

**The Material and the Real:  
American Conceptions of Materialism in the Nineteenth Century**

by

Holly E. Rapp

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(History)  
in the University of Michigan  
2015

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Howard Brick, Co-Chair  
Professor James W. Cook, Jr., Co-Chair  
Professor John Carson  
Professor Gregg D. Crane

© Holly Elizabeth Rapp  
2015

For Chad and Daisy

## **Acknowledgements**

This dissertation could not have been written without several individuals from the University of Michigan community. Jay Cook, who served as my advisor from the first day of graduate school, was an extraordinary mentor. It is hard to imagine a better model for graduate advising, a sentiment readily echoed by many of Jay's advisees. Jay offered generous support and advice every step of the way. I am very thankful for the opportunity to work so closely with such an incredible historian, teacher, and person.

It was Jay who encouraged me to take a graduate seminar with Howard Brick during his first year at UM and I am very glad I took his advice. I quickly learned Howard is not only one of the smartest people I've ever known, but also one of the kindest. Howard's ability to "think big" and take subjects like "the world" seriously as a unit of historical analysis is nothing short of astounding. His exceptional work in intellectual history showed me that my interests in theory and philosophy did not have to remain separate from my historical endeavors.

I was also fortunate enough to work with John Carson, another remarkable intellectual historian whose almost unimaginably ambitious work I admire greatly, to say the least. John is not only a rigorous and phenomenal historian; he is also one of the best teachers I have ever encountered. John was kind enough to do an independent study course and help me prepare for preliminary exams even while living abroad. His willingness to "meet" regularly and sit through my entire prelims over the phone was much appreciated.

Gregg Crane also deserves many thanks for agreeing to serve as my cognate member. Gregg offered smart writing advice and excellent interdisciplinary perspective to this project. Though I fear it is not nearly as well-written as most dissertations in the English department, I am thankful for Gregg's input on a project that often felt overly insular in scope.

I am very grateful to the Rackham Graduate School, the Department of History at the University of Michigan, and the Beinecke Scholarship program for financial support throughout this project. Here Kathleen King, Diana Denney, and Lorna Altstetter deserve special mention for always patiently answering my questions about funding and other program logistics. As a representative of the Beinecke Scholarship and the Sperry Fund, Thomas L. Parkinson helped me navigate both the funding process and the early transition to graduate school.

In another testament to his generosity as an advisor, Jay created and hosted a cultural history dissertation workshop. The members of this group - Pascal Massinon, Cookie Woolner, Katie Lennard, Liz Harmon, Joseph Ho, Jacques Vest, and Rachel Miller - worked through some of my early chapter drafts. Many thanks to them, and Jay, for taking time out of their busy schedules to make these workshops a helpful experience. Extra thanks to Pascal for many thoughtful discussions over coffee throughout the years.

Sarah Harper Nobles, Aston Gonzales, and Joe Cialdella were members of a wonderful writing group that helped me through the earliest stages of the dissertation. Special mention goes to Joe, who was always a kind and generous reader. Joe went above and beyond in continuing our weekly accountability emails and reading my drafts even long after he had already finished his own dissertation. His friendship was a bright spot through this long and challenging process.

Finally, love and gratitude to Chad, my constant source of support, and Daisy, my faithful writing companion.

## Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	vi
Introduction: Materialism and Anti-Materialism in American Culture.....	1
Chapters	
1. Christian Materialism: Joseph Priestley and Thomas Cooper.....	34
2. Radical Materialism: Abner Kneeland.....	97
3. Materialism, Science, and Radical Reform: Charles Knowlton and Frances Wright.....	146
4. Materialism and the Spiritual Sciences: Joseph Buchanan and Joseph Rodes Buchanan.....	213
Conclusion: The Final Science: Spiritual Materialism.....	251
Selected Bibliography.....	266

## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines debates about the concept of "materialism" in the United States during the nineteenth century. Though now more commonly used to describe a sense of avarice or obsession with material gain, nineteenth-century discussions focused primarily on philosophical materialism, that is, materialism as a distinct body of thought that held matter as first principle. In this project, I trace the paired development of both materialist and anti-materialist discourse in the U.S., dissenting cultural traditions that clashed repeatedly as they evolved over this period. I argue that these debates about materialism reveal one way Americans responded to the continually shifting terrain of the nineteenth century. In general, anti-materialist rhetoric revealed a desire to preserve certain facets of American religious, social, intellectual, and political culture believed to be under threat. For much of the century, anti-materialist critics fixated on the allegedly atheistic implications of philosophical materialism. Materialists, by contrast, frequently voiced a desire to unseat deeply entrenched beliefs and profoundly transform American society. I argue that materialism remained steadily controversial precisely because of its connections to radical religious, philosophical, and political doctrines that called for such large-scale transformations.

Throughout, I follow the careers of the few self-professed materialists who tried to disseminate materialist philosophy in the U.S. despite the inhospitable intellectual climate it provided for such ideas. These figures included English chemist, theologian, and philosopher

Joseph Priestley (1733-1804); American physician and philosopher Joseph Buchanan (1785-1829); English scientist, lawyer, and politician Thomas Cooper (1759-1839); American theologian, editor, and publisher Abner Kneeland (1774-1844); American physician and philosopher Charles Knowlton (1800-1850); and Scottish-born lecturer and radical reformer Frances Wright (1795-1852). As a concluding counterpoint, I also examine the work of anti-materialist physician and spiritualist Joseph Rodes Buchanan (1814-1899), son of the aforementioned Joseph Buchanan.



## Introduction:

### Materialism and Anti-Materialism in American Culture

Today, cultural diagnoses of the U.S. as an overly materialistic nation are not difficult to find. Arguments decrying the allegedly rampant materialism of American society regularly appear in print and online, commonly bearing titles like "Long Live American Materialism," "Wanting Things Makes Us Happier Than Having Them: An Empirical Evaluation of Materialism" or "Materialism: A System That Eats Us From the Inside Out."<sup>1</sup> This contemporary commentary on materialism generally falls into one of two categories: assessments of American values that suggest we are overly obsessed with profit and material gain at the expense of other priorities, or self-help manifestos that promise to free readers from the shackles of a desire to buy, spend, and accumulate a never-ending stream of consumer goods. Psychologist Tim Kasser's 2002 *The High Price of Materialism* is one of the most well-known and frequently cited examples of such works.<sup>2</sup> Combining these two genres, Kasser's book argues that Americans who "strongly value the pursuit of wealth and possessions" are more

---

<sup>1</sup> "Long Live American Materialism," *The Economist*, Free Exchange (Blog), April 17, 2009, [http://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2009/04/will\\_the\\_us\\_resemble\\_germany](http://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2009/04/will_the_us_resemble_germany); Lindsay Abrams, "Study: Wanting Things Makes Us Happier Than Having Them," *The Atlantic*, January 16, 2013; George Monbiot, "Materialism: A System that Eats Us From the Inside Out," *The Guardian*, Money (Blog), December 9, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/09/materialism-system-eats-us-from-inside-out>. For more examples, see Ryan T. Howell, "What Causes Materialism in America? The Geography of Consumption," *Psychology Today*, Can't Buy Happiness (Blog), March 23, 2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/cant-buy-happiness/201403/what-causes-materialism-in-america>; Shanzeh Khurram, "Is the American Dream Becoming Too Materialistic?" *The Huffington Post*, February 17, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shanzeh-khurram/is-the-american-dream-bec\\_b\\_2702164.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shanzeh-khurram/is-the-american-dream-bec_b_2702164.html).

<sup>2</sup> Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002).

unhappy and unfulfilled than those who are "less concerned with such aims."<sup>3</sup> After presenting evidence from a number of psychological studies that link materialism to greater risk of depression, anxiety, and other maladies, Kasser concludes that "materialistic values are unhealthy" and suggests readers may experience greater well-being by re-orienting their values away from those related to material goods or monetary gain.<sup>4</sup>

While they come from a number of different fields and authors, these current discussions of materialism share a significant common thread: all portray materialism in an extremely negative light. Across the board, obsession with acquisitiveness is denigrated as wholly immoral and often described in terms like avarice, greed, and corruption. Many further express fear that materialistic ideals are becoming increasingly common in the U.S., an observation that leads to worries about the effect such misplaced values may have on our nation. While such critiques might suggest Americans are facing a new and growing sense of apprehension about materialism, this is in fact far from the first time concerns about materialism have appeared in American discourse.

Though speaking about it in a different sense, nineteenth century Americans, too, wondered about the possibly immoral influence of materialism in the U.S. The content and meaning of this earlier critique differed, however, in important ways. Rather than viewing materialism as prioritizing material gain or other forms of wealth over alternative values, a type of materialism I label "economic materialism," earlier critics of materialism, sometimes called "immaterialists" or "anti-materialists," fixated on the seemingly atheistic implications of "philosophical materialism," that is, materialism as a distinct body of thought or school of philosophy. Here I follow the lead of Raymond Williams, who argued in his *Keywords* that

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 8.

materialism has two main uses in the English language. Williams very aptly described materialism in its first sense as “a very long, difficult, and varying set of arguments which propose matter as the primary substance of all living and non-living things, including human beings.”<sup>5</sup> Materialism under this definition is what I have called “philosophical materialism.” In its other definition, Williams suggested that materialism also acts as “a distinguishable set of attitudes and activities, with no necessary philosophical and scientific connection, which can be summarized as an overriding or primary concern with the production or acquisition of things and money.”<sup>6</sup> While this second definition, which I have called economic materialism, represents the most popular usage of the word today, the term materialism has carried other significant meanings in American discourse. It certainly holds even more definitions outside these economic and philosophical references, though it is nearly impossible to catalog exhaustively all of its uses in a single study.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, this dissertation makes no claim to be a complete or comprehensive history of all forms of materialism. Instead, this project focuses largely on philosophical materialism both for reasons of brevity and because of its significance in the nineteenth century U.S.

---

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 163.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Williams' own "cultural materialism" suggests another significant use of materialism from the fields of literary criticism and cultural studies. "Cultural materialism" generally referred to Williams' cultural studies methodology and its distinct version of Marxism, which rejected the vulgar base/superstructure distinction and conceived of culture as a constitutive rather than purely reflective force. For a good introduction to this concept, see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977); Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1980). The term "historical materialism," which lies outside the scope of this study, is another example of a prominent version of materialism. The scholarship on historical materialism (and its many variants) is vast. A good starting point is Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology, Volume I* (1845). For more on the materialist conception of history, see Gregor McLennan, *Marxism and the Methodologies of History* (1981) and Joseph Fracchia, "Marx's *Aufhebung* of Philosophy and the Foundations of Historical-Materialistic Science," *History and Theory* 30 (1991): 157-79.

This dissertation argues that most nineteenth-century discussions of materialism in America centered around philosophical materialism.<sup>8</sup> In the first half of the century, Americans understood materialism first as a philosophical position tied to a specific conception of reality and, by extension, the rejection of certain religious or spiritual beliefs. Through its central claim that matter is the only substance that exists in the world, philosophical materialism appeared to deny the existence of immaterial entities like god, spirit, or soul, a dangerous line of reasoning in the deeply religious culture of early America. In his 1970 book *On Materialism*, literary critic Sebastiano Timpanaro offered a more detailed definition of philosophical materialism that hints at the consequences of this deceptively simple claim to matter as first principle:

By materialism, we understand above all acknowledgement of the priority of nature over ‘mind,’ or if you like, of the physical level over the biological level, and of the biological level over the socio-economic and cultural level; both in the sense of chronological priority...and in the sense of the conditioning which nature *still* exercises on man...Cognitively, therefore, the materialist maintains that experience cannot be reduced to either a production of reality by a subject...or to a reciprocal implication of subject and object. We cannot, in other words, deny or evade the element of passivity in experience: the external situation which we do not create but which imposes itself on us.<sup>9</sup>

As Timpanaro suggests, efforts to prioritize the material open the door to a host of new issues,

---

<sup>8</sup> References to philosophical materialism certainly still exist today, but they far are less common in general parlance than in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. Current discussions of philosophical materialism tend to take place, unsurprisingly, primarily among philosophers. For a general overview of fairly recent trends in materialist philosophy, see Paul K. Moser and J. D. Trout, eds., *Contemporary Materialism: A Reader* (Routledge: London, 1995). For additional current perspectives on materialism, see "What is Materialism," *PLI: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 12 (November 25, 2001), an entire issue devoted to materialist philosophy. Physicalism, a branch of philosophy sometimes called materialistic monism, received renewed attention in the 1990s and 2000s. See, for example, R. T. Herbert, "Dualism/Materialism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 48, no. 191 (April 1998): 148; Andrew Melnyk, *A Physicalist Manifesto: Thoroughly Modern Materialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). In the 1990s, collaborations between philosophers and neuroscientists became more common as questions about the nature of human consciousness became more informed by new studies of the brain. For examples of these studies, which fall broadly into the field of the philosophy of mind, see Antti Revonsuo and Matti Kamppinen, eds., *Consciousness in Philosophy and Cognitive Neuroscience* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994); Alvin I. Goldman, *Readings in Philosophy and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993); Alexander Moreira-Almeida and Franklin Santana Santos, eds., *Exploring Frontiers of the Mind-Brain Relationship* (New York: Springer Science, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Timpanaro, *On Materialism*, 34. Raymond Williams argued that while Timpanaro's definition "correctly and valuably re-emphasizes the weight of the nature forces that are beyond our...control," his summary of these forces as "nature's oppression of man" ultimately leads to an unattractive position of "materialist pessimism." See Raymond Williams, "Problems of Materialism," *New Left Review* (May/June 1978), 9.

from the foundational question of the ultimate nature of reality to the possibility of the subject/object distinction or the puzzle of free will versus determinism. When Americans confronted materialist philosophy over the course of the nineteenth century, they found themselves facing many of these very same enduring problems.

## **The Evolution of Materialism**

This dissertation argues that debates about materialism reveal one way Americans responded to the continually shifting religious, social, intellectual, political and economic terrain of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> To demonstrate this claim, I trace the paired development of both materialist and anti-materialist discourse in the U.S., showing how each formed as distinct and often dissenting cultural traditions that evolved over the course of the century. In general, anti-materialist sentiment revealed a desire to preserve certain facets of American society that were viewed as threatened or under attack. Materialists, by contrast, frequently voiced a wish to unseat deeply entrenched beliefs and profoundly transform American culture. Materialist and anti-materialist rhetoric thus served as one way certain groups of Americans articulated concerns about the ever-changing landscape of the nineteenth century.

This dissertation argues further that the broad shifts in materialism's common usage demonstrate how the meaning of the term was transformed repeatedly to match issues of contemporary concern. Commentary about economic materialism, for example, became most popular in the latter part of the nineteenth century, a period marked by the rise of corporate and

---

<sup>10</sup> For a good overview of the major transformations in the nineteenth century U.S., the following period syntheses are a good starting point: Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

consumer capitalism.<sup>11</sup> As apprehension about new forms of labor and economy began to grow, worries about philosophical materialism's godless implications started to include a new set of concerns about misplaced obsession with profit and material gain. In one example of typical Gilded Age use of the term, an 1881 *Harper's Weekly* article expressed fear that the nation was moving "in the direction of sordid materialism," a situation described as follows: "Our people are losing their high ideals; they are becoming absorbed in business affairs; they care only for building railroads and factories and towns, and for developing material resources. They are learning to worship Mammon, and to adore prosperity."<sup>12</sup> (Mammon, sometimes also called Mamon, was a Biblical reference to a god of greed or wealth.) Forged in an era that saw unprecedented concentrations of wealth and the creation of a new corporate order, these late nineteenth century references to economic materialism laid the foundation for today's most common use of the term.

But well before materialism was connected to an unhealthy obsession with consumer culture, philosophical materialism created its own great controversy. From the 1780s through the first half of the nineteenth century, Americans fixated on the seemingly atheistic implications of philosophical materialism along with a shifting set of radical political, social, and scientific doctrines they believed would necessarily follow such a loss of faith. This anti-materialist rhetoric confirms Williams' argument that "Materialist modes of investigation have been historically connected, though never exclusively, with certain radical forms of social and

---

<sup>11</sup> For a variety of perspectives on corporate and consumer capitalism, good starting points include: Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); Richard Fox and Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983); Martin Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, Law, and Politics* (1988); Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> "The Atlanta Exhibition," *Harper's Weekly*, October 22, 1881.

political struggle.”<sup>13</sup> In the process, materialism became a term of derision that encompassed a host of charges, the precise content of which, as I have already suggested, changed in different eras to match current issues. Because anti-materialist discourse could adjust the nature of its target to suit its needs, it remained continually relevant. Part of what makes materialism so powerful yet so elusive is this very adaptability. Here it is important to be clear that this does not mean materialism was an endlessly flexible term or that any meaning at all could be attached to it, but rather to suggest that the set of concerns attached to materialism could change even while it retained a certain set of core commitments. For philosophical materialism, the claim to matter as first principle served as the stable element throughout its tenure. Anti-materialists, by contrast, often focused on varying implications of this materialist ontology as it suited current trends and their own needs.

In a similar vein, it is important to recognize that though I employ the categories of "materialist" and "anti-materialist" to divide broadly the sets of ideas I trace throughout this project, the use of these terms does not imply that either existed as a singular or monolithic entity. Though such analytical divisions are useful when making broad arguments, they necessarily elide many of the finer distinctions that exist within these larger groups. There were significant distinctions within and variations among different forms of both materialist and anti-materialist thought over the course of the century. The shifting contours of both materialist and anti-materialist discourse, as well as the different methods those on either side of these debates used to articulate their ideas, are crucial components of this analysis. In each era, both the figures associated with and tactics employed by each of these groups changed, in some cases dramatically. In the process, these transformations created distinct periods of materialist and anti-materialist critique.

---

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Williams, "Problems of Materialism," *New Left Review* I, 109 (May/June 1978): 4.

Take, for instance, the example of anti-materialist rhetoric. Like today, worries about materialism and its possibly detrimental consequences could be found in various forms of print such as newspapers and periodicals. A brief survey of such comments reveals both the wide range, tone, and varying sources of the different forms of early anti-materialist discourse. In a comment typical of mid-century concerns about materialism, for example, one writer for *The Congregationalist and Boston Recorder* warned readers in the 1860s that “materialism, in all its various shades and varieties, is fast becoming fashionable.” These unspecified materialisms, this author argued, had “an alarming spread and influence, which are on the increase.” Should these trends continue, Americans, he feared, would soon be living in “a carnival day of atheism and materialism.”<sup>14</sup>

While many nineteenth-century periodicals included cultural commentary that gestured toward the specter of similarly vague and undefined notions of materialism, others, especially those who worked behind the pulpit, articulated more specific concerns about the philosophy's assumed ungodly influence. Congregationalist pastor John Weiss, for example, delivered an 1852 sermon decrying the “popular degrading tendencies” of a “widely spread materialism.” This “most hopeless materialism,” Weiss argued, used the discoveries of modern “science” to reduce the world to a base “physical order,” leaving no room for god and religion and thereby “destroy[ing] the spiritual life of man.”<sup>15</sup> In a closely related line of argument, many theologians attacked philosophical materialism for a perceived lack of ethics or morality, suggesting that by eliminating the promise of an afterlife and the paired threat of eternal damnation, or by reducing the universe to nothing more than a set of physical laws, materialism left no room for human accountability.

---

<sup>14</sup> “Materialism,” *The Congregationalist and Boston Recorder*, April 29, 1869.

<sup>15</sup> *Modern Materialism: A Discourse at the Ordination of Mr. Charles Lowe* (New Bedford: The Press of Benjamin Lindsey, 1852), 4, 5, 15.



Religious figures across many denominations shared these fears of materialism's corrosive influence on the spiritual and religious life of nineteenth-century Americans. Over the course of the century, they remained some of the most consistent and vocal critics of materialism, often articles printed in periodicals, books, or giving sermons that were later made available in print as their key ways of reaching audiences. In 1854, Presbyterian pastor John Lord joined the chorus of voices speaking out against materialism, arguing that "gross materialism...denies both angel and spirit" and "is as much at war with reason and natural religion as it is with the Bible."<sup>16</sup> Reverend Louis Heylen even identified materialism as the great "danger of the age" in the 1860s, warning Americans against "the thickening darkness of materialism" and the growing "spirit of infidelity," which he saw as "one of the dark symptoms of the prevalence of materialism" in the U.S.<sup>17</sup>

Intellectual critics, too, were disturbed by the impact of materialism on American thought. In 1847, in an article surveying the "intellectual characteristics and tendencies of our times," a writer for the *North American Review* argued that the decade of the 1840s was best described as a "culminating era of material philosophy and science."<sup>18</sup> While such language may sound like a celebration of scientific or intellectual progress, it was actually intended as a warning. Keeping in line with earlier *North American Review* opinions on materialism, which past articles labeled as everything from a "logical absurdity" to a "groveling theory," this 1847 author claimed that materialist philosophy promoted a limited and reductionist conception of reality, one which denied the existence of a "spiritual universe" and reduced all surroundings to a

---

<sup>16</sup> John C. Lord, *Medical Science and Materialism* (Buffalo: Jewett, Thomas, and Co. Printers, 1854), 21.

<sup>17</sup> Louis S. J. Heylen, *The Progress of the Age, and the Danger of the Age* (Cincinnati: John P. Walsh, 1865), 107, 71.

<sup>18</sup> "Sketches of Modern Literature and Eminent Literary Men," *The North American Review* (April 1847).

“material universe.”<sup>19</sup> Such reductionism, this author believed, threatened not only religion and spirituality but also creative or artistic output. With the ascendancy of materialist ideas, “Science,” he claimed, had finally “driven imagination from her last earthly covert,” thereby replacing “a world of chimeras and fantastic forms” with “a world of stiff, stubborn, angular facts” which could be “neither ben[t] nor mould[ed].”<sup>20</sup>

In historical context, then, it is clear that contemporary analyses of materialism are far from the first to appear before American readers; they are instead only the most recent episode in a longstanding series of debates about materialism in the United States. Though played out in different terms, these critiques of materialism across the centuries have shared significant common themes. Most broadly, materialism has consistently carried highly negative connotations. And while the specific content of such concerns has varied, Americans have long worried about the possibly detrimental ethical, social, and political consequences of materialistic values. This longstanding vilification of materialism raises the question of why, despite its continually shifting meanings and associations, materialism has remained so steadily controversial and almost universally denounced in American culture.

This dissertation seeks to explain this phenomenon by tracing the development of American materialist and anti-materialist discourse from approximately the 1780s through the 1880s. By looking at the meanings attributed to materialism, how its use changed over time, and the critical responses these various forms of materialism, I show how debates about materialism acted as a lens into efforts to both preserve and transform various aspects of American culture. In the most general view, the development of materialist ideas reveals a series of efforts to enact

---

<sup>19</sup>“Abercrombie on the Intellectual Powers,” *The North American Review*, 36, no. 79 (April 1833): 498; “On Natural Theology,” *The North American Review*, 54, no. 115 (April 1842): 383; “Sketches of Modern Literature and Eminent Literary Men.”

<sup>20</sup> “Sketches of Modern Literature and Eminent Literary Men.”

wide-ranging social, political, and economic reform in the U.S. The historical evolution of anti-materialist discourse, by contrast, demonstrates the growth of a critical tradition that deemed certain sets of beliefs radical or dangerous in an effort to suppress and discredit them. From the seemingly simple claim that matter is all that exists in the world, materialist philosophy ignited controversy that forced those on both sides of these debates to articulate and defend competing idealized images of American culture and society. Not coincidentally, such debates surfaced most frequently and forcefully during eras of great transformation like the advent of the second great awakening or the rise of industrial capitalism.

### **Philosophical Materialism: General Background and Historiography**

To explain materialism's long-maligned status in the U.S., it is helpful to begin by surveying some of its earliest moments of circulation as this narrative reveals important factors that partially shaped American understandings of the concept. Most historians agree that the term “materialism” was first used in Europe sometime in the late seventeenth century. One of three figures is generally credited with its earliest usage: British physicist Robert Boyle (1627-1691); French philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647-1706); or the famous German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716).<sup>21</sup> Though the term was not coined until the seventeenth century, most philosophers agree that the ideas behind philosophical materialism first appeared in ancient Greece. From its earliest iterations, materialism turned to natural, material explanations rather than some type of god or creator as the origin of all life and everything that exists in the world. The Greek philosophers Thales (624 BC-546 BC), who argued that water is first principle, and Anaximenes (585 BC-528 BC), who declared air the first source, are two of

---

<sup>21</sup> Max Jammer, “Materialism,” in Wentzel Van Huyssteen et al., *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion* (Macmillan Reference USA, 2003), 538.

the most commonly cited early materialists.<sup>22</sup> By declaring a single substance the source of life and all existence, these Ionians laid the groundwork for later materialist arguments that would posit "matter" rather than a specific substance like air or water as first principle. The Greek atomists Democritus (460 BC-370 BC) and Epicurus (341 BC-270 BC) and the later Roman philosopher Lucretius (99 BC-55 BC) are also acknowledged as early materialists for their theories that the entire universe is composed of nothing but tiny particles of matter called atoms.<sup>23</sup>

With the decline of atomism, the rise of Aristotelianism, and the church censure on philosophy, materialist theories were largely pushed underground until the seventeenth century.<sup>24</sup> French philosopher Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) is generally credited with materialism's revival through his efforts to reconcile atomism and Christianity. Gassendi tried to write God into materialist cosmology by suggesting atoms were divine creations rather than perpetually existing building blocks of the universe.<sup>25</sup> Later chapters of this dissertation frequently return to this question of materialism and its status via Christianity, an issue of paramount concern in nearly all U.S. discussions of the topic. Gassendi's work was followed by a significant school of radical French materialists in the eighteenth century, including most famously Julien Offray de la Mettrie (1709-1751), Claude-Adrien Helvetius (1715-1771), Denis Diderot (1713-1784), and Paul-Henri Thiry d'Holbach (1729-1789).<sup>26</sup> Outside France, other important materialist works

---

<sup>22</sup> The very similarly named Anaximander (611BC-546BC), another pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, was a student of Thales and peer to Anaximenes. Anaximander is also sometimes credited as an early materialist.

<sup>23</sup> Lucretius' poem *De rerum natura*, or, *On the Nature of Things*, also included an early materialist theory of mind, soul, and thought.

<sup>24</sup> Jammer, 539; Keith Campbell, "Materialism," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 8.

<sup>25</sup> For more on Gassendi and his theories, see Antonia LoLordo, *Pierre Gassendi and the Birth of Early Modern Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Though it remains largely unexplored, the American reception of these radical French enlightenment materialists acted as an important precursor to the narrative of materialism in this dissertation. While such claims would require more research to substantiate, the scholarship that does exist suggests that the connections between these figures and

came from English philosophers like Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), David Hartley (1705-1757), and Joseph Priestley (1733-1804). In the nineteenth century, Germany became a significant center of materialist philosophy as figures like Karl Vogt (1817-1895) and Ludwig Buechner (1824-1899) rose to prominence in the post-Kantian era. The American reception of several of these European figures is discussed in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

Here it is important to note that this generally-accepted chronology of the development of philosophical materialism does not include any American names, even as it moves into the nineteenth century. Indeed, “materialism” rarely appears as a concept of any significance in early American historiography. Most cultural and intellectual histories simply give the impression that debates about philosophical materialism had little relevance in the U.S.<sup>27</sup> The three volumes of Twayne’s American Thought and Culture Series that cover the nineteenth century, for instance, do not mention “materialism” as a doctrine of thought.<sup>28</sup> Neither the *Blackwell Companion to 19<sup>th</sup> Century America* nor the *Companion to American Cultural History*

---

materialist philosophy had already positioned materialism as an extreme, dangerous doctrine, often tied to radically egalitarian politics. For more on the general reception of these figures in the U.S., see Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 41, 118. For further discussion of the American reception of Helvetius, see Chapters 1 and 2 of John Carson, *Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Historians do occasionally mention materialism in discussions of the market revolution, generally using the term to describe a set of values that prioritized profit and material gain over all other pursuits. Examples of such references include Amy Dru Stanley’s description of “the selfish materialism of the economic domain of men” in an essay on the market revolution and separate spheres ideology, or Jeffrey Sklansky’s reference to “the selfishness and materialism and strife” of market society in a discussion of sociological critiques of these phenomena. But while these historians, like most, confine materialism to a sense of economic excess, a meaning commonly associated with the term today, nineteenth-century Americans did not commonly use materialism in this way until the 1870s. In the earlier part of the century, most understood materialism first as a philosophical position tied to a specific conception of reality and a rejection of certain religious or spiritual beliefs, older meanings of the term now largely ignored by contemporary historians. See Amy Dru Stanley, “Home Life and the Morality of the Market,” in Melvyn Stokes, ed., *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800-1880* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 83; Jeffrey Sklansky, *The Soul’s Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 72.

<sup>28</sup> Jean V. Matthews, *Toward a New Society: American Thought and Culture, 1800-1830* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991); Anne C. Rose, *Voices of the Marketplace: American Thought and Culture, 1830-1860* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995); Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991).

discuss materialism.<sup>29</sup> James Kloppenberg and Richard Wrightman Fox's *Companion to American Thought*, a reference work with nearly seven hundred entries meant to cover the "major concepts and thinkers in the diverse tradition of American thought," contains no entry on "materialism."<sup>30</sup> And outside these survey and reference books, no historian has published a major work with explicit or sustained discussion of materialism in the U.S.<sup>31</sup>

The scholarship that does exist on materialism comes almost exclusively from the history of philosophy.<sup>32</sup> General surveys of philosophical materialism, however, almost never discuss materialism in the U.S., just as most works on the history of philosophy in America do not mention materialism as a significant school of thought.<sup>33</sup> Richard C. Vitzthum's 1995 *Materialism: An Affirmative History and Definition* is the most recent historical account of philosophical materialism.<sup>34</sup> Following the trend in most studies of materialism, Vitzthum describes a completely non-U.S. genealogy of materialist thought, beginning with Lucretius, skipping ahead to d'Holbach, and ending with Buechner. Like Vitzthum's book, other major works on the history of philosophical materialism like Manabendra Roy's 1940 *Materialism: An*

---

<sup>29</sup> William Barney, ed., *A Companion to 19<sup>th</sup> Century America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001) 1; Karen Halttunen, ed., *A Companion to American Cultural History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Richard Wrightman Fox and James Kloppenberg, eds., *Companion to American Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), x. Materialism does appear more commonly in philosophy reference books. See, for instance, John R. Shook's *Dictionary of Early American Philosophers*.

<sup>31</sup> In 1974, Joyce Appleby did publish a book titled *Materialism and Morality in the American Past*. This book, however, is not a study of materialist ideas, but rather a sourcebook of documents from early American history. Many of these sources relate to the industrial and economic development of the nation, and it is this source material that Appleby takes as the "materialism" in her title. Nowhere in her introduction or comments on the sources does Appleby define materialism. See Joyce Appleby, *Materialism and Morality in the American Past: Themes and Sources, 1600-1800* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1974).

<sup>32</sup> Some of the most comprehensive histories of philosophical materialism include: Richard C. Vitzthum, *Materialism: An Affirmative History and Definition* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995); Manabendra Roy, *Materialism: An Outline of the History of Scientific Thought* (Dehra Dun: Renaissance Association, 1940); Albert Lange, *History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Present Importance*, 3 vols., trans. Ernest Chester Thomas (Boston: J.R. Osgood and Company, 1877).

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

<sup>34</sup> Richard C. Vitzthum, *Materialism: An Affirmative History and Definition* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995).

*Outline of the History of Scientific Thought* focus almost solely on European figures.<sup>35</sup> As the publication date of Roy's book suggests, much of this work on the history of materialism is also quite dated.

One significant explanation for the relative historiographical silence on materialism is the fact that nineteenth-century cultural and intellectual histories of the U.S. tend to be dominated by idealism, romanticism, and transcendentalism, all currents of thought, admittedly much more prominent, that stood in direct opposition to materialism. Though it may not carry the same historical resonance, the effort to trace more marginalized ideas like materialism can reveal facts of circulation and repression that are not apparent when examining only the more mainstream. Trying to explain why a particular set of ideas became so unpopular or neglected can in itself be a worthwhile historical pursuit, one which provided some of the initial motivations for this project. Some scholars have even suggested that historians' own biases might explain the general neglect of topics like materialism or other forms of disbelief in U.S. historiography. In a recent article on the question of the enlightenment in America, Nathalie Caron and Naomi Wulf argue that "In a nation long dominated by a de facto Protestant establishment...it may have been inconvenient for scholars to examine the criticism of Christianity inherent in the epistemological project of the rationalist Enlightenment."<sup>36</sup> As materialism existed in a similar milieu as Enlightenment ideas, such explanations may also be relevant in this case.

There are some important exceptions to the general historiographical gap on materialism. One example is John Ryder, a historian who specializes in early American philosophy. Based in part on his research on Cadwallader Colden (1688-1776), a physician who is sometimes credited

---

<sup>35</sup> Manabendra Roy, *Materialism: An Outline of the History of Scientific Thought* (Dehra Dun: Renaissance Association, 1940); Albert Lange, *History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Present Importance*, 3 vols., trans. Ernest Chester Thomas (Boston: J.R. Osgood and Company, 1877).

<sup>36</sup> Nathalie Caron and Naomi Wulf, "American Enlightenments: Continuity and Renewal," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 4 (March 2013): 1073.

as an early American materialist because of his theory that matter acts as the source of all life and animation, Ryder asserts that “Materialism has...been an influential force, probably never more so than in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.”<sup>37</sup> (Colden is discussed in more detail in Chapter 1 of this dissertation). Making a general claim for materialism's relevance in the American context, Ryder suggests that materialism cannot be ignored because it acted as “one of the fundamental dichotomies since the early modern period in terms of which the world has been understood and philosophies have been characterized.”<sup>38</sup> The study of materialist and anti-materialist discourse reveals how some American thinkers approached these longstanding questions of idealism and materialism, especially as they related to the issue of the philosophical relationship between the material and the spiritual.

To find more substantive discussions of materialism in U.S. historiography, one must go back to early twentieth century histories of philosophy. I. Woodbridge Riley's 1907 *American Philosophy: The Early Schools* is perhaps the best example. Riley devoted section four of his book, a total of seven chapters and over one hundred pages, entirely to materialism. He focused on the philosophical positions developed by individuals such as Cadwallader Colden, Joseph Priestley, Joseph Buchanan, Thomas Cooper, and Benjamin Rush, several figures who play prominent roles in this dissertation. His work largely traced the development of debates about matter, spirit, and mind through the publications of these various authors. Throughout, he was sure to note the unpopular or marginal status of many of these theories.<sup>39</sup>

Some mid-century intellectual history surveys also reveal at least scant recognition of materialist ideas in the U.S. Merle Curti's famous *The Growth of American Thought*, for

---

<sup>37</sup> John Ryder, “Cadwallader Colden, Samuel Johnson, and the Activity of Matter: Materialism and Idealism in Colonial America,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 32, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 251; 248.

<sup>38</sup> Ryder, 251; 248.

<sup>39</sup> Woodbridge Riley, *American Philosophy: The Early Schools* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1907), 324.



instance, included mention of a “general materialist philosophy,” which he defined as a theory that “assumed that the universe could be adequately explained in terms of the existence and nature of matter.”<sup>40</sup> He argued, however, that “the general climate of opinion in America was much too ingrained with religious orthodoxy to nourish its growth,” though he tempered this statement with the suggestion that materialism was at least “not unknown.”<sup>41</sup> Some members of the American Philosophical Society, Curti noted, were familiar with the work of notable French materialists like La Mettrie and d’Holbach, suggesting that these ideas, even if unpopular, enjoyed some type of minimal circulation in the U.S.<sup>42</sup> Curti's general observation about the incompatibility of materialist philosophy and the religious culture of the U.S., however, summarized the general historical outlook on materialism that stood long after the publication of his work.

This dissertation argues that materialism had more significance in the United States than this historiography might suggest. It is indeed extremely rare to find anything but hostile reactions to materialist ideas in early American sources, but *unfavorable* reactions are not the same as completely *absent* ones. Here I follow the lead of historian and philosopher Alfred Lloyd (1864-1927), who published his thoughts about materialism in a 1905 issue of the *American Historical Review*. “Materialism,” Lloyd stated bluntly, “has come into discredit.”

Lloyd created a damning picture of materialism's status in the U.S., declaring that:

Theology has led a strong fight against it, declaring the first cause to be the Divine power; Philosophy has repeatedly and vigorously attacked it and has finally inflicted a deadly blow in the discovery of its weakest point – the heel of Achilles of materialism – *Consciousness and Free Will*. The general public, too, looks with abhorrence on materialism, dreading and combating it like an ulcer; although not sufficiently acquainted either with the facts upon which materialism is based or with its philosophical merits and

---

<sup>40</sup> Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1943), 163.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

errors, it feels darkly the presence of a danger to society in the principle of inexorable, pre-established *Necessity*.<sup>43</sup>

But despite materialism's bleak position, Lloyd insisted it was still important to understand *why* materialism had reached such a low point and to determine what precisely was behind the almost universal rejection of the philosophy. As stated earlier, the motivations for my own project are similar and I thus take seriously Lloyd's argument that "materialism is an epithet that demands most careful scrutiny."<sup>44</sup>

Epithet is, in fact, perhaps one of the most accurate ways to describe materialism's general status in the nineteenth century. Despite its changing associations, materialism remained a powerful charge that could be leveled at an opponent to discredit him or her morally or politically. Simply associating one's name with materialist ideas carried dangerous tinges of radical social and political beliefs. Why, exactly, was this the case? How did materialist ideas come to be wedded to radical doctrines in the eyes of many Americans? These questions point to an even more basic set of assumptions that demand explanation. Why did so many Americans hold such a negative view of materialism? What precisely made it so unpalatable? Was this always the case, or could it be traced to a particular moment of controversy? These questions, too, jump ahead of an even more fundamental set of inquiries about how Americans became familiar with materialist ideas. The fact that responses to materialist theories even existed demonstrates that materialist philosophy was known by some and thus somehow found its way to American audiences. How, then, were Americans exposed to materialist ideas? In such an inhospitable cultural and intellectual environment, was anyone ever willing to voice public support for materialist ideas?

---

<sup>43</sup> Alexander Petrunkevich, *The Freedom of the Will: A Study in Materialism* (Short Hills, N.J., 1905), 1.

<sup>44</sup> Alfred H. Lloyd, "History and Materialism," *American Historical Review* 10, no. 4 (July 1905): 727.

This dissertation addresses these questions by looking at several moments from the 1780s through the 1880s when debates about materialism appeared in the United States. In particular, I analyze commentary about materialist ideas from a variety of books, periodicals, newspapers, sermons, and pamphlets. These sources cover a wide range of American philosophical, theological, medical, and scientific discourse. In addition to these printed materials, I also examine the circulation of both materialist and anti-materialist discourse through lecture circuits, reading rooms, and alternative meeting halls. To further ground these debates, each chapter focuses on the lives of significant materialists and anti-materialists, using their work, its reception, and the narratives of their careers to broaden further our understanding of materialism in the U.S.

Throughout, I pay careful attention to the multiple sides of these exchanges. In general, it is much easier to track the history of anti-materialist rhetoric in the U.S. than it is to uncover any self-professed materialists. In this study, then, there is a constant tension between the minority nature of the few self-professed materialists and the much more dominant status of anti-materialist discourse. The format of this dissertation, through its emphasis on the small number of American materialists in each chapter, sometimes creates a disproportionate image of the prominence of materialist and anti-materialist discourse. In reality, the number of anti-materialists was unquestionably always far greater. This discrepancy, however, raises some questions of its own. In a period when almost no one advocated for materialism, why did some Americans still feel the need to articulate such vehement arguments against materialist ideas? How, in other words, might we explain why the critical response appears to be so disproportionate to the actual number or influence of American materialists?

## The Historiography of Irreligion

To answer these and other questions, this project brings together work across several historical sub-fields, from cultural and intellectual history to religious history, the history of science, the history of philosophy, and the history of medicine, the latter especially as it relates to the fields of physiology and anatomy. While discussion of materialism does not commonly appear in many of these fields, such a study has the potential to speak to several of them.

The history of irreligion provides some of the most interesting opportunities for such connections. Chapter 1, "Christian Materialism," builds on the work of historians like Eric Schlereth, Christopher Grasso, and Amanda Porterfield who have studied the links between politics, citizenship, and irreligion in early America.<sup>45</sup> As I argue in Chapter 2, "Radical Materialism," and Chapter 3, "Materialism, Science, and Radical Reform," several recent works, including Grasso's 2008 article "Deist Monster: On Religious Common Sense in the Wake of the American Revolution," Porterfield's 2012 *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation*, and Schlereth's 2013 *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States* have signaled growing interest in the question of disbelief in the United States. Schlereth, Grasso, and Porterfield's work, in fact, represents some of the most sustained discussion of irreligion to appear since the 1985 publication of James C. Turner's classic *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America*.<sup>46</sup> While Turner argued that his more narrow version of unbelief (defined as "the absence of a conviction that any superhuman power exists") did not surface until the second half of the nineteenth century, these

---

<sup>45</sup> Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004); Eric Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Christopher Grasso, "Deist Monster: On Common Sense in the Wake of the American Revolution," *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 1 (June 2008).

<sup>46</sup> James C. Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

newer perspectives on irreligion argue for the presence and significance of various forms of disbelief in the early republic.<sup>47</sup> This dissertation acts as another contribution to these studies of irreligion in the first half of the nineteenth-century, a period more commonly dominated by narratives of evangelical revival and claims of nearly uniform religious adherence.<sup>48</sup>

This new wave of historiography also builds on and in some cases challenges the narrative of religion and politics established by Nathan O. Hatch's 1989 *The Democratization of American Christianity*.<sup>49</sup> While Hatch emphasized the shared ethos behind evangelical religion, Jeffersonian democracy, and the rise of a market economy in the first part of the century, Porterfield argues that Hatch overstated these claims and ignored what she sees as significant links between evangelism and conservative politics.<sup>50</sup> My own work on materialism demonstrates that the individualistic experience of evangelical religion lauded by Hatch was summarily dismissed by certain radical freethinkers who criticized religion as the basis of a corrupt and inherently unequal national order. During the antebellum era, the growth of what I have called "radical materialism," that is, forms of philosophical materialism that were openly atheist in nature, also saw the formation of crucial links between materialism and egalitarian political positions. Such an arrangement was contingent and carefully constructed by figures with specific political agendas rather than a natural outgrowth of materialist philosophy. There

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, xv.

<sup>48</sup> The historiography on evangelical religion in the antebellum era is immense. Good starting points that give a general survey of the development of this field include Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950); Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). For an interesting counterpoint, see James D. Bratt, "Religious Anti-Revivalism in Antebellum America," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 65-106.

<sup>49</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>50</sup> Porterfield, 11. Schlereth, by contrast, seeks to add infidelity to Hatch's story more so than simply supplanting it. He does so by exploring the ways deism and free enquiry, too, acted as significant forces in the negotiation of political boundaries in the first half of the century.

was, in other words, no necessary connection between materialist philosophy and radically egalitarian social and political beliefs. In many cases, materialism moved in the precisely the opposite direction, acting as the basis of rigidly hierarchical systems rooted in the supposedly fixed nature of biological difference.<sup>51</sup> But many of the figures I identify as radical materialists saw different potential in materialist philosophy, suggesting that the triumph of materialist values over religious prescription would ultimately lead to a more fair and just society.

Many historians have considered such bold critiques of religion and outright atheism in the early U.S. difficult subjects to approach because of a long-assumed lack of sources. Jon Butler, for instance, has explained this phenomena by noting that "Unbelief lacked the institutional manifestations so obvious in its opposite."<sup>52</sup> As I argue in Chapters 2 and 3, the circulation of materialist ideas in the U.S. through newspapers, periodicals, lectures, and other institutions provides examples of precisely this organized presence of unbelief, thereby offering a significant lens into these questions of irreligion. Though I discuss many such institutions in this project, there are still many that remain largely unexplored.<sup>53</sup> Further investigation of antebellum freethought sites that facilitated the dissemination of radical ideas like materialism

---

<sup>51</sup> Key nineteenth-century examples of such phenomena include polygenism, certain versions of phrenology, various forms of scientific racism, and eugenics. For an excellent recent discussion of these issues, see Ann Fabian's work on American craniologists, including detailed discussion of Philadelphia physician and scientist Samuel George Morton (1799-1851), founder of the American School of ethnography. See Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>52</sup> Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 20.

<sup>53</sup> The several reading rooms and libraries connected with these groups are one example of such institutions. Take, for instance, Abner Kneeland's Boston Circulating Library. Founded in the 1830s, the titles available included Knowlton's *Elements of Modern Materialism* as well as Wright's lectures and her *A Few Days in Athens*. Subscribers paid \$2 per year for borrowing privileges while non-subscribers were allowed to deposit the price of the book and pay a fee, ranging from 6 to 25 cents per week, based on the volume borrowed. Patrons could exchange books once a day and all items were loaned for a two week period. See "Kneeland's Circulating Library," *Boston Investigator*, September 8, 1837. George Henry Evans' Workingman's Reading Room was another example. Evans created the Reading Room to be a repository of his own periodicals and other publications of interest to the Working Men. He hoped such a space would allow interested individuals to become more educated and socialize with other like-minded readers. Subscribers to Evans' papers would be able to access the room for \$1 per year while non-subscribers would be charged \$2.00. See "Working Men's Reading Room," *Workingman's Advocate*, June 16, 1832.

could serve as another significant point of investigation for those interested in the history of irreligion in America.<sup>54</sup>

Chapter 3, "Materialism, Science, and Radical Reform," builds on the considerable historical work on reform during the antebellum period, an era often described as "America's first age of reform."<sup>55</sup> While most current historiography like that from Lori Ginzberg and Stephen Mintz has focused on the importance of the religious motivations and religious groups behind many of these reform efforts, this dissertation argues that explicitly *anti*-religious belief systems also influenced social projects during the same era.<sup>56</sup> This reversal of the commonly-assumed relationship between religion and reform provides another perspective on antebellum reform and suggests the existence of even more radical, peripheral projects that existed outside the scope of most surveys of the period.

The relationship between science and religion in the nineteenth-century U.S., a particularly thorny historical question, lies in the background of many of these debates. Historians generally described the first half of the century as a period of relative harmony on this count. Theodore Bozeman summarized this position in his 1977 *Protestants in an Age of Science*, where he argued:

In the nineteenth century (as in the eighteenth) the scientists' chief rivals were theologians, for both groups considered themselves to be dealing with natural laws, and both considered themselves competent interpreters of those laws. In such a situation the surprising thing is not that there has been some 'conflict between science and religion,'

---

<sup>54</sup> With the exception of Susan Jacoby's *Freethinkers*, most works on freethought in America are quite dated. The most detailed studies include Albert Post, *Popular Freethought in America, 1825-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943); and Sidney Warren, *American Freethought, 1860-1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943).

<sup>55</sup> Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), xiii.

<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); T. Gregory Garvey, *Creating the Culture of Reform in Antebellum America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006); Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

that there has been so little of it. In early nineteenth-century America there was virtually none.<sup>57</sup>

The second half the century, by contrast, was often told as a narrative of greater conflict marked by religious decline paired with growing faith in science - in essence, different variations of the secularization thesis. Most historians have now, however, adopted the outlook advanced by John Hedley Brooke, who suggests that such broad generalizations are nearly impossible to sustain. Brooke instead calls instead for more careful attention to the complexity, variety, and historical specificity of this relationship. Moving away from the conflict and harmony debates, Brooke suggested in his 1991 *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* that it is more productive to consider questions like the changing boundaries of the categories of science and religion.<sup>58</sup> Though Brooke focuses on Europe, his general observations about the study of science and religion have been borne out by many more recent American works that challenge the well-worn narrative of religious decline over the course of the century. Jon Butler, for instance, has documented the “tenacity of popular belief in... forms of supernatural intervention in America” while Catherine Albanese's more recent *Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* makes a similar claim for the persistence of practices she labels as "metaphysical religion" well beyond midcentury.<sup>59</sup>

The narrative of materialist and anti-materialist discourse offers yet another view that frequently runs counter to the tale of adherence and decline. Chapter 1, which chronicles Joseph Priestley and Thomas Cooper's attempts to create a version of materialism that remained in accord with Christianity, suggests there was more discord than one might expect in the early part

---

<sup>57</sup> Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 51.

<sup>58</sup> John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>59</sup> Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 228.



of the century as demonstrated by Priestley and Cooper's struggle to make their scientific and philosophical beliefs co-exist with orthodox Christian doctrine. Chapters 2 and 3, which chronicle the development of the most radical and openly atheist forms of antebellum materialism, demonstrate the existence of an organized network for the circulation of materialism and other forms of infidelity during the first part of the century. Though an admittedly small group, the efforts of figures like Abner Kneeland, Charles Knowlton, and Frances Wright add wrinkles to the image of an era usually described in terms of evangelical fervor and relatively homogenous religious adherence. Chapter 4, too, suggests counterexamples to the narrative of belief and decline as it shows how Joseph Buchanan published materialist and allegedly atheist theories in the earliest part of the nineteenth century while his son, Joseph Rodes Buchanan, sought to create a comprehensive "science of man" that would harmoniously unite religious belief and scientific inquiry during the second half of the century. This father-son duo thus remained perfectly out of step with the story of the nineteenth century as a narrative of religion displaced by science.

The much more considerable historiography on materialism from a non-U.S. perspective provides another excellent opportunity for further study. Though this project has a limited U.S. focus, a more global view of materialism could form the basis of another compelling study, as many projects of this more ambitious scope have demonstrated that the global exchange of ideas reveals important elements that cannot be seen in more narrow views.<sup>60</sup> More careful attention to the circulation of materialist philosophy between the U.S. and other countries might, for

---

<sup>60</sup> See, for instance, James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998); Leslie Butler, *Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007); John Carson, *The Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

instance, reveal important aspects of translation and reception not addressed in this dissertation. Simply establishing these lines of circulation of ideas would itself answer many questions about how materialist philosophy moved across national borders and if such transmission was largely one-sided (for instance, primarily from other countries to the U.S.) or if it moved in multiple directions.<sup>61</sup> A more comparative view of materialism's status in non-U.S. settings could also shed light on the focal question of why materialism remained so marginal in America.

### **Chapter Outline**

Each chapter of this dissertation focuses on a particular moment of debate about materialism in the United States, following chronologically the development of various forms of both materialist and anti-materialist discourse from approximately the 1780s through the 1880s. The first three chapters follow the work and lives of prominent materialist voices in the U.S. as well as the much more voluminous critical responses to their ideas. Chapter 4 offers an alternative perspective, looking more closely at the career and reception of a vocal American anti-materialist. Taken as a whole, these chapters demonstrate how the controversy surrounding materialism evolved through a series of stages marked by interest in questions inflected by issues of contemporary concern. In each era, there were three crucial areas through which I trace major transformations: 1) the precise content and meaning of different forms of both materialist and anti-materialist discourse; 2) the individuals who produced this content; and, 3) the primary methods used to articulate and circulate ideas.

**Chapter 1, "Christian Materialism: Joseph Priestley and Thomas Cooper,"** traces materialism's controversial entry into the U.S. through the American reception of Englishman

---

<sup>61</sup> Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen's recent account of Nietzsche's American reception acts as an excellent model of such studies. See Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Joseph Priestley's (1733-1804) work on materialism in the 1780s and 1790s. Priestley, who moved to Philadelphia in 1794, tried, along with his good friend and intellectual collaborator, Thomas Cooper (1759-1839), to create a system of materialism that remained consistent with belief in God and Christianity. The two developed and shared their theories mainly in print, using books, periodicals, and pamphlets as their preferred modes of address. In a few instances, most notably with Thomas Jefferson, this discussion was confined to personal correspondence and not intended for wide circulation. But despite their efforts to soften philosophical materialism for an American audience, Priestley and Cooper were branded infidels and their work on materialism was dismissed as atheistic.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, debates about materialism thus fixated largely on philosophical materialism's alleged atheism and the disastrous religious, social, and political implications that were believed to follow such disbelief. The questions of whether materialism could be made compatible with Christianity and whether or not it denied the existence of God, spirit, and soul were of paramount importance during this early era. Religious figures, theologians, and philosophers produced much of the anti-materialist rhetoric of this period. Their attacks against materialism primarily took the form of sermons, both delivered and published, as well as different versions of printed debate in books, periodicals, pamphlets, and letters. In most cases these print materials were published and available publically. As critics responded to Priestley and Cooper's materialist theories, they developed an anti-materialist rhetoric that connected materialism to atheism as well as the radical politics (such as their vocal support of the French Revolution) that most associated with Priestley and Cooper. While both produced well-respected studies in fields like chemistry (Priestley) or medicine and law (Cooper), their association with materialist ideas made their American careers trying ordeals at

best. Cooper, in particular, became the target of several campaigns to push him out of various faculty and legal positions. When written responses were no longer sufficient, Cooper's detractors instead tried to derail his career and remove him from any position of power, tactics meant to limit his influence, discredit his ideas, and ruin his reputation in the U.S.

**Chapter 2, "Radical Materialism: Abner Kneeland,"** picks up the story of materialism's development in the U.S. following the disastrous reception of Priestley and Cooper's versions of the philosophy. Focusing on Abner Kneeland (1744-1844), one of the only self-proclaimed American materialists to live in the nineteenth century, the chapter describes Kneeland's efforts to develop a more radical, openly atheist version of materialist philosophy in the 1820s and 30s after being introduced to materialist philosophy through some of Priestley's publications.<sup>62</sup> In the midst of an era of evangelical fervor, Kneeland tried to spread his materialist ideas through numerous venues including self-published periodicals and books as well as public lectures, alternative Sunday services, dances, and other gatherings held at freethought intuitions like his "Temple of Reason" in Boston. Rather surprisingly, his efforts earned a number of devoted followers, especially among those involved in the freethought and radical reform movements of the antebellum era, causes for which Kneeland voiced unwavering support.

Unsurprisingly, Kneeland's work also generated extreme backlash, ultimately culminating in his conviction during the last blasphemy trial held in the state of Massachusetts.

---

<sup>62</sup> Here the term "radical materialism" is meant to reference the openly atheistic nature of Kneeland's materialism. Though it carries other associations like Kneeland's radically egalitarian politics, the "radical" is intended primarily to signal the shift from Priestley and Cooper's at least partially Christianized versions of materialism to Kneeland's more outright rejection of traditional Christian belief.

As in Cooper and Priestley's era, religious figures, philosophers, and theologians acted as some of the most prominent anti-materialist voices in the U.S., frequently publishing angry responses to the materialist and allegedly atheist ideas published in Kneeland's *Boston Investigator*, his most well-known and controversial periodical. Kneeland's case also saw many political observers become deeply invested in efforts to silence his institutions and stop the spread of his publications. Figures like John Barton Derby and Samuel Gridley Howe began to voice public worries about the cheap and easily accessible nature of Kneeland's printed works and lectures. With the potential to attract large audiences of lower class Americans, the danger that such mass appeal could translate into political action or actual results at the polls lead Kneeland's opponents to change their tactics by 1834. When written attacks had failed to slow the circulation of his ideas, Samuel Dunn Parker, a prominent Boston prosecutor, charged Kneeland under a 1782 Massachusetts blasphemy statute. After a protracted legal affair, Kneeland was found guilty in 1838 and left Massachusetts almost immediately after serving his jail sentence. Kneeland's legacy further cemented the image of materialism as a radical, ungodly doctrine as anti-materialist critics held him aloft as an example of the dangers of materialism incarnate.

**Chapter 3, "Materialism, Science, and Radical Reform: Charles Knowlton and Frances Wright"** looks more closely at the connections forged between materialism and radical reform during the antebellum era. Focusing on the life and career of Massachusetts physician and philosopher Charles Knowlton (1800-1850) as well as the famous Scottish-born lecturer and freethinker Frances Wright (1795-1852), the chapter explores how materialism became wedded explicitly to controversial reform movements like free thought, women's rights, and worker's rights in the 1830s, 40s, and 50s. In a complete inversion of the commonly assumed relationship

between religion and reform during this era, Knowlton and Wright portrayed religion as an oppressive force that actively worked against reform agendas. In his *Elements of Modern Materialism*, one of the most comprehensive books on materialism to appear in the antebellum U.S., Knowlton lauded materialism as the foundation of an alternative, non-religious, and more egalitarian society. Knowlton advertised his work as widely as possible and even went on book tours in an effort to sell more copies. He frequently engaged in public debates with religious leaders about materialism and later helped found several self-professed "infidel" groups as an alternative to more traditional reform societies. Though she did not claim the title of materialist, Wright worked in the same milieu as Knowlton. The critiques of religion and empirically-based theory of knowledge that she promoted both in print and through her famous lecture tours shared significant points of convergence with Knowlton's materialism. My effort to label Wright a materialist is an experimental move meant to suggest that there may have been figures outside of those who self-identified as materialists who shared a similar set of beliefs even without adopting the same terminology.

Both Wright and Knowlton's arguments were met with considerable objection as anti-materialist critics warned that such ideas threatened the entire American social, political, and economic order. By midcentury, anti-materialist rhetoric was thus augmented with new concerns about materialism's explicit connections to radical reform movements of the period. The two drew the ire of numerous religious figures across many denominations. Knowlton was further subjected to accusations that his fully corporeal, materialist theories of medicine threatened to taint the profession as an immoral, ungodly affair. Wright faced incensed reactions from all sides. Individuals like the famous Presbyterian minister and co-founder of the American Temperance Society Lyman Beecher launched public campaigns to discredit Wright and limit

the influence of her well-attended and frequently discussed lecture tours. Knowlton and Wright's work further solidified the image of materialism as a dangerous, fringe set of ideas that needed to be suppressed, lest it gain too many followers or too much traction in the U.S.

**Chapter 4, "Materialism and the Spiritual Sciences: Joseph Buchanan and Joseph Rodes Buchanan"** looks at the development of materialist ideas in the United States from the multi-generational perspective of father and son, Joseph Buchanan (1785-1829) and Joseph Rodes Buchanan (1814-1899). Joseph Buchanan, a Kentucky physician, was branded an atheist for the materialism of his publications on anatomy and the philosophy of mind in the early 1800s, most notably his 1812 book *The Philosophy of Human Nature*.<sup>63</sup> His son, Joseph R. Buchanan, began his own medical career shortly before the rise of spiritualism in the U.S. and quickly found himself at the forefront of the newly-developed spiritual sciences, a field of study meant to prove demonstrably and definitively the existence of spiritual phenomena, in the 1850s and 60s. While his early education came from his materialist father, Joseph R. became one of the most prominent anti-materialist voices in the U.S.

Curiously, however, Rodes Buchanan's *immaterialist* arguments were met with nearly as much resistance as his father's early version of materialism. In his efforts to prove the existence of spiritual entities, including God, Rodes Buchanan was attacked from all sides. Some critics accused him of clinging too tightly to the empirical and physical tenets of materialist standards of validity, suggesting, in other words, that his spiritualism was overly materialistic. Others, however, accused him of providing insufficient tangible or material evidence to support his claims, implying that his anti-materialist spiritualism was somehow not materialist enough. As older questions about materialism and Christianity were re-visited in the newly-developed

---

<sup>63</sup> Joseph Buchanan, *The Philosophy of Human Nature* (Richmond, Kentucky: John A. Grimes, 1812).

language of spiritualism, these critiques of Buchanan created a temporary moment of flux in materialist and anti-materialist discourse where the two sides occasionally shared significant points of accord. The rise of spiritualism thus prompted a new set of queries about standards of scientific proof and validity that resulted in a period of instability in which materialist and anti-discourse did not necessarily stand in complete opposition to one another.

This transitional period, however, was quickly followed by the resurgence of conservative anti-materialist rhetoric, a topic covered briefly in the **Conclusion, "The Final Science: Spiritual Materialism."** In the latter part of the century, certain forms of anti-materialist discourse settled on new targets like evolution as they returned to a full-force assertion of the rightful dominance of orthodox Christianity in the U.S. There are, however, other potential ways to trace the legacy of materialist and anti-materialist thought in America, a set of genealogical possibilities introduced in the final section of the conclusion.

### **Materialism(s)**

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, the first traces of economic materialism, the term's most common contemporary usage, began to appear. While earlier anti-materialists had argued against materialism's prioritization of matter or the material over the spiritual, the advent of the Gilded Age and its new forms of economic upheaval updated these worries about materialism's misplaced priorities to include profit and monetary gain. In light of the larger trajectory of materialism's meanings over the course of the century, the development of economic materialism was a rather stunning reversal from earlier antebellum notions of materialism. Figures like Abner Kneeland, Charles Knowlton, and Frances Wright had viewed materialist philosophy as the basis of a more egalitarian society founded on a system of beliefs



that ran completely counter to the notions of avarice and greed that dominated the term's usage in the late nineteenth century and beyond. Though such an arrangement was not a necessary or obvious outcome of materialist philosophy, figures like Kneeland and Knowlton saw the potential for greater equality within a system based on reason and material fact rather than intangible or supernatural beliefs. In a testament to the relative cultural strength of anti-materialist discourse, these older meanings of radical antebellum materialism were not only pushed aside but completely inverted by the close of the century.

As they confronted a series of major transformations in the nineteenth century, from the rise of the market economy to the evangelical fervor of the second great awakening or the tumult of the age of reform, anti-materialist discourse became one language some Americans used to voice their desire to preserve certain elements of American culture. Along the way, these debates about materialism forced Americans to confront difficult questions about a range of enduring philosophical issues like free will, ethics, mechanism, and determinism, as well as the ever-contentious questions of epistemology and ontology as the existence of God, spirit, and soul was put, again and again, through tests meant to prove or disprove their reality. In the end, despite its rather remarkable mutability, materialism could never be completely separated from its long-assumed ungodly nature, the vestiges of which remain today in critiques of the godless pursuit of wealth.

## Chapter 1:

### Christian Materialism: Joseph Priestley and Thomas Cooper

In 1823, a small, anonymously published pamphlet with the curious title of *The Scripture Doctrine of Materialism* appeared in Philadelphia. Signed sometimes by “A Layman” and others by “A Physician,” this pamphlet opened with a series of claims that undoubtedly sounded paradoxical to most Americans: “Christ and his apostles were Materialists,” the pamphlet stated boldly in its introduction.<sup>64</sup> Later it made the equally shocking claim that “The opinion denominated *Materialism* is – and the opinion denominated *Immaterialism* is not - consistent with Christianity.”<sup>65</sup> These arguments made little sense to Americans who had, for decades, associated materialism with atheism and infidelity, positions that generated tremendous controversy in the deeply religious culture of the early U.S.<sup>66</sup> Accordingly, American philosophical and religious tracts had frequently denigrated materialism as “debasing,” “senseless,” “wretched,” “vulgar,” “untenable,” and “absurd.”<sup>67</sup> How, then, could a philosophy

---

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Cooper, Thomas Cooper, *The Scripture Doctrine of Materialism* (Philadelphia: A. Small, 1823), 301.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 304.

<sup>66</sup> In my dissertation, I adopt Eric Schlereth’s definition of “infidel.” Schlereth writes, “In a strict sense, infidels were non-Christians, specifically Muslims and Jews, according to Christian usage of the term.” In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century U.S., the term, however, took on “a more capacious and protean view that an infidel was any person whose religious expressions seemed politically or culturally subversive.” In particular, the label “infidel” was “used for various reasons – both principled and opportunistic – by writers who understood their own beliefs as broadly Christian but viewed their opponents’ beliefs as decidedly anti-Christian.” See Eric Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 3, 5.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, George Adams, *Lectures on Natural and Experimental Philosophy, Considered In Its Present State of Improvement. Describing in a Familiar and Easy Manner the Principal Phenomena of Nature; and Showing That They All Co-operate in Displaying the Goodness, Wisdom, and Power of God* (Whitehall, Pennsylvania: William W. Woodward, 1806), v; Thomas Scott, *Essays On the Most Important Subjects In Religion* (New York: Williams and Whiting, 1809), 358; George Campbell, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Boston: Thomas B. Wait and Co., 1809), 155.

that had long been connected to unbelief suddenly become a Christian doctrine? Who, furthermore, would dare to publish arguments that directly challenged such sacred and popular beliefs?

A few Americans, most notably Thomas Jefferson, knew almost immediately who was responsible for this controversial material. In 1824, Jefferson wrote to the pamphlet's assumed author, Dr. Thomas Cooper, to offer his praise for the arguments contained within:

I received...a small pamphlet on Materialism, without any indication from what quarter it came: but I knew there was but one person in the United States capable of writing it, and therefore am at no loss to whom to address my thanks for it and assurances of my high esteem and respect.<sup>68</sup>

Cooper, an English lawyer, physician, and chemist who had moved to Philadelphia in 1794, was a polarizing figure in the U.S. While he enjoyed the support of certain powerful friends like Jefferson, he quickly became a hated man as a result of his outspoken materialism, unorthodox religious beliefs, and radical political views. Jefferson was thus a distinct minority in his support for Cooper and his materialism. Though Cooper argued strenuously for what I call Christian materialism, that is, a form of philosophical materialism he believed remained consistent with rather than opposed to belief in God and most doctrines of Christianity, Americans refused to accept his Christianized version of the theory.<sup>69</sup> Cooper's efforts to spread his materialist philosophy instead lead to charges of infidelity that nearly destroyed his career in the U.S.

---

<sup>68</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Cooper, March 29, 1824, reprinted in Francois Joseph Victor Broussais, *On Irritation and Insanity: A Work Wherein the Relations of the Physical With the Moral Conditions of Man, Are Established on the Basis of Physiological Medicine*, trans. Thomas Cooper (Columbia, South Carolina: S. J. M'Morris, 1831), 376.

<sup>69</sup> For contemporary uses of the term "Christian materialism," see Lynne Rudder Baker, "Christian Materialism in a Scientific Age," *International Journal of Philosophy and Religion* 70 (2011): 47-59; Charles Taliaferro and Stewart Goetz, "The Prospect of Christian Materialism," *Christian Scholar's Review* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 303-321; Dean W. Zimmerman, "Christians Should Affirm Mind-Body Dualism," in *Contemporary Dialogues in Philosophy of Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 315-327; Nicholas Lash, *A Matter of Hope: A Theologian's Reflections on the Thought of Karl Marx* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982).

Cooper drew several elements of his materialism from the work of his friend and intellectual collaborator Joseph Priestley. Priestley, the world-famous English chemist credited with the discovery of oxygen, had moved to Philadelphia shortly before Cooper. As Robert Schofield, James Dybikowski, and John Yolton have argued, Priestley was one of the first philosophers who created a system of materialism specifically designed to remain in accord with Christianity.<sup>70</sup> Americans, however, rejected Priestley's materialism just as quickly as Cooper's. Priestley and Cooper soon became the names many Americans associated with materialism and their work largely shaped American opinions of the philosophy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Though each published many detailed arguments both in England and the U.S. explaining their theories of Christian materialism and meticulously recounting the scriptural and philosophical evidence behind their claims, American writers overwhelmingly dismissed their ideas as heretical, atheistic, and dangerous.<sup>71</sup>

The nearly uniform rejection of Priestley and Cooper's materialism raises the question of why materialist ideas met with such great resistance in the U.S. While it is unsurprising that an allegedly atheist doctrine stirred up extreme controversy in a nation where, as historian Merle Curti has argued, "the Christian tradition" had long been "the chief foundation stone of...intellectual development," it is more complicated to explain why so many Americans

---

<sup>70</sup> Robert E. Schofield, *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Works From 1733 to 1773* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work From 1773 to 1804* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); James Dybikowski, "Joseph Priestley, Metaphysician and Philosopher of Religion," in *Joseph Priestley, Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 85; John W. Yolton, John W. Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). Schofield's two volume intellectual biography of Priestley is the most comprehensive work on Priestley's life. Schofield also wrote a book on the intellectual milieu in which Priestley developed his materialism in England, though some of his conclusions about Priestley's scientific thought from this earlier book have since been discredited by other Priestley scholars. See Robert Schofield, *Mechanism and Materialism: British Natural Philosophy in the Age of Reason* (Princeton University Press, 1970).

