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American Unitarians and the George B. English Controversy

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You seem not to have heard of the book which engages all the attention here at present;—Mr. English's apology for leaving his profession. You will have heard of it, however, before you receive this,—for it will pass like wildfire through the country; and like that too it will flash, and crackle, and sparkle, and dazzle, and amaze for a moment, and then go out, or be put out.

—Henry Ware Sr.¹

In late September 1813, a Harvard graduate named George Bethune English published an attack on the historical evidences of Christianity titled *The Grounds of Christianity Examined, by Comparing the New Testament with the Old.*² English denied the relevance of miracles and argued that Jesus's claims to divine authority hinged solely on his fulfillment of Messianic prophecies. Only by twisting such prophecies beyond their obvious meanings, English argued, could Christians

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¹ Henry Ware Sr. to Henry Ware Jr., 20 October 1813, in *Memoir of the Life of Henry Ware, Jr.*, ed. John Ware, vol. 1 (Boston: James Munroe, 1846), 63.
conceivably claim that Jesus fulfilled them. In their own day, the apostles and Evangelists did just that—misapplying the prophecies to Jesus either out of ignorance or dishonesty. In either case, English concluded, the New Testament was not inspired, Jesus was not the prophesied Messiah, and the traditional historical evidences—miracles and prophecy—could not support the claims of Christianity.

The controversy English ignited has long since been forgotten, true to the senior Ware’s prediction, but during an important moment in American Unitarian history it held Boston’s collective attention and engaged some of the city’s most talented preachers and scholars. The reverends William Ellery Channing and Samuel Cary published the first hasty rebuttals, but these only fanned the flames. In English’s heated responses to both ministers, his confidence appeared unshaken. The General Repository and Review added its own critique and alluded eagerly to a forthcoming work that would finally “put out” the fire. In August 1814, the young Edward Everett’s five-hundred-page monument, *A Defence of Christianity*, decisively ended the debate.3

Although several broader works include brief synopses of the George B. English controversy, the full story has never been explored.4 Historians have, unfortunately, often dismissed the importance of the controversy, seeing it as merely a parochial rehashing of

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eighteenth-century contests. And, to some extent, it was. A century before English's publication, Deist and Christian scholars in Britain had debated the historical evidences of the Bible in scores of volumes. The Boston controversialists drew from this Enlightenment tradition extensively (and in English's case, unscrupulously). Thus, one historian has written that the lengthy efforts of Everett and others to refute English "finally seemed a bit ludicrous, since [English] had simply lifted large portions" from other Deist works. But neither English nor his opponents claimed that his central arguments were new, and yet, Everett and others saw purpose in writing lengthy rebuttals of English's work. The significance of the controversy lay not in new arguments but in a new context. In 1813, Boston Congregationalists were dividing over major tenets of the establishment's Calvinist (Reformed) orthodoxy. Liberal Christians had come to reject these tenets, particularly the Trinity and substitutionary Atonement, in favor of a Unitarian God and an essentially Arian Jesus. They had also made the earliest efforts

8. On this, David Robinson echoes Daniel Walker Howe's The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy 1805–1861 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970). Robinson has noted that "the name 'Unitarian' has long suggested that the dominant idea among the liberal Congregationalists was a rejection of Trinitarian doctrine, when in fact the stress on moral culture and the corresponding rejection of innate depravity were
to understand and appropriate higher biblical criticism from Germany, which they used to ground their theology in what they saw as defensible New Testament history. English's public opponents were all prominent liberal Christians and, given the growing rift in Congregationalism, they were eager to prove that a historically grounded Unitarian faith was more defensible than a Christianity burdened with the theological accretions of Calvinism. Boston's homegrown heretic gave liberals the opportunity to demonstrate that they could defeat infidelity and defend Christianity in ways the conservatives could not.

Participants on both sides of the George B. English controversy drew from the previous century's Deist debates, but they used the works produced during those debates to engage in the emerging Unitarian conflict. In doing so, they highlighted an important transition in American religious discourse—from general defenses of Christianity to debates about which forms of Christianity (liberal or conservative) were most defensible in the face of long-standing rationalist critiques. English and his opponents also participated in laying the groundwork for another later transition toward the transcendentalist thought of figures like Emerson and Theodore Parker. Unitarians' preoccupation with historical evidences, exemplified by Everett and his colleagues, fed transcendentalists' disillusionment with traditional Christianity and their subsequent radical insistence on immediate revelatory experience,
fostering a new transatlantic conversation; Unitarians, drawing from and debating English Deism and German higher criticism, so prominently displayed in the George B. English controversy, would help give rise to American transcendentalist engagement with English romanticism and German idealism—an important nineteenth-century reverberation of Enlightenment religious discourse in America.¹⁰

Although debates similar to the English controversy had engrossed those on both sides of the Atlantic in the previous century, a new context meant that English's book was “indeed a new thing,” as Cary put it.¹¹ English's attacks on Christianity were, as another reviewer wrote, “entitled to the bad distinction of being the first original works of this character, ever published in New England.”¹² Exploring the controversy within its New England context and in relation to broader movements in religious thought will illuminate how the supposedly superfluous responses to this forgotten figure were a timely demonstration of Unitarian strength.

George Bethune English graduated from Harvard in 1807. He was an exceptional student—much like his future foe, Edward Everett.¹³ He was


¹³. English and Everett were the top two Boylston Prize winners in 1812 for their respective dissertations. See “Intelligence: Harvard College,” *The General Repository and Review* 2 (October 1812): 392.
also noted for his eccentricities by nearly all who mentioned him. He studied law after graduating and gained admittance to the bar of Suffolk but never practiced. A fellow law student who lived with English during his school years later wrote a brief newspaper article about him, recalling that his religious opinions had been deeply unsettled. English had consequently studied the historical evidences of Christianity extensively and told his roommate, "If my understanding were once convinced, nothing would defer me from devoting my life to the cause. I would study divinity to-morrow." 

