

**A LETTER TO WILLIAM E.
CHANNING D.D.
ON THE SUBJECT OF
RELIGIOUS LIBERTY**

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MOSES STUART

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A
LETTER

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TO

WILLIAM E. CHANNING · D. D.

ON THE SUBJECT OF

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY.

BY MOSES STUART

Professor of Sac. Literature in the Theol. Seminary, Andover.

Boston:

PERKINS & MARVIN, No. 114, WASHINGTON ST.

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1830.

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DISTRICT OF MASSACHUSETTS.....TO WIT.

District Clerk's Office.

BE it remembered, that on the nineteenth day of July, A. D. 1830, in the fifty fifth Year of the Independence of the United States of America, PERKINS & MARVIS, of the said District, have deposited in this Office the Title of a Book, the right whereof they claim as Proprietors, in the Words following, to wit :

A Letter to William E. Channing, D. D. on the subject of Religious Liberty. By Moses Stuart, Professor of Sacred Literature in the Theological Seminary, Andover.

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JNO. W. DAVIS, { *Clerk of the District
of Massachusetts.*

LETTER.

REVEREND SIR,

IN perusing the volume which you have recently published, entitled 'Discourses, Reviews, and Miscellanies,' and also in reading your 'Election Sermon' recently delivered before the Legislature of this State, I have met with some passages which contain charges, expressed or implied, against the denomination of Christians in Massachusetts who are called *Orthodox* or *Trinitarians*, that seem to me to deserve serious and candid examination. If they are indeed well founded, it is proper that the community should know it; nor can it be taken amiss, that you have given your name to the world as a pledge that they can be established and made good. But if they have no foundation in point of fact, you will join with me in saying that they ought in justice no longer to pass current under the sanction of your name, but that the public should be correctly informed respecting them.

Passages in your recently published works, of the nature to which I have above adverted, are somewhat numerous. But as it is not my object to multiply quotations, or to dispute about words, I shall content myself in this place with making merely a few extracts.

My first extract shall be from your Election Sermon recently published.

"You have all heard of the outward evils, which religion, when thus turned into tyranny, has inflicted; how it has dug dreary dungeons, kindled fires for the martyr, and invented instruments of exquisite torture. But to me all this is less fearful than its influence over the mind. When I see the superstitions which it has fastened on the conscience, the spiritual terrors with which it has haunted and subdued the ignorant and susceptible, the dark appalling views of God which it has spread far and wide, the dread of inquiry which it has struck into superior understandings, and the servility of spirit which it has made to pass for piety,—when I see all this, the fire, the scaffold, and the outward inquisition, terrible as they are, seem to me inferior evils. I look with a solemn joy on the heroic spirits, who have met freely and fearlessly pain and death in the cause of truth and human rights. But there are other victims of intolerance, on whom I look with unmix'd sorrow. They are those, who, spell-bound by early prejudice or by intimidations from the pulpit and the press, dare not think; who anxiously stifle every doubt or misgiving in regard to their opinions, as if to doubt were a crime; who shrink from the seekers after truth as from infection; who deny all virtue, which does not wear the livery of their own sect; who, surrendering to others their best powers, receive unresistingly a teaching which wars against reason and conscience; and who think it a merit to impose on such as live within their influence, the grievous bondage, which they bear themselves. How much to be deplored is it, that religion, the very principle which is designed to raise men above the judgment and power of man, should become the chief instrument of usurpation over the soul.