<sup>71</sup> Deism suffered a similar fate in American discourse. Though most deists were not in fact atheists, Erich Schlereth's recent study of infidelity demonstrates how most American critics considered deism tantamount to atheism because it did not fit within the bounds of orthodox Christianity. See Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels*.

continued to decry materialism as an atheist system despite Priestley and Cooper's tireless claims to the contrary.<sup>72</sup> To begin, it is crucial to note that American anti-materialists repeatedly articulated fears of the radical social and political agendas they believed necessarily accompanied materialist philosophy. From one perspective, then, these attacks on Priestley and Cooper's materialism act as a previously unrecognized strand of the conservative backlash of the 1790s and early 1800s that Curti identified in his 1943 *Growth of American Thought* and Henry May expanded upon in his 1976 *Enlightenment in America*.<sup>73</sup> Both Curti and May described the proliferation of conservative reactions to Enlightenment skepticism, rationalism, and revolutionary politics (primarily in the form of support for the French Revolution), a set of ideas closely associated with both Priestley and Cooper's materialist philosophies. May further demonstrated that a growing number of conservatives began to argue that rationalist and Enlightenment ideas constituted "a conspiracy of philosophers against all religious and social order" during this era.<sup>74</sup> Many anti-materialist critics charged Priestley and Cooper in exactly the same terms, claiming materialism would corrode the religious foundations of the U.S. and thereby threatened to destroy the entire American social and political order. Anti-materialist discourse thus appeared to act as another variant of this conservative reaction, or at least to exist in a similar vein. This observation suggests there is perhaps still room to explore these questions of Enlightenment ideas and the conservative reaction in America in ways beyond those long-established by pivotal figures like May and Curti. Recent articles like Nathalie Caron and Naomi Wulf's "American Enlightenments: Continuity and Renewal" or John M. Dixon's "Henry F. May and the Revival of the American Enlightenment: Problems and Possibly for Intellectual and

---

<sup>72</sup> Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1943); 50.

<sup>73</sup> Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*; Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>74</sup> May, 252.

Social History" advance similar arguments about the potential for renewed study of these older topics.<sup>75</sup>

As part of another new wave of scholarship that seeks to establish the connections between politics, citizenship, and religious disbelief in the early republic, Eric Schlereth suggests that the formation of irreligion as a threat to the nation grew out of the complex interplay between religion and politics during the early nineteenth century, a period in which the limits of religious liberty became a matter of utmost concern. "Writers who labeled infidelity seditious," Schlereth argues,

pursued their commitments to limited tolerance within a political order shaped by expanding religious liberties. Undesirable religious opinions were less open to challenge on theological...grounds..., but individuals who held such opinions could be denied the privilege of full civil membership if their opinions seemingly had seditious implications. Writers could deny infidels civil power while upholding their belief in religious liberty.<sup>76</sup>

Christopher Grasso, another historian interested in skepticism and other forms of irreligion in the early republic, has used the term "religious common sense" to describe the pervasive assumption that "virtuous citizenship presupposed Christianity and that challenging the divine inspiration of the Bible was therefore not just heterodox but un-American and, perhaps, lunacy."<sup>77</sup> Materialism violated this notion of religious common sense and pushed well beyond the boundaries of belief deemed acceptable for an American citizen. The strength of anti-materialist discourse further confirms the significance of religious common sense as a foundational principle in early American society.

---

<sup>75</sup> Nathalie Caron and Naomi Wulf, "American Enlightenments: Continuity and Renewal," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 4 (March 2013): 1072-1091; John M. Dixon, "Henry F. May and the Revival of the American Enlightenment: Problems and Possibilities for Intellectual and Social History," *William and Mary Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (April 2014): 254-280.

<sup>76</sup> Schlereth, 29.

<sup>77</sup> Christopher Grasso, "Deist Monster: On Common Sense in the Wake of the American Revolution," *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 1 (June 2008): 44.

From another historical viewpoint, Priestley and Cooper represent two important figures in early American freethought as defined by Susan Jacoby in her 2004 *Freethinkers*, one of the most recent studies of secularism and freethought in the United States.<sup>78</sup> Freethought, Jacoby argues, is best understood as

a phenomenon running the gamut from the truly antireligious – those who regarded all religion as a form of superstition and wished to reduce its influence in every aspect of society – to those who adhered to a private, unconventional faith revering some form of God...but at odds with orthodox religious authority. American freethinkers have included deists...agnostics; and unabashed atheists. What the many types of freethinkers shared...was a rationalist approach to fundamental questions of earthly existence – a conviction that the affairs of human beings should be governed not by faith in the supernatural but by a reliance on reason and evidence adduced from the natural world.<sup>79</sup>

Though neither Priestley nor Cooper figure prominently in Jacoby's work, both fit squarely within the revolutionary freethought milieu she identifies.<sup>80</sup> Both were, furthermore, criticized in precisely the same terms as many of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century freethinkers she discusses. Jacoby, for instance, describes how Jedidiah Morse wrote in 1789 that all freethinkers, deists, and anti-Federalists were all part of “a conspiracy against *all* Religions and Governments.”<sup>81</sup> Anti-materialist critics invoked these same sentiments of “conspiracy” and materialism as a threat to the entire social order in their repeated denunciations of Priestley and Cooper's materialism.

Certain Americans were willing to go to extreme lengths to suppress the spread of Priestley's and especially Cooper's materialism. These efforts demonstrate just how great of a threat some felt materialist ideas posed to the new nation. While both men were harshly criticized and publicly denounced, Cooper was also dismissed from public office, taken to court,

---

<sup>78</sup> Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>80</sup> Jacoby does not discuss Priestley in *Freethinkers*. She mentions Cooper in passing, twice referencing his expulsion from South Carolina College because of his religious beliefs, as further evidence of conservative attempts to suppress freethought and secularist ideas. See Jacoby, 71, 143.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Jacoby, 47.

and the target of multiple campaigns that resulted in his removal from several faculty positions at U.S. academic institutions. The fact that this anti-materialist sentiment was always stronger and more prominent than any support for materialism in the U.S. leads to further questions about the virulence of American anti-materialist discourse. Given, in other words, the fact that almost no one, save Priestley and Cooper, claimed to be a materialist, why were Americans so worried about the circulation of these ideas and how do we explain the steady growth of anti-materialist sentiment during this era?

In the 1790s and early 1800s, as the reception of Priestley and Cooper's ideas demonstrates, most American commentators fixated on materialism's assumed atheism and rejection of orthodox Christianity, which many saw as the foundation of U.S. society. Anti-materialist discourse thereby acted as another language some Americans used to articulate their desire to preserve a particular vision of U.S. culture at the turn of the century. In this chapter, I look at American debates surrounding Priestley and Cooper's work, beginning with an examination of their lives and theories of materialism, in order to understand why Americans so vehemently denounced their philosophies. The disastrous American reception of Priestley and Cooper's ideas demonstrates how American anti-materialist discourse linked "materialism" to heterodoxy, atheism, science, revolutionary politics, and radical social agendas, an explosive combination of controversial doctrines that Americans would continue associate with materialism for decades to come.



## Priestley's Materialism

Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) was born in Birstall, England. As a child, Priestley was an exceptional student who attended several dissenting academies.<sup>82</sup> Priestley was especially interested in the study of theology, science, and natural philosophy, though his heterodox religious beliefs precluded him from attending major universities like Oxford. Priestley worked briefly as a teacher at one of the academies he attended and then as minister of dissenting congregations in Suffolk and Leeds before he began to devote more time to his scientific research.<sup>83</sup> Priestley would eventually become one of the most prominent scientists of his day, recognized most widely for his discovery of oxygen.<sup>84</sup> Priestley's work in chemistry was so path-breaking that historians of science argue his research "revolutionized experimental chemistry" and earned him status as "the preeminent scientist in the Anglo-American world in the era of the American and French Revolutions."<sup>85</sup> While Priestley's work as a chemist was extremely well-respected, his numerous theological and philosophical publications met with a much different fate.<sup>86</sup> In England and the U.S., Priestley's philosophy was fiercely criticized and nearly universally rejected because of his arguments for materialism.

While Priestley was far from the first individual to articulate a theory of materialism, his particular iteration of the concept was notable as one of the first to explicitly attempt to reconcile Christianity and materialist philosophy. As early as the ancient Greek philosophers Thales,

---

<sup>82</sup> Dissenters did not adhere to the doctrines of the officially established Church of England. Unitarians, for instance, were dissenters, as they denied the existence of the trinity. For more detailed information on Priestley's schooling, see Chapters 2 through 6 of Schofield's *Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley*.

<sup>83</sup> Schofield, *Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley*, 63; David L. Wykes, "Joseph Priestley, Minister and Teacher," in Rivers and Wykes, 28, 34.

<sup>84</sup> Though recognized mainly for his discovery of oxygen, Priestley also discovered ammonia, sulphur dioxide, nitrous oxide, and nitrogen dioxide. See Schofield, *Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley*, 273.

<sup>85</sup> Rivers and Wykes, 1; Isaac Kramnick, "Eighteenth-Century Science and Radical Social Theory: The Case of Joseph Priestley's Scientific Liberalism," *Journal of British Studies* 25, no. 1 (January 1986): 3.

<sup>86</sup> Priestley published approximately 250 books, pamphlets, and articles during his career. See John G. McEvoy, "Joseph Priestley, Scientist, Philosopher, and Divine," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 128, no. 3 (1984): 193.

Democritus, and Lucretius, materialism had been associated with atheism because it claimed matter as first principle.<sup>87</sup> That is, in its simplest form, philosophical materialism argues that nothing other than matter exists in the world. This foundational materialist claim, however, appears to straightforwardly contradict the existence of an immaterial god, a triune god who is part spirit (ie: the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost), and the notion of an immaterial, immortal soul, each crucial components of Christianity.

The connections between materialism and atheism were only further confirmed during Priestley's lifetime with the 1770 publication of French philosopher Baron d'Holbach's (1723-1789) *La Systeme de la Nature*.<sup>88</sup> Along with Julien Offray de la Mettrie's 1748 *L'Homme Machine* and Claude Adrien Helvetius' 1758 *De l'esprit*, d'Holbach's *La Systeme* was one of the most significant eighteenth century works published on materialism. d'Holbach's *La Systeme* was, as Richard Vitzthum has argued, the first theory of materialism that included a "positive defense of atheism."<sup>89</sup> Most previous systems of materialism, by contrast, only seemed to imply an atheist world-view. As Henry May, however, has demonstrated, very few of these radical French Enlightenment works had much influence on American readers outside of certain intellectual circles. While Helvetius enjoyed at least some circulation in the U.S., especially after the 1790s, May concluded that few read d'Holbach, leaving his work "nearly unknown in America."<sup>90</sup> In the U.S., certain individuals, especially those interested in philosophy, were most

---

<sup>87</sup> Thales argued for a version of substance monism based on water while Democritus and Lucretius each developed theories of atomism. In their simplest forms, each of these philosophies suggested that the entire universe could be understood in terms of natural, physical phenomena that were not necessarily organized by a higher or intelligent power, thus implying atheism. For more on the history of philosophical materialism, see Richard C. Vitzthum, *Materialism: An Affirmative History and Definition* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995).

<sup>88</sup> d'Holbach's *La Systeme* would be available in English translation in the U.S. in 1808. See *System of Nature, or, the Laws of the Moral and Physical World* (Philadelphia: R. Benson, 1808).

<sup>89</sup> Vitzthum, 86.

<sup>90</sup> May, 41, 118. For further discussion of the American reception of Helvetius, see Chapters 1 and 2 of John Carson, *Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

likely to be familiar with the French materialists. Members of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, for instance, “kept abreast of the materialistic theories” of la Mettrie and d’Holbach, even if they found them unconvincing.<sup>91</sup> The fact that those Americans who were familiar with materialist philosophy associated it primarily with this notorious group of radical French theorists contributed to the already inhospitable background later materialists who tried to circulate their ideas in the U.S. would encounter.

Priestley developed most of his materialist theories while working as a librarian for William Petty, Earl of Shelburne.<sup>92</sup> It was Richard Price, the dissenting minister and philosopher, who recruited Priestley in 1772 to work with Shelburne and the group of liberal intellectuals, sometimes called the Bowood Circle, who met at Shelburne's Bowood House.<sup>93</sup> Priestley's new position included extended travels to Paris where he met several French materialists including d’Holbach.<sup>94</sup> Priestley, however, was thoroughly unimpressed with d’Holbach’s open atheism, and he was equally disappointed by the famously ambiguous conclusion of Scottish philosopher David Hume’s 1779 *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.<sup>95</sup> He instead believed that Christianity and materialism were compatible and even

---

<sup>91</sup> Curti, 163.

<sup>92</sup> Rivers and Wykes, 38.

<sup>93</sup> Though they greatly respected one another, Price did not agree with many components of Priestley's materialism. In particular, Price supported the immortality of the human soul and the notion of free agency. For one series of their correspondence on the topic, see Joseph Priestley and Richard Price, *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism, and Philosophical Necessity, in a Correspondence between Dr. Price and Dr. Priestley* (London: J. Johnson, 1778). For references to the Bowood Circle, see Steven Blakemore, *Intertextual War: Edmund Burke and the French Revolution in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, and James Mackintosh* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 87.

<sup>94</sup> Priestley accompanied Shelburne on an extended trip from August through October 1774. Their visits included Holland, Germany, and France, among other locations. They spent one month in Paris. See Rivers and Wykes, 39.

<sup>95</sup> Dybikowski, 85. On Priestley and d’Holbach, see James Dybikowski, “Joseph Priestley, Metaphysician and Philosopher of Religion,” in Rivers and Wykes, *Joseph Priestley*, 85. For Priestley’s opinions on Hume, see his detailed review of Hume’s *Dialogues*, in Joseph Priestley, “An Examination of Mr. Hume’s Dialogues on Natural Religion,” Letter IX in *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, 101-151. Priestley also commented on Hume in the preface to his *Disquisitions*. See Priestley, *Disquisitions*, xviii. For a current take on Hume and materialism, see Stephen Buckle, “Hume’s Sceptical Materialism,” *Philosophy* 82, no. 322 (October 2007): 553-578.

complementary belief systems, and he set out to prove his point in several publications in the late 1770s.

While historians have devoted much attention to Priestley's scientific and political tracts, his writings on materialism are generally only mentioned in passing, a curious omission given that his materialism served as the philosophical foundation for many of his political and scientific arguments.<sup>96</sup> In 1775, Priestley published one of the earliest statements of his soon-to-be controversial materialism in a book on *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind*.<sup>97</sup> In his introduction, Priestley included the following two statements:

I am rather inclined to think...that man does not consist of *two principles* so essentially different from one another as *matter* and *spirit*, which are always described as having no one common property, by means of which they can affect...each other; the one occupying space, and the other not only not occupying...space, but incapable of bearing any relation to it...

I rather think that the whole of man is of some *uniform composition*; and that the property of *perception*, as well as the other powers that are termed *mental*, is the result...of such an organical structure as that of the brain: consequently, that the whole man becomes extinct at death, and that we have no hope of surviving the grave, but what is derived from the scheme of revelation.<sup>98</sup>

Priestley later wrote that he "little imagined that such a paragraph could have given the alarm that I presently found it had done." This "alarm," he explained, took the form of an "exceedingly

---

<sup>96</sup> The two previously mentioned works by Dybikowski and Yolton are exceptions to this general lack of interest in Priestley's materialism. Here John G. McEvoy should also be recognized for his emphasis on the "interconnectedness of Priestley's thought" across his numerous theological, political, religious, and scientific works. See John G. McEvoy, "Joseph Priestley, Scientist, Philosopher, and Divine," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 128, no. 3 (1984): 193-199.

<sup>97</sup> Priestley's *Examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, published in 1774, also strongly hinted at the materialist arguments he would advance more fully in his *Disquisitions*. In his *Examination*, Priestley argued against Reid's theory of the acquisition of human knowledge. Reid, who was an important figure in Scottish Common Sense philosophy, believed that human possess certain innate beliefs (common sense) including those of a religious or moral nature, by virtue of being human. Priestley, by contrast, saw common sense philosophy as destructive to human reason or critical inquiry, and preferred the sensationalism and empiricism of John Locke combined with the association theory of David Hartley. Locke himself had been accused of promoting materialism in his philosophy. As Henry May has noted, many Americans believed Locke's sensationalism promoted the "frightening specter of mechanistic materialism," a system which "seemed to leave the mind largely passive, acted on from outside through the senses." See May, 9.

<sup>98</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind, On the Principle of the Association of Ideas, With Essays Relating to the Subject of It* (London: J. Johnson, 1775), xx.

general and loud...cry against me as an *unbeliever*, and a *favourer of atheism*.”<sup>99</sup> From the earliest moments of its publication, critics attacked Priestley’s materialism as a dangerous philosophy that promoted atheism and threatened to disrupt the social stability provided by religion. James Dybikowski suggests that Priestley’s willingness to engage seriously with these heterodox and unpopular ideas, even in the face of severe criticism, was the most significant trait of his work: “Priestley’s chief importance as a philosophical theorist,” Dybikowski argues, “lies in keeping alive, clarifying, and deepening lines of thought under threat of being marginalized as the exclusive preserve of unbelievers.”<sup>100</sup>

Despite his deviance from orthodox Christianity, numerous accounts suggest Priestley was devout in his beliefs. Benjamin Stillman, a Professor of Natural History and Chemistry at Yale, recalled, for instance, meeting Priestley at a dinner party. When the subject of religion came up, Priestley shared a story that demonstrated his commitment to Christianity. While dining in Paris, he saw two men dressed in Canonicals. Priestley asked his host who the men were and the host replied that “one of them is bishop so and so and the other bishop so and so; but they are very clever fellows and although they are bishops they do not believe anything more of this mummery of Christianity than you or I do.” Priestley replied immediately, “Speak for yourself sir...for, although I am accounted a heretic in England I do believe what you call this mummery of Christianity.”<sup>101</sup>

In response to the initial outcry against his materialism, Priestley published his *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit, To Which is Added, the History of the Philosophical Doctrine Concerning the Origins of the Soul, and the Nature of Matter, With its Influence on*

---

<sup>99</sup> Priestley, *Disquisitions*, xiv. For more on the critical English reception of Priestley’s materialism, see Yolton, *Thinking Matter*, 115-125.

<sup>100</sup> Dybikowski, 111.

<sup>101</sup> Benjamin Stillman, Sr., “Excerpts from the Autobiography of Benjamin Stillman, Sr.,” in Nathan Reingold, *Science in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 10.

*Christianity*. First released in London in 1777, Priestley's *Disquisitions* would become the most well-known statement of his materialism. Using the *Disquisitions* as an opportunity to clarify and expand on some of the arguments from his *Examination*, Priestley recognized that this work, too, would likely be received poorly: "Though I have spent the greatest part of my life in the study and defence of christianity," (Priestley, like many later American materialists, often did not capitalize "Christianity") he wrote in his preface,

the suspicion of my being an unbeliever, and an underminer of all religion, may be confirmed; and...I may for generations lie under the imputation of absolute atheism...So very free and undisguised attack upon an opinion almost universally deemed to be of the utmost importance to all religion...may be expected to rouse the zeal of many friends to the prevailing system.<sup>102</sup>

Indeed, Priestley's materialism challenged numerous widely-held doctrines of late eighteenth-century philosophy, science, and theology. Priestley opened his *Disquisitions* by rejecting of the commonly accepted dualism of mind and body or matter and spirit, arguing instead that matter was the only substance which truly exists in the world. Priestley summarized the prevailing view as one in which

Matter is that kind of substance of which our *bodies* are composed, whereas the principle of perception and thought...is said to reside in a *spirit*, or immaterial principle...the higher order of intelligent beings, and...the Divine Being, are said to be purely immaterial.<sup>103</sup>

Priestley, by contrast, argued that the concept of spirit, some kind of immaterial form that had no extension, occupied no space, and existed nowhere, was nonsensical.<sup>104</sup> Priestley's monism was, as John Yolton has argued, built on a revolutionary new conception of matter.<sup>105</sup> Priestley understood matter not as passive or inert, as most prior philosophers had conceived of the substance, but rather as an active, vital force. Matter, according to Priestley, existed as a series

---

<sup>102</sup> Priestley, *Disquisitions*, xvii-xviii.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, ii.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>105</sup> Yolton, 107-115.

of “*physical points*” that were attracted and repulsed from one another, thereby remaining penetrable and porous rather than simply solid.<sup>106</sup>

Over thirty years earlier, Cadwallader Colden (1688-1776) had published his own theory of matter as an active force.<sup>107</sup> Priestley was evidently unfamiliar with Colden’s work.<sup>108</sup> Though he disavowed materialism, historians suggest Colden “came close to taking a materialist position” and he should be recognized as “one of the pioneers in the development of...scientific materialism.”<sup>109</sup> A Scottish-born physician who served as both Surveyor General and Lieutenant Governor of New York (1761-1776), Colden found the distinction between material and immaterial substances pointless. He felt the notion of “substance” was itself equally useless and he rejected the notion that there is something that exists underneath or behind all properties.<sup>110</sup> In his 1745 *Explication of the First Causes of Action in Matter*, reprinted in 1751 as *The Principles of Action in Matter*, Colden argued that matter should instead be understood as active, in terms like force, inertia, and motion.<sup>111</sup> By suggesting matter was active of its own accord, Colden’s arguments seemed to hint at atheism, a fact not lost on some of his American critics,

---

<sup>106</sup> Priestley, *Disquisitions*, 19; Yolton, 113.

<sup>107</sup> Colden received a degree from the University of Edinburgh and also studied medicine in London. He moved in Philadelphia in 1710 and New York in 1718. Colden was especially interested in the study of Newtonian science, hence his emphasis on inertia and force in his understanding of active matter. For more on Colden, see Riley, *American Philosophy: The Early Schools*, 329-372; Alfred R. Hoermann, *Cadwallader Colden: A Figure of the American Enlightenment* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002); Seymour Schwartz, *Cadwallader Colden: A Biography*, (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2013).

<sup>108</sup> During an unrelated dispute, Priestley denied having any knowledge of Colden or his writings. See Schofield, *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley*, 87.

<sup>109</sup> Curti, 96; Riley, *American Philosophy: The Early Schools*, 372.

<sup>110</sup> These arguments about substance can be found in Colden’s *Principles of Action in Matter* as well as in a series of letters with Samuel Johnson, written between 1742 and 1750. In this correspondence, Johnson, a Connecticut minister, defended the idealism of Bishop George Berkeley against Colden’s early materialism. For more on this exchange, see John Michael Dixon, “Cadwallader Colden and the Rise of Public Dissension: Politics and Science in Pre-Revolutionary New York,” (PhD Diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2007), 123-133.

<sup>111</sup> For more on Colden’s theory of matter, see John Ryder, “Cadwallader Colden, Samuel Johnson, and the Activity of Matter: Materialism and idealism in Colonial America,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 32, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 248-272; Riley, “Cadwallader Colden,” in *American Philosophy: The Early Schools*, 329-372.

though Colden denied such accusations.<sup>112</sup> Colden's work was received poorly by his peers, as the few who read it found it overly technical and confusing.<sup>113</sup> His theories about the active nature of matter and his materialist renderings of the mind appear well ahead of their time. During the antebellum era, American materialists like Charles Knowlton would articulate similar theories about the self-organizing nature of matter, though none would cite Colden.

Perhaps most significantly, Priestley's rejection of dualism led him to deny the existence of the soul. As John Barresi and Raymond Martin have demonstrated, the vast majority of eighteenth century European philosophers believed that the "self was the soul, an immaterial substance" that was "naturally immortal."<sup>114</sup> Priestley, however, thought that no such entity could exist. By extension, he also then rejected the standard eighteenth century account of thought and perception. While most believed that the soul was the source of all mental phenomena, Priestley argued that the physical mind acted as the seat of human cognition and that human thought could not exist independently from matter. "What we call *mind*, or the principle of perception and thought," he wrote, "is not a substance distinct from the body, but the result of corporeal organization."<sup>115</sup>

Priestley believed that the scriptures, philosophy, and science all supported his claim to the corporeal origins of mental faculties. He first turned to the Biblical account of the creation of man in Genesis as evidence that the soul does not exist: "We see here," Priestley explained,

---

<sup>112</sup> "I am sorry to find by yours that one of the Fellows of your College is apprehensive of some tendency in my system towards atheism. This is a misfortune which has happened to all new discoveries in philosophy." Cadwallader Colden to Dr. Samuel Johnson, November 19, 1746, in Pratt and Ryder, *The Philosophical Writings of Cadwallader Colden*, 197. For more on the atheistic implications of Colden's theory of matter, see Riley, 338-340.

<sup>113</sup> Scott L. Pratt and John Ryder, eds., *The Philosophical Writings of Cadwallader Colden* (New York: Humanity Books, 2002), 32-33. Based on a letter from Benjamin Franklin, Woodbridge Riley suggests that Colden's writings received better reception in England and possibly Germany and France, despite the fact that they "fell flat at home" and "in the colonies... were unknown and unhonoured." See Riley, 333-334.

<sup>114</sup> John Barresi and Raymond Martin, *Naturalization of the Soul: Self and Personal Identity in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1.

<sup>115</sup> Priestley, *Disquisitions*, iv.



“that the *whole man*... was made of the dust of the ground. No part of him is said to have had a higher... original; and surely so... important a circumstance as that of an *immaterial principle*, which could not be from the *dust*, would not have been omitted.”<sup>116</sup> Priestley further found it “absurd” to believe that “two substances that have no *common property*... are capable of intimate connection and mutual action.”<sup>117</sup> That is, he did not believe an immaterial soul could interact with a material human body if the two shared no common attributes.

Priestley drew heavily upon the work of David Hartley (1705-1757) to support his account of thought and perception. Hartley, the English philosopher most famous for his 1749 publication of *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations*, introduced Priestley to the notion that thought might stem from physical structures like the nervous system and brain rather than an immaterial soul.<sup>118</sup> “Since... sensations are conveyed to the mind, by the efficiency of corporeal causes of the medullary substance, as is acknowledged by all physiologists,” Hartley argued in a well-known passage from his *Observations*, “... the powers of generating ideas, and raising them by association, must also arise from corporeal causes.”<sup>119</sup> Priestley also admired Hartley’s theory of the association of ideas, which suggests that all ideas are generated from external sensations. Priestley wrote that reading Hartley’s work was like “entering upon a *new world*” as it introduced him to a “new and most extensive *science*.”<sup>120</sup> He later claimed that he was “more indebted to this one treatise, than to all the books I ever read

---

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, iii.

<sup>118</sup> As Oberg notes, Priestley left out one of the main components of Hartley’s work, his theory of vibrations, in his 1775 re-issue of his *Observations on Man*. Hartley’s theory suggested that the particles that make up the brain and nervous system begin a series of small movements (vibrations) when they come in contact with an external object. Through these vibrations, sensory signals move through nerves and spinal marrow back up to the medullary substance of the brain. See Oberg, 442.

<sup>119</sup> David Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Thomas Tegg, 1834), 46.

<sup>120</sup> Joseph Priestley, *An Examination of Dr. Reid’s Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense, Dr. Beattie’s Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, and Dr. Oswald’s Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: J. Johnson, 1775), xix.

beside; the scriptures excepted.”<sup>121</sup> Though Hartley’s work served as an important precursor to Priestley’s materialism, Hartley was a devout Christian who wholly rejected the notion of materialism and tried purposefully to distance his work from the dreaded doctrine.<sup>122</sup>

While Priestley embraced certain components of Hartley’s theories, he rejected another important contemporary account of human cognition: that of Scottish common sense philosophy.<sup>123</sup> Represented by figures like philosopher Thomas Reid (1710-1796), the common sense school argued that humans possess certain innate beliefs (common sense), including those of a religious or moral nature, simply by virtue of their constitution as human beings. In his 1774 *Examination of Dr. Reid’s Inquiry Into the Human Mind*, Priestley rejected this notion of innate ideas and portrayed common sense philosophy as destructive to human reason and critical inquiry.<sup>124</sup> He preferred instead the famous English philosopher John Locke’s sensationalism and empiricism. Well into the nineteenth century, Locke (1632-1704) would continue to be a popular figure among American materialists for his rejection of innate ideas and his sensationalist epistemology.

Priestley’s twin move of aligning with Locke and rejecting common sense philosophy set the stage for a rocky reception in the U.S. As Henry May has noted, many Americans dismissed Locke’s sensationalism because it seemed to (though did not necessarily) promote the “frightening specter of mechanistic materialism” by leaving “the mind largely passive, acted on from outside through the senses.”<sup>125</sup> Many historians, furthermore, have demonstrated the

---

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, xix.

<sup>122</sup> For more on Hartley’s efforts to distance himself from materialism, see Barbara Bowen Oberg, “David Hartley and the Association of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37, no. 3 (July-September 1976): 443-444.

<sup>123</sup> For more on Priestley and Reid, see J. H. Faurot, “Reid’s Answer to Joseph Priestley,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39, no. 2(April-June 1978): 285-292; Alan Tapper, “Reid and Priestley on Method and the Mind,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 52, no. 209 (October 2002): 511-525.

<sup>124</sup> For more on Priestley’s epistemology, see Vilem Mudroch, “Joseph Priestley’s Eclectic Epistemology,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (January 2005): 49-71.

<sup>125</sup> May, 9.

importance of Scottish common sense philosophy in the U.S.<sup>126</sup> Mark Noll, for instance, has noted the “tremendous influence” of the common sense school on theology and the “nearly universal approval” of commonsense ethics in the nineteenth century, while Daniel Howe has shown that Thomas Reid boasted a “favorable reception” in the U.S. and his theories enjoyed “widespread acceptance” in American Calvinist seminaries and colleges beginning in the 1790s.<sup>127</sup> In his praise of Locke and attacks on Reid and common sense philosophy, Priestley declared allegiance to a contentious philosopher and distanced himself from a significant school of thought in the U.S.

For Priestley to preserve both his religion and his system of materialism, he was forced to modify and reject certain tenets of Christianity. At one point, he even went so far as to claim that materialism could actually *improve* Christianity: “By the help of the system of materialism,” Priestley suggested, “The Christian removes the very foundation of many doctrines, which have...debased and corrupted Christianity.”<sup>128</sup> The fact that Priestley was often more willing to revise Christianity rather than his own materialism explains, in part, why his philosophy proved so contentious, as his willingness to dismiss sacred doctrines infuriated many of his contemporaries. Priestley, for instance, used his materialism to argue against the common Christian assumption that God is immaterial. Making another argument from scriptural absence, Priestley pointed out that the Bible contained “no reference whatever to the *immateriality* of the

---

<sup>126</sup> In *The Enlightenment in America*, May divided European Enlightenment thought into four main categories: a moderate English enlightenment, a skeptical French enlightenment, a radical revolutionary enlightenment, and the commonsense Scottish enlightenment. May argued that only the Scottish version fit well enough with the deeply-Protestant culture of the U.S. to attract actual followers in America. For more on common sense philosophy in the U.S., see J. David Hoeveler, *James McCosh and the Scottish Intellectual Tradition: From Glasgow to Princeton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

<sup>127</sup> Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 93; Daniel Howe, “John Witherspoon and the Transatlantic Enlightenment,” in *The Atlantic Enlightenment*, ed. Susan Manning and Francis D. Cogliano (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008), 72.

<sup>128</sup> Priestley, *Disquisitions*, 49.

divine nature.”<sup>129</sup> Though he admitted that God may exist in some form that humans could not comprehend fully, philosophically, Priestley believed God must possess at least some attribute of materiality in order to have created the material world.<sup>130</sup>

One of Priestley’s early religious influences, Socinianism, also shaped his belief in the materiality of God.<sup>131</sup> Theologically similar to Unitarians, the denomination with which Priestley would later be associated, Socinians were a sect of liberal dissenters that one historian describes as “a radical Continental heresy popularly synonymous with anti-trinitarianism.”<sup>132</sup> Most importantly for Priestley’s materialism, Socinians believed that human reason must be used to interpret revelation. Promoting an early form of biblical criticism, Socinians argued that the scriptures should be held to the same standards of evidence as other historical texts.<sup>133</sup> Following this emphasis on reason, they read Biblical descriptions of God as a “person” as a literal description of him as a single individual rather than a triune god who was part immaterial or spirit.<sup>134</sup> This denial of the trinity would later serve as the basis of the Unitarianism Priestley

---

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 183.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 106-107.

<sup>131</sup> Priestley became a Socinian in 1767. Some of the earliest hints of Priestley’s materialism could be found in a massive work three-volume work he published on Socinianism, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, between 1772 and 1774. See William Allen, “Priestley, Joseph,” in *An American Biographical and Historical Dictionary* (Cambridge: Hillard and Metcalf, 1809), 484; Daniel E. White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 154, 165.

<sup>132</sup> Phillip Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes: The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century* (London: T and T Clark, 2003), 4. In addition to the Trinity, Socinians rejected several other foundational doctrines of Christianity, including that of Transubstantiation. Historian of religion Jon Butler has defined the “principle doctrines” of Unitarianism as: “a largely positive view of man, universal salvation, rejection of the Trinity, fascination with science, and a trend toward systemization.” See Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); 220.

<sup>133</sup> Alison Kennedy places Priestley within the tradition of biblical criticism and argues that his “contribution as a historical biblical critic may be seen as an important element in a pattern of development of the rational interpretation of the Holy Scriptures which stretched all the way from John Locke...to later eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century scholars.” Priestley, Kennedy suggests, was guided by the “fundamental maxim...that the critic should consider the gospel historians in the same light as any other historians in order to form a true picture. The credibility of any fact in the scriptures must be supported by evidence recorded by contemporary historians and also by those who were regarded as reliable sources at the time.” See Alison Kennedy, “Historical Perspectives in the Mind of Joseph Priestley,” in Rivers and Wykes, 195.

<sup>134</sup> Sarah Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution: The Challenge of Socinianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3; Dixon, 41-42.

attempted to promote while living in Pennsylvania.<sup>135</sup> Priestley would eventually explain his rejection of the trinity and Christ's divinity in an especially bold passage of one of his American publications on religion:

I do not believe the divinity of Christ...because I do not believe it to be the doctrine of the scriptures, and because I cannot help thinking that if Christ, and also the Holy Spirit, be possessed of all the attributes of divinity, equally with God the Father, there must be *three Gods*, and not *only one*...In this you will not agree with me, being of the opinion that...*three* may be *one*...<sup>136</sup>

Finally, Priestley also believed that his materialism supported the doctrine of philosophical necessity. In a line of reasoning that required some logical leaps of faith, Priestley explained in his *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated* that "if man...be wholly a *material* being, it will not be denied...that he must be a *mechanical* being....and, consequently, the doctrine of necessity is a direct inference from materialism."<sup>137</sup> Published in 1777 as an appendix to his *Disquisitions*, Priestley argued in the *Doctrine* that God's divine will controlled the universe and determined the outcome of all natural events.<sup>138</sup> In Priestley's view, philosophical necessity had two main components:

According to the established laws of nature, no event could have been otherwise than it *has been, is, or is to be*, and therefore, all things past, present, and to come, are precisely what the Author of nature really intended them to be.<sup>139</sup>

The proper *mechanism of the mind*, depend[s] upon the certain influence of motives to determine the will, by means of which the whole series of events...makes one connected *chain of causes and effects*, originally established by the Deity.<sup>140</sup>

---

<sup>135</sup> For more on Priestley's Unitarianism and its reception in the U.S., see J.D. Bowers, *Joseph Priestley and English Unitarianism in America* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

<sup>136</sup> Priestley, *Letters to the Inhabitants of Northumberland*, Letter VII.

<sup>137</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Physical Necessity*, xx. Priestley drew inspiration for this work largely from the famous English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who he credited as "the first who understood and maintained the proper doctrine of philosophical necessity." See Priestley, *Doctrine of Physical Necessity*, xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>138</sup> Priestley published *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity* and *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (1780) in response to the intense criticism he received after writing his *Disquisitions*, using these two works in an attempt to clarify and defend his earlier positions. For more on English attacks against Priestley's *Disquisitions*, see "Matter and Spirit," Chapter 4 of Schofield, *Enlightened Joseph Priestley*, 59-76, and Dybikowski, "Joseph Priestley, Metaphysician and Philosopher of Religion."

<sup>139</sup> Priestley, *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated*, 8.

<sup>140</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Physical Necessity*, xxv.

The fact that Priestley saw materialism and philosophical necessity as inseparable systems (and his description of man as a “mechanical being”) helps explain, in part, why materialism was frequently criticized as an overly mechanistic school of thought that reduced human beings to parts of a system with no free will or moral accountability. One early nineteenth century American book on religion, for instance, argued that

The moral effects of this system are to be dreaded. It tends to remove from man all distinctions between right and wrong; it gives him no higher place than an involuntary machine, operated upon by mechanical force...Mechanism is the undoubted consequence of materialism. Thus man is at once divested of all that renders him accountable.<sup>141</sup>

Priestley, however, did not see his materialism in the same light at this oft-repeated critique portrayed it. As Isaac Kramnick has noted, Priestley’s philosophical necessity did present something of a paradox when considered alongside his reform agenda: “As necessitarians they claimed humankind to be the passive product of circumstances; as reformers they preached active intervention in controlling and changing circumstances.”<sup>142</sup> Jack Fruchtman suggests that Priestley’s millennialism added further tension to this dynamic: “A central, yet seemingly contradictory, premise underlay” Priestley’s thought: “Political change occurred at two levels...first, because God simply desired it to occur; second, because men who are citizens were best capable of deciding how to accomplish it.”<sup>143</sup> Fruchtman, however, argues that these two paths to change seemed perfectly reconcilable to Priestley, as he “simply accepted

---

<sup>141</sup> Gilbert McMaster, *Essay in Defence of Some Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity* (Schenectady, New York: Riggs and Stevens, 1815), 53.

<sup>142</sup> Kramnick, 85. Though not focused on Priestley, May noted the same materialist reform paradox in his 1976 *Enlightenment in America*: “Oddly, people like Diderot who were determinists and materialists were also devoted to the moral and physical improvement of human nature. Acute thinkers could not help seeing the inconsistency between a taste for improvement and a belief in determinism. Where would the motive for improvement come from, or what would the criterion be, when mankind recovered from its superstitions?” See May, 110.

<sup>143</sup> Jack Fruchtman, *The Apocalyptic Politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley: A Study in Late Eighteenth Century English Republican Millennialism* (Independence Square, Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1983), 21.

on an equal basis the truth of both the cosmic and human elements of political change.”<sup>144</sup>

Priestley, in other words, believed that though history would unfold as God had willed it to be, humans still needed to act and move society to fulfill its potential before God’s plan would be completely realized.

Kramnick suggests more significant links between Priestley’s materialism and his belief in social progress. Referencing what he calls the “scientific optimism of Priestley’s materialism,” Kramnick argues that “the doctrine of the materiality of man” was linked to the

parallel assumption of reform and improvement being a simple matter of changing the ‘associations’ linked to external sensation. The materialist psychology, by eliminating the mind-body distinction, provided a scientific basis for the widespread belief that man’s social and moral behavior could be changed by disciplining their bodies... The state literally becomes a laboratory in which men and institutions can be perfected, like machines, by trial and error.<sup>145</sup>

Kramnick concludes that for Priestley, “Science and materialism cut both ways. The undermined the old order, liberating...man from timeless domination and mystery. They also promised a new day when scientific leadership will produce great happiness...by manipulating men..., even if achieving such happiness involved the sacrifice of freedom.”<sup>146</sup> The question of these connections between materialism, scientific progress, and radical reform would, as I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3, later become central to American articulations of materialism in the antebellum era.

Priestley’s *Disquisitions* would be one of the first modern works on philosophical materialism that most Americans would encounter. In 1816, a copy of the *Disquisitions* would fall into the hands of a young man named Abner Kneeland, a crucial figure in the history of American materialism and the main subject of Chapter 2, while he was studying theology in New

---

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>145</sup> Kramnick, “Eighteenth-Century Science and Radical Social Theory,” 24-25.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 29.

York. While most Americans simply dismissed Priestley's philosophy, his materialism would strongly influence Kneeland, though certainly not in the way Priestley intended. Priestley's disquisitions would instead act as a starting point for Kneeland's own more radical and avowedly atheist version of philosophical materialism, a set of ideas he would develop most fully in the 1820s and 1830s while living in Boston.

### **Early American Reception of Priestley**

Though American interest in Priestley's materialism picked up considerably after his move to Philadelphia in 1794, several Americans took note of his philosophical and theological work even before he lived in the U.S. One of the earliest American discussions of Priestley's work appeared in Hannah Adams' 1791 *View of Religions, in Two Parts*. Adams (1755-1831), who lived in Massachusetts, dedicated the book to her distant cousin John Adams, a soon-to-be contentious figure in Priestley's new life in America. In her *View of Religions*, Adams dedicated several pages to an in-depth summary of Priestley's materialism, reprinting many passages directly from the *Disquisitions*. Throughout, Adams was especially careful to note that Priestley's materialism remained compatible with the notion of resurrection, an afterlife, and God:

The corporeal and mental faculties, inhering in the same substance, grow, ripen, and decay together; and whenever the system is dissolved, it continues in a state of dissolution, till it shall please that almighty Being who called it into existence, to restore it to life again...

Dr. *Priestley* considers man as a being, consisting of what is called *matter* disposed in a certain manner. At death, the parts of this material substance are disarranged, that the powers of perception and thought, which depend upon this arrangement, cease. At the resurrection they will be re-arranged in the same, or in a familiar manner as before, and



consequently the powers of perception and thought will be restored.<sup>147</sup>

Adams, however, offered none of her own opinions on Priestley's work, as she stated that the goal of her book was to "exhibit the multiplied speculations of the human mind in as just and impartial a manner as possible."<sup>148</sup>

Other American reviewers were far less "impartial" in their commentary on Priestley. Baptist pastor John Stancliff (1742-1802), for example, did not hold back his opinions on Priestley in a 1784 sermon he gave in Philadelphia. The title of the sermon alone, *An Account of the Trial of Doctor Joseph Priestley, For the Horrid Crime of High Treason Against the King of Heaven and Earth*, made clear his view of Priestley's philosophy.<sup>149</sup> Several other Americans published works challenging Priestley's materialist theology, especially his arguments against the divinity of Christ. Some of these authors included Charles H. Warton (1788-1833), a clergyman and member of the American Philosophical Society; Samuel Wetherill (1736-1816), founder of the Society of Free Quakers; and an anonymous attack on Priestley signed "By the public's Humble Servant, an Advocate of Repentance and Faith."<sup>150</sup> By 1792, Priestley's theological and political views were well-known enough that Eliphaz Liberalissimus (the pseudonym of Ashbel Green [1762-1848], a Presbyterian minister and founding member of the Pennsylvania Bible Society) included "I believe Dr. Priestley to be a wiser and better teacher

---

<sup>147</sup> Hannah Adams, *A View of Religions, in Two Parts* (Boston: John West Folsom, 1791), 134. The first paragraph is a direct quotation from Priestley's *Disquisitions*.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

<sup>149</sup> John Stancliff, *An Account of the Trial of Doctor Joseph Priestly, for the Horrid Crime of High-treason Against the King of Heaven and Earth, and Supreme Governor of the United States of North-America, Delivered Under the Similitude of a Dream* (Philadelphia: Charles Cist, 1784).

<sup>150</sup> Charles H. Wharton, *A Short and Candid Inquiry into the Proofs of Christ's Divinity, in Which Dr. Priestley's History of Opinions Concerning Christ is Occasionally Considered* (Wilmington: Brynberg and Andrews, 1791); Samuel Wetherill, *The Divinity of Jesus Christ Proved, Being a Reply to Dr. Joseph Priestley's 'Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity'* (Philadelphia: Francis Bailey and Thomas Lang, 1792); *An Answer to Dr. Priestley's Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity* (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1795).

than Jesus Christ” as tenet number six of his satirical “Liberal Man’s Confession of Faith.”<sup>151</sup>

While the term “liberal” held many meanings during this era, its use in descriptions of materialist theology generally signified an alarming move away from the tenets of orthodox Christianity.

Many Americans were also aware that Priestley had been at the forefront of several radical political and religious societies in Birmingham. In the 1780s, Birmingham was “a stronghold of English dissent” and home to the largest number of Unitarians in England.<sup>152</sup> Priestley was a leader in this dissenting community and he was also well-known for his support for Parliamentary reform, expansion of suffrage, and separation of church and state.<sup>153</sup> He was further an outspoken advocate for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, legislation that required public office holders to be members of the Anglican Church of England and specifically barred Catholics and Nonconformists from service. Priestley’s fervent, public support for both the American and French revolutions, coupled with his long history of political agitation, eventually led Edmund Burke, leader of the Old Whigs (who opposed the French Revolution) in the House of Commons, and Prime Minister William Pitt, to denounce him publically on several occasions and accuse him repeatedly of plots to overthrow the English order.<sup>154</sup> Priestley’s connections with political tumult and radical reform, forged in part by his close association with figures like Richard Price, would soon follow him to the U.S., where individuals like President John Adams and Secretary of State William Pickering would continue Burke and Pitt’s criticism in an American context.

As Isaac Kramnick has argued, Priestley saw his religious, scientific, and political work as part of a far-reaching effort to re-orient English society, sentiments he would later apply to the

---

<sup>151</sup> Eliphaz Liberalissimus, *A Letter to the Preacher of Liberal Sentiments, Containing Among Other Important matters, a Liberal Man’s Confession of Faith* (Philadelphia: 1792).

<sup>152</sup> R. B. Rose, “The Priestley Riots of 1791,” *Past and Present* 18 (November 1960): 83; 71.

<sup>153</sup> For more on Priestley’s arguments for the separation of church and state, see Kramnick, 88.

<sup>154</sup> For more on Priestley’s support for the American and French Revolutions, see May, 219.

United States.<sup>155</sup> In a famous sermon that earned him the nickname “Gunpowder Joe,” Priestley argued that

We are as it were, laying gunpowder, grain by grain, under the old building of error and superstition, which a single spark may hereafter inflame, so as to produce an instantaneous explosion; in consequence of which that edifice, the erection of which has been the work of ages, may be overturned in a moment and so effectually as that same foundation can never be built again.<sup>156</sup>

Here Priestley echoed the sentiments of his friend Thomas Paine’s most recent publication, the *Age of Reason*. Priestley’s association with Paine served as another black mark on his image to Americans. By the 1790s, as many historians have noted, Paine’s reputation in the U.S. as the heroic author of *Common Sense* had been replaced by Paine as “the notorious author of the godless *Age of Reason*.”<sup>157</sup> Paine, like Priestley, believed that the Enlightenment ideal of free rational inquiry should be applied to all subjects, including religion and the scriptures.

Paine generally supported a position of deism, that is, the belief that a rational deity created the world as well as the natural laws that govern it. Most deists denied the more supernatural elements of Christianity, claims such as the existence of a triune God and the notion of divine miracles. The rise of deism, which reached its apex in the U.S. from the 1780s through the early 1810s, appeared to signal a new willingness, at least among some, to challenge religious orthodoxy. It was closely related to the earlier eighteenth century theories of natural (as opposed to revealed) religion and natural theology, systems generally defined as the belief that there exists in the universe "a real system of truths available to all by the use of unaided

---

<sup>155</sup> Kramnick calls this combination of science and progressive politics Priestley’s “scientific liberalism.” See Kramnick, 71-73.

<sup>156</sup> Priestley, “Reflections on the Present State of Free Inquiry in This Country,” quoted in Kramnick, 82.

<sup>157</sup> Durey, 662. For more on Paine’s American reception, see May, 173-176; Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Schlereth, 49-65; Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 18-34.

reason."<sup>158</sup> Several variants of both natural religion and deism circulated in early America. In the first part of the eighteenth century, those interested in natural religion generally stressed how their beliefs remained consistent with standard Christian doctrine, like Cotton Mather's early publications on natural theology that sought to affirm the "harmony between scientific truth and biblical revelation."<sup>159</sup> By the latter part of the century, however, deists like Paine were more likely to stray from the orthodox and reject certain ideas like human immortality or the existence of an afterlife. Despite these controversial claims, deism boasted a number of well-known adherents such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Ethan Allen. Not all deists, however, were willing to declare their beliefs publicly. Some, like Franklin and Jefferson, were more private about their ideas, while others like Paine and Allen, whose 1784 *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* is considered to be a foundational text in deism, had little interest in keeping their thoughts to themselves.<sup>160</sup> Religious historian A. Owen Aldridge suggests this public/private distinction was so important that it places these individuals in different categories: "deists" simply "wished to proclaim a particular form of religion," while "freethinkers" also "envisioned the liberty of writing and publishing without censorship."<sup>161</sup>

Paine, in particular, displayed a bold willingness to challenge openly Christian orthodoxy. His "godless" (though not atheistic) tract on reason, for instance, included many passages like the following:

The Bible and the Testaments are impositions upon the world...the fall of man, the account of Jesus Christ being the Son of God, and of his dying to appease the wrath of God, and of salvation by that strange means, are all fabulous inventions, dishonorable to

---

<sup>158</sup> Peter Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism*, (London: Routledge, 1989), 4, quoted in A. Owen Aldridge, "Natural Religion and Deism in America Before Ethan Allen and Thomas Paine," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (October 1997): 836.

<sup>159</sup> Aldridge, 837.

<sup>160</sup> Some of Franklin's most controversial publications on religion were published in London and not well known in the U.S. until after his death. In addition to their less public nature, Franklin and Jefferson are also generally considered more moderate in their deist beliefs than Allen or Paine. See Aldridge, 837.

<sup>161</sup> Aldridge, 836.

the wisdom and power of the almighty...the only true religion is Deism, by which I...mean...the belief of one God, and an imitation of his moral character, or the practice of what are called moral virtues.<sup>162</sup>

Later American materialists would continue to venerate Paine for his anti-religious sentiments, which would become a core commitment in American elaborations of the philosophy. In the 1790s, however, Paine was criticized in many of the same terms as Priestley, with his heterodox religious beliefs continually linked to immoral and dangerous behavior. One famous American review portrayed him as a modern day Judas, suggesting that “Like Judas he will be remembered by posterity; men will learn to express all that is base, malignant, treacherous, unnatural, and blasphemous by the single monosyllable of Paine.”<sup>163</sup> Though Priestley drew much inspiration from Paine, their association led Priestley to fear for his safety in England. “Many times,” Priestley wrote, “...I have been burned in effigy along with Mr. Paine; and numberless insulting and threatening letters have been sent to me from all parts of the kingdom.”<sup>164</sup> He further recalled that “one time there was cause of apprehension that I should have been brought into danger for lending one of Mr. Paine’s books.”<sup>165</sup>

This “danger” reached a climax on July 14, 1791, the first day of the Priestley Riots (also known as the "Church and King Riots" or the "Birmingham Riots of 1791"), the catalyst which set in motion Priestley’s eventual path to America. On the evening of the 14th, a mob of several hundred “church and king” rioters descended on a group of French Revolution sympathizers who had gathered at the Birmingham Hotel to celebrate the second anniversary of the taking of the

---

<sup>162</sup> Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason, Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology, Part I* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1898), 153-154.

<sup>163</sup> Quoted in Jacoby, 36.

<sup>164</sup> Priestley, *Two Sermons, I. The Present State of Europe Compared with Ancient Prophecies, Preached on the Fast-Day in 1794, With a Preface, Containing the Reasons for the Author’s Leaving England, II. The Use of Christianity, Especially in Difficult Times; Being the Author’s Farewell Discourse to His Congregation at Hackney* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1794), xix.

<sup>165</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Two Sermons*, xix.

Bastille.<sup>166</sup> The rioters attacked the sympathizers with stones and looted the hotel before setting fire to three Unitarian meeting houses.<sup>167</sup> They then moved on to Priestley's house, which they burned to the ground along with his laboratory, books, and all his manuscripts.<sup>168</sup> Priestley's outspoken status as a dissenter and revolution supporter along with his well-known association with figures other notorious reform figures like Richard Price, made him an easy target.<sup>169</sup> Before the riots ended, the homes of twenty six other Revolution supporters and dissenters of various denominations were looted and burned.<sup>170</sup> Priestley and his family managed to escape to London. The riots led Priestley, in consultation with his friend Thomas Cooper, to consider seriously moving to the U.S.<sup>171</sup> Though he was unsure about his choice, and several times considered moving to France instead, Priestley finally settled on America after three of his sons, William, Joseph Jr., and Henry, left for Pennsylvania.<sup>172</sup> In his memoirs, Priestley described "a scheme for a large settlement for the friends of liberty in general near the head of the Susquehanna in Pennsylvania."<sup>173</sup> Priestley was attracted to Pennsylvania in particular because Philadelphia "had long been the scientific center of America."<sup>174</sup> The former national capital, Philadelphia was also the largest city in America in 1790, boasting a population of 44,000.<sup>175</sup>

---

<sup>166</sup> Rose, 72. The precise composition of the rioters has been long debated by historians. Most agree with Rose's conclusion that the majority were industrial artisan and laborers with perhaps one woman present. Other evidence suggests that this larger group of rioters gathered largely to cover up the actions of a smaller group of about 30 men who had carefully planned a series of arson directed at specific residences and meeting houses. See Rose, 78-79, 83.

<sup>167</sup> Rose, 76.

<sup>168</sup> Schofield, 274.

<sup>169</sup> It was Price who had recruited Priestley to the Bowood Circle, a group of liberal intellectuals that was an important influence in some of the formative years of Priestley's early career.

<sup>170</sup> Rose, 76.

<sup>171</sup> Caroline Robbins, "Honest Heretic: Joseph Priestley in America, 1794-1804," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 106, no. 1 (February 15, 1962): 63.

<sup>172</sup> Jenny Graham, *Revolutionary in Exile: The Emigration of Joseph Priestley to America, 1794-1804* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1995), 28.

<sup>173</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley: To the Year 1795, Volume 1* (London: J. Johnson, 1806), 126.

<sup>174</sup> Curti, 182.

<sup>175</sup> May, 197.

Most importantly, however, Priestley looked forward to the religious and political freedom he hoped he would enjoy in the U.S. In a farewell sermon reprinted and available in Philadelphia, Priestley explained his reasons for leaving England, citing the 1791 riots along with “the bigotry of the clergy and the church of England with respect to me” as his chief concerns.<sup>176</sup> Priestley’s decision to emigrate made him part of a larger cohort of “British and Irish radicals who fled to the United States in the 1790s.”<sup>177</sup> As Michael Durey has demonstrated, nearly all these radicals supported the Jeffersonian Republicans as they saw Federalist policies of “excessive governmental power” and a “financial system supported by the state” as nothing more than new forms of the governments they had tried to escape.<sup>178</sup> The Federalist party was, furthermore, generally a refuge of religious conservatives, housing many Americans who staunchly believed in the importance of orthodox Christianity as the foundation of the nation. Durey has shown further that these British and Irish radicals quickly became active in American politics, as eighteen of these men edited a total of forty nine newspapers and periodicals in the U.S., these publications representing approximately 20 percent of all Republican printers during the 1790s and early 1800s.<sup>179</sup> Priestley and his friend Thomas Cooper would soon become two leading figures in this group of anti-Federalist émigrés, and their materialism would quickly become linked to their support for the Jeffersonian Republicans.

---

<sup>176</sup> Priestley, *Two Sermons*, xvii.

<sup>177</sup> Michael Durey, “Thomas Paine’s Apostles: Radical Émigrés and the Triumph of Jeffersonian Republicanism,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (October 1987): 665.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 674, 675.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 682-683. For a comprehensive list of editors and their publications, see Durey, 687-688. The 1790s saw immense growth in U.S. newspapers, with the number of papers in 1790 (90) almost doubling by 1800. See May, 223.

## Priestley in America: 1794 and Beyond

Priestley and his family arrived in New York on June 4, 1794. After spending two weeks in New York, they left for Philadelphia on June 18 and eventually made their way to the small rural township of Northumberland. Finding it cheaper than Philadelphia and to the liking of both himself and his wife, Priestley built a large house and new laboratory.<sup>180</sup> Upon news of Priestley's arrival in the U.S., American newspapers were filled with letters welcoming the famous and well-respected scientist. Though several Americans had already criticized Priestley for his materialism and unorthodox theology, these welcome letters generally made no mention of Priestley's religious beliefs or theological work, instead focusing on his scientific accomplishments and the freedom of opinion they claimed he would enjoy in America. In the shadow of the Revolution, it is unsurprising that most Americans were eager to emphasize the ideals of freedom and toleration Priestley would find in the U.S. The Associated Teachers of New York, for instance, extended Priestley "a sincere and hearty welcome" to the "land of tranquility and freedom," excited that Priestley would be a "valuable...acquisition to the growing interests of science and literature, in this country."<sup>181</sup> The President of the American Philosophical Society, David Rittenhouse, wrote that he was delighted Priestley's "talents and virtues, have been transferred to his *republic*." Rittenhouse concluded his welcome letter to Priestley with a grand statement attesting to the freedom of the U.S.:

It must afford the most sincere gratification to every well wisher to the rights of man, that the United States of America, the land of freedom and independence, has become the asylum of the greatest characters of the present age, who have been persecuted in Europe.<sup>182</sup>

---

<sup>180</sup> Priestley, *Memoirs*, 126-127; Himes, *Life and Times of Judge Thomas Cooper*, 20.

<sup>181</sup> William Payne and Edward Shephard, "To Joseph Priestley," *Dunlap and Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser*, June 14, 1794.

<sup>182</sup> David Rittenhouse, "To Joseph Priestley," *Dunlap and Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser*, June 23, 1794.



Priestley replied to every letter he received. In his response to Rittenhouse, he expressed his excitement about the freedom of opinion he would soon experience:

It is, in great part, for the sake of pursuing our common studies without molestation... that I left my native country, and have come to America; and a Society of Philosophers, who will have no objection to a person on account of his political or religious sentiments, will be as grateful, as it will be new to me.<sup>183</sup>

Though Priestley had high hopes, he soon discovered, as Schofield has argued, that “Americans were not more...tolerant of religious heresy than the English.”<sup>184</sup>

Coming to America in the wake of the Revolution, Priestley found himself in the middle of what Jon Butler has described as a series of “adamant campaigns against irreligion in its intellectual disguises of skepticism, atheism, and deism.”<sup>185</sup> After the Revolution, Butler argues, Americans launched a “war against irreligion” in an effort to purify the new nation and establish “real religion, meaning orthodox Christianity, in the new republic.”<sup>186</sup> Henry May suggests that this “war” began as early as the 1780s, the decade in which at least “some of the orthodox were already worried about deism, infidelity, and general religious decline.”<sup>187</sup> It was during this era, for instance, that Pennsylvania began to require all public officers to take an oath swearing belief in God and an afterlife before assuming their positions.<sup>188</sup> Paired with this war on irreligion, Butler argues that the same decade also saw “steady congregational growth” and a series of “important religious revivals” that prefigured the Second Great Awakening.<sup>189</sup> These religious developments were all part of the larger conservative reaction of the 1790s. As Merle Curti has argued, this decade saw the growth of support for institutionalism, aristocracy, and the sanctity

---

<sup>183</sup> Edgar Fahs Smith, *Priestley in America, 1794-1804* (Philadelphia: P. Blakiston’s Son and Co., 1920), 50.

<sup>184</sup> Schofield, 275.

<sup>185</sup> Butler, 218.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> May, 122. Curti describes a similar phenomena in his discussion of the spread of deism in the 1780s and 90s. See Curti, 156-161.

<sup>188</sup> Jacoby, 31.

<sup>189</sup> Butler, 218. May further claims that this “triumphant popular revivalism” swept away “what was left of the Skeptical Enlightenment” in America by the end of the eighteenth century. See May, 149.

of revealed religion against the spread of Enlightenment thought, rationalism, and the radicalism of the French Revolution.<sup>190</sup> During this same era, conservative members of the American clergy linked the Revolution to infidelity and atheism and warned that the dangers of irreligion could spread to the U.S. through French philosophy.<sup>191</sup>

Because Priestley came to America during a period of particular religious and conservative zeal, it is unsurprising that after the initial excitement of his arrival faded, Americans quickly began to question his materialism. One of the earliest to do so was William Cobbett (1763-1835), who, under the penname Peter Porcupine, launched a series of scathing attacks on Priestley in several pamphlets and periodicals including his *Porcupine's Gazette*, which boasted over 3,000 subscribers.<sup>192</sup> Hoping to win the favor of the Federalists in a period of growing partisan conflict, Cobbett focused much of his energy on Priestley's politics and religious beliefs. In one of his most damning blows to Priestley, Cobbett managed, in the wake of the 1798 passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts, to publish several of Priestley's private letters which included searing attacks on the Federalists and open discussion of his continued support for the French.<sup>193</sup>

Cobbett also celebrated the fact that most American churches refused to allow Priestley to preach, publishing an open letter to Priestley informing him that "The ministers of Philadelphia, in shutting their pulpits against you, undoubtedly were actuated by the best of motives; that of guarding their flocks from the dangerous tendency of your doctrines."<sup>194</sup> Priestley, indeed, was not allowed to preach at most churches in Pennsylvania and on the

---

<sup>190</sup> See "The Conservative Reaction," Chapter 8 of Curti's *Growth of American Thought*, 185-210.

<sup>191</sup> Curti, 199-200.

<sup>192</sup> David A. Wilson, ed., *Peter Porcupine in America: The Career of William Corbett, 1792-1800* (Philadelphia: Times and News Publishing Company, 1939), 35.

<sup>193</sup> Graham, 102.

<sup>194</sup> Henry Mackenzie, *An Answer to Paine's Rights of Man, To Which is Added a Letter From P. Porcupine* (Philadelphia: Printed for William Cobbett, 1796), v.

occasions when he was able to organize a Unitarian service, he lamented that only other English emigrants and dissenters attended.<sup>195</sup> Frustrated with his early experiences in the U.S., Priestley wrote to a friend late in 1794, complaining that in America he could find “nothing but the extremes of infidelity and bigoted orthodoxy.”<sup>196</sup> The American public, it seemed, had no room for Priestley’s middle ground of Christian materialism.

Cobbett published his most serious charges against Priestley in his 1794 *Observations on the Emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestly* [sic], a work that warned Americans of the eminent scientist’s radical past:

Those who know any thing of the English dissenters, know that they always introduce their political claims...under the mask of religion. The Doctor was one of those who entertained hopes of bringing about a revolution in England upon the French plan; and for this purpose he found it would be very convenient for him to be at the head of a religious sect. Unitarianism was now revived, and the society held regular meetings at Birmingham. In inflammatory discourses, called sermons, that were delivered at these meetings, the English constitution was openly attacked; and doctrines were there held forth subversive of all civil and religious order.<sup>197</sup>

After linking Priestley’s religion to a radical political agenda, Cobbett suggested that Priestley’s rejection of orthodox Christianity now posed a serious threat to the social and political stability of America. Noah Webster, the noted early American scholar, agreed with Cobbett’s conclusions as he, too, believed Priestley’s alleged atheism was directly tied to his support for the French Revolution. Americans, Webster wrote, needed to beware of Priestley’s “French principles” of “Atheism” and “irreligion,” which he saw as a “dangerous doctrine, calculated to undermine the foundation of morals and all social confidence and security.”<sup>198</sup> From some of its

---

<sup>195</sup> Graham, “Joseph Priestley in America,” in Rivers and Wykes, 220.

<sup>196</sup> Joseph Priestley to Thomas Belsham, December 14, 1794, quoted in Bowers, 133.

<sup>197</sup> William Cobbett, *Observations on the Emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestly, and on the Several Addresses Delivered to Him on His Arrival at New York* (Philadelphia, printed; New York, reprinted: 1794), 5.

<sup>198</sup> Noah Webster, *Ten Letters to Dr. Joseph Priestley, in Answer to His Letters to the Inhabitants of Northumberland* (New Haven: Read and Morse, 1800), 21.

earliest moments in U.S. discourse, Priestley's materialism was thus linked to radical or subversive politics and threats to the American social order.

Priestley responded to Cobbett's criticism of his religious beliefs several times, perhaps most notably in his 1799 *Letters to the Inhabitants of Northumberland*. In a letter titled "On my Religion," Priestley wrote to his "Friends and Neighbours" in an effort to defend himself and clarify his stance on religion:

Mr. COBBETT calls me...an atheist, and always a hypocrite. And a great hypocrite I must...be, if, in reality, I do not believe in the being of a God, or in the truth of Christianity, when I have written more in defense of those articles of faith than any other man now living.<sup>199</sup>

Most Americans, however, still saw Priestley's materialism simply as another form of atheism. Samuel Miller, a member of the American Philosophical Society and a Presbyterian pastor in New York, singled out Priestley as the figurehead of what he called "THE AGE OF INFIDEL PHILOSOPHY" in his retrospective book on eighteenth-century science and literature:

The last age is distinguished by the adoption of this anti-christian error, by some who profess to embrace the Christian faith. Among these the most conspicuous and active is DR. PRIESTLEY, who maintains that 'man does not consist of two substances essentially different from each other; but that the conscious and thinking principle, or what we generally term the soul, is merely a property resulting from a peculiar organical structure of the brain.'<sup>200</sup>

While Miller recognized Priestley's efforts to create a Christian form of materialism (what he called "Modern Materialism"), he remained unconvinced that Priestley's materialism could be anything but atheist and further denied that the Bible supported anything resembling materialism. "The system of materialism," he argued, "...is unsupported by any facts; it is contrary to all the experience of mankind; it is opposed to every principle of human nature, and it is scarcely

---

<sup>199</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Letters to the Inhabitants of Northumberland and its Neighbourhood, on Subjects Interesting to the Author* (Northumberland, Pennsylvania: Printed for the Author, 1799), Letter VII, "Of my Religion."

<sup>200</sup> Miller, like Priestley, often did not capitalize the word "Christian" or its variants. Miller, *Brief Retrospect*, 32. Henry May argues that Miller's book was "the first American intellectual history." May, 339.

necessary to add, to the plainest dictates of Revelation.”<sup>201</sup> Miller, however, was careful to distinguish his rejection of Priestley’s materialism from his great respect for Priestley’s scientific accomplishments:

The services of DR. PRIESTLEY in the physical sciences have been mentioned with high respect...It is to be regretted that so much of what he has written on the philosophy of mind, and almost the whole of his writings on...theology, should be so radically erroneous, and so subversive of all the interests of evangelical truth and practical piety.”<sup>202</sup>

John Campbell, a doctor turned Presbyterian minister after being dismayed by the “infidel opinions” he was exposed to during his medical training, voiced further criticisms of Priestley’s supposedly Christian version of materialism.<sup>203</sup> Campbell argued that

though Priestley...ha[s] attempted to graft... materialism upon a Christian stock...it is really atheism still, and deserves unqualified reprobation...the body and soul both...according to him, were material and suffered death. To tag such a scheme with some shreds of Christianity, is one of those monstrous anomalies in the moral world...Materialism christianised is...[a] great...insult upon reason.<sup>204</sup>

Campbell agreed with Samuel Miller that Priestley should have stuck to chemistry: “The attempt to amalgamate the doctrines of Christ with those of materialism, was a wretched experiment of Priestley. It would have been infinitely better...had his pursuits as an experimenter, been confined to phlogiston and the gasses.”<sup>205</sup> Several of Priestley’s critics employed a similar strategy of confining their criticism to his theology and philosophy while commending his scientific accomplishments. Take, for instance, John Blair Linn, a Presbyterian pastor in Philadelphia, who wrote in a pamphlet addressed to Priestley: “At your feet I would willingly

---

<sup>201</sup> Miller, *Brief Retrospect*, 29.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid*, 32-33.

<sup>203</sup> William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit, Volume 3* (New York: R. Carter and Brothers, 1859), 627.

<sup>204</sup> Campbell, *Several Letters*, 149.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid*, 149.

sit, and be instructed in...the precepts of science. But there are some opinions in which I cannot follow you. There are some...in which I think you deviate from the word of God.”<sup>206</sup>

Many other Americans quickly jumped to defend orthodox Christianity from Priestley’s materialist theology. Outraged that his materialism seemed “to ascribe greater powers to particles of matter than to God himself,” James Purves, a Universalist minister, offered over two hundred pages of detailed refutations to nearly every aspect of Priestley’s materialist philosophy.<sup>207</sup> Samuel Knox, a Presbyterian minister (1755-1832), adamantly defended the notion of an afterlife, arguing that Priestley’s materialism led to the dangerous claim that there was no afterlife and thus no system of reward or, more importantly, punishment, after death.<sup>208</sup> Charles Nisbet (1736-1804), who served as the first president of Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, worried in 1800 that “the most distinguishing character of the age, is the *spirit of free inquiry*, which has been...carried almost to madness...”<sup>209</sup> Nisbet associated materialist philosophy with a series of larger concerns about the “love of skepticism,” “an unrestrained liberty of thought, speech, [and] publication,” and the “reviv[al] of old exploded errors, such as Atheism, Socinianism, and...the indifference to all opinions in religion.”<sup>210</sup> He was especially disgusted by Priestley’s assertion that “the soul of man is material,” an almost unthinkable claim for Christians who saw the soul as the seat of morality and the part that would live on and be rewarded in the afterlife.<sup>211</sup> Nisbet further outlined a series of disturbing claims he attributed directly to Priestley, including his worries “That when the Evangelists relate miracles, they are

---

<sup>206</sup> John Blair Linn, *A Letter to Joseph Priestley in Answer to His Performance, Entitled Socrates and Jesus Compared* (Philadelphia: H. Maxwell, 1803), 6.

<sup>207</sup> James Purves, *Observations on Doctor Priestley’s Doctrines of Philosophical Necessity and Materialism* (19

<sup>208</sup> Samuel Knox, *The Scriptural Doctrine of Future Punishment Vindicated, to Which Are Prefixed Some Prefatory Strictures on the Lately Avowed Religious Principles of Joseph Priestley* (Georgetown, D.C.: Green, English, and Co., 1797).