Eventually, English's understanding was convinced. Immediately after being admitted to the bar, English returned to Harvard to study divinity for three years. According to his description in the introduction to *Grounds of Christianity*, he became a believer in the religion of the New Testament for a time, after "a sufficient examination of its evidence for a divine origin." On completing his divinity studies, he received his license to preach from the Boston Association of Ministers; but his preaching was, by most accounts, not popular. At some point, in the basement of the Harvard library, English discovered what he believed were some lesser-known arguments against the Christian evidences. After a thorough examination, he felt "finally, very reluctantly," as he put it, "compelled to feel persuaded, by proofs he could neither refute nor evade," that the New Testament contradicted the Old Testament, the foundation on which it claimed to build, and, therefore, Christianity could not be true.

English's emphasis on his "understanding" being "convinced" and his mind being "compelled . . . by proofs" reflected the epistemological assumptions underlying the debate. E. Brooks Holifield had noted that, in relation to conversion and faith, it was "commonplace" for "[earlier] Protestant thought to distinguish intellectual assent from a heartfelt consent made possible by the spirit." But, as James Turner has written,

17. Ibid.
after over a century of defending the reasonableness of Christianity from Deist arguments, "belief" gravitated toward the connotation it had for Deists: intellectual assent to a definable proposition."¹⁹ The English debate presupposed this equation of faith with intellectual assent to logical propositions.²⁰ With a convinced mind and an Enlightenment insistence on intellectual honesty, English believed he was obligated not only to renounce Christianity and leave the ministry but also to publish his reasons for doing so.

However, the timing of English's discovery in the Harvard library fostered skepticism about his motives. Paul Revere Frothingham, in his brief 1925 account, suggested that English left the pulpit because he was not succeeding in the ministry and then, "partly perhaps in pique," published his "attack upon the Christian claims."²¹ In contrast, English claimed that his honest discovery came first and his departure from the ministry second. English actually went to several ministers, including Cary and Channing, before publishing *Grounds of Christianity*. While still uncertain and still a minister, English presented them with his concerns and a manuscript of his book, but he received no satisfactory answers or counsel. Instead, he heard false rumors circulating that he was an atheist. English claimed that only then did he publish his book. Neither Cary nor Channing ever refuted that claim. But regardless of whether his stated motives were sincere, substantial plagiarisms his opponents later uncovered in his book ensured that questions about his personal motives would always plague his public arguments.

English's central argument was that Jesus could only be the Christ—the Messiah—if he had fulfilled Messianic prophecies. The New Testament's authors themselves, English argued, always proved the truth of Christianity from Old Testament prophecies, not from miracles, and not from other evidences. Even Jesus himself, English noted, told his disciples after his resurrection, "All things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses, and in the Psalms, and

²⁰. Ibid.
in the Prophets concerning him."22 Fulfillment of Messianic prophecy, then, was the only valid evidence of Jesus's authority, miracles notwithstanding, "for miracles can never render a foundation valid, which is in itself invalid; [and] can never make a false inference true."23

After narrowing the evidential grounds of Christianity to prophecy, English traced the characteristics of the Messiah as prophesied in the Old Testament. First, Christ was to be a "mighty monarch" 24 who would conquer Israel's enemies and establish a universal reign of peace and happiness; Israel was to be established as the seat of Christ's government. Second, Christ was to be a descendant of David and was to rule from Jerusalem. Third, English emphasized, the restoration of Israel would be contemporaneous with Christ's mortal manifestation. In contrast, English argued, the historical Jesus's kingdom was "not of this world."25 The Jews, far from being gathered, were scattered and oppressed for eighteen centuries after Jesus's death. Jesus was not called by the name of David and he never reigned in Jerusalem. "Indeed," English wrote, "nothing seems to be more dissimilar than the character of the Messiah as given by the Hebrew prophets, and that of Jesus of Nazareth."26

With such obvious disparities between the two figures, English asked why New Testament writers tried to prove Jesus's authority by quoting inapplicable Old Testament passages. The standard defense was what English referred to as "the principle of accommodation."27 Christian scholars argued that the apostles and Evangelists justifiably "accommodated" Old Testament passages to New Testament events even though

23. Ibid., 7.
24. Ibid., 13.
25. Ibid., 21.
26. English, *Grounds of Christianity*, 22. The Andover archconservative Moses Stuart was unimpressed by English's interpretation of Messianic prophecies. In an 1813 letter to Edward Everett, Stuart wrote, "It is indeed the most absurd scheme of argument I have ever seen . . . 'It is the coincidence of the character of Jesus with the descriptions of the Old Testament which alone can support his claims.'—But who is to determine what these descriptions mean? Why Mr. E. to be sure—But have not thousands misinterpreted these passages?"; Moses Stuart to Edward Everett, 14 October 1813, in Edward Everett Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Reel 1; hereafter cited as Everett Papers.
such passages were likely not actually intended as prophecy.\textsuperscript{28} According to this argument, accommodated quotations were often simply illustrations applied to the present, meant to appeal to Jewish audiences. This practice was supposedly justifiable because it was “of established authority among the Jews” at the time.\textsuperscript{29} Throughout the debate, each of English’s opponents would touch on this argument—admitting that some New Testament quotations of Old Testament passages were questionable, and suggesting that such quotations were perhaps “merely arguments ad hominem, to convince the Jews of the truth of Christianity, who allowed such a method of arguing to be valid.”\textsuperscript{30}