"Is it said, that, in this country, where the rights of private judgment and of speaking and writing according to our convictions, are guaranteed with every solemnity by institutions and laws, religion can never degenerate into tyranny; that here its whole influence must conspire to the liberation and dignity of the mind? I answer, we discover little knowledge of human nature, if we ascribe to constitutions the power of charming to sleep the spirit of intolerance and exclusion. Almost every other bad passion may sooner be put to rest; and for this plain reason, that intolerance always shelters itself under the name and garb of religious zeal. Because we live in a country, where the gross, outward, visible chain is broken, we must not conclude that we are necessarily free. There are chains not made of iron, which eat more deeply into the soul. An espionage of bigotry may as effectually close our lips and chill our hearts, as an armed and hundred-eyed police. There are countless ways by which men in a free country may encroach on their neighbours' rights. In religion the instrument is ready made and always at hand. I refer to Opinion, combined and organized in sects, and swayed by the clergy. We say we have no Inquisition. But a sect, skillfully organized, trained to utter one cry, combined to cover with reproach whoever may differ from themselves, to drown the free expression of opinion by denunciations of heresy, and to strike terror into the multitude

by joint and perpetual menace,—such a sect is as perilous and palying to the intellect as the Inquisition. It serves the minister as effectually as the sword. The present age is notoriously sectarian, and therefore hostile to liberty.”—pp. 26—28.

Again, in the newly printed volume of your Discourses, &c. you say;

“We do not deny, that our brethren have a right to form a judgment as to our Christian character. But we insist that we have a right to be judged by the fairest, the most approved, and the most settled rules, by which character can be tried; and when these are overlooked, and the most uncertain standard is applied, we are injured; and an assault on character, which rests on this ground, deserves no better name than defamation and persecution.

“I know that this suggestion of persecution will be indignantly repelled by those, who deal most largely in denunciation. But persecution is a wrong or injury inflicted for opinions; and surely assaults on character fall under this definition. Some persons seem to think, that persecution consists in pursuing error with fire and sword; and that therefore it has ceased to exist, except in distempered imaginations, because no class of Christians among us is armed with these terrible weapons. But no. The form is changed, but the spirit lives. Persecution has given up its halberd and fagot, but it breathes venom from its lips, and secretly blasts what it cannot openly destroy.—pp. 561, 562.

In the same volume, when speaking (as in the preceding extract) against a “system of exclusion and denunciation in religion,” you make the following remarks;

“Another important consideration is, that this system of excluding men of apparent sincerity, for their opinions, entirely subverts free inquiry into the scriptures. When once a particular system is surrounded by this bulwark; when once its defenders have brought the majority to believe, that the rejection of it is a mark of depravity and perdition, what but the name of liberty is left to Christians? The obstacles to inquiry are as real, and may be as powerful, as in the neighborhood of the Inquisition. The multitude dare not think, and the thinking dare not speak. The right of private judgment may thus, in a Protestant country, be reduced to a nullity. It is true, that men are sent to the scriptures; but they are told before they go, that they will be driven from the church on earth and in heaven, unless they find in the scriptures the doctrines which are embodied in the popular creed. They are told, indeed, to inquire for themselves; but they are also told, at what points inquiry must arrive; and the sentence of exclusion hangs over them, if they happen to stray, with some of the best and wisest men, into forbidden paths. Now this ‘Protestant liberty’ is, in one respect, more irritating than Papal bondage. It mocks as well as enslaves us. It talks to us courteously as friends and brethren, whilst it rivets our chains. It invites and even charges us to look with our own eyes, but with the same breath warns us against

seeing anything which Orthodox eyes have not seen before us. Is this a state of things favorable to serious inquiry into the truths of the gospel; yet, how long has the church been groaning under this cruel yoke?

