

**WILLIAM ELLERY  
CHANNING, HIS  
OPINIONS, GENIUS AND  
CHARACTER: A DISCOURSE**

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William Ellery Channing, his opinions, genius and character: a discourse by Henry W. Bellows

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**HENRY W. BELLOWS**

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# WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING

HIS OPINIONS, GENIUS AND CHARACTER

A DISCOURSE

GIVEN AT NEWPORT, R. I., ON THE CELEBRATION OF THE CENTENARY OF HIS BIRTH, APRIL 7, 1880

BY

HENRY W. BELLOWS

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NEW YORK  
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1880

"THE greatest minds admit no biography. They are determined from within. Their works spring from unfathomed depths in their own souls, from silent, secret thoughts, inquisitions, aspirations, which come they know not whence, go they know not whither."—*From a letter of Channing's, dated Boston, May 4th, 1838, vol. i., p. 350 of Channing's Memoirs.*

Inscriptions on Channing's monument at Mount Auburn,  
Cambridge, Mass.:

On one side:

Here rest the remains of  
WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING,  
Born, 7 April, 1780,  
at Newport, R. I. ;  
Ordained, 1 June, 1803,  
as a minister of Jesus Christ to the  
Society, worshipping God in Federal  
St., Boston :  
Died 2 October, 1842,  
while on a journey, at Bennington,  
Vermont.

On the other side:

In memory of  
WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING,  
Honored throughout Christendom, for  
his eloquence and courage in maintain-  
ing and advancing  
the Great Cause of  
Truth, Religion and Human Freedom,  
this monument  
is gratefully and reverently erected  
by the Christian Society,  
of which during nearly forty years  
he was Pastor.

## DISCOURSE.

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"He was a burning and a shining light: and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light."—JOHN, v. 35.

It was when John the Baptist's light was fading in the glory of the newly-risen Sun of Righteousness, that Jesus bore this generous testimony to his predecessor's lustre. He characterized, in words that have become immortal, the flame of that stern prophet who had heralded the way for his own appearing; but at the same time intimated that its fires had paled, like a torch whose oil had burned low. The sun had risen, the torch was no longer useful.

We have come together to bless and praise a modern prophet, who, like many other saints who have been the burning and shining lights of their generation, was the herald of a new and brighter day. But it is not his memory chiefly that we recall. It is a living light that we are to contemplate, brighter than it ever was; it is not a torch that has gone out, but a star that shines on, guiding our present way, that we meet to rejoice in the light of. Of Channing we do not say he *was*, but he *is* a burning and a shining light, and the season has not gone by, it has not even reached its meridian, when the Church and the world are willing to rejoice in his light.

On this occasion, the centennial of his birth, and in the place of his birth, it falls to me to be the spokesman of the love and honor in which his life and teachings, his character and his services to the Church and the world are held by his townsmen, and especially by those who have inherited, and have sought to extend and perpetuate what was special in his theological opinions. It is true his birth-place was not the principal seat of his life and labors, and it is still more true that

no sect or denomination has any exclusive right in his fame. He belonged to the order of Christians called Unitarians, but he belonged still more to the Church Universal, and nothing would have grieved him more than any attempt to shut him in to any inclosure that shuts out the pure and good of any name, Catholic or Protestant, Trinitarian or Unitarian. His theological opinions, in my judgment, upon a very recent careful reconsideration of them, prove much more systematic, definite and positive than it is common to allow; but they are also much more comprehensive, inclusive, and inconsistent with the sectarian spirit or form than they are sometimes assumed to be. They are profoundly conservative and profoundly radical, holding on to all that is eternal, going down to all that is eternal, and going on to all that is eternal. In the strength of his moral intuitions and convictions, and without anticipating many results of later criticism, or using the methods which a larger learning has employed, he simply ignored and set aside all that hampered his full intellectual and moral freedom, and slowly evolved a system of religious thought, which has recommended itself more and more to spiritual minds in all branches of the Church, and in all Christian countries—a system so profound, simple and lofty, so humane and natural, and yet so Christ-like and divine, that it lacks dogmatic and ecclesiastical features almost as much as the Sermon on the Mount, or the personal teachings of the Saviour; enters almost as little into scholastic and technical questions, and avoids, by reducing to their proper insignificance, most of the sectarian disputes of the Church.

Channing was a theologian, but not of the old pattern. He studied God and reported his ways and his will after a manner that had not been recognized in former schools of theology. This indeed was his chief service, that he broke with the old theological methods, and refused to settle the controversies of the Church by an appeal to scriptures and creeds, authoritative *over* the mind and heart of man, and not merely authoritative *within* them, and by concurrence with their testimony. He was fully convinced that the prevailing system of dog-



matic and ecclesiastical Christianity—essentially the same in the Romish and the Protestant Historical Church—was contrary to the teaching of the spirit of Christ—contrary to the light of natural reason and conscience (which indeed has been offered as the proof of its divinity and of man's total corruption), and that the power of the Gospel could be restored only by returning to Jesus' method of teaching it, a method that respected, honored, and relied upon man's essential relations to God, instituted in his rational and moral constitution.