To English, this was a fatal admission. If this was the interpretive method used in every case, then “the whole affair of Jesus being foretold as the Messiah is reduced to an accommodation of phrases!”\textsuperscript{31} But if Old Testament passages quoted in the New Testament were, in some cases, actually prophecies fulfilled yet, in other cases, merely phrases accommodated, then by “what rule,” English asked, could one judge which was which?\textsuperscript{32} The apostles themselves were no help in differentiating between the two because they introduced all Old Testament quotations in the same way. English concluded that if accommodation was an accepted Jewish practice adopted by the apostles, then any actual prophecies were indecipherable from accommodated phrases. And if the apostles did not adopt the accommodation principle from their contemporaries, then they simply misapplied prophecies out of ignorance or dishonesty. As Jesus’s claims rested solely on his supposed fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, “each horn of the Dilemma,” English wrote, “must prove as fatal as the other.”\textsuperscript{33}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 29.
  \item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 30; emphasis added.
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 32.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 33. English’s critique of the accommodation principle was thought-provoking to his contemporaries. Henry Ware Sr. wrote to his son, “I shall be anxious to hear how the book strikes you”; Henry Ware Sr. to Henry Ware Jr., 20 October 1813, in \textit{Life of Henry Ware, Jr.}, vol. 1, 64. The junior Ware’s response, still in the first month after English’s publication, was perplexity: “I don’t know what to think of the subject of the typical [as in types and shadows] application of the Old Testament. Ought we to say that the tabernacle was built in order to prefigure the church, or is it only referred to as an apt
As English advertised, he had discovered his central arguments in some "lesser-known" texts in the Harvard library basement. Yet, as Everett would later expose, English's articulation of these arguments often included an unattributed amalgam of the works of British Deists, principally Anthony Collins. English's more original work was not his largely plagiarized central argument but his rhetorical hedging of that argument. English used comparisons to Mahometanism (i.e., Islam) to try to keep the debate centered on Messianic prophecy. Each of his opponents would predictably attempt to maintain other evidences for Christianity—most prominently, miracles, moral truths, and missionary successes—but English asserted that the same evidences existed for Mahometanism. Such common evidences, English argued, could not prove any exclusively Christian truth claims. (Later developments in English's personal religious journey would make his rhetorical stance toward Islam intriguing.)

In the century of American religious history preceding the English debate, the most important historical evidences for Christianity alongside the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies were the New Testament miracles, but English denied their uniqueness. "Innumerable volumes" were written to record and revere the miracles of Mahomet (i.e., Muhammad) too: "Christian reader, thou seest how much can be said, and how many respectable witnesses and authorities can be adduced to prove that Mahomet wrought miracles. Canst thou adduce more, or better, authorities in behalf of the miracles of the New Testament?"

As English anticipated, his opponents would also point to supposedly distinctive moral truths in the New Testament as an evidence of Christianity. "That the New Testament inculcates an excellent morality,

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cannot be denied," English admitted. Otherwise, he asked, why would anyone have believed Jesus and the apostles? But Mahomet and the Koran also promoted excellent moral truths. And "surely that will not prove Islamism to be from God, nor that Mahomet was his prophet!" Finally, English argued that the "rapid propagation" of Christianity was not a unique evidence of Christ's divinity. "Islamism," English asserted, "made more progress in one hundred years, than Christianity did in a thousand... [although] Mahomet was a poor camel-driver." The then-standard Christian response was that Mahomet spread his message with the sword. But English argued that, in fact, more people voluntarily embraced Islam than Christianity. He reminded his readers of Constantine, Charlemagne, the Teutonic Knights, and the soldiers who had forcefully established Christianity in Europe. The spread of Mahometanism, he concluded, was no more violent and no less legitimate or rapid than that of Christianity.

Thomas Kidd has written that, by the middle decades of the eighteenth century, "citing the similarities between an opponent's views and the 'beliefs' of Islam as a means to discredit one's adversaries" had become "a staple of religious polemics" in America. Identifying one's opponents with Islam was effective because all parties involved in a given debate normally agreed on the degenerate nature of Islamic culture and religion. While English drew from this well-established Western tradition, he also departed from it in some innovative ways. True to form, he cited similarities between Christianity and Islam to discredit his opponents, yet English used shared virtues, rather than shared vices, to deflate Christian evidences. Islamic characteristics functioned not as a foil for English's position but as a contradiction of Christian claims to uniqueness. The negative image of Islam in the American cultural imagination made this a biting comparison and a considerable deconstruction of Christian evidential exclusivity. The irony is that English

36. Ibid., 75.
37. Ibid., 75–76.
38. Ibid., 121.
39. Ibid.
tapped into those assumptions without actually sharing them. English did not consider Islam self-evidently false or evil; he recognized that his opponents did and took full advantage.  

Although English's book had provided Boston liberals with a timely opportunity, English's rhetorical strategy did not make it easy for them to assert Unitarianism as the definitive and defensible Christianity. It forced them to maintain multiple boundaries—not only between liberal and orthodox positions but around Christianity generally. English's opponents would have to simultaneously defend Christianity from Deism, differentiate Christianity from Mahometanism, and define Christianity as Unitarianism. English understood what he had required of his opponents and concluded his book with confidence: "If any person should feel inclined to attempt to refute this book, let him do it like a man; without evading the question, or equivocating, or caviling about little things. Let him consider the principal question."  

English's opponents took up that challenge during a lacuna in liberal leadership created by the death of Joseph Stevens Buckminster Jr. in 1812. Nine years before English's publication, in 1804, Buckminster entered the New England ministry and rose quickly. "Every other Boston divine" soon "moved in his shadow." During his eight years at the Brattle Street pulpit, Buckminster introduced German higher criticism to America, with the expectation that it would support liberals in New England's theological battles. As Robinson has explained, "[i]nsofar as the higher criticism called certain parts of the canon into question, Buckminster thought that it undermined the foundations of Trinitarian


42. English, Grounds of Christianity, 175.

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doctrine and helped to establish more securely the form of purified Christianity [i.e., Unitarianism] that he believed he and his colleagues preached. Because Buckminster was not only a renowned minister and scholar but New England's most promising opponent of orthodoxy, his sudden death the year before the English controversy left behind the mantle of leadership and an "unprecedented lament."

William Ellery Channing would assume that mantle during the 1815 controversy, but in 1813, Buckminster's successor was yet to be determined. When English published his book, Channing was popular at his Federal Street pulpit but still relatively unknown outside of Boston and relatively averse to participating in religious controversy, let alone leading what would be perceived as a dissenting faction. Samuel Cary, though virtually unknown now, was recognized then as the heir apparent of Stone Chapel's James Freeman, the first self-declared Unitarian minister in America. But Freeman's Unitarianism was that of the British radicals, not the New England liberals, so Cary's association with Freeman had excluded him from the possibility of liberal leadership. In contrast, nothing hindered Edward Everett from filling Buckminster's role, and many rightly looked to him for the definitive answer to English's work; he would inherit Buckminster's Brattle Street pulpit four months into the controversy and in the process of refuting English he would surpass


45. Robinson, Unitarians and Universalists, 30.


47. In 1815, a Unitarian periodical in England dedicated several pages of praise to Cary both before and after his unexpected death. The magazine considered Freeman "the father of Unitarianism in the Eastern States" and described Freeman and Cary together as being "as avowed Unitarians, as the late Mr. Lindsey"; "Foreign Intelligence: Unitarians in America," The Monthly Repository of Theology and General Literature 10 (1815): 657. At the time of the controversy, Cary had recently expressed his strong anti-Trinitarian views in print. See his 1808 letter discussed and reprinted as "Mr. Cary's Letter on the Trinity," Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany 44, no. 1 (January 1848): 34–47.
Buckminster's biblical scholarship. But those outcomes were still uncertain when English deposited his manuscript at the district clerk's office for publication on September 24, 1813, and the "wildfire" that Ware predicted began.

**Channing's Sermons and Cary's Review**

Channing countered English within weeks in his *Two Sermons on Infidelity* (1813). It was actually only one sermon, delivered on October 24, 1813, at Channing's Federal Street Church and published soon after with an extended introduction. Channing was unique in his avoidance of personal attacks—refraining from even using English's name. He focused his sermon on the interpretation of Messianic prophecies. Such prophecies, he noted, were communicated in "the language of the boldest metaphors," which could easily be misinterpreted. Was it any wonder, Channing asked, "that Jews beheld in these predictions their own nation raised to universal empire, and enjoying ease and plenty under their victorious leader?" In contrast, interpretations of the Messiah as a "teacher, a light to the Gentiles ... who should introduce universal peace ... by instruction ... [were] more generous and

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49. William Ellery Channing, *Two Sermons on Infidelity* (Boston: Cummings and Hilliard, 1813).

50. Six years later, Channing would be heavily involved in another theological debate with arch-conservative Trinitarian Moses Stuart. At that time, Channing wrote that "the controversy should have as little to do with individuals as possible. It is one of the chief wiles of party to mix up extraneous considerations with subjects of debate, to turn the publick mind from the true point of discussion"; William Ellery Channing to Andrews Norton, 2 May 1819, quoted in Brown, *Biblical Criticism*, 69. Channing's distaste for debate was consistent over these years of involvement in New England religious controversies. His response in 1813 was a striking contrast to the otherwise deeply personal polemics that other opponents directed at English.


52. Ibid., emphasis in the original.
sublime, more worthy of God, and more desirable to mankind, than
that to which the Jews adhered."

Channing admitted, however, that applications of Old Testament
passages in the New Testament were often questionable. "We are
told," wrote Channing, "that [the apostles] have quoted and applied
incorrectly passages from the Old Testament." This objection "is . . .
perhaps the most plausible with which Christianity has been assailed."
Channing mentioned the accommodation principle as a possible expla­
nation, but was more inclined to simply acknowledge the humanity of
the apostles and rely on non-prophetic evidences. "Suppose . . . that
the apostles have erred in some quotations," Channing wrote. "The
apostles, indeed, will in this case appear to have been men, whose
memories and reasoning powers sometimes failed them; but does this
destroy their credibility?" The apostles, Channing argued, were still
reliable witnesses to the miracles and resurrection of Jesus. Even with­
out prophecy, these and the other non-prophetic evidences could bear
the burden of proof.

Yet English had already countered non-prophetic evidences.
For example, Channing wrote that the truth of Christianity was evi­
denced by "the wonderful rapidity" with which it spread. "I know
the answer which is made to this," he admitted, "Mahometanism, we
are told, triumphed as rapidly as Christianity." But Channing argued
that Mahometans brandished a sword in one hand and a Koran in
the other while Christianity flourished peacefully, English's contrary
evidence notwithstanding. Channing maintained that "[a]ll history
presents nothing parallel with the diffusion of Christianity." Channing
acknowledged and rejected English's Mahometan parallels without
actually countering English's arguments. The miracles, morals, and
providential propagation of Christianity were, to Channing, unique
evidences that Jesus was the Messiah.

53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 21.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., 24.
57. Ibid., 26.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., 27.
Channing concluded with a theme that all of English’s opponents would repeat. The ravings of infidels were unoriginal but ultimately beneficial for Christianity because they revealed its strength. Channing reasoned that, “had [Christianity’s] truth never been questioned before, we might fear for the result of inquiry. . . . But this uncertainty is removed. Christianity has passed the trial. . . . We may now dismiss our fears for our religion.” 60 What Christianity meant to William Ellery Channing in 1813 and what type of Christianity was strengthened by the attacks of infidels would become clearer as English’s liberal opponents continued their efforts to refute him.

Less than four weeks later, the young but noted liberal minister, Samuel Cary, began where Channing left off: “The Christian religion . . . rests upon a rock of adamant and cannot be subverted by man. For this . . . it is principally indebted to infidelity—to the severe scrutiny which it has been compelled to receive, and to an open and thorough discussion of its pretensions.” 61 Deist attacks on historical evidences were thus a welcome refiner’s fire to Cary. Opponents such as English consumed systematic theology that could not withstand the heat of Biblical criticism, leaving only the solid core of rational, primitive, Unitarian Christianity. Like English’s other opponents, Cary saw English’s Grounds of Christianity as a benefit to Christianity because, to him, Christianity was Unitarianism.