<sup>209</sup> Charles Nisbet to Samuel Miller, December 16, 1800, in *Memoir of the Rev. Charles Nisbet, D.D.: Late President of Dickinson College*, ed. Samuel Miller (New York: Robert Carter, 1840), 268.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 268-269.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

always to be explained according to the laws of nature. That there are no mysteries, nor revealed religion. That the chief object of Christianity is morality, and nothing more. That the doctrine of the Trinity is not true.”<sup>212</sup>

After Priestley’s death in 1804, Americans overwhelmingly continued to associate materialism with atheism. Priestley’s attempts to transform materialism into a system compatible with Christianity thus met with almost no success. Bradley Abraham, for instance, continued to argue against materialism as an atheist doctrine in his 1808 *Philosophical Retrospect on the General Out-Lines of Creation and Providence Wherein is Considered the Origin of Matter, and Works of Creation*. A New York lawyer who studied religion and philosophy, Abraham wrote that materialists “say there is no God: but matter has in itself all the springs and source of motion and animation... This we... deem impossible. A God there must be, for that which possesses no innate intelligence cannot produce intelligent beings.”<sup>213</sup> Shortly after Abraham’s book was published, Thomas Scott wrote another book on religion arguing that “the system of modern materialists cannot be supported... except by rejecting the word of God, and treating the scared writers as men who espoused and propagated vulgar errors.”<sup>214</sup>

Several prominent American doctors also continued to argue publically against materialism. The most outspoken was John Augustine Smith, a physician and editor of the *Medical and Physiological Journal*, and later president of William and Mary College. Smith criticized materialism as bad science as well as an overly bleak and limiting view of human life. He described materialism as “a doctrine which appears to me not only absurd, but which goes to

---

<sup>212</sup> Ibid, 276.

<sup>213</sup> Bradley, *Philosophical Retrospect*, 6-7.

<sup>214</sup> Thomas Scott, *Essays On the Most Important Subjects In Religion* (New York: Williams and Whiting, 1809), 357.

degrade man to a level with brute matter.”<sup>215</sup> Smith, like Bradley Abraham and many other Americans, did not believe matter alone could account for human intellect and consciousness. He argued, furthermore, that “neither Anatomy, nor any other science...affords any *positive* arguments in favour of the materialists.”<sup>216</sup> “The dismal darkness of *materialism*,” Smith later wrote, is “a truly distressing doctrine indeed, since it excludes the idea of an external *being* to reward the righteous, and punish the wicked; it extinguishes the most distant hope of immortality beyond the present life.”<sup>217</sup> Elias Boudinot, a New York lawyer, voiced a similar objection to materialism, arguing that it promoted a “brutalizing doctrine of the eternal sleep of death.”<sup>218</sup> Though Priestley actually supported the doctrine of resurrection, as Adams had pointed out in her early summary of his philosophy, most Americans continued to assume materialism denied the notion of an afterlife as well as that of the soul and God. Priestley thus not only failed to change American perceptions of materialism as an atheist doctrine; he also added radical political agitation to the litany of charges Americans associated with the doctrine, further cementing the subversive status of these ideas in the eyes of the American public.

### **Joseph Priestley and Thomas Jefferson: The “Great Apostle” of Science**

Despite the many Americans who decried his materialist ideas, Priestley did find support for his philosophy from one important figure: Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson first read Priestley’s work around 1789 after their mutual friend Richard Price sent him some of Priestley’s

---

<sup>215</sup> John Augustine Smith, *A Syllabus of the Lectures Delivered to the Senior Students in the College of William and Mary On Government To Which is Added, a Discourse, By the Same Author, On the Manner in Which Peculiarities in the Anatomical Structure Affect the Moral Character* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson and Son, 1817), 84.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>217</sup> John Augustine Smith, *An Oration Delivered Before the Western Medical Society On the Philosophy of the Human Mind and the Agency of the Human Mind On the Organized Body* (Washington, Pennsylvania: Wm. Sample at the Office of the Reporter, 1815), 51.

<sup>218</sup> Elias Boudinot, *The Second Advent, or Coming of the Messiah in Glory Shown to Be a Scripture Doctrine, and Taught By Divine Revelation, From the Beginning of the World By an American Layman* (Trenton, New Jersey: D. Fenton and S. Hutchinson, 1815), 567.



theological writings.<sup>219</sup> Jefferson was so taken by Priestley's work that he spent the next few years reading as many of Priestley's books and essays as he could find. In 1797, the two met for the first time when Jefferson traveled to Philadelphia. While there, he regularly attended Priestley's Unitarian services, the only known instance of his regular attendance at any church.<sup>220</sup> Paul Conkin, one of several historians who have noted the Priestley/Jefferson relationship, argues that Jefferson ultimately ended up being "Priestley's most distinguished convert to Unitarianism."<sup>221</sup> Isaac Kramnick has also shown that Jefferson admired Priestley's political arguments and consulted Priestley's writings on the separation of church and state while working on his 1776 disestablishment statute in Virginia.<sup>222</sup>

Jefferson further adopted many facets of Priestley's theology in his private correspondence, including, most notably, his views on the trinity. "It is too late in the day," Jefferson argued in one letter, "for men of sincerity to pretend they believe in the Platonic mysticisms that three are one, and one is three."<sup>223</sup> Again following Priestley's arguments, Jefferson also questioned the notion of an immaterial, immortal soul and denied the possibility of the immaculate conception in other correspondence.<sup>224</sup> Shortly after Priestley's arrival in America, Jefferson christened him the "great apostle" of "science" and wrote that he hoped Priestley's theology would usher in a new era of Christianity in the U.S., one liberated from the superstition and impossible miracles that Jefferson believed had corrupted the modern church.<sup>225</sup>

---

<sup>219</sup> Paul Conkin, "The Religious Pilgrimage of Thomas Jefferson," in *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter Onuf (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 29.

<sup>220</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Leroy and Bayard, July 5, 1822, in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Volume 12*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), 244; Conkin, 29.

<sup>221</sup> Conkin, 30.

<sup>222</sup> Kramnick, 72-73.

<sup>223</sup> Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, August 22, 1813, in Ford, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Volume 9*, 326, 328.

<sup>224</sup> Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, January 8, 1825, in Braden, 228; Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 11, 1823, in Braden, 223-224. Conkin, 25.

<sup>225</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, March 21, 1801, in Ford, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Volume 9*, 216.

Late in his career, Jefferson still had not given up hope that Priestley's rational theology might "effect a quiet euthanasia of the heresies of bigotry and fanaticism which have so long triumphed over human reason."<sup>226</sup> For his part, Jefferson himself tried, quite literally, to remove those parts of the scripture he did not see as the true gospel of Jesus. In 1813, Jefferson wrote to John Adams explaining that

We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select even from them the very words of Jesus... There will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man. I have performed this operation for my own use by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and arranging the matter which is evidently his... The result is 8 vo. [octavo] of 46 pages of pure and sophisticated doctrines.<sup>227</sup>

In a later letter, Jefferson explained how he assembled these parts of the Bible he deemed the true word into a book:

I... have made a wee, little book from the same materials, which I call the Philosophy of Jesus. It is a paradigm of his doctrines, made by cutting the texts out of the book, and arranging them on the pages of a blank book, in a certain order... It is a document in proof that I AM A REAL CHRISTIAN, that is to say a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus, very different from... [those] who call me infidel and themselves Christians and preachers of the gospel, while they draw all their... dogmas from what it author never said nor saw.<sup>228</sup>

Jefferson titled his little-known revised version of the New Testament *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, its contents shaped in part by Jefferson's readings of Priestley's materialist theology.<sup>229</sup>

Jefferson was horrified by the American reception of Priestley's work. In 1800 he wrote Priestley to say "What an effort, my dear Sir, of bigotry in Politics & Religion have we gone through!... How deeply I have been chagrined & mortified at the persecution which fanaticism &

---

<sup>226</sup> Thomas Jefferson to William Short, October 31, 1819, in Ford, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Volume 12*, 142.

<sup>227</sup> Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 12, 1813, in 'Ye Will Say I am no Christian': *The Thomas Jefferson/John Adams Correspondence on Religion, Morals, and Values*, ed. Bruce Braden (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2006), 100.

<sup>228</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Charles Thomson, January 9, 1816.

<sup>229</sup> In 1904, the Government Printing Office made 5,000 copies of Jefferson's abridged version of the Bible under this title. Several publishers currently publish it as *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*

monarchy have excited against you, even here!”<sup>230</sup> Nearly all of his support for Priestley, however, was voiced in private correspondence. As most Jefferson scholars have noted, Jefferson was extremely hesitant to share publically any of his religious views. Historian Peter Onuf, for example, has described Jefferson’s “almost pathological determination to keep his own religious views private.”<sup>231</sup> In a letter to Dr. Benjamin Rush praising some of Priestley’s theological publications, Jefferson cautioned his friend to keep their discussion quiet, telling Rush “I am moreover averse to the communication of my religious tenets to the public.”<sup>232</sup>

Rush (1749-1813) had met Priestley shortly after his arrival in Philadelphia and the two enjoyed a close friendship and correspondence during Priestley’s time in America. Priestley and Rush moved in similar circles, as Rush was also very close to Jefferson and Thomas Paine – it had been Rush, for instance, who suggested to Paine the title “Common Sense” for his famous 1776 pamphlet.<sup>233</sup> Rush, too, was a popular target of William Cobbett, who even launched a short-lived periodical, *The Rush Light*, in an effort to destroy Rush’s reputation and medical credibility in the U.S.<sup>234</sup> Rush, like Priestley, was another enthusiastic devotee of Hartley’s theory of association.<sup>235</sup>

Rush boasted a long and storied career, having served as a member of the 1776 Continental Congress, Surgeon General of the Continental Army during the Revolution, and Treasurer of the U.S. Mint (1799-1813). He was also one of the most prominent American physicians of his era, often acknowledged today as the father of American psychiatry because of his contentiously-received arguments that mental disorders could be treated medically. Rush

---

<sup>230</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, January 18, 1800, in Ford, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Volume 9*, 95.

<sup>231</sup> Onuf, *Mind of Thomas Jefferson*, 148.

<sup>232</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803, in Ford, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Volume 9*, 457.

<sup>233</sup> Alyn Brodsky, *Benjamin Rush: Patriot and Physician* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), 123.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 342-343.

<sup>235</sup> Kramnick, 93.

studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh, one of the most progressive medical schools in the world. Alan Brodsky argues that Rush's studies in Edinburgh were crucial because they introduced him to a "nondogmatic" and "empirical approach to medicine."<sup>236</sup> Most American physicians, by contrast, were "theological rather than scientific in outlook."<sup>237</sup> Though a lifelong orthodox Presbyterian, Rush's training left him more open to scientific explanations of natural phenomena than many of his American counterparts.<sup>238</sup>

In February 1786, Rush gave a lecture to American Philosophical Society, later published as *An Inquiry into the Influence of Physical Causes Upon the Moral Faculty*, in which he argued that the moral faculties could be treated scientifically.<sup>239</sup> In a period where mental illness was commonly attributed to supernatural causes and treated by imprisonment in asylums, Rush connected madness to issues in the nervous system that could be cured by treating the body. Though he did not publically voice support for materialism like Priestley, Rush's medical practice, especially his arguments about the corporeal origins of mental maladies, included certain beliefs that appeared materialist in nature. Rush, however, escaped much of the criticism leveled at Priestley as he remained steadfast in his belief in God and Presbyterianism, never embracing Enlightenment skepticism as fully as Priestley.

Priestley's name became one of the first that many Americans associated with materialism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Shortly after he died, one American theological dictionary was even updated to include the following under its entry for "MATERIALISTS": "The followers of the late Dr. Priestley are considered as Materialists."<sup>240</sup>

---

<sup>236</sup> Brodsky, 47.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, 46-48; 57-58.

<sup>239</sup> Benjamin Rush, *An Inquiry into the Influence of Physical Causes Upon the Moral Faculty* (Philadelphia: Haswell, Barrington, and Haswell, 1839).

<sup>240</sup> Buck, "Materialists," 84. American definitions of materialism from this period generally focused on one of three main subjects: Priestley's philosophy, the denial of spirit, and the denial of soul. An example of a definition

Though Americans rejected his materialism, Priestley remained fairly well respected during his time in the U.S. As historian Jenny Graham has argued in her study of Priestley's politics, Priestley worked actively to distance himself from the American political scene, often claiming he wanted no involvement in U.S. affairs.<sup>241</sup> Though Graham demonstrates that Priestley was far more involved in American politics than he let on, the fact that he tried to create an image of himself as isolated from the U.S. political scene helps explain why his political views were often less of an issue than his theology and his materialism, though of course the three could not be completely separated. In many cases, it seemed that Priestley's considerable scientific accomplishments outweighed the controversy surrounding his unorthodox religious views. One of Priestley's friends, for instance, recalled the following from a conversation with another associate: "You and I will know that Dr. Priestley is quite wrong in regard to his theology, but, notwithstanding this, he is a great and good man."<sup>242</sup>

### **Thomas Cooper (1759-1839)**

Priestley's close friend and American travel companion, Thomas Cooper (1759-1839), was born in Westminster, England. He studied law, medicine, and science at Oxford University, though did not formally graduate, and he worked as a successful lawyer and chemist, sometimes

---

focused on spirit read: "Materialist: one who denies the doctrine of a spiritual substance." Examples of those focused on soul read: "MATERIALISTS. The doctrine of *Materialism* respects the nature of the human soul... All Materialists deny an intermediate state of consciousness between death and the resurrection" and "MATERIALISTS is... a name given to those who maintain that the soul of man is material; or that the principle of perception and thought is not a substance distinct from the body, but the result of corporeal organization." See Samuel Johnson, *Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language, To Which are Added, An Alphabetical Account of the Heathen Deities, and a Copious Chronological Table of Remarkable Events, Discoveries, and Inventions* (Boston: W.P. and L. Blake, 1804), 142; John Evans, *A Sketch of the Denominations of the Christian World Accompanied With a Persuasive to Religious Moderation to Which is Prefixed, An Account of Atheism, Deism, Theophilantropism, Judaism, Mahometanism, and Christianity, Adapted to the Present Times* (Wilmington, Delaware: Bonsal and Niles, 1804), 62; *The New and Complete American Encyclopædia, Or, Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (New York: John Low, 1805), 274.

<sup>241</sup> Graham, 2-3; 39.

<sup>242</sup> John Towill Rutt, *Life and Correspondence of Joseph Priestley, Volume II* (London: R. Hunter, 1832), 265.

joining in Priestley's projects.<sup>243</sup> Cooper was very active in politics and he spent several months in Paris with his friend James Watt, Jr. (son of the Scottish inventor famous for his steam engine design) during the French revolution. Initially an enthusiastic supporter of the Revolution, Cooper had officially been sent as a delegate of the Manchester Society to a Jacobin Club in Paris. Never one to hold back his opinions, Cooper was eventually forced to flee France after outspoken debates with Maximilien de Robespierre left his life in danger.<sup>244</sup>

Shortly after he fled Paris, Cooper began discussing a move to America with Priestley. The two made an initial voyage together, though Cooper returned to England shortly after. Excited by his initial visit to the U.S., Cooper quickly published *Some Information Respecting America*, a work praising the nation in the hopes of attracting others to join Priestley's settlement at Northumberland. At several points in his book, Cooper hinted at his own plans to move to the U.S., repeatedly describing the country as a land of great religious and political freedom. "You ask what appear to me to be the general inducements to people to quit England for America? In my mind," Cooper explained, "there is little fault to find with the government of America...we have no animosities about religion; it is a subject about which no questions are asked..."<sup>245</sup> America, Cooper later wrote, seemed to be a place "where I may differ from my neighbor in politics or religion with impunity; and where I may have the time to correct erroneous opinions without the...intervention of the halter or the guillotine."<sup>246</sup> Cooper returned to live with Priestley in Northumberland near the end of 1794. By November 1795, this "somewhat cranky British Unitarian" had become a naturalized American citizen.<sup>247</sup>

---

<sup>243</sup> Cooper did eventually receive an honorary doctorate in medicine from the University of New York.

<sup>244</sup> Himes, 9-11. Some accounts go so far as to suggest that Cooper at one point pulled a sword, called Robespierre a scoundrel, and challenged him to a duel.

<sup>245</sup> Thomas Cooper, *Some Information Respecting America* (London: J. Johnson, 1794), 52-53.

<sup>246</sup> Cooper, *Some Information*, 76.

<sup>247</sup> May, 333; Charles Francis Himes, *Life and Times of Judge Thomas Cooper: Jurist, Scientist, Educator, Author, Publicist* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Dickinson School of Law, 1918), 19, 20.

Once in the U.S., however, Cooper, like Priestley, soon discovered his image of the nation had been overly optimistic. Shortly after he arrived in Pennsylvania, Cooper's radical religious and political views began to stir up trouble. American historians have, in fact, recognized Cooper mainly for his involvement in several political controversies, most notably his sedition trial.<sup>248</sup> In April 1800, Cooper was tried and convicted in the *United States v. Cooper* for comments he published criticizing President Adams, the Federalist party, and the Alien and Sedition Acts.<sup>249</sup> Cooper's sentence of a \$400 fine and six months in jail was "the largest fine and prison term of anyone convicted under the [Sedition] statute."<sup>250</sup> Following the political realignment ushered in by the Revolution of 1800, Cooper was appointed President Judge of the Fourth Judicial District of Pennsylvania in August 1804. He was, however, removed from the position only a few years later after several local political disputes and accusations that his decisions were unreliable and "arbitrary."<sup>251</sup>

Cooper's sedition trial only heightened the prevailing sense that materialists posed a threat to the national order. Prominent Americans picked up on this theme, suggesting

---

<sup>248</sup> For concise accounts of Cooper's sedition trial, see James Morton Smith, "President John Adams, Thomas Cooper, and Sedition: A Case Study," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 42, no. 3 (December 1955): 438-465; Eugene Volokh, "Thomas Cooper, Early American Public Intellectual," *New York University Journal of Law and Liberty* 4, no. 2 (2009): 372-381; Geoffrey R. Stone, "The Trial of Thomas Cooper," in *Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 54-58; and Larry E. Tise, *the American Counter Revolution: A Retreat From Liberty, 1783-1800* (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 1998), 288-290. For a full-length treatment of the subject, see Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Free Press Crisis of 1800: Thomas Cooper's Trial for Seditious Libel* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

<sup>249</sup> Cooper published his own account of the trial as Thomas Cooper, *An Account of the Trial of Thomas Cooper of Northumberland; On a Charge of Libel Against the President of the United States; Taken in Short Hand, With a Preface, Notes, and Appendix* (Philadelphia: John Bioren, 1800).

<sup>250</sup> James F. Simon, *What Kind of Nation: Thomas Jefferson, John Marshall, and the Epic Struggle to Create the United States* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), from Chapter 9, "A 'Bungling Way' to Remove Judges," un-paginated e-book.

<sup>251</sup> Himes, *Life and Times*, 24, 30-31; *Report of the Public Record Commission to the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina* (Columbia: Charles A. Calvo, Jr., State Printer, 1893), 145. One of Cooper's critics gleefully described his removal in a newspaper article that included passages like the following: "To such an extent did he carry his high-handed and overbearing despotism, that the Representatives of the People were obliged to interfere. Judge Cooper was removed from office – justly degraded – by the votes of two-thirds of both branches of the Assembly, and the hearty concurrence of Governor Snyder." See "The Name of Thomas Cooper," *Daily National Journal*, November 5, 1827.

repeatedly that Cooper and his materialist ideas were an outside force or something foreign to American culture. One Federalist, for instance, described Cooper and his Republican followers as “Jacobins, Democrats, [and] enemies to God and Man,” “continually busy to destroy all order, Society and tranquility.”<sup>252</sup> Thomas Pickering, John Adams’ Secretary of State, wrote to Adams in 1799, alarmed by a letter from a Northumberland resident that outlined “a publication by Thomas Cooper, an Englishman, and a connection of Dr. Priestley.” Pickering described Priestley’s “want of decency, being an alien,” and “his discontented and turbulent spirit, that will never be quiet under the freest government on earth,” as demonstrated by his efforts to publish and distribute Cooper’s work. Upon learning that “Dr. Cooper has taken care to get himself admitted to citizenship,” Pickering wrote “I am sorry for it; for those who are desirous of maintaining our internal tranquility must wish them both removed from the United States.”<sup>253</sup>

### **Cooper's Materialism**

Cooper’s outspoken materialism made the remainder of his career in the U.S. an extremely trying ordeal. The ideas lead to Cooper’s trial and left him subject to constant accusations of atheism were, like Priestley’s, actually intended to support Christianity and belief in God. The entire point of Cooper’s *Scripture Doctrine of Materialism*, one of the earliest American documents supporting materialism and Cooper’s most significant publication on the topic, had been “to prove that Christ and his apostles were Materialists” and that the “doctrine of *Materialism* is the doctrine actually held and maintained in the Christian gospels by the founder

---

<sup>252</sup> Bernard Hubley, Jr., to John Adams, November 7, 1799, quoted in Smith, 446.

<sup>253</sup> Timothy Pickering to John Adams, August 1, 1799, in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: With a Life of the Author, Notes, and Illustrations, Volume 9* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854), 5-6.



of Christianity.”<sup>254</sup> Cooper opened his *Scripture Doctrine* by defining materialism in contrast to immaterialism, which he identified as the more common belief among Americans.

Immaterialists, Cooper explained, believe that “man is a compound animal consisting of a soul immaterial, immortal, invisible, and of a body such as we see...when the body dies, the soul survives.”<sup>255</sup> Materialists, by contrast, see “man...not [as] a compound animal, but...merely [as] the parts and their properties, which are visible and apparent and can be made known to us by our senses....when the body dies, the whole man dies.”<sup>256</sup>

Like Priestley, Cooper’s materialism denied the existence of the soul. Cooper agreed with Priestley’s main objections to the soul, returning frequently to the question of “how the soul [can] act upon matter if it [has] no property in common with matter.”<sup>257</sup> Cooper also echoed Priestley’s argument that the scriptures would have contained explicit discussion of an immaterial soul if such an entity existed:

If it were true that the human being consisted of a material body incapable of thought...and of an immaterial...soul conjoined to it during life, and set free from it at death – and if this were one of the essential doctrines of the Christian religion, then would the declarations of Jesus Christ to this purpose, have been plain, unambiguous, and explicit: but we have no such description of human nature laid down by Christ...he has nowhere described us as consisting of an immortal soul conjoined to a mortal body.<sup>258</sup>

Cooper, however, also added some of his own philosophical objections to the soul. “How,” he asked in one passage, “is an immaterial and immortal soul corporeally propagated?”<sup>259</sup> Using an argument rooted in the work of John Locke, Cooper also believed he could demonstrate the concept of a soul distinct from the human body to be a logical fallacy:

---

<sup>254</sup> Thomas Cooper, *The Scripture Doctrine of Materialism* (Philadelphia: A. Small, 1823), Preface, 304; Cooper, Preface to *Irritation and Insanity*.

<sup>255</sup> Cooper, *Scripture Doctrine*, 304.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid*, 303.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*, 322.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid*, 311.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid*, 322.

Locke has shewn that we have no innate ideas; that all our ideas are ideas of sensation or reflection... proceed from...the impressions made upon our senses...But if all our ideas proceed from impressions made on our senses, as these are entirely corporeal, we never could have attained ideas without the body: that is, there would have been none of those phenomena of thinking from whence we deduce the existence of the Soul...without the body...the commencement of the existence of the Soul [thus] depends on the commencement of the existence of the body.<sup>260</sup>

Cooper concluded his discussion of the soul by suggesting there could actually never be any evidence of its existence: “But what evidence can we possibly have of the existence of the Soul. It is not cognizable by any of our senses...By the very nature of it, we can have no sensible proof of its existence.”<sup>261</sup>

Much like Priestley, Cooper’s denial of the soul led him to reinterpret several doctrines of Christianity. Cooper was particularly interested in making the idea of resurrection accord with his materialism. He first suggested that if human beings actually possessed an immortal soul, resurrection would be a redundant or self-defeating concept:

the modern hypothesis of an immaterial soul, that survives the body and never dies...is not merely an absurdity, but a falsehood. Again, if this supposed seat of thought, intelligence, volition, of all the passions and affections, do [sic] really exist...then is a resurrection useless and unnecessary. That being needs not be revived from the dead, which never dies.<sup>262</sup>

Cooper argued instead that the material body itself must be what is resurrected: “Animation ceases when the body dies; and it will be restored when the body is called up from the grave at the great day in conformity with the promises made to us in the Gospel of Christ.”<sup>263</sup>

As evidence to support his assertion, Cooper turned to Biblical accounts of Christ’s resurrection and claimed that he could extrapolate from Christ’s own resurrection a model for all other resurrections. “The resurrection from the dead promised by Jesus,” Cooper argued, “was

---

<sup>260</sup> Cooper, *View of the Metaphysical and Physiological Arguments*, 343.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid*, 345.

<sup>262</sup> Cooper, *Scripture Doctrine*, 310.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid*, 310.

exemplified by his own death, burial, and resurrection, such was *his* resurrection, such will be *ours*.”<sup>264</sup> Cooper then highlighted scripture passages like the following from John that referenced Jesus’ body after the resurrection: “When Jesus had risen, the women who went to search for his body, found it not in the sepulture; for the body had risen from the dead.”<sup>265</sup> “Is it not strange,” Cooper asked, “that in none of these passages relating to resurrection from the dead, we have *any* reference to the soul?”<sup>266</sup> Cooper also turned to the Apostles’ Creed as further proof of bodily resurrection: “The Apostles’ Creed,” he wrote, “requires us to hold as an essential article of the Christian faith, what, the resurrection of the soul. No, ‘the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.’ Amen.”<sup>267</sup> Cooper concluded his arguments on resurrection by claiming that only a materialist could actually appreciate the doctrine of resurrection, as immaterialists, because of their notion of the soul, would simply take immortality for granted:

To a materialist, the value of a Christian gospel is unspeakable; to an immaterialist, it is superfluous and even contradictory... The doctrine of a future state, stands on a much firmer basis on the supposition of the resurrection of the body, and the body only, than on the resurrection of the soul (if indeed this last be not, as I take it to be, a manifest contradiction in terms)... To an immaterialist, the Scripture doctrine of the resurrection is superfluous; for *his* man is essentially immortal in his immortal soul! To a materialist, it is every thing; for it contains the only sure and certain proof of a resurrection that is to be found within the compass of human knowledge...<sup>268</sup>

In addition to the scriptures, Cooper believed modern science and physiology supported his denial of the soul. Following Priestley, Cooper argued that “the Phenomena termed MENTAL depend on the Properties necessarily resulting from one’s Organization, without the Assistance of a distinct immaterial Principle.”<sup>269</sup> “I say,” Cooper explained further, “that it is not possible for a fair man, conversant with physiology, to deny, that...all our intellectual

---

<sup>264</sup> Ibid, 311.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, 311.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid, 311.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid, 319.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid, 314-315.

<sup>269</sup> Cooper, *View of the Metaphysical and Physiological Arguments*.

phenomena consist...in motions communicated to the corporeal nervous systems...They are, therefore, corporeal phenomena, and no more.”<sup>270</sup>

While Priestley relied heavily on Hartley’s work to support these assertions, Cooper turned instead to the theories of French physician Francois Joseph Victor Broussais (1772-1838). In 1831, Cooper published an English translation of Broussais’ *On Irritation and Insanity: A Work Wherein the Relations of the Physical With the Moral Conditions of Man, Are Established on the Basis of Physiological Medicine*.<sup>271</sup> Cooper wrote an extensive preface to Broussais’ work, using this introduction as an opportunity to make many of his own statements of materialism. In addition, Cooper included several of his writings on materialism as appendices to the volume, including his previously anonymous *Scripture Doctrine of Materialism*, which he then publically acknowledged as his work. Broussais’ arguments, as Cooper summarized them, were meant

to rescue the theory of Insanity from the supposition that it is an affection of the mind or soul; an entity hypothetically assumed, to account for the intellectual phenomena exhibited by the nervous system of the human body...Insanity...is a disease not of the mind, but of the body; and its seat is in the encephalon. Hence it became necessary for [Broussais] to show the total want of reasonable evidence attending to the hypothesis of a soul, separate and distinct in its existence from the body.<sup>272</sup>

Cooper used his own medical experience to support further the corporeal origins of mental faculties. “I appeal to any physician accustomed to cases of insanity,” he wrote, “and I ask whether all the intellectual appearance of that disease are not manifestly the result of the morbid state of the bodily organs?”<sup>273</sup> Later he argued that “The general fact, well established, is, that

---

<sup>270</sup> Cooper, *Scripture Doctrine*, 354.

<sup>271</sup> Francois Joseph Victor Broussais, *On Irritation and Insanity: A Work Wherein the Relations of the Physical With the Moral Conditions of Man, Are Established on the Basis of Physiological Medicine*, trans. Thomas Cooper (Columbia, South Carolina: S. J. M’Morris, 1831).

<sup>272</sup> Cooper, Appendix to *On Irritation and Insanity*, 296.

<sup>273</sup> Cooper, *View of the Metaphysical and Physiological Arguments*, 353.

when the brain is injured, the intellect is injured also. The major part of...lunatic and maniacal cases may be cited in full proof of this.”<sup>274</sup>

### **Cooper's American Career**

While historians identify Cooper with a variety of religious beliefs, most commonly deism, few, with the notable exception of Michael O'Brien, have acknowledged the pivotal role materialism played in Cooper's work.<sup>275</sup> As with Priestley, Cooper's materialism served as the philosophical foundation for many of his legal and political arguments, most of which were more well respected than any of his philosophical or theological publications. Several of his legal writings, including especially his 1819 *Tracts on Medical Jurisprudence*, the first American publication on the topic, were highly regarded. Though many Americans recognized Cooper's impressive legal and scientific resume, especially in the fields of chemistry and geology, the merit of his work, unlike Priestley's, never fully outweighed the controversy surrounding his unorthodox religious beliefs.

After losing his judicial appointment, Cooper accepted a series of tenuous and often short-lived academic positions at Dickinson College (1811-1815), the University of Pennsylvania (1816-1819), the University of Virginia (1819), and South Carolina College (1820-1834). In each case, Cooper's initial hire was protested because of his materialism and his eventual resignation could be traced back to the same controversy. Take, for example, Cooper's position at Dickinson College. When he became a Professor of Chemistry and Mineralogy in the Natural Sciences department of Dickinson in August 1811, the Board of Trustees submitted a

---

<sup>274</sup> Cooper, "Outline of the Association of Ideas," 385.

<sup>275</sup> See, for example, Peter Onuf calls Cooper an "infamous deist." *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 143. Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860, Volume 2* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 1014-1016.

written protest arguing that Cooper's association with the Presbyterian institution "would prove highly injurious to the interest and reputation of the College, in consequence of the prejudices entertained by the public against him."<sup>276</sup> These "prejudices," as the letter explained, referred chiefly to Cooper's sedition trial and his alleged atheism.<sup>277</sup> His resignation in September 1815 was attributed to the same problem of his religious beliefs.<sup>278</sup>

Cooper went through similar episodes at the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Virginia, and South Carolina College, each affair more contentious than the last. After leaving the University of Pennsylvania, Cooper never even had the chance to fill his positions in Natural Science and Law at the newly-formed University of Virginia. Though Cooper was the first faculty member Jefferson appointed to the university, he was forced to resign before ever actually working a day thanks to a campaign by several Virginia clergy who refused to have a materialist like Cooper associated with their state institution.<sup>279</sup> Dr. John Rice led the effort to block Cooper's appointment. Rice, a Presbyterian pastor and editor of a religious periodical in Richmond, was infuriated by an article Cooper had recently published. In this article, Rice claimed, "the entire sect of Presbyterian...religious opinions were severely criticized" and "a belief was intimated, that they desired to have them established by law; as to monopolize the education for the country; in a word, that they cherished a factious, ambitious spirit."<sup>280</sup> Another account of the University of Virginia dispute explained that Cooper's appointment

was thought impolitic by some of Mr. Jefferson's colleagues...and proved distasteful to very many citizens of Virginia, including all classes of what are called the 'religious

---

<sup>276</sup> Himes, *Life and Times*, 36; Charles Francis Himes, *A Sketch of Dickinson College* (Harrisburg: Lanes Hart, 1879), 98; Himes, 31.

<sup>277</sup> Himes, *Sketch*, 102.

<sup>278</sup> Himes, *Sketch*, 102; Himes, *Life and Times*, 36.

<sup>279</sup> For more on Cooper and the University of Virginia, see Herbert Baxter Adams, *Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1888), 56-62

<sup>280</sup> *Early History of the University of Virginia*, 235. Another source described this campaign as an effort by several clergy to drive Cooper "out of Virginia, by exposing his want of sound scholarship." See "Dr. Thomas Cooper," *Vermont Chronicle*, April 8, 1831.

community.’ The reason alleged was, that Dr. Cooper held, on many subjects, extreme opinions, which he was at no pains to conceal; and some of which, they honestly believed, struck at the very foundations of social order, of morals and religion.<sup>281</sup>

By this point in his career, one American newspaper mocked Cooper as “Dr. Thomas Cooper, an Englishman by birth, who has been unsuccessful in retaining popularity in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and perhaps some other states...”<sup>282</sup>

After his job at the University of Virginia failed to materialize, Cooper accepted what would be his final position in the U.S.: a faculty appointment at South Carolina College, where he would lecture on chemistry, geology, and political economy. Cooper’s time in South Carolina would include some of the greatest successes and most difficult moments of his career. By his second year at the College (1821), Cooper became president of the institution following the death of the previous president. Cooper’s acceptance of this high profile position, however, only forced his religious beliefs under closer public scrutiny. Several commentators worried that the controversy surrounding Cooper’s materialism distracted from the true mission of the college. “In this new station,” one of Cooper’s critics complained, “the public has heard more of disputes respecting religious principles, than of the improvement of his pupils.”<sup>283</sup> Another later went so far as to claim that Cooper’s lack of religious principles threatened to destroy the College:

Dr. Thomas Cooper was called to the presidency from his high reputation as a man of science and general learning...He was a lawyer, a statesman, a physician, a philosopher...and somewhat even of a theologian; but withal he was an infidel, an atheist. And the college soon took the type of its head. Infidelity and irreligion took possession...The college was broken down by...disorder; parents lots confidence and durst not expose their sons to the...danger of infidel principles.<sup>284</sup>

One objection to Cooper’s presidency described him as “a thoroughgoing wronghead” and a “noisy foreigner,” concluding its assessment by stating that “we did hope that Cooper would

---

<sup>281</sup> *Early History of the University of Virginia*, 234.

<sup>282</sup> “Dr. Thomas Cooper,” *Vermont Chronicle*, April 8, 1831.

<sup>283</sup> “The Name of Thomas Cooper,” *Daily National Journal*, November 5, 1827.

<sup>284</sup> “Dr. Hooper’s Address,” *Fayetteville Observer*, September 12, 1859.

have died in the faith in which he has lived on all topics, excepting religion, on which subject there was ample room for repentance at least.”<sup>285</sup>

A few years after becoming president of the College, Cooper decided to publish his *Scripture Doctrine of Materialism*, a risky venture even though he did not publically attach his name to the work until 1831. At the same time he published the *Scripture Doctrine*, Cooper also released the first American edition of his 1781 *View of the Metaphysical and Physiological Arguments in Favor of Materialism*. Unlike the *Scripture Doctrine*, Cooper clearly identified himself as the author of the *Metaphysical and Physiological Arguments*. By the 1830s, then, there was no longer any question in America that Cooper was a materialist. The fact many Americans would associate Cooper’s name with materialism, coupled with the fact that he was such a polarizing and decidedly unpopular figure explains, in part, why materialism would go on to have such a questionable reputation in the U.S.

Shortly after Cooper published his 1831 edition of the *Scripture Doctrine*, the College’s Board of Trustees decided to take formal action. Cooper’s latest publication, along with his earlier assertions that new geological studies contradicted the Biblical account of creation, had caused such a great public outcry, especially among local Presbyterians, that the situation could no longer be ignored. On December 7, 1831, the College launched an investigation into the “conduct of Doctor Cooper as president of the South Carolina College,” resolving that “if they find...his continuance in office defeats the...aims of the institution...they be requested to remove him.”<sup>286</sup> Cooper was eventually put on trial before the Board of Trustees in December 1832. At his trial, the Board charged that Cooper had “willfully and unnecessarily assailed the religious opinions and observances of large portions of this people, and thereby has done injury

---

<sup>285</sup> “Nec Defensories Istis,” *The Globe*, July 25, 1837.

<sup>286</sup> *Report of the Public Record Commission*, 151.



to the college.”<sup>287</sup> They also claimed that Cooper’s “needless publication of his opinions upon religion, which he knew to be offensive to the popular feelings and opinions prevalent in this state, injured the prosperity of the college.” Cooper defended his opinions in several lengthy speeches over the course of two days. He argued, in part, that Thomas Jefferson as well as some unnamed clergy supported his materialism.<sup>288</sup> At the end of his trial, in a highly unexpected move, the Board exonerated Cooper, offering only the vague explanation that “no charges against Doctor Cooper...have been substantiated by proof, and the charges against him be therefore dismissed.”<sup>289</sup>

Public backlash against Cooper’s exoneration was so great, however, that he resigned his presidency less than a year later and his professorship shortly after in 1834. Though the Board did not formally remove him, the trial ultimately served its purpose. Following Cooper’s departure, the College quickly sought to reaffirm its religious commitment to the public. First, the “strict enforcement of attendance on religious services was supplemented after Doctor Cooper’s removal.”<sup>290</sup> The college also “establish[ed] a professorship of the evidences of Christianity and sacred literature” as further proof of its religious adherence.<sup>291</sup> Cooper died in Columbia in 1834, only a few years after his resignation.

Cooper was active in politics and a polarizing figure until his last days, recognized most widely for his ardent support of states’ rights and slavery. He thus took a rather confusing trajectory from that of a dangerous radical associated with the egalitarian rhetoric of the French Revolution to his eventual alignment with some of the most conservative political forces in the

---

<sup>287</sup> “Trial of Doctor Cooper Before the Trustees of South Carolina,” *The Free Enquirer*, December 29, 1832.

<sup>288</sup> *Report of the Public Record Commission*, 151.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>290</sup> Colyer Meriwether, *History of Higher Education in South Carolina* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 159.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

U.S. It only adds to the puzzle that Cooper had, earlier in his career, published a series of abolitionist tracts.<sup>292</sup> By the late 1820s, however, while living in South Carolina during the nullification crisis, Cooper tried to defend slavery using, as Daniel Kilbride has demonstrated, a utilitarian argument drawn from the philosophy of Jeremy Bentham. Cooper adamantly opposed any interference with the South's peculiar institution. Citing the economic efficiency of slavery over free labor and the innate inferiority of the black race, as "proven" by recent developments in phrenology and ethnology, Cooper claimed that slavery was the best possible situation for master and slave as well as the South as a whole. Cooper's appeal to Bentham was an unusual move in proslavery ideology, as "the evangelical and romantic tendencies of southern culture" generally "found utilitarianism's spare, secular rationalism uncongenial."<sup>293</sup> As Kilbride noted, Cooper's argument also appears strange because he applied a "radical philosophy to the defense of conservative institutions" and his "conservative social ideas" thus ultimately "emerged from a modern, liberal, utilitarian philosophy."<sup>294</sup> Cooper's position via slavery stands out as an unusual among American materialists. Most antebellum materialists, as I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3, lived in the North, opposed slavery, and advocated radical racial, gender, and economic equality. Those who took an *anti*-materialist position, as I explain in Chapter 4, were more likely to be attracted to the rhetoric of innate inferiority and biological hierarchy that Cooper defended so stridently in his final years.

---

<sup>292</sup> Thomas Cooper, *Letters on the Slave Trade* (Manchester: C. Wheeler, 1787).

<sup>293</sup> Daniel Kilbride, "Slavery and Utilitarianism: Thomas Cooper and the Mind of the Old South," *The Journal of Southern History* 59, no. 3 (August 1993): 474.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 485.

## Thomas Cooper and Thomas Jefferson

Though public opinion was decidedly against him, Cooper retained the support of a select group of powerful friends in America, including, most notably, Thomas Jefferson. Cooper enjoyed a much closer relationship with Jefferson than Priestley ever had, and Jefferson especially admired Cooper as an intellectual. In 1819, he wrote that “Cooper is acknowledged by every enlightened man who knows him, to be the greatest man in America, in the power of mind, and in acquired information”<sup>295</sup> Jefferson also consulted Cooper frequently while planning the University of Virginia, asking him for his opinions on education and the proposed structure of the institution. During their lifetimes, Cooper and Jefferson exchanged a total of 144 letters, most written between 1810 and 1826.<sup>296</sup> In some of these letters, Jefferson described how Cooper introduced him to the concept of materialism. After Cooper sent Jefferson some of his arguments about materialism as a Christian notion, Jefferson responded with the following: “That the doctrine of Materialism was that of Jesus himself, was a new idea to me. Yet it is *proved unquestionably*...I hope the physiological part will follow, in spite of the prevailing fanaticism, reason will make its way.”<sup>297</sup>

By 1820, Jefferson began identifying himself as a materialist when discussing religious matters in his correspondence: “I am a materialist,” Jefferson wrote in one 1820 letter contrasting his views with those of “the side of spiritualism.”<sup>298</sup> Some of Jefferson’s strongest statements affirming his adherence to Cooper’s materialism came in an August 1820 letter to

---

<sup>295</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Joseph C. Cabell, March 1, 1819, in *Early History of the University of Virginia, As Contained in the Letters of Thomas Jefferson and Joseph C. Cabell, Hitherto Unpublished* (Richmond, Virginia: J.W. Randolph, 1856), 169.

<sup>296</sup> Seymour S. Cohen, “The Correspondence of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Cooper: A Previously Unpublished Manuscript of Dumas Malone,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 147, no. 1 (March 2003): 42.

<sup>297</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Cooper, December 11, 1823.

<sup>298</sup> Thomas Jefferson to William Short, April 13, 1820. The Thomas Jefferson Papers, 1601-1827, Series I: General Correspondence, 1651-1827, Manuscript Division, The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

John Adams. Repeating many of the arguments Cooper had sent him in previous letters, Jefferson wrote:

To talk of *immaterial* existence is to talk of *nothings*. To say that the human Soul, Angels, God, are immaterial, is to say, they are nothings, or that there is no God, no Angels, no Soul. I cannot reason otherwise. But I believe I am supported in my creed of Materialism...At what age of the Christian Church this heresy of *Immaterialism* or masked Atheism crept in, I do not exactly know, but a heresy it certainly is. Jesus taught *nothing of it*. He said, indeed, God is a spirit, but he has not defined what spirit is, nor has he said it is not matter.<sup>299</sup>

While Jefferson professed his support for materialism in some of his letters, historians have identified Jefferson with a variety of religious beliefs, though most agree with Kerry Walters' general description of Jefferson as "a religious man, although not in any orthodox sense of the word."<sup>300</sup> Jon Butler, for instance, has summarized Jefferson's relationship to religion as follows:

Jefferson's actual religious views were complex. He was...a deist, and he also expressed a quiet regard for Christ and Christian ethics. But he rejected Christ's divinity and criticized religious coercion with a vigor that made some suspicious of his real religious views, despite the fact that evangelicals had long support him for his efforts on behalf of religious freedom...Many ministers denounced Jefferson from their pulpits and decried the fate of the nation in the hands of a red-haired deist, an obvious agent of the devil.<sup>301</sup>

While many Jefferson scholars highlight deism, Paul Conkin argues that Jefferson believed in a "form of religious rationalism" best described as "a minimalist, Unitarian version of Christianity."<sup>302</sup>

While the precise contents of their theology may have differed slightly, Jefferson clearly shared Cooper's vehement anticlericalism. As historian Paul Onuf has demonstrated in his studies of Jefferson's religion, Jefferson regularly denounced "priestcraft" in his private correspondence. In one such letter, Jefferson famously remarked that "The Presbyterian clergy

---

<sup>299</sup> Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, August 15, 1820.

<sup>300</sup> Walters, 146.

<sup>301</sup> Butler, 219-220.

<sup>302</sup> Conkin, 21.

are the loudest, the most intolerant of all sects, the most tyrannical and ambitious.”<sup>303</sup> Cooper, embittered by his experiences in America, took Jefferson’s criticism of the clergy even farther. Cooper was especially disappointed that Americans refused to engage seriously with his materialist ideas, and he blamed the clergy in particular for trying to suppress discussion of his work. In 1831, Cooper published the following remarks in the preface to his English translation of Broussais’ *On Irritation and Insanity*:

I regret that in this country and among a people who boast of their being so enlightened...I find it expedient to fortify myself by Mr. Jefferson’s coinciding opinions; but so it is: the value of free discussion is not yet appreciated as it ought to be in these United States; and the powerful enmity of the clergy and their ignorant adherents, is sure to pursue every man who exercises the right of discussing clerical doctrines and clerical claims.<sup>304</sup>

While many critics harshly condemned Cooper for his materialism, Cooper rather ironically accused the clergy of pursuing what would be, by the end of the nineteenth century, popularly referred to as their own “materialist interests.” “Their most profitable concern,” Cooper wrote of the clergy, “is that of becoming authors, printers, and booksellers...The Bible society, interfering with the regular printing trade...brings a good interest to the persons who conduct it. Such are the means of satisfying the craving for *Money, Money, Money*, employed by this...avaricious and crafty set of men.”<sup>305</sup>

Cooper’s willingness to criticize the clergy so openly and vehemently was not taken lightly in a culture where the clergy had, since the colonial era, asserted a great deal of influence and power in all facets of American life.<sup>306</sup> Cooper concluded his attack on the clergy by turning to his own experiences in the U.S.:

---

<sup>303</sup> Thomas Jefferson to William Short, April 13, 1820.

<sup>304</sup> Cooper, Preface to *On Irritation and Insanity*, vi.

<sup>305</sup> Cooper, *Scripture Doctrine*, 326.

<sup>306</sup> See, for instance, Curti, 73.

But in no country whatever, is a spirit of persecution for mere opinions, more prevalent than in the United States of America. It is a country most tolerant in theory, and most bigoted in practice...the clergy of this country...are united in persecuting every man who calls in question any of their metaphysical opinions...They...vilify him...they hoot at him as infidel, deist, atheist...I know and have felt their unprovoked hostility... They look with a jealous eye at every *scientific* discussions; prohibiting, so far as they dare, all investigations that do not harmonize with their own theological creed.<sup>307</sup>

Cooper's *Scripture Doctrine of Materialism* stood in stark contrast to the idealistic image of the U.S. as a land of freedom and toleration he published nearly two decades earlier in *Some Information*. By the end of their careers and lives in the U.S., both Cooper and Priestley expressed deep disappointment with their time in the U.S. and the American reception of their materialist philosophies. While each labored to demonstrate that the long-vilified doctrine could remain consistent with Christianity, belief in God, and new physiological theories, Americans were preoccupied with the radical doctrines they came to associate with materialism, in part by virtue of its connection to Cooper and Priestley, and remained steadfast in their assumption that materialism was tantamount to atheism. The hostile American reception of Priestley and Cooper's materialism set the stage for later debates about materialism, leaving it a contentious and thoroughly despised set of ideas.

### **Conclusion: The Limits of Belief in Early America**

From its entry into American discourse, materialism was a category that brought together unorthodox religious views, revolutionary politics, and visions of social transformation. Together, this combination of radical ideas and politics appeared, at least to some, to pose a serious threat to the nation. Despite his lack of faith in most Americans, Cooper still predicted in the early 1830s that materialism would eventually rise to prominence as the science behind the philosophy was proven even more indelibly in the years to come. "As to the doctrine of

---

<sup>307</sup> Cooper, *Scripture Doctrine*, 324-325.

MATERIALISM,” Cooper wrote in 1831, “I run no risk in prophesying that twenty years hence, it will be the prevailing doctrine among Physiologists and Physicians, not only in Europe but in this country.”<sup>308</sup> Both Cooper and Priestley failed to anticipate that most Americans would view any movement from orthodox Christianity, including their materialist revisions of the doctrine, as an attack on the very foundations of U.S. society.<sup>309</sup> The fact that two such well-learned and well-respected (at least in Priestley’s case) men supported materialism seemed to make their ideas an even greater threat, heightened by their presence in institutions and positions of power.

Merle Curti, among others, argues that in the late eighteenth century, some Americans feared that the loss of religion “might open the gates to social unrest...by undermining the social control of the masses provided by orthodox religion.”<sup>310</sup> While other historians have since challenged this “social control” thesis of religion as an outdated view, American anti-materialist discourse suggests that many Americans were indeed deeply invested in the notion of Christianity as a stabilizing force in American society. In much more nuanced ways, Christopher Grasso’s arguments about the development of “religious common sense” further confirm these suspicions by demonstrating how virtuous citizenship assumed adherence to Christianity and portrayed any deviance from orthodox religion as an un-American threat to society. Priestley and Cooper’s example suggests that belief in the early republic was not as clear-cut as a simple dichotomy between “atheist” or “believer,” despite the fact that their critics often tried to portray it as such. In responding to Cooper and Priestley, devout Americans were forced to articulate their own beliefs more fully in order to determine the limits of acceptable doctrine. Some Americans, in other words, defined their own religiosity by making clear which doctrines they did not believe in – and for some, anti-materialist critique served this purpose by policing the

---

<sup>308</sup> Cooper, Appendix to *On Irritation and insanity*, 298.

<sup>309</sup> Curti, 50.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid*, 157.

boundaries of orthodox Christianity. In an era that saw the rise of heterodox belief systems like deism, such efforts only became more pressing and important.

Priestley and Cooper's Christian materialism served as the starting point for what would come to be the one of the most successful iterations of American materialism to exist in the nineteenth century. After Americans thoroughly condemned Priestley and Cooper's materialism, and at the very moment historians describe immense growth in religious practice and piety with the start of the Second Great Awakening, a new, more radical form of American materialism was beginning to take shape, one which took Priestley and Cooper's work and pushed it one step farther by largely eliminating God and Christianity from the equation. Seemingly against all odds, this new form of seemingly openly atheist materialism, started by an individual named Abner Kneeland and developed in institutions of radical freethought, would attract support that Priestley and Cooper's Christian materialism could never sustain.



## Chapter 2:

### Radical Materialism: Abner Kneeland

In 1834, Bostonian Samuel Gridley Howe published an article detailing his experiences at a weekly Sunday service held at the Federal Street Theater.<sup>311</sup> “On the Sabbath,” Howe wrote, “the doors of this temple are thrown open, and the congregation begins to collect...when the church-bells cease tolling, the services commence.”<sup>312</sup> Upon walking into the Theater, Howe saw a stage with a pulpit in the center and “seats for the singers” on each side of the stage.<sup>313</sup> After everyone had been seated, Howe noted that “the minister” started the service by “rising and inviting the attention of the congregation to the singing of a hymn.”<sup>314</sup> While Howe’s experiences to this point sounded unremarkable, the song he cited did not appear in standard nineteenth-century Christian hymnals:

“Wisely improve the present hour,  
Be innocently merry;  
Sight not the pleasures in your power,  
Which will not, cannot tarry.

...

---

<sup>311</sup> Howe was a Boston physician who was active in local politics. He would be best known for his work as an abolitionist, including his involvement in John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, as Howe was one of the Secret Six who helped Brown secure weapons prior to the raid. After the Civil War, Lincoln appointed Howe as head of the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, the government group responsible for creating policies pertaining to the newly freed population. Through he supported abolition, Howe maintained a strong stance against racial miscegenation throughout his career. Howe’s wife, Julia Ward Howe, was also notable as the author of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

<sup>312</sup> Samuel Gridley Howe, “Atheism in New-England,” *New-England Magazine* 7 (December 1834): 504. Howe’s expose was reprinted in slightly revised form in the February 4, 1837 issue of the *Weekly Advocate*, an African-American newspaper published in New York.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

Though time must fly, though flowers may fade,  
And pleasure prove uncertain,  
In pleasure's path we'll ever tread,  
Till death shall draw the curtain."<sup>315</sup>

Following this ode to gratification enjoyed in this life rather than the next, Howe described Bible readings for the day that moved even farther astray from the expected content of a nineteenth-century Christian service:

"66<sup>th</sup> verse: As to prophecies and miracles, it may be evinced...that all such lies are the mere preached impostures of priests.

71<sup>st</sup> verse: All fears of hell are vain; the furies, the devil, hell, and damnation, are but fables."<sup>316</sup>

While these two verses were certainly surprising, the 58<sup>th</sup> verse proved most shocking of all, questioning not only the existence of heaven, hell, and miracles, but also god himself:

"58<sup>th</sup> verse: It is plain that the notion of a god's existence is founded alone on the impressions which itself hath made on the minds of uninformed men."<sup>317</sup>

These readings came not from the Christian Bible, but from *The Bible of Reason*, a collection of writings from ancient and modern philosophers organized into books and verses and labeled as "Scriptures."<sup>318</sup> The hymn for the day, an original composition titled "Gather Your Roses While You May," was published in collections designated specifically "For the Use of Liberals" and "For the Use of Those Who Are Slaves to No Sect."<sup>319</sup> This service, moreover, was held not at a

---

<sup>315</sup> Ibid, 504-505.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid, 505.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

<sup>318</sup> The verses Howe quoted came from the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, founder of Epicurean philosophy.

<sup>319</sup> Josiah P. Mendum published this collection of hymns several years after Kneeland's death. Mendum was Kneeland's friend and associate, and he took over as editor of one of Kneeland's newspapers, the *Boston Investigator*, after Kneeland moved from Boston. Abner Kneeland, *National Hymns, Original and Selected, For the Use of Those Who Are Slaves to No Sect* (Boston: J.P. Mendum, 1870), 77-78. "Gather Your Roses While You May" was also published in *The Truth Seeker Collection of Forms, Hymns, and Recitations: Original and Selected. For the Use of Liberals* (New York: D. M. Bennett, Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1877), 198.

traditional church but at the Temple of Reason, with Abner Kneeland, author of the hymn and avowed materialist, presiding.

Each of the prominent themes in Kneeland's service, from the denial of an afterlife to the denial of god, could be united under the heading of "materialism." While most historians would agree with Merle Curti's conclusion that "the general climate of opinion in America was too much ingrained with religious orthodoxy to nourish [materialism's] growth," Abner Kneeland somehow managed to develop his own materialist philosophy, publish his ideas in a widely-distributed newspaper, and share his thoughts in well-attended weekly lectures and Sunday services.<sup>320</sup> Though the term "materialism" held many meanings throughout the nineteenth century, most antebellum Americans thought of materialism first as a philosophy or set of ideas associated with atheism. Philosophical materialists like Kneeland believed matter to be the basis of all reality and they accordingly denied the existence of any spiritual or non-material phenomena like the immaterial soul. Because materialism refused to admit of metaphysical entities like spirit or soul, most Americans believed atheism logically followed from materialism. In his Sunday services and numerous publications, Abner Kneeland boldly promoted these controversial materialist and allegedly atheist ideas. In the process, Kneeland directly challenged many facets of the dominant social, economic, religious, and political order of antebellum America.

Indeed, Samuel Gridley Howe argued that Kneeland and his materialist beliefs posed a grave threat to the American nation. Howe attended a service at the Temple of Reason to gather evidence for an expose he hoped to write in order to warn fellow New Englanders about Kneeland and the dangerous network of "free thinkers" and "avowed infidels" with whom he

---

<sup>320</sup> Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1943), 163.

associated.<sup>321</sup> Howe believed that Kneeland's services at the Temple were only one component of a much larger organized effort to convince Americans that "there is no God, no future state, and no soul."<sup>322</sup> By the mid-1830s, Howe himself was convinced that antebellum New England had become home to "an extensive party" of dangerous materialists with Kneeland serving as the public face and figurehead of the group.<sup>323</sup> These materialists, Howe feared, would continue to "openly and violently assail Christianity" until they finally realized their ultimate goal: to "break up the foundations of society" in America.<sup>324</sup>

What should we make of Abner Kneeland and his efforts to disseminate materialist ideas into the inhospitable religious and intellectual culture of antebellum America? Who exactly was Kneeland? How did he become associated with materialist philosophy? Who were the men and women who attended his services and read his publications? How many followers did Kneeland actually have? And why were critics like Samuel Gridley Howe so thoroughly convinced that Kneeland stood at the center of a vast conspiracy to destroy American society? The answers to these questions can be found in the narrative of Kneeland's career and the parallel tale of the changing meanings of materialism in antebellum America. Kneeland's story, which culminated in the last blasphemy trial held in the state of Massachusetts, demonstrates perhaps more clearly than any other the extreme backlash against materialism characteristic of the early nineteenth century. The controversy surrounding Kneeland's trial is especially valuable because it reveals examples of how some Americans explained, in detail, the reasons they believed materialism posed such a serious threat. Kneeland's work effectively pushed materialism out of the Christian realm in which Priestley and Cooper tried to keep it and instead associated materialism with a

---

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Howe, 506.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> 501; 507.

series of radical social positions including arguments for gender, economic, and racial equality. Alarmed by the surprising number of followers Kneeland managed to attract through his Temple of Reason and many publications, anti-materialists fought to suppress his work and damage his public reputation in any way possible. In the process, they contributed to a tradition of anti-materialist discourse that equated materialism with an explosive combination of radical social and political doctrines, an image of the philosophy that would stand long after the end of Kneeland's career in the early 1840s.

### **Abner Kneeland: Early Life and Education**

Abner Kneeland was born in Gardner, Massachusetts on April 7, 1774. Kneeland's parents, Martha and Timothy Kneeland, were farmers, and he spent much of his childhood working on the family farm. Educational opportunities for Abner were sparse, though he briefly attended the Gardner common schools and spent one term at an academy in Chesterfield, New Hampshire.<sup>325</sup> In his early 20s, Kneeland moved to Vermont to find work as a carpenter.<sup>326</sup> Though he had little formal education, Kneeland believed strongly in self-education and decided to teach school and create spelling books in addition to his carpentry work.<sup>327</sup> Kneeland's interest in teaching and spelling even led him to create his own alphabet system, though his efforts received little attention.<sup>328</sup> While largely unremarkable on their own, these early books

---

<sup>325</sup> Mary R. Whitcomb, "Abner Kneeland: His Relations to Early Iowa History," *Annals of Iowa* (April 1904): 340. Though now dated, Whitcomb's article remains one of the most comprehensive sources for biographical information on Kneeland.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 340-341.

<sup>327</sup> Abner Kneeland, *The Child's Spelling Book, Containing Easy Words, From One to Four Syllables* (Walpole, New Hampshire: Bill Blake and G.W. Nichols, 1802); *The American Definition Spelling Book* (Keene, New Hampshire: John Prentiss, 1802). Later in his career, Kneeland also published *A Specimen of the American Pronouncing Spelling Book: A Sure Guide to the True Pronunciation of the English Language* (Abner Kneeland, 1824).

<sup>328</sup> Abner Kneeland, *A Brief Sketch of a New System of Orthography Delineated In an Orthographical Chart, Containing the Alphabet and Scheme of the Orthographer* (Walpole, New Hampshire: Nichols and Hale, 1807).

did signal Kneeland's interest in publication and his desire to spread his ideas to a wider audience. Around the same time, Kneeland met a Baptist preacher named Elhanan Winchester. After hearing Winchester preach, Kneeland found that he quickly "fell in with his [Winchester's] views."<sup>329</sup> In 1801, Kneeland joined the Baptist church in Putney, Vermont, and soon became a lay preacher at the church. Kneeland's work as a preacher likely satisfied some of the same ambitions as his publications, providing him with another opportunity to share his thoughts with a larger public.

Kneeland, however, spent only a short time with the Baptist church. Soon after joining, Kneeland experienced a period of doubt that he resolved by converting to Universalism. Universalism, as historian Ann Bressler explains, was one of the main "branches of early nineteenth-century religious liberalism."<sup>330</sup> Susan Jacoby argues further that "The connection among freethinkers, Unitarians, and Universalists was such that many religious conservatives considered the liberal Protestant sects just another species of infidelity."<sup>331</sup> In contrast to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, Universalists, as their name suggested, believed in universal salvation.<sup>332</sup> By 1803, Kneeland became a licensed Universalist preacher, and in 1805 he was ordained as a pastor in the church.<sup>333</sup> Kneeland spent the next two decades traveling and intermittently preaching around the New England region, moving among churches primarily in Philadelphia and New York.

During these travels, Kneeland began to question his faith more seriously and more openly. Sometime around 1815, Kneeland wrote to Hosea Ballou, a well-known Universalist

---

Kneeland later revised and updated his system in *A Key to the New System of Orthography* (New York: Abner Kneeland, 1828).

<sup>329</sup> Abner Kneeland, Untitled Article, *Boston Investigator*, June 26, 1835.

<sup>330</sup> Ann Bressler, *The Universalist Movement in America: 1770-1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3. Jon Butler describes Universalism in similar terms, calling it a form of "rationalist liberalism." See Butler, 220.

<sup>331</sup> Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 51.

<sup>332</sup> Bressler, 7.

<sup>333</sup> Whitcomb, 341.

preacher, to voice his concerns about the possibility of divine revelation and the authority of the scriptures. Throughout the correspondence, Kneeland made little attempt to hide his growing skepticism and doubt. “Very few people at the present day,” Kneeland noted wryly, “are benefited by a revelation from god.”<sup>334</sup> And even if one were to receive a revelation, such an event, he reasoned, would be “something supernatural” and therefore a “mere matter of opinion” rather than a “matter of fact.”<sup>335</sup> This distinction was significant, Kneeland explained, because you could not establish the validity of a matter of opinion with the same rigor or certainty as a matter of fact. Kneeland summarized his concerns in a single bold question: “If the things stated in the bible are no more reasonable than those in profane history, what reason have we to believe *these* more than *those*?”<sup>336</sup>

In 1816, shortly after his exchange with Ballou, Kneeland’s religious and intellectual trajectory took an important turn when he discovered the work of Joseph Priestley. It was his reading of Priestley, Kneeland explained, that led him to first identify as a materialist. Kneeland singled out Priestley’s *Disquisition on Matter and Spirit*, in particular, as the work that first turned him to materialist philosophy:

while at New Hartford, N.Y., [I] obtained and read for the first time the theological works of Dr. Priestley, which took deep hold on [my] mind, particularly his *Disquisition on Matter and Spirit*, from the reading of which, [I] became a *materialist*; a materialist in every and in the strictest sense of that word.

In the coming years, Kneeland would gradually articulate what it meant to him to be “a materialist in every and in the strictest sense of that word.” For the time being, however, he simply recognized that he wanted to push Priestley’s materialism to a new level:

---

<sup>334</sup> Abner Kneeland, Letter to Hosea Ballou, reprinted as “Extract No. 1” in Hosea Ballou, *A Series of Letters in Defense of Divine Revelation: In Reply to Rev. Abner Kneeland’s Serious Inquiry Into the Authenticity of the Same* (Boston: Henry Bowen, 1820), 7.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid, 14-15.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid, 15.

[I] soon carried the idea even beyond Dr. Priestley himself; for he...admitted that God was immaterial...Here [my] skepticism commenced...

Kneeland provided no further explanation of his “skepticism,” though he clearly implied his own materialism left no room for any non-material beings, god or otherwise. Though Kneeland did not know it at the time, the question of his belief in god would soon become a topic New Englanders would debate for years to come. Kneeland’s writings reveal great ambiguity about his personal belief in god. Though he sometimes flatly denied the existence of god, Kneeland occasionally claimed belief in some form or conception of god. In his “Philosophical Creed,” for instance, Kneeland argued that he was a pantheist, not an atheist:

I believe that the whole universe is NATURE...and that God and Nature, so far as we can attach any rational idea to either, are perfectly synonymous terms. Hence, I am not an Atheist, but a Pantheist; that is, instead of believing there is no God, I believe that in the abstract, all is God.<sup>337</sup>

Kneeland’s writings wavered back and forth between these denials and vague affirmations of god’s existence. In general, however, his arguments against god were more frequent, more strongly argued, and more convincing.

Looking back several years later, Kneeland described his reading of Priestley as something of a reverse-conversion experience. As he finished reading Priestley’s *Disquisition on Matter and Spirit*, Kneeland said he felt “the whole fabric of Christian evidence was completely demolished in [his] mind, without leaving even a wreck behind.”<sup>338</sup> Though Kneeland identified 1816 as the year he became a materialist and no longer believed the basic tenets of Christianity, he did not formally leave the Universalist church until May 1829. In the interim, Kneeland continued to preach and write, making less of an effort to hide his skepticism

---

<sup>337</sup> Abner Kneeland, “Philosophical Creed,” *Boston Investigator*, July 12, 1833.

<sup>338</sup> Abner Kneeland, Untitled Article, *Boston Investigator*, June 26, 1835.



of Christianity and his newfound materialist beliefs. Priestley's name appeared frequently in Kneeland's lectures from this period.<sup>339</sup>

In 1824, Kneeland stirred up new controversy when he took part in a public debate with the Rev. W. L. McCalla on the topic of universal salvation.<sup>340</sup> McCalla later published the exchange as a *Discussion of Universalism, or, a Defence of Orthodoxy Against the Heresy of Universalism As Advocated By Mr. Abner Kneeland*.<sup>341</sup> McCalla's title provided a succinct summary of the way most Universalists viewed Kneeland during this period. By the time he left the Universalist church in 1829, Kneeland's work had become so radical that he could no longer find churches that would allow him to preach. Though Universalism was one of the most liberal religious movements of its day, Kneeland had already been asked to leave several churches earlier in the decade because of the questionable content of his preaching. Around the same time he left Universalists, Kneeland was also banned from the local Masonic Hall where he held weekly meetings and lectures.<sup>342</sup>

Finally, in August 1829, Kneeland formally announced his departure from Christianity. At Broadway Hall in New York, Kneeland delivered a series of six lectures he later published as *A Review of the Evidences of Christianity*.<sup>343</sup> In these two-hundred plus pages of complex and

---

<sup>339</sup> Abner Kneeland, *A Series of Lectures on the Doctrine of Universal Benevolence; Delivered in the Universalist Church, in Lombard Street, Philadelphia, in the Autumn of 1818* (Philadelphia: Clark and Raser, 1818), 3, 42, 86, 94-96, 103, 123-125, 140.

<sup>340</sup> Abner Kneeland and W. L. McCalla, *Minutes of a Discussion on the Question 'Is the Punishment of the Wicked Absolutely Eternal? Or is it Only a Temporal Punishment in This World, For Their Good, and to Be Succeeded By Eternal Happiness After Death?'* (Philadelphia: Publisher Unknown, 1824); *Substance of a Discussion Between the Rev. W. L. McCalla and the Rev. Abner Kneeland on the Following Question: Is the Punishment of the Wicked Absolutely Eternal? Or is it Only a Temporal Punishment in the World For their Good, and to Be Succeeded By Eternal Happiness After Death?* (Philadelphia: T.S. Manning, 1824).

<sup>341</sup> W. L. McCalla, *Discussion of Universalism, or, a Defence of Orthodoxy Against the Heresy of Universalism as Advocated By Mr. Abner Kneeland in the Debate in the Universalist Church, Lombard Street, July, 1824, and in His Various Publications* (Philadelphia: John Young, 1825).

<sup>342</sup> Roderick S. French, "Liberation From Man and God in Boston: Abner Kneeland's Free-Thought Campaign, 1830-1839," *American Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1980); 203.

<sup>343</sup> Abner Kneeland, *A Review of the Evidences of Christianity: In a Series of Lectures, Delivered in Broadway Hall, New York, August 1829* (Boston: Office of the Investigator, 1831).

often confusing arguments, Kneeland tried to portray Christianity as a wholly illogical, untenable system of beliefs. At its conclusion, Kneeland believed he had used reason to dismantle most of the major doctrines of Christianity, from the authenticity of the scriptures to the resurrection of Christ. It is likely that Kneeland spent much of his time between 1816 and 1829 writing and revising these lectures, polishing them as much as possible before presenting them to the public as his final, dramatic departure from organized religion.

Kneeland's publicly-voiced disbelief was highly unusual for the period in which he lived, as most historians of religion agree that the first half of the nineteenth century was an era of great religiosity and revival (ie: the Second Great Awakening) in the U.S. Jon Butler, for instance, describes this period as one of "Christian ascension" and "Christianization," while James Turner labels it the era of "Modern Belief."<sup>344</sup> Nathan Hatch argues further that these years saw the rise of "American Christianity" as a "mass enterprise," a transformation characterized by a "wave of popular religious movements" and staggering growth in the number of preachers, denominations, and churches in the U.S.<sup>345</sup> Contemporary observers, likewise, commented on the significance and proliferation of religion in the U.S. during these years. Most famously, perhaps, Alexis de Tocqueville claimed in 1835 that "There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains greater influence over the souls of men than in America."<sup>346</sup> In all these different ways, then, Kneeland and his materialism stood out as jarring aberrations in a period of growing religious fervor.

---

<sup>344</sup> Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 2.