Channing recognized no theology based upon a revelation which by interpretation separated Christianity from the general history of humanity, and placed it, and must ever keep it, in antagonism to Philosophy and Life. He did not consider theology as the study of God, within the covers of the Bible, as if that were a book foreign to human intelligence, and altogether above and aside from it. He resisted stoutly, from the irrepressible freedom of his own soul, all *compulsory* allegiance to the Church, to the creeds, to the past, to Jesus, nay to God himself, and strove to emancipate all other souls from this prostration before mere power and authority. It was not necessary to bind him with cords to the altar, if the Being worshiped there was entitled, as he thought he was, by his holiness, justice, and goodness, to the sacrifice of his heart. Freely, joyfully, humbly, and with his whole soul he bowed before truth, worth, goodness, purity, sacredness, and in the testimonies of his own spiritual nature he saw them, to an infinite extent, in the Great Source of his own moral experiences. But not one joint would he bend before the threats of mere power, or the assumptions of an authority not guaranteed by his rational and moral nature.

We are not left to speculate about his fundamental ideas. They are not only given with transparent simplicity and unflinching courage, and with a reiteration that to many is wearisome in his collected writings; but he has prefaced his own works, almost at the conclusion of his life, with a deliberate statement, in which he distinctly, and with the most

solemn emphasis calls attention to the two ideas which he wishes to be regarded as the dominant notes and the master-keys of his whole system of religious and political thinking and feeling. One is unqualified reverence for human nature; the other, boundless faith in freedom. They are easily interchangeable, and become in his writings one and the same. Human nature is worthy of unspeakable, immeasurable reverence, because God informs it; because it reveals God; because reason is the intellectual life of God and man, and conscience the moral life of God, which he dignified man by inviting him to share. Man knows God only because he is made in his rational and moral image. God is as much dependent upon our moral and rational powers for worship, communion and filial love, as we are dependent on his holiness and loveliness and paternal character for an object which is truly adorable. And our intellectual and moral powers owe their worth, their development and their glory to freedom. This is God's own everlasting glory and life—freedom. Were he not free in his holiness, his goodness, his thoughts, he could not command the love and reverence of free beings; and were they not free to offer him a voluntary, a rational, moral homage, their worship would be mechanical and worthless. Civilization is nothing but the triumph of freedom, and that is the victory of Reason and Conscience. Unreason—the fruit of self-will, ignorance, passion, prejudice—shows itself in barbarisms of a more or less atrocious kind; and society, even now, in its least deplorable forms, is irrational and barbaric. It is not yet based upon, and is not characteristically conducted in reverence for Reason; but rests still on force, on cupidity, on fear. Governments are not strong where they should be strong, in their reliance on what is true and right, but in their appeal to party passion, the love of power and national animosities. Mankind do not glory in their nature as rational and moral, but in its external circumstances. They build up artificial distinctions of condition and caste; they glory in luxury and ostentation; they belittle themselves with cos-

tume and equipage and titles and state. And if Reason, in the occasional form of triumphant logic or vigorous literature, obtains respect, it is often in disregard of the only element that makes Reason wholly worthy of reverence—its subordination to Conscience. Can that state of society be regarded as in any but an inchoate condition, in which the quality that alone makes God godlike or venerable is made secondary and subordinate, and that by an immense and all-characterizing step, to what is convenient, pleasant, favorable to immediate interests, or flattering to mean and interested desires? Where is the city or community in which the right and the good are enshrined in the inmost heart; governing respect and affection, deciding social station, making and executing the laws? If God be moral perfection, must he not expect and demand that the Race made in his image should be aiming steadily to make justice and goodness prevail and reflect his holiness? But this justice and goodness cannot be *forced*. They perish and discharge themselves of their essence when in bondage or under force. Hence in Channing's eyes any state of commotion, revolution or contention was preferable to intellectual formalism and compulsory decorum. No atheistic or infidel opinions were so much to be dreaded as a compulsory formalism of creed. That was the smothering of the rational and moral nature. Free, it might wander, but it would learn by its wanderings, and at any rate keep itself alive by its motion, and might some day return. But slavery of the will was moral death.

The exalted view of human nature, which Channing had, was not only not opposed, but it grew out of his sublime sense of the greatness and glory of God. Man learned God's Being and his moral and rational attributes from the constitution of his own soul, not from external nature. This was the chief glory of man's own spirit, that it revealed an Infinite Spirit! Self-reverence was only the reflection of the awe which God's holiness or moral grandeur kindled in a being who found himself capable of recognizing the Divine