Cary spent his next forty pages attacking English personally for his questionable methods and motives—a fact Cary’s eulogizer, Henry Colman, would regret publicly at Cary’s death while recounting the English controversy. 62 When Cary came to English’s arguments, he critiqued English’s dismissal of miracles as interpretively presumptuous. English had argued that miracles were invalid evidences because they could only prove a contradiction—that a man who did not fit the prophetic pattern was nevertheless the Messiah. Cary responded that miracles did

60. Ibid., 32.
62. Of Cary’s Review of a Book, Colman wrote, “we must always regret, that anything personal should be mingled in our discussions of a subject of such immense importance and dignity as the truth of our religion”; “Character of the Rev. Samuel Cary,” Christian Disciple, August 4, 1816, 241.
not prove directly that Jesus was the Messiah. Rather, miracles proved that Jesus was a teacher from God. Therefore, Cary asserted, Jesus had divine authority to interpret the Messianic prophecies as being fulfilled in him. Because Jesus was a teacher from God, his interpretations of scripture were infinitely more reliable than English's. Did English and his sources, Cary asked, have "the vanity to believe that . . . the prophecies themselves are in their hands, and that they are as competent judges of their relevancy to Christ as he himself could be?" Given the transmission history of Jesus's words, it was a difficult argument to make, but Cary believed the argument solved the interpretive problem surrounding Jesus's fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.

Most notable to the controversy's significance in 1813 Boston, Cary argued that orthodox Christianity was, in contrast to Unitarian Christianity, deeply vulnerable to English's attacks. One of English's central recurring arguments was that Jesus encouraged idolatry by commanding that he himself be worshiped. By doing so, "he taught the worship of other Beings besides Jehovah" and contradicted numerous Messianic prophecies. Cary was quick to respond that English's attack assumed the orthodox reading of scripture. What English had claimed was an idolatrous "doctrine of Christianity," Cary argued was actually creedal theology that Trinitarians had erroneously read into the original text. For them, this was a vulnerability, but not for Cary: "How they [i.e., Trinitarians] who believe that Jesus . . . can be entitled to the same kind of adoration with the Deity himself will vindicate themselves from this charge of Mr. E. is an affair with which I have no sort of concern." For Unitarians, English's argument posed no such problem. Cary argued that "Jesus taught in the most explicit manner . . . the unity and unrivalled excellence of God." When Jesus said, "I and my Father are one," he meant "nothing more than that the will of his Father and his will, that

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64. English, Grounds of Christianity, 131. Bostonians took particular notice of this argument. As Everett commented, it was "in the mouth of everyone who knew Mr. English"; A Defence, 417.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid., 88.
they were one in design, intention, object." In contrast to a Trinitarian Jesus who claimed his own divinity, Cary concluded, the Unitarian Jesus taught the worship of the one true God, in fulfillment of Messianic prophecies.

Besides demonstrating the defensibility of Unitarian Christianity, Cary used the opportunity to assert that Unitarianism was Christianity: "The errors of Calvinists are not to be confounded with Christianity." Such presuppositions of Unitarianism as Christianity illuminate the recurring theme of infidelity's benefits to Christianity. In short, to Cary and his colleagues, the Christianity benefitting from English was the only Christianity that could withstand Deist attacks—Unitarianism. Understandably, then, those who made the effort to publicly respond to English were all liberals; more than one religious battle occupied Bostonians at the time, and liberal Christianity had the most to gain by engaging with English's attack on the historical evidences of the Bible.

**English's Letters to Channing and Cary**

Before the end of 1813, English responded to Channing and Cary in print. His confidence was unshaken and his rhetorical strategies were unrevised. Channing's sermon had argued that the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament, spiritually understood, would be a divine teacher, a light to the Gentiles—which described the Jesus actually recorded in the New Testament. According to Channing, "[t]he extension of the knowledge of the true God among the heathen nations" that Jesus accomplished had fulfilled prophecy and distinguished him from every other human teacher of religion. At the same time, Channing had tried to shift the burden of proof from the apostles' questionable interpretations of prophecy to what he considered to be their unquestionable witnesses of Jesus's miracles. He argued that their humanness influenced their hermeneutics without invalidating their testimonies.

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68. Ibid., 89.
69. Ibid., 131.
Turning once again to Mahometanism, English asked how Jesus's teaching could prove any kind of unique authority. He scoffed at Channing's belief that Jesus's "teaching and enlightening of the Gentiles" was "sufficient to prove him the Messiah"; such a characteristic would "prove Mahomet the Messiah sooner than Jesus; since Mahomet in person converted more Gentiles to the worship of one God during his life time, than Christianity did in one hundred years." And although apostles could have misread the Old Testament without mistaking Jesus's miracles, English stated that the textual history of the Gospels excluded the possibility of eyewitness testimonies. Matthew and John were the only apostles supposed to have seen Jesus's miracles, and, as English outlined at length, scholars were unsure if Matthew and John themselves wrote their eponymous Gospels.

English responded well to the impersonal nature of Channing's sermon. He argued with Channing "respectfully"—a titular adverb conspicuously missing from the Cary letter. But he was dismissive of Channing's logic. He attributed Channing's influence instead to his eloquent appeals to sentiment. English believed that one of the crudest such appeals in Channing's Two Sermons was the idea that if Christians gave up Christianity, they would have no religion left. On the contrary, English argued, devout Gentiles could easily give up the New Testament, worship the one true God, and keep the moral law contained in the Old Testament—mere "Theism garnished," as he described it. He closed by affirming, in the face of false rumors, his belief in God and his support of public worship, sans Christianity.

In contrast to the Channing letter, English's response to Cary's bitter criticism was perhaps the most heated moment in the controversy. Why, English asked, had Cary suppressed English's investigation with such vitriol if it were beneficial to Christianity? The question was rhetorical; already understanding how his infidelity was beneficial to

71. George Bethune English, A Letter Respectfully Addressed to the Reverend Mr. Channing, Relative to His Two Sermons on Infidelity (Boston: privately printed, 1813), 11.
72. Ibid., 26.
liberals in Boston, English considered Cary's assertions of Unitarian theology evasions of Christianity’s vulnerabilities. Cary had argued that English made Christianity accountable for Trinitarian doctrines, but English critiqued that argument as an identification of Christianity with Unitarianism. "Now sir, when a man argues about the Christian System, as I do," English wrote, "[one] suppose[s] that he means the System established and agreed on by Christians in general”; did not that system in Christian churches inevitably "begin with the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation?" Of course they did, English answered, "and my opinions, nor your opinions cannot invalidate this fact.” English recognized that a Trinitarian Jesus was less compatible with Messianic prophecy than a Unitarian Jesus and therefore worked to refute Cary's assertion of the latter.

In another instance, Cary had mishandled the careful boundary maintenance of Unitarianism and Trinitarianism while defending Christianity from English's Deism. English had argued in *Grounds* that the crucial, contested prophecy in Isaiah 53 described the suffering people of Israel, not a suffering Messiah. The "righteous servant" in Isaiah was to be wounded for our iniquities and bear our sins as an "intercession for the transgressors.” So Cary had mocked English's interpretation by asking whose sins and iniquities the Jews had borne. But Cary's rhetorical implied acceptance of the traditional Christian interpretation of Isaiah 53, which presupposed a substitutionary Atonement. “Did the Unitarian, Antisatisfactionist, Mr. Cary, mean to intimate, by his manner of arguing upon these passages, a hint in favour of such a shocking Doctrine?” English asked. “God forbid!” Well aware of his opponent's layered loyalties, English was quick to mock any transgressions of the Unitarian–Trinitarian boundary.

While such oversights highlight the complex negotiation of religious boundaries involved in the controversy, Cary's *Review* had other issues as well. Hastily composing the work in just four weeks, Cary had failed to trace some quotations to their primary sources, resulting

75. Ibid., 33–34.
in several citation errors. English took full advantage of these errors, although they were not as serious as his own. Cary’s petty, personal tone had weakened his tract, too, and ultimately English emerged from the first round of counterattacks embittered and emboldened.

**The General Repository and Review**

Soon after Cary’s response, the General Repository and Review assessed the current state of the controversy and added its own indictment of English. The Repository had been founded in January 1812 as a voice for New England Unitarianism, and in 1813 its editors were eager to point out the controversy’s potential benefits. 78 They wrote that liberal Christians were indebted to men like English “for the clearing away of all which human folly . . . has connected with Christianity.” 79 “The efforts of the enemies of Christianity;” they continued, have aided “the destruction of what its most sincere and intelligent friends are laboring to remove.” 80 Henry Ware Sr. had predicted that English’s book would “pass like wildfire” through New England; the Repository articulated the benefits of that blaze: “The foundation, which no man has laid, cannot be removed by man; but the wood, and the hay, and the stubble, which have been built upon it, have very often blazed in the contest with the assailants. We expect some advantages of this kind from the publications of Mr. English.” 81 As Calvinistic superstructures burned to the ground, they

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78. The General Repository and Review was the creation of Andrews Norton, who would go on to become one of the most strident defenders of New England Unitarianism, earning himself the title of “Unitarian Pope.” In its first year, under Norton as editor, the Repository was confrontational in its critique of orthodox Christianity and its promotion of liberal Christianity. By 1813, Norton’s approach had lost some favor, and in April, he accepted the Dexter Lectureship at Harvard, resigning as editor of the Repository. But in the issue covering the George English controversy, the Repository’s editors reiterated their liberal loyalties: “The members of the society . . . all claim to be liberal Christians”; they “feel no other interest in the work than as liberal Christians”; “The Editors to the Public,” General Repository and Review (October 1813), 403, 405. For the history and significance of the Repository, see Lillian Handlin, “Babylon est delenda—the Young Andrews Norton,” in American Unitarianism: 1805–1865, ed. Conrad Erick Wright (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society and Northeastern University Press, 1989), 53–86.

79. “Article 9,” 301.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid.
argued, a Unitarian foundation would be revealed. Mr. English was the most recent in a long line of infidels, the editors asserted. And the broader tensions in New England Congregationalism made his attacks a particularly timely invitation to demonstrate liberal strength.

The *Repository* article included personal and scholarly critiques. The editors traced English's life history to illustrate his intellectual vacillations. How seriously could one take the man's religious opinions, they asked, considering how temporary they might be? In their scholarly critique, the editors analyzed some of English's methodological errors, which foreshadowed Everett's approach. The *Repository* concluded with an eloquent and emotional evocation of Christian miracles, moral truths, and remarkable growth. The editors did not fail to acknowledge English's Mahometan critiques of these evidences. Nor did they fail to see the sympathy for Mahometanism that lay behind English's rhetoric and the potential implications of his restless religiosity. Their comment on the subject would prove prophetic: "With his sort of mind, if he were to happen to get engaged in the history of Mahomet, we should be not at all surprised, if he were to suffer a new change, as extraordinary as any that have preceded."