<sup>345</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 4, 3.

<sup>346</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, trans. Henry Reeve, ed. Phillips Bradley (New York: Knopf, 1945), 303.

## **Boston and the *Investigator***

In 1831, Kneeland entered the final and most significant phase of his career. In this year, Frances Wright (a figure discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation) invited Kneeland to become a lecturer at her newly-formed First Society of Free Enquirers in Boston, an invitation Kneeland immediately and happily accepted.<sup>347</sup> Along with New York (and, though to a lesser degree, Cincinnati and certain areas of Philadelphia), Boston housed the most prominent free thought community in the antebellum U.S. One observer described Boston as “a curious hot-bed of learning, infidelity, honesty, philosophy, and Christianity.”<sup>348</sup> Once he arrived in Boston, Kneeland decided that, in addition to his duties at the Society, he wanted to start his own weekly newspaper. Kneeland already had several years of experience running a newspaper, as he had previously served as editor of three Universalist publications: the *Universalist Magazine and Christian Messenger*, the *Olive Branch*, and the *Olive Branch and Christian Inquirer*.<sup>349</sup> The *Boston Investigator*, which would be Kneeland’s final and most well-known publication, was also the venture that set the stage for his eventual blasphemy trial and conviction. Kneeland printed the first issue of the *Investigator* in February but dated it April 2, 1831, a discrepancy of unknown origin.<sup>350</sup>

With the notable exception of Roderick French, historians have paid little attention to the *Investigator*. French has, in particular, established much valuable information about the circulation and distribution of the *Investigator*.<sup>351</sup> Some older studies like J.M. Wheeler’s 1889 *Biographical Dictionary of Freethinkers* have also recognized the paper for its connections to the

---

<sup>347</sup> The two had previously met in 1829 when Kneeland asked Wright to speak at one of his meetings.

<sup>348</sup> “Progress of the New Philosophy,” *New York Herald*, March 24, 1842.

<sup>349</sup> Whitcomb, 341, 342, 343.

<sup>350</sup> French, 205.

<sup>351</sup> In addition to his previously cited article, French’s dissertation contains further information on Kneeland and the *Investigator*. See Roderick French, “The Trials of Abner Kneeland” (George Washington University, 1971).

nineteenth-century free thought movement, a phenomenon discussed in-depth in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. Wheeler, for instance, identified the *Boston Investigator* as “the oldest Freethought journal” published in the United States.<sup>352</sup> The initial issue of the *Investigator*, which described the publication’s mission as “Devoted to the development and promotion of universal mental liberty,” clearly linked the publication to the free thought movement. The fact that Frances Wright served as associate editor of the paper from 1837 to 1838 further solidified this free thought connection.

Few historians, however, have studied the actual content of the *Investigator*. The bulk of each issue generally consisted of several lengthy articles on various philosophical or political debates. Reprinted articles from the *Free Enquirer* were also common in the *Investigator* during the mid-1830s. Kneeland devoted several pages of every issue to correspondence from readers and he regularly published letters from those who fiercely criticized or disagreed with his own views. Kneeland also like to print long quotations and essays from philosophers and thinkers he admired such as Voltaire and Paine. As Henry May demonstrated, though many Americans read Voltaire, very few were familiar with his “unequivocally anti-Christian” *Philosophical Dictionary*, the least known of all his works among American readers.<sup>353</sup> He regularly advertised books by these authors as well as works by his friends and intellectual associates such as Dr. Charles Knowlton (a key figure in Chapter 3) and Robert D. Owen. A subscription to the *Investigator* generally cost \$2 to \$5 per year, though Kneeland sometimes scaled these rates according to the means of the subscriber in order to make his publication as affordable and accessible as possible.<sup>354</sup>

---

<sup>352</sup> J.M. Wheeler, *A Biographical Dictionary of Freethinkers of All Ages and Nations* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1889), 191.

<sup>353</sup> May, 40.

<sup>354</sup> Whitcomb, 345.

Kneeland's decision to start an openly materialist publication in Boston was an especially bold venture given the staunch religious conservatism of the state. Take, for example, the 1780 Massachusetts constitution, which "authorized legislation demanding compulsory church attendance" and allowed citizens to be taxed "for the institution of the public worship of God, and for the support and maintenance of public Protestant teachers of piety, religion, and morality."<sup>355</sup> While several New England states had such religious establishments, every state except Massachusetts dissolved these arrangements by the late eighteenth or very early nineteenth century.<sup>356</sup> Massachusetts held out longer than any other state on this issue, refusing disestablishment until 1833.<sup>357</sup>

Given the deeply religious culture of Massachusetts, it was unsurprising that local critics quickly picked up on the materialist slant of the *Investigator*. Dr. Joseph Rodes Buchanan, a figure discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, called the publication a "fearless, Infidel, and materialist newspaper."<sup>358</sup> John Barton Derby made no attempt to hide his contempt when he called the paper "a lava stream of blasphemy and obscenity which blasts the vision and gangrenes the very soul of the uncorrupted reader."<sup>359</sup> Another slightly more restrained reviewer described the *Investigator* as "the open and decided advocate of *Atheism* and materialism, and all the mad and mischievous doctrines of Frances Wright and the Owens."<sup>360</sup> Though meant as an insult, Kneeland liked this second description of his work so much that he re-printed it approvingly in an 1832 issue of the *Investigator*.

---

<sup>355</sup> Butler, 259.

<sup>356</sup> Howe, 164-165.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>358</sup> Reprinted in "The Investigator, Boston," *Boston Investigator*, October 12, 1853.

<sup>359</sup> John Barton Derby, *Political Reminiscences, Including a Sketch of the Origin and History of the 'Statesman Party' of Boston* (Boston: Homer and Palmer, 1835), 144.

<sup>360</sup> "Boston Investigator," *The Boston Investigator*, November 16, 1832.

This review did, indeed, provide an accurate image of the paper's content, as it was in the pages of the *Investigator* that Kneeland articulated his own understandings of materialism. Beginning with his prospectus for the paper, Kneeland published several tenets of his materialist philosophy and explained how they guided his work at the *Investigator*. Kneeland opened his prospectus with a statement of materialist epistemology. As the title of his paper suggested, Kneeland believed strongly in the importance of using reason and common sense to interrogate questions and verify the truth or falsity of claims. The *Investigator*, Kneeland wrote in his prospectus, "is intended to improve the condition of man by...better enabling him to judge of what is probably false." The paper, he continued, "will...advocate practical utility, rather than defend speculative theories."<sup>361</sup> A later version of the prospectus expanded on this point, stating that "Our object is, to call the attention of the public from the visionary dreams of superstition and fanaticism, which have too long infested the moral world, to things of known realities, or facts that may be known."<sup>362</sup>

Kneeland moved next to the materialist ontology underlying his publication. The *Investigator*, he stated firmly,

will advocate the existence of no...beings or things, whether angelic, infernal, or divine, of which the sense of man can take no cognizance; and which are neither visible nor tangible objects; or else which cannot otherwise be demonstrated by their visible effects.<sup>363</sup>

Kneeland's philosophical materialism was based on a specific world-view and conception of reality. Matter served as the first principle of materialism and only the material and the tangible were believed to truly exist in the world. "Matter," as one article in the *Free Enquirer*, a sister publication to the *Investigator*, explained, "is...the very *fundiminis* or beginning of all things

---

<sup>361</sup> Abner Kneeland, "Prospectus of the Boston Investigator," *Boston Investigator*, October 21, 1831.

<sup>362</sup> Abner Kneeland, "Prospectus of the Boston Investigator," *Boston Investigator*, February 22, 1839.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*

(mind not excepted)...The notion of a spiritual existence *non substantial* is ideal, fanciful, foolish.”<sup>364</sup> Why would one ever turn to invisible spirits or an unknowable god, another materialist wondered, when “*You* have something tangible, something visible, the whole universe, for your belief?”<sup>365</sup> With his focus on the visible and the tangible, Kneeland’s materialism shared Locke’s emphasis on sensory perception and empirical data as our way of knowing the world. Acknowledging his debt to Locke, Kneeland sometimes printed his favorite quotes from the philosopher in the *Investigator*. Kneeland was especially fond of the following passage from Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: “Whatever groundless opinion settles itself strongly upon the fancy, is ‘an illumination from above;’ and whatsoever there is a strong inclination to do, that impulse is concluded to be...direction from ‘heaven,’ and must be obeyed.”<sup>366</sup>

In contrast to the Christian creation story, which described God making the world out of nothing, materialists like Kneeland believed that matter always had and always would exist. As one antebellum materialist explained,

The visionaries believe that their invisible idol existed before matter – that it *made* matter from *nothing*...materialists believe that these proceed from the operations of matter...upon itself, that matter and its motion is the cause of causes...

The hackneyed language of [the] Spiritualists says Deity is the *first* cause; they dogmatically say so, never having provide the existence of deity; materialists, believing in the eternity of matter, admit of no *first* cause.<sup>367</sup>

---

<sup>364</sup> Scrutator, “To the Editor of the Free Enquirer,” *The Free Enquirer* 1, no. 33 (June 8, 1834): 259. Here it is interesting to note that “Scrutator” was a known penname of Joseph Priestley. This essay, however, was clearly not written by Priestley as he died in 1804. For more on Priestley’s writings as “Scrutator,” see Robert Schofield, *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work From 1773 to 1804* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 204-207.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> “Enthusiasm,” *Boston Investigator*, June 15, 1832. This passage came from book 4, chapter 19, “Of Enthusiasm,” in Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

<sup>367</sup> “To the Editor of the Free Enquirer.”

Materialists found it absurd to believe that an immaterial god somehow created the entire material universe. The “Antitheistical Catechism,” published by George Henry Evans (another figure discussed in more detail in Chapter 3) as part of his serial project, *Messengers of Truth, or, Pills for the Pious; A Series of Liberal Tracts*, explained why materialists refused the Christian narrative of creation:

“Q. Do not these men, calling themselves the priests of Christianity, say that their deity created...the entire universe?”

A. Yes, but how a spirit, an immaterial being, could create that which is material, they cannot tell; it is another mystery.

Q. Can they give any proof of the existence of their deity, or its attributes?

A. None whatever.<sup>368</sup>

John Stewart, an English materialist whose work Kneeland admired and frequently reprinted, summarized this materialist conception of reality as “a circle of existence in the endless transmutation of...indestructible matter.”<sup>369</sup> Kneeland published a more playful statement of this same point in “The Unbeliever’s Creed,” the materialist version of Nicene Creed or Apostle’s Creed: “I believe there is no God, but that matter is God, and God is matter; and that it is no matter whether there is any God or not...”<sup>370</sup>

Though meant as satire, the Unbeliever’s Creed accurately portrayed the main components of materialist philosophy. The Creed, for instance, also summarized the materialist conception of life and death: “I believe...that the soul is the body, and the body is the soul, and

---

<sup>368</sup> “The Antitheistical Catechism,” in *Messengers of Truth, or, Pills for the Pious; A Series of Liberal Tracts, Volume 1*, George Evans, ed. (New York: George Evans, 1833), 126

<sup>369</sup> John Stewart, *Opus Maximum, An Essay on Materialism: To Reduce the Moral World From Contingency to System*, in George Henry Evans, *The Bible of Nature, and Substance of Virtue: Condensed from the Scriptures of Eminent Cosmians, Pantheists and Physiphilanthropists, of Various Ages and Climes* (Albany: C. Van Benthuysen, 1842), 57.

<sup>370</sup> “The Unbeliever’s Creed,” *Boston Investigator*, March 1, 1833.



that after death there is neither body nor soul.<sup>371</sup> This single sentence highlighted several issues of great debate during the antebellum era including the question of the resurrection of the dead. While the resurrection of Christ was a foundational doctrine of Christianity, materialists argued that human life was finite and the dead could never rise. Kneeland explained that he simply “did not...believe” in the “resurrection of the dead, immortality, and eternal life,” but rather held “that all life is material” and that “death is an external extinction of life.”<sup>372</sup> Kneeland expressed especially strong skepticism about the resurrection of Christ, in particular questioning any evidence that the event had actually taken place. In all the “testimonies to the death and resurrection of Christ,” Kneeland argued, there was “not one disinterested witness specified.” Because all the “testimonies” came from Jesus’ own apostles and followers, every eyewitness account of the resurrection in the Bible, Kneeland concluded, was too “suspicious” to definitively “establish the truth of the facts.”<sup>373</sup> In an especially audacious passage, Kneeland claimed, furthermore, that no impartial party had ever actually seen Christ after his supposed resurrection:

Jesus Christ, if he ever lived, died, or rose (all equally doubtful,) sneaked about after his resurrection like a thief from the officers of justice – known only to the male and female bigots of his own party... Why did he not put the question to rest by appearing publically after his resurrection, and by causing the public evidence of it to be preserved?<sup>374</sup>

Kneeland hoped such brazen arguments would grab the attention of his fellow Americans, who would then be enlightened by the reason and logic of his claims.

Alongside the belief that the dead could never rise again, materialists argued there is no spirit or soul that lives on in any kind of afterlife following the death of the body. This materialist claim ran counter to the beliefs of the vast majority of antebellum Americans, who

---

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Abner Kneeland, “To the Editor of the Trumpet,” *Boston Investigator*, December 20, 1833.

<sup>373</sup> Kneeland, *Review of the Evidences of Christianity*, 57-58.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid, 149-150.

saw the soul as a sacred part of their identity that, once separated from the physical body, would live on in an eternal afterlife. Philosophical materialists simply denied the existence of any non-material phenomena like an immaterial, immortal soul that somehow existed outside the corporeal form. One materialist explained his understanding of death as follows:

The materialist is fully and rationally convinced...that his...identity will be absolutely annihilated, when the dissolution of his animal machine takes place; while the Christian is saturated with the belief (though a vain and chimerical one,) that an eternal state of happiness will be his portion after his natural life shall terminate.<sup>375</sup>

Materialists also frequently argued that there was simply no tangible or compelling evidence that the soul existed. “No man,” one materialist pointed out in a Lockean passage, “has ever felt, heard, seen, smelled, or tasted a soul. Its existence is therefore mere supposition.”<sup>376</sup>

Following their denial of the soul and physical understanding of the mind, materialists took a staunchly anti-dualist stance in the mind/body debates of the era. The *North American Review*, a strongly anti-materialist publication (articles commonly labeled materialism everything from a “logical absurdity” to a “groveling theory”), described the two sides of the debate as follows:

It is well known, that there are two great classes of moral philosophers: one, that regards the mind and body as two essences wholly distinct, the other, that considers the mind as a consequence, a result of the organization of the body. Those of the former class are called immaterialists, and of the latter materialists.<sup>377</sup>

While materialists (anti-dualists) argued that the mind and body were both fully corporeal and physical, dualists (often anti-materialists) refused to believe that the mind was simply another organ in the body. Anti-materialists, sometimes called immaterialists, argued that plain matter could never account for all the complex and wondrous functions of the mind. “Is it possible,”

---

<sup>375</sup> J.D. Smith, “Unpublished Articles of the Speculative Dictionary,” *The Free Enquirer* 5, no. 10 (December 29, 1832): 75.

<sup>376</sup> Ben Krapac, “Cogitations of an Infidel, No. 1: On the Soul,” *Boston Investigator*, November 15, 1833.

<sup>377</sup> “Abercrombie on the Intellectual Powers,” *The North American Review*, 36, no. 79 (April 1833): 498; “On Natural Theology,” *The North American Review*, 54, no. 115 (April 1842): 383; “Abercrombie,” 496.

one scientist asked, “for matter by and of itself, to think, to choose, reason?” Such “materialism,” he quickly answered, was simply too “absurd” to fathom.<sup>378</sup>

Some dualists argued that not only were the mind and body separate entities, but that the soul also existed as something distinct from the mind. In this dualist understanding of the mind and soul, the mind acted as the source of all mental processes and cognition while the soul contained all human emotion and morality. As one anti-materialist explained, “when a man tells me that the moral sentiments, or the soul, is located in the brain, I feel an Irrepressible inclination to laugh in his face.” “The soul,” he continued, “originates and manifests every emotion of joy or grief, love or hatred, sin or holiness.” Without a soul, humans would “lose all consciousness of moral emotion” and “become incapable of analyzing [their] own feelings.”<sup>379</sup> Because many Americans saw the soul as the seat of human morality, and because materialists did not believe in the existence of the soul, most Americans viewed materialism as an immoral, base philosophy. One immaterialist, for example, described “Materialism” as a philosophy “utterly subversive...of morals,” while another writer for the *Princeton Review* claimed that materialism was “destructive to moral feeling.”<sup>380</sup> Some critics argued further that materialism, by reducing the world to a set of physical or material laws (a “mere mechanical understanding” of the world, as one author put it), left no room for human accountability and thus could not account for any kind of ethics or morality.<sup>381</sup> Others claimed that by denying the soul, materialism reduced human beings to nothing “but a higher order of animal.”<sup>382</sup>

---

<sup>378</sup> “Notice of a Lecture on Chemistry,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 4, no. 6 (June 1838): 367-369.

<sup>379</sup> David Campbell, “Phrenology and Grahmism,” *The Liberator*, December 27, 1839.

<sup>380</sup> “Notice of a Lecture on Chemistry;” “Suggestions For Theological Students.” *The Princeton Review* 5, no. 1 (January 1833): 108.

<sup>381</sup> “Review: Coleridge,” *The North American Review*, 40, no. 87 (April 1835): 334.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid*, 333.

Kneeland, however, strongly believed materialism had important moral and political implications, and he explained these in his prospectus for the *Investigator*. Kneeland opened his prospectus by touching on of the basic tenets of materialist philosophy discussed above: the materialist epistemology of reason and truth-verification, an ontology of the material and tangible, a finite conception of human life, denial of the possibility of resurrection, and a fully corporeal schema of the human mind (physical brain) and body, with no mysterious immaterial soul floating around somewhere unknown. After he explained these basic materialist principles, Kneeland laid out a sweeping platform of reform efforts that he believed grew out of the foundations of his materialism:

It [the *Investigator*] will oppose all monopolies and unnecessary monied Institutions (which only...favor the rich at the expense of the poor)...

It will advocate a general system of education as a public good; which no child should be deprived of, on account of the condition of his parents...

It will contend for...the abolition of slavery, and the abolishment of imprisonment for debts...

It will...particularly espouse the cause of the laboring and producing classes...

It will advocate the rights of women, whose rights have too long been neglected...

This ambitious list touched on most of the major radical reform efforts of the antebellum era, from working-class rights and women's rights to the abolition of slavery, the advancement of racial equality, and various modes of economic reform.<sup>383</sup> With his first issue of the *Investigator*, Kneeland thus publically proclaimed his support for several of the most contentious issues of the era.

---

<sup>383</sup> For more on antebellum reform movements, see Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Leslie Butler, *Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

John Stewart's *Bible of Nature*, a book Kneeland regularly advertised in the *Investigator*, explained one perspective on the connections between materialism and this radical reform agenda. In his *Opus Maximum, An Essay on Materialism*, Stewart argued that materialism could be a powerful antidote to many of society's ills, including, most importantly, economic inequality. By organizing society around materialist rather than religious beliefs, Stewart believed the working classes would finally have a

means to contend with monopoly, and the avarice of property, that oppresses the poorer classes of the community...The laborer has no time allowed him for recreation, comfort, or instruction; the harpy eye of avarice watches over him in the field or the factory...The fruits of his own labor are turned against him by enriching his master, and enabling him to be a monopolist...<sup>384</sup>

Stewart argued that a religiously-based society had not produced anything remotely resembling economic equality or better treatment for the working class. [Historian Merle Curti argues that from the colonial era, "Christian doctrine was used to reinforce an economy based on the sanctity of private property and the value of individual enterprise and profit."<sup>385</sup>] Religion, Stewart concluded, amounted to "nothing but an observance of external rites."<sup>386</sup> The "parade of religion...we observe among the middling classes," he wrote,

has little effect upon their moral conduct, for we see these pious votaries extort, without any hesitation, the severest labor from their...peasantry, the most oppressive rent from their tenants, and the hardest bargains from their purchasers.<sup>387</sup>

Stewart believed that replacing religion with a materialist system of values would benefit society as a whole. In his ideal materialist society, the basic physical needs of all citizens would be put first. Religious superstition would no longer provide a false veneer of morality for the upper and

---

<sup>384</sup> Stewart, 48.

<sup>385</sup> Curti, 69.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

middle classes, and religion would no longer provide justification for intolerance or unequal treatment on the basis of class or race.<sup>388</sup>

Kneeland, too, argued that materialism would lead the way to greater tolerance and acceptance in American society. Take, for instance, Kneeland's description of a September 1831 meeting at Julien Hall in which nearly thirty new members were admitted to the First Society of Free Enquirers. Kneeland described the initiation like an alternative conversion narrative, writing that all present had

experienced the *grace of reason and common sense*, and obtained a favorable hope that...during the remainder of their lives, they shall be completely delivered from *fanaticism, bigotry, superstition, and intolerance!*<sup>389</sup>

While Stewart and Kneeland had high aspirations for materialism's transformative power, neither provided much information about how such plans to reorganize society around materialist ideas would be practically implemented. Kneeland's tireless efforts to share his work with the largest possible audience did, however, suggest he believed this transformation would start through the spread of materialist ideas.

In the larger context of materialism's changing meanings over the course of the nineteenth-century, Stewart and Kneeland's insistence that materialism would lead to economic equality appears quite surprising. By the final decades of the century, the term "materialism" commonly referred to the dominance of greed and avarice or obsession with profit and the acquisition of material goods, the meaning with which most Americans associate the term today. During the antebellum era, however, individuals like Kneeland believed materialism to be an antidote to precisely these values. Kneeland, in particular, had idealistic hopes for a society oriented around materialism. Such a materialist society, he believed, would finally lead

---

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

<sup>389</sup> Abner Kneeland, "Revival At Julien Hall," *Boston Investigator*, September 23, 1831.

Americans to equal allocation of economic resources, fair treatment for all sexes and races, free education for all citizens, and an end to pervasive and long-enduring religious myths.

### **The Mass Appeal of Materialism**

Throughout his career, Kneeland worked continually to spread his materialist ideas to a wider audience. Kneeland's very public approach represented an important shift in American discourse surrounding materialism. As discussed in the previous chapter, materialism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was the subject of fairly technical philosophical debates read and circulated primarily among educated individuals. During the antebellum era, however, with his free public lectures and cheap publications, Kneeland made materialist philosophy accessible to Americans of more varied educational and economic means. And because he devoted several pages of each issue of *The Investigator* to letters sent in from readers, Kneeland gave anyone who was literate a chance to be part of the conversation. As Roderick French has noted, "In these letters one often detects a sense of pleasure in writing for publication; no doubt it was a privilege novel to them as individuals and to person of their standing in society in general."<sup>390</sup> Kneeland, in short, presented a new danger: materialism packaged for greater appeal.

Critics like Samuel Gridley Howe immediately picked up on Kneeland's commitment to accessibility and popular appeal and deemed it one of his most dangerous attributes. Using his own observations and estimated statistics to make his case, Howe argued that Kneeland was gaining followers at an alarming rate, earning him as many as "perhaps fifty thousand" devotees by the mid 1830s.<sup>391</sup> The few historians who have studied Kneeland agree that he had a

---

<sup>390</sup> French, 215.

<sup>391</sup> Howe, 501.

considerable following, though they have not been able to confirm the precise numbers Howe suggested. Roderick French, for instance, has demonstrated that many of Kneeland's lectures and Sunday services were so well attended that several hundred individuals were often turned away because of lack of space in the venues where Kneeland spoke.<sup>392</sup>

The story of Kneeland's institutional history in Boston illustrates both his growing popularity and notoriety. In the early 1830s, as part of his work with the First Society of Free Enquirers, Kneeland gave Sunday lectures at Boston's Julien Hall. These lectures became so popular that he soon began holding two each Sunday, one in the afternoon and the other in the evening. These lectures covered pre-announced topics such as "On the Rights of man to Property"" or "On the testimony of the bible; showing the various contradictory dogmas that may be plausibly, but not conclusively proved therefrom."<sup>393</sup> Given their openly radical and even blasphemous content, these meetings attracted surprisingly large crowds. By their peak, Kneeland reported that nearly 500 people were turned away from his lectures at Julien Hall for lack of room.<sup>394</sup> Though comprehensive attendance records for Kneeland's meetings do not exist, there are several reports that include attendance figures for individual meetings. At a September 1831 meeting, for example, Kneeland recorded that "There could not have been much short of *five hundred* persons in all; about one third of whom were females."<sup>395</sup> As usual, Kneeland was sure to note the presence of women at his lectures and services. At this same September meeting, Kneeland also happily noted that twenty-eight new members, including eighteen women, were admitted to the First Society of Free Enquirers.<sup>396</sup> Kneeland's careful

---

<sup>392</sup> French, 215.

<sup>393</sup> "Sunday Lectures at Julien Hall," *Boston Investigator*, November 22, 1833.

<sup>394</sup> French, 215.

<sup>395</sup> Abner Kneeland, "Revival At Julien Hall," *Boston Investigator*, September 23, 1831.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*



attention to female attendance served a double purpose: it signaled his support for women's rights and education and also encouraged more women to attend his events.

Because of the controversial nature of these meetings, Kneeland was soon banned from Julien Hall. He took his meetings to the Federal Street Theater, the location he would eventually christen as the Temple of Reason. But even after moving to the much larger Federal Street space, Kneeland attracted crowds larger than the building could hold. At the first meeting, he reported that over 250 attended and more than 100 were turned away for lack of room. Kneeland's Sunday services at the Theater also quickly grew more popular than he anticipated. Shortly after they began, these services were "standing-room only."<sup>397</sup> John Barton Derby, who believed Kneeland's services amounted to nothing more than "Infidel orgies at the Federal-street Theatre," was appalled to learn that these meetings sometimes attracted mixed-sex crowds as large as 2,000:

The Federal-street Theatre, where he [Kneeland] holds his Sunday meetings to scoff at the Bible,- to ridicule everything we hold sacred and to sneer at the Deity, is usually crowded from top to bottom. It is said that 2000 have been present at once! And, monstrous to relate, a considerable proportion of the assemblage *were females*...<sup>398</sup>

As Roderick French has shown, Kneeland attracted similarly large crowds when he traveled around New England on a mini-lecture circuit. In Lynn, Massachusetts, nearly 600 people gathered to hear Kneeland speak. His lectures in Newport, Rhode Island were even more successful, attracting 1,200 Americans eager to hear his ideas.<sup>399</sup>

In addition to his lectures, Kneeland began hosting alternative social gatherings such as Wednesday evening dances. Kneeland's announcements for these dances read: "The members of the Society of Free Enquirers and others, assemble to dance every Wednesday evening. All

---

<sup>397</sup> French, 215; Leonard W. Levy, "Satan's Last Apostle in Massachusetts," *American Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1953): 17.

<sup>398</sup> Derby, 143, 144.

<sup>399</sup> French, 210.

tending to promote social virtue.”<sup>400</sup> With his claim to virtuous dances, Kneeland preemptively responded to the criticism such mixed-sex evening gatherings would likely attract. In 1833, Kneeland decided to hold a “Four Nights Ball” at Julien Hall as an alternative to the revival and camp meetings sometimes called “Four Days Meetings” during the Second Great Awakening. Kneeland sold tickets for the ball and donated all profits to “charitable purposes.”<sup>401</sup> Kneeland’s Sunday lectures, Wednesday dances, and other gatherings created an alternative calendar of events for those not interested in Boston’s conventional or religiously-based social functions.

While the growing popularity of Kneeland’s lectures and social gatherings was troubling enough, critics were further alarmed by the success of the *Boston Investigator*. Kneeland started his publication on the eve of the mid-nineteenth century print revolution, a period when changes in industrial print methods created the ability to publish with unprecedented speed, on a greater scale, and at a lower cost than ever before.<sup>402</sup> In 1834, Samuel Gridley Howe noted with dismay that “The Boston Investigator strikes off two thousand impressions weekly, which are eagerly taken up, read, and handed from one to another.”<sup>403</sup> Throughout the 1830s, the circulation of the *Investigator* grew steadily. It began with 250 active subscribers in 1831.<sup>404</sup> At the end of its initial year of publication, the number of subscribers had grown to 1,000, a figure that doubled to 2,000 by 1839.<sup>405</sup> As his paper grew more popular, Kneeland struggled to print enough copies to keep up with demand. By the end of 1834, Kneeland began printing 500 additional copies of the

---

<sup>400</sup> *Boston Investigator*, December 14, 1832.

<sup>401</sup> “Four Nights’ Ball,” *Boston Investigator*, February 15, 1833.

<sup>402</sup> For more on the industrial print revolution, see Scott Casper, ed., *The History of the Book in America: Volume 3, The Industrial Book, 1840-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>404</sup> Abner Kneeland, “Prospectus of the Boston Investigator,” February 22, 1839.

<sup>405</sup> French, 208; Kneeland, “Prospectus of the Boston Investigator.”

*Investigator* each week to keep pace with the increased interest in his publication, bringing his total to 2,500.<sup>406</sup> In 1836, his printing runs grew once again to 3,000.

Howe was especially troubled by how easily Americans of any means could access materialist publications like the *Investigator*, as many of these works were available very cheaply or even for free. In the entryway of the Temple of Reason, for instance, Howe observed a table “on which are paraded for sale a numerous collection of books, pamphlets, and tracts,” including “one-cent publications, abounding with blasphemy, ribaldry, and obscenity.”<sup>407</sup> Howe saw this cheap and easy access as part of Kneeland’s purposeful efforts to attract lower or working class readers and followers. These “professedly atheistical” texts, Howe worried, are “printed at the various infidel presses, and sold dog-cheap.” Even more troublesome to Howe was that fact that “in some instances, great pains have been taken to distribute them gratuitously over the country.”<sup>408</sup> Howe argued that the cheap and free circulation of these materialist publications must be stopped because men like Kneeland attempted to spread their blasphemous influence primarily “by means of the establishments of newspapers, and the dissemination of infidel tracts and books.”<sup>409</sup>

Howe was correct in recognizing that printed materials played an important role in the circulation of materialist ideas during the antebellum era. The *Investigator* and its sister publications, in fact, constituted a significant print network during the 1830s. The *Investigator* was one of the founding publications in a newly-formed network of self-identified “liberal” and “free thought” periodicals that purposefully promoted a materialist world view. Other publications that identified as “advocates of the cause of truth” included *The Free Enquirer*, the

---

<sup>406</sup> French, 215.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid, 506.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid, 503.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid, 501.

*Philadelphia National Library*, the *St. Louis Western Examiner*, *The Liberalist*, the *Albany Microscope*, and *Priestcraft Exposed*.<sup>410</sup> *The Free Enquirer*, in particular, is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Throughout the 1830s, the most active decade for most these publications, contributors for each paper frequently corresponded with one another, wrote pieces for one another's papers, and reprinted many of the same articles. This circulation of ideas in print served as one of the only avowed materialist networks to ever exist in the nineteenth-century U.S.

Kneeland also reviewed and advertised many materialist books in the *Investigator*. Several of these books were compilations of works by ancient and modern philosophers like Kneeland's deluxe edition of Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* that he advertised in the *Investigator* as the "Free Enquirer's Family Bible," available in two volumes for five dollars.<sup>411</sup> George Henry Evans also published and sold many materialist tracts that Kneeland advertised in the *Investigator*. Though better known for his work on land reform and as editor of the *Working Man's Advocate* and the *New York Sentinel*, Evans also published both the *Bible of Reason* and *Bible of Nature* that Kneeland frequently used in his Sunday services. These bibles were compilations of works by philosophers, some who promoted a materialist world view. The *Bible of Nature*, for instance, contained scriptures written by wide range of authors including Lucretius, Spinoza, Thomas Paine, Robert Dale Owen and Frances Wright, the last two being figures discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.<sup>412</sup> Both these books contained materialist arguments like the following from the *Bible of Reason*:

If theorists were to confine themselves to nature, and divest their minds of all the prejudices of...the school, and the church, we should hear no more of the soul – of a thinking spiritual being – thought with out material or of a thinking spiritual being –

---

<sup>410</sup> "Regular Toasts," *The Free Enquirer*, 1, no, 18 (February 23, 1834): 142.

<sup>411</sup> French, 216.

<sup>412</sup> John Stewart, *The Bible of Nature*, 2.

thought without material organization. Unshackled by the dogmas...of priestcraft, man would confine himself to truth perceptible in the course of natural perpetuity.<sup>413</sup>

Evans also authored the previously mentioned serial project *Pills for the Pious; A Series of Liberal Tracts*. Evans described his project as follows: “These LIBERAL TRACTS are designed as antidotes to the mental poison diffused throughout the community by means of what are termed *religious* tracts.”<sup>414</sup>

In addition to these philosophical compilations, Kneeland also advertised some original works on materialism, including, most notably, his friend Charles Knowlton’s *Elements of Modern Materialism*.<sup>415</sup> Knowlton, who serves as a key figure in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, believed modern science had irrefutably proven biological structures like the nervous system and physical brain, not the “soul” or “some other immaterial thing seated in the brain,” acted as the source of all mental phenomenon and sensation.<sup>416</sup> Physicians, Knowlton argued, should accordingly focus their treatment on the patient’s physical and corporeal rather than religious or moral needs. Knowlton’s police record reveals just how strongly he privileged the material dimensions of medicine, as he was arrested for grave robbery and illegal dissection in 1823 and sentenced to jail for these charges in 1824.<sup>417</sup> Knowlton’s crimes were driven by his belief that in order to truly understand human anatomy, he needed an actual corpse in front of him: “I soon had such a desire to *see* the various organs which I read so much about, that I ventured out all alone, one night in January, without saying a word to anyone, and took up a subject.”<sup>418</sup> Like other materialists of his era, Knowlton believed strongly in the importance of the material and

---

<sup>413</sup> Benjamin F. Powell, *The Bible of Reason; or, Scriptures of Modern Authors* (New York: George H. Evans, 1828), 145-146.

<sup>414</sup> Evans, *Pills for the Pious*.

<sup>415</sup> Charles Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism: Inculcating the Idea of a Future State, In Which All Will Be More Happy, Under Whatever Circumstances They May Be Placed, Than If They Experienced No Misery In This Life* (Adams, MA: A. Oakey, 1829).

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>417</sup> “The Late Dr. Knowlton’s Autobiography,” *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 45, no. 8 (1851): 119.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid*, 115.

the tangible and thought certain kinds of knowledge could be gained only through the sensory experience of these physical objects.

Knowlton's strict scientific materialist beliefs made him a minority in the early nineteenth-century U.S. medical community. In contrast to Knowlton, many American physicians fiercely defended the existence of the soul and argued that doctors must account for a patient's spiritual and moral well-being in any medical treatment. Medical publications like the *New England Journal of Medicine and Surgery* and the *New York Medical Magazine*, for instance, printed many articles stating that new anatomical discoveries in no way supported the theories of materialism.<sup>419</sup> As Merle Curti has noted, "Virtually all the leading scientists...accepted...the basic doctrine of Christian theology and explicitly tried to show that no contradiction existed between science and religion."<sup>420</sup> George Armstrong, for example, warned his chemistry students against the dangers of materialism in the current "age of skepticism." "Materialism," Armstrong argued, "is as utterly subversive of physics, as it is of morals...If there is ever any part...of human knowledge where atheism should never set foot, that part is the domain of natural science. The evidence and existence of a creator...is written on ever separate atom of structures."<sup>421</sup>

Though their beliefs ran contrary to popular scientific, religious, and cultural views, Knowlton, Kneeland, and Evans' materialist publications, along with Kneeland's Sunday lectures, meetings, and social gatherings constituted something like an organized network of materialism in Boston. While religious historian Jon Butler argues that atheism is challenging to study because "Unbelief lacked the institutional manifestations so obvious in its opposite,"

---

<sup>419</sup> See, for example, "Idea of a New Anatomy of the Brain," *The New York Medical Magazine* (January 1, 1814): 84, or "Censors for the Second Medical District," *The New - England Journal of Medicine and Surgery, and Collateral Branches of Science* 9, no. 3 (July 1820): 309-311.

<sup>420</sup> Curti, 321.

<sup>421</sup> "Notice of a Lecture on Chemistry," *Southern Literary Messenger* 4, no. 6 (June 1838): 368.

Kneeland's work was an example of precisely this institutional presence of disbelief.<sup>422</sup> From the offices of the *Investigator* to Julien Hall and the Temple of Reason, Kneeland created an system of materialist-friendly organizations in antebellum Boston. Critics like Samuel Gridley Howe were by worried these developments. Howe in particular noted a troubling trend he described as "the gradual formation of atheists, infidels, and agrarians, into a party...several of which are regularly established, and proceed with all the order and system of other societies."<sup>423</sup> Indeed, as his work became more well-organized and established, more and more Bostonians began to take note of Kneeland's ideas, though not only for the reasons he hoped.

### **The Blasphemy Trials, 1834-1838**

By 1834, Kneeland's tireless efforts to spread materialist ideas to the widest possible audience attracted the attention of Samuel Dunn Parker, a prominent Boston prosecutor. Incensed by the radical material Kneeland regularly printed in the *Investigator*, as well the growing popularity of his lectures and Sunday services, Parker began looking for ways to silence Kneeland. Parker found his solution in January 1834, when he formally charged Kneeland with blasphemy under a 1782 Massachusetts statue. As Parker's arguments at the trial would soon make clear, blasphemy served as something like a proxy charge to get Kneeland into the courtroom. The accusations Parker leveled against Kneeland quickly moved well beyond blasphemy to include his character, personal beliefs, and political affiliations.

With his 1834 charge, Parker initiated the last blasphemy trial that would ever take place in the state of Massachusetts, a complex legal battle that would last four years and take place in five separate trials between 1834 and 1838. Parker's original indictment listed three counts of

---

<sup>422</sup> Butler, 20.

<sup>423</sup> Howe, 504.

blasphemy against Kneeland based on three separate articles published in the *Boston Investigator*. The first two articles, “Cogitations of an Infidel, No. 2: On Faith,” and “Cogitations of an Infidel, No. 3: On Prejudice,” were actually reprints from the *Free Enquirer* written by an unknown author who called himself “Ben Krapac.” These articles appeared in the *Investigator* on December 13, 1833, and December 20, 1833, respectively.

The first article named in the indictment allegedly “ridicule[d]” the practice of prayer, while the other supposedly contained “obscene” comments about the immaculate conception.<sup>424</sup> Parker refused to comment on the precise content of these articles in court, asserting instead that the “gross, scandalous, and indecent” content of these essays was “too shocking to all Christians, too obscene and too revolting to decency, to be discussed here.”<sup>425</sup> The following are some of the objectionable passages on prayer that Parker would not repeat in court:

Think of the prayers that are offered up every...day in this country...think of their contradictory character; one is asking for one thing, another for another; one for rain, another for dry weather...Now, can any one conceive of, how all these prayers can be either heard or answered by one person?...

It...appears to me, that God must have an ear very different from any thing I can conceive of...and I am equally at a loss to imagine how he could recollect them all...Perhaps he keeps a set of books, and clerks, to enter all the prayers in; but...when would he find time to examine those books?...

I now in sober reality ask, what conception can any one form of a being capable of... hearing, remembering, and answering, such an innumerable mass of contradictory petitions, continually pouring in from all quarters?<sup>426</sup>

The obscene comments on the immaculate conception in the second article were actually part of an extended quotation from Voltaire. While Parker considered the quotation questionable for its

---

<sup>424</sup> “Commonwealth v. Kneeland,” in Peter Oxenbridge Thacher, *Reports of Criminal Cases: Tried in the Municipal Court in the City of Boston, Before Peter Oxenbridge Thatcher, 1823-1843* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1845), 346.

<sup>425</sup> Samuel Dunn Parker, *Report of the Arguments of the Attorney of the Commonwealth: At the Trials of Abner Kneeland, For Blasphemy, In the Municipal and Supreme Courts, in Boston, January and May, 1834* (Boston: Beals, Homer, and Co., 1834), 14.

<sup>426</sup> Ben Krapac, “Cogitations of an Infidel, No. 2: On Faith,” *Boston Investigator*, December 13, 1833.



frequent use of the coarse word “testicle,” it was the final line that contained the most dangerous implication:

A Parisian would be surprised to hear that the Hottentots cut out one of the testicles of every little boy; and a Hottentot would be surprised to hear that the Parisians leave every little boy two... The Frenchman will ask *why* the Hottentot allow their boys but one testicle, but that same Frenchman, though he be too stupid to understand the laws of evidence, or too illiterate to apply them to history, firmly believes that Jesus Christ was begotten without any testicles at all.<sup>427</sup>

These two articles, however, received almost no mention in court, as it was the third article that proved most significant to the case.

Kneeland’s first trial, in fact, turned largely on the question of this third article. Unlike the previous two essays, Kneeland himself had written this piece, a fact he did not contest. Kneeland published the article in the December 20, 1833 issue of the *Investigator* after Thomas Whittemore, editor of the *Trumpet*, one of the leading Universalists publications in Boston, requested that Kneeland clarify his relationship with the Universalist church.<sup>428</sup> Kneeland responded by explaining his own beliefs in contrast to those of the Universalists:

1. Universalists believe in a god which I do not; but believe that their god, with all his moral attributes, (aside from nature itself,) is nothing more than a chimera of their own imagination.
2. Universalists believe in Christ, which I do not; but believe that the whole story concerning him is... a fable and a fiction...
3. Universalists believe in miracles, which I do not; but believe that every pretension to them can be accounted for on natural principles or else is... attributed to mere trick and imposture
4. Universalists believe in the resurrection of the dead, in immortality and eternal life, which I do not; but believe that all life is mortal, that death is an eternal extinction of life... and that no individual life is, ever was, or ever will be eternal.<sup>429</sup>

---

<sup>427</sup> Ben Krapac, “Cogitations of an Infidel, No. 3: On Prejudice,” *Boston Investigator*, December 20, 1833.

<sup>428</sup> Burkholder, 6.

<sup>429</sup> Abner Kneeland, “To the Editor of the *Trumpet*,” *Boston Investigator*, December 20, 1833.

While the entire article was full of scandalous content, it was the opening phrase of the first sentence, “Universalists believe in a god which I do not,” that received the most scrutiny in court.<sup>430</sup> Parker offered this phrase as his main evidence of Kneeland’s blasphemy, arguing that these words clearly demonstrated Kneeland was guilty of “*willfully blaspheming the holy name of God,*” a crime prohibited by the 1782 Massachusetts blasphemy statute.<sup>431</sup>

Kneeland responded to Parker with an unusual defense strategy, claiming that a single piece of punctuation would prove his innocence in the matter. In a lengthy speech before the court, Kneeland argued that because he had not included a comma after the word “god,” the sentence implied only that he “believe[d] in a god, differing in some respects from the god of the universalists,” not that he absolutely denied the existence of any god.<sup>432</sup> If one meant to profess complete disbelief, Kneeland claimed, the sentence would not have contained the limiting article “a” before “god” but would have included a comma after “god” to read: “Universalists believe in god, which I do not.”<sup>433</sup> The jury, however, was unconvinced by Kneeland’s grammatical defense, and quickly found him guilty.<sup>434</sup> Parker was greatly pleased the jury had not been tricked by “the very elaborate...ingenious glosses” and “minute criticism” Kneeland had used in his efforts to “explain away” his charges.<sup>435</sup> Kneeland, however, decided to appeal his case, and it was sent to the supreme court of Massachusetts.

Kneeland’s second and third trials both ended in hung juries. In each case, much to the consternation of the judge and other jurors, a single dissenting juror refused to find him guilty.

---

<sup>430</sup> Ibid.

<sup>431</sup> Parker, 6.

<sup>432</sup> Abner Kneeland, *An Introduction to the Defence of Abner Kneeland, Charged With Blasphemy* (Boston: 1834), 19.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid, 28-29.

<sup>434</sup> Leonard Levy, *The Law of the Commonwealth and Chief Justice Shaw* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 43.

<sup>435</sup> Parker, 23.

After the death of his defense attorney, Andrew Dunlap, Kneeland represented himself in his fourth trial. This trial, which took place in November 1835, ended with a guilty verdict from Judge Samuel Wilde, the same judge who had presided at Kneeland's third trial. Though Kneeland's case was technically decided by a jury, Wilde plainly told the jurors that Kneeland was guilty of blasphemy and the jury returned its verdict accordingly.<sup>436</sup>

Kneeland made one final appeal and his case was heard for the last time in March 1836. Once again, Kneeland decided to represent himself. This time, Kneeland faced a new prosecutor, Massachusetts Attorney General James T. Austin, and a new judge, Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw. Though the trial took place in 1836, Shaw did not issue a final opinion until 1838. In a decision one legal historian describes as "one of the worst opinions...written by Chief Justice Shaw...in American history," Shaw upheld Kneeland's guilty conviction.<sup>437</sup> Following his conviction, Kneeland wrote a letter to Shaw stating that he was ready "to undergo the penalty of that barbarous, cruel, absurd law."<sup>438</sup> Under the 1782 Massachusetts blasphemy statute, Shaw could have sentenced Kneeland to any of the following: "Imprisonment not exceeding Twelve months...sitting in the Pillory...Whipping...or sitting on the Gallows with a Rope about the Neck."<sup>439</sup> Of these options, Shaw chose to put Kneeland in jail for sixty days.

## **Materialism Incarnate**

Throughout its duration, Kneeland's case was a sensational affair that garnered much newspaper and periodical coverage in the New England area and beyond. Kneeland also published a book on his trial, *An Introduction to the Defence of Abner Kneeland*. In response to

---

<sup>436</sup> Commager, 37.

<sup>437</sup> Levy, *Blasphemy*, 413.

<sup>438</sup> Kneeland to Shaw, June 1, 1838, *Shaw Papers*, Boston Social Law Library.

<sup>439</sup> Levy, "Satan's Last Apostle," 17.

Kneeland's book, "some friends of religion and law" decided to publish Parker's arguments so that that "those who wish to read both sides of this case will have an opportunity."<sup>440</sup> Their efforts resulted in the *Report of the Arguments of the Attorney of the Commonwealth*, a book described as "Collected and published at the request of some Christians of various denominations."<sup>441</sup>

Historians, however, have shown little interest in *Commonwealth v. Kneeland*. Mary Whitcomb did include a very brief description of Kneeland's trial in her 1904 biographical study of Kneeland.<sup>442</sup> After Whitcomb, Henry Steele Commager's 1935 article "The Blasphemy of Abner Kneeland" appears to be the earliest historical study focused specifically on Kneeland's case.<sup>443</sup> Leonard Levy, one of Commager's graduate students, continued Commager's research on Kneeland, and Levy's work now contains the most comprehensive coverage of Kneeland's case. Levy began by updating Commager's original 1935 article with his own findings, publishing his new version of the essay in 1953 as "Satan's Last Apostle in Massachusetts."<sup>444</sup> In 1973, Levy published an edited collection of documents on Kneeland's case, *Blasphemy in Massachusetts: Freedom of Conscience and the Abner Kneeland Case*.<sup>445</sup> Though Levy argues that *Commonwealth v. Kneeland* was the "most important and most colorful of all American

---

<sup>440</sup> Samuel Dunn Parker, *Report of the Arguments of the Attorney of the Commonwealth, At the Trials of Abner Kneeland, For Blasphemy, in the Municipal and Supreme Courts, in Boston, January and May, 1834* (Boston: Beals, Homer, and Co., 1834).

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>442</sup> Whitcomb, 346-347.

<sup>443</sup> Henry Steele Commager, "The Blasphemy of Abner Kneeland," *The New England Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (March 1935): 29-41.

<sup>444</sup> Leonard W. Levy, "Satan's Last Apostle in Massachusetts," *American Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1953): 16-30.

<sup>445</sup> Leonard Levy, ed. *Blasphemy in Massachusetts: Freedom of Conscience and the Abner Kneeland Case: A Documentary Record* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973). Levy also briefly mentions Kneeland's trial in two of his other books: *Legacy of Suppression: Freedom of Speech and Press in Early American History* and *Blasphemy: Verbal Offense Against the Sacred*. See Leonard Levy, *Legacy of Suppression: Freedom of Speech and Press in Early American History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1960), 213; Leonard Levy, *Blasphemy: Verbal Offense Against the Sacred, From Moses to Salman Rushdie* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 413-423.

blasphemy cases,” almost no other historians have studied Kneeland’s case.<sup>446</sup> As Levy own work suggests, Kneeland’s trial has mainly attracted the attention of legal historians interested in issues of free speech and freedom of the press in the U.S.

Looking at the trial for reasons beyond its merit as a free speech case reveals several lengthy debates about American values and beliefs during the antebellum era. In particular, the trial itself as well as the commentary surrounding the trial contained many arguments about Kneeland’s materialist beliefs and their alleged danger and corrosive influence on American society. In each of his trials, the prosecution portrayed Kneeland as living proof of the myriad ways materialist beliefs would corrupt an individual. Kneeland’s own life, they argued, demonstrated the potentially disastrous moral, economic, and political implications of his materialist philosophy. As they listed each of the ways Kneeland’s materialism degraded his morality, character, and work, Kneeland’s prosecutors and critics revealed the host of controversial beliefs that they believed the doctrine of “materialism” represented. Materialism, as Kneeland’s trial demonstrates, became something of a catch-all term some Americans used to articulate a particular set of concerns about antebellum society.

The issues brought up during Kneeland’s trial quickly moved well beyond his blasphemy. Parker, in fact, explicitly argued that Kneeland’s blasphemy was only the start of a dangerous path to other radical social and economic transformations: “*Blasphemy*,” he argued, “*is but one part of the system...It is but one step...in the road to ruin.*” This system, Parker explained, “is matured and graduated,” and it began with the denial of god:

Atheism is to dethrone the Judge of heaven and earth; a future state of rewards and punishments, is to be described as a nursery bug-bear; moral and religions restraints are to be removed by proclaiming death to be an eternal sleep; marriage to be denounced as an unlawful restraint upon shifting affections, a tyrannical invasion upon the rights of the fickle passion of love...and as a wicked...union cunningly devised to keep property in

---

<sup>446</sup> Levy, *Blasphemy*, 413.

rich families; illicit sexual intercourse to be encouraged by physiological checks upon contraception; the laws of property are to be repealed as restrictions upon ‘the greatest possible good;’ a community of property to be established; all children to be supported out of the common fund...Such are the connected objects, combined into *one system*.<sup>447</sup>

Like many antebellum Americans, Parker saw religion as a necessary component of the social order and social stability. The materialist denial of religion, he warned, would destroy the stabilizing morality of religion and lead to a dangerous cascade of social evils that threatened everything from sexual propriety to the sacrament of marriage and individual property rights.

Parker elaborated on each of these points throughout the trial. He opened his case by explaining why Kneeland’s materialist beliefs and derision of Christianity effectively served as a direct assault of the U.S. government, the constitution, and the social stability of the nation. In his two hour opening statement at Kneeland’s initial trial, Parker laboriously argued the point that the government and religion relied on one another, and any attack on religion was thus tantamount to an attack on the U.S. government. “Government,” Parker claimed, “depends upon...the Christian Religion as its basis, and as the strong foundation of morality, duty and Law.”<sup>448</sup> “If the mass of the people were debauched from the principles of religion,” he argued, “the prostration of our excellent Constitution and laws would soon follow. These are interwoven together.”<sup>449</sup> To further support his assertion, Parker offered the following example: “Destroy religion, blaspheme God, ridicule the Holy Scriptures, cause it to be universally believed that death is an eternal sleep, and there is no state of future rewards and punishment; and what security has the Commonwealth?”<sup>450</sup> Parker concluded with the sweeping statement that “every attempt to destroy religion...has a direct tendency to destroy...the safety and security of the

---

<sup>447</sup> Parker, 81-82.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid, 13.

public peace.”<sup>451</sup> Outside the trial, Howe echoed similar sentiments in his attacks on Kneeland. “Religion, morality, order, and law, are essential,” Howe wrote, “and we have a right to demand and extort conformity to them.”<sup>452</sup>

Parker tried to further demonstrate Kneeland’s danger by highlighting his efforts to spread his materialist beliefs and convince other Americans to join him in infidelity. Kneeland was guilty not only of blasphemy, Parker argued, but of “Open brazen faced infidelity.”<sup>453</sup> At one point during the trial, Parker ominously warned the judge and jury that “Fanny Wright, Robert Dale Owen, Knowlton, and Abner Kneeland” were together “attempting to start a REVOLUTION” by spreading blasphemous ideas, many of which had already led to the “sacrifice” of a “number of unhappy victims...upon the altar of infidelity.”<sup>454</sup> (The alleged revolution brewing among these figures is discussed in great detail in Chapter 3). Parker was far from the only American to worry about the growth of materialism in the U.S. Other commentators, too, voiced concerns about the spread of materialism during the antebellum era, such as a writer for the *North American Review* who worried that materialist beliefs were becoming “more prevalent in modern times.”<sup>455</sup> Another author for the same publication warned Americans that “the stifling influences of materialism” must be “swept away” so the nation could be “rescue[d]...from the baneful influence of that materialism, which has lain with a weight like death upon universal science.”<sup>456</sup>

Parker was especially concerned that Kneeland made his ideas so easily accessible to the lower classes, the group he believed was in the greatest need of religious influence and also the

---

<sup>451</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>452</sup> Howe, 56.

<sup>453</sup> Parker, 81.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>455</sup> “Abercrombie on the Intellectual Powers,” 499.

<sup>456</sup> “Review: Coleridge,” *The North American Review*, 40, no. 87 (April 1835): 350-351.

most vulnerable to the dangerous teachings of Kneeland's materialism. Parker, like many antebellum Americans, saw religious practice as a mark of civilization and status. As Richard Bushman has argued, most Americans believed that "all...refined virtues were rooted in Christian principles and improved with compliance to God's law."<sup>457</sup> Parker described the *Investigator* as "a Newspaper, cheap – and sent into a thousand families...a thousand may be injured by this Newspaper so widely circulated, so easily read – so coarsely expressed – so industriously spread abroad."<sup>458</sup> Parker noted that Kneeland specifically sought "converts among the poor...with a view first to demoralize them, and to make them apt instruments to root up the foundations of society, & make all property common"<sup>459</sup> Materialism, as Parker explained here, threatened not only the class hierarchy of the U.S., but also the venerated principle of private property. Samuel Gridley Howe thoroughly agreed with Parker that Kneeland hoped to stir up class conflict with his materialism. According to Howe, Kneeland's materialism was "sowing discord between the various classes of the community."<sup>460</sup> Kneeland and his followers, Howe argued, "make open and undisguised efforts to stir up the passion of the poor against the rich; and they propose means to remove what they call 'the tyranny of the rich.'"<sup>461</sup>

In addition to class, materialism also posed a threat to the traditional gender order and antebellum notions of sexual restraint and propriety. Howe, for instance, was horrified by the mixed-sex nature of Kneeland's lectures and services. He described Kneeland's Sunday services as "orgies" where "the seats in the pit fill promiscuously with men and women."<sup>462</sup> Howe's description of Kneeland's followers as "licentious men and misguided females, who congregate

---

<sup>457</sup> Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 325.

<sup>458</sup> Parker, 13-14.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>460</sup> Howe, 502.

<sup>461</sup> Samuel Gridley Howe, "Atheism in New-England," *New-England Magazine* 8 (January 1835): 59.

<sup>462</sup> Howe, 507, 504.



in this temple of iniquity” further suggested the possibility of sexual impropriety at Kneeland’s services, as did his accusation that Kneeland’s teachings added “new incentives to the gratification of libertinism and lust.”<sup>463</sup> Parker took these charges a step further during Kneeland’s trial. “I have been informed,” he noted ominously, “there are beds in the Dressing Rooms at the Federal Street Theater.”<sup>464</sup>

Parker argued that Kneeland used “music and dancing” as well as “frequent balls and other enticements” to attract “young men and women together, to instruct them that there is no God or religion to restrain their passions.”<sup>465</sup> Because of his sexually permissive beliefs, Parker believed Kneeland’s teachings held special appeal to “the young and...the lovers of pleasure.”<sup>466</sup> Parker also worried that Kneeland was teaching wicked methods of birth control and contraception: “I believe also...that some secrets of physiology, said to be worth knowing to persons fond of certain pleasures, some checks to a too great increase of population, are now taught to the initiated in the schools of infidelity.”<sup>467</sup> Howe, too, was incensed by Kneeland’s support for education about contraceptive methods when he discovered that Kneeland had “lewd pamphlets” and “books, giving directions for the gratification of animal desire without fear of the natural consequences.”<sup>468</sup> These “books” Howe referred to were, in fact, the first widely available publications on birth control to be published in the U.S., and they were written by two of Kneeland’s associates: Robert D. Owen’s 1830 *Moral Physiology: or a Brief and Plain*

---

<sup>463</sup> Ibid, 507.

<sup>464</sup> Parker, 88.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>468</sup> Howe, 60, 58.

*Treatise on the Population Question* and Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy, or the Private Companion of Young Married People*.<sup>469</sup>

Howe believed Kneeland's views on sex and gender further led to a degradation of the sacrament of marriage. Howe argued that Kneeland saw marriage "merely as an arrangement to be taken up and laid aside at pleasure," a view that "deride[d] the sacredness of the marriage compact."<sup>470</sup> Parker agreed, claiming that Kneeland respected "no lawfulness in the institution of marriage."<sup>471</sup> Here both were likely referring to Kneeland's argument that "There should be no laws in relation to marriage. It is a civil contract between the parties...which [is] binding as long as the parties mutually agree...The parties who make the contact can dissolve it at pleasure by mutual contract."<sup>472</sup> In an effort to reinforce traditional marriage and gender roles, Howe insisted that men must look after their women more closely to protect them from Kneeland's reckless teachings: "We would...call upon fathers, and brothers, and husbands, to look about them and know the dangers to which their daughters, and sisters, and wives are weekly and daily exposed."<sup>473</sup> Without this protective male presence, Howe warned that Kneeland would "make...all women as common as brutes."<sup>474</sup>

The politics of Kneeland's materialism served as another source of controversy during his trial. Though Kneeland actually made few remarks about party alliances throughout his career, his vocal support for working-class rights led his critics to quickly label him a "Jackson man."<sup>475</sup>

---

<sup>469</sup> Robert D. Owen, *Moral Physiology: or a Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question* (New York: 1830); Charles Knowlton, *Fruits of Philosophy, or the Private Companion of Young Married People* (New York: 1832). For more on Knowlton, see Sripati Chandrasekhar, *Reproductive Physiology and Birth Control: The Writings of Charles Knowlton and Annie Besant* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2002).

<sup>470</sup> Howe, 507.

<sup>471</sup> Parker, 81.

<sup>472</sup> Kneeland, *Review of the Evidences of Christianity*, 194.

<sup>473</sup> Howe, 509.

<sup>474</sup> Parker, 82.

<sup>475</sup> The historiography on "Jacksonian democracy" is immense. For a basic overview of the topic, see Harry Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990).

John Barton Derby argued that Kneeland had created a dangerous “connexion between the Boston Jackson and Infidel parties.”<sup>476</sup> As evidence to support his claim, Derby pointed out that “Kneeland advertises in his paper...portraits of Jackson...for sale at his office.”<sup>477</sup> He also claimed that the *Investigator* was one of “only two Jackson newspapers in Boston”<sup>478</sup>

Kneeland’s politics were scrutinized even more carefully after the hung jury of his second trial in November 1834. The single dissident juror in the case was Charles Gordon Greene. Greene was a very public Jackson-supporter, a leader of the Massachusetts Democratic party, and editor of a democratic newspaper.<sup>479</sup> Derby believed that Greene’s place on the jury was not a coincidence: “Mr. Kneeland, having published in his paper a most obscene and blasphemous article...is...put on trial. Most extraordinarily, it so happens, that the other Jackson editor is on the Jury to try him!”<sup>480</sup> An article from the *Boston Atlas* stated the point more clearly: “This reverend martyr in the cause of Satan was recently saved from conviction, on a charge of blasphemy, by the agency of his brother Jacksonian.”<sup>481</sup> Written by an ardent Whig supporter, this article urged Christians to defeat the godless Democratic party at the polls:

A new position has been assumed by one branch of the JACKSON PARTY; and, it would seem, that the BELIEF AND WORSHIP OF THE DEITY is expected to be PUT DOWN by the ultra radicals...Are the SONS OF THE PILGRIMS prepared to surrender the destinies of this glorious Commonwealth into the hands of INIFIDELS and BLASPHEMERS? Shall this hallowed soil be polluted by the sway of ATHEISM? *Awake, CHRISTIANS OF ALL SECTS! AWAKE, AND TO THE POOLS, EVERY MAN WHO BELIEVES IN GOD!*<sup>482</sup>

As his trial made clear, the charges leveled against Kneeland went well beyond his blasphemy. Many Americans strongly believed Parker’s argument that atheism was simply the

---

<sup>476</sup> Derby, 145.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>479</sup> French, 214.

<sup>480</sup> Derby, 145.

<sup>481</sup> “To All Thinking Men,” *The Daily Atlas*, November 8, 1834.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid. For more on the role of religion in the Whig party, see Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

first step in a long line of vices and degradation that were sure to follow unbelievers. Howe suggested as much when he warned that Kneeland's materialism "strike[s] at the very foundations of society."<sup>483</sup> As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. has argued, most antebellum Americans saw religion "as a great stabilizing influence in society."<sup>484</sup> Those who lacked the moral and restraining influence of religion threatened everything from the security of the nation to class order and hierarchy, individual property rights, sexual propriety, traditional gender roles, and the sacrament of marriage. Kneeland's materialism carried the implications of this entire litany of social, economic, and political dangers.

### **The Petition**

Kneeland's 1838 conviction attracted the attention of many New Englanders, including a group of unlikely supporters. Shortly after his trial ended, William Ellery Channing and Ellis Gray Loring wrote a petition calling for Kneeland to be unconditionally pardoned. For their petition, Channing and Loring obtained the signatures of 168 prominent intellectuals and public figures of the day, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Parker, George Ripley, Amos Bronson Alcott, and George Bancroft. As Henry Commager Steele has observed, the names on this list "read like a 'Who's Who' among the reformers – dangerous intellectuals and eccentrics all."<sup>485</sup>

---

<sup>483</sup> Howe, 507.

<sup>484</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1953), 350. For another argument about the connections between antebellum religion and social order or control, see Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978). Johnson argues that the Finneyite revivals, by bringing workers into a religion that focused on ideals of piety and self-restraint, gave the middle-class a new way to create a "well-regulated, orderly" society in the absence of paternalistic controls of the older labor order. Religion, Johnson claims, thus provided the bourgeoisie with a "solution to the social disorder and moral confusion that attended the creation of a free-labor economy." See Johnson, 135.

<sup>485</sup> Steele, 29.

In the petition, Channing and Loring defended Kneeland largely on the grounds of “freedom of speech and the press.”<sup>486</sup> Though they called for the state to respect Kneeland’s “civil and religious rights... guaranteed by the constitution of the United States and this Commonwealth,” Channing and Loring took care to note that they did not share Kneeland’s materialist beliefs, which they called “as pernicious and degrading as they are false.” Their defense of Kneeland was thus limited and included several statements that clearly distanced the authors from Kneeland’s materialism. The petition concluded with the argument that “religion needs no support from penal law” and that religion was in fact “grossly dishonored by interpositions for its defence, which imply that it cannot be trusted to its own strength.” Such “truths essential to the existence of society,” Channing wrote, are “so palpable as to need no protection from the magistrate.”<sup>487</sup>

Privately, Channing expressed mixed opinions about Kneeland’s case. In a letter to Loring, Channing wrote that it was “shocking” that “a man should be punished for his opinions.” At the same time, however, Channing recognized that Kneeland had tread on very perilous ground by “assailing, in obscene and contemptuous language, the opinions which are most dear and sacred to all around him.”<sup>488</sup> Many years after the trial, in a letter to another friend, Channing described his “increasing compassion” for men like Kneeland. “I see more and more,” he explained, “how little they comprehend the spiritual life which Christ came to give, how rooted they are to the earth, how swallowed up in the outward, how blind to the true dignity of the human soul.”<sup>489</sup> In this particular passage, Channing articulated some of the most common

---

<sup>486</sup> A copy of the petition can be found in William Henry Channing, *The Life of William Ellery Channing* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1899), 504-505.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>488</sup> William Ellery Channing, Letter to Ellis Gray Loring, March 1838, reprinted in William Henry Channing, *The Life of William Ellery Channing* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1899), 506.

<sup>489</sup> William Ellery Channing, Letter to Joseph Tuckerman, July 1838, reprinted in William Henry Channing, *The Life of William Ellery Channing* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1899), 506-507.

critiques of early nineteenth-century materialism, including the belief that materialists had no conception of a spiritual universe or higher existence. Channing echoed these concerns in another letter, writing he worried that “the inward, spiritual, higher interests of humanity are little comprehended, prized, or sought.”<sup>490</sup>

Many who signed the petition had similarly complex relationships to Kneeland and his materialism. Emerson, for instance, displayed a great deal of ambivalence in response to Kneeland’s ideas.<sup>491</sup> Given his general opinion of Kneeland, it is somewhat surprising that Emerson signed the petition. Emerson had previously critiqued Kneeland in many of the same terms as Howe and Derby, writing about the “miserable babble of Kneeland” and “the Julien Hall gentry” or “the orgies of the Julien Hall.”<sup>492</sup> In a journal entry dated April 26, 1834, Emerson did give a slightly softer take on Kneeland:

Good is promoted by the worst. Don’t despise even the Kneelands... In the great cycle they find their place & like the insect that fertilizes the soil... or the scavenger bustard that removes carrion they perform a beneficence they know not of, & cannot hinder if they would.<sup>493</sup>

Like Emerson, William Lloyd Garrison, too, had a complex relationship with Kneeland and his materialism. Prior to Kneeland’s trial, the two had met in 1830 when Kneeland invited Garrison to speak at Julien Hall when no other institution in Boston was willing to host the abolitionist.<sup>494</sup> Garrison and Kneeland were outspoken advocates for many of the same issues, including abolition, interracial marriage, and women’s rights. Garrison, however, also spoke out

---

<sup>490</sup> William Ellery Channing, Letter to Lant Carpenter, 1839, William Henry Channing, *The Life of William Ellery Channing* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1899), 592.

<sup>491</sup> For a more extended discussion of Emerson and Kneeland, see Robert E. Burkholder, “Emerson, Kneeland, and the Divinity School Address,” *American Literature* 58, no. 1 (March 1886): 1-14.

<sup>492</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume 5, 1835-1838*, ed. William H. Gillman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 71, 256; *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume 4, 1832-1834*, ed. William Henry Gilman (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1964), 326.

<sup>493</sup> *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume 4*, 281.

<sup>494</sup> Archibald Henry Grimke, *William Lloyd Garrison, the Abolitionist* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1891), 90.

strongly against materialism. Garrison, for instance, gave a lecture designed to “refute the doctrine of materialists, who affirm, that there is no such entity as a spiritual substance, but that mind is matter” when addressing the Young Men’s Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia. Rooting his arguments largely in personal experience, Garrison explained that “during the thirty years of my life, I have never been able to locate my *body* in two places...at the same time; but I have found no difficulty in letting my *mind* range here, there, every where...Human thoughts and opinions may ultimately possess an earthly omnipresence.”<sup>495</sup> Like other critics, Garrison saw materialism’s corporeal understanding of the brain as an overly reductionist view. Garrison further argued against the materialist conception of death: “Death is not to separate the mind from matter, but...to raise it from its present subjection to matter to a glorious triumph over it.”<sup>496</sup> Garrison thus had an ambiguous relationship with materialist ideas. Though he was willing to read and publish such material, his views on mind and thought tended toward immaterial conceptions of these phenomena. His interest in materialism seemed to come mainly from shared political affinities as the philosophy was often wedded to several radical political and reform movements, an important set of connections discussed in detail in the next chapter of this dissertation.

### **Conclusion: Salubria**

Though the petition attracted some attention, it did not result in a pardon for Kneeland. Following his conviction, Kneeland served a sixty-day jail sentence, stepped down as editor of the *Investigator*, and moved his family from Boston to the Iowa territory, where he spent the remainder of his life in a failed attempt to establish Salubria, a utopian community built around

---

<sup>495</sup> The text of Garrison’s lecture was printed as “Mr. Garrison’s Letter,” *The Liberator*, June 4, 1836.

<sup>496</sup> William Ellery Channing, Letter to Ruth P. Olney, March 6, 1829, William Henry Channing, *The Life of William Ellery Channing* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1899), 442.

“reason” and “free thinking.”<sup>497</sup> Kneeland drew inspiration for Salubria from Wright’s Nashoba utopian experiment in Tennessee and Owen’s New Harmony in Illinois. Located near present-day Farmington, Iowa, most locals remembered the project simply as “the infidel colony,” a dark spot in Van Buren County history.<sup>498</sup> One account of the project concluded with the assessment that “Salubria did not endure as an atheist colony, but after Kneeland’s death gradually became a comfortable farming community, with orthodox religious sentiments.”<sup>499</sup>

Just as outsiders recognized Salubria only for its disbelief, most antebellum Americans focused solely on the anti-spiritual nature of materialism and its attendant implications for the existence of god. Though materialist philosophers actually debated a wide variety of topics ranging from theories of causation and identity to the question of the ultimate nature of reality, American critics fixated on the atheist dimensions of materialism. As Kneeland’s example demonstrated, these Americans worried most about the loss of social control, restraint, or order that they believed would follow from the rejection of religion. For such critics, materialism appeared to be a corrupt philosophical foundation that would lead to a host of other radical beliefs and practices. Branded by critics as the “hoary-headed apostle of Satan,” Abner Kneeland stood as a living example of these fears embodied in a single individual.<sup>500</sup> His life represented the licentiousness, vice, and dangerous beliefs that were sure to follow from materialism. Though an unusual figure, Kneeland was not alone in his materialist beliefs. A few other antebellum Americans, including two of Kneeland's colleagues, Charles Knowlton and Frances Wright, shared Kneeland's interest in materialism. Knowlton and Wright, however, were willing to take Kneeland's agenda and push it one step further, explicitly linking materialist

---

<sup>497</sup> Kneeland died in Salubria in 1844. Salubria was located near present-day Farmington, Iowa.

<sup>498</sup> *Van Buren County, Compiled By Writers’ Program of the Work Projects Administration* (T.L Keith, Farmington, Iowa: 1940), 14.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>500</sup> Howe, 507.



philosophy to a radical reform agenda that promised to completely rid the U.S. of all religious superstition.

### Chapter 3:

#### Materialism, Science, and Radical Reform: Charles Knowlton and Frances Wright

Historians generally agree that organized efforts to “improve” self or society held special significance during the antebellum era, a time which Steven Mintz describes as “America’s first age of reform.”<sup>501</sup> From temperance and abolition to the school, prison, and asylum reform movements, many historians have recognized the immense role religion played in these efforts.<sup>502</sup> Most, in fact, consider religion so crucial to antebellum reform, as well as the culture of this period more generally, that it is easy to assume religious fervor was an indispensable factor in early American visions of social transformation. Such a view, however, obscures another side of mid nineteenth-century reform and the question of how explicitly *anti*-religious belief systems may have shaped social projects during the same era.<sup>503</sup> Though associated primarily with other causes, both Dr. Charles Knowlton, a Massachusetts physician, and Frances Wright, the infamous Scottish-born lecturer and freethinker, promoted materialist ideas that informed their more commonly recognized work. Knowlton and Wright, who were colleagues

---

<sup>501</sup> Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America’s Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), xiii.

<sup>502</sup> See, for instance, Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); T. Gregory Garvey, *Creating the Culture of Reform in Antebellum America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006); Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>503</sup> The conclusion to this chapter contains more detailed discussion of the historiography on irreligion in the U.S.

of Abner Kneeland, as mentioned briefly in Chapter 3, each drew upon concepts central to philosophical materialism as inspiration and justification for their reform agendas.<sup>504</sup>

Looking at the ways Knowlton and Wright connected materialist philosophy to their projects first suggests a new way to look at reform during this period. Debates surrounding materialism from the 1820s through the 1840s reveal the existence of a series of avowedly secular reform programs, many of which shared important connections to the burgeoning freethought institutions of the era.<sup>505</sup> How did these efforts differ from their more mainstream counterparts? Did their ideas ever translate into direct social or political change? And what might the reception and outcome of these materialist-driven projects tell us about the state of religion, science, and reform in the U.S. during this period?

Knowlton and Wright reversed the oft-assumed relationship between religion and reform, portraying religion as an oppressive force that actively worked against social transformation. For them, materialism held the promise of an alternative, non-religious, and more egalitarian society. In *Elements of Modern Materialism*, his major work on the topic, Knowlton argued for the need to eliminate a host of “superstitious” claims that had become deeply embedded in American culture. These mistaken beliefs, Knowlton declared, threatened to mislead an entire nation, distracting them from the pressing issues before them (ie: economic inequality and racial

---

<sup>504</sup> Samuel Dunn Parker, attorney for the commonwealth at one of Kneeland's trials, hinted at this fact when he proclaimed dramatically that “Fanny Wright, . . . Knowlton, and Abner Kneeland” were together “attempting to start a REVOLUTION among us” by spreading blasphemous ideas, many of which had already led to the “sacrifice” of a “number of unhappy victims . . . upon the altar of infidelity.” See Samuel Dunn Parker, *Report of the Arguments of the Attorney of the Commonwealth, At the Trials of Abner Kneeland, For Blasphemy, In the Municipal and Supreme Courts, In Boston* (Boston: Beals, Homer, and Co., 1834), 82.

<sup>505</sup> As explained in Chapter 1, I use Susan Jacoby's definition of free thought. Freethought, Jacoby argues, is best understood as “a phenomenon running the gamut from the truly antireligious – those who regarded all religion as a form of superstition and wished to reduce its influence in every aspect of society – to those who adhered to a private, unconventional faith revering some form of God . . . but at odds with orthodox religious authority. American freethinkers have included deists . . . agnostics; and unabashed atheists. What the many types of freethinkers shared . . . was a rationalist approach to fundamental questions of earthly existence – a conviction that the affairs of human beings should be governed not by faith in the supernatural but by a reliance on reason and evidence adduced from the natural world.” See Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 4.

discrimination) by encouraging a misplaced obsession with an afterlife that did not exist. True knowledge, Knowlton asserted, consisted of facts obtained through and verified by empirical inquiry and materialist epistemological standards of the tangible and the material that religious belief could never meet.

Though Frances Wright's work included less explicit discussion of materialism than Knowlton's, she was interested in many of the same ideas Knowlton labeled as materialist. Believing that education was the key to a truly egalitarian society, Wright campaigned for a system of state-run, free-thought based education that would be accessible to children of all classes. She called for a method of instruction rooted in a theory of knowledge very similar to Knowlton's, one based on secular and empirically grounded analysis. Though her vision of a national school system was never realized, Wright brought one version of this approach to life with her 1829 Hall of Science. Located in New York city, the Hall was a freethought institution where radical ideas like materialism could be openly discussed and taught. Patrons could also find printed works on materialism in the Hall's bookstore and library as well as in the *Free Enquirer*, the newspaper Wright ran out of the basement of the Hall.

In the broader context of American materialism, Knowlton and Wright's work represented a more hard-line move against organized religion than Joseph Priestley, Thomas Cooper, and, in some ways, even Abner Kneeland. Priestley proclaimed belief in some form of God, while Cooper and Kneeland did their best to skirt the issue or at least provide only ambivalent responses when directly addressing the issue in public. Knowlton and Wright, by contrast, openly attacked Christianity and unabashedly announced their atheistic views, undeterred by riots, threats against their livelihood, and organized efforts to force them from

their homes.<sup>506</sup> This backlash was so great, in part, because the two at least briefly achieved surprising success in circulating their ideas. Some of the many venues they employed included book tours; lectures at freethought institutions like the Hall of Science and the Sunday Lyceum; articles in radical periodicals; alternative reading rooms and libraries; networks of so-called “liberal” books sold primarily in New York and Boston; and local and national “infidel” associations like the United Liberals of Franklin County and the Boston Infidel Relief Society.

These efforts to disseminate materialist ideas were met with the same volatile reception as previous iterations of the long-reviled philosophy. Detractors continued to conflate materialism with atheism, skepticism, and infidelity and critics continued to connect materialism to the charges of moral degradation, social decline, and political disorder that were believed to follow these various forms of irreligion. Knowlton and Wright’s work, however, also introduced a new set of concerns about the moral status of science in the U.S. Knowlton was deeply invested in presenting materialism as a worldview backed by science, a move he hoped would enhance the long-vilified philosophy’s credibility, while Wright, too, claimed the authority of science in her lectures and reform projects. This question of the relationship between materialism and science opened the door to a host of issues about epistemology and scientific standards of validity that would only grow in importance in the next era of materialist and anti-materialist discourse, as Chapter 4 will demonstrate.

Wright and Knowlton were both harshly condemned in the press, subject to personal attacks, and became the targets of multiple campaigns to ruin their careers and drive them out of

---

<sup>506</sup> The claim here refers to Knowlton’s views on God during his mid to late career. As I will explain, Knowlton’s materialism evolved from a philosophy that admitted of the possibility of some kind of God or creator, though one that he insisted must exist in material form (his view during most of the 1820s) to a doctrine that denied the existence of any kind of deity (his stance in the 1830s, 40s, and 50s.) Wright was more openly skeptical about God and religion from the start of her American lecture career, though her claims against organized religion radicalized and hardened even more in the 1830s and 40s.

their respective communities. In one view, then, the narrative of materialism in the U.S. during this period is the story of a struggle for scientific and cultural legitimacy as figures like Knowlton and Wright sought to challenge the dominant, religiously-based concept of social reform. From another perspective, it is a tale of the repression of alternative religious and scientific cultures and look at how such projects were vilified and invalidated before the American public as anti-materialist critics attacked Wright and Knowlton as living confirmation of the dangerous links between materialist philosophy and the radical social, political, and religious doctrines that were now firmly wedded to it by their own explicit admissions.

### **Charles Knowlton: Early Life and Education**

Charles Knowlton (1800-1850) was born in Templeton, Massachusetts, a town 50 miles northwest of Boston with a population around 1,000.<sup>507</sup> His parents, Stephen and Comfort White Knowlton, were farmers who raised him in a strictly Calvinist household.<sup>508</sup> Knowlton spent most of his childhood on the modest family farm and had few opportunities to attend school, though he did spend a couple terms at New Salem Academy.<sup>509</sup> Charles was in poor health much of his life and the experience of his own illnesses spurred an early interest in science and anatomy.<sup>510</sup> Despite his lack of formal education, Knowlton began to study medicine with a

---

<sup>507</sup> In his autobiography, Knowlton noted carefully that he could not confirm his date and place of birth as facts since the information was received wisdom, not a direct observation on his part: "I have been informed, but whether correctly or not I can never *know* – however confidently I may *believe* – that I, Charles Knowlton, was born in Templeton, Worcester Co., Mass., on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, 1800." See "The Late Charles Knowlton, M.D.," 112. The best published accounts on Knowlton are Michael Sappol, "The Odd Case of Charles Knowlton: Anatomical Performance, Medical Narrative, and Identity in Antebellum America," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 83, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 460-498; Robert E. Riegel, "The American Father of Birth Control," *New England Quarterly* 6 (1933): 470-490; and Dan Allosso, *An Infidel Body-Snatcher and the Fruits of His Philosophy* (Minnesota: Stay Outside the Box Publishing, 2013).

<sup>508</sup> Charles Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism: Inculcating the Idea of a Future State, In Which All Will Be More Happy, Under Whatever Circumstances They May Be Placed, Than If They Experienced No Misery In This Life* (Adams, MA: A. Oakey, 1829), 446; Riegel, "The American Father of Birth Control," 474; Allosso, 3.

<sup>509</sup> "The Late Charles Knowlton, M.D.," 113; Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 447.

<sup>510</sup> For more on Knowlton's illnesses, see Michael Sappol, "The Odd Case of Charles Knowlton," 460-498.

local physician, Dr. Charles Wilder, in 1821.<sup>511</sup> In April of the same year, Knowlton married seventeen-year old Tabitha Stuart. Tabitha and Charles would eventually have five children. Tabitha was the daughter of Richard Stuart, a local mechanic who attempted to treat some of Knowlton's medical ailments through an early form of electric therapy.<sup>512</sup> Knowlton also claimed Stuart was the first materialist he ever met. He described Stuart as "a materialist in reality" and it was Stuart who introduced him to Paine's *Age of Reason*, a favorite among freethinkers who admired Paine's brazen attacks on organized religion.<sup>513</sup> At that time, Knowlton, still devout from his Protestant upbringing, refused to read the *Age of Reason*, supposing it to be "a *bad* book, and its author a very *wicked* man."<sup>514</sup>

In 1822, Knowlton enrolled at the New Hampshire Medical Institution (now Dartmouth Medical School), the medical school nearest Templeton.<sup>515</sup> At this time, admissions requirements for medical school were easy to meet and a number of rather questionable for-profit medical schools had begun to appear around the country.<sup>516</sup> The New Hampshire Medical Institution was small, consisting of a single three-story brick building.<sup>517</sup> Students generally attended four lectures a day and were quizzed at the start of each.<sup>518</sup> Though it is unclear if

---

<sup>511</sup> Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 447. Previously, Knowlton had studied Latin with Dr. Charles Adams, a physician in Keene, New Hampshire. Adams, who had studied medicine at Harvard College, specialized in the study of anatomy. Knowlton's records do not indicate whether he also studied medicine with Adams, but it seems likely the two at least discussed the topic. See Allosso, 10-11; Simon Goodell Griffin, et al., *A History of the Town of Keene From 1732* (Keene, New Hampshire: Sentinel Printing Company, 1904), 556.

<sup>512</sup> Knowlton described these treatments as follows: "So, having heard of my case which none of the physicians had been able to cure, eh called to see me, and to propose a trial of electricity." Knowlton referred to the trial as "that electrizing business" and wrote that "it was to me a great and strange novelty. It put the 'vital fluid' into me, as I was made to believe." See "The Late Dr. Charles Knowlton," 114.

<sup>513</sup> Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 447.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid.

<sup>515</sup> Riegel, 476.

<sup>516</sup> Tuition cost fifty dollars while room and board was an additional \$1.25 per week. See Riegel, 277. From 1768 to 1820, there were ten medical schools founded in the U.S. Fifty two more would appear between 1821 and 1860. See Breeden, 325, note 14.

<sup>517</sup> John King Lord, *A History of Dartmouth College, 1815-1819* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Rumford Press, 1913), 181

<sup>518</sup> Riegel, 477.

medical students were held to the same standards, Dartmouth College required students to attend multiple daily prayer services during this period. Students could not play with cards or dice and were required to abstain from all secular activities on the Sabbath.<sup>519</sup>

Despite the strict religious standards of the college, Knowlton quickly began to adopt materialist sentiments. As he developed his own approach to medicine, Knowlton intuitively felt physicians should understand their work in strictly corporeal rather than moral or spiritual terms.<sup>520</sup> Knowlton's view of medicine was thus unusual for his era, as most early nineteenth-century physicians incorporated moral considerations into their understanding of the causes of and proper treatments for medical ailments. The heroic school of medicine, which "dominated American medical practice in the first decades of the nineteenth century," treated disease as a systemic imbalance caused by physical and spiritual factors such as one's occupation, family background, or moral status.<sup>521</sup> Knowlton's emphasis on the physical over the moral was an unpopular stance among his fellow physicians.<sup>522</sup> As Dan Allosso has argued, "Anything that

---

<sup>519</sup> Lord, 199-200.

<sup>520</sup> Knowlton, for instance, prided himself greatly on his close physical examinations. His focus on careful physical exams and treatments based on material experimentation appear, in some ways, to be an early precursor to what is today called evidence-based medicine. For a concise definition of evidence based medicine see D. L. Sackett et al., "Evidence based medicine: what it is and what it isn't," *British Medical Journal* 312, no. 7023 (January 13, 1996): 71-72.

<sup>521</sup> Heroic practices began to decline in the 1830s and were largely discredited by the 1850s. See Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine : The Rise of a Sovereign Profession and the Making of a Vast Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 42, 56. John Harley Warner, "From Specificity to Universalism in Medical Therapeutics: Transformation in the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century United States," in Judith Walzer Leavitt and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *Sickness and Health in America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 88.

<sup>522</sup> Some physicians did try, with various degrees of success, to support materialist-leaning theories while still remaining devoted to Christianity. Amariah Brigham (1798-1849), a physician who founded the *American Journal of Insanity*, supported materialist physiology and asserted that the brain existed as a material organ. Such arguments quickly led to charges of skepticism and infidelity. Following the publication of one of his books in 1835, one observer, for instance, noted that "The community...were led, too hastily, to conclude that the writer was a disbeliever in all religion – an inference which he at the time solemnly denied." Brigham argued for the importance of nurturing both the physical and spiritual at various points in one's development, rather than one at the expense of the other. In his 1845 *Remarks on the Influence of Mental Cultivation and Mental Excitement Upon Health*, Brigham laid out his middle-ground position, arguing that his work was "intended to show the necessity of giving more attention to the health and growth of the body, and less to the cultivation of the mind, especially in early life...to teach that man, at every period of his existence, should be considered both as a spiritual and material being, as influenced by both physical and moral causes." See W.O. McClure, *Biographical Sketch of Amariah Brigham*,



put physical causes of disease first smacked of materialism.”<sup>523</sup> Historian Michael Sappol has noted that medical professionals, most of who belonged to churches and proclaimed belief in God, were quick to distance themselves from any such charges of materialism: “Prominent medical figures,” Sappol argues,

took pains to assure the public of their own and the profession’s religious rectitude. The medical discourse of the period is filled with disavowals of freethinking materialism and avowals of religious orthodoxy. Most physicians publicly adhered to the dominant religious beliefs, and many seem to have had deep religious commitments.<sup>524</sup>

Medicine and religion also had institutional connections in the U.S. Clergymen, for instance, often served as the presidents of early medical societies, and there were many so-called “pastor-physicians,” that is, medical practitioners were also ministers or religious leaders.<sup>525</sup> Knowlton’s police record soon reflected just how strongly he privileged the material dimensions of medicine, as he was arrested for grave robbery and illegal dissection in 1823 and ultimately sentenced to jail on charges of bodysnatching in 1824.<sup>526</sup> Prior to his arrest, Knowlton had taken at least three other bodies.<sup>527</sup> His crimes were driven by the belief that to truly understand human anatomy, he needed an actual corpse in front of him.<sup>528</sup> At the time, such bodies were difficult to come by, as dissection was largely seen as a form of desecration and disrespect for

---

*M.D., Late Superintendent of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, Utica, N.Y.* (Utica, New York: Curtiss and White Printers, 1858), 94; Amariah Brigham, *Remarks On the Influence of Mental Cultivation and Mental Excitement Upon Health* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845), vii.

<sup>523</sup> Allosso, 31.

<sup>524</sup> Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 334-335.

<sup>525</sup> Starr, 40.

<sup>526</sup> “The Late Dr. Knowlton’s Autobiography,” 119. For more on these incidents, see Sappol, “The Odd Case of Charles Knowlton,” 460-498, and Allosso, 30-35, 42-45, 51-54.

<sup>527</sup> Sections of Knowlton’s case book were published upon his death as part of his obituary in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*. Stephen J. W. Tabor, one of Knowlton’s medical apprentices and his eventual son-in-law, sent passages from the book to the *Journal* with the following note: “He left behind him a *Case Book*, in which there is an unfinished autobiography of himself. . . . A portion of this document, with some erasures and omissions, I herewith send you, thinking it will be interesting to your readers to note the perseverance which an humble individual displayed in obtaining his profession and placing himself at the head of it. I send the document exactly as he wrote it himself, excepting the omissions to which I have alluded, without attempting to alter its occasional odd phraseology or quaint expressions.” See Stephen J. W. Tabor, “The Late Charles Knowlton, M.D.,” *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 45, no. 6 (September 1851): 111-120.

<sup>528</sup> It was, as Michael Sappol argues, only through physical interaction with a cadaver that Knowlton could establish definitively his “epistemological authority” as a physician. See Sappol, “The Odd Case of Charles Knowlton,” 477.

the dead. It further grossly violated the Protestant doctrine of resurrection, which suggested that both body and soul would one day be raised from the dead. Physicians' attempts to obtain bodies for study had even spurred riots in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including the 1788 Doctors' Mob in New York City, an anti-dissection riot in Baltimore in the same year, and an 1824 riot against the medical department at Yale.<sup>529</sup> Though some states allowed the bodies of criminals sentenced to death to be used for medical study, corpses were, as Sappol has demonstrated, always in short supply.<sup>530</sup>

Despite the legal risks and extreme social stigma surrounding such practices, students like Knowlton knew a fresh grave was the surest way to find a body. Knowlton recalled his first grave robbery in mild, clinical terms: "I soon had such a desire to *see* the various organs which I read so much about that I ventured out all alone, one night in January, without saying a word to anyone, and took up a subject."<sup>531</sup> In another instance, Knowlton referenced a later bodysnatching attempt in a more colorful manner: "matters so turned out, that I was safely lodged in Worcester jail, for the no less heinous crime than that of being instrumental (as was *supposed*) in depriving a parcel of worms their dinner."<sup>532</sup> Whenever discussing these crimes, Knowlton was careful to describe the deceased not as a person, but as a material object: "a

---

<sup>529</sup> For more on the Doctors' Mob and anti-dissection riots, see Stephen Robert Wilf, "Anatomy and Punishment in Late Eighteenth-Century New York," *Journal of Social History* 22, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 507-530; Jules Calvin Ladenheim, "'The Doctors' Mob' of 1788," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* (Winter 1950): 23-43; James O. Breeden, "Body Snatchers and Anatomy Professors: Medical Education in Nineteenth-Century Virginia," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 83, no. 3 (July 1975): 321-345; Hannibal Hamlin, "The Dissection Riot of 1824 and the Connecticut Anatomy Law," *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 7, no. 4 (March 1935): 275-289; "Doctors' Riot, 1788," Chapter 4 in Joel T. Headley, *The Great Riots of New York, 1712-1873* (New York: B. Treat and Co., 1873), 56-65.

<sup>530</sup> Michael Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 3-4. Sappol also notes that the Massachusetts Anatomy Act of 1831 sought to reduce the number of grave robberies by legalizing anatomical study. The Act, however, did little to alleviate the shortage of bodies, an issue which would persist through the duration of the nineteenth century. See Sappol, *A Traffic*, 125.

<sup>531</sup> "The Late Dr. Knowlton's Autobiography," *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 45, no. 8 (1851): 115

<sup>532</sup> Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 447.

subject” in the first example, and “dinner” for worms in the second. Such language purposefully depersonalized and dehumanized the corpse.

Knowlton’s case book revealed the ghastly details of his initial grave robbery, which took place while he was studying with Dr. Wilder. Given his slight frame (a self-described 5’11” and barely 135 lbs.), he ran into some difficulty removing the body from the ground but persevered: “As I was about shouldering it, to convey it out of the yard to the sleigh...wind or gas was forced upward out of the stomach with a somewhat frightful noise; but I...trudged on, nothing daunted.”<sup>533</sup> Worried he may be caught with illegal remains, Knowlton began a weeks-long process of moving the body to several locations before finally performing his prized dissection:

I put it into a sleigh, late in the evening, carried it off ten miles, and buried it in a hay mow; and two or three weeks afterwards, finding there was no noise or stir about it, I went in the evening, cut a hole through the ice of a pond, and there put the subject to thaw over night. The next day I got it into an old building, skinned it, and extracted what few teeth there were remaining in its head, that it might not be identified by any one. Having done all this, I conveyed the subject back to the doctor’s, and there, all alone, in the same room where I slept, I deliberately dissected the subject to my heart’s content.<sup>534</sup>

Though he had not yet claimed the title of materialist, Knowlton believed absolutely in the importance of the tangible and was convinced certain kinds of knowledge could be gained only through sensory experience of physical objects. His graphic story suggests the lengths he was willing to go to obtain such knowledge. These grave robberies imply further that Knowlton had already developed the materialist conception of death he would later publish. In his view, these bodies contained no trace of the identity of the person who had once inhabited them; they were simply pieces of matter that could be examined like any other material object.

Knowlton’s second bodysnatching attempt was motivated more by finances than scientific curiosity. Before moving to Hanover to begin medical school, Knowlton learned that

---

<sup>533</sup> “The Late Dr. Charles Knowlton,” 112; 115.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid, 115-116.

some doctors there would “give fifty dollars for a subject.”<sup>535</sup> Desperately poor and emboldened by his prior grave robbery, he quickly set out in search of another body, this time with a companion: another young man from Templeton, identified only as Partridge, who also hoped to attend the New Hampshire medical school. Partridge provided a wagon while Knowlton’s father bought the two a horse of dubious physical standing. Knowlton described the start of this second, more ill-fated bodysnatching attempt as follows:

At length we got *to* one, but the weather had been warm when it was buried, and it was too *slippery* for our purpose. We concluded, however, that the bones would be worth something, and being loth [sic] to lose all our labor, we conveyed it that night four miles, and left it in a woods... The next day, at the appointed hour, we there met, buried all the soft parts, and I brought off the bones.<sup>536</sup>

Not content with these bones, Knowlton and Partridge continued to look for a more viable body:

We were still on the look-out for another subject, and within two or three days we heard of a burial in a town ten miles more distant from Hanover than Templeton... After examining the yard for some time by star-light... we found what we believed to be a recent grave, and so it proved to be. When we were all loaded snug in our wagon, and on our way back to Templeton, we felt grandly.<sup>537</sup>

It was at this point in their adventures, however, that a combination of the weather, the feeble horse, and the “subjects” brought Knowlton and Partridge’s journey to a disappointing end:

But the weather was warm; our load, we thought, looked suspicious; our horse was slow and insufficient for the task... However, we walked up all the hills, and pushed along as fast as we could... We drove that poor horse until nine-o’clock at night... In the evening of the next day we reached Hanover. Our subject had become quite offensive, and, what was still worse, the professor of anatomy told us he did not want any subject at that time; that he should not commence dissections for several weeks, when the weather was cooler. However, out of regard for our good will to serve him... he would allow us \$20 for it, if we would put it in a cask.<sup>538</sup>

Though disappointing from a financial perspective, these efforts, Knowlton would later insist, paid off handsomely in other ways during his time medical school.

---

<sup>535</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid, 116-117.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid.

Knowlton was a self-described odd student and his peers openly mocked his abject poverty, strange mannerisms, and sickly, gaunt physique. He reported, for instance, that his fellow students would, “among other tricks,” draw “profiles even more unseemly than [his] own, and put them into [his] hat.”<sup>539</sup> Knowlton alleged, however, that information derived in part from his illegal dissections allowed him to earn the respect of some classmates. During one of the weekly Saturday quizzes held at the medical school, Knowlton reported that he was able to answer a question about the “structure and functions of the liver” with such stunning detail and confident authority that his surprised professors and classmates ceased “ma[king] sport” of him.<sup>540</sup>

Knowlton’s arrest on charges of bodysnatching and illegal dissection took place in the summer of 1823. Knowlton had traveled to Royalston, Massachusetts, to study with Dr. Stephen Bacheller, a well-regarded physician who mentored more than forty medical students throughout his career.<sup>541</sup> Sometime in August, Knowlton and four other students working with Bacheller “were strongly suspected of having taken up a subject in that town.”<sup>542</sup> Knowlton made only a brief, passive note about the incident: “in truth,” he wrote, “one was taken up and dissected by somebody.”<sup>543</sup> In any case, Knowlton was charged and told to report to the Worcester County court in October, an arduous journey of 110 miles that he was forced to travel by foot.<sup>544</sup> Despite his legal woes, Knowlton’s medical studies continued to go very well. He had the opportunity to perform surgeries and amputations with Dr. Amos Twitchell in Keene, New Hampshire, and at

---

<sup>539</sup> Ibid, 118.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid, 119; *History of Worcester County, Massachusetts, Embracing a Comprehensive History of the County From Its First Settlement to the Present Time, With a History and Description of Its Cities and Towns* (Boston: C.F. Jewett and Company, 1879),

<sup>542</sup> “The Late Dr. Charles Knowlton,” 119.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid. Allosso suggests Knowlton “probably instigated but did not lead his fellow students in stealing a corpse in Royalston.” Allosso, 53.

<sup>544</sup> “The Late Dr. Charles Knowlton,” 119, 120.

the end of the term, he readily passed his final medical school exam and was thus licensed to practice.<sup>545</sup>

After his exam, Knowlton moved to Hawley, Massachusetts, a town about 110 miles west of Boston and 60 miles west of Templeton. As he struggled to open a medical practice, Knowlton received the sentence for his earlier bodysnatching crimes and subsequently spent two months in the Worcester County jail. Knowlton later described his time in prison as a pivotal turning point in his intellectual career, as it was during this period that he began to identify as a materialist:

My head was very clear. I used to read and write by day, and lie and think by night; and it was upon my flea and bed-bug couch, which lay on the floor, that I became a materialist, and conceived some important views of the intellectual operations which I still believe correct, and which I think will in time be generally acknowledged to be so.<sup>546</sup>

In another autobiographical account, Knowlton described an alternative narrative of this conversion to materialism.<sup>547</sup> Ostensibly while still in jail, Knowlton tried to write a thesis on the cognitive functions of man. He soon, however, “met with insurmountable difficulties,” namely, that “the soul appeared to be much in [his] way.”<sup>548</sup> One night he found his way out of this intellectual quandary after he was struck by a materialist revelation, that of the nonexistence of the soul:

At last thinks I, as I lay on my couch one night, what if I should put the soul entirely aside for the present – say that an action of the brain is a thought, and an action of the brain and nerve together a sensation; and see how we can explain matters and things upon

---

<sup>545</sup> The American Medical Association, which sought to standardize licensing practices, was not established until 1847. Prior to the AMA, physicians in many states could present a medical school diploma from any institution as the equivalent of a medical license to practice. See Ronald L. Numbers, “The Fall and Rise of the American Medical Profession,” in Leavitt and Numbers, 226. “The Late Dr. Charles Knowlton,” 120.

<sup>546</sup> “The Late Dr. Knowlton’s Autobiography,” 152.

<sup>547</sup> Eric Schlereth also discusses this notion of conversion to irreligion in the antebellum era. He describes “infidel conversion narratives,” first published in the 1820s, which “offer detailed intellectual autobiographies of why people became free enquirers, the process of infidel conversion, and the significance that observers attached to individual exits from Christianity.” See Schlereth, 171-172.

<sup>548</sup> Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 448.

this supposition? Good George! How things were altered – every thing was now plain and easy; the very facts which before puzzled me, now helped me.<sup>549</sup>

Knowlton thus experienced a gradual intellectual evolution to materialism, from his intuitive emphasis on the physical and corporeal in his medical school days to his grave robberies and anatomical studies with a final culmination in his moments of materialist clarity. Notably, Knowlton presented his path to materialism as a wholly individual endeavor. While materialists like Thomas Cooper and Abner Kneeland had pointed to the work of certain philosophers as the catalyst for their own materialist conversions, Knowlton noted specifically that he had “never got hold of any work written by a materialist” until after he had written his own materialist theories.<sup>550</sup> Because he was largely unfamiliar with materialist philosophy, Knowlton believed his ideas were truly original – he called them “a *new system* of notions” and marveled that he “had hit upon a truth which thousands of learned searchers had failed to discover.”<sup>551</sup>

Even more important than these dubious claims to innovation was Knowlton’s declaration that these ideas came to him through his observations of the world, an assertion meant to make his ideas seem even more materialist. That is, by suggesting his theories grew out of the physical world around him, Knowlton felt his arguments achieved greater epistemological authority: “I did not receive my opinions by *inoculation*; but...they are the natural and

---

<sup>549</sup> Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 448.

<sup>550</sup> With the exception of John Locke, who Knowlton admired for “banishing the world of innate ideas,” he indeed referred to few other philosophers in his early writings on materialism. Knowlton did include excerpts from Thomas Cooper’s *Scripture Doctrine* of materialism in his *Elements of Modern Materialism*, but he did not seem to know Cooper was the author as he argued that the *Scripture Doctrine* “was written by a masterly pen; but the author is to be reprehended by every friend of truth and intellectual freedom, for not putting his name to it.” He also seemed to misunderstand Cooper’s arguments about the soul, claiming “It may be remarked that even *materialists* of former times appear to have a vague notion of something in a man’s head, which may properly enough be called a soul. But *modern* materialists know of nothing which the world soul can...be used to signify.” See Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 396. Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 448.

<sup>551</sup> Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, viii, 448.

irresistible conclusions to which the physical facts known to me, give rise.”<sup>552</sup> Later in his career, Knowlton frequently made similar claims, drawing on the authority of nature as a privileged ground for his arguments: “I got out of the fog myself...by reflecting on facts derived from the book of Nature, which is my Bible – the great universal Bible, no parts of which contradict itself, and with which the paper Bible that man can make, alter, or destroy, makes no comparison.”<sup>553</sup>

After serving his sentence and returning to Hawley, Knowlton decided to publish his theories by writing a book on human cognition and mental phenomena from a materialist perspective. Knowlton worked tirelessly on his manuscript from 1827 until 1829, a period he described as intellectually intense and often lonely:

I spent my winters, secluded in my office, studying metaphysics by day, and dreaming about metaphysical subjects at night. Sometimes, for a week, I did not take my horse out of the barn. At length my great aim was to astonish the world, and become even more famous than John Locke ever was, by publishing a work containing the only *true* explanation of the intellectual phenomena of man that had ever been given.<sup>554</sup>

Though he worked mostly in isolation, Knowlton did share some of his ideas with Edward Dorr Griffin (1770-1837), a Congregational minister and president of Williams College (1821-1836). Knowlton was eager for Griffin to hear his theories because he had been told Griffin was “a great metaphysician.”<sup>555</sup> Knowlton reported, however, that his philosophy “met with no favorable reception from Dr. Griffin. He pronounced [it] all vague assumptions. Nothing in his view was more unreasonable than materialism.”<sup>556</sup> In search of more like-minded theorists, Knowlton also traveled to New York where he found a small community of freethinkers including Robert D.

---

<sup>552</sup> Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 448.

<sup>553</sup> Charles Knowlton, “Religion,” *Boston Investigator*, January 14, 1846. Though there was an actual text, *The Bible of Nature*, as discussed in Chapter 2, I do not believe that is what Knowlton references here.

<sup>554</sup> “The Late Dr. Knowlton’s Autobiography,” 153.

<sup>555</sup> Charles Knowlton, “Transcendentalism,” *Boston Investigator*, June 17, 1846.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*



Owen, who invited Knowlton to speak at the Hall of Science.<sup>557</sup> After hearing some of his theories, Owen also pledged to sell Knowlton's work at the bookstore in the Hall.<sup>558</sup> Bolstered by his trip to New York, Knowlton remained optimistic that the completion of his masterwork would bring him widespread recognition and great wealth. Unfortunately for him, quite the opposite would soon prove to be true.

While his 1829 *Elements of Modern Materialism* still stands as one of the seminal works on materialism, the book was poorly received and Knowlton's efforts to publish and sell it sent the already impoverished physician even deeper into debt. Early in his project, he tried and failed to find enough subscribers to finance his book.<sup>559</sup> When he couldn't find a publisher willing to accept his book, Knowlton struggled to finance a small print run of one thousand self-published copies.<sup>560</sup> In the end, he could not afford to have all the volumes bound and was forced to sell numerous personal belongings, including his house and a gold watch, to repay the printer and bookbinder.<sup>561</sup> Knowlton later traveled to New York for a series of wildly unsuccessful book tours.<sup>562</sup> The title of his book alone deterred many booksellers who "would not look further" and "wanted nothing to do with it" after seeing the word "Materialism" prominently displayed.<sup>563</sup> During another less than spectacular book tour, Knowlton tried to sell copies of the *Elements* to students at Amherst College and was arrested yet again, this time for selling books without a license.<sup>564</sup>

---

<sup>557</sup> Allosso, 88.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid.

<sup>559</sup> "The Late Dr. Knowlton's Autobiography," 153.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>561</sup> Knowlton and his family were forced to stay with Tabitha's family in Winchendon. See Allosso, 96.

<sup>562</sup> Allosso, 95.

<sup>563</sup> "The Late Dr. Knowlton's Autobiography," 154.

<sup>564</sup> Though his formal charges were for peddling books without a license, the true issue was the skeptical and unorthodox nature of the book. "The Late Dr. Knowlton's Autobiography," 154; Chandrasekhar, 22; Allosso, 97-101.

The high price Knowlton tried to charge for his book, \$2.50, likely did not help matters.<sup>565</sup> Several advertisements suggest booksellers later dropped this price dramatically in an effort to move more copies. Gilbert Vale (1788-1866), for instance, offered Knowlton's *Elements* for 50 cents as part of the "Catalogue of Liberal Works" available in his Chatham Square Shop in New York city, while both the office of the *Boston Investigator* and the "LIBERAL BOOK-STORE" on Washington Street in Boston charged \$1.00.<sup>566</sup> George Henry Evans (1805-1856) listed Knowlton's book for the reduced price of \$1.25 as one of the many "LIBERAL WORKS" sold at his New York Mott Street shop.<sup>567</sup>

Evans, who I mentioned briefly in Chapter 2 and discuss again later in this chapter, was a printer and reformer best known for his work on land reform and as editor of the *Workingman's Advocate* (1829-1836), the publication of the short-lived Working Man's Party.<sup>568</sup> One of his lesser-known ventures included sales of openly irreligious and skeptical tracts that were difficult to obtain elsewhere. Other "Liberal" works Evans advertised included publications from David Hume, Voltaire, Baron d'Holbach, Thomas Paine, Frances Wright, Thomas Cooper, and Abner Kneeland. Those less inclined to liberal views lambasted these collections, arguing they promoted the "circulation of the most demoralizing and disorganizing productions of this, or any

---

<sup>565</sup> "The Late Dr. Knowlton's Autobiography," 153.

<sup>566</sup> G.W. and A.J. Mastell also offered Knowlton's *Elements* for \$1.00 as part of their "Catalogue of Liberal Books" also sold on Chatham Street in New York. Allosso, 119; "Knowlton's Modern Materialism," *Boston Investigator*, March 30, 1832; "Liberal Books," *Boston Investigator*, March 15, 1833; "Catalogue of Liberal Books," *Boston Investigator*, January 8, 1836; "Revised Catalogue," *Boston Investigator*, February 9, 1838.

<sup>567</sup> This listing was included in several of Evans' publications. See, for instance, John Morrison, *An Oration Delivered in Tammany Hall: In Commemoration of the Birthday of Thomas Paine* (New York: Evans and Brooks, 1832), 32

<sup>568</sup> Born in Bromyard, Herefordshire, England, Evans had moved to the United States in 1820 and was apprenticed to a printer in Ithaca. Early in his career, he worked for exchange papers, periodicals that consisted almost solely of reprinted articles from other publications. Evans was quickly introduced to arguments against priestcraft and the evils of religion, as many of the papers he worked for were highly critical of the evangelical fervor sweeping across New York. In an odd parallel to Knowlton's career, Evans later campaigned for the right to give one's body for dissection after death so that physicians would no longer be forced to resort to bodysnatching. See Jeffrey J. Pilz, *The Life, Work, and Times of George Henry Evans, Newspaperman, Activist, and Reformer, 1829-1849* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 13-14; 69.

former age.”<sup>569</sup> These networks of liberal publications served as radical counterparts to antebellum tract and Bible societies. Eric Schlereth has described the creation of similar collections, including Henry D. Robinson’s subscription Philosophical Library, which included titles from d’Holbach and Thomas Cooper, as well as the Free Enquirer’s Family Library. He argues that these “efforts to create and promote a print culture...resulted in a fairly coherent curriculum of texts, both classic and contemporary, that provided opponents of political religion a history and an intellectual tradition to bolster their efforts.”<sup>570</sup>

In 1831, hoping to recover financially from the *Elements* disaster, Knowlton moved to Ashfield, a nearby Massachusetts town with a population of approximately 1,800.<sup>571</sup> After hearing the town needed a new physician, Knowlton established a medical practice and was eventually regarded by many as a fine doctor. Women in the area, it was reported, especially preferred Knowlton to attend their births.<sup>572</sup> In 1832, Knowlton published *The Fruits of Philosophy, or The Private Companion of Young Married People*, a pamphlet created originally for distribution among his patients. Historians have recognized Knowlton mainly for this controversial birth control manual, of which nearly 10,000 copies sold by 1839.<sup>573</sup> *The Fruits of Philosophy* was, one historian claims, “the first popularly written medical guide on how to prevent conception in the English language.”<sup>574</sup> The book would go through nine editions during

---

<sup>569</sup> “Rights of Conscience,” *The Methodist Quarterly Review* (January 1843): 20.

<sup>570</sup> Schlereth, 213.

<sup>571</sup> Vern L. Bullough, ed., “Knowlton, Charles,” in *Encyclopedia of Birth Control* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2001), 162.

<sup>572</sup> Chandrasekhar, 22.

<sup>573</sup> Bullough, 162.

<sup>574</sup> Sripati Chandrasekhar, *Reproductive Physiology and Birth Control: The Writings of Charles Knowlton and Annie Besant* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2002). Though Robert Dale Owen had published his *Moral Physiology* in 1831, Chandrasekhar argues that Owen’s book was “more a sociological and economic tract and...recommended only one non-clinical method, withdrawal.” See Chandrasekhar, 23.

Knowlton's lifetime, including several reprints in England, where it would lead to jail time for several publishers and become the subject of a sensational trial in 1877.<sup>575</sup>

Critics were horrified that Knowlton's book sought "to *disseminate* a knowledge of the means whereby men and women may refrain *at will* from becoming parents, *without even a partial sacrifice of the pleasure* which attends the *gratification* of the re-productive instinct!"<sup>576</sup> Several publications attributed a class-based motivation to Knowlton's interest in disseminating contraceptive information. Many printed some variation of the following, suggesting that Knowlton's *Fruits* was designed "to instruct poor people how to avoid raising children to become slaves to the rich" or "to teach poor people that they need not raise children to be slaves to the rich if they choose otherwise."<sup>577</sup> The book's plain language and indelicate subject matter caused a great deal of controversy and Knowlton was charged for "publishing a book calculated to injure the public morals."<sup>578</sup> For this work, he was ultimately fined \$50, sentenced to three months hard labor, and tried in court on three separate occasions.<sup>579</sup> After a trial in Lowell, Knowlton spent three months in the Cambridge jail. During that time, Abner Kneeland took up his cause, publishing several articles in the *Boston Investigator* defending Knowlton's right to disseminate contraceptive information. Later, Knowlton would reciprocate by offering his support to Kneeland during his blasphemy trials.

---

<sup>575</sup> In 1877, Neo-Malthusian reformers Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh reprinted Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy* in England. Intending to use his book to test the right to publish such information, they sent a copy to the police and were subsequently arrested. Both were prosecuted in an 1877-1888 English trial as was Charles Watts, the London publisher who put Besant and Bradlaugh's reprint to press. See Chandrasekhar, 1.

<sup>576</sup> Charles Knowlton, Preface to *The Fruits of Philosophy*.

<sup>577</sup> See "Infant Labor," *Little Falls Inquirer*, reprinted in *Boston Investigator*, May 10, 1833; "Multiple News Items," *Boston Investigator*, March 1, 1833.

<sup>578</sup> George D. Crittenden, "Personal Recollections," in *History and Proceedings of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Volume 5* (Deerfield, Mass.: The Association, 1912), 59.

<sup>579</sup> These suits were brought by a lawyer from Taunton, Massachusetts, who worried Knowlton's book would enable more women to become prostitutes, a physician from Cambridge who was begrudged Knowlton's success as a medical practitioner, and an Ashfield clergyman appalled by the immoral nature of the book. Dawn B. Sova, *Banned Books: Literature Suppressed on Social Grounds* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2006), 147-150; Chandrasekhar, 24-25.

Given its more sensational impact, it is unsurprising that the *Fruits of Philosophy* has greatly overshadowed Knowlton's *Elements of Modern Materialism* in the few historical studies of his career that exist. *The Elements*, however, is a curious omission since it was Knowlton's materialism that provided the unifying framework for the rest of his ventures, including his bodysnatching, illegal dissections, and contraceptive studies. *The Elements* also contained some of his most shocking public claims. While *The Fruits of Philosophy* appalled readers with its coarse descriptions of human anatomy, the materialist philosophy Knowlton advanced in his *Elements* laid out unconventional physiological and scientific claims alongside openly sacrilegious diatribes. Knowlton's *Elements* thus took aim at both the commonly accepted scientific knowledge of his day and the dominant religious sentiments that largely defined antebellum American culture during the revivals of the Second Great Awakening.

### **Knowlton's *Elements of Modern Materialism***

With thirty six chapters and nearly 450 pages of curious, sometimes rambling arguments, Knowlton's *Elements* provides a lengthy but intriguing window into mid- nineteenth-century medical, philosophical, and theological debates. Knowlton summarized the main tenets of his materialism in the following definition: "By *materialism*, I mean the doctrine that the thinking part of man is material – not immaterial or spiritual; and that when a man is said to die, he does indeed die, and...ceases to think or be conscious."<sup>580</sup> Here Knowlton laid out the central components of his philosophical materialism: the denial of any type of spiritual existence; the claim that human cognition resulted from a material organ, not an immaterial entity like the soul or mind; and, finally, the denial of a soul that somehow lives on after the death of the body. Knowlton did not shy away from the obvious implications of these claims, openly pushing his

---

<sup>580</sup> Knowlton, *Two Remarkable Lectures*, 6.

denial of the soul to what he saw as its logical conclusion: “if the doctrine of the soul be essential to christianity” Knowlton reasoned, “...then it is evident that christianity is false.”<sup>581</sup>

Each of Knowlton’s arguments ran against the dominant religious and scientific views of the antebellum era. Following Christian convention, many Americans believed the soul to be the most sacred part of an individual’s identity. The soul, it was suggested, served as the center of all moral, virtuous activity; it alone was the source of one’s cognitive ability. Most importantly, the soul was the part of a person that would live on in the afterlife after the death of the body. Knowlton straightforwardly denied each of these claims and instead argued that humans possessed a material brain, not an immaterial soul: “To clear away...all old rubbish,” Knowlton argued, “I told you distinctly, that a man has no soul, no mind, no spirit...nothing at all in his head but just a brain.”<sup>582</sup>

Though few Americans adopted Knowlton’s views, the publication of such theories generated a variety of critical responses. When, for instance, confronted with the materialist denial of the soul and physical conception of the brain, critics commonly worried that such a base description of the body degraded humans to the level of brutes or animals.<sup>583</sup> One article in *The Christian Lady’s Magazine*, for example, argued that the

brain *may* be in some sense the *organ* through which the mind operates on the body, and through which it receive information from the senses, but to speak...of the brain as synonymous with the animal organization of the mind, is, to say the least, a very

---

<sup>581</sup> Knowlton, *Elements*, 378. Knowlton’s stance on materialism and Christianity was often unclear in these passages. He suggested, for instance, that materialism wasn’t less compatible with certain Christian beliefs than immaterialism. He maintained, however, that he couldn’t say much at all in the absence of a standard definition of Christianity. In any case, what is clear is that Knowlton denied the Christian doctrine of the soul. It is less clear if, at the time he wrote the *Elements*, he felt the nonexistence of the soul discredited Christianity or if Christianity needed to be modified to accommodate his claim.

<sup>582</sup> Knowlton, *Two Remarkable Lectures*, 20.

<sup>583</sup> Knowlton argued that “as the thinking abilities of man are superior to those of any other species of animals, so is his brain larger, in proportion to the amount of nervous elongations that proceed from it, than the brain of any other species of animal.” Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 73.

dangerous approach to the unscriptural doctrine of materialism.<sup>584</sup>

Others refused to believe that matter could be the source of high-level phenomena like cognition. One chemist, for instance, argued that “Materialism is as utterly subversive of physics, as it is of morals. Is it possible for matter by and of itself, to think, choose, reason?”<sup>585</sup>

Writing during a time when the field of physiology saw great growth in the United States, Knowlton’s treatise on the soul made him one of the many physicians who contributed to the flourishing interest in questions of human biology and anatomy.<sup>586</sup> In place of the soul, Knowlton identified specific organs he believed responsible for human perception, listing them as “the brain, the spinal marrow, and the nerves.”<sup>587</sup> Knowlton theorized that the central part of the brain, which he called the “sensorium,” was connected to nerves that ran all throughout the body in the “sensorial extremities.” Sensations then occurred when input from the sensorial extremities traveled back to the sensorium.<sup>588</sup> Knowlton argued that these sensations formed the basis of all human knowledge:

I believe that, as the word [intelligence] is generally used, it means...the same as the word knowledge; and I believe a man’s knowledge is nothing other than his sensorial tendencies...As to sensibility...this physiological property...arise[s] from the organic union of inseparable atoms.<sup>589</sup>

Knowlton sought to de-mystify the brain by explaining its functions as simply another structure in the body. “The brain,” he asserted, “is an organ of thought, as...the liver is an organ for the secretion of bile.”<sup>590</sup> Certain forms of cognition, Knowlton suggested, could also occur without

---

<sup>584</sup> “Home Education,” *The Christian Lady’s Magazine* 11, no. 2 (February 1839), 58.

<sup>585</sup> “Lecture on Chemistry,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 4, no. 6 (June 1838).

<sup>586</sup> In the U.S., the first half of the nineteenth century saw the greatest growth in interest in physiology and biology. Nathan Reingold, *Science in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 162.

<sup>587</sup> Knowlton, *Two Remarkable Lectures*, 7.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>589</sup> Knowlton, *Elements*, 53.

<sup>590</sup> Knowlton, *Two Remarkable Lectures*, 7.

sensory input. He proposed, for instance, that “a conscient action of the sensorium *alone* is a thought or idea.”<sup>591</sup>

To support his theories, Knowlton presented information from published medical studies as well as theories gleaned from the dissections and physical exams he had performed. Knowlton’s interest in experimentation and scientific research was somewhat unusual as American physicians during this era tended “to pride themselves more on their skill as practitioners of the art of medicine than on their contributions to the science of medicine.”<sup>592</sup> Knowlton, however, firmly believed that laboratory experimentation was the only way to prove these theories empirically and thus indisputably. “In all cases of idiotism,” Knowlton noted, “the brain is found imperfect on dissection. And in all cases of insanity, on dissection are found structural diseases of the brain.” He observed further that diseases of the “lower or central part of the brain...affect the power to think” and “sometimes arrest all thought, all consciousness.”<sup>593</sup> Knowlton concluded that it was “no speculation” but a “plain matter of fact, as every physiologist well knows,” that “if, by any means, the lower and central part of the brain be compressed, all consciousness ceases until such pressure be removed.”<sup>594</sup>

In addition to scientific arguments, Knowlton also offered selective readings of certain Biblical passages as further evidence against the soul. Knowlton pointed out, for instance, several references to corporeal forms in the parable of Lazarus, such as when the rich man condemned to hell “lifted up his *eyes* and saw Lazarus” or when “he cried out to Abraham to let Lazarus come and dip his fingers in water, and cool his *tongue*.”<sup>595</sup> “Now in the name of common sense,” Knowlton asked, “how comes it that an unextended soul has eyes and a tongue

---

<sup>591</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>592</sup> Numbers and Warner, 113.

<sup>593</sup> Knowlton, *Two Remarkable Lectures*, 8.

<sup>594</sup> Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 35.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid, 386.



in hell?”<sup>596</sup> Knowlton gave similarly literal readings of other Christian beliefs. The conversion experience, for example, was sometimes described as “a change of heart” or the result of “special operations of the Holy Ghost upon the heart.”<sup>597</sup> Knowlton argued that such an anatomical transformation was simply impossible. “The heart,” he noted dryly, “is a thick muscular organ...Its function is to assist in circulating the blood...It has no more to do with a man’s thoughts and feelings than his lungs; and we have no more reason to suppose it is ever the seat of...any good or evil...It is less liable to *change* than almost any other important organ.”<sup>598</sup> The sub-title of Knowlton’s book, *Inculcating the Idea of a Future State, in Which All Will Be More Happy, Under Whatever Circumstances They May Be Placed, Than if They Experienced No Misery in This Life*, laid out the lofty goals he held for his vision of materialism. For Knowlton, these issues were not simply a matter of theoretical or philosophical debate; he firmly believed they had a practical impact on the way society was organized. Knowlton accordingly dedicated his *Elements* “As the strongest effort of a feeble pen, to brush away the scholastic mist that has so long enveloped the intellectual phenomena, and served to foster many important errors.”<sup>599</sup>

Like many other scientists of his day, Knowlton felt his studies had important moral dimensions. “Nineteenth-century American men of science,” Paul Lucier has argued, “never tired in their moralizing. They considered themselves individuals of the highest character embodying everything from honesty...to disinterestedness...As moral beacons upon a hill, men of science expected the public to look up to them and to trust them.”<sup>600</sup> For most scientists,

---

<sup>596</sup> Ibid, 386.

<sup>597</sup> Ibid, 322.

<sup>598</sup> Ibid, 327.

<sup>599</sup> Ibid, iii.

<sup>600</sup> Paul Lucier, *Scientists and Swindlers: Consulting on Coal and Oil in America, 1820-1890* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 309.

religion was an important part of the moral mission of their work during this period, an era in which historians generally agree there was little conflict between science and religion. Merle Curti, for instance, argued that “Virtually all the leading scientists in the ‘thirties and ‘forties accepted...the basic doctrine of Christian theology and explicitly tried to show that no contradiction existed between science and religion.”<sup>601</sup> Knowlton’s example, however, as well as the host of criticism it generated, suggests there were at least a few significant exceptions to the general harmony between these fields.

Some of Knowlton’s peers worried that studies like his, especially those in anatomy and physiology, presented a danger to the moral status of the field.<sup>602</sup> George D. Armstrong, a Presbyterian minister and chemistry professor at Washington College in Lexington, Virginia (now Washington and Lee University), expressed these concerns in a February 1838 lecture:

If there is any part in the wide circle of human knowledge, where atheism should never set foot, that part is the domain of natural science...Materialism and atheism may seem so absurd to you, that you may think that natural science cannot possibly suffer from them; and yet if you will become acquainted with what has been written of late years, on scientific subjects, you will find traces of them where you would little suppose they had ever entered.<sup>603</sup>

Armstrong concluded with a sober reminder that science served to confirm, not deny, the existence of a deity: “When natural science is pursued in a proper manner, and with a proper spirit,” he argued, “its effect is always to deepen the feeling of pious reverence which once found expression from the lips of one of old; ‘How manifold are thy works, O Lord! In wisdom hast

---

<sup>601</sup> Curti, 321.

<sup>602</sup> Andrew Jewett has described a similar phenomena later in the nineteenth century, noting that materialism’s “narrow reading of sensory evidence seemed to banish the possibility of a scientifically informed ethics.” See Andrew Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 92.

<sup>603</sup> “Lecture on Chemistry,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 4, no. 6 (June 1838).

thou made them all.”<sup>604</sup> Other critics feared that the study of medicine, especially the subject of anatomy, had already been corrupted by materialist sentiments:

If we send our sons to infidels, to be taught either metaphysics or anatomy, it is no wonder that we find them coming back to us, skeptics and materialists... Were men imbued... with religious feelings... in our colleges,... we could venture our youth into the schools... without fearing they would learn only to doubt, to cavil, or to dogmatize; we might even trust them within the walls of the dissecting-room, without any apprehension lest they should be tainted by the moral impurity of its atmosphere.<sup>605</sup>

Because anatomy and physiology were frequently singled out as fields particularly susceptible to charges of materialism, major medical publications like the *New England Journal of Medicine and Surgery* and the *New York Medical Magazine* printed numerous articles stating that new anatomical discoveries in no way supported the theories of materialism.<sup>606</sup> Though there were few confirmed materialists in the practice of medicine or science in the U.S., it is notable how many physicians felt the need to defend and distinguish carefully their own views from those of materialism.

Though popular opinion assumed materialism to be immoral and Christians defended staunchly the equation of morality with religion, Knowlton saw important ethical dimensions to his materialism. Free enquirers thus were not, as Susan Jacoby argued in her recent study of secularism, “value-free; their values [were] simply grounded in earthly concerns rather than in anticipation of heavenly rewards or fear of infernal punishments.”<sup>607</sup> Knowlton indeed insisted that by focusing on the afterlife, Christianity led its followers to “sink into perfect apathy as to the things of this world, and anxiously await the hour of death.”<sup>608</sup> Rather than waiting for an afterlife that did not exist, Knowlton urged his readers to care more about the world in which

---

<sup>604</sup> Ibid.

<sup>605</sup> “The Lecture System,” *The National Magazine* 2, no. 3 (1831): 304.

<sup>606</sup> See, for example, “Idea of a New Anatomy of the Brain,” *The New York Medical Magazine* (January 1, 1814): 84, or “Censors for the Second Medical District,” *The New - England Journal of Medicine and Surgery, and Collateral Branches of Science* 9, no. 3 (July 1820): 309-311.

<sup>607</sup> Jacoby, 10.

<sup>608</sup> Knowlton, *Elements*, 328.

they currently lived: “All the mental disquietude about things ‘hereafter,’ and all the wars, persecutions, and wrangling to which religion gives rise, may...be prevented by a better order of things.”<sup>609</sup> It was only after the false notions of the soul and the afterlife were finally disproven, Knowlton felt, that Americans would stop fretting about the nonsensical possibility of eternal damnation or salvation and pay attention to the pressing issues in front of them.

Knowlton’s own politics reveal some of the causes he saw as important.<sup>610</sup> His main concerns – economic, racial, and gender equality - echoed those of Abner Kneeland. Knowlton’s politics thus forged the link between arguments for radical egalitarianism and materialist philosophy even more strongly in the eyes of the American public. As mentioned previously, Knowlton’s efforts to disseminate birth control methods were rooted in a kind of class politics, as he sought to give families, especially poorer ones, more control over their finances by allowing them to limit the number of children in each household. He argued publicly for racial equality, at one point petitioning the Massachusetts legislature “concerning the intermarriage law” and “in relation to the rights of colored persons.”<sup>611</sup> Knowlton also supported the equal treatment of women. After forming a freethought group, the United Liberals of Franklin County (a project I discuss in more detail later in this chapter), he included a bylaw in the group’s constitution stating that female members would enjoy the same rights and privileges as male members.<sup>612</sup> Knowlton thought the money poured into religious institutions could be put to better use addressing some of these more immediate concerns: “the millions and tens of millions, in time

---

<sup>609</sup> Charles Knowlton, “To Free Enquirers,” *Boston Investigator*, January 27, 1841.

<sup>610</sup> Several points of Knowlton’s politics are unclear. Some of his articles, for instance, were published in *The Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison’s Boston abolitionist periodical, but his writings do not contain any commentary on slavery. In November 1847, Knowlton ran for office as a Free Soil candidate, hoping to become a representative in the Massachusetts legislature. He did not, however, leave any record of his decision to join the party. Etsy, 40, quoted in Sappol, “The Odd Case of Charles Knowlton,” 489; Allosso, 224, 260.

<sup>611</sup> “House of Representatives,” *The Daily Atlas*, February 14, 1842.

<sup>612</sup> “Constitution of the United Liberals of Franklin County,” *Boston Investigator*, October 1, 1845.

and money, yearly expended in the United States, about matters and things beyond the clouds, are,” he argued, “...spent in vain.”<sup>613</sup>

While antebellum materialists like Knowlton and Kneeland viewed materialism as a philosophy of social change and egalitarian reform, some anti-materialist critics tried to portray materialism as a theory completely antithetical to social reform. Because of its foundational adherence to material existence and material fact, many felt materialism to be an overly rigid philosophy. Figures like William Batchelder Greene (1819-1878), a Unitarian and Transcendentalist from Massachusetts, argued that “Materialism is the philosophy of the *existing fact*, and the opposition to all change, and therefore is destructive to liberty.”<sup>614</sup> This static conception of materialism as a theory wedded to the current state of affairs and incapable of social transformation was the precisely the opposite of what self-professed materialists like Knowlton saw in materialist ideas.

Knowlton believed people would simply *enjoy* their lives more if they adopted a materialist understanding of death. He belabored this point in several obituaries he wrote for the *Boston Investigator*, the radical freethought periodical founded by his friend Kneeland. In one obituary, Knowlton noted that the deceased “died a firm believer in the saving doctrines of Materialism. They saved him from all anxiety and trouble in relation to a future state of existence.”<sup>615</sup> He praised “the sober, sound, peace-giving, and profitable doctrines of Materialism,” as they erased all fears of eternal punishment or reward, and he later described “that state of mind which the *confirmed* materialist enjoys,” in which “one can be really indifferent concerning futurity” and thus can die “in a calm state of mind...having no dreams of

---

<sup>613</sup> Charles Knowlton, “To Free Enquirers,” *Boston Investigator*, January 27, 1841.

<sup>614</sup> William Batchelder Greene, *Transcendentalism*, 64.

<sup>615</sup> Charles Knowlton, “Obituary. Another Lamp Has Gone Out!” *Boston Investigator*, February 8, 1843.

heaven nor fears of hell.”<sup>616</sup> All worrying was for naught, Knowlton reasoned, because “If I don’t exist in a future state, I shall not care a straw; for when I am dead, I shall not exist; and it is absurd to suppose that being will *care*, which does not exist.”<sup>617</sup> In another effort to make death a less frightening process, Knowlton explained the physical mechanisms of death and assured readers that “In all cases of dying, the individual suffers no pain after the sensibility of the nervous system is destroyed.”<sup>618</sup> “A man does not die,” Knowlton concluded, “because his ‘soul’ flies away from him! The truth is, a man is alive...when his organs are in condition to act, and when they are not, he is dead. This is all.”<sup>619</sup>

Knowlton made it a point to describe consciousness and death in purely anatomical, material terms. He opened one obituary, for example, as follows: “On the 14<sup>th</sup> of Jan., 1843, the vital organs of HEZEKIAH WARENER had undergone such impairment that they all ceased to act. Of course he ceased to be conscious.”<sup>620</sup> Knowlton ended Warner’s obituary by noting that a post mortem examination confirmed death by “cancerous disease...[of] the *upper* part of the stomach and the lower part of the esophagus.”<sup>621</sup> Here he described a physical explanation for death, discovered through dissection, and spoke plainly of the dissection as a simple act of scientific examination.

If, then, materialism could provide a more peaceful and enjoyable existence, why didn’t more Americans turn away from religion? Many believers, Knowlton posited, were simply indoctrinated into Christianity from a young age and accepted it uncritically as part of their lives:

One grand reason why so many believe in the christian religion, is this; They are...taught to believe it before they are old enough to reason...they are at this tender age deeply

---

<sup>616</sup> Charles Knowlton, “Obituary. Another Lamp Has Gone Out!” *Boston Investigator*, February 8, 1843.

<sup>617</sup> Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 377.

<sup>618</sup> Charles Knowlton, “Death Not a Painful Process,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, June 8, 1848.

<sup>619</sup> Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 55.

<sup>620</sup> Charles Knowlton, “Obituary. Another Lamp Has Gone Out!” *Boston Investigator*, February 8, 1843.

<sup>621</sup> Charles Knowlton, “Obituary,” January 6, 1841.

impressed with the idea that they *ought* to believe it, and that they will be eternally wretched after they die if they do not believe it.<sup>622</sup>

Rather than through habituation or the threat of damnation, Knowlton suggested that all individuals should “come to the *age of reason* before they are made acquainted with any religious notions,” at which time they should be “present[ed]...with the bible, together with all that has been...written, both for and against it.”<sup>623</sup> As his thinly veiled reference to Paine suggests, Knowlton had completely transformed his world-view by the late 1820s, from one who supposed Paine to be “a very *wicked* man” to an advocate for his gospel of reason.<sup>624</sup> In 1834, Knowlton’s name would even be toasted, alongside Thomas Cooper’s, at a celebration for the anniversary of Paine’s birthday.<sup>625</sup> That years ceremony (several were held in New York and Philadelphia in the 1830s) took place in Tammany Hall and was attended by more than 200 men, with some turned away for lack of space.<sup>626</sup> The toasts took place during a dinner which also featured a mixed-sex ball and performances of songs written especially for the occasion. Knowlton was named in a toast dedicated to “Dr. Cooper, Dr. Knowlton, and Dr. Underhill, with the liberal philosophers of the U. States.”<sup>627</sup> The celebration included toasts to other materialist philosophers like Baron d’Holbach as well as one for “The materialists of the U. States; they will not yield to any, in true patriotism, genuine republicanism, love of knowledge, pure morality, honesty, and industry.”<sup>628</sup>

---

<sup>622</sup> Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 329.

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>624</sup> *Ibid.*, 447.

<sup>625</sup> For an excellent account of American celebrations of Paine’s birthday, see Eric Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 191-200.

<sup>626</sup> “Celebration of the Anniversary of Thomas Paine’s Birthday,” *Free Enquirer*, February 2, 1834; “Birth Day of Thomas Paine,” *Free Enquirer*, March 2, 1834.

<sup>627</sup> “Regular Toasts,” *Free Enquirer*, February 23, 1834.

<sup>628</sup> *Ibid.*

## Reception of Knowlton's Materialism

While few were interested in actually purchasing Knowlton's *Elements*, his theories became known well enough that some Americans began to associate his name with materialism. George D. Crittenden, a farmer and teacher from Ashfield, recalled in his memoirs the day Knowlton arrived in town.<sup>629</sup> He noted darkly that Knowlton's "fame as an advocate of materialism and other views tending to atheism had preceded him."<sup>630</sup> Knowlton's reputation indeed eventually led to several public debates with local clergymen. One of the most well-known exchanges took place with the Reverend Tyler Thatcher and Origen Batchelder. Thatcher was an "ultra-Calvinistic" theologian who had attended Brown University while Batchelder was the founder of *The Anti-Universalist* and an itinerant lecturer "who made it his business to travel over the country and hold public debates with infidels."<sup>631</sup> The two squared off against Knowlton in "the old meetinghouse" where a reportedly "large audience" had "gathered from surrounding towns to hear the debate."<sup>632</sup> Crittenden described the match as "a great forensic battle...fought between the theism of the Puritan fathers and modern materialism."<sup>633</sup>

Knowlton laid out the central question for the day in strictly philosophical terms: "*Is there any being or agent in existence that is not material?*"<sup>634</sup> In this debate, Knowlton focused on an argument from absence, repeatedly returning to the point that "it is certain that we have no real knowledge of any such being, inasmuch as no such being has ever made any perceptible

---

<sup>629</sup> Kate Upson Clark, "George Dennison Crittenden," in *History and Proceedings of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Volume 6* (Deerfield, Massachusetts: The Association, 1921), 430.

<sup>630</sup> Crittenden, 57.

<sup>631</sup> Crittenden, 58; Allosso, 168. For an alternative account of an itinerant infidel lecturer, see Schlereth, 216-218.

<sup>632</sup> Crittenden, 58. Unfortunately, Crittenden offered no further details on the makeup of the audience (ie: gender, class, or specific numbers).

<sup>633</sup> Ibid.

<sup>634</sup> Charles Knowlton, *Speech of Dr. Charles Knowlton, in Support of Materialism, Against the Argument of Origen Bachelier, the Great Goliath, and Champion of the Cross, in 1836* (Philadelphia: Printed for the Society of Free Enquirers, 1838), 3.



impression upon any of our senses.”<sup>635</sup> He highlighted the impossibility of such an entity to one with a materialist sensibility: “language cannot express a greater absurdity than an *immaterial being*. For by immaterial is now meant that which has not the essential properties of matter.”<sup>636</sup> Elsewhere, Knowlton offered a simple explanation of matter, defining it as “a combination of properties” that always carried two traits: “Whatever is extended and solid, corresponds to our idea of matter, and for this reason I...consider extension and solidity as the only *essential* properties of matter.”<sup>637</sup> Even seemingly invisible phenomena, Knowlton asserted, existed as extended and solid matter: “Air is matter, light, heat...vapours, &c., are all material. It is true that as *bodies* they are not solid; but the exceedingly minute atoms of which they are composed are solid and of course extended.”<sup>638</sup>

The question of what actually exists in the world was a popular topic of debate during the antebellum era. Knowlton’s assertion that matter was the only substance in existence put him on the opposite end of an ontological spectrum from idealists. Though idealism was a far more dominant intellectual force in the antebellum U.S., Knowlton quickly rejected the philosophy. He labeled it the “immaterialist” position and argued it was “a mere hypothesis” that could never be proven demonstrably.<sup>639</sup> He was especially incensed by claims that “matter is something that lies back and behind all appearances something which never acts directly on our senses.”<sup>640</sup> While Knowlton believed all knowledge came through physical interaction with the world, some idealists asserted that humans can have no direct knowledge of material entities. William B. Greene, for instance, argued that “Material objects are the causes of impressions. We do not

---

<sup>635</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>636</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>637</sup> Charles Knowlton, “Mr. Editor, Sir,” *Boston Investigator*, May 8, 1835.

<sup>638</sup> Ibid.

<sup>639</sup> Charles Knowlton, “Transcendentalism,” *Boston Investigator*, June 17, 1846.

<sup>640</sup> Ibid.

perceive material objects; we only perceive the impressions which they make upon us... We know material objects by their properties only.”<sup>641</sup> Greene, a Unitarian from Massachusetts and a frequent contributor to *The Dial*, the leading publication of the Transcendentalists, believed the ultimate nature of reality, or at least what humans can know of reality, was fundamentally mental or immaterial.

Between the extremes of materialism and idealism was a kind of middle ground represented by men like Cyrus Bartol (1813-1900). A Unitarian minister and another Transcendentalist, Bartol did not deny the existence of physical entities, but instead asserted that the material existed only as “perishable accumulations” that would eventually “crumble” and “fall,” leaving behind only the spiritual.<sup>642</sup> “An unseen and heavenly world is required to correspond to our faith,” Bartol argued, “just as much as a material world to correspond to our senses.”<sup>643</sup> Like most American philosophers, Bartol exalted the spiritual over the material. He suggested that the body and material universe exists “not for its own sake, but as a servant” to the greater heavenly universe. He described the material world as “dull and naught,” nothing more than “dead forms, empty vessels, unless filled and enlivened” by a spiritual element beyond the physical or formal.<sup>644</sup> Materialists, Bartol concluded, were overly “earthly-minded, intent on worldly and carnal things, having hands only for gross and material works.”<sup>645</sup>

These ontological questions, however, were only precursors to the real issue that at hand: namely, the existence of God, who was assumed to exist as a spiritual or immaterial entity. Knowlton believed no theologian or philosopher could provide a reasonable explanation for such

---

<sup>641</sup> William B. Greene, “First Principles,” *The Dial*, January 1842.

<sup>642</sup> Cyrus Augustus Bartol, *Discourses on the Christian Spirit and Life* (Boston: Wm. Crosby and H.P. Nichols, 1850), 161.

<sup>643</sup> *Ibid*, 163.

<sup>644</sup> *Ibid*, 352.

<sup>645</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

a being. He cited, for instance, the well-known Transcendentalist Orestes Brownson's description of God as a particularly illogical, untenable example of such metaphysical speculation. "We can," Brownson claimed,

have no *definite* conception of God, still we can have *some* conception of him. God is a spirit. We can easily tell what a spirit is *not*, but not so easily what it is. We may, however, attain some proximate idea of it. In many instances it is the reality, the...essence of things. The universe is not a mere apparition – something is at the bottom of it...Amid all changes we...recognize something which changes not, a permanent, indestructible essence. This something I what we mean by reality...It is the living form, that which constitutes the essence of the thing of which we speak. It is what makes the thing what it is...Now God is a spirit. He is then, the life, the...substance of whatever is. He is the unseen, unchangeable, and permanent reality of this mighty apparition which men call nature.<sup>646</sup>

Such roundabout claims, Knowlton argued, were nonsensical. He bluntly stated his own position by asserting that "we can form no conception of the eternal existence of...something...called God. And further, we cannot conceive how this impossible, this unimaginable something...could make or create matter of nothing."<sup>647</sup>

Knowlton's unabashed blasphemy represented a shift in his materialist theory. Earlier in his career, Knowlton had promoted a more moderate materialism, one which focused on the denial of the soul rather than the denial of God and even admitted there may be a "Great Architect" or "Deity," albeit a material one, that had created the universe.<sup>648</sup> By the 1830s, however, as seen in his exchange with Thatcher and Batchelder, his materialism had evolved to a more straightforwardly atheist stance. Knowlton's arguments appalled those present at the debate, especially since he was speaking such sacrilege from "the pulpit in the old church, from

---

<sup>646</sup> Charles Knowlton, "Transcendentalism," *Boston Investigator*, June 17, 1846.

<sup>647</sup> Knowlton, *Speech of Dr. Charles Knowlton, in Defense of Materialism*, 6.

<sup>648</sup> Knowlton, *Elements of Modern Materialism*, 80.

which, up to that day, nothing had emanated but the pure unadulterated theism of the pilgrim fathers.”<sup>649</sup>

Knowlton continued to horrify his audience by explaining how materialism simply wrote God out of the creation story. Rather than a universe created by an all-powerful God, Knowlton suggested that “the existence of matter is natural, necessary, and eternal.”<sup>650</sup> “Matter,” Knowlton claimed in a later publication, “by virtue of its own inherent properties, *organizes itself*.”<sup>651</sup> Elsewhere, he asserted that “Matter...contains within itself, as part and parcel of its very nature...an organizing property, or a tendency to organize, which acting under favorable circumstances, has filled earth, air, and water with an almost endless variety of vegetables and animals.”<sup>652</sup> While Knowlton saw his all-encompassing theory of matter as a scientifically grounded and logical view, romantics and idealists resisted the reduction of the world to nothing but matter. Such claims, they worried, created an overly limited view of the universe, one which denied the existence of a higher realm or greater goods:

The beautiful and the sublime are but shadows of the spiritual and the infinite resting on the surface of the physical world. Beauty and sublimity are not qualities inherent in matter. They exist in the latent associations of the mind, which refer to higher moral elements. There is an implied recognition of a loftier spiritual sphere of existence, in all that charms the eye and captures the soul.<sup>653</sup>

Instead of a world ruled by God’s divine will, Knowlton believed the universe was governed by inviolable laws of nature. If “there is nothing in existence but matter,” he argued, “it follows...that all the phenomena of nature...are but actions or changes of matter. Now all

---

<sup>649</sup> Crittenden, 58.

<sup>650</sup> Knowlton, *Speech of Dr. Charles Knowlton, in Defense of Materialism*, 6. On the specific question of the origins of man, Knowlton argued that spontaneous generation theory, though not “perfectly clear” or “entirely satisfactory,” appeared to him to be “more probable, and attended with far less difficulties than any other view.” See Knowlton, *Speech of Dr. Charles Knowlton, in Defense of Materialism*, 12.

<sup>651</sup> Charles Knowlton, “An Essay on Man,” *Boston Investigator*, May 17, 1843.

<sup>652</sup> Charles Knowlton, “A Discourse, Delivered Before the United Liberals of Franklin County,” *Boston Investigator*, June 17, 1846.

<sup>653</sup> “Poetry and Religion, No. IV,” *Southern Literary Messenger* (March 1847): 55.

these changes take place in a certain invariable order...Herein...lies all that wonderful *order* that has been brought forth as evidence of a God.”<sup>654</sup> In his rejection of free will, Knowlton later referenced “the doctrine of necessity,” one of the central concepts in Joseph Priestley’s version of materialism, though Knowlton did not name or cite Priestley.<sup>655</sup> Elsewhere, Knowlton bluntly stated that “man is not a free agent.”<sup>656</sup> “There are,” he posited, “no events, actions, or changes, or effects, without their causes; and one effect as necessarily follows its cause as another. Consequently, every thought, feeling, and muscular movement of man which does occur, as necessarily occurs as a ball of lead, unsupported, falls to the ground.”<sup>657</sup>

In another common critique of materialism, some critics contended that this denial of free will led to a dangerous moral relativism and lack of accountability:

For if every effect has an adequate cause, it is easy to run back to the first cause in an adamant chain of fixed effects and causes. This is also materialism. It makes man a thing when it removes his responsibility, and it makes him a machine if he be moved by cause other than his spontaneous willing.<sup>658</sup>

Others worried more about the obvious removal of God’s role as creator in the universe. With his theory of self-organizing matter, Knowlton exemplified what chemist George Armstrong called “the skeptical physiologist,” a new breed of scientist. These “skeptics,” Armstrong explained, claimed that nature operated wholly through “laws of matter” as part of an effort “to get rid of the necessity of acknowledging the existence, either of a spirit within us, or of a spirit

---

<sup>654</sup> Knowlton, *Speech of Dr. Charles Knowlton, in Defense of Materialism*, 6-7.

<sup>655</sup> Knowlton, *Two Remarkable Lectures*, 30.

<sup>656</sup> Charles Knowlton, “Free Agency,” *Boston Investigator*, December 14, 1842.

<sup>657</sup> Ibid. Interestingly, Knowlton’s denial of chance was in line with mainstream mid-nineteenth century thought on the topic, though for reasons much different than most. “It is,” Maurice Lee has argued, “hard to overestimate how anathema chance was in the mid-nineteenth century,” largely because most American philosophers and theologians viewed chance as “an atheistic delusion.” Knowlton by contrast believed an ordered universe simply demonstrated the laws of nature that were part of his totalizing system of materialism. See Maurice S. Lee, *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism, and Belief in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 54.

<sup>658</sup> W. Grayson, “Philosophy of Mine,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 20, no. 12 (December 1854): 8.

above us; a soul or a deity.”<sup>659</sup> To refute such skepticism, Armstrong returned to the argument from design, proclaiming that all scientific discoveries proved God’s existence and revealed his wonderful creations: “The evidence of the existence of a creator and governor is,” Armstrong asserted, “...written on every separate atom of the structures.”<sup>660</sup>

Though the majority opposed Knowlton’s position, there are a few examples of Americans who found his materialist theories compelling. The Thatcher-Batchelder-Knowlton debate, for instance, did turn at least one observer, albeit not a local resident, to materialism. Several years after the exchange, an individual identified only as M. Y. wrote to the *Boston Investigator*:

I am indebted to Dr. Knowlton for my conversion to materialism. A discussion held between him and a Rev. some one [Mr. Thatcher] appeared in the Boston Investigator a number of years past, when the venerable Mr. Kneeland was editor of the same, led me to examine into the subject of materialism and immaterialism, a subject I had never thought of before; and I shall, while I live, revere and respect the able and fearless Doctor, though I never had the honor...of seeing him.<sup>661</sup>

M. Y.’s example suggests that some materialist ideas circulated well beyond the small, mostly local networks in Boston and New York in which they originated. It also demonstrates the importance of periodicals in disseminating such radical material and confirms the existence of an interested and open-minded audience for such content.

M. Y.’s reaction to the Ashfield debate, however, was highly unusual. In a local context, Ashfield community leaders began a campaign to shun Knowlton and boycott his medical practice in the hopes of pushing him out of town after the debate. Reverend Mason Grosvenor, a local Congregational minister who had studied at Yale, spearheaded these efforts.<sup>662</sup> Grosvenor

---

<sup>659</sup> “Lecture on Chemistry,” *Southern Literary Messenger* (June 1838), 25.

<sup>660</sup> Ibid.

<sup>661</sup> Though M. Y. was not present at the actual debate, he read a transcript of it published in the *Boston Investigator*. M. Y., “Mr. Editor,” *Boston Investigator*, March 12, 1851.

<sup>662</sup> For more on Grosvenor, see Allosso, 147.

urged his parishioners to avoid Knowlton in their day-to-day activities and refuse his services as a physician. “Infidelity,” Grosvenor proclaimed, “must be crushed in Ashfield by withdrawing patronage from that firm.”<sup>663</sup> To further motivate his followers, Grosvenor informed his congregation that any member who continued to use Knowlton’s practice would be banned from the church. A longtime Ashfield resident identified as Mr. Cole recalled Grosvenor’s efforts as part of “the ill feeling from the old Calvinistic element of that town” following the public debate. Cole remembered that “They drew up the following preamble, and succeeded in getting many signers: ‘We, the undersigned, owing to Dr. Knowlton’s Atheistic principles, do hereby agree not to employ him as a physician in our families.’ A rare sympathetic observer, Cole also noted wryly that “When any of them were taken sick, the *first resort* was to DR. CHARLES KNOWLTON. Comment is unnecessary.”<sup>664</sup>

Here Cole suggested an interesting disconnect between opinions about Knowlton based on his abilities as a physician and those based on his materialism. Though his materialism strongly informed his medical practice, some of his patients evidently tried to separate the two or ignored his infidelity when they fell ill. Knowlton’s obituary from the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* noted this same dichotomy:

among the first physicians of Western Massachusetts, very few indeed, if any, surpassed, him in medical skill, acumen, or knowledge...In examining a patient, he was careful, scrutinizing, and thorough...Hence he was uncommonly accurate in diagnosis...These habits of close thinking and accurate observation, combined with his complete...knowledge of the resources of medicine, made him wonderfully successful as a practitioner. In spite of his known and avowed Infidelity on the subject of religion, these qualities secured him a run of business which no physician in Franklin County, probably, ever exceeded.<sup>665</sup>

---

<sup>663</sup> Crittenden, 59.

<sup>664</sup> A. A. Cole, “Dr. Charles Knowlton,” *Boston Investigator*, April 13, 1887.

<sup>665</sup> Stephen J. W. Tabor, “The Late Dr. Charles Knowlton, M.D.” *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 45, no. 6 (September 10, 1851): 109-120; “The Late Dr. Knowlton’s Autobiography,” *The Boston Medical and Surgical*

Such accounts suggest that while Knowlton had several detractors, he also earned the respect of many residents.<sup>666</sup> Another report described Knowlton similarly as “a very skillful physician, and highly esteemed in spite of his heresy.” It also called him “a ‘thorn’ to the orthodox” and “a martyr to science” for his willingness to advance unpopular theories regardless of the consequences.<sup>667</sup>

### **The United Liberals of Franklin County and the Infidel Conventions**

Knowlton’s many trials, jail sentences, and public defamations eventually led him to argue that infidels and materialists needed to band together and organize in the same way as Christians:

Christian sects obtain, secure, and increase their power and influence by means of organized associations... The grand step we should take, in order to advance the doctrines we maintain, and to secure ourselves from prosecution, is to form a brotherly alliance... What should prevent the Infidels from organizing themselves into a society?... Trade Unions are formed for the purpose of aiding mechanics in the mutual protection of individuals from the grinding spirit of their wealthy employers. Infidels should form a similar union for the purpose of protecting one another’s reputation, and maintain their freedom of speech.<sup>668</sup>

Amid similar calls to organize, the idea of an “Infidel Convention,” a gathering of like-minded individuals, began to appear in the early 1840s in the *Boston Investigator* and other radical freethought publications. After several years of discussion and debate, Knowlton and over 70 other individuals (including some women) from states as far away as South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, and Kentucky pledged to attend an Infidel Convention in New York on

---

*Journal* 45, no. 8 (September 24, 1851): 149-157. Portions of the obituary were reprinted as “The Late Dr. Charles Knowlton” in the *Boston Investigator*, October 23, 1850.

<sup>666</sup> Some even went so far as to name their children after him, including a Col. Charles Knowlton Hawks who would later serve in the Union Army. See Crittenden, 57-58.

<sup>667</sup> “Materialism – Dr. Charles Knowlton,” *Boston Investigator*, September 23, 1874.

<sup>668</sup> “Reasons for a Friendly Alliance Among Infidels,” *Boston Investigator*, June 7, 1843.



Sunday, May 4, 1845.<sup>669</sup> The convention took place in the Hall of the Coliseum on Broadway and the number of delegates in attendance far exceeded these initial pledges: “Instead of eighty or one hundred delegates, to which we had limited our estimates, there were several hundred, representing Fourteen States and Territories, and Europe.”<sup>670</sup> Some reports suggested that in total, nearly five hundred attended.<sup>671</sup> Robert D. Owen welcomed the group and “hailed their assembling as an index of the future emancipation of the human mind from the thralldom of error, beneath which it had so long struggled in slavery and suffering.”<sup>672</sup> During the meeting, Knowlton was elected the 5<sup>th</sup> Vice President of the group (ten Vice Presidents were elected, along with a President, Secretary, and Assistant Secretary) and appointed Chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means.<sup>673</sup> Reactions to the initial meeting from outside observers were generally unfavorable. Many were taken aback by nearly every aspect of the convention, from the fact that it met “on *Sunday*” to the claim that “even *females*” had attended, including one, a Mrs. Rose, who had “harangued the meeting!”<sup>674</sup>

After returning from the Convention, Knowlton organized “a County Society for the promotion of mental liberty.” This local chapter, he hoped, would eventually “co-operate with other Societies about to be organized throughout the United States, for the purpose of carrying forward the important work of *mental emancipation*.”<sup>675</sup> On September 20, 1845, his society met for the first time at a “Liberal Meeting in Greenfield,” the seat of Franklin County. Knowlton became chairman of the resulting organization, “The United Liberals of Franklin

---

<sup>669</sup> “Delegates to the Infidel Convention,” March 12, 1845.

<sup>670</sup> “The Late Infidel Convention,” *Boston Investigator*, May 14, 1845.

<sup>671</sup> “Infidel Convention,” *The North American and Daily Advertiser*, May 6, 1845.

<sup>672</sup> “Minutes and Proceedings of the Infidel Convention,” *Boston Investigator*, May 14, 1845.

<sup>673</sup> Ibid; “The Late Infidel Convention,” *Boston Investigator*, July 18, 1845.

<sup>674</sup> “An Infidel Convention,” *Fayetteville Observer*, May 14, 1845.

<sup>675</sup> Charles Knowlton, “Notice,” *Boston Investigator*, August 6, 1845.

County.” In the preamble to their constitution, the United Liberals described their goal of rooting out religion and other superstitious beliefs from American culture:

We, citizens of Franklin County, (Mass.,) whose names are annexed to this instrument, being disposed to promote the cause of Mental Liberty, and also to exercise this liberty ourselves by freely enquiring into the truth of all religions which claim to be a revelation from some intelligent being superior to man, do, for the attainment of these purposes, hereby organize ourselves into a Society, by adopting the following constitution.<sup>676</sup>

Knowlton’s group was one of several others organized after the New York infidel convention.

The Boston Infidel Relief Society, for instance, had been founded earlier that year in March.

The group used the pages of the *Boston Investigator* to urge “Infidels everywhere” to

“form...similar societies” as a way for Infidels to be “effectually organized as a body.”<sup>677</sup> They

noted that these societies were to display “genuine liberality in receive all sorts of people into

membership, and allowing them equal benefits – whether they be male or female, black or white,

Christians, Jews, Heathen, infidel, or neither.”<sup>678</sup> In addition to Sunday meetings with lectures,

debates, music, and other entertainment, the Boston Infidel Relief Society provided material

assistance to those in need: “the relief of those who are prevented by poverty, sickness, or old

age, from administering to their own necessities” was listed as one of the group’s central aims.<sup>679</sup>

In its initial year, men were charged \$2 to join with a monthly fee of 12 ½ cents while women

were charged \$1 with a 6 ¼ cent fee. Membership was reported to be 61, consisting of 49 men

---

<sup>676</sup> “Constitution of the United Liberals of Franklin County,” *Boston Investigator*, October 1, 1845.

<sup>677</sup> “A Great Institution,” *Boston Investigator*, June 18, 1845.

<sup>678</sup> Ibid.

<sup>679</sup> The group met at various locations announced prior to each meeting. Examples included the private residence of “Mrs. P. Worchester” on Bunker Hill Street, Shawmut Hall, the Crystal Fount Hall and the Office of the Investigator. Regular notices for group meetings ran from 1845 to 1860, the year the group tried to incorporate in Massachusetts. “Constitution and By-Laws of the Boston Infidel Relief Society,” *Boston Investigator*, June 18, 1845; “Boston Infidel Relief Society,” *Boston Investigator*, June 11, 1845; “A Great Institution,” *Boston Investigator*, June 18, 1845; “Boston Infidel Relief Society,” September 3, 1845; “Boston Infidel Relief Society,” October 29, 1845; “Special Notice: A Petition for an Act of Incorporation,” *Boston Investigator*, November 21, 1860; “A Great Institution,” *Boston Investigator*, June 18, 1845.

and 12 women.<sup>680</sup> The Infidel Relief Society met regularly from 1845 until at least the early 1860s.<sup>681</sup>

Knowlton also attended the next year's convention, which was sponsored by the newly-formed "Infidel Society for the Promotion of Mental Liberty."<sup>682</sup> On June 14, 1846, delegates reported to New York from New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and Indiana. Most were members of the six auxiliary groups that had been formed since the previous year's "Infidel Convention," including the Free Enquirer's Library Association in New York, another group which sought to circulate liberal tracts, and the Infidel Society for the Promotion of Mental Liberty from Farmington in the Iowa Territory, the location of Abner Kneeland's failed Salubria experiment.<sup>683</sup> The New York Infidel Conventions appear to have stopped meeting in 1847, though it is possible that later records no longer exist or have not yet been located. For some of the auxiliary groups, however, it is possible to document a much longer tenure. Knowlton's United Liberals of Franklin County appears to have been quite short-lived, as no records of the group apart from a few initial meetings exist.

---

<sup>680</sup> "Report From the Boston Infidel Relief Society," in "The Late Infidel Convention," *Boston Investigator*, July 8, 1845.

<sup>681</sup> The Boston Infidel Relief Society can be traced through several Massachusetts registries in the 1850s and early 1860s. It appears in the listings for "Charitable Societies" in several registers throughout the 1850s and then shows up under a slightly different name, the "BOSTON INFIDEL SOCIETY," in the early 1860s. Despite the change in name, the group still lists familiar names such as Horace Seaver as president and Josiah P. Mendum as Treasurer. The only other information provided in the 1862 entry is that the group held an annual meeting in May. See George Adams, *The Massachusetts Register: A State Record, for the Year 1852, Containing a Business Directory of the State, With a Variety of Useful Information* (Boston: Office, No. 91 Washington Street, 1852), 291; George Adams, *The Massachusetts Register for the Year 1854* (Boston: George Adams, (1854), 204; *The Boston Directory, Embracing the City Record, A General Directory of the Citizens, and a Business Directory, for the Year Commencing July 1, 1862* (Boston: Adams, Sampson, and Company), 535.

<sup>682</sup> Minutes from the convention note that Knowlton donated \$5.00 to the group's fund. "Infidel Convention," *Boston Investigator*, July 1, 1846.

<sup>683</sup> "Infidel Convention," *Boston Investigator*, July 1, 1846. For more on the Free Enquirer's Library Association, see Schlereth, 8.

## Knowlton's Final Years

Knowlton continued to practice medicine in Ashfield and surrounding areas for the remainder of his life. He became a member of the Massachusetts Medical Society in 1844 and published several articles in the group's publication, the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*.<sup>684</sup> These articles were, unsurprisingly, often contentious and challenged conventional medical wisdom.<sup>685</sup> According to most accounts, Knowlton's materialist and anti-religious beliefs only hardened as he grew older. One of his biographers claims that in the final years of his life, Knowlton began a Sunday tradition of opening his windows and playing his fiddle loudly to taunt the pious churchgoers who passed by his home.<sup>686</sup> In 1850, Knowlton died suddenly while staying in Winchendon, a town in the northernmost region of Worcester County, where he had been visiting Tabitha's sister, Lucy Stuart Simonds.<sup>687</sup> His obituary listed a longstanding heart problem as the likely cause of death.

## Frances Wright (1795-1852)

Historians have told Frances Wright's story from many perspectives. Many have traced her speaking career and popular lecture tours in the U.S.<sup>688</sup> Some have focused on her disastrous Nashoba experiment while others have noted her role in the formation of the New York Working

---

<sup>684</sup> Riegel, 489.

<sup>685</sup> For more on Knowlton's publications in the *Journal* and his later medical work, see Allosso, 188-210.

<sup>686</sup> Etsy, 18, 24, quoted in Sappol, "The Odd Case of Charles Knowlton," 489.

<sup>687</sup> "The Late Charles Knowlton, M.D.," 109; Allosso, 225.

<sup>688</sup> The most comprehensive book on Wright is Celia Morris Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). Another much older but still useful account is A. J. G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson, *Frances Wright, Free Enquirer: The Study of a Temperament* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939). See also Lori D. Ginzberg, "The Hearts of Your Readers Will Shudder": Fanny Wright, Infidelity, and American Freethought," *American Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (June 1994): 195-226; Susan Kissell, *In Common Cause: The "Conservative" Frances Trollope and the "Radical" Frances Wright* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 198); Elizabeth Ann Bartlett, *Liberty, Equality, Sorority: The Origins and Interpretation of American Feminist Thought: Frances Wright, Sarah Grimke, and Margaret Fuller* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1994); Robert J. Connors, "Frances Wright: First Female Civic Rhetor in America," *National Council of Teachers of English* 62, no. 1 (September 1999): 30-57.

Man's party.<sup>689</sup> Nearly all have demonstrated the numerous ways Wright defied the gender norms of her era. Few, however, have connected Wright's name to materialist philosophy, an understandable omission given her infrequent use of the term.<sup>690</sup> I argue, however, that many of Wright's ideas, especially her theory of knowledge, fit within the parameters of materialist epistemology as defined by Charles Knowlton. Her vehement criticisms of Christianity along with her agitation for economic, gender, and racial equality lined up neatly with the interests of other self-proclaimed materialists like Kneeland and Knowlton. Finally, several of Wright's ventures like her Hall of Science and the *Free Enquirer* served as important sites of circulation for radical ideas like materialism that were repressed elsewhere.

Frances Wright was born in September 1795 to a wealthy family in Scotland. Her mother, Camilla, came from a family of British aristocrats, while her father, James Wright, Jr., was a well-educated linen merchant who worked to distribute cheap copies of Thomas Paine's controversial *Rights of Man* in the 1790s.<sup>691</sup> Both of Fanny's parents died in 1798 when she was only two years old. After the death of her parents, Wright spent the remainder of her childhood in London with Duncan Campbell, her maternal grandfather, and Frances Campbell, her aunt.<sup>692</sup> The Campbells raised Fanny in the Anglican church. She grew up with many educational advantages, including numerous books and private tutors constantly at her disposal.<sup>693</sup> Fanny

---

<sup>689</sup> For a recent interpretation of Nashoba, see Gail Bederman, "Revisiting Nashoba: Slavery, Utopia, and Frances Wright in America, 1818-1826," *American Literary History* (2005): 438-459. For Wright and the Working Man's party, see Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 176-216.

<sup>690</sup> Some accounts suggest Wright's work was influenced by that of the "French materialists." See, for instance, Mary R. Whitcomb, "Abner Kneeland: His Relations to Early Iowa History," *Annals of Iowa* (April 1904), 343. Other historians have previously described Wright's ideas as materialist. Therese Boos Dykeman, for instance, writes that "Frances Wright's epistemology is materialistic, reality underlying all being." See Therese Boos Dykeman, ed., *The Neglected Canon: Nine Women Philosophers* (Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 282.

<sup>691</sup> Frances Wright, *Biography, Notes, and Political Letters of Frances Wright D'Arusmont* (New York: John Windt, 1844), 6, 7; Eckhardt, 5.

<sup>692</sup> Wright, *Biography*, 8.

<sup>693</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

was thus, as biographer Celia Morris Eckhardt has argued, exceptionally well educated even for a woman of her standing.<sup>694</sup> Throughout her childhood, Fanny was appalled by the displays of inequality she saw in London. She was especially taken by the contrast between her own privileged life and that of the beggars and peasants she encountered.

At the age of seventeen, Wright read her first book on America, an account of the American revolution, and she began to idealize the U.S. as a land of freedom and equality.<sup>695</sup> In 1813, she moved back to Scotland and continued her studies.<sup>696</sup> While women were not allowed to attend Glasgow's university, Wright was permitted to use the university library.<sup>697</sup> Wright's connections to materialism appear in some of her writings from this early period of study. Most notable was *A Few Days in Athens*, a piece modeled in the tradition of Epicurean philosophy that she wrote at the age of nineteen.<sup>698</sup> One of the earliest philosophers identified with materialist ideas, Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) denied the existence of an immortal soul, rejected the notion of Platonic forms, and promoted an atomistic conception of the universe that explained nature in terms of physical phenomena. Wright admired Epicurus as a thinker well ahead of his time: "How beautifully," she wrote,

have the modern discoveries in chemistry and natural philosophy, and the more accurate analysis of the human mind – sciences unknown to the ancient world – substantiated the leading principles of Epicurean ethics and physics – the only ancient school of either, really deserving the name.<sup>699</sup>

Wright noted she was interested in Epicurean philosophy before she read more contemporary materialist philosophers like Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789).<sup>700</sup> *A Few Days* was a morality tale

---

<sup>694</sup> Eckhardt, 10.

<sup>695</sup> Wright, *Biography*, 11; Eckhardt, 11.

<sup>696</sup> Wright, *Biography*, 12.

<sup>697</sup> Wright, *Biography*, 13; Eckhardt, 13.

<sup>698</sup> Wright, *Biography*, 10.

<sup>699</sup> Frances Wright, *A Few Days in Athens; Being a Translation of a Greek Manuscript Discovered in Herculaneum* (Boston: J. P. Mendum, 1850), 80.

<sup>700</sup> Wright, *Biography*, 6.

that highlighted the importance of carefully weighing evidence and openly exchanging information before drawing a conclusion. Wright contrasted this method of inquiry with that of simply believing received wisdom or behaving in a certain way out of guilt or shame, the main mechanisms through which she implied Christianity functioned.<sup>701</sup> The dialogues in Wright's story included both an impassioned defense of materialist philosophy as well as several blistering attacks on religion:

We have named the leading error of the human mind – the bane of human happiness – the perverter of human virtue! It is Religion – that dark coinage of trembling ignorance! It is Religion – that prisoner of human felicity! It is Religion – that blind guide of human reason! It is Religion - that dethroner of human virtue! which lies at the root of all the evil and all the misery that pervade the world!<sup>702</sup>

Wright's early anti-religious sentiments and her emphasis on reason and free inquiry would later become central to her worldview.

In August 1818, Wright traveled to the U.S. for the first time. She wrote that this trip “had been made entirely for her own instruction.”<sup>703</sup> Eckhardt suggests that Wright was further motivated by a desire to escape both the political tumult in London and the strict codes of conduct that restricted her behavior as an upper-class woman in the early nineteenth century.<sup>704</sup> Frances and her sister Camilla landed in New York, excited to finally see this fabled land of freedom.<sup>705</sup> It was during this initial trip to the U.S. that Wright first witnessed the institution of slavery and was thoroughly horrified by what she saw. In March 1820, she and Camilla sailed back to London and Wright published *Views of Society and Manners in America*, a fairly rosy account of the nation, though the final paragraph of her book hinted at her early anti-slavery

---

<sup>701</sup> For a succinct summary and analysis of *A Few Days in Athens*, see Eckhardt, 16-17. Eckhardt also describes Wright's poorly conceived 1827 addendum to the piece. See Eckhardt, 134-136.

<sup>702</sup> Wright, *A Few Days in Athens*, 85-86. For Leontium's defense of materialism while questioning Theon, see Wright, *A Few Days in Athens*, 73-75.

<sup>703</sup> Wright, *Biography*, 15.

<sup>704</sup> Eckhardt, 23.

sentiments.<sup>706</sup> Wright returned to the U.S. again in 1824 and it was during this period that her opinions of the nation began to evolve.<sup>707</sup> The following year, 1825, marked several important moments in her career. It was during this time that she and Camilla became citizens of the U.S. and she met Robert D. Owen, the famous Scottish reformer and utopian socialist who would soon be one of her closest friends and colleagues.<sup>708</sup>

After spending time at New Harmony, Owen's utopian community in Indiana, Wright combined her anti-slavery cause with Owen's utopian views and founded Nashoba, her own ill-fated utopian commune located on a 640 acre plot near Memphis, Tennessee. Wright founded Nashoba upon explicitly anti-religious principles, declaring that religion would have no place in her community. While many historians claim Wright envisioned Nashoba as an interracial utopia, Gail Bederman argues that the project was actually part of "a complex financial scheme" that would "perfect American liberty by ridding the US of both slavery and former slaves" through the "support [of] universal colonization."<sup>709</sup> On all counts, the project fell far short of these goals. Plagued by financial difficulties, Wright admitted failure and signed the deeds to Nashoba over to a group of white resident trustees in December 1826.<sup>710</sup> She sailed to Europe in July 1827 and returned in December of the same year, just in time to see her project dissolve amidst accusations of "free love," racial miscegenation, and mistreatment of the slaves.<sup>711</sup>

Following the Nashoba disaster, Wright became co-editor of Owen's *New Harmony Gazette* in 1828, a move that made her, Eckhardt suggests, "probably the first woman since

---

<sup>706</sup> Frances Wright, *Views of Society and Manners in America* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1821), 522.

<sup>707</sup> Wright, *Biography*, 19.

<sup>708</sup> Eckhardt, 107.

<sup>709</sup> Bederman, "Revisiting Nashoba," 438.

<sup>710</sup> Wright was unable to afford enough slaves to inhabit Nashoba, which had only 15 slaves at its peak. Bederman, 451.

<sup>711</sup> In the interim, Wright traveled to Haiti, where she emancipated Nashoba's remaining slaves. Bederman, 453.



colonial times to edit an American paper meant for general circulation.”<sup>712</sup> A precursor to the *Free Enquirer*, the *Gazette* was a free thought publication that, like the *Boston Investigator*, acted as an important link between New England radicals, providing them a way of communicating and circulating ideas deemed too controversial by other periodicals.

On July 4, 1828, Wright found an even more compelling way to disseminate her ideas when she began her famous lecture tours, arguably the high point of her career.<sup>713</sup> Speaking publicly before large mixed audiences was a bold and largely unprecedented move for a woman of her era.<sup>714</sup> By all accounts, Wright was a captivating, electrifying speaker with incredible stage presence, facts only amplified by her nearly six-foot height.<sup>715</sup> She spoke on many topics but was especially passionate about those of religion and education. Wright voiced a vehement anticlericalism and regularly spoke out against “priestcraft” and the evils of the established religious order: “I will request you to observe,” she opened one lecture,

that your religion is the same as that of monarchical England – taught from the same books, and promulgated and sustained by similar means, viz. a salaried priesthood, set apart from the people; sectarian churches, in whose property the people have no share, and over whose use and occupancy the people have no control; expensive missions, treasury funds, associations, and, above all, a compulsory power, compounded at once of accumulated wealth, established custom, . . . and a system of education imbued with its spirit and all pervaded by its influence.<sup>716</sup>

This interlinked system of religion and education, Wright contended, was “devoted to . . . upholding, perpetuating, and strengthening the power and privilege to which [it] owes [its]

---

<sup>712</sup>Eckhardt, 168.

<sup>713</sup>Wright’s lectures were later published.

<sup>714</sup>For more on Wright’s challenge to conventional gender roles and her notoriety as a public figure, see Celia Morris Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Lori D. Ginzberg, “‘The Hearts of Your Readers Will Shudder’: Fanny Wright, Infidelity, and American Freethought,” *American Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (June 1994): 195-226.

<sup>715</sup>One account described Wright as follows: “Madame d’Arusmont is among the tallest of women; being about five feet ten inches high; she walks erect, and is remarkably handsome. Her brow is broad and magnificent; her eyes are large; her face is masculine, but well formed.” See Frances Wright, *Biography, Notes, and Political Lectures of Frances Wright D’Arusmont* (New York: John Windt, 1844), 45.

<sup>716</sup>Wright, “Existing Evils,” 154-155.

origin.”<sup>717</sup> It was thus only through secular educational reform that equality in society could be achieved. In the U.S., Wright quickly became infamous for her radical ideas and her willingness to defy the cultural and Christian conventions that dictated a woman’s proper role in society. Her failure to subscribe to antebellum gender norms led to charges of sexual impropriety and a host of other unscrupulous behaviors.<sup>718</sup> For her efforts in America, Wright would be branded the “red harlot of infidelity,” “a crazy atheistical woman,” and the “high priestess of infidelity.”<sup>719</sup>

### **The Hall of Science, 1829**

Because no institutions existed to support her free thought activities, Wright began to create her own. One of her most interesting projects began in 1829 when she purchased the former Ebenezer Church located on Broome Street in New York. With a \$7,000 offer, Wright managed to obtain the property over a group of “church speculators [who] had hoped to buy the property for a song.”<sup>720</sup> Wright christened her new building the Hall of Science and dedicated it with the goal of providing New Yorkers with a series of alternative social and educational experiences consciously rooted in free enquiry rather than religion. An announcement in the *Free Enquirer*, the newspaper Wright and Robert D. Owen ran out of the basement of the Hall, stated that “The Ebenezer church, in Broome street, has been purchased for a hall of science. In

---

<sup>717</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>718</sup> Wright is also notable as one of the only women to discuss openly materialist ideas in the U.S. While it is possible that some anonymous authors of materialist essays may have been female, Wright is one of the only documentable examples of such a woman. Given both the rigid gender roles of the period as well as the extremely small number of Americans interested in materialism, this lack of female materialists is unsurprising. It is, however, notable that Wright as well as other materialists like Abner Kneeland went out of their way to invite women to their various lectures and social gatherings.

<sup>719</sup> William Randall Waterman, “Frances Wright,” *Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law* 256 (1924): 205.

<sup>720</sup> The funds for this purchase, as well as her frequent Atlantic crossings and travels throughout the U.S., likely came from a combination of her parents’ wealth and her 1803 inheritance from William Campbell, her extremely affluent uncle who had died in a battle in India. Quoted in Perkins and Wolfson, 234; Eckhardt, 7.

this building popular instruction, all the more useful branches of knowledge, will be imparted by means of familiar lectures.”<sup>721</sup> The statement of purpose for the Hall explained that the Hall’s five trustees were to “procure competent persons to lecture on scientific and moral subjects, at least once every Sunday, and whenever else circumstances will permit.”<sup>722</sup> The Hall’s grand opening was held in April 1829 and included a ceremony in which the Hall was “dedicated to natural, moral, and mental philosophy.”<sup>723</sup> During her American speaking tours, Wright urged her audiences to create Halls in their own towns, hoping that someday a Hall of Science would exist in every city in the U.S.<sup>724</sup>

Like Abner Kneeland’s Temple of Reason in Boston, the Hall of Science was Wright’s radical version of the athenaeum or lyceum, institutions that appeared in the U.S. during the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>725</sup> The American lyceum movement began with Josiah Holbrook’s lyceum in Millbury, Massachusetts, in 1826. By the 1830s, more than 3,000 lyceums existed in the U.S., with an especially high concentration in the New England region.<sup>726</sup> Lyceums acted as sites of adult education and entertainment, featuring programming like lectures, classes, professional training, debates, and performances. When Wright remodeled the Hall, she chose details like the addition of Greek columns that made her institution appear even more like a traditional lyceum. Wright also, however, decorated the Hall’s front window with pictures of men like Thomas Paine, images meant to taunt those who frequented the Bible repository located directly across

---

<sup>721</sup> “Hall of Science,” *The Free Enquirer*, March 25, 1829.

<sup>722</sup> “Hall of Science,” *The Free Enquirer*, February 11, 1829.

<sup>723</sup> “Hall of Science,” *The Free Enquirer*, April 29, 1829.

<sup>724</sup> Eckhardt, 175.

<sup>725</sup> For more on the lyceum movement, see Angela G. Ray, *The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2005); Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1968); Curti, 365-367.

<sup>726</sup> Russel Blaine Nye, *Society and Culture in America, 1830-1860* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 360. Notable New England lyceums included one run by Daniel Webster as well as one in Concord, Massachusetts that attracted well-known Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

the street from the Hall.<sup>727</sup> The programming of her Hall of Science also differed significantly from that of the mainstream lyceums, which for the most part avoided material of a contentious nature. The Hall, by contrast, was created purposefully as a space where radical ideas like materialism could circulate freely. To these ends, the Hall sold books like Knowlton's *Elements of Modern Materialism*.<sup>728</sup> The collection offered at the Hall was very similar to the previously mentioned "Liberal" catalogs sold by George Henry Evans and Gilbert Vale. The bookstore saw a great deal of business, reportedly reaching sales of almost \$2,000 in one year, an especially surprising figure given its location in the heart of the burned-over district.<sup>729</sup> During her renovations, Wright added seating for approximately 1,200, another ambitious figure for such a radical institution. Wright offered the Hall as a platform for those who were not allowed to speak publically elsewhere, including female lecturers like herself.<sup>730</sup> As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Charles Knowlton gave lectures on anatomy and materialism at the Hall during one of his disappointing New York book tours.<sup>731</sup>

Knowlton also lectured at the Sunday Lyceum, another Boston counterpart to Wright's New York Hall of Science. Founded in 1835, the Sunday Lyceum met at the American Gallery on Summer Street.<sup>732</sup> The Sunday Lyceum consisted primarily of a series of lectures sponsored by the First Society of Free Enquirers. The topics for each week's gatherings were announced in the *Boston Investigator* and included titles such as "On supernatural operations, or Metaphysics; showing that all such terms were invented to express what exists in the imagination only" or "On

---

<sup>727</sup> Eckhardt, 191, 194; Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 511.

<sup>728</sup> "Hall of Science," *The Free Enquirer*, September 30, 1829. Dan Allosso has also noted that Knowlton "traded copies of the book with...Wright...for other freethought books and pamphlets...carried in the bookshop." See Allosso, 95.

<sup>729</sup> Eckhardt, 194.

<sup>730</sup> "Female Preaching," *The Free Enquirer*, January 7, 1832.

<sup>731</sup> Mary Lee Etsy, "Dr. Charles Knowlton: A Biography," (Ashfield Historical Society, ca. 1972), 15-16, quoted in Sappol, "The Odd Case of Charles Knowlton," 478-488.

<sup>732</sup> "Notice. Sunday Lyceum," *Boston Investigator*, October 9, 1835.

the Being of Infinite Knowledge, Wisdom, Power, and Benevolence... What ought we to expect from such a Being? – Something, surely, very different from what we have.”<sup>733</sup> Early reports suggest that the Lyceum was well attended: the inaugural lecture had seating for over 200 but ran out of space.<sup>734</sup> In addition to lectures, the Sunday Lyceum also hosted mixed-sex concerts and balls, activities not generally advocated by members of traditional lyceums.<sup>735</sup> In February 1839, however, the Lyceum started only to hold evening lectures. After April 1839, it stopped announcing all programming.<sup>736</sup>

The group reformed in November 1845, this time meeting in the Phonographic Hall on Washington Street. Admittance was free and any member of the public was invited to attend.<sup>737</sup> Knowlton lectured on materialism in this second iteration of the Sunday Lyceum in 1846. On that particular night, the Phonographic Hall was “well filled with a respectable and intelligent audience; among whom we noticed many Christians, who, we must give them the credit of saying, listened with marked attention.”<sup>738</sup> Though not all were convinced by his work, an article in the *Boston Investigator* noted that “to the Infidel portion of his hearers, he proved beyond doubt the superiority of Materialism to the vague, shadowy, and unsubstantial doctrines of immaterial substances and spiritual beings.”<sup>739</sup> This account provides a rare note on the audiences at these freethought institutions, suggesting that some Christians were attended in order to hear alternative views, even if only to confirm their own beliefs.

Institutions like the Sunday Lyceum and Wright’s Hall of Science acted not only as alternatives to traditional churches, but direct challenges to them. Wright’s challenge to religion

---

<sup>733</sup> “Sunday Lectures at the Sunday Lyceum, Summer Street,” March 30, 1838; “Sunday Lectures at the Sunday Lyceum, Summer Street,” *Boston Investigator*, April 7, 1837.

<sup>734</sup> “Sunday Lyceum,” *Boston Investigator*, October 16, 1835.

<sup>735</sup> “Sunday Lectures at the Sunday Lyceum, Summer Street,” *Boston Investigator*, December 1, 1837.

<sup>736</sup> “Sunday Lectures at the Sunday Lyceum,” *Boston Investigator*, February 22, 1839.

<sup>737</sup> “Sunday Lyceum,” *Boston Investigator*, November 19, 1845.

<sup>738</sup> “Lecture by Dr. Charles Knowlton,” *Boston Investigator*, February 11, 1846.

<sup>739</sup> *Ibid.*

came through especially clearly in the educational programming at the Hall. Because she believed social change would begin with education, Wright began to offer Sunday School classes in addition to weekly lectures at the Hall. The initial announcement of these classes stated:

Persons desirous of joining the...classes, either male or female, may apply at the School...The present course of instruction embraces Lectures on arithmetic and other branches of mathematics, anatomy, natural history, reading, writing, composing, and public speaking. Free Admission.<sup>740</sup>

Each Sunday, classes ran from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. For the senior class, lectures began with geometry at 9:30, anatomy and physiology at 10:30, and instruction on “the means of acquiring knowledge” at 11:30. Younger students were instructed in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Popular lectures for adults were held in the morning as well as the evening, with new topics announced each week in the *Enquirer*. The Hall auditorium could hold approximately 1,200.<sup>741</sup> A typical week included lectures “at 10 o’clock on the art of reasoning. At 11 on mathematics. At 12 on Nat. History. Afternoon lecture at 4 on Nat. Philosophy. Evening lecture at 7 on the ‘State of the public mind and the measures which it calls for,’ by Frances Wright.”<sup>742</sup> Tickets for the lectures were available for purchase in advance or at the door.<sup>743</sup> Evening lectures cost 12 ½ cents while the morning and afternoon lectures were generally free. In an effort to attract female followers, women were offered free admission to many events at the Hall.<sup>744</sup>

One of Wright’s memoirs described how she “invited those who were opposed, to come and attack her views or defend their own” at the Hall.<sup>745</sup> Starting in 1830, Wright did indeed add a regular series of religious and political debates to the programming at the Hall.<sup>746</sup> Admittance

---

<sup>740</sup> “SUNDAY SCHOOL, FOR INSTRUCTION IN KNOWLEDGE,” *The Free Enquirer*, April 8, 1829.

<sup>741</sup> Eckhardt, 194.

<sup>742</sup> “Hall of Science,” *The Free Enquirer*, September 30, 1829.

<sup>743</sup> “Hall of Science: Broome Street, Between Elizabeth and Mott,” *The Free Enquirer*, April 29, 1829.

<sup>744</sup> “Hall of Science,” *The Free Enquirer*, May 20, 1829.

<sup>745</sup> Amos Gilbert, *Memoir of Frances Wright, the Pioneer Woman in the Cause of Human Rights* (Cincinnati: Longly Brothers Printers, 1855), 32.

<sup>746</sup> “Hall of Science Debates,” *The Free Enquirer*, June 12, 1830.

to the debates was eight cents for men while women could attend for free. Each debate covered topics such as “the immortality of the soul” or other pre-published questions such as “*Is human sin and misery attributable to an innate depravity of our nature, or to the inequality of man’s condition and the consequent pressure of want.*”<sup>747</sup> These often lively debates continued in the pages of the *Free Enquirer*, where attendees regularly wrote letters in response to the evening’s events.<sup>748</sup> In addition to its educational mission, Wright also saw the Hall as an institution that could provide material support to its users. She planned, for instance, to eventually offer more dedicated vocational training at the Hall. Some accounts suggest that in its later years, the Hall had a medical dispensary that provided medical services to those in the area who could not afford them elsewhere.<sup>749</sup>

Beset with debt from her travels, Wright sold the Hall to a Methodist congregation in November 1832.<sup>750</sup> In its short tenure, the Hall had achieved a surprising degree of success, attracting a loyal audience for its weekly lectures and debates as well as regular attendees at the Sunday school. One of Wright’s biographers summarized the Hall’s admirable run as follows:

The Hall of Science remained for some time the one tangible sign of her campaign for a juster and more liberal public opinion. . . Bought with her own money, supported largely by the receipts from her lectures, its classes in geology, chemistry, physics, and other like subjects, its forums of free debate furnished a much needed center for free enquiry among the more intelligent young mechanics of the Workingman’s Party to whom all other institutions of higher learning were closed.<sup>751</sup>

As this account suggests, the Hall also acted as a meeting place for like-minded people,

---

<sup>747</sup> “Hall of Science,” *The Free Enquirer*, June 4, 1831; “Debates,” *The Free Enquirer*, March 3, 1832.

<sup>748</sup> See, for instance, in response to the question of man’s depravity described above, “Debates in the Hall of Science,” *The Free Enquirer*, July 20, 1831.

<sup>749</sup> A. J. G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson make this claim in their 1939 biography of Wright, though I have been unable to verify this information elsewhere. See J.G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson, *Frances Wright, Free Enquirer: The Study of a Temperament* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939), 310.

<sup>750</sup> In the meantime, Wright had left New York for England in July 1830. In February 1831, she was devastated by the death of her sister Camilla, her constant companion during her many travels.

<sup>751</sup> Perkins and Wolfson, 295.

including members of the Working Man's Party, another project that combined Wright's passion for reform, education, and political agitation.

### **Education and Free Thought**

The type of scientifically-based, free thought education Wright offered at the Hall was based on a model she hoped would soon be adopted across the entire nation. Wright made it clear that religion would have no place in her ideal educational system. She defined religion as “*a belief in, and homage rendered to, existences unseen and causes unknown.*”<sup>752</sup> As her definition suggested, Wright felt religion did not belong in the realm of legitimate, verifiable knowledge. Though she did not claim the title of materialist, Wright's conception of knowledge was nearly identical to that of other self-proclaimed materialists like Knowlton. She argued, for instance, in several Lockean passages that knowledge came through experience of the material world, not superstition or received wisdom: “Knowledge,” she explained, “we ascertained to consist in an accumulation of facts. The doors by which we admit these facts are our senses...these cursory remarks...lead to the observation that nothing can be known where there is nothing to operate on our senses.”<sup>753</sup> In her dedication speech at the Hall of Science, Wright issued the following warning:

Yet this, above all things: *speculate not farther than you know*. Endeavor to curb that futile curiosity, which, fostered by a vicious education, is ever wining the human imagination beyond what the eye hath seen, the touch examined, and the judgment compared. Let us unite on the safe and sure ground of fact and experiment, and we can ever err.<sup>754</sup>

Her empiricism led her to decry any “*assumed* instead of *substantiated* data” as “unreal

---

<sup>752</sup> Wright, “Morals,” 112.

<sup>753</sup> Frances Wright, “Religion,” in *Course of Popular Lectures*, 88.

<sup>754</sup> Wright, “Hall of Science,” 209.



science.”<sup>755</sup>

Wright’s philosophy of science as a sensory-based, empirically-grounded way of knowing suggested a glaring conflict between science and religion. Based on her theory of knowledge, religion amounted to nothing more than “a system of error” created in a “world of imagination.”<sup>756</sup> Wright believed, furthermore, that religion foreclosed the possibility of true inquiry. In one lecture, for instance, she challenged her audience to consider how religion tried to police the boundaries of human investigation:

those who call themselves the guardians of morality, and who *are* the constituted guardians of religion. Enquiry, it seems, suits not them. They have drawn the line, beyond which human reason shall not pass – above which human virtue shall not aspire! All that is without their faith...is immortality, is atheism...<sup>757</sup>

Religion, Wright argued, did not deserve the status of a science, that is, a branch of actual human knowledge, as it had no connection to the “material existence” that supplies sensory information.<sup>758</sup> She later asserted that religion is “wanting in substantiated and...enduring data to which the senses of each individual might appeal.”<sup>759</sup>

Like Knowlton, Wright believed religion distracted its followers from worldly concerns by promoting a misplaced obsession with the afterlife. “I will pray ye to observe,” she wrote, “how much of our positive misery originates in our idle speculations in matters of faith, and in our...forgetfulness of facts...our...*insane* indifference to visible causes of tangible evil.”<sup>760</sup>

Wright later named religion as one of these tangible evils, claiming that “religion has ever been,

---

<sup>755</sup> Wright, “Religion,” 89.

<sup>756</sup> Ibid, 100, 99.

<sup>757</sup> Frances Wright, “Of Free Enquiry, Considered as a Means of Obtaining Just Knowledge,” in *Course of Popular Lectures*, 47.

<sup>758</sup> Wright, “Religion,” 98.

<sup>759</sup> Wright, “Morals,” 107.

<sup>760</sup> Wright, “Religion,” 101.

and now is, the deepest source of contentions, wars, persecution for conscience sake...suspicious, false judgments...unjust...inconsistent actions.”<sup>761</sup>

Wright asserted further that these errors of religion were replicated and perpetuated in the American educational system, which she believed contained serious errors in method and content:

we are still in the habit of employing in our seminaries of learning...early Christian fanaticism...Thus are we still in the habit of imparting to the child a first idea of number through...allegorical ciphers, instead of tangible and visible objects; thus...we...persist in substantiating solely by a process of abstract reasoning...instead of first submitting those truths in the form of facts to the eye.<sup>762</sup>

Wright launched several attacks on the state of education in the U.S., describing it as a “cumbrous, expensive, useless, or rather pernicious system of partial, opinionative, and dogmatical instruction” and later as a “false, narrow, prejudiced, ignorant...relic of the dark ages – the gift and bequeathment of king-governed, priest-ridden nations.”<sup>763</sup>

In the early republic, American education was provided mainly by religious or private institutions. There was no organized public school system, though some states did offer limited free public education for poor students (ie: the New York Public School Society, founded in 1805, and a series of Boston public primary schools, starting in 1817).<sup>764</sup> Public schools saw gradual growth in the 1820s, as the first public high school opened in 1820 Boston and Massachusetts became the first state offer free public grade school for all children in 1827. The common school movement of the 1830s gave rise to even more public schools. Wright, however, still regarded these educational opportunities as deeply flawed and inherently unequal:

---

<sup>761</sup> Wright, “Morals,” 107.

<sup>762</sup> Wright, “Religion,” 89.

<sup>763</sup> Wright, “Existing Evils,” 151; 153.

<sup>764</sup> There were no compulsory attendance laws until the 1850s and later. Massachusetts, one of the earliest states to adopt such a measure, did so in 1851.

The object proposed by common schools...is to impart to the whole population knowledge which are in common use: reading and writing. To these are added arithmetic, and occasionally...some imperfect lessons in the simpler sciences. But I would ask, supposing these institutions should even be made to embrace all the branches of intellectual knowledge, and, thus, science offered gratis to all the children of the land, how are the children of the very class, for whom we suppose the schools instituted, to be supplied with food and raiment, or instructed in the trade necessary o their future subsistence, while they are following these studies? How are they, I ask, to be fed and clothed, when...the labor of the parents is often insufficient for their own sustenance...?<sup>765</sup>

To remedy these problems, Wright called for “a radical reform” of the American education system: “Time it is, I say, to turn our churches into halls of science, our schools of faith into schools of knowledge, our privileged colleges into state institutions for all the youth of the land.”<sup>766</sup> In a lecture originally delivered in Philadelphia on June 2, 1829 (“On Existing Evils, and Their Remedy”), Wright laid out the framework for a new form of national education meant to act as the foundation of a truly egalitarian society. This system, as she described it, would be

at once national, rational, and republication; one which shall take for its study, our own world and our own nature; for its object, the improvement of man; and for its means, the practical development of truth...and the gradual equalization of the human condition...by the equal diffusion of knowledge without distinction of class or sect – both of which distinctions are inconsistent with republican institutions as they are with reason and with common sense.<sup>767</sup>

Wright’s specific solution was a program of state-run boarding schools, funded largely through a graduated income tax, that would provide students with housing, food, and clothing.<sup>768</sup> This tax, Wright noted, would make “the rich...contribute, according to their riches, to the relief of the

---

<sup>765</sup> Wright, “Existing Evils,” 165.

<sup>766</sup> Ibid, 150; 152.

<sup>767</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>768</sup> Ibid, 166-167. Wright noted that a “double tax” may be necessary at the start of this endeavor. This “double tax” would consist of “a moderate tax per head for every child, to be laid upon its parents conjointly, or divided between them, due attention being always paid to the varying strength of the two sexes, and to the undue depreciation which now rests on female labor.” This “parental tax” could be paid “in money, or in labor, produce, or domestic manufactures.” Orphans would be exempted from the parental tax. The second tax would be “on property, increasing in percentage with the wealth of the individual.” See Wright, “Existing Evils, 167, 168.

poor, and to the support of the state, by raising up its best bulwark – an enlightened and united generation.”<sup>769</sup> Children would be separated into school districts and moved to their corresponding school as young as the age of two.<sup>770</sup> Parents could visit, but would have no control over their children’s schooling.<sup>771</sup>

Wright insisted that “In these nurseries of a free nation, no inequality must be allowed to enter.” To these ends, all children would wear the same uniforms, eat the same food, and sleep in the same boarding area:

Fed at a common board; clothed in a common garb...raised in the exercise of common duties, in the acquirement of the same knowledge and practice of the same industry, varied only according to individual taste and capabilities; in the exercise of the same virtues, in the enjoyment of the same pleasures; in the study of the same nature; in pursuit of the same object – their own and each other’s happiness – say! Would not such a race...work out the reform of society – perfect the free institutions of America?<sup>772</sup>

This plan was based in part on the Fellenberg School in Hofwyl, Switzerland, a program that communally housed and trained students. Robert D. Owen had spent time at such schools and shared his experiences with Wright.

## **The Political Threat**

Wright’s eventually had her plan for state-run boarding schools written into platform of the New York Working Man’s Party: “Our voice,” it stated, “...shall be raised in favor of a system of education which shall be open to *all*, as in a real republic it should be.”<sup>773</sup> Founded in

---

<sup>769</sup> Ibid, 168.

<sup>770</sup> Ibid, 166. This age was implied by Wright’s division of each school district into programs tailored for students of specific ages, beginning with “the first, infants between two and four, or two and six.” See Wright, “Existing Evils,” 166.

<sup>771</sup> Wright noted that “parents, who would necessarily be resident in their close neighborhood, could visit the children at suitable hours, but, in no case, interfere with or interrupt the rules of the institution.” Wright, “Existing Evils,” 167.

<sup>772</sup> Wright, “Existing Evils,” 169.

<sup>773</sup> *Working Man’s Advocate*, October 31, 1829.

1828, Wright played a key role in organizing and mobilizing the party.<sup>774</sup> The party paper, the *Working Man's Advocate*, was created by George Henry Evans, the publisher and political agitator who helped Wright launch the *Free Enquirer*. The New York Working Men's party was briefly led by Thomas Skidmore, but internal conflict eventually left the group in the hands of Wright, Evans, and the famous utopian socialist Robert D. Owen. Part of the conflict arose from contention over Wright's education plan. Split by dissention within and discredited by charges of infidelity, the party was largely obsolete by 1831, when most of its remaining members were absorbed by the Democratic Party. The simple fact, however, that the party made it onto the ballot was enough to worry men like Lyman Beecher.

A Presbyterian minister and co-founder of the American Temperance Society, Beecher offered an especially fiery and lengthy attack on Wright in an 1835 lecture on "The Perils of Atheism to the Nation." This single speech contained a summary of nearly every charge leveled against materialism during this period. Beecher labeled Wright "the female apostle of atheistic liberty" and classified her as a "political atheist," one he defined as part of a "conspiracy in our land, against the being of a God, and our civil, and social, and religious institutions."<sup>775</sup> Beecher argued that Wright was a key member of a larger network of political atheists located primarily in Boston and New York, places where "their organization was as open and as well known as that of Christian churches." Beecher hinted at the potential threat of these "political atheists" as they began to organize and grow in numbers. "Their plans," he claimed, "were avowed in their books, and tracts, and newspapers, and inculcated in their temples of reason, discussed in their weekly meetings...It was boasted that in Boston there were six hundred men on their side, ready

---

<sup>774</sup> For more on Wright and the Working Men's Party, see Eckhardt, 216-220; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 176-216.

<sup>775</sup> Lyman Beecher, *Beecher's Lectures on Skepticism, Delivered in Park Street Church, Boston, and in the Second Presbyterian Church, Cincinnati* (Cincinnati: Corey and Fairbank, 1835), 74.

to pledge their property for the propagation of their principles.”<sup>776</sup> Referencing the appearance of the Working Men’s party, he noted that “In New York the effects of such efforts were still greater. Under the imposing title of ‘the working men,’ the campaign was opened at the polls, and the Atheistic ticket came near to succeeding.”<sup>777</sup>

Here Beecher moved from the perceived threat of “ambient infidelity,” the term Eric Schlereth uses to describe the “prevalent assumption in the early republic that anti-Christian opinions had strong appeal and growing influence even in the absence of a large number of infidels,” to an actual identifiable issue - namely, the possibility that such radical ideas had already garnered enough support that their influence may translate into political action.<sup>778</sup> What Beecher feared most was the possibility that materialist or atheist sentiments had the potential to sway public opinion enough to influence political decisions: “in this country it is not proposed to revolutionize by force, but by public sentiment, till it shall speak out at the polls.”<sup>779</sup> Beecher saw further evidence of Wright’s potential to shape public views in her lectures. He was especially horrified that her lectures attracted mixed audiences and that some women in attendance were swayed by her arguments:

her lectures were thronged not only by men, but even by females of respectable standing. And the effects of these lectures on such listeners, was not the mere gratification of curiosity. She made her converts, and that too not among the low and the vicious alone. Females of education and refinement – females of respectable standing in society...now...advocate her sentiments.<sup>780</sup>

Beecher maintained further that Wright’s free thought agenda had important class implications, describing her work as part of “a crusade against religion, and purity, and property,

---

<sup>776</sup> Beecher, 74-75.

<sup>777</sup> Beecher, 75.

<sup>778</sup> Eric Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>779</sup> Beecher, 85.

<sup>780</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

and law” and an “infidel trumpet-call to all the envious and vicious poor.”<sup>781</sup> His references to “property” and the “poor” referenced both Wright’s support for a graduated income tax for state services as well as the many claims she made for the interests of the many over those of the few: “Let the popular suffrage be exercised with a few to the popular good. Let the industrious classes, and all honest men of all classes, unite for the sending to the legislatures those who will represent the real interests of the many, not the imagined interests of the few.”<sup>782</sup> Because she used such rhetoric, Beecher also accused Wright of masterminding a plan “designed and eminently calculated to divide society against itself, by fostering invidious distinctions between the laboring and intellectual classes, and the relatively poor and rich.”<sup>783</sup>

Beecher offered several other familiar critiques of materialism, including the claim that without religion and the possibility of an afterlife, man became nothing more than “a mere machine, . . . acting on mechanical principles, without the specter of desire for good or deterrence from evil.”<sup>784</sup> In a similar vein, he later contended that “Atheism then lets out a race of famished, infuriated animals, goaded by instinct, and unrestrained by prospective hopes and fears, to rend and devour, and destroy.”<sup>785</sup> He concluded his attack on Wright with several overwrought claims, suggesting that atheists like Wright were “creating and extending a poisonous leaven, which gradually and silently, but really and effectually shall undermine the faith and moral principle of the nation and prepare society for dissolution” and ending with the ominous but vague warning that “this atheistic conspiracy may destroy us.”<sup>786</sup>

---

<sup>781</sup> Ibid, 88; 76.

<sup>782</sup> Wright, “Existing Evils,” 169.

<sup>783</sup> Beecher, 89.

<sup>784</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>785</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>786</sup> Ibid, 77; 87.

Attacks against Wright like Beecher's were common in lectures and periodicals. In some instances, however, the threat extended beyond print. In October 1838, Wright's attempt to carry on a lecture series at the New York Masonic Hall was cut short by several riots. On October 9, 1838, a "mixed multitude of friends and foes" had gathered to hear Wright lecture on her "anti-religious and political doctrines."<sup>787</sup> Wright, however, was quickly "assailed with hisses" and various obscenities. One account described how a "fight sprang up, and then another and another, until six sturdy fellows of antagonizing faiths and fists, were pounding and bruising each other most magnificently."<sup>788</sup> Wright was forced to hide while the police put down the riot, which continued for quite some time with "cries to put her out."<sup>789</sup> Less than two weeks later, another riot took place when Wright attempted to lecture once again at the Masonic Hall. This time, a crowd of nearly 5,000 had gathered to hear Wright speak, and it was reported that 10,000 had gathered in the streets outside the Hall.<sup>790</sup> As her lecture ended, "a great multitude of mobocrats assembled in front of the Hall" and "attempted to seize the lecturer, amid a horrid din of oaths, and shouts, and imprecations."<sup>791</sup> Wright escaped, but only "with great difficulty." Other women present were not as lucky, as one account noted that "Several females...were assailed by the ruffians, and shamefully treated." One of the rare sympathetic observers asked, "Is this the mode to put down or build up infidelity?"<sup>792</sup>

---

<sup>787</sup> "Riots in New-York," *The Liberator*, November 2, 1838.

<sup>788</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>789</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>790</sup> Eckhardt, 267.

<sup>791</sup> "Riots in New-York."

<sup>792</sup> *Ibid.*



## Wright's Final Years

In June 1839, Wright left New York for Paris where she endured the final bitter years of a marriage of obligation to Phiquepal d'Arusmont, the man she had married after she realized early in 1830, following a trip to Haiti with him, that she was pregnant.<sup>793</sup> In 1844, she left Liverpool for Cincinnati. Her husband and daughter remained in Europe. During her last years in America, Wright suffered a nervous breakdown.<sup>794</sup> She had isolated herself from most companions and destroyed her friendship with Robert D. Owen many years earlier. In 1850, she filed for divorce and in January 1852, she fell on the ice and broke her leg, an injury that left her in agony for the remainder of her life.<sup>795</sup> Wright died on December 13, 1852 in Cincinnati.

## Conclusion

The story of Knowlton and Wright's lives demonstrates the very real challenges of trying to promote unpopular or countercultural views like materialism in the early U.S. Though met by much resistance, the efforts of figures like Charles Knowlton, Frances Wright, and Abner Kneeland created a set of networks for the circulation of unpopular ideas like materialism and other forms of disbelief. In the late 1820s and 1830s, freethought institutions in New York and Boston served as important sites that effectively facilitated the spread of ideas deemed too radical by other venues. While some of the more prominent projects like Wright's Hall of Science are relatively well-known among historians, there are still a number of smaller projects like Knowlton's United Liberals of Franklin County and the Boston Infidel Relief Society that could serve as further grounds for study. Such groups provide a rare glimpse into both

---

<sup>793</sup> One of the only times Wright conformed to the moral codes of her day was to marry to ensure the legitimacy of (and thus hopefully a better future for) her daughter, Sylva d'Arusmont. Eckhardt, 213. Wright gave birth sometime early in 1831. Eckhardt, 228. She had a second daughter in 1832 but the child died in infancy. Eckhardt, 235.

<sup>794</sup> Eckhardt, 284.

<sup>795</sup> Ibid, 286.

alternative reform organizations and self-consciously irreligious projects, phenomena that have often eluded historical analysis because of their marginal and often short-lived existence.

Here the extreme minority nature of these projects can be viewed in several ways. While I have chosen to emphasize the historical value of such ventures precisely because of their relatively obscure and unusual nature, these same features appear quite differently when considered in light of the overall impact of such endeavors. It is important, for instance, to note that even among the already radical freethought community, Knowlton and Wright remained extreme figures. While many involved with freethought were deists or professed other unorthodox forms of belief, few supported openly atheist positions. Knowlton and Wright were thus exceptional figures among an already marginal group. The very small numbers involved in these institutions must also be taken into account. Though it is perhaps remarkable that groups like Knowlton's United Liberals even existed, or surprising just how many attended meetings and lectures at institutions like Wright's Hall of Science, these claims must always be contextualized in light of the much more dominant evangelical groups and mainstream antebellum reform societies, organizations which attracted support and numbers that individuals like Knowlton and even Wright could never imagine. The ultimately limited impact of these groups, especially following the swift decline of many of the freethought institutions discussed in this chapter by the 1840s and 1850s, cannot be discounted.

The tension here between wide historical resonance and the merit of uncommon cases is mirrored throughout this entire dissertation. Though the extremely small numbers and the short-lived tenure of these materialist networks suggests reasons for its insignificance, these are simultaneously two of its defining aspects, as it is partially the ephemeral and limited nature of these groups that makes them valuable historical cases. In the same way, the existence of any

self-professed American materialists, a rather surprising development in and of itself, must be balanced with the much more dominant anti-materialist discourse that developed throughout the same period. The challenge, then, is to make a convincing case for the historical significance of these materialist and freethought institutions while simultaneously recognizing their marginal status.

Knowlton and Wright promoted a set of radically egalitarian social and political beliefs undergirded by an openly secular philosophy. While most anti-materialists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century assumed materialism's connections to reform because of Priestley and Cooper's political activities, antebellum materialists like Knowlton and Wright firmly established materialism's status as a doctrine connected to social transformation by explicitly wedding materialist philosophy to a wide-reaching radical reform agenda. Their status as very controversial figures in their respective fields only heightened the sense of materialism as a philosophy connected to fringe figures. While Priestley and, though to a lesser extent, Cooper, were respected for their distinguished work in areas other than their materialist theories, later antebellum materialists like Kneeland, Knowlton, and Wright were more polarizing individuals, generally without the benefit of esteemed studies in other fields to bolster their credibility. With the possible exception of Wright, they were also less financially secure and generally not as influential or well-recognized outside their moments of materialist controversy. Wright, however, did face the formidable challenge of gender on top of the already great obstacles that deterred those who tried to circulate radical ideas in the antebellum U.S.

The irreligious nature of Knowlton and Wright's work certainly stood out as one of its most contentious aspects. Though critics attacked both for their radically egalitarian positions on class, race, and gender, the question of open infidelity still loomed large in many of these

disputes. But was the specter of atheism still the hallmark problem of anti-materialist critique, as it had been at the turn of the century? As a number of new concerns like worries about science and materialism began to enter anti-materialist discourse, the absolute emphasis on materialism and its status via belief or disbelief began to shift, at least temporarily. As the rise of spiritualism reinvigorated older epistemological and ontological questions about the nature of the spiritual and the material, a new era of materialist and anti-materialist debate began to develop in the 1840s, 50s, and 60s, one in which materialist and anti-materialist discourse were complicated in ways that hinted the two may not be as wholly antagonistic as they appeared in the past.

## Chapter 4:

### Materialism and the Spiritual Sciences: Joseph Buchanan and Joseph Rodes Buchanan

In August 1844, *The Columbian Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine* published an unusual article that contained several statements of materialist ontology and cosmology. A passage on the question of god, for instance, read as follows:

P. What then, is God?

V. I cannot tell.

P. Is not God spirit?

...

P. Is not God immaterial?

V. There is no immateriality; it is a mere word. That which is not matter, is not at all – unless qualities are things.

P. Is God then material?

V. No.

P. What then, is he?

V. He is no spirit, for he exists. Nor is he matter, *as you understand it*. But there are *gradations* of matter of which man knows nothing, the grosser impelling the finer, the finer pervading the grosser... These gradations of matter increase in rarity or fineness, until we arrive at a matter *unparticled*... indivisible... The ultimate or unparticled matter

not only permeates all things, but impels all things; and thus is all things within itself. This matter is God.<sup>796</sup>

This dialogue recapitulated several arguments of materialist philosophy including, most importantly, the sole existence of the material and the attendant denial of the immaterial. The passage ended with an argument echoing Joseph Priestley's suggestion that matter existed in various forms or degrees, an idea first introduced to Americans in the 1790s through Priestley's attempts to make materialism compatible with Christianity. In contrast to Priestley, however, this article offered a more ambivalent take on god, suggesting ultimately that "God...is but the perfection of matter."<sup>797</sup>

This statement of materialist philosophy differed greatly from most late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century discussions of the topic. Though written in the style of an authentic scientific account, it was actually a work of fiction, as the final paragraph of the essay made clear - at least to some readers. This question of factual status was only heightened by the curious source of these materialist claims: one "V," later identified as a Mr. Vankirk. The veracity of V's ideas was confirmed allegedly by the state of being from which he voiced these thoughts: gravely ill, Vankirk was speaking while mesmerized and thus revealed these materialist ideas from a place between life and death, a revelation made in the essay's dramatic conclusion:

As the sleep-waker pronounced these latter words...I observed upon his countenance a singular expression, which...alarmed me, and induced me to awake him...No sooner had I done this, than, with a bright smile irradiating all his features, he fell back upon his pillow and expired. I noticed that in less than a minute afterward his corpse had all the stern rigidity of stone.<sup>798</sup>

---

<sup>796</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "Mesmeric Revelation," *The Columbian Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine* (August 1844): 68.

<sup>797</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>798</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

The tale of M. Vankirk was part of a series on mesmerism written by Edgar Allan Poe (1804-1849).<sup>799</sup> Near the end of his career, in a period bookended by the completion of his well-known “The Tell-Tell Heart” (1843) and “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846), Poe published a collection of mesmeric dream vision stories that included various statements of materialist philosophy.<sup>800</sup> A theory originally known as “animal magnetism” and eventually transformed into the practice now called hypnotism, “mesmerism” was a term coined by the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) in the late eighteenth-century.<sup>801</sup> It rose to popularity in the mid-nineteenth-century U.S. as part of the interest in spiritualism that swept across the country.<sup>802</sup> Poe's tales were only a small part of the explosion of publications on mesmerism, animal magnetism, and other forms of spiritualism that appeared during this era.<sup>803</sup>

---

<sup>799</sup> Two of Poe's most prominent mesmerism tales were “Mesmeric Revelation” (1844) and “The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845). In each, various subjects were used to test the hypotheses of whether mesmerism could slow the progression of death and whether those who were close to death could be mesmerized to a deeper degree than those in sound health. In “Mesmeric Revelation,” Vankirk, who was gravely ill, volunteered as Poe's subject and summoned Poe to his deathbed on a Saturday. When Poe arrived, Vankirk confusingly declared that he was already dead. He then requested to be mesmerized and Poe complied. For the next seven months, Poe visited Vankirk daily and always found him unmoving and unresponsive in his bed, seemingly frozen at the moment prior to death. “Mesmeric Revelation” included the deathbed conversation, quoted above, in which the mesmerized Vankirk revealed a thoroughgoing materialism before his dramatic passing. “The Facts” described the events that took place when Poe tried to lift another subject, Mr. Valdemar, from a mesmeric trance so he could finally die. After Poe experienced great difficulty waking Valdemar, he claimed, as Vankirk had in the first tale, that he was already dead. The story ended with the seemingly impossibly quick decomposition of Valdemar's body, only seconds after his death, a final twist meant to suggest he, too, had been dead the entire period of his mesmeric trance.

<sup>800</sup> In literature, a dream vision features an individual who receives knowledge through a dream or vision that they could not ascertain in a normal state. For more on Poe's mesmerism tales, see Doris V. Falk, “Poe and the Power of Animal Magnetism,” *PMLA* 84, no. 3 (May 1969): 536-546; Bruce Mills, *Poe, Fuller, and the Mesmeric Arts: Transition States in the American Renaissance* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006).

<sup>801</sup> Mesmer believed that an invisible magnetic force that existed as some kind of fluid existed throughout the entire natural world. The balance of this fluid, he argued, explained human illness and manipulation of it could cure disease. After Mesmer's theory was largely discredited, Frenchman Jacques Francois de Chastenet picked up the terms “animal magnetism” and “mesmerism” to describe various acts of clairvoyance, hypnosis, and other altered states of consciousness he believed humans could achieve.

<sup>802</sup> For more on mesmerism in the U.S., see Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

<sup>803</sup> Spiritualism in the U.S. included a wide variety of practices and methods. Some of the most popular included spirit rapping, trance lectures, séances, spirit photography, clairvoyant mediumship, and somnambulism.

His work, however, remained fairly distinct in its statements of materialist philosophy and physics.<sup>804</sup>

Joseph Rodes Buchanan, a second-generation Kentucky physician and scientist, took great interest in the general confusion about the factual status of Poe's story: "This was truly a Munchausen story," Buchanan wrote, "but it was believed by some who could not distinguish between its wild absurdity and the true wonders of science."<sup>805</sup> Buchanan expressed mixed feelings about Poe's tale via his own work.<sup>806</sup> As a spiritualist and a scientist, he did believe the living could commune with the deceased. Buchanan insisted, however, that the possibility of spiritual communion could only be understood through the lens of careful scientific investigation. Such phenomena, he argued, must be understood not as supernatural but rather as made possible and governed by the same natural laws as the rest of the universe.

Buchanan was not alone in his quest to find scientific proof of spiritual existence. In the mid-nineteenth century, certain groups of spiritualists sought to prove, scientifically and empirically, the existence of the soul, the afterlife, and a spiritual realm. Arguments in support of soul and spirit were certainly not new; Americans had long made such claims and, in the process, grounded them confidently in the authority of divine revelation. What was notable, however, was that some practitioners of these new fields, like Buchanan, claimed the authority of scientific evidence rather than divine mandate to assert the validity of these spiritual sciences. As Ann Braude argued in her seminal 1989 study of spiritualism, *Radical Spirits*, several forms of nineteenth-century American spiritualism were based "on the view that contact with the spirits of the dead provided empirical proof of the immortality of the soul...For those no longer

---

<sup>804</sup> Doris V. Falk, "Poe and the Power of Animal Magnetism," *PMLA* 84, no. 3 (May 1969): 543.

<sup>805</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "Delusion, Hoax, and Humbug," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 2, no. 8 (February 1851): 252.

<sup>806</sup> Poe himself was described as a "brilliant adherent" of Buchanan's theories. See "Psychometry in Brooklyn," *New York Times*, December 29, 1878.



convinced by the 'evidence' of Christianity, Spiritualism provided 'scientific' evidence of religious truth."<sup>807</sup>

Buchanan voiced frustration that gullible readers viewed Poe's tale as a credible account while they simultaneously rejected "true" scientific studies like his own "science of man" or "spiritual science," terms he often used to refer to his theories.<sup>808</sup> Buchanan believed his science of man would finally solve the problem of dualism in all its forms: mind/body, soul/brain, and spirit/matter. Most importantly, as the pairing of the term "spiritual science" implied, Buchanan felt the existence of immaterial entities could be proven with the same rigor as any tangible, material phenomenon. His spiritual science, Buchanan claimed, thus incontrovertibly refuted all forms of materialism as it proved the reality of spiritual existence. In the wake of his discoveries, Buchanan argued, no one could possibly "rationally remain in the cold and circumscribed region of Materialism."<sup>809</sup> Given the vehement anti-materialist sentiment discussed in previous chapters, one might expect that an anti-materialist theory grounded in scientific evidence would attract many supporters in the U.S. Buchanan, however, found many unwilling to accept the validity of his new science. Why did many Americans reject a set of

---

<sup>807</sup> Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 4. A good starting point for the historiography on spiritualism in the U.S. is R. Laurence Moore's pioneering *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Moore especially emphasized the importance of observable fact and natural law in spiritualist practices. Braude's *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) was notable for her argument about spiritualism's links to antebellum reform. Following Braude, several more recent studies, including Bret E. Carroll's *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), Robert S. Cox's *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), and Molly McGarry's *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) have explored further the political dimensions of U.S. spiritualism. Though not focused solely on spiritualism, Catherine L. Albanese's *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) treats similar ground as she argues that the category of American religion should be redefined to include what she refers to as "metaphysical" religious practices, which included many spiritualist works.

<sup>808</sup> Buchanan later defined "humbug" as "the jeer of the rabble against higher and purer truths from which their own brutality recoils." See Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "Reception of the Marvelous," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 2, no. 3 (September 1850): 84.

<sup>809</sup> "The Night Side of Nature," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* (October 1850): 119.

arguments meant to *disprove* materialism almost as vociferously as they had denounced materialism itself? How do we explain Buchanan's failure to gain traction in an environment seemingly tailored to his success?

With ideas that appeared to walk a fine line between fact and fiction, science and hoax, critics lambasted Buchanan's work as fantastical and unsubstantiated despite his constant insistence that his studies were meticulously scientific and rigorous in nature. But what exactly did it mean to be "scientific" during this era? Buchanan began publishing his anti-materialist theories in a period where some American commentators worried that science and philosophy had become overly materialistic pursuits. The *North American Review*, for instance, summarized the 1840s as a "culminating era of material philosophy and science" while physician and scientist Daniel G. Brinton noted anxiously that "scientific materialism has been making gigantic strides" in the 1850s and 60s.<sup>810</sup> Anti-materialist discourse in the 1840s, 50s, and 60s thus took on a new tenor, as this emphasis on the links between science and materialism presented past concerns about materialism's assumed atheism in a new light. Worries about materialism's threat to the social and political order from the 1790s through the 1830s began to give way to new concerns about "scientific materialism," a largely denigrating term that generally referred to an overly rigid adherence to empirical or material modes of explanation.

Scientific materialism is not a common term in American historiography. One of the few to write about the concept, historian Andrew Jewett has argued that in the second half of the nineteenth century, scientific materialism was characterized largely by a desire to restrict scientific inquiry to a "solid, external object," namely, "nature," in order to preserve the integrity of the field:

---

<sup>810</sup> D. G. Brinton, "The Metaphysics of Materialism," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 1, no. 3 (1867): 176.

scientific materialists...tried to wall science off from theological questions, hoping thereby to protect science's public image as a fount of consensus and reliable knowledge. This version of positivism formalized John Michels' rather loose conception of separate intellectual spheres by limiting science to questions regarding the natural world. Scientists, in this view, should restrict themselves to inquiries in which the existence of a solid, external object – nature – ensured eventual agreement.<sup>811</sup>

Buchanan's spiritual science, however, did not fit neatly within this paradigm. Though he believed his studies to be of the natural world, such a claim was certainly debatable. It was instead more likely that studies such as his were the type that strict scientific materialists like those Jewett describes hoped to eradicate.

The advent of the spiritual sciences thus led to an unusually fluid period between materialist and anti-materialist discourse, a fact seen in Joseph Rodes Buchanan's relationship to materialism, spiritualism, and science in the mid-nineteenth century. Rodes Buchanan first created an anti-materialist spiritualism that simultaneously appealed to materialist standards of validity, at least in his insistence on the need for empirical and tangible evidence.<sup>812</sup> Buchanan's reception only confused matters further. Though wrapped in the veil of science, his spiritual theories were repeatedly rejected as unfounded, unsubstantiated, and in some ways not materialist enough. The same rigor and emphasis on material, physical data that was denounced by some as scientific materialism is precisely what other critics claimed Buchanan's anti-

---

<sup>811</sup> Andrew Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 85.

<sup>812</sup> Here it is important to recognize a distinction between empiricism and materialism. Though the two shared important core commitments, there were key differences in their usage and implications. Though many variants of empiricist philosophy exist, most insist that sense perception (as opposed to innate or a priori knowledge that is somehow derived independently of sensory experience) is necessary to obtain knowledge. Empiricists thus justified knowledge claims with evidence discovered through scientific experimentation or exploration of the natural world rather than some form of revelation or intuition. Because of this focus on sense perception and experimentation, empiricists shared the general materialist belief in the importance of tangible, material evidence in the verification of truth claims. Unlike strict philosophical materialists, however, empiricists could still hold that non-material entities existed in the world. Empiricism also did not necessarily carry the same radical, atheist implications as materialism, though there was great debate about whether or not empiricist philosophy made room for any kind of religious beliefs. In any case, Rodes Buchanan felt it was necessary to justify his claims through scientific experimentation and observation. What remained unclear, however, was what methods would be considered valid or what standards of evidence would be upheld in such endeavors.

materialist arguments lacked, despite his own insistence that his work was deeply grounded in such evidence. What, then, are we to make of Buchanan's spiritual science and its uneven reception?

Beginning with a brief discussion of his father, Joseph Buchanan, a physician and scientist accused of being a materialist, I trace the development of Joseph Rodes Buchanan's anti-materialist ideas and try to untangle his efforts to create a science of man that was sufficiently spiritual and material in nature, a seemingly neat solution to the problems of dualism and materialism that was poorly received and never lived up to its promise. Rodes Buchanan's example suggests that the rise of spiritualism and the attendant renewed interest in questions of epistemology and scientific standards of validity represented an important moment of transition in the status of materialist and anti-materialist discourse. By midcentury, at least in some instances, the two did not always share a straightforwardly antagonistic relationship. Certain anti-materialists rejected Buchanan's spiritual theories as lacking substantial material evidence, a seemingly materialist standard of evidence, while Buchanan himself professed to adopt certain elements of materialist epistemology in his self-consciously anti-materialist spiritual science. While the two sides had been clearly delineated in past eras, the advent of the spiritual sciences thus created a moment of flux where some anti-materialist and materialist arguments began to accord in unprecedented ways. The question that remained, then, was whether or not these hints of potential convergence would have any lasting impact beyond the rather exceptional era of the spiritual sciences.

## Joseph Buchanan (1785-1829)

The general shift in anti-materialist discourse identified above was reflected in the careers Joseph Rodes Buchanan (1814-1899) and his father, Joseph Buchanan (1785-1829).<sup>813</sup> Joseph Buchanan, a Kentucky physician, was labeled a materialist after the 1812 publication of his *Philosophy of Human Nature*. The anti-materialist reception of Buchanan's work largely followed the pattern described in the first three chapters of this dissertation, as critics fixated on the atheistic implications of his materialism and his bold willingness to challenge scripture on the basis of scientific investigation. Joseph Rodes Buchanan, though largely educated by his father, would later find himself on a very different path, one in which he created a spiritual science that sought to repudiate the materialist ideas of his father's *Philosophy* and ultimately render the divide between the material and the spiritual obsolete.

Branded an atheist for the materialism of his *Philosophy of Human Nature*, Joseph Buchanan was a physician who studied and later taught at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky.<sup>814</sup> While working as a Professor at the University's Institutes of Medicine, Buchanan "thought it necessary to commence with a metaphysical investigation of human nature."<sup>815</sup> Accordingly, he prepared a series of lectures on the topic (though he left the school before giving them), later publishing them with "some additions and improvements" as *The Philosophy of*

---

<sup>813</sup> The possible confusion between Joseph Buchanan and Joseph Rodes Buchanan is further compounded by the existence of Joseph Ray Buchanan (1851-1924). Both Joseph Rodes Buchanan and Joseph Ray Buchanan published and were sometimes referenced only as "Joseph R. Buchanan." Released after Rodes Buchanan's death, Ray Buchanan's 1903 book, *The Story of a Labor Agitator*, should not be mistaken as a piece by Joseph Rodes Buchanan. See Joseph Ray Buchanan, *The Story of a Labor Agitator* (New York: The Outlook Company, 1903).

<sup>814</sup> Buchanan's religious views remained somewhat unclear. As a Jeffersonian Democrat, however, his support for separation of church and state was apparent in his writings as well as several debates with Presbyterian clergymen later in his life. For more on Buchanan's political views and general biography, see Hugh M. Ayer, "A Prophet and a Science Are Born," *Indiana Magazine of History* 48, no. 4 (December 1952): 379-396.

<sup>815</sup> Buchanan enrolled at Transylvania University in 1804. Shortly after, he left to study medicine with Dr. Samuel Brown, a Lexington physician. He opened his first practice in Fort Gibson, Mississippi, but quickly returned to Transylvania University to finish his degree. In 1809, Buchanan accepted a position at the University's Institutes of Medicine as part of an effort to organize a medical school at Transylvania. The project quickly dissolved and Buchanan resigned from his position by 1810. See Robert Peter, *The History of the Medical Department of Transylvania University* (Louisville, Kentucky: John P. Morton and Company, 1905), 13-14.

*Human Nature*.<sup>816</sup> At least one thousand copies of the book were printed in Richmond, Kentucky.<sup>817</sup>

Merle Curti described Buchanan's *Philosophy* as "one of the earliest systematic and consistent presentations of materialism to be published in America" while other historians have identified it as an early example of "materialist monism."<sup>818</sup> Buchanan asserted that the mind did not exist independently of the body, a position that, as demonstrated in previous chapters, marked his *Philosophy* as unusual and unpopular in its time. The "most rational" approach, Buchanan argued, took mind to be "merely an organic state of matter, such as constitutes the human brain" rather than "an independent spiritual existence, mysteriously connected with the human body."<sup>819</sup> As such, the "acts and attributes of the mind...cannot be exercised without concurring actions in the conjoined organic substance."<sup>820</sup> "The mental act," he concluded, "thus "proves to be secondary and consequential to the physical."<sup>821</sup>

To support these claims, Buchanan drew on the theories of several philosophers popular among American materialists, including John Locke (1632-1704), David Hartley (1705-1757), David Hume (1711-1776) and the English physician Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802).<sup>822</sup> He also pointed to medical studies that connected changes in the physical structure of the brain to changes in intellect:

According to the observations of many ingenious men, the external form and internal texture of the brain, are very important circumstances to the intellect it embraces. If that

---

<sup>816</sup> Buchanan, *The Philosophy of Human Nature*, v.

<sup>817</sup> Adams and Hoberman, 342.

<sup>818</sup> Merle Curti, "Joseph Buchanan," *Dictionary of American Biography*, III, 215; Adams and Hoberman, 345. One of the fullest and most technical discussions of Buchanan's *Philosophy* remains I. Woodbridge Riley's chapter on Buchanan in his *American Philosophy*. See I. Woodbridge Riley, *American Philosophy: The Early Schools* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1907), 373-95.

<sup>819</sup> Buchanan, *The Philosophy of Human Nature*, 3.

<sup>820</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>821</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>822</sup> Buchanan specifically listed these four as his primary intellectual influences. See Buchanan, *The Philosophy of Human Nature*, v.

intellect were purely spiritual and intrinsically active, it is very improbable that these trivial circumstances in the mere instrument of its operations, could make an important difference in its powers: but if mentality be only an attribute of the living brain, it is then to be expected, that...a slight variation in intrinsic structure...would produce the greatest difference of intellectual powers ... The fact then...that the various degrees of intelligent power observable among men...may be traced to varieties in the formation and texture of their nervous systems; is no inconsiderable argument for materialism.<sup>823</sup>

Much like Charles Knowlton, Buchanan noted that several scientific discoveries appeared to contradict doctrines of Christianity and he was puzzled as to why these facts had not unseated such misguided beliefs: “The mystery of the trinity is contradicted by the intuitive axioms of geometry,” Buchanan observed, yet many continued to believe “that the words describing it express an incomprehensible truth.”<sup>824</sup> “The doctrine of transubstantiation,” he later noted, “is believed by the majority of christendom; yet this barbarous and inconsistent notion, of eating his human flesh and blood, in honor of the prince of peace, is contradicted by the perceptions of sense.”<sup>825</sup> Buchanan worried that children were too frequently indoctrinated into such religious beliefs through the authority and influence of parents, a phenomenon he called “parental inculcation.”<sup>826</sup> Like other philosophical materialists such as Knowlton, Abner Kneeland, and Frances Wright, Buchanan instead urged children to come to their own views through direct observation and study of the world around them.

Predictably, Buchanan's arguments quickly led to charges of infidelity and atheism. Though historians of science have labeled Buchanan's tome as "obscure," its publication garnered a strong, largely negative, local response.<sup>827</sup> One history of Buchanan's work summarized the situation well when it suggested that "Buchanan's work was not received with

---

<sup>823</sup> Buchanan, *The Philosophy of Human Nature*, 11.

<sup>824</sup> Ibid, 296.

<sup>825</sup> Ibid, 296.

<sup>826</sup> Ibid, 293; 294.

<sup>827</sup> James F. Adams and Arnold A. Hoberman, "Joseph Buchanan, 1785-1829: Pioneer American Psychologist," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 5, no. 4 (October 1969), 340.

great approval by his contemporaries; however, it was read."<sup>828</sup> An early review of *The Philosophy of Human Nature* stated that "The reader had not far to go before he found that the author was an advocate of materialism." It continued by noting that "The avowal of these opinions shocked the feelings of the reading community and rendered their author unpopular."<sup>829</sup> A survey of the "religious and moral state" of Kentucky conducted by the Massachusetts Missionary Society labeled Buchanan's book as one of "three Infidel publications issued from the press at Lexington in 1812."<sup>830</sup> Buchanan himself was called "a professed Infidel" who sought for children to be "initiated into all the illusions of infidelity from their earliest infancy."<sup>831</sup>

One of the most scathing reviews of Buchanan's *Philosophy* appeared in *The Evangelical Record and Western Review*, a religious periodical published out of Lexington. Written under the penname Pantaenus, a reference to the ancient Greek theologian and philosopher, and titled "A Stricture on 'The Philosophy of Human Nature by Joseph Buchanan,'" the author summarized Buchanan's work as "grossly speculative" and "grossly infidel."<sup>832</sup> This anonymous critic described a "want of philosophical precision," "an unfitness of diction," and "a deficiency of literature" in Buchanan's writing before launching into the most damning critique: a line of reasoning designed to prove the atheism of Buchanan's materialist theory of mind.<sup>833</sup> If mind exists only as "a peculiar combination of material elements," as Buchanan described it, Pantaenus reasoned there could be no such thing as a mind that existed apart from matter:

---

<sup>828</sup> Adams and Hoberman, 347.

<sup>829</sup> Kentucky State Medical Society, *Transactions of the Kentucky State Medical Society*, 241.

<sup>830</sup> John Freeman Schermerhorn and Samuel John Mills, *A Correct View of That Part of the United States Which Lies West of the Allegany Mountains, With Regard to Religion and Morals* (Hartford: Peter B. Gleason and Co., 1814), 20.

<sup>831</sup> Schermerhorn and Mills, 20. The mention of children pointed to Buchanan's efforts to establish a school near Lexington that would teach no religion or politics but only science.

<sup>832</sup> Pantaenus, "A Stricture on 'The Philosophy of Human Nature' by Joseph Buchanan, No. 1" *The Evangelical Record and Western Review* (March 1, 1813).

<sup>833</sup> Ibid.



In a word, there is NO SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENT FIRST CAUSE. THERE IS NO GOD - NO FUTURE STATE OF EXISTENCE...Matter, deathless, omnific matter, is this philosopher's God. Such is the monstrous doctrine which addresses the Kentucky public, under the revered name of PHILOSOPHY!

Criticism of Buchanan thus fell largely along the lines of the anti-materialist sentiment described in the first three chapters of this dissertation, with worries about atheism and infidelity of paramount concern.

Buchanan's career thus largely reprises arguments from the earlier chapters of this dissertation, adding another figure to the small cast of American materialists and confirming the virulence of anti-materialist discourse in response to such allegedly atheist and immoral theories. Despite the controversy surrounding his book and his frequent disputes with the local Presbyterian church, Buchanan was, much like Joseph Priestley and Thomas Cooper in Chapter 1, respected for his work in other fields. Most notably, he made an important innovation in steam engine design, as well as founding, editing, and writing several local newspapers.<sup>834</sup> In 1814, Buchanan and his wife, Nancy Rodes Garth Buchanan, had a son, Joseph Rodes Buchanan. Joseph Buchanan died in 1829 when J. R. was fifteen years old. Though Joseph R. Buchanan was largely educated by his father, his work ultimately culminated in a spiritual "science of man" which sought to disprove many of the materialist tenets his father advocated.

### **Joseph Rodes Buchanan (1814-1899)**

Hugh M. Ayer's 1950 thesis and series of articles published in the *Indiana Magazine of History* remain some of the most comprehensive historical works on Joseph Rodes Buchanan.<sup>835</sup>

---

<sup>834</sup> For a brief introduction to Joseph Buchanan's other work, see Peter Fosl, "Joseph Buchanan: American Psychologist," *Transylvania Treasures* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 10-11.

<sup>835</sup> Hugh M. Ayer, "Joseph Rodes Buchanan: Physician, Philosopher, and Neurological Anthropologist" (Master's thesis, Indiana University, 1950); "A Prophet and a Science Are Born," *Indiana Magazine of History* 48, no. 4

Buchanan does receive brief mention in several histories of spiritualism, usually noted for his theories of impressability and nervaura (both concepts discussed in detail later in this chapter) or for his role as a vocal supporter of the spirit rappings (later revealed by the Fox sisters as elaborate hoaxes) that began in Hydesville, New York, in 1848.<sup>836</sup> Buchanan's career spanned several decades and included numerous publications as he worked almost until his death in 1899. While it is difficult to summarize such a long career that, like his father's, included many varied pursuits, Buchanan's work can be divided roughly into three periods: an early part beginning with his formal medical education in the 1840s and continuing through the start of the 1860s; a middle point marked partially by his interest in the politics of the Civil War; and his final years in the 1880s and 1890s, the era which produced some of his most fantastic spiritual claims in a series of three books: *Therapeutic Sarcognomy, A Scientific Exposition of the Mysterious Union of Soul, Brain, and Body* (1884), *Manual of Psychometry: Dawn of a New Civilization* (1885), and *Primitive Christianity* (1897).<sup>837</sup>

While it is not possible to divorce wholly his early theories from his later work, in this chapter I focus on the initial period of Buchanan's career from the 1840s through the 1860s. It was during these years that Buchanan developed the core of his science of man and published the

---

(December 1952): 379-396; "Political Activities of Joseph Rodes Buchanan," *Indiana Magazine of History* 49, no. 1 (March 1953): 61-67.

<sup>836</sup> See, for instance, Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Metaphysical History of American Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 203-204. In 1888, Margaret and Kate Fox confessed the rappings were a fraud. For more on the Fox sisters and the spirit rappings, see Braude, *Radical Spirits*.

<sup>837</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, *Therapeutic Sarcognomy, A Scientific Exposition of the Mysterious Union of Soul, Brain, and Body* (Boston: Published by the Author, 1884); *Manual of Psychometry: The Dawn of a New Civilization* (Boston: Holman Brothers, 1885); *Primitive Christianity Volume 1, Containing the Lost Lives of Jesus Christ and the Apostles* (San Jose, California: J. R. Buchanan, 1897). These years also included publication of the following books: *The New Education: Moral, Industrial, Hygienic, Intellectual* (Boston: Joseph Rodes Buchanan, 1882); *Periodicity: The Absolute Law of the Entire Universe* (San Jose, California: E. S. Buchanan, 1897).

fullest statements of these theories in his eponymous periodical *Buchanan's Journal of Man* and his 1854 *Outline of Lectures on the Neurological System of Anthropology*.<sup>838</sup>

### **Early Medical Education and Phrenology**

After his father's death, Joseph R. continued his studies at the University of Louisville. He spent much of his time studying medicine and phrenology with physician Charles Caldwell (1772-1853).<sup>839</sup> Phrenology reached peak popularity in the U.S. in the 1820s and 1830s, the years of Buchanan's initial medical education.<sup>840</sup> First developed in the late eighteenth century by German physicians Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828) and his successor, Johann Spurzheim (1776-1832), phrenology was a science based on mapping and measurements of the human skull.<sup>841</sup> Phrenologists believed certain sections of the skull corresponded directly to particular attributes of human intellect and behavior. This founding claim of phrenology sometimes led to accusations of materialism as it suggested the root of all mental faculties could be found in anatomical structures.

These charges of materialism were common and worrisome enough that prominent phrenologists often included disclaimers meant to distinguish their practices from materialism in lectures and books on the subject. In the American edition of his *System of Phrenology*, for instance, prominent Scottish phrenologist George Combe (1788-1858) noted that “The

---

<sup>838</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, *Outline of Lectures on the Neurological System of Anthropology* (Cincinnati: The Office of Buchanan's Journal of Man, 1854). During this period a collection of Buchanan's early essays was also released as *Sketches of Buchanan's Discoveries in Neurology* (Louisville, Kentucky: J. Elliot and Co., 1842). In London, Robert Dale Owen published *Neurology: An Account of Some Experiments in Cerebral Physiology by Dr. Buchanan of Louisville* (London: J. Watson, 1842).

<sup>839</sup> Ayer, 387.

<sup>840</sup> For more on phrenology in the U.S., see Charles Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) and Peter McCandless, "Mesmerism and Phrenology in Antebellum Charleston: 'Enough of the Marvellous'," *The Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 2 (May 1992): 199-230. Colbert classifies Buchanan as a "phreno-mesmerist," one committed to the importance of both mind and body. See Colbert, 290.

<sup>841</sup> Buchanan sometimes harshly criticized the Gallian system for erroneously mapping attributes to incorrect organs. See, for example, "Errors of Phrenologists," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 2, no. 10 (April 1851): 289-297.

objection...that Phrenology leads to materialism, has been so frequently urged against the science, that it demands some consideration.”<sup>842</sup> Combe, whose lecture tour of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York in 1838 and 1839 introduced many Americans to phrenology, continued to offer a lengthy note as to why his work was not materialistic in nature in order to reassure readers of the moral rectitude of his studies.<sup>843</sup>

Such concerns were not unique to phrenology. The study of medicine in general, as discussed in Chapter 3, was often feared to be an overly materialistic pursuit in the U.S. One representative statement of this position appeared in an 1854 Sabbath lecture for the faculty and students at Buffalo Medical College. Titled “Medical Science and Materialism,” and given by John C. Lord, pastor at the Central Presbyterian Church, Lord's sermon somberly warned his audience that medicine could be a godly pursuit only if practiced properly. “It has been alleged,” Lord opened, “that the studies connected with the art of healing tend to materialism and infidelity: that those who become familiar with the anatomy and physiology of the body are led, in many instances, to doubt the immateriality and immortality of the soul, and to deny the first principles of morality and religion.”<sup>844</sup> Physicians, Lord argued, must therefore never forget man is a “compounded being,” made of “soul and body,” and thus possessing “both an animal existence and an immortal life.”<sup>845</sup>

The dualistic nature of man, Lord suggested, meant physicians could not neglect the moral dimensions of medicine, which he asserted were of the utmost importance: “The soul and body are so intimately related...that no practitioner can be accomplished in the art of healing, without a careful study of the moral nature of man...The soul has its maladies as well as the

---

<sup>842</sup> George Combe, *A System of Phrenology* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1860), 455.

<sup>843</sup> For more on Combe's American lecture tour, see Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 92-103.

<sup>844</sup> John C. Lord, *Medical Science and Materialism* (Buffalo: Jewett, Thomas and Co., Printers, 1854), 14.

<sup>845</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

body, and the derangement of the one frequently...affects the health of the other."<sup>846</sup> Lord concluded by reminding his audience that revelation and the "sure word of prophecy" provided the only evidence needed to support these claims.<sup>847</sup> Spiritualists like Buchanan explicitly rejected this notion that faith provided sufficient grounds for claims of knowledge. Their epistemologies instead turned, more and more commonly, to the language of science and empirical fact, standards of validity often deemed "materialistic" in previous decades.

In addition to phrenology, the rise of eclecticism as an alternative to the "regular" medical school in the U.S. also had an important impact on Buchanan's education and early theories. Eclectic medicine (sometimes called the "American School" for its preference for American medical developments over those of European origin) began and remained most popular in Kentucky and Ohio.<sup>848</sup> Eclectics preferred simple botanical remedies over more extreme treatments like bleeding, emetics, or massive doses of medicine. They advocated for "faith in science" and a "more empirical approach to disease," meaning they argued for the use of treatments that proved effective in actual practice rather than adhering rigidly to predetermined systems.<sup>849</sup> These eclectic standards of evidence would eventually play an important role in Buchanan's science of man.

Buchanan received his M.D. in 1841, the same year of his first of three marriages.<sup>850</sup> In 1846, he joined the Eclectic Medical Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he served as chair of the Physiology department. While there were thirteen eclectic colleges in the U.S. prior to 1860,

---

<sup>846</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>847</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>848</sup> John S. Haller, *Medical Protestants: The Eclectics in American Medicine, 1825-1939* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), xviii.

<sup>849</sup> Ibid, xv-xvi.

<sup>850</sup> Buchanan's first wife was Anne Rowan. Buchanan and Rowan would have four children before Anne's death in 1873. In 1881, he married Cornelia H. Decker, who died in 1891. After Decker's death, Buchanan moved to Kansas City, Missouri, and then later to San Jose, California. In 1894, he was married for the third and final time to Elizabeth S. Worthington. Ayer, 389.

the original Cincinnati college remained the center of eclectic medicine in the U.S.<sup>851</sup> In 1850 Buchanan was appointed Dean of the Institute and he acted as both Dean and Professor of Physiology until he was forced to leave in 1856.<sup>852</sup> Buchanan's involvement in eclectic medicine likely shaped his political outlook as well as his scientific and medical beliefs. Eclectic institutions had exceptionally inclusive admission practices when compared to other colleges of their era. They were, for instance, notable as some of the first to admit women to study medicine.<sup>853</sup> Buchanan exemplified this eclectic emphasis on equality in his anti-slavery views as well as the public support he voiced for other contentious causes: "I hope the day may come," Buchanan proclaimed boldly in 1849, "when our National authorities and State governments shall all regard it as the great end of government to secure the happiness and full educational development of *every human being* under their control, of all ages and sexes, colors, conditions, and characters."<sup>854</sup> Buchanan thus wed his spiritualist science to a reform agenda nearly identical to that of materialists like Kneeland and Knowlton. Few critics, however, seemed to take note of his radical political beliefs, despite their equally controversial nature. American commentators instead fixated on Buchanan's eccentric scientific claims and the ever-pressing question of their legitimacy.

---

<sup>851</sup> Haller, *A Profile in Alternative Medicine*, 19.

<sup>852</sup> Hugh M. Ayer, "Political Activities of Joseph Rodes Buchanan," *Indiana Journal of History* 49, no. 1 (March 1953): 61. For more on Buchanan's time as dean and his eventual expulsion, see John S. Haller, *A Profile in American Medicine: The Eclectic Medical College of Cincinnati, 1845-1942* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1999), 30-32. See also Haller, *Medical Protestants*, 94-138.

<sup>853</sup> Haller, *Medical Protestants*, 97; xvii.

<sup>854</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "Table Talk," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 1, no. 3 (March 1849): 137-138. For more on Buchanan's anti-slavery politics and his political views in general, see Hugh M. Ayer, "Political Activities of Joseph Rodes Buchanan," *Indiana Magazine of History* 49, no. 1 (March 1953): 61-67, and James Coates, *Seeing the Invisible: Practical Studies in Psychometry, Thought Transference, Telepathy, and Allied Phenomena* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1906), 288.

## Buchanan's Science of Man

Though he was initially attracted to phrenology, Buchanan soon began to feel it was an overly limiting field. Later in his career he would refer to phrenology as a "half science," one which could not adequately account for the totality of man as a mental and physical being.<sup>855</sup> "Mental philosophy," Buchanan explained, "was too limited in its scope, and had too little of the practical character," while "Phrenology," by contrast, "promised much," but "struck [him] as an unsatisfactory system of mental philosophy," though it remained "one worthy of investigation as a natural science."<sup>856</sup> Using phrenology as a starting point, Buchanan set out to create a universal theory of human nature, one which could provide a unified, comprehensive theory of man as a both a mental and physical being. "The common conception that the material and the immaterial, or the material or the spiritual, are things of an essentially opposite nature, standing at an immeasurable distance apart...is a very limited and inaccurate view," Buchanan argued. "There is," he continued, "no chasm or gulf, nor even a clear dividing line between the material and the spiritual."<sup>857</sup> By connecting the material and the spiritual, Buchanan hoped his science of man would unite the brain and soul, mind and body. Buchanan thus sought the same "mysterious" connection his father deemed irrational and impossible decades earlier.<sup>858</sup>

A key component of Buchanan's theory was the invention of "nervaura," a kind of mental or spiritual energy based in the nervous system and modeled loosely after the theories of magnetism and galvanism. Though many of his ideas may sound quite unusual, Buchanan's theory was thus at least partially aligned with other scientific developments in an era where

---

<sup>855</sup> See, for instance, Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "Gallian Phrenology - and the Neurological System," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 2, no. 1 (July 1850):

<sup>856</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, *Outlines of Lectures on the Neurological System of Anthropology* (Cincinnati: The Office of Buchanan's Journal of Man, 1854), 31.

<sup>857</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>858</sup> Joseph Buchanan, *The Philosophy of Human Nature*, 3.

theories of the nervous system were frequently revised. "My investigations of the nervous system," Buchanan explained, "...have clearly shown that its capacities are far more extensive, varied and interesting, than physiologists or philosophers have been willing to acknowledge. We find in the nervous system the vast aggregate of powers which constitute the vitality of man, existing in intimate connection with the vast...powers of his mind."<sup>859</sup> Well-versed in the anatomical science of his day, Buchanan believed his discovery would compliment and complete already-established theories of the brain and nervous system.

For Buchanan, *nervaura* served as the crucial link between the spiritual and the material. "It is not probable," Buchanan wrote, "that any single agent can be at the same time sufficiently material to act upon matter, and sufficiently spiritual to come into contact with mind." *Nervaura* solved this problem by connecting the material and the spiritual through "gradations of almost inconceivable delicacy."<sup>860</sup> "Being thus connected by these fine gradations," Buchanan concluded, "we may conceive that, although...so widely separated...at their extreme limits, each may yet act and reach upon the other, and...BOTH may be subjected to the same great system of laws."<sup>861</sup> While he admitted the finer points of *nervaura* remained somewhat unclear, Buchanan asserted above all else that *nervaura* was in fact real, calling it a form of "spiritual reality, with as positive an existence as a block of marble."<sup>862</sup>

*Nervaura* linked the entire universe, connecting mind and spirit as well as individuals to one another through a quality Buchanan called "impressability." Buchanan believed impressability, sometimes referred to as "sympathetic impressability," acted as the basis of his

---

<sup>859</sup> Reprinted in Joseph Rodes Buchanan, *Manual of Psychometry*, 16.

<sup>860</sup> Poe's mesmerism tales discussed in the introduction to this chapter contained very similar imagery, further evidence to support claims that Poe was a fan of Buchanan's ideas. See fn. 11 for more.

<sup>861</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, *Outlines of Lectures on the Neurological System of Anthropology*, 195.

<sup>862</sup> Buchanan, *Outlines of Lectures on the Neurological System of Anthropology*, 195.



"comprehensive philosophy of man."<sup>863</sup> Closely connected to the practice of animal magnetism, Buchanan defined impressability as the interaction of one's psychic energy with that of another individual's through the nervaura. In his words, impressability described the moment when "The nervaura of another constitution modifies the action of our own."<sup>864</sup> It could also be understood as "the power of being...affected through the nervauric sense."<sup>865</sup> Buchanan posited that individuals possessed varying degrees of impressability. Some, like clairvoyants or mediums, displayed a great level of impressability, while others seemed to have little to no ability to perceive impressions from others. Buchanan cataloged numerous experiments with readily impressible individuals and believed that a long enough record of these investigations would help convince the world of the truth of his claims.<sup>866</sup>

Nervaura and impressability both played important roles in Buchanan's theory of psychometry. Though he developed his ideas about psychometry in the 1840s, Buchanan published his fullest statement on psychometry in his ambitiously titled 1885 *Manual of Psychometry: The Dawn of a New Civilization*. Buchanan boasted that his invention of psychometry would "prove the dawn of a new era in science, philosophy, and social progress, more important to human enlightenment...than all the...sciences heretofore known..."<sup>867</sup> His *Manual* declared that "The word Psychometry, coined in 1842 to express the character of a new science and art, is the most pregnant and important word that has been added to the English language. Coined from the Greek (*psyche*, soul and *metron*, measure) it literally signifies *soul-*

---

<sup>863</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "Sympathetic Impressability," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 1, no. 8 (October 1849): 353.

<sup>864</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "Sympathetic Impressability," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 1, no. 8 (October 1849): 354.

<sup>865</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>866</sup> Several experiments were recorded in "Sympathetic Impressability," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 1, no. 8 (October 1849): 353-368.

<sup>867</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, *Manual of Psychometry*, 45.

*measuring*."<sup>868</sup> As his definition suggested, Buchanan believed mental faculties could be studied, quantified, and measured in the same fashion as other natural phenomena, a claim meant to reassure even "the most cautious inquirer in vital science...that he is treading on safe and solid ground."<sup>869</sup> Here again, Buchanan took great pains to highlight the careful scientific nature of his investigations.

Buchanan believed psychometry would finally explain "the mechanism of those transcendent powers which have heretofore defied the comprehension of philosophy, and have been regarded with defiant hostility by materialistic cultivators of mere physical science."<sup>870</sup> It was through psychometry, he suggested, that he had at last located the scientific basis for spiritual existence: "The spiritual nature in man, if we do not discard the authentic reports of thousands of rational and conscientious observers, is capable of communing with spiritual nature *exterior to itself*, and of existing *apart from matter* - in other words, of perceiving directly the phenomena of a Spiritual World."<sup>871</sup> Using his own investigations as well as observations by other scientists and spiritualists, Buchanan believed he could now prove the existence of the spiritual realm *and* explain how human knowledge of the spiritual was made possible through a combination of physiological structures and mental capabilities. In order to demonstrate the scientific validity of his claims, Buchanan decided to found a periodical that would allow him to share his experiments and ideas with the largest audience he could possibly reach.

---

<sup>868</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>869</sup> Ibid, 10-11.

<sup>870</sup> Ibid, 4; 10.

<sup>871</sup> Buchanan, *Outlines of Lectures on the Neurological System of Anthropology*, 196.

## *Buchanan's Journal of Man*

In 1849, a few years after he started working at the Eclectic Medical Institute, Buchanan began writing and printing *Buchanan's Journal of Man*. Published out of Cincinnati and sold for \$2 per year, Buchanan's eponymous *Journal* served as the main outlet for his theories until its run ended in 1856.<sup>872</sup> (Near the end of his career, Buchanan did revive the project briefly, publishing another series from 1887 to 1890.) While he reprinted articles and letters of interest from other periodicals, Buchanan's self-written essays formed the core of his *Journal*. He intended for the journal, when taken as a whole, to explain his "science of man," which he sometimes referred to as anthropology.<sup>873</sup> The goal of his journal, Buchanan wrote, was "the attainment of a thorough, profound and accurate knowledge of the whole mental and physical Constitution of Man" and its "relations to external objects, to society, to nature, and to the laws of the universe."<sup>874</sup> Such an undertaking would include surveys of numerous fields, including anatomy, physiology, pathology, phrenology, mental philosophy, physiognomy, psychology, animal magnetism, biography, history, political economy, fine arts, hygiene, dietetics, and materia medica.<sup>875</sup> This fantastic range of topics led one reviewer to call Buchanan "the advocate of so many queer *isms*" and to describe his periodical as "a perfect mental 'curiosity shop.'"<sup>876</sup>

---

<sup>872</sup> Ohio bookstores like J. H. Riley & Co. in Columbus carried the *Journal* and offered subscriptions. See "Buchanan's Journal of Man," *Weekly Ohio State Journal*, December 30, 1848. Other evidence suggests Buchanan at one point had agents as far south as Natchez, Mississippi looking for subscribers. See "Journal of Man," *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette*, May 26, 1849.

<sup>873</sup> Buchanan described his plan for the journal as follows: "Each volume must be devoted to its own subjects, and those who would study them as already discussed must refer to the back volumes for their elucidation. By pursuing this course, the Journal will present after the lapse of a few years, a compact system of original anthropological science, well adapted for reference and study." See Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "Introduction to Volume II," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 2, no. 1 (July 1850): 1-2.

<sup>874</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "To the Readers of the Journal of Man," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 1, no. 1 (January 1849): 43.

<sup>875</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "The First Number," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 1, no. 1 (January 1849): 3-5.

<sup>876</sup> "Buchanan's Journal of Man," *The Daily Scioto Gazette*, August 11, 1853.

Many readers were unsure what to make of Buchanan's rather unusual work. The first issues of his *Journal* received mixed reviews at best. Most reviewers noted the "unique" or "eclectic" nature of the subjects covered and several suggested that the journal would appeal only to niche audiences such as "intellectual loafer[s]" or "very dreamy or very sensitive thinkers."<sup>877</sup> After the release of an early issue featuring essays on neurology, impressability, and organic chemistry, one critic stated plainly: "We feel so little interest in these subjects, when we compare them with the great mass of *practical* and *useful* reading which is constantly within reach, that we cannot read them with any degree of gratification."<sup>878</sup> Though many readers voiced similar opinions about the relatively obscure nature of the topics covered, interest in Buchanan's *Journal* did increase briefly after the spirit rappings of the late 1840s and 1850s as many turned to his essays as early accounts of the mysterious phenomenon.<sup>879</sup>

A few readers offered more generous interpretations of the *Journal*. In an interesting turn of events, publications that were willing to publish articles supporting materialist ideas or materialist philosophy generally proved the most supportive of Buchanan's explicitly anti-materialist spiritual science. *The Liberator*, for instance, gave the *Journal* a ringing endorsement, calling it a "repository of curious experiments, marvelous discoveries, and valuable facts" and more significantly describing Buchanan himself as a "rational, enlightened teacher of sublime truths, and a real discoverer of many important facts pertaining to the human mind and

---

<sup>877</sup> "Literary Notices," *Daily Scioto Gazette*, October 29, 1850; "A friend has laid on our table No. 8 of 'Buchanan's Journal of Man,'" *The Hinds County Gazette*, November 23, 1849; "Buchanan's 'Journal of Man,' for October, is Received," *The Daily Scioto Gazette*, November 18, 1851.

<sup>878</sup> "A friend has laid on our table No. 8 of 'Buchanan's Journal of Man,'" *The Hinds County Gazette*, November 23, 1849.

<sup>879</sup> See, for instance, "A Lick Ahead," *The Daily Scioto Gazette*, October 10, 1850; "The 'Spirit Rappings,'" *Missouri Courier*, May 6, 1852. Non-U.S. periodicals also picked up on Buchanan's discussions of the rappings. See, for example, the following from a London publication: "Clairvoyance," *The Daily Ohio Statesman*, October 30, 1850.

body."<sup>880</sup> The *Boston Investigator* also praised the initial run of the journal, labeling it as "probably the most valuable magazine of its kind to be found in this country or any other."<sup>881</sup> In a nod to its ambitious scope and dense articles, the *Investigator* review noted that the periodical was "a work to be *studied*, rather than read."<sup>882</sup> These self-identified "liberal" publications, which themselves regularly printed contentious material, would remain some of the most amenable to Buchanan's *Journal* and its unusual arguments.

Most readers, however, were less than impressed with Buchanan's theories. A periodical published out of nearby Chillicothe, Ohio, did offer a cautious recommendation of the first volume of the *Journal*, suggesting that "Those who are fond of new, or suppositious, science, and gentlemen of liberal views...would be interested in the Journal of Man."<sup>883</sup> After the release of more issues, however, the Chillicothe reviewer labeled the publication "curious" and decided that Buchanan's experiments and scientific conclusions were "strange enough to stagger the credulity of the most gullible."<sup>884</sup> Many critics picked up on this question of the scientific proof, or lack thereof, that Buchanan presented to support his theories. The *Ladies Repository*, for instance, offered the following colorful take on the *Journal's* claims:

It is an amiable mistake of the Doctor's, that...he presumes every body will believe his statements, however marvelous, on the authority of a single declaration. This no man, however, good and true, has a right to scientifically presume. Should St. Peter make some of the assertions and developments, which we have seen from...Dr. Buchanan, the world would demand some...evidence, for their faith to go on."<sup>885</sup>

Surveying his own reception, Buchanan suggested optimistically that the press was "generally...courteous and liberal" and, "in a few instances, liberally appreciative."<sup>886</sup> He did,

---

<sup>880</sup> "Buchanan's Journal of Man," *The Liberator*, February 8, 1850; "Buchanan's Journal of Man," *The Liberator*, November 16, 1849.

<sup>881</sup> "Buchanan's 'Journal of Man'," *Boston Investigator*, October 5, 1853.

<sup>882</sup> "Buchanan's 'Journal of Man'," *Boston Investigator*, October 5, 1853.

<sup>883</sup> "Buchanan's Journal of Man," *The Scioto Gazette*, October 25, 1848.

<sup>884</sup> "Buchanan's Journal of Man," *The Scioto Gazette*, March 7, 1849.

<sup>885</sup> "Buchanan's Journal of Man," *The Ladies' Repository* 10, no. 1 (January 1850): 37.

however, feel the need to respond to one particularly negative review from the *New York Harbinger*. It had ended with the following pointed challenge: "We hope, however, that in future numbers, the Professor will give us the *science* of what he proposes to teach, and not mere scattered observations..." Buchanan, who had carefully enveloped all his arguments in the language of science, claimed the *Harbinger* reviewer to be "*oblivious* of the important principles and statements of my first number, and of the whole course of my public teachings."<sup>887</sup> He did, however, conclude his response with a polite nod to the publication, stating that "The Harbinger is a profound and brilliant newspaper, full of interesting matter."<sup>888</sup>

Later reviews judged Buchanan's work even more harshly on this question of science and the alleged scientific nature of his studies. "What reception then should thoughtful persons give to this theory?" asked one review of his *Manual of Psychometry* in 1885. "Modern science," it answered, "unhesitatingly denounces it as unmitigated trash. It certainly evades all scientific tests." There is, the review continued, "a debatable country lying between material science on one side and immaterial nonsense on the other. Yet, where is the line to be drawn between science and nonsense?" The theories Buchanan put forward, the reviewer concluded, all clearly fell "outside" the realm of verifiable science.<sup>889</sup> Why, despite his constant invocations of science as his guiding principle, did critics attack his Buchanan's ideas as ungrounded and unscientific? How was it that his self-proclaimed "science of man" came under siege as an insufficiently scientific theory?

---

<sup>886</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "Reception of the Journal," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 1, no. 2 (February 1849): 96.

<sup>887</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "Reception of the Journal," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 1, no. 2 (February 1849): 96.

<sup>888</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>889</sup> "Manual of Psychometry – The Dawn of a New Civilization," *Daily Evening Bulletin*, Saturday, August 29, 1885.

## The Authority of Science

As his terms "spiritual science" and "science of man" suggest, Buchanan held science in the highest regard throughout his career. Furthermore, he was not afraid to place scientific norms above the sacred. Buchanan summarized his stance on science and religion in an 1851 lecture on the question of "the conscious principle" in man. "I know," he opened,

that many will say there is no need for any scientific research upon this question - that it has been settled by...the Christian religion, and that no rational man can possibly doubt his own spiritual and immortal nature. But I affirm the voice of science is needed up on this subject. The voice of Christianity has not settled this question in the minds of all men.<sup>890</sup>

At first glance, Buchanan's 1851 turn toward science appears to fit perfectly with standard narratives of religion and science in the nineteenth century U.S. Many historians have described the first half of the century as a period of relative harmony on this count. Theodore Bozeman summarized this position in his influential 1977 book *Protestants in an Age of Science* where he argued:

In the nineteenth century (as in the eighteenth) the scientists' chief rivals were theologians, for both groups considered themselves to be dealing with natural laws, and both considered themselves competent interpreters of those laws. In such a situation the surprising thing is not that there has been some 'conflict between science and religion,' it is that there has been so little of it. In early nineteenth-century America there was virtually none.<sup>891</sup>

The second half the century, by contrast, has often been told as a narrative of greater conflict marked by religious decline paired with growing faith in science. Mark Noll, for example, argues that Protestant theologians in this period gradually began to "rely less on...deference to inherited confessions and more on self-evident propositions organized by scientific method."<sup>892</sup> Several recent studies, however, have challenged this well-worn narrative of religious adherence

---

<sup>890</sup> Joseph R. Buchanan, "Relations of Matter and Mind," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* (February 1851): 226.

<sup>891</sup> Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 51.

<sup>892</sup> Noll, 4.

followed by decline. Jon Butler, for instance, has documented the “tenacity of popular belief in...forms of supernatural intervention in America” in what he calls the “antebellum spiritual hothouse.”<sup>893</sup> Catherine Albanese's even more recent study argues for the continued importance of what she calls "metaphysical religion" throughout the entire century.<sup>894</sup>

Buchanan's work, however, does not fit neatly with any of these perspectives. Though he used science rather than religion as justification for his beliefs, Buchanan did not support atheism as his father and many other materialists allegedly had. Buchanan, in fact, stated his belief in God and often highlighted the importance of the spiritual above that of the material throughout his career. On the count of religion and science, then, Buchanan's theories are perhaps best explained by an argument from Molly McGarry's 2012 study of spiritualism, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*. “Spiritualism,” McGarry argues, “denied the warfare between science and religion” and thereby “refused to acknowledge [culture’s] deepest divides.”<sup>895</sup> In spiritualism, McGarry continues, “science and religion worked as mutually constitutive knowledges, together producing a materialist belief system to explain the immaterial world.”<sup>896</sup> Indeed, rather than pitting the two against one another, Buchanan more often sought to merge science and the spiritual in a way that would completely redefine each. His description of his work as "spiritual science," a field which involved "exploration of the phenomena of the spiritual world" and sought to verify "the reality" and "the accessibility" of this realm illustrates the importance Buchanan placed on both.<sup>897</sup>

---

<sup>893</sup> Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 228.

<sup>894</sup> Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>895</sup> Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 14.

<sup>896</sup> Molly McGarry, 129.

<sup>897</sup> J. R. Buchanan, "Relations of Matter and Mind," 239.



When discussed in histories of spiritualism, historians frequently note Buchanan's emphasis on empirical investigation and scientific rigor. In *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, for instance, Bret E. Carroll argues that "Indeed, proving the objective existence of spirits was the whole point of Spiritualism's scientific dimension. Joseph Rodes Buchanan, an investigator of mesmerism and psychology as well as Spiritualism, called spirits' objective existence 'the real question at issue' for investigators of spirit manifestations."<sup>898</sup> John L. Modern has also discussed Buchanan's emphasis on tangible, scientific evidence, writing that "Joseph Buchanan...undertook elaborate investigations into the materiality reality of the unseen that were designed to provide empirical evidence for the process of social animation."<sup>899</sup> While historians have clearly picked up on Buchanan's focus on science and empirical evidence and even identify his work with this trait in particular, why did his peers react so differently?

To begin, we have to take a closer look at what exactly Buchanan held aloft as scientific evidence. The short answer is that, in many cases, he referred chiefly to his own studies, investigations, and observations. When it came to his arguments about nervaura and impressability, for instance, Buchanan drew upon impressive knowledge of contemporary neurological and anatomical studies and tried to demonstrate how his theories mapped directly onto commonly accepted schema of the brain and nervous system. His ideas, he believed, were borne out in the correspondence between already-established physiological findings and his new theories. While such conclusions may have been too much of a logical leap for some, Buchanan's other sources of scientific evidence proved even more confounding.

Buchanan, for example, recorded numerous experiences with clairvoyants like the famous Andrew Jackson Davis, who claimed to be able to identify objects with their eyes closed

---

<sup>898</sup> Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 27.

<sup>899</sup> John L. Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 223.

or while in somnambulist trances. Such events, Buchanan believed, demonstrated that mental power alone could allow a properly impressible individual to visit distant destinations, see events in the past and future, and enter into connections with other people's minds through the *nervaura*.<sup>900</sup> Buchanan felt his and other investigators' ability to reproduce such results in repeated experiments with many different individuals to be a sufficient scientific basis from which he could further extrapolate these claims. When it came down to it, then, Buchanan often asked readers to have faith in his (and sometimes others') direct observations of spiritual phenomena. Though this counted as empirical evidence to him, others were less than convinced when he could not produce any more material, tangible evidence to back his assertions.

In addition to these controlled experiments, Buchanan also referenced more organic cases as further evidence to bolster his claims. One important source included events in which, similar to the dream visions of Poe's mesmeric tales, individuals allegedly died but then came back to life and spoke of experiences beyond the grave. Buchanan believed the existence of such stories acted as further evidence that mental processes could continue in the absence of a functioning physical brain. One of the most well-known accounts of such an event was the apparent death and revival of Reverend Wm. Tennent. An abridged version of Tennent's experiences, complete with a refutation of materialism in its conclusion, appeared in an oft-referenced 1813 sermon:

Rev. Wm. Tennent, of Freeheld, N. J...was conversing, one morning, with his brother...on the state of his soul, when he fainted and died away...He was laid out, and his Funeral was appointed...On the third day, the people were invited, and assembled to attend the funeral...

At this critical...moment, the body, to the great alarm and astonishment of all present, opened the eyes, gave a dreadful groan, and sank again into apparent death... In another hour...a complete revival took place to...no small astonishment...of very many, who had been ridiculing the idea of restoring life to a dead body...

---

<sup>900</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "Relations of Matter and Mind," 234.

While his body was in this lifeless state...his soul, in a...vision was admitted into heaven...On the recovery of his health, his former ideas, memory, and knowledge returned...He had a perfect recollection of what he saw and heard while in Heaven...

All this proves, that in the decay of those corporeal powers, the faculties of the soul, while connected to the body, are not destroyed... And that the soul, in its separation from the body, will retain all the knowledge which it had ever acquired...

Can these facts be reconciled to the system of materialism? We are confident they cannot.<sup>901</sup>

In an effort to give a scientific explanation for such dream visions, Buchanan theorized that it was in these states of "repose" or "apparent death" that mental powers appeared strongest: an individual's mental faculties, he argued, "attain their highest condition when the corporeal functions are completely arrested" and "the mind" could thus "permanently continue in a more exalted condition than any which it had previously known while in the body."<sup>902</sup> This state of "permanent existence and identity after the total suspension of physical vitality" should, Buchanan reasoned, be perceptible to the living and thus scientifically demonstrable.<sup>903</sup>

While he occasionally discussed outside instances like Tennyson's revival, Buchanan more frequently referenced his own studies as his most important and reliable evidence. Statements like the following frequently appeared in his writings: "My own experiments have shown that this kind of testimony to the reality of spirit life is sufficiently abundant."<sup>904</sup> The "testimony" to which Buchanan referred here meant accounts of communion with the dead through various mediums, a body of work he described as "the vast collected mass of evidence upon this subject" in the form of "a sufficient accumulation of testimony."<sup>905</sup> "[R]eports of psychometers in

---

<sup>901</sup> Clark Brown, *Human Life Not Always Desirable. A Sermon Delivered at Richmond, N.H. November 17, 1813. At the Funeral of Mr. Solomon Atherton* (Keene, New Hampshire: John Prentiss, 1814), 11-14.

<sup>902</sup> Buchanan, "Relations of Matter and Mind," 235.

<sup>903</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>904</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>905</sup> *Ibid.*

reference to the spiritual life after death," Buchanan argued, "are worthy of our reliance. These reports are harmonious, consistent, and rational...These reports, derived from the intuitive perceptive powers, are not produced merely by imagination."<sup>906</sup> Here Buchanan suggests that after a certain amount of congruent information had been collected, one could reasonably take such reports to be valid and established as scientific fact.

But as his early reviews suggested, not everyone was convinced by Buchanan's claims to scientific proof. His arguments here clearly left several assumptions unaddressed: what, for example, counts as "sufficient accumulation of testimony"? Who decides the bounds of such claims? How should one weigh different forms of testimony if they conflicted? And, perhaps most importantly, why should his own observations be regarded as scientific fact amid numerous conflicting reports? Spiritualism, after all, was far from readily accepted by all Americans. Though it was a powerful cultural movement that boasted devoted adherents, many voiced skepticism about spiritualism's otherworldly claims.

Buchanan himself frequently acknowledged such critics. After news of the Hydesville rappings began to spread, he published an article titled "Reception of the Marvelous" in response to the outcry of those who declared the rappings a hoax. "The history of the recent wonderful phenomena in New York," Buchanan wrote, "illustrates very plainly one of the *brutish* elements of human nature, which has never been sufficiently rebuked, and which prevails equally among *the vulgar, the learned, and the Pharisaically pious* - the disposition to denounce and assail with satanic fierceness, whatever appears to transcend the bounds of what is considered credible."<sup>907</sup> "In the present state of the world," Buchanan continued, "the cry of *humbug* is...but the jeer of

---

<sup>906</sup> Ibid.

<sup>907</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "Reception of the Marvelous," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* 2, no. 3 (September 1850): 84.

the rabble against higher and purer truths from which their own brutality recoils."<sup>908</sup> Though unpleasant, Buchanan felt that such reactions were to be expected and to some degree even welcomed in such cases: when "knowledge transcends the bounds of what was previously known," he argued, "it becomes wonderful *and incredible*, and, consequently, meets with a hostility *proportioned to its value*."<sup>909</sup>

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, several investigative committees, perhaps most famously the Seybert Commission for Investigating Modern Spiritualism, were formed in an effort to establish, once and for all, the truth or falsity of phenomena like the spirit rappings, slate writing, and spirit photography.<sup>910</sup> Buchanan himself was the subject of one such proposed investigation in Boston in the 1870s after a group of prominent figures including C. A. Bartol and William Lloyd Garrison invited him to Parker Memorial Hall to lecture on "the more occult and mysterious phenomena of human nature" and to "state [his] views on these subjects in a course of public lectures, with such proofs and illustrations as you are prepared to give." Unfortunately, little to no information exists about what happened following the committee's invitation.

Buchanan's relationship with "science" was, as I have suggested, far from straightforward. On numerous occasions, as I have already mentioned, Buchanan used comparisons with the sciences to bolster the credibility of his work. Buchanan claimed, for instance, that he always presented his findings backed by facts and evidence meant to demonstrate the solidly scientific nature of his studies. He argued at one point that the study of

---

<sup>908</sup> Ibid.

<sup>909</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>910</sup> The Seybert Commission, which was formed in 1884 at the request of Henry Seybert (a spiritualist believer), consisted of ten men of varied specialties including several physicians, a chemist, and a paleontologist. The commission released its final report in 1887 as *Preliminary Report of the Commission Appointed by the University of Pennsylvania to Investigate Modern Spiritualism in Accordance With the Request of the Late Henry Seybert* (Boston: J. B. Lippincott, 1887). The report suggested that several of the phenomena investigated were fraudulent in nature.

the spiritual phenomena was "perhaps as easy of exploration as the physical science of geology" and the spirit world should thus "be as much of a subject of scientific investigation as the world of minerals and plants."<sup>911</sup> Buchanan employed such comparisons with the existing sciences as another way to make his often fantastic claims seem more relatable and understandable through already-accepted frameworks of knowledge. Wrapping his theories of the language of science was a crucial way Buchanan sought to prove his legitimacy and authority.

At other times, however, Buchanan seemed to turn against at least certain forms of science. I have, for example, already quoted his reference to "mere physical science" that appeared in his comment about "those transcendent powers which have heretofore defied the comprehension of philosophy, and have been regarded with defiant hostility by materialistic cultivators of mere physical science."<sup>912</sup> Buchanan even suggested at times that the sciences were an overly limiting and thus poor model for his studies:

If...we come to the conclusion that all the power of man are the mere effects of phenomena of organized matter, we render the science of man nothing more than the highest department of chemistry...But if, on the other hand, we conclude that man has a permanent, substantial, spiritual entity within him, capable of surviving the destruction of the body, we are compelled to go farther, and to inquire what becomes of that spiritual nature when the body is laid aside?<sup>913</sup>

Buchanan spent much of his career trying to mediate his genuine belief in the intangible with his desire to demonstrate the empirical, scientific rigor of his findings. His endeavor was constantly marred by the seemingly intractable divide between the spiritual and the material.

Though his system recognized both, Buchanan sometimes gave the spiritual privileged status within his cosmology, which he summarized as "a vast chain of being from matter to God": "Man, standing mid-way in the universe, perceived beneath him the Lowest Form of

---

<sup>911</sup> J. R. Buchanan, "Relations of Matter and Mind," 239, 236.

<sup>912</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, *Manual of Psychometry*, 4; 10.

<sup>913</sup> Joseph R. Buchanan, "Relations of Matter and Mind," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* (February 1851): 226.

Existence - Matter; and, above him, the Highest Form of which he can have any conception - SPIRIT."<sup>914</sup> At the very top, Buchanan posited the existence of God, the "All-Powerful or Divine, and perfectly immaterial, unlimited by any space, form, or locality."<sup>915</sup> Unlike his father, whose personal religious views remained unclear or hinted toward atheism, Buchanan explicitly stated his status as a believer several times, working in mentions of God or simply stating "I believe in God" in lectures or articles.<sup>916</sup>

Given his exaltation of the spiritual, it is unsurprising that Buchanan called materialism a "dead" theory that lacked "consciousness of the existence of the great spiritual world of a higher and better life."<sup>917</sup> In references like "the dogmatic materialism which my experiments have overthrown," Buchanan credited his own work as an important step in materialism's downfall.<sup>918</sup> Not everyone, however, was convinced by such arguments. In response to Buchanan's repeated repudiations of materialism, an author identified only as "MATTER" wrote a letter to the *Boston Investigator* identifying "Dr. Joseph Rodes Buchanan" as the "noted Spiritualist" who had called "Materialists 'vulgarly material'" and claimed that "'their debasing philosophy has brutified all things.'" Challenging the logic of his claims, Buchanan, the letter continued,

seem[s] to be greatly opposed to Materialists because we depend on matter. And so do they, for they can have no Spiritual communication except through a material medium. There can be no communion with spirits when there is no material medium present, for there are no spirits in the 'abstract' or independent of matter. They can do nothing without material help, and therefore the proper name of their philosophy, supposing it to be true, is not Spiritualism, but exactly its opposite, namely, Materialism.<sup>919</sup>

Buchanan thus attracted criticism from all sides. The rare vocal materialist like MATTER, if he or she did not outright reject Buchanan's spiritual science, could not help but point out how his

---

<sup>914</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, *Outlines of Lectures on the Neurological System of Anthropology*, 196.

<sup>915</sup> Ibid.

<sup>916</sup> See, for instance, Joseph Rodes Buchanan, *Outlines of Lectures on the Neurological System of Anthropology*, 14.

<sup>917</sup> "Article 5," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* (April 1850): 550.

<sup>918</sup> Joseph Rodes Buchanan, *Manual of Psychometry: The Dawn of a New Civilization* (Boston: Holman Brothers, 1885), 46.

<sup>919</sup> "Discuss, But Don't Abuse!" *Boston Investigator*, January 20, 1886.

spiritual system relied heavily on the material while skeptics simultaneously denounced his conclusions as insufficiently grounded in material fact. Despite his efforts to finally connect the spiritual and the material, Buchanan could not escape the fact that his ideas were developed in a theoretical framework still dominated by their dualistic nature.

## **Conclusion**

Buchanan's science of man and its rocky reception represented a moment of flux and transition in American discussions of materialism. In the most optimistic view, the rise of the spiritual sciences might have ushered in a new era of American debates about materialism. Past confrontations between materialist and anti-materialist thought, as I have suggested in previous chapters, were predicated on fundamentally incompatible epistemologies. That is, these older debates could never move past anti-materialist appeals to divine revelation or religious belief, as materialists employed a strict evidentialism that dismissed claims of faith as insufficiently grounded in material fact. The advent of these new spiritual sciences, however, represented a move to level epistemological ground, a shift which would seemingly allow materialists and anti-materialists to engage in debate through a shared discourse of scientific knowledge.

The rise of the spiritual sciences, however, clearly did not end the stalemate in which appeals to divine authority remained incommensurate with materialist standards of validity. Many of these new spiritual sciences, like Buchanan's, were instead cautiously received or outright rejected. His critical reception can also be explained by the fact that these sciences which claimed to disprove a materialist world-view simultaneously appealed to some tenets of materialist philosophy as a way to validate their claims. That is, anti-materialist critique tried to assumed some of the same concepts previously subject to its criticisms, a fact seen in Buchanan's



repeated appeals to empirical fact and tangible, sensory data. The otherworldly nature of Buchanan's studies and the constant question of his scientific authority did not help his cause.

