nets, but did leave the catchers some small change as compensation!

He died in 1791 (five years after his wife) and such was his reputation that a full list of his publications was actually produced as an appendix for the funeral sermon given by Joseph Priestley. The village of Newington Green had lost one of its famous names.