"Another objection to this system of excluding professed disciples of Christ, on account of their opinions, is, that it is inconsistent with the great principles of Congregationalism. In churches, where the power is lodged in a few individuals, who are supposed to be the most learned men in the community, the work of marking out and excluding the erroneous may seem less difficult. But among Congregationalists, the tribunal before which the offender is to be brought is the whole church, consisting partly of men in humble circumstances, and of unimproved minds; partly of men engaged in active and pressing business; and partly of men of education, whose studies have been directed to law and medicine. Now is this a tribunal, before which the most intricate points of theology are to be discussed, and serious inquirers are to answer for opinions, which they have perhaps examined more laboriously and faithfully than all their judges? Would a church of humble men, conscious of their limited opportunities, consent to try, for these pretended crimes, professing Christians, as intelligent, as honest, and as exemplary as themselves? It is evident, that in the business of excluding men for opinions, a church can be little more than the tool of the minister, or a few influential members; and our churches are, in general, too independent and too upright to take this part in so solemn a transaction. To correct their deficiencies, and to quicken their zeal on this point, we are now threatened with new tribunals, or Consociations, whose office it will be to try ministers for their errors, to inspect the churches, and to advise and assist them in the extirpation of 'heresy.' Whilst the laity are slumbering, the ancient and free constitution of our churches is silently undermined, and is crumbling away. Since argument is insufficient to produce uniformity of opinion, recourse must be had to more powerful instruments of conviction; I mean, to ECCLESIASTICAL COURTS. And are this people indeed prepared to submit to this most degrading form of vassalage; a vassalage, which reaches and palsies the mind, and imposes on it the dreams and fictions of men, for the everlasting truth of God!"—pp. 565, 566.

Once more, in your preface to the same volume, you say;

"It is due to myself to say, that the controversial character of a part of this volume, is to be ascribed, not to the love of disputation, but to the circumstances in which I was called to write. It was my lot to enter on public life at a time when this part of the country was visited, by what I esteem one of its sorest scourges; I mean, by a revival of the spirit of intolerance and persecution. I saw the commencement of those systematic efforts, which have been since developed, for fastening on the community a particular creed. Opinions, which I thought true and purifying, were not only assailed as errors, but branded as crimes. Then began, what seems to me one of the gross immoralities of our times, the practice of aspersing the characters of exemplary men, on the ground of differences of opinion as to the most mysterious articles of faith. Then began those assaults on freedom of thought

and speech, which, had they succeeded, would have left us only the name of religious liberty. Then it grew perilous to search the scriptures for ourselves, and to speak freely according to the conviction of our own minds. I saw that penalties, as serious in this country as fine and imprisonment, were, if possible, to be attached to the profession of liberal views of Christianity, the penalties of general hatred and scorn; and that a degrading uniformity of opinion was to be imposed by the severest persecution, which the spirit of the age would allow. At such a period, I dared not be silent. To oppose what I deemed error was to me a secondary consideration. My first duty, as I believed, was, to maintain practically and resolutely the rights of the human mind; to live and to suffer, if to suffer were necessary, for that intellectual and religious liberty, which I prize incomparably more than my civil rights. I felt myself called, not merely to plead in general for freedom of thought and speech, but, what was more important and trying, to assert this freedom by action. I should have felt myself disloyal to truth and freedom, had I confined myself to vague commonplaces about our rights, and forborne to bear my testimony expressly and specially to proscribed and persecuted opinions. The times required that a voice of strength and courage should be lifted up, and I rejoice, that I was found among those by whom it was uttered and sent far and wide."—pp. vii. viii.

On the tenor and spirit of these accusations throughout, (which however only accord with a multitude of other passages in your writings), it is not my purpose here to remark in a particular manner. I reserve what I have more specially to say respecting these, to another part of the present letter.

I trust you will have the ingenuousness to avow at once, that it was your intention in these passages, and in others of the like nature, to characterize the efforts, the arguments, the designs, and the cause of those who are usually denominated *Orthodox* or *Trinitarians* in this Commonwealth.

You will permit me, in the following pages, to name the class of men *Orthodox*, to whom I here advert, and to call their liberal opponents *Unitarians*. I do this merely for the sake of convenience and brevity; not for the sake of making any claims for one party, or of casting any odium on the other, by the use of such appellations.

In the above extracts then, (as often elsewhere), you have charged the *Orthodox* with a settled, steadfast, unrelenting purpose to suppress all free inquiry respecting matters of religion, to cover with reproach those who may differ from