At the same time, a new set of worries about science's overly materialistic nature that began to appear in American discourse only further complicate our understanding of the status of Buchanan's claims. "Materialism," one writer for the *Congregationalist and Boston Recorder* argued in the 1860s, "has an alarming spread and influence which are on the increase."<sup>920</sup> Identifying materialists chiefly as "men of science," this author argued that such men tried to "launch a misshapen theory out of excited brains, and call its science, and ask the nations to bow down before it."<sup>921</sup> These concerns about scientific materialism, as I argued earlier in this chapter, first surfaced in the 1840s, as some critics began to voice worries that science had become an overly empirical system with dogmatic adherence to material fact as its validating standard. Buchanan's anti-materialist science of man, however, was somehow curiously assailed as insufficiently rooted in material fact at the same moment such adherence to tangible evidence was decried as overly rigid and narrow-minded by others. What, then, are we to make of these seemingly insurmountable debates? Can Buchanan's story act as anything more than a tale of rejected eccentric ideas or a moment of missed opportunity in American discussions of materialism?

Viewed in a perhaps more positive light, the controversy surrounding Buchanan's ideas can be seen as one way the tensions between Enlightenment thought and Romanticism, or naturalism and supernaturalism, continued to play out in American culture. These debates about Buchanan's spiritual science thus serve as one episode in a series of longstanding American intellectual debates which fit largely under the umbrella of idealism and materialism, a

---

<sup>920</sup> "Materialism," *The Congregationalist and Boston Recorder*, April 29, 1869.

<sup>921</sup> *Ibid.*

dichotomy now viewed mostly as outmoded, but, as historian of philosophy John Ryder has argued, a dominant conceptual divide in nineteenth-century Western philosophy and an issue still very much alive in American discussions of spiritualism and materialism during this era. As Ryder has asserted, materialism and idealism cannot be ignored in part because they acted as “one of the fundamental dichotomies since the early modern period in terms of which the world has been understood and philosophies have been characterized.”<sup>922</sup> Taking place in a distinctly American setting, the collision of materialist and spiritualist practices raised new questions about the increasingly uneasy relationship between materialism and idealism as well as religion and science. Along the way, these debates also reinvigorated a number of difficult epistemological question about how we delineate what fits within the confines of acceptable belief. Is verification of fact internal or external? In the face of conflicting evidence, how are we to judge the validity of dissenting claims? Buchanan's narrative suggests that Americans were not ready to stop asking these questions, despite the fact that solid solutions might prove impossible.

---

<sup>922</sup> John Ryder, “Cadwallader Colden, Samuel Johnson, and the Activity of Matter: Materialism and idealism in Colonial America,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 32, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 248.

## **Conclusion:**

### **The Final Science: Spiritual Materialism**

#### **The Material and the Spiritual Reprised**

While debates about materialism covered much ground over the course of the nineteenth century, the seemingly intractable divide between the material and the spiritual could be found at the core of nearly every discussion of the topic. Though inflected in different ways, this question of the material and the spiritual - the incessant dispute about which could claim "real" existence or foundational priority - could be traced through each major materialist controversy covered in this dissertation. When Joseph Priestley and Thomas Cooper presented their distinctively Christianized versions of materialist philosophy to American audiences in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, they struggled to find a way to make the materialist belief in matter as first principle remain consistent with Christian doctrines that rely on spiritual forms (ie: the notion of the immaterial soul or the existence of God). Most Americans rejected their efforts and continued to view materialism as an atheistic, immoral theory. In the process, these critics began a tradition of American anti-materialist discourse that identified the philosophy chiefly with atheism, infidelity, and heterodox religious beliefs, as well as host of radical social and political positions.

Following Priestley and Cooper, more radical antebellum materialists like Abner Kneeland, Charles Knowlton, and Frances Wright were no longer interested in making accommodations for religion. These radical materialists instead used their arguments for the sole

existence of the material in an attempt to challenge and replace all forms of spiritual beliefs. While their efforts gained a surprising number of followers, especially among those in free thought or certain reform circles, their ideas met with incredible resistance and suppression amid the evangelical fervor of the antebellum era. Knowlton, Kneeland, and Wright confirmed earlier suspicions, initially sparked by Priestley and Cooper, that materialism was somehow connected to radical social and political doctrines. Though Priestley and Cooper had hinted at such connections in their writings and personal associations, neither tied materialist philosophy to a radical reform agenda as explicitly as these antebellum materialists, especially Knowlton and Wright, did. By purposefully forging links between materialism and sweeping egalitarian social reform, these antebellum materialists set off a new wave of anti-materialist discourse as critics warily eyed the growth of freethought institutions like Kneeland's *Boston Investigator*, Wright's Hall of Science, and the infidel societies founded by Knowlton, all sites where materialist and other radical ideas could circulate freely. Though short lived, the relative popularity of these venues temporarily made the threat of materialist ideas translating into popular political action more pressing and real.

With the rise of spiritualism at mid-century, figures like Joseph Rodes Buchanan showed renewed interest in efforts to make the spiritual and the material co-exist with both scientific and religious beliefs, but, as the unwelcome reception of his spiritual science demonstrated, there would be no easily accepted solutions, even from those who remained on the side of Christianity and anti-materialism. While Buchanan claimed to have scientific proof of spiritual existence, a finding that would disprove materialism by providing incontrovertible evidence spiritual forms exist, his spiritual theories were repeatedly rejected as unfounded, unsubstantiated, and in some ways not materialist enough. The very same emphasis on empirical data anti-materialists

sometimes denounced as an overly rigid and limiting epistemology is precisely what other critics claimed Buchanan's anti-materialist arguments lacked, despite his repeated insistence to the contrary. Buchanan's work thus revealed an interesting moment of flux in materialist and anti-materialist discourse. While the two were fairly straightforwardly oppositional in previous eras, Buchanan's anti-materialism served as a moment when his anti-materialist arguments shared certain elements with the materialist emphasis on empirical, tangible evidence as a standard of validity. It was unclear, however, if these changes would have any impact beyond the era of the spiritual sciences.

### ***The Final Science; or, Spiritual Materialism, 1885***

Such debates were indeed far from over during Buchanan's era. In 1885, another book that claimed to finally solve the problem of the spiritual and the material appeared in New York. Initially published anonymously, the title, *The Final Science, or Spiritual Materialism, Being a Strict Application of the Most Approved Modern Scientific Principles to the Solution of the Deepest Problems of the Age*, suggested an ambitious agenda. Had this author finally, as the label "spiritual materialism" implied, found a tenable solution to the spiritual/material divide, the problem that had vexed Buchanan and so many before him? Readers hoping for a masterful synthesis were, however, quickly disappointed as they learned this book promised no such communion. "What substance," the author asked in opening,

must be regarded as first?...Matter? Spirit? Matter and Spirit? Something behind both...? After spending many years...profoundly investigating this problem, I have at last struck bottom. Unhesitatingly and unconditionally I adopt materialism and declare it to be the sole and all-sufficient explanation of the universe.<sup>923</sup>

---

<sup>923</sup> John Henry Wilbrand Stuckenberg, *The Final Science; or, Spiritual Materialism: Being a Strict Application of the Most Approved Modern Scientific Principles to the Solution of the Deepest Problems of the Age* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1885), 7.

Though he called his theory "spiritual materialism," this author quickly declared allegiance solely to materialist ideas. Unlike Joseph R. Buchanan (who was still working and publishing at this time), whose use of the label "spiritual" to refer to his science of man was borne out of genuine interest in affirming spiritual existence, this author admitted a very different motivation for adopting the term: he had added the word "spiritual" to his theory of materialism simply to "relieve our science of that suspicion of coarseness which prevents its influence over certain minds."<sup>924</sup> Well aware of the long-established biases against strict philosophical materialism in the U.S., this author invoked the spiritual in an attempt to attract more open-minded readers.

At first glance, this book appeared to be a fairly straightforward statement of materialist philosophy. Several concepts in the book had appeared in earlier American works on materialism. Much like self-avowed antebellum materialists Abner Kneeland and Charles Knowlton, this anonymous author argued that materialism had the potential to "to change radically the thoughts, interests, and pursuits of humanity...to transform science, literature, morals, religion, and politics; and to make real in this life that heaven of which religious enthusiasts have only dreamt."<sup>925</sup> The author also called his theory "modern materialism," the exact terminology Knowlton adopted in his 1829 *Elements of Modern Materialism*, though the author seemed unaware of Knowlton's work.

As the book progressed, however, several unusual statements began to appear. While earlier materialists had spent much time laying out elaborate theories of matter, this book offered an oddly underdeveloped theory, simply stating that the material and spiritual were somehow connected by evolution: "In the process of evolution," one pertinent section read, "matter becomes mind, and the physical is transformed into the spiritual...Since matter is evolved into

---

<sup>924</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>925</sup> Ibid, 8.

spirit, it is evident that the spiritual is material.”<sup>926</sup> The use of the term "evolved" here was purposeful and meant to suggest more than just evolution in its general sense of transformation or change over time. Names like Charles Darwin (1809-1882), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) appeared frequently throughout the text. They, along with Ludwig Buechner (1824-1899), author *Force and Nature*, a significant 1855 book on materialism, were lauded as "our patron saints," those who would finally "secure the victory of Matter over mind."<sup>927</sup> A German philosopher, physician, and freethinker, Buechner's *Force and Nature*, published in 1855, was a reaction against the dominance of idealism and other theologically-based theories of the universe. The author of *The Final Science* hailed Buechner's text as "the materialistic Bible."<sup>928</sup>

*Spiritual Materialism*, however, offered only flat recapitulations of these supposedly hallowed figures in the materialist canon. Following a section on Darwin, for instance, it concluded with the statement "Man is purely an evolution of matter through apes."<sup>929</sup> When discussing Spencer, it fixated almost solely on his theory that there was not only no divine order, but no order in the universe at all. The anonymous author summarized Spencer by stating that "Nature is 'a blind, insatiable, irresistible fate...destitute of intelligence and reason...All that exists in any way...is the direct and sole product of the blind force of matter.'"<sup>930</sup> By the end of the book, the author pushed these materialist theories to a series of increasingly absurd conclusions. "There is," one section claimed, "nothing but matter; the materialist understands matter perfectly; therefore, he knows everything."<sup>931</sup> Later came the suggestion that the meaning

---

<sup>926</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>927</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>928</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>929</sup> Ibid, 141.

<sup>930</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>931</sup> Ibid, 41.

of matter seemed to be endlessly flexible and thus devoid of any actual meaning: "Materialism needs scholars who are liberal enough to confer on matter all it needs to accomplish whatever occurs."<sup>932</sup> The book reached a strange climax linking materialism and evolution when it stated that humans would eventually "evolve" into a new "materialist species" that would "be the infinite, absolute product of matter - the crowning glory of spiritual materialism."<sup>933</sup> This "new descendent of man" would be "gifted intuitively with inside knowledge of matter" and, "being too cultured to believe, he will only know; and the first axiom of his science will be that there are no spirits."<sup>934</sup> Finally, the book concluded with the statement that this arch-materialist would "have neither heart nor soul" and "freed from all superstition, he will not be religious, nor will he comprehend how any one can be; he will be a stranger to the torments of conscience and his morality, if he has any, will be purely pleasurable."<sup>935</sup>

### **John Henry Wilbrand Stuckenberg (1835-1903)**

If readers had not already been clued in, this ridiculous conclusion ensured most would see that *The Final Science* was actually a satire of materialism. By the late nineteenth century, materialism, at least for some, had reached the point of outright mockery. Written by pastor, theologian, and philosopher John Henry Wilbrand Stuckenberg (1835-1903), who was later announced as the author of the previously anonymous text, *Spiritual Materialism* linked Darwin, Spencer, evolutionary theory, positivism, and atheism all under the heading of materialism.<sup>936</sup>

---

<sup>932</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>933</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>934</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>935</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>936</sup> Stuckenberg was born in Osnabrueck (Bramsche), Germany, in 1835. In 1837 his family moved to the U.S. and he spent most his childhood in Pittsburg and Cincinnati. In the 1850s, he attended Wittenberg College and studied at the Wittenberg Theological Department in Springfield, Ohio. At various points in his career he also returned to Germany to study theology at the University of Halle, the University of Berlin, and the University of Tuebingen. He served as a pastor in several parts of the U.S. including Davenport, Erie, and Indianapolis.<sup>936</sup> During the Civil War



As Stuckenberg's book demonstrated, the list of charges associated with materialism had once again expanded, this time to include evolution, a theory labeled materialistic by some critics seeking to discredit it. By this point, then, materialism had become something of a general-purpose epithet for ideas associated with atheism. With the rise of evolution, avowedly religious anti-materialist critics like Stuckenberg set their sights on figures like Darwin and Spencer as new targets of their critique. In the wake of the pivotal 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species*, anti-materialist critics turned to this new threat as they worked through the storm of controversy surrounding evolution.

Stuckenberg's book was praised by many for its unusual defense of religiosity against the allegedly growing scourge of science, evolution, and materialism.<sup>937</sup> One offered an especially glowing review in the form of a concise summary of the book:

Agnosticism receives a deadly thrust at the hands of this distinguished writer, who prefers to withhold his name. He writes as a materialist of the most advanced school, and the purpose and scope of the book are to reconcile the established facts of science to his theory of Atheistic Evolution as "The Final Science." He utterly fails in his attempt but clings to his scientific theory. The lesson is obvious.<sup>938</sup>

---

he served as a military Chaplain for the 145<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Volunteers / Army of the Potomac.<sup>936</sup> He worked as a Professor at Wittenberg for several years in the 1870s until returning to Berlin in 1880. He remained in Berlin for fourteen years, working as a pastor and writing several texts for American audiences. During the final years of his life, he moved between the U.S., primarily Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Berlin. In the Spring of 1903 he died in surgery performed during a trip to London. The most complete biography on Stuckenberg is John O. Evjen, *The Life of J.H.W. Stuckenberg - Theologian, Philosopher, Sociologist* (Minneapolis: The Lutheran Free Church, 1938). For more biographical information on Stuckenberg, see his entries in Patrick W. Carey and Joseph T. Lienhard, eds., *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Theologians* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000), 42-43 and L. DeAne Lagerquist, *The Lutherans* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 223-224. For Stuckenberg being announced as the author of *The Final Science*, see "Rev. J. H. W. Stuckenberg, D. D.," in Jens Christian Roseland, *American Lutheran Biographies, or, Historical Notices of Over Three Hundred and Fifty Leading Men of the American Lutheran Church From Its Establishment to the Year 1890* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Press of A. Houtkamp and Son, 1890), 779

<sup>937</sup> It also received some less than favorable reviews. There was some general confusion about the book's status as satire, as one reviewer stated ": "The whole thing is an enigma. We are in doubt whether the author is sincere in his belief, or whether he is indulging in well-covered satire." See "The Final Science, or Spiritual Materialism," *The Phi Gamma Delta Quarterly* 8 (January-October 1886): 171. Others felt the book was overdone and poorly written, like the review that called the text "clumsy" and concluded that, " "To attempt a whole book of suppressed satire is at best a doubtful expedient." See "Notice of New Books," *New Englander and Yale Review* 45 (February 1886): 192.

<sup>938</sup> "Some Books in Popular Science," *The Literary Digest* 9 (July 9, 1894), 58

“With superior skill," another reviewer wrote admiringly, Stuckenberg's work "exposes the illogical character of modern materialism."<sup>939</sup> “This book," the same review noted, "is directed against the popular scientists who get their materialistic theories second hand and aim them at the overthrow of religion and morality."<sup>940</sup> Here materialism retained its association with irreligion and science, but the science portion had been updated to include new theories, including most significantly evolution. This new discussion of evolution also reinvigorated past charges that materialism led to a base image of man as nothing more than a brute or animal lacking any morality, re-packaging these older critiques in the new language of evolution.

Historian Louis Menand has argued that the denial of order was one of the most materialistic elements of evolution:

What was radical about *On the Origin of Species* was not its evolutionism, but its materialism. Darwin wanted to establish something even his most loyal disciples were reluctant to admit, which is that the species – including human beings – were created by, and evolve according to, processes that are entirely natural, change-generated, and blind.<sup>941</sup>

Some of the most prominent American anti-materialists lambasted evolution for precisely these reasons. Robert Lewis Dabney (1820-1898), a conservative Presbyterian theologian and pastor, argued that in a system of materialism, “our only master is an irresistible, blind machine, revolving forever by the law of mechanical necessity... This picture is as black as hell itself.”<sup>942</sup> In such a world, Dabney believed, there could be "no moral distinction, no right, no wrong,...no rational restraints on human wickedness. The consistent working of materialism would turn all men into beasts of prey, and earth to Tophet.”<sup>943</sup> (Tophet, often used as a reference to hell or a

---

<sup>939</sup> “Rev. J. H. W. Stuckenberg, D. D.,” 779.

<sup>940</sup> Ibid, 778-779.

<sup>941</sup> Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 121.

<sup>942</sup> Robert L. Dabney, *The Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century, Considered* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph and Company, 1875), 204.

<sup>943</sup> Ibid.

hell-like place, was a site in Jerusalem where Canaanites offered living sacrifices, usually children, to the gods Moloch and Baal.<sup>944</sup>) In a book containing numerous anti-materialist arguments, Dabney linked together a familiar set of charges, including atheism, skepticism, sexual licentiousness, and lack of moral accountability, all under the heading of materialism. He then, just as Stuckenberg had, added to this older list some new figures, including Spencer, Darwin, and evolution. The title of one chapter of his book, "Evolution theory materialistic, and therefore false," summarized his general stance on the issue.

In the shadow of the Civil War, Dabney also tried to turn anti-materialist rhetoric to racist ends.<sup>945</sup> While materialism could just as easily undergird claims to essential racial difference, Dabney feared that the loss of religion would erode all claims to natural order. In perhaps the most conservative of all late nineteenth century anti-materialist claims, Dabney, who had served as a chaplain in the Confederate Army and as Chief of Staff to Stonewall Jackson, argued that materialism was dangerous because it threatened the notion of a divinely-ordained notion of fixed social hierarchy, with whites superior to blacks, a fact Dabney believed to be rooted in Biblical arguments and the natural order created by God. For Dabney, the Civil War had been a theological battle between the pious Christian South and the immoral, godless North. Though the war was over, the specter of atheism still loomed large in his world.

Dabney's anti-materialism recapitulated many late eighteenth and early nineteenth century anti-materialist arguments. He repeated the frequent anti-materialist refrain that "Atheism and Materialism are twin sisters" and explained the descent from materialism to

---

<sup>944</sup> Tophet is sometimes also known as Topeth. Moloch was a god associated with the sacrifice of children. The name is now generally a reference to some type of great or costly sacrifice. Baal was an important Canaanite god often connected to fertility and children.

<sup>945</sup> For a general discussion of the impact of the Civil War on American intellectual life, see George Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993 reprint edition). See also "The Long Shadow of Appomattox," Chapter 1 of Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

atheism in similar terms: such theories, he wrote, "involv[e] tendencies to erroneous logic,...to universal skepticism;...to nihilism; to the obliterating of moral distinctions, and the destruction of moral responsibility;...to a denial of the supernatural; and thus, to atheism."<sup>946</sup> Dabney also revived claims from Priestley and Cooper's era that matter could not possibly serve as the basis of life in the universe. In a move that echoed late eighteenth and early nineteenth century anti-materialist rhetoric, Dabney asserted that there must be some kind of force external to matter that shapes it, and that only God or spirit could serve such a force. A "fortuitous conjunction of atoms," he wrote, could never "account for all the marvels of design in the universe," just as "a material mass" could never be "endowed with consciousness, reason, and conscience."<sup>947</sup> This time, however, Dabney addressed such claims from figures associated with evolutionary theory. "Herbert Spencer," he noted, "evolves everything from primary dead matter by force acting inevitably and eternally, developing organisms, and then changing them by the reactions of organs and environments."<sup>948</sup> Past concerns about materialism's denial of divine order, a staple of anti-materialist discourse from Priestley and Cooper's era, thus appeared in new form in the second half of the century.

Moving to the question of science, Dabney asserted that divine mandate would always remain the standard of validity over scientific proof.<sup>949</sup> He quoted approvingly German physician Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902), who argued against materialism in science:

Of all kinds of dogmatism, the materialistic is the most dangerous, because it denies its own dogmatism, and appears in the garb of science; because it professes to rest on facts, when it is but speculation, and because it attempts to annex territories to natural science before they have been fairly conquered.<sup>950</sup>

---

<sup>946</sup> Dabney, 2-3.

<sup>947</sup> Ibid, 168.

<sup>948</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>949</sup> Ibid, 186; 207.

<sup>950</sup> Quoted in Dabney, 135.

Other anti-materialists voiced similar sentiments. “Materialism,” a writer for the *Congregationalist and Boston Recorder* argued in the 1860s, “has an alarming spread and influence which are on the increase.”<sup>951</sup> This author defined materialism as a twin set of beliefs held by “men of science *who utterly repudiate all theology, and laugh at the pretensions of all existing religious systems to any authority in the world of thoughts.*”<sup>952</sup> Such scientists, the article claimed, “launch a misshapen theory out of excited brains, and call its science, and ask the nations to bow down before it.”<sup>953</sup> By the end of the century, certain strands of anti-materialist discourse, especially among those active in religious communities, found their way back to questions that had appeared at the very start of the century. The return to such issues, however, was not completely reprised, as it viewed them through the lens of newly developed theories like evolution.

Positivism, too, was another philosophy often labeled materialistic by those hoping to discredit it. Both Dabney and Stuckenberg lambasted positivism nearly as harshly as evolution. Focusing on the version of positivism laid out by French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857), Dabney observed with dismay that the new positive philosophy was simply another path through science that ended in materialism:

The tendencies of physicists are...towards an anti-theistic Naturalism; the boldness with which the school of *Comte* lift up their standard, has encouraged many to gather around it. Its most deplorable result is the impulse which it gives to irreligion and open atheism. Thousands of shallow persons...are emboldened to babble materialism...by hearing it said that the ‘positive philosophy’ has exploded the supernatural.<sup>954</sup>

Positivism and materialism did indeed share an empirical foundation. Comte's positivism, which suggested that society would develop through a series of fixed stages that operate in the same

---

<sup>951</sup> “Materialism,” *The Congregationalist and Boston Recorder*, April 29, 1869.

<sup>952</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>953</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>954</sup> The “positive philosophy” was a term commonly used to refer to Comtean positivism. Dabney, 105.

way as the laws that govern the natural world, was often conflated with materialism because of its emphasis on this mechanistic, necessary model of social transformation. Comte's general schema, which posited that humans would develop through the "theological" and the "metaphysical" before reaching the "positive" stage, suggested to many a trend toward the atheism and infidelity that had long been wedded to materialist philosophy.<sup>955</sup> Reactions to positivism and evolution among religious figures thus reveals the resurgence of conservative Christian rhetoric in certain forms of anti-materialist discourse. Both in print and from behind the pulpit, efforts to preserve traditional Christian belief as a pillar of American social and political life only grew more strident as conservative anti-materialist voices turned their attention toward new targets like positivism and evolution.

### **The Legacy of Materialism and Anti-Materialism in American Thought**

What, then, do we make of the trajectory of materialism and anti-materialism over the course of the nineteenth century? The reassertion of traditional Christian belief in religiously-based anti-materialist critique was certainly an important form of anti-materialist thought that should not be overlooked. But while the persistence of traditional anti-materialist rhetoric is perhaps the most obvious conclusion to this narrative, there are other, more subtle ways that one can trace the movement of these ideas. Take, for instance, the epistemological debates about materialist standards of validity, a long-running series of questions that could be found in every era of materialist debate discussed in this dissertation. Over a longer view, these early nineteenth-century debates about the ultimate nature of knowledge prefigured in interesting ways

---

<sup>955</sup> Comte's work is often divided into two periods: his early work, represented by his *Course of Positive Philosophy*, published in six volumes between 1830 and 1842, and his later *System of Positive Polity, or Treatise on Sociology, Instituting the Religion of Humanity*, published in four volumes between 1851 and 1854. My discussion of Comte here, and the debates about the allegedly materialistic nature of his work, referenced primarily the Comte of *The Course*.

the rise of falliblistic and revisable notions of truth that became popular in the final part of the century with the growth of American pragmatism and other related philosophical developments like those described by James T. Kloppenberg in *Uncertain Victory*.<sup>956</sup>

One of the most important U.S. contributions to western philosophy, Louis Menand argues that pragmatism developed not from a single point of origin but rather as a "variant of many strands in nineteenth century thought."<sup>957</sup> Here it is possible to see the continual negotiation and re-negotiation of materialist theories of knowledge as one small step in an intellectual lineage that ended with the work of figures like William James (1842-1910), Charles S. Pierce (1839-1914), and John Dewey (1859-1952). To be clear, James rejected materialism as an overly limiting and incomplete conception of the world, at one time calling it a "monstrous abridgement of life."<sup>958</sup> But in his 1896 lecture "The Will to Believe," one of the most famous statements of pragmatism, James tread much of the same ground as these lesser-known early nineteenth-century philosophical exchanges between materialists and their critics. As he sought to negotiate the epistemological boundary between truth and error or certainty and doubt, James' reasoning moved along contours similar to these earlier debates in which the certitude and finality materialists sought to achieve in establishing verifiable methods of material fact came up against critical responses from those who asserted the legitimacy of alternative epistemologies of faith or belief in the intangible and the unseen.

While I do not mean to suggest that materialist and anti-materialist discourse can be traced in a straight line to the growth of American pragmatism, or to claim that discussion of materialism carried anywhere near the same intellectual or cultural significance as pragmatism, I

---

<sup>956</sup> James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>957</sup> Menand, 370.

<sup>958</sup> Quoted in Kloppenberg, 48.

do argue that these earlier philosophical exchanges served as one part of this longer intellectual trajectory. Though materialist philosophy itself may not have been a significant cultural force in the United States, the debate it engendered foreshadowed consistently what would come to be some of the most dominant philosophical questions of the late nineteenth century.

### **The Fate of Materialism**

Few vestiges of radical antebellum materialism remained in the latter part of the century. The *Boston Investigator*, Kneeland's premier periodical, was one of the sole institutions still in existence. Started in 1831, the *Investigator* continued to be printed until 1904. Even well after Kneeland's tenure at the publication ended, the periodical maintained its commitment to "the development and promotion of universal mental liberty" and never shied away from controversial topics. Articles on materialism occasionally appeared in the *Investigator's* later years. Most were written in support of the philosophy. One 1874 article even paid homage to Charles Knowlton and Abner Kneeland before concluding with an optimistic statement, reminiscent of Thomas Cooper's premature 1831 predictions, that materialism and science might still win out the era:

Notwithstanding...the length of time that Materialism has been before the public, and its reasonable foundation, still it frightens the church fearfully...But science cannot be put down by sophistry, nor bigotry, nor denunciation, and as Materialism rests on Science, the progress of one is the advancement of the other.<sup>959</sup>

By the final decades of the century, references to economic materialism began to appear with increasing frequency as a new form of anti-materialist discourse. Virginia lawyer and politician Henry A. Wise (1806-1876) described the situation well when he wrote about "the ascendancy of materialism" in the late nineteenth century as a period in which Americans began

---

<sup>959</sup> "Materialism - Dr. Charles Knowlton," *Boston Investigator*, September 23, 1874.



to care only about questions like “‘Will it pay?’ ‘Will it pay money?’ ‘What is the per cent of pecuniary profit?’”<sup>960</sup> The rise of economic materialism was especially confounding given the fact that antebellum materialists like Kneeland, Knowlton, and Wright had used materialist philosophy to argue specifically against these notions of avarice and material gain that eventually came to dominate common definitions of the term. Kneeland, who was repeatedly accused supporting the radical ideas like the notion that Americans should “make all property common,” would have likely been confused and bewildered by turn-of-the-century references to economic materialism.<sup>961</sup> The philosophy he upheld as the path to a more equitable and just society, devoid of any discrimination based on class, race, or gender, was quickly eclipsed as most freethought and radical reform institutions associated with materialist philosophy faded by midcentury. This older legacy of materialism, now mostly long forgotten, has been almost completely replaced by a contemporary set of meanings that would be completely unrecognizable to those who once saw materialism as a philosophy of radical egalitarian reform.

---

<sup>960</sup> Henry A. Wise, *Seven Decades of the Union: The Humanities and Materialism* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1872), 67.

<sup>961</sup> Samuel Dunn Parker, *Report of the Arguments of the Attorney of the Commonwealth: At the Trials of Abner Kneeland, For Blasphemy, In the Municipal and Supreme Courts, in Boston, January and May, 1834* (Boston: Beals, Homer, and Co., 1834), 82.

## Selected Bibliography

### Primary Sources

### Unpublished Material

State Historical Society of Iowa

Abner Kneeland Daybook and Papers, 1826-1843

Abner Kneeland Materials, 1828-1897

Abner Kneeland Papers, 1812-1920

Salubria: Memories of the Abner Kneeland Project in Van Buren County, Iowa

### Published Material

### Newspapers and Periodicals

*Boston Investigator*, 1831-1904

*The Free Enquirer*, 1828-1835

*Buchanan's Journal of Man*, 1849-1856; 1887-1890

### Books, Articles, and Other Published Material

“Abercrombie on the Intellectual Powers.” *The North American Review* 36, no. 79 (April 1833): 488-518.

Adams, George. *Lectures on Natural and Experimental Philosophy, Considered In Its Present State of Improvement. Describing in a Familiar and Easy Manner the Principal Phenomena of Nature; and Showing That They All Co-operate in Displaying the Goodness, Wisdom, and Power of God.* Whitehall, Pennsylvania: William W. Woodward, 1806.

Adams, George. *The Boston Directory, Embracing the City Record, A General Directory of the Citizens, and a Business Directory, for the Year Commencing July 1, 1862.* Boston: Adams, Sampson, and Company, 1862.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Massachusetts Register: A State Record, for the Year 1852, Containing a Business Directory of the State, With a Variety of Useful Information.* Boston: Office No. 91, 1852.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Massachusetts Register for the Year 1854.* Boston: George Adams, 1854.
- Adams, Hannah. *A View of Religion in Two Parts.* Boston: John West Folsom, 1791.
- Allen, J.S. "Phrenology Examined." *Southern Literary Messenger* 12, no. 5 (May 1846): 267-277.
- "Article 2." *The National Recorder* 3, no. 17 (April 22, 1820): 270.
- "The Atlanta Exhibition." *Harper's Weekly*, November 22, 1881.
- Ballou, Hosea. *A Series of Letters in Defense of Divine Revelation: In Reply to Rev. Abner Kneeland's Serious Inquiry Into the Authenticity of the Same.* Boston: Henry Bowen, 1820.
- Bartol, Cyrus Augustus. *Discourses on the Christian Spirit and Life.* Boston: Wm. Crosby and H.P. Nichols, 1850.
- Beattie, James. *Elements of Moral Science.* Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1806.
- Beecher, Lyman. *Beecher's Lectures on Skepticism, Delivered in Park Street Church, Boston, and in the Second Presbyterian Church, Cincinnati.* Cincinnati: Corey and Fairbank, 1835.
- Boudinot, Elias. *The Second Advent, or Coming of the Messiah in Glory Shown to Be a Scripture Doctrine, and Taught By Divine Revelation, From the Beginning of the World By an American Layman.* Trenton, New Jersey: D. Fenton and S. Hutchinson, 1815.
- Bradley, Abraham. *A Philosophical Retrospect On the General Out-Lines of Creation and Providence Wherein is Considered the Origin of Matter, and Works of Creation...* Wilkesbarre, Pennsylvania: Charles Miner, 1808.
- Brinton, D.G. "The Metaphysics of Materialism." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1867): 176-178.
- Broussais, F.J.V. *On Irritation and Insanity: A Work Wherein the Relations of the Physical With the Moral Conditions of Man Are Established on the Basis of Physiological Medicine. To Which Are Added Two Tracts on Materialism,* trans. Thomas Cooper. Columbia, South Carolina: S.J. M'Morris, 1831.

Brown, Clark. *Human Life Not Always Desirable. A Sermon Delivered at Richmond, N.H. November 17, 1813. At the Funeral of Mr. Solomon Atherton.* Keene, New Hampshire: John Prentiss, 1814.

Buchanan, James. *Modern Atheism Under its Forms of Pantheism, Materialism, Secularism, Development, and Natural Laws.* Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1857.

Buchanan, Joseph. *The Philosophy of Human Nature.* Richmond, Kentucky: John A. Grimes, 1812.

Buchanan, Joseph Rodes. *Manual of Psychometry: The Dawn of a New Civilization.* Boston: Holman Brothers, 1885.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The New Education: Moral, Industrial, Hygienic, Intellectual.* Boston: Joseph Rodes Buchanan, 1882.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Outline of Lectures on the Neurological System of Anthropology.* Cincinnati: The Office of Buchanan's Journal of Man, 1854.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Periodicity: The Absolute Law of the Entire Universe.* San Jose, California: E. S. Buchanan, 1897.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Primitive Christianity Volume 1, Containing the Lost Lives of Jesus Christ and the Apostles.* San Jose, California: J. R. Buchanan, 1897.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Sketches of Buchanan's Discoveries in Neurology.* Louisville, Kentucky: J. Elliot and Co., 1842.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Therapeutic Sarcognomy, A Scientific Exposition of the Mysterious Union of Soul, Brain, and Body.* Boston: Published by the Author, 1884.

"Buchanan's Journal of Man." *The Daily Scioto Gazette*, August 11, 1853.

"Buchanan's Journal of Man." *The Liberator*, November 16, 1849.

"Buchanan's Journal of Man." *The Liberator*, February 8, 1850.

Buck, Charles. *The Practical Expositor, Or, Scripture Illustrated By Facts, and Arranged For Every Day in the Year.* Philadelphia: Griggs and Dickinsons, 1815.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A Theological Dictionary Containing Definitions of All Religious Terms. A Comprehensive View of Every Article in the System of Divinity. An Impartial Account of All the Principal Denominations Which Have Subsisted in the Religious World...* Philadelphia: W.W. Woodward, 1807.

"Buechner's Force and Matter." *Anthropological Review* 3, no. 8 (February 1865): 22-28.

- The Bush-Thwacker*. New Orleans: Bruner and Duhy Printers, 1818.
- Campbell, George. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Boston: Thomas B. Wait and Co., 1809.
- Campbell, John P. *Several Letters Addressed to the Rev. T.B. Craighead*. Lexington, Kentucky: Thomas Smith, 1810.
- “Censors for the Second Medical District.” *The New - England Journal of Medicine and Surgery, and Collateral Branches of Science* 9, no. 3 (July 1820): 309-311.
- Channing, William Ellery. ”Petition on Behalf of Abner Kneeland, 1838,” in Henry Steele Commager, *The Era of Reform, 1830-1860* (Malabar, Florida: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1982), 159-161.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Remarks on the Rev. Dr. Worcester’s Second Letter to Mr. Channing On American Unitarianism*. Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1815.
- Channing, William Henry. *The Life of William Ellery Channing*. Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1899.
- Christianity and Infidelity, Or A Discussion of the Doctrine of Materialism*. North Wrentham, MA: *New England Telegraph Press*, 1834.
- Coates, James. *Seeing the Invisible: Practical Studies in Psychometry, Thought Transference, Telepathy, and Allied Phenomena*. New York: Fowler and Wells, 1906.
- Cobbett, William. *Observations on the Emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestly, and on the Several Addresses Delivered to Him on His Arrival at New York*. Philadelphia, 1794.
- Combe, George. *A System of Phrenology*. New York: Harper Brothers, 1860.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Notes on the United States of North America, During a Phrenological Visit in 1838* 40. Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1841.
- “Concerning Things Spiritual.” *The Nation* 4, no. 81 (January 17, 1867): 52-53.
- Cooper, Thomas. *The Scripture Doctrine of Materialism*. Philadelphia: A. Small, 1823.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Some Information Respecting America*. London: J. Johnson, 1794.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A View of the Metaphysical and Physiological Arguments in Favour of Materialism*. Philadelphia: A. Small, 1823.
- Cunningham, Abner. *Practical Infidelity Portrayed and the Judgments of god Made Manifest: An Address, Submitted to the Consideration of Robert D. Owen, Kneeland, Houston,*

- and Others of the Infidel Party.* New York: Daniel Coledge, 1836.
- Dabney, Robert L. *The Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century, Considered.* New York: Anson D. F. Randolph and Company, 1875.
- Derby, John Barton. *Political Reminiscences, Including a Sketch of the Origin and History of the 'Statesman Party' of Boston.* Boston: Homer and Palmer, 1835.
- "Dr. Thomas Cooper." *Vermont Chronicle*, April 8, 1831.
- Evans, George Henry. *The Bible of Nature, and Substance of Virtue, Condensed From the Scriptures of Eminent Cosmians, Pantheists and Physiphilanthropists, of Various Ages and Climes.* Albany: C. Van Benthuisen, 1842.
- Evans, John. *A Sketch of the Denominations of the Christian World Accompanied With a Persuasive to Religious Moderation to Which is Prefixed, An Account of Atheism, Deism, Theophilantropism, Judaism, Mahometanism, and Christianity, Adapted to the Present Times.* Wilmington, Delaware: Bonsal and Niles, 1804.
- Ferriar, John. "An Argument Against the Doctrine of Materialism, Addressed to Thomas Cooper." *The Port-Folio* 8, no. 6 (December 1819): 469-482.
- "The Final Science, or Spiritual Materialism." *The Phi Gamma Delta Quarterly* 8 (January-October 1886): 171.
- Fletcher, John. *An Appeal to Matter of Fact and Common Sense, Or, A Rational Demonstration of Man's Corrupt and Lost Estate.* New York: Kirk and Robinson, 1804.
- Fowler, O.S. *Phrenology Proved, Illustrated, and Applied.* New York: W.H. Coyer, 1836.
- Gahan, William. *A Compendious Abstract of the History of the Church of Christ From Its First Foundation to the Eighteenth-Century.* New York: J. Seymour, 1814.
- Gilbert, Amos. *Memoir of Frances Wright, the Pioneer Woman in the Cause of Human Rights.* Cincinnati: Longly Brothers Printers, 1855.
- Hartley, David. *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations, 6th ed.* London: Thomas Tegg, 1834.
- Henshaw, David. *A Review of the Prosecution Against Abner Kneeland, For Blasphemy.* Boston, 1835.
- Heylen, Louis. *The Progress of the Age, and the Danger of the Age.* Cincinnati: John P. Walsh, 1865.

Hindmarsh, Robert. *A Seal Upon the Lips of Unitarians, Trinitarians, and All Others Who Refuse to Acknowledge the Sole, Supreme, and Exclusive Divinity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*. Philadelphia: Lydia Bailey, 1815.

*History and Proceedings of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Volume 5*. Deerfield, Massachusetts: The Association, 1912.

*History of Worchester County, Massachusetts, Embracing a Comprehensive History of the County From Its First Settlement to the Present Time, With a History and Description of Its Cities and Towns*. Boston: C.F. Jewett and Company, 1879.

Howe, Samuel Gridley. "Atheism in New-England." *New-England Magazine* 7 (December 1834).

"Idea of a New Anatomy of the Brain." *The New York Medical Magazine* (January 1, 1814): 84.

"An Infidel Convention." *Fayetteville Observer*, May 14, 1845.

"Introduction to Philosophy." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (1867): 114-120.

Johnson, Samuel. *Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language, To Which are Added, An Alphabetical Account of the Heathen Deities, and a Copious Chronological Table of Remarkable Events, Discoveries, and Inventions By Joseph Hamilton*. Boston: W.P. and L. Blake, 1804.

"Journal of Man." *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette*, May 26, 1849.

Kneeland, Abner. *The American Definition Spelling Book*. Keene, New Hampshire: John Prentiss, 1802.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A Brief Sketch of a New System of Orthography Delineated In an Orthographical Chart, Containing the Alphabet and Scheme of the Orthographer*. Walpole, New Hampshire: Nichols and Hale, 1807.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Child's Spelling Book, Containing Easy Words, From One to Four Syllables*. Walpole, New Hampshire: Bill Blake and G.W. Nichols, 1802.

\_\_\_\_\_. *An Introduction to the Defence of Abner Kneeland, Charged With Blasphemy, Before the Municipal Court, In Boston*. Boston: Abner Kneeland, 1834.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A Key to the New System of Orthography*. New York: Abner Kneeland, 1828.

\_\_\_\_\_. *National Hymns, Original and Selected, For the Use of Those Who Are "Slaves To No Sect."* Boston: J.P. Mendum, 1870.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Review of the Evidences of Christianity: In a Series of Lectures, Delivered in Broadway Hall, New York, August 1929.* Boston: Office of the Investigator, 1831.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Review of the Trial, Conviction, and Final Imprisonment in the Common Jail in the County of Suffolk, of Abner Kneeland, For the Alleged Crime of Blasphemy.* Boston: George A. Chapman, 1838.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Specimen of the American Pronouncing Spelling Book: A Sure Guide to the True Pronunciation of the English Language.* Abner Kneeland, 1824
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Speech of Abner Kneeland Delivered Before the Full Bench of Judges of the Supreme Court, In His Own Defense For the Alleged Crime of Blasphemy.* Boston: J.Q. Adams, 1836.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Valedictory Address of Abner Kneeland, to the First Society of Free Enquirers in Boston.* Boston: 1839.
- Kneeland, Abner, and W. L. McCalla. *Minutes of a Discussion on the Question 'Is the Punishment of the Wicked Absolutely Eternal? Or is it Only a Temporal Punishment in This World, For Their Good, and to Be Succeeded By Eternal Happiness After Death?'* Philadelphia: Publisher Unknown, 1824.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Substance of a Discussion Between the Rev. W. L. McCalla and the Rev. Abner Kneeland on the Following Question: Is the Punishment of the Wicked Absolutely Eternal? Or is it Only a Temporal Punishment in the World For their Good, and to Be Succeeded By Eternal Happiness After Death?* Philadelphia: T.S. Manning, 1824.
- Kneeland, Stillman Foster. *Seven Centuries in the Kneeland Family.* New York: Stillman Foster Kneeland, 1897.
- "Kneeland's Circulating Library." *Boston Investigator*, September 8, 1837.
- Knowlton, Charles. *Elements of Modern Materialism: Inculcating the Idea of a Future State, In Which All Will Be More Happy, Under Whatever Circumstances They May Be Placed, Than If They Experienced No Misery In This Life.* Adams, MA: A. Oakey, 1829.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Speech of Charles Knowlton, In Support of Materialism, Against the Argument of Origen Bachelier.* Philadelphia: The Society of Free Enquirers, 1838.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Two Remarkable Lectures Delivered in Boston By Dr. C. Knowlton, On the Day of His Leaving the Jail at East Cambridge.* Boston: A. Kneeland, 1833.
- Knox, Samuel. *The Scriptural Doctrine of Future Punishment Vindicated, to Which Are Prefixed Some Prefatory Strictures on the Lately Avowed Religious Principles of Joseph Priestley.* Georgetown, D.C.: Green, English, and Co., 1797.



- Lange, Albert. *History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Present Importance*, 3 vols., trans. Ernest Chester Thomas. Boston: J.R. Osgood and Company, 1877.
- Linn, John Blair. *A Letter to Joseph Priestley in Answer to His Performance, Entitled Socrates and Jesus Compared*. Philadelphia: H. Maxwell, 1803.
- "Literary Notices." *Daily Scioto Gazette*, October 29, 1850.
- Lord, John C. *Medical Science and Materialism: A Discourse Delivered Before the Faculty and Students of the Buffalo Medical College of February 12, 1854*. Buffalo: Thomas Jewett, 1854.
- Lumen, Henry. "The Immortality of the Soul Discoverable by the Light of Reason." *Lady's Weekly Miscellany* 6, no. 14 (January 30, 1808); 217-219.
- "Materialism." *The Congregationalist and Boston Recorder*, April 29, 1869.
- "Materialism." *The National Recorder* 4, no. 10 (September 2, 1820): 145.
- Maxcy, Jonathan. *Funeral Sermon, Delivered on Lord's Day, December 18, 1817, in the Representatives' Chamber Before Both Branches of the Legislature of the State of South Carolina*. Columbia, South Carolina: Telescope Press, 1818.
- McCalla, W. L. *Discussion of Universalism, or, a Defence of Orthodoxy Against the Heresy of Universalism as Advocated By Mr. Abner Kneeland in the Debate in the Universalist Church, Lombard Street, July, 1824, and in His Various Publications*. Philadelphia: John Young, 1825.
- McMaster, Gilbert. *Essay in Defence of Some Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity*. Schenectady, New York: Riggs and Stevens, 1815.
- Meikle, James. *The Works of James Meikle, Containing Solitude Sweetened, The Traveller, Select Remains, Metaphysical Maxims, and other Miscellaneous Works*. Pittsburgh: R. Patterson and Lambdin, 1818.
- Meriwether, Colyer. *History of Higher Education in South Carolina*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889.
- Messengers of Truth, or, Pills for the Pious; A Series of Liberal Tracts, Volume 1*. New York: George Evans, 1833.
- Miller, Samuel. *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century. Containing a Sketch of the Revolutions and Improvements in Science, Arts, and Literature of That Period*. New York: T. and J. Swords, 1803.
- Morrison, John. *An Oration Delivered in Tammany Hall, in Commemoration of the Birthday of*

*Thomas Paine and an Account of the Celebration of the 95<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of That Day By The Friends and Admirers of His Writings.* New York: Evans and Brooks, 1832.

"The Name of Thomas Cooper." *Daily National Journal*, November 5, 1827.

*The New and Complete American Encyclopædia, Or, Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences...* New York: John Low, 1805.

"Observations on the Theory of Hartley. *The Monthly Anthology and Boston Review* 5, no. 10 (October 1, 1808): 521-530.

"Of Philosophical Necessity." *The Churchman's Magazine* 8, no. 5 (September/October 1811): 284-299.

"On Infidelity," *Weekly Advocate*, February 4, 1837.

"On the Material Doctrine." *The Portico* 4, no. 6 (December 1, 1817): 480-483.

"On Natural Theology." *The North American Review* 54, no. 115 (April 1842): 356-397.

Owen, Robert Dale. *Moral Physiology: or a Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question.* New York: 1830.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Neurology: An Account of Some Experiments in Cerebral Physiology by Dr. Buchanan of Louisville.* London: J. Watson, 1842.

Paine, Thomas. *The Age of Reason, Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology, Part I.* New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1898.

Pantaenus. "A Stricture on 'The Philosophy of Human Nature' by Joseph Buchanan, No. 1." *The Evangelical Record and Western Review*, March 1, 1813.

Parker, Samuel Dunn. *Report of the Arguments of the Attorney of the Commonwealth, At the Trials of Abner Kneeland, for Blasphemy in the Municipal and Supreme Courts, in Boston.* Boston: Beals, Homer, and Co., 1834.

Payne, William, and Edward Shephard. "To Joseph Priestley." *Dunlap and Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser*, June 14, 1794.

Payne, Martyn. *A Discourse on the Soul and Instinct, Physiologically Distinguished from Materialism.* New York: Edward H. Fletcher, 1849.

Peter, Robert. *The History of the Medical Department of Transylvania University.* Louisville, Kentucky: John P. Morton and Company, 1905.

"Philosophical Works of Emanuel Swedenborg, Reviewed." *The Southern Quarterly Review* 13,

no. 26 (April 1848): 427-469.

“The Philosophy of Space and Time.” *The North American Review* 99, no. 204 (July 1864): 64-116.

Poe, Edgar Allan. “Mesmeric Revelation,” *The Columbian Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine*, August 1844.

Powell, Benjamin F. *The Bible of Reason; or, Scriptures of Modern Authors*. New York: George H. Evans, 1828.

Price, Richard, and Joseph Priestley. *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism, and Philosophical Necessity, In a Correspondence Between Dr. Price, and Dr. Priestley*. London: J. Johnson, 1778.

Priestley, Joseph. *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit: To Which Is Added the History of the Philosophical Doctrine Concerning the Origin of the Soul, And the Nature of Matter*. London: J. Johnson, 1777.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated; Being an Appendix to the Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit to Which is Added an Answer to the Letters on Materialism, and on Hartley's Theory of the Mind*. London: J. Johnson, 1777.

\_\_\_\_\_. *An Examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense, Dr. Beattie's Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, and Dr. Oswald's Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion, 2nd ed.* London: J. Johnson, 1775.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind, On the Principle of the Association of Ideas, With Essays Relating to the Subject of It*. London: J. Johnson, 1775.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Letters to the Inhabitants of Northumberland and its Neighbourhood, on Subjects Interesting to the Author*. Northumberland, Pennsylvania: 1799.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever. Part I, Containing an Examination of the Principal Objections to the Doctrines of Natural Religion, and Especially Those Contained in the Writings of Mr. Hume, 2nd ed.* Birmingham: Pearson and Rollason, 1787.

“Progress of the New Philosophy.” *New York Herald*, March 24, 1842.

“Psychometry in Brooklyn.” *New York Times*, December 29, 1878.

Purves, James. *Observations on Doctor Priestley's Doctrines of Philosophical Necessity and Materialism*. Philadelphia: William Pritchard, 1797.

"Religious Intelligence." *Harper's Weekly*. December 12, 1874.

"Review." *Virginia Evangelical and Literary Magazine* 3, no. 2 (February 1820): 63-74.

"Review 1." *Christian Observer* 14, no. 166 (October 1815): 685-693.

"Riots in New-York," *The Liberator*, November 2, 1838.

Roseland, Jens Christian. *American Lutheran Biographies, or, Historical Notices of Over Three Hundred and Fifty Leading Men of the American Lutheran Church From Its Establishment to the Year 1890*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Press of A. Houtkamp and Son, 1890.

Schermerhorn, John Freeman, and Samuel John Mills. *A Correct View of That Part of the United States Which Lies West of the Allegany Mountains, With Regard to Religion and Morals*. Hartford: Peter B. Gleason and Co., 1814.

Scott, Thomas. *Essays On the Most Important Subjects In Religion*. New York: Williams and Whiting, 1809.

Seybert Commission for Investigating Modern Spiritualism. *Preliminary Report of the Commission Appointed By the University of Pennsylvania to Investigate Modern Spiritualism, In Accordance of the Request of the Late Henry Seybert*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1887.

"A Short Account of the Doctrine of Materialism." *The Almoner, A Periodical Religious Publication* (July 1, 1814): 95.

Smith, John Augustine. *On the Sense of Touch, or Physiology and Philosophy as Opposed to Materialism and Atheism*. New York: W.E. Dean Printer and Publisher, 1837.

\_\_\_\_\_. *An Oration Delivered Before the Western Medical Society On the Philosophy of the Human Mind and the Agency of the Human Mind On the Organized Body*. Washington, Pennsylvania: Wm. Sample at the Office of the Reporter, 1815.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A Syllabus of the Lectures Delivered to the Senior Students in the College of William and Mary On Government To Which is Added, a Discourse, By the Same Author, On the Manner in Which Peculiarities in the Anatomical Structure Affect the Moral Character*. Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson and Son, 1817.

"Some Books in Popular Science." *The Literary Digest*, July 9, 1894.

"Sophistry Clairvoyance Tendencies of Mesmerism." *Ladies Repository, and Gatherings of the West* 5 (May 1, 1845): 157-160.

"The 'Spirit Rappings.'" *Missouri Courier*, May 6, 1852.

- Stancliff, John. *An Account of the Trial of Doctor Joseph Priestly, for the Horrid Crime of High-Treason Against the King of Heaven and Earth, and Supreme Governor of the United States of North-America, Delivered Under the Similitude of a Dream*. Philadelphia: Charles Cist, 1784.
- Stewart, John. *Opus Maximum, An Essay on Materialism: To Reduce the Moral World From Contingency to System*. Albany: C. Van Benthuyzen, 1842.
- Stuckenberg, John Henry Wilbrand. *The Final Science; or, Spiritual Materialism: Being a Strict Application of the Most Approved Modern Scientific Principles to the Solution of the Deepest Problems of the Age*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1885.
- Sutcliffe, Joseph. *An Introduction to Christianity Designed to Preserve Young People From Irreligion and Vice*. New York: Pelsue and Gould, 1814.
- “Suggestions For Theological Students.” *The Princeton Review* 5, no. 1 (January 1833): 100-113.
- Tabor, S. J. W. “The Late Charles Knowlton, M.D.” *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 45, No. 6 (September 10, 1851): 109-120.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “The Late Dr. Knowlton’s Autobiography.” *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 45, no. 8 (September 24, 1851): 149-157.
- Thacher, Peter Oxenbridge. *Reports of Criminal Cases: Tried in the Municipal Court in the City of Boston, Before Peter Oxenbridge Thatcher, 1823-1843*. Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1845.
- “To All Thinking Men,” *The Daily Atlas*, November 8, 1834.
- The Truth Seeker Collection of Forms, Hymns, and Recitations: Original and Selected. For the Use of Liberals*. New York: D. M. Bennett, Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1877.
- Tuck, W.J. “A Brief Sketch of the Life and Character of John Mason Good, M.D.” *Southern Literary Messenger* 12, no. 5 (May 1846): 279.
- “Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation.” *The Princeton Review* 17, no. 4 (October 1845): 505-557.
- Webster, Noah. *Ten Letters to Dr. Joseph Priestley, in Answer to His Letters to the Inhabitants of Northumberland*. New Haven: Read and Morse, 1800.
- Weiss, John. *Modern Materialism: A Discourse at the Ordination of Mr. Charles Lowe*. New Bedford, Press of Benjamin Lindsey, 1852.

Wetherill, Samuel. *The Divinity of Jesus Christ Proved, Being a Reply to Dr. Joseph Priestley's 'Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity.'* Philadelphia: Francis Bailey and Thomas Lang, 1792.

Wharton, Charles H. *A Short and Candid Inquiry into the Proofs of Christ's Divinity, in Which Dr. Priestley's History of Opinions Concerning Christ is Occasionally Considered.* Wilmington: Brynberg and Andrews, 1791.

Wheeler, J.M. *A Biographical Dictionary of Freethinkers of All Ages and Nations.* London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1889.

Wise, Henry A. *Seven Decades of the Union. The Humanities and Materialism, Illustrated by a Memoir of John Tyler, With Reminiscences of Some of His Great Contemporaries. The Transition State of This Nation, Its Dangers, and Their Remedy.* Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott and Company, 1872.

"Working Men's Reading Room." *Workingman's Advocate*, June 16, 1832.

Wright, Frances D'Arusmont. *Biography, Notes, and Political Letters of Frances Wright D'Arusmont.* New York: John Windt, 1844.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Course of Popular Lectures, as Delivered by Frances Wright, in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Boston, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Louisville, and Other Cities, Towns, and Districts of the United States With Three Addresses, on Various Public Occasions, and a Reply to the Charges Against the French Reformers of 1789, 2nd ed.* New York: The Office of the Free Enquirer, 1829.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A Few Days in Athens; Being the Translation of a Greek Manuscript Discovered in Herculeum.* Boston: J. P. Mendum, 1850.

## Secondary Sources

Abrams, Lindsay. "Study: Wanting Things Makes Us Happier Than Having Them." *The Atlantic*, January 16, 2013.

James F. Adams, James F., and Arnold A. Hoberman. "Joseph Buchanan, 1785-1829: Pioneer American Psychologist." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 5, no. 4 (October 1969).

Albanese, Catherine L. *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

Aldridge, A. Owen. "Natural Religion and Deism in America Before Ethan Allen and Thomas

- Paine." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (October 1997): 836-848.
- Allosso, Dan. *An Infidel Body-Snatcher and the Fruits of His Philosophy*. Minnesota: Stay Outside the Box Publishing, 2013.
- Appleby, Joyce, ed. *Materialism and Morality in the American Past*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1974.
- Ayer, Hugh M. "Political Activities of Joseph Rodes Buchanan." *Indiana Magazine of History* 49, no. 1 (March 1953): 61-67.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "A Prophet and a Science Are Born." *Indiana Magazine of History* 48, no. 4 (December 1952): 379-396.
- Azbug, Robert H. *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Baker, Lynne Rudder. "Christian Materialism in a Scientific Age." *International Journal of Philosophy and Religion* 70 (2011): 47-59.
- Barney, William, ed. *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century America*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
- Barresi, John, and Raymond Martin. *Naturalization of the Soul: Self and Personal Identity in the Eighteenth Century*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Bederman, Gail. "Revisiting Nashoba: Slavery, Utopia, and Frances Wright in America, 1818-1826." *American Literary History* (2005): 438-459.
- Bennett, Bridget. *Transatlantic Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Bhaskar, Roy. *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy*. London: Verso, 1989.
- Bode, Carl. *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1968.
- Bonney, Margaret Atherton. "The Salubria Story." *Palimpsest* 56, no. 2 (March/April 1975): 34-45.
- Bowers, J.D. *Joseph Priestley and English Unitarianism in America*. University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

- Bozeman, Theodore Dwight. *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977.
- James D. Bratt, "Religious Anti-Revivalism in Antebellum America." *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 65-106.
- Braude, Ann. *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.
- Breeden, James O. "Body Snatchers and Anatomy Professors: Medical Education in Nineteenth-Century Virginia." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 83, no. 3 (July 1975): 321-345.
- Bressler, Ann. *The Universalist Movement in America: 1770-1880*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Brodsky, Alan. *Benjamin Rush: Patriot and Physician*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004.
- Brooke, John Hedley. *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Buchli, Victor, ed. *The Material Culture Reader*. New York: Berg, 2002.
- Buckle, Stephen. "Hume's Sceptical Materialism." *Philosophy* 82, no. 322 (October 2007): 553-578.
- Burrows, Edwin G., and Mike Wallace. *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Butler, Jon. *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Bushman, Richard. *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.
- Butler, Leslie. *Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007.
- Campbell, Keith. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. "Materialism." New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005.
- Carey, Patrick W., and Joseph T. Lienhard, eds. *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Theologians*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Caron, Nathalie, and Naomi Wulf. "American Enlightenments: Continuity and Renewal." *Journal of American History* 99, no. 4 (March 2013): 1072-1091.



- Carroll, Bret E. *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Carson, John. *The Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750-1940*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Chandrasekhar, Sripati. *Reproductive Physiology and Birth Control: The Writings of Charles Knowlton and Annie Besant*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2002.
- Cohen, Seymour S. "The Correspondence of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Cooper: A Previously Unpublished Manuscript of Dumas Malone." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 147, no. 1 (March 2003): 39-64.
- Colbert, Charles. *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.
- Commager, Henry Steele. "The Blasphemy of Abner Kneeland." *The New England Quarterly* 7 (1935): 29-41.
- Cox, Robert S. *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003.
- Curti, Merle. *The Growth of American Thought*. New York: Harper Brothers Publishers, 1943.
- Dykeman, Therese Boos, ed., *The Neglected Canon: Nine Women Philosophers*. Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999.
- Eckhardt, Celia Morris. *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Evjen, John O. *The Life of J.H.W. Stuckenberg - Theologian, Philosopher, Sociologist*. Minneapolis: The Lutheran Free Church, 1938.
- Fabian, Ann. *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Falk, Doris V. "Poe and the Power of Animal Magnetism." *PMLA* 84, no. 3 (May 1969): 536-546.
- Foner, Eric. *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- Fosl, Peter. "Joseph Buchanan: American Psychologist." *Transylvania Treasures* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 10-11.

- Fox, Richard Wrightman, and James Kloppenberg, eds. *Companion to American Thought*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.
- Fox, Richard Wrightman, and Jackson T. Lears., eds. *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.
- Fredrickson, George. *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993 reprint edition.
- French, Roderick S. "Liberation from Man and God in Boston: Abner Kneeland's Free-Thought Campaign 1830-1839." *The American Quarterly*, 32, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 202-221.
- Fruchtman, Jack. *The Apocalyptic Politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley: A Study in Late Eighteenth Century Republican Millennialism*. Independence Square, Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1983.
- Fuller, Robert C. *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.
- Ginzberg, Lori D. "'The Hearts of Your Readers Will Shudder': Fanny Wright, Infidelity, and American Freethought." *American Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (June 1994): 195-226.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.
- Grasso, Christopher. "Deist Monster: On Common Sense in the Wake of the American Revolution." *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 1 (June 2008): 43-68.
- Guest, David. *A Textbook of Dialectical Materialism*. New York: International Publishers, 1939.
- Gura, Philip. *American Transcendentalism: A History*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2008.
- Haller, John S. *Medical Protestants: The Eclectics in American Medicine, 1825-1939*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Profile in American Medicine: The Eclectic Medical College of Cincinnati, 1845-1942*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 1999.
- Halttunen, Karen, ed. *A Companion to American Cultural History*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2008.
- Hamlin, Hannibal. "The Dissection Riot of 1824 and the Connecticut Anatomy Law." *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 7, no. 4 (March 1935): 275-289.

- Hatch, Nathan O. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Higgins, John. *Raymond Williams: Literature, Marxism, and Cultural Materialism*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Himes, Charles Francis. *Life and Times of Judge Thomas Cooper: Jurist, Scientist, Educator, Author, Publicist*. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Dickinson School of Law, 1918.
- Hoeveler, J. David, Jr. *James McCosh and the Scottish Intellectual Tradition: From Glasgow to Princeton*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.
- Howe, Daniel Walker. *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Howell, Ryan T. "What Causes Materialism in America? The Geography of Consumption," *Psychology Today*. Can't Buy Happiness (Blog). March 23, 2014. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/cant-buy-happiness/201403/what-causes-materialism-in-america>
- Jacoby, Susan. *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004.
- Jammer, Max. *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, "Materialism." New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003.
- Jewett, Andrew. *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Johnson, Paul. *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.
- Kaitaro, Timo. "Brain-Mind Identities in Dualism and Materialism: A Historical Perspective." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 35, no. 4 (December 2004): 627-645.
- Kasser, Tim. *The High Price of Materialism*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002.
- Khurram, Shanzeh. "Is the American Dream Becoming Too Materialistic?" *The Huffington Post*, February 17, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shanzeh-khurram/is-the-american-dream-bec\\_b\\_2702164.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shanzeh-khurram/is-the-american-dream-bec_b_2702164.html).
- Kloppenber, James T. *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Kramnick, Issac. "Eighteenth-Century Science and Radical Social Theory: The Case of Joseph Priestley's Scientific Liberalism." *Journal of British Studies* 25, no. 1 (January 1986): 1-30.

Kuklick, Bruce. *The Rise of American Philosophy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

Ladenheim, Jules Calvin. "'The Doctors' Mob' of 1788." *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* (Winter 1950): 23-43.

Lears, Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920*. New York: Harper Collins, 2009.

Lee, Maurice S. *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism, and Belief in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Levy, Leonard W. *Blasphemy in Massachusetts: Freedom of Conscience and the Abner Kneeland Case, A Documentary Record*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1973.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Blasphemy: Verbal Offense Against the Sacred, From Moses to Salman Rushdie*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Legacy of Suppression: Freedom of Speech and Press in Early American History*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1960.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Satan's Apostle and Freedom of Conscience," in *The Law of the Commonwealth and Chief Justice Shaw*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Lloyd, Alfred H. "History and Materialism." *American Historical Review* 10, no. 4 (July 1905): 727-750.

"Long Live American Materialism," *The Economist*, Free Exchange (Blog). April 17, 2009.  
[http://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2009/04/will\\_the\\_us\\_resemble\\_germany](http://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2009/04/will_the_us_resemble_germany).

LoLordo, Antonia. *Pierre Gassendi and the Birth of Early Modern Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

"Materialism: A System that Eats Us From the Inside Out," *The Guardian*, Money (Blog). December 9, 2013,  
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/09/materialism-system-eats-us-from-inside-out>.

Matthews, Jean V. *Toward a New Society: American Thought and Culture, 1800-1830*.

- Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991.
- May, Henry. *The Enlightenment in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- McCandless, Peter. "Mesmerism and Phrenology in Antebellum Charleston: 'Enough of the Marvellous.'" *The Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 2 (May 1992): 199-230.
- McEvoy, John G. "Joseph Priestley: Scientist, Philosopher, and Divine." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 128, no. 3 (1984): 193-199.
- McGarry, Molly. *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- Menand, Louis. *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001.
- Mills, Bruce. *Poe, Fuller, and the Mesmeric Arts: Transition States in the American Renaissance*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006.
- Mintz, Stephen. *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Modern, John L. *Secularism in Antebellum America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Moore, R. Laurence. *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Moser, Paul K. and J.D. Trout. *Contemporary Materialism: A Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Mudroch, Vilem. "Joseph Priestley's Eclectic Epistemology." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (January 2005): 49-71.
- Noll, Mark. *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Nye, Russel Blaine. *Society and Culture in America, 1830-1860*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.
- Oberg, Barbara Bowen. "David Hartley and the Association of Ideas." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37, no. 3 (July-September 1976): 441-454.
- O'Brien, Michael. *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860, Volume 2*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

- Papa, Stephen. *The Last Man Jailed For Blasphemy*. Franklin, North Carolina: Trillium Books, 1998.
- Perkins, A. J. G., and Theresa Wolfson. *Frances Wright, Free Enquirer: The Study of a Temperament*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939.
- Perry, Lewis. *Intellectual Life in America: A History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Porterfield, Amanda. *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Post, Albert. *Popular Freethought in America, 1825-1850*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1943.
- Prendergast, Christopher, ed. *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.
- Angela G. Ray, *The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2005.
- Reingold, Nathan. *Science in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964.
- Riegel, Robert E. "The American Father of Birth Control." *The New England Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (September 1933): 470-490.
- Riley, I. Woodbridge. *American Philosophy: The Early Schools*. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1907.
- Rivers, Isabel, and David L. Wykes, eds. *Joseph Priestley, Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Robbins, Caroline. "Honest Heretic: Joseph Priestley in America, 1794-1804." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 106, no. 1 (February 15, 1962): 60-76.
- Robertson, John Mackinnon. *A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century, Vol. 1 and 2*. London: Watts and Co., 1929.
- Rodgers, Daniel T. *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Roediger, David. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Rose, Anne C. *Voices of the Marketplace: American Thought and Culture, 1830-1860*. New

- York: Twayne Publishers, 1995.
- Rose, R. B. "The Priestley Riots of 1791." *Past and Present* 18 (November 1960): 68-88.
- Ross, Dorothy. *The Origins of American Social Science*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Roy, Manabendra. *Materialism: An Outline of the History of Scientific Thought*. Dehra Dun: Renaissance Association, 1940.
- Ryder, John. "Cadwallader Colden, Samuel Johnson, and the Activity of Matter: Materialism and Idealism in Colonial America." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 32, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 248-272.
- Sappol, Michael. "The Odd Case of Charles Knowlton: Anatomical Performance, Medical Narrative, and Identity in Antebellum America." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 83, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 460-498.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Schaffner, Kenneth F. *Nineteenth-Century Aether Theories*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1972.
- Schlereth, Eric. *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.
- Schofield, Robert E. *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work from 1773 to 1804*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Works From 1733 to 1773*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Mechanism and Materialism: British Natural Philosophy in the Age of Reason*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970.
- Sellers, Charles. *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Sklansky, Jeffrey. *The Soul's Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820-1920*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Sova, Dawn B. *Banned Books: Literature Suppressed on Social Grounds*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2006.
- Starr, Paul. *The Social Transformation of American Medicine: The Rise of a Sovereign*

- Profession and the Making of a Vast Industry*. New York: Basic Books Inc., 1982.
- Stevenson, Louise L. *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991.
- Stokes, Melvyn, ed. *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800-1880*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996.
- Taliaferro, Charles, and Stewart Goetz. "The Prospect of Christian Materialism." *Christian Scholar's Review* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 303-321.
- Tapper, Alan. "Reid and Priestley on the Method and the Mind." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 52, no. 209 (October 2002): 511-525.
- Timpanaro, Sebastiano. *On Materialism*. London: NLB, 1975.
- Trachtenberg, Alan. *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.
- Turner, James. *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.
- Vitzthum, Richard C. *Materialism: An Affirmative History and Definition*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1995.
- Volokh, Eugene. "Thomas Cooper, Early American Public Intellectual," *New York University Journal of Law and Liberty* 4, no. 2 (2009): 372-381.
- Walker, John. *A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary, and Expositor of the English Language: In Which, Not Only the Meaning of Every Word is Clearly Explained...* Philadelphia: Budd and Bartram, 1803.
- Warren, Sidney. *American Freethought, 1860-1914*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1943.
- Watson, Harry. *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1990.
- Wesley, John. *Sermons on Several Occasions*. New York: Ezekiel Cooper and John Wilson, 1815.
- Wilentz, Sean. *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Whitcomb, Mary R. "Abner Kneeland: His Relations to Early Iowa History." *Annals of Iowa* (April 1904).



Whittaker, Edmund. *A History of the Theories of Aether and Electricity, Volume One: The Classical Theories*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1910.

Wiebe, Robert. *The Search for Order*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1967.

Wilf, Stephen Robert. "Anatomy and Punishment in Late Eighteenth-Century New York." *Journal of Social History* 22, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 507-530.

Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays*. London: Verso, 1980.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Marxism and Literature*. London: Oxford University Press, 1977.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Problems of Materialism," *New Left Review* (May/June 1978): 3-17.

Yolton, John W. *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.