**Edward Everett's *Defence of Christianity***

On February 9, 1814, Edward Everett was ordained at the Brattle Street church. He had been working on his *Defence of Christianity* for about four months, and his parishioners knew about his work. The *Religious Remembrancer*'s article on his ordination ceremony expressed supreme confidence in Everett and perhaps a continuing awareness of the still unresolved controversy: "While our churches are instructed and defended by such enlightened and pious Teachers . . . the friends of Christianity need not be alarmed by . . . the cavils of infidelity."83

Earlier, on October 14, 1813, English's book had reached Moses Stuart in Andover, Massachusetts. In a letter to Everett, Stuart dismissed

82. Ibid., 307–8.
Grounds of Christianity and advised Everett on the response he had already begun writing:

Will you permit me to suggest one thing? Do not undertake to answer all that Mr. E. has said, for it will make your volume too large. Seize the fundamental points—expose their weakness, & (though tenderly) their wickedness—give specimens of his misstatements, perversions, etc.—& leave it. The answer, to be read, should be brief—and a brief one will be all that is necessary.

Whatever Everett's initial intentions, his five-hundred-page book was not brief, and by the time he wrote the book, it had become clear that a brief response was not all that would be necessary. Stuart's overly optimistic prediction corresponds with Frothingham's 1925 assessment of Everett's Defence. While it was well done, wrote Frothingham, "whether the book was necessary or not, is another question. Probably it was not. But Stuart made his prediction before Channing and Cary failed to silence English, and Frothingham's judgment was based solely on Everett's self-effacing preface. Until Everett published his book, Bostonians felt that English was yet to be refuted; those who were not outright critical of Cary's response were, at the least, unsatisfied with it. The Repository linked its lingering dissatisfaction with Cary to its anticipation of Everett's book. "There are some oversights" in Cary's work, the editors opined, but "we expect a more complete answer to English's book than has yet appeared, from a gentleman, whom we are gratified to speak of as one of our number." As another Bostonian remembered the story, Grounds of Christianity "unsettled the faith of many, and, if left unanswered, seemed destined to do this for many more," even after "several older men... attempted without success" to answer English. Later historians have questioned the need for Everett's lengthy work, but Everett's liberal contemporaries believed his book was necessary

84. Stuart to Everett, 14 October 1813, Everett Papers, Reel 1.
85. Frothingham, Everett, 30.
86. "Article 9," 313.
and anticipated it being a triumphant answer to English. Their lofty expectations were not disappointed.

Everett has been most remembered for exhaustively exposing English's unattributed source materials. As George Ticknor told the story, the previous responses to English "from the pulpit and the press" were unsatisfactory because "their authors had not frequented the strange by-paths of learning in which Mr. English had ... been wandering."^{88} But Everett "followed him everywhere with a careful scholarship ... unknown to his presumptuous adversary."^{89} Everett began with a table listing the pages English had plagiarized (in total, seventy-four pages out of two hundred) and the sources from which he had taken them. He filled every chapter thereafter with meticulously traced examples of English's sloppy or dishonest scholarship. In the memory of his contemporaries, Everett "so destroyed [English's] credit as a scholar and as an honest controversialist, that he sent the pamphlet down to oblivion."^{90}

But Everett also engaged English's own (i.e., non-plagiarized) arguments. He presented rival interpretations of the Messianic prophecies that English had examined, arguing that the major ones, like Isaiah 53, were indeed fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. He displayed a mastery of European scholarship, particularly German higher criticism, far beyond English's.^{91} His logic was as meticulous as his research and, in many places, revealed contradictions and inconsistencies in English's reasoning that Channing and Cary had missed. He also tersely dismissed English's equation of Christian and Muslim evidences. Like Christianity, Mahometanism had its "alleged miracles," Everett acknowledged, but "it is as easy to discern between true and false miracles, as between true and false prophecy."^{92}

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89. Ibid., 136–37.
91. Everett had access to Eichhorn and other German works through Moses Stuart. Stuart obtained the German works in 1812 at the auction of Buckminster's famous library by narrowly outbidding the young Everett. See Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 22–23.
Everett’s lasting legacy in his own mind was his revision of the standard accommodation theory. As all of English’s opponents had done, Everett acknowledged that many Old Testament passages quoted as prophecies in the New Testament were not actually intended as prophecies. But Everett argued that the apostles accommodated these passages out of their original context because they, as Jews, quoted the Old Testament in the same way rabbis did in the Mishna, not simply because their audiences were Jewish. In 1855, Everett noted this insight in his personal account of the controversy. Of his own book, he wrote, “there are many parts of it which would not stand the test of modern criticism. There are some parts of it however which if I may be permitted to say so threw new light upon . . . the quotations of the Old Testament by the New Testament writers.” Jerry Wayne Brown has likewise described Everett’s explanation of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament as an original contribution: “Everett’s innovation turned the light of historical criticism on the Gospels, a giant stride forward in biblical studies and a significant American development.” Later, commentators would legitimately criticize Defence’s short shelf life, but Everett’s contemporaries found this particular insight relevant beyond the controversy itself. In 1832, for example, a Boston periodical called the Scriptural Interpreter, exploring how the Old Testament was quoted in the New Testament, praised and reprinted Everett’s entire treatment of the subject from his book.

To his liberal contemporaries, there was another reason why Everett’s book was not superfluous. The Christianity whose strength Everett demonstrated was thoroughly Unitarian; Defence was Boston Unitarianism’s own contribution to the long evidentialist dialogue that had strengthened liberal Christianity. The review of Defence in the Christian Disciple, which Everett still remembered and quoted with pleasure in 1855, stated that the evidences of Christianity had received a “full examination . . . during the last century,” having “been assailed and

94. Autobiography, Everett Papers, Reel 41a.
defended by men on both sides. Christianity had been found "vulnerable only in some points, which made no part of it as it came from the hands of its Author." But a century of scrutiny spurred by evidential debates had brought "the real... doctrines of the Gospel... back nearly to their primitive simplicity... as they are understood by men of liberal and enlightened minds. The Disciple linked Everett’s Defence to this tradition and lauded its unique contribution to the liberal cause in Boston.

