

“Three Sermons That Shaped Our Faith: Channing’s Baltimore Sermon”
Oct. 26, 2008 Rev. Martha Hodges

If you have attended other Unitarian Universalist churches, you may have seen meeting rooms labeled the Channing Room. There are churches in our denomination that carry his name. A lot of modern UUs know that William Ellery Channing was a Boston preacher of the early nineteenth century. They no doubt have a vague sense that we ought to know more about him. But not many of us, I would guess, do know much about this man who put his stamp on so much of what we consider “Unitarian.” Nor do all of us know much about the society in which he lived and the extraordinary influence that he enjoyed. (And “enjoy” it, he did, admitting as much to his journal -- one of the more endearing examples of the moral honesty of this famously modest man.)

We Unitarian Universalists are used to occupying the fringes of American religion. In fact, we often reveal a perverse kind of pride in our smallness and obscurity as a denomination. Well, it was not always so! At the time of Channing’s ascendancy as the spokesman of American Unitarianism, this title really meant something. Unitarians occupied most of the positions of power, wealth and intellectual influence in the Boston of Channing’s day. And to be a mover and shaker in antebellum Boston was to be known by intellectuals, politicians and writers throughout the US and even Europe. New York, Philadelphia and Washington DC were rustic outposts compared to Boston, the home of the Unitarian-dominated Harvard and the great trading and shipping center of the East. And in this intellectual, artistic and commercial center of the new world, Unitarians ruled. In short, if you wanted to be a Somebody, you’d better be a Unitarian. Just imagine! Alas, how have the mighty fallen!

Among these Unitarians, William Ellery Channing was the accepted father figure, called by his admirers “the angelic doctor” and Unitarianism’s “bishop.”

It has been observed that his was not an original or innovative intellect like his contemporary and friend Emerson; nor was he the boldest of social reformers, like another of his friends, the Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker. (I’ll be talking in the future about sermons by Emerson and Parker; these three sermons that changed the face of Unitarianism.) Channing was considered amiable but rather cold by some. What distinguished him from his contemporaries was his lucidity of expression and his intellectual integrity, and his unusual tolerance of diverse viewpoints -- and of those who held them.

Most of all perhaps, Channing was in the right place at the right time. The right place was the Federal Street Church of Boston and the right time was the takeover of Harvard by the Unitarians and the displacement of the Calvinist Congregationalists from which they evolved. The occasion was the appointment of a Unitarian, Henry Ware Jr., to Harvard’s coveted Hollis Chair of Theology, signaling an end to the domination of the university by the orthodox Calvinists.

Calvinists, you will remember, preached the doctrine of Original Sin – that all people were inherently depraved – and that some lucky ones were selected by God for salvation while others were doomed to eternal damnation. This was the doctrine of predestination – that we were saved or condemned to hell, not because of anything good or evil we did during our lifetimes, but thanks to the unmerited grace of God, which Jesus had bought for humanity, atoning for us with his suffering and death on the cross. It is hard to imagine that this harsh and gloomy view of human destiny was ever the predominant belief of our forefathers and mothers, but it was.

Out of this orthodox version of Christianity arose a more optimistic and humane view of human nature and a more approachable but perhaps less easily understood conception of God. The holders of this new, more benign view, known as Liberal Christians, included Channing. The controversy brought about by the naming of the Hollis Lecturer prompted him to make a statement in defense of this new understanding of what he called Unitarian Christianity. He chose to do this as the invited speaker at the ordination in Baltimore of a young colleague named Jared Sparks. The sermon he preached on that occasion was a deliberate challenge to orthodoxy and became the “party platform” of the new Unitarianism. The year was 1819 – a date that all UU ministers are expected to have at the ready, by the way.

So what was so extraordinary about this sermon? It went on for an hour and a half, but that wasn’t unusual in that day when preachers regularly delivered two or even three sermons of that length every Sunday. (No wonder so many of them, including Channing, suffered from what was termed “delicate health” and were forced to take occasional rest cures in temperate climes and, even so, died young!)

What made this sermon -- Channing’s “Baltimore Sermon” -- the subject of a pamphlet war unmatched in volume since the days of Tom Paine? A debate that went on for half a decade? (People took their religion very seriously in those days. It’s hard for us to imagine that sermons were debated in newspapers and reproduced in private printings and published collections that repeatedly sold out. (These were the days before Monday Night Football and “Dancing with the Stars,” after all.)

What made this particular sermon so controversial and gives it historical and theological significance to us as modern Unitarians was Channing’s insistence that the Bible must be subjected to the same tests of reason as any other book. It must be understood as the product of a specific time and place and culture, although the revelation contained in its pages infallibly supported the conclusions reached by the rational observer of human experience. In other words, the Bible was “true,” but not sacrosanct.

