

**THE SOCIAL MESSAGE OF
WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING**

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PREFACE

William Ellery Channing, minister of the Federal Street Church in Boston, died in 1842. The question naturally arises as to the value of his utterances on social questions. His contribution to religious thought is well recognized, but, to many, at least, his contribution to thought on social questions is much less clearly understood. This pamphlet is prepared for the purpose of presenting Channing's deep interest, and profound insight into the social question of the times. As one reads his work from this point of view, he is impressed more and more strongly with the fact that Channing's message on the social question, as we have come to call it, is still prophetic and vital. Great as was his contribution to theology, still greater was his contribution as prophet of social righteousness. The aim in preparing this article has been to select passages that disclose Channing's own point of view rather than the point of view of the compiler of the citations. Furthermore it is hoped that this pamphlet may serve to send inquiring persons to a more thorough investigation of Channing's thought. The times need much that he has to say.

EARL C. DAVIS.

The Social Message of Channing

The point of view from which Channing thought, wrote, preached and worked is well set forth in the introduction to his published works.

"The following writings will be found to be distinguished by nothing more than by the high estimate which they express of human nature. A respect for the human soul breathes through them." "It has been under a deep feeling of the intimate connection of better and juster views of human nature with all social and religious progress, that I have insisted on it so much in the following tracts, and I hope that the reader will not think that I have given it disproportionate importance."

—Page 7.

"I proceed to another sentiment, which is expressed so habitually in these writings as to constitute one of their characteristics, and which is intimately connected with the preceding topic. It is reverence for liberty, for human rights—a sentiment which has grown with my growth, which is striking deeper root in my age, which seems to me a chief element of true love for mankind, and which alone fits a man for intercourse with his fellow-creatures. I have lost no occasion for expressing my deep attachment to liberty in all its forms, civil, political, religious, to liberty of thought, speech, and the press, and of giving utterance to my abhorrence of all the forms of oppression." . . . "It is because I have learned to regard man under the light of this religion, (Christian) that I cannot bear to see him treated as a brute, insulted, wronged, enslaved, made to wear a yoke, to tremble before his brother, to serve him as a tool, to hold property and life at his will, to surrender intellect and conscience to the priest, or to seal his lips or belie his thoughts through dread of civil power. It is because I have learned the essential equality of men before the common Father that I cannot endure to see one man establishing his arbitrary will over another by fraud, or force, or wealth, or rank, or superstitious

claims. It is because the human being has moral powers, because he carries a law in his own breast, and was made to govern himself, that I cannot endure to see him taken out of his own hands and fashioned into a tool by another's avarice or pride. It is because I see in him a great nature, the divine image, and vast capacities, that I demand for him means of self-development, spheres for free action; that I call society not to fetter, but to aid his growth. Without intending to disparage the outward temporal advantages of liberty, I have habitually regarded it in a higher light—as the birthright of the soul, as the element in which men are to put themselves forth, to become conscious of what they are, and to fulfil the end of their being.”—Pages 7 and 8.

“There are times when the assertion of great principles is the best service a man can render society.”—Introduction to address on Slavery.