Most responses to Everett’s book were as positive as the Disciple’s, and for Bostonians, the controversy was over. After reading Defence, Boston judge F. A. Van de Kemp wrote to Everett with a representative assessment in appropriately Biblical language: “You have discovered the nakedness of Mr. English... exploded his objections—shown the futility of his mean and scurrilous calumnies—and with all this treated him with a gentleman like regard.” Everett’s work was, as he would put it in his autobiography, “overwhelming.” Later commentators would often remark that Defence disappeared as quickly as Grounds of Christianity because the debate was so decisively settled. Everett himself also disappeared quickly. His masterful engagement with German higher criticism in Grounds of Christianity foreshadowed his departure to Germany just months later. While abroad, Everett received two years of Harvard-funded education that included training from the great Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, founder of modern Old Testament criticism.

The year after the publication of Everett’s book, Jedidiah Morse sparked the first of several pamphlet wars by conflating New England liberals with their more radical English Unitarian counterparts, forcing a public self-definition and initiating the culminating stages of the American Unitarian controversy. As that controversy engrossed Boston Congregationalists, the George B. English controversy was largely, but not completely, forgotten. In some ways, the evolving public tensions

98. Ibid.
99. F. A. Van de Kemp to Edward Everett, 3 April 1815, Everett Papers, Reel 1.
100. Autobiography, Everett Papers, Reel 41a.
between Unitarians and Trinitarians would actually perpetuate and revise the English controversy’s significance.

**Conclusion**

Although scholars have described Channing as “bound” to assume Buckminster’s mantle of liberal leadership, that mantle seemed at least equally accessible to Everett after his preeminent role in the English controversy.  

Ironically, Everett’s role in the controversy contributed to his disillusionment with the liberal cause during his study of higher criticism in Germany. In January 1816, Everett looked back “with disapprobation” on many parts of his book, loathing “to think how near [he] had come to giving credit to that poorest of all systematizing, systematic Theology” and longing to “separate the public worship of God and the public teaching of duty, from all connection with arbitrary facts, supposed to have happened in distant nations and ages.” Devoting himself to classicism instead, Everett decided to leave “the world to fight out the cause of Religion, as piously as they have fought it out hitherto.”  

Although he was at the forefront of American biblical criticism and nascent New England Unitarianism in 1814, Everett is known today for his oratory and political career. Cary became ill, traveled to England to try to recover, and died in October 1815. Channing alone stayed involved in the liberal cause and became the defining voice of American Unitarianism.

English’s religious path continued to be eccentric. He had shown some healthy self-awareness when he proclaimed his intellectual impartiality to Cary: “I have given too many proofs already that I am not one apt to be influenced by the pride of consistency to stand to opinions because they were mine.” In the years following the controversy, English traveled to Turkey and Egypt, where, according to reports in the *London Jewish Expositor*, he converted to Islam. Under

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102. Everett to Alexander Everett, 5 January 1816, Everett Papers, Reel 1.
103. Ibid.
the name Mohamed Effendi, he published an exposition of the Koran before returning to the United States in 1822.\(^{105}\) Two years later, English published *Five Pebbles from the Brook*, a response to Everett's *Defence*, but it went unnoticed (according to Everett, English wrote it while living in Robert Owen's New Harmony, Indiana, community and printed it at the community's expense).\(^{106}\) English died in 1827, having journeyed through skepticism, Unitarianism, Judaism, Deism, Islam, and possibly Utopian Socialism—a path surely traveled by few nineteenth-century Americans.

The works English and his opponents produced during the debate did not disappear from the American religious scene.\(^{107}\) An episode in 1821 illustrated their continuing significance in the context of Trinitarian-Unitarian tensions. That year, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church publicly accused Jared Sparks and his Baltimore, Maryland Unitarian congregation (significant for being the first outside of New England) of propagating a modified form of infidelity under the guise of Christianity. With their Christian credentials at stake, Sparks held up Unitarianism's history of defending the historical evidences of the Bible, particularly in the George B. English controversy. "We are charged with infidelity. But . . . with what justice?" Sparks asked.\(^{108}\) "Let us," he continued, "pursue this subject in relation to facts. Does it appear that Unitarians have rejected, or even slighted the evidences of Christianity? . . . Have we done nothing for the truth of the Christian religion?"\(^{109}\)

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106. Autobiography, Everett Papers, Reel 41a.


109. Ibid., 310–11.
Noting that, "[i]n the present case, it is our duty to vindicate ourselves at home," Sparks turned to the Boston controversialists and recounted the "singular and labored attack... made on the Christian religion... by Mr. English [in 1813]." He reminded his readers of the powerful defenses that Channing, Cary, and especially Everett had produced. With these as some of his primary examples, Sparks argued that Unitarians had done more to defend the cause of Christianity and to earn the Christian name than any other denomination.

In comparison, he asserted, Unitarians' accusers had contributed little to the defense of Christianity. As Sparks pointed out, "[t]he Trinitarian clergy often complain of the alarming progress of infidelity. But what have they done to oppose it?" Beyond negligence, Trinitarians had, in one case, even claimed Unitarian efforts as their own. The Evangelical Magazine had recently reported that English's book was still being read with "mischievous effect" in parts of Virginia. To oppose it, the magazine had reprinted an excerpt of Everett's Defence without actually crediting the Unitarian author. The magazine, Sparks wrote, was suspiciously "sparing of names" that might attribute merit or draw attention to "the works of unitarians." The Evangelicals' dubious move was an implicit acknowledgment that the English controversy demonstrated Unitarian strength.

This episode signaled the completion of an important rhetorical realignment. With the American Unitarian controversy then in full bloom, the significance of the English debate as a blow to Deism was fully subsumed by its meaning for Unitarians and Trinitarians. It was no longer important that Christianity had been defended; what mattered was who had more ably defended it and which Christianity had been more defensible. In 1813–14, amid multiple cross-currents of religious controversy, Boston liberals demonstrated that their historically grounded Unitarianism could put out the wildfire that George Bethune English had ignited.

110. Ibid., 311.
111. Ibid., 312.
112. Ibid., 311.
113. Ibid.