We tend to forget that Unitarianism began as a biblical faith. The first part of this sermon of Channing’s is devoted to a discussion of how the Bible, in particular, the New Testament, is to be interpreted as a whole, viewed in its cultural context. In other words, a verse here or there, taken out of context, tells us virtually nothing and is likely to be contradicted somewhere else in the gospels. (This lesson has apparently not yet been absorbed by those many who throw biblical verses at us to “prove” one point or another.)

The “Baltimore Sermon” was yet more remarkable because of its second part, in which Channing enumerates what distinguishes the Unitarian understanding of Christianity from the Orthodox and argues that the latter interpretation of the Bible is baseless and unsupported by the text.

Channing refuted the idea that a perfectly moral god would condemn any of his creatures to eternal damnation. He rejected the doctrine of the Trinity as non-scriptural and offensive to reason, concluding that Jesus was not a god or part of the godhead. And he pronounced that humankind was not inherently depraved, but endowed with a moral likeness to God and the potential for perfectibility, as exemplified by Jesus. The “Baltimore Sermon” marked the separation between Liberal Christianity, or Unitarianism, and orthodox Congregationalism – a separation that, with this sermon, became undeniable.

The separation, labeled the Unitarian Controversy, had been underway for two generations, prompted by the ideals of eighteenth-century rationalism, the Age of Enlightenment. But from 1819 on, as a deliberate result of this “Baltimore Sermon,” the Unitarians had to regard themselves as a distinct sect, whether they wanted to or not. This sermon boldly accepted the label “Unitarian” and announced to the listening world – and the world was listening – that henceforth, ours was a distinct movement with intentions to expand far beyond the Boston intelligentsia. This date marked one of the many turning points in our Unitarian religion when more liberal views prevailed over the status quo – a pattern that, by the way, it behooves us to recognize if we would understand the nature of our faith.

If you want to understand the flavor of Channing’s thinking, there is no better way than to listen to his own words. Here is a little taste of what he said in his “Baltimore Sermon”:

On Biblical literalism: “We profess not to know a book which demands a more frequent exercise of reason than the Bible... We may observe that its style nowhere affects the precision of science, or the accuracy of definition. Its language is singularly glowing, bold and figurative, demanding more frequent departures from the literal sense than that of our own age and country, and consequently demanding more continual exercise of judgment.”

On reason: “All willingly avail themselves of reason when it can be pressed into the service of their own party, and only complain of it when its weapons wound themselves...” And this: “The most pernicious doctrines have been the growth of the darkest times, when the general credulity encouraged bad men and enthusiasts [(by which he means those governed by emotion, as in the revivalist movement called the Great Awakening) – these “pernicious doctrines” encouraged these zealots] to broach their dreams and inventions and to stifle the faint remonstrances of reason, by the menaces of everlasting perdition. Say what we will, God has given us a rational nature and will call us to account for it. We may let it sleep, but we do so at our peril.”

On the Trinity: “We believe in the doctrine of God’s Unity, or that there is one God and one only. With Jesus, we worship the Father, as the only living and true God. We are astonished that any man can read the New Testament and avoid the conviction that the Father alone is God”.

And this, on the nature of Jesus: “Jesus, in his preaching, continually spoke of God. The word was always in his mouth. We ask, does he by this word ever mean himself? We say, never. On the contrary, he most plainly distinguishes between god and himself, and so do his disciples. How this is to be reconciled with the idea that the manifestation of Christ as God was a primary object of Christianity, our adversaries must determine.”

“We believe that he was sent by the father to effect a moral or spiritual deliverance of mankind; that is, to rescue men from sin and its consequences and to bring them to a state of everlasting purity and happiness.... We farther agree in rejecting as unscriptural and absurd, the explanation of the manner in which Christ’s death procures forgiveness for men... We ask our adversaries... to point to one text in which we are told that god took human nature that he might make an infinite satisfaction to his own justice; for one text which tells us that human guilt requires an infinite substitute, that Christ’s sufferings owe their efficacy to their being borne by an infinite being, or that his divine nature gives infinite value to the sufferings of the human....” In other words, Christ died, not to change the heart of God toward mankind, but to change the heart of mankind toward God. “Christianity.” Channing concludes, “is in no degree responsible [for these fictions of theologians.]”

On the nature of Christian virtue or true holiness: “We believe that all virtue has its foundation in the moral nature of man, that is, in conscience, or his sense of duty, and in the power of forming his temper and life according to conscience. We believe that these moral faculties are the grounds of responsibility, and the highest distinctions of human nature, and that no act is praiseworthy, any farther than it springs from their exertion.”

On the moral perfection of god: “We conceive that Christians have generally leaned towards a very injurious view of the Supreme Being. They have too often felt as if he were raised by his greatness and sovereignty above the principles of morality, above those eternal laws of equity and rectitude to which all other beings are subjected... It is not because his will is irresistible, but because his will is the perfection of virtue, that we pay him allegiance. We cannot bow before a being, however great and powerful, who governs tyrannically.”

And, finally, on piety: “If religion be the shipwreck of understanding, we cannot keep too far from it. We owe it to truth and religion to maintain that fanaticism, partial insanity, sudden impression and ungovernable transports are anything rather than piety. We would not by these remarks be understood as wishing to exclude from religion warmth and even transport”. [A *little* transport was okay.] “We honor and highly value

true religious sensibility. [But] when we observe a fervor, called religious, in men whose general character expresses little refinement and elevation and whose piety seems at war with reason, we pay it little respect. We honor religion too much to give its sacred name to a feverish, forced, fluctuating zeal which has little power..." Such zeal, such a "shipwreck of understanding" is all too familiar to us today, isn't it?

I've heard it remarked that Channing would not recognize our modern Unitarian Universalism, with our embrace of Atheist and Buddhist and Pagan beliefs. Not to mention the Christophobia or "Cross cringe" that is so common in many of our congregations (though not, thankfully, in this one.) I don't doubt that this is true. On the other hand, these modern developments fit right into the story of Unitarianism, with its theological controversies and pattern of recurring turning points in how we define ourselves. Channing himself went on to become considered old fashioned and no longer represented the voice of Liberalism to his intellectual successors, the Transcendentalists, but unlike the obsessively individualistic Transcendentalists, Channing spoke for a majority view as they never did.

William Ellery Channing represented a religion in flux and a liberally religious response to the evils of industrialization as well as a society on the brink of Civil War. Channing as social reformer and advocate for the enslaved, whether on Southern plantations or in Northern factories, ensures his continuing place in our highly selective UU pantheon – perhaps even more than do his theological views. His ideas about the social ills of his time – with the possible exception of his views on temperance – he disapproved of strong drink -- are easier for many of us to embrace. This, despite the ambiguities of his position as a member of an elite whose prosperity depended on the slave trade and his own status as the son of a slave-holding family. But his theological views and his astonishing influence in his own time may actually be more instructive to us as UUs at this moment in our history.

They remind us that our religion has most likely not arrived in its final form; they demonstrate again that our faith is one that adjusts to accommodate the religious needs of liberal thinkers, no matter what the period – perhaps even to the point of becoming unrecognizable. Channing's theology reminds us that our Christian roots go deep and bear fruit to this day. A knowledge of Channing reminds us not to be dismissive of all Christianity and Christians as hopelessly orthodox and intolerant. Channing exemplifies the Christian religion's potential for revolutionary free thought and reminds us of the origin of that revolutionary tradition in the figure of Jesus himself.

Channing's role in his society is unlikely to be replicated by any UU minister of our day... or any religious leader. For one thing, our country is much more pluralistic than in those times and theological discussions (strange to say) are not the stuff of mass entertainment that they once were. But who knows? Even as we honor the liberal Christians among us, we must recognize the growing power of orthodoxy and intolerance in our country and around the world. We may already have reached the point when a voice such as Channing's – a voice of reason that does not ignore or deny the essential

nature of spiritual inquiry – we may already have reached the point when such a voice can carry over harsher doctrines.

Heaven knows we need such a voice – and if it is not to come from us, than from whom? And if not at this point in our history, then when? Whatever we may think of Channing’s particular views, his moral and intellectual courage and integrity are beyond question. We may not shake up the established order with our small numbers. We may not carry the collective influence that Unitarians once did. But Channing would remind us that each of us is endowed with the power to question orthodoxy and challenge intolerance. The voice of reason and liberal thought becomes hard to hear amid the clamor of fanaticism.

Would that we could speak of our religion with all the passion of Channing’s day. Others speak of their faith, and act upon that faith with a fervor seemingly unmitigated by rational thought. This is all the more reason to take a lesson from William Ellery Channing and to speak with lucidity and daring as understanding and conscience dictate that we must. May we do so with all the passion and all the intellectual and moral integrity we can muster.

I am indebted to Conrad Wright for some of these interpretations of Channing’s significance. The full text of the “Baltimore Sermon” can be found in the book edited by Wright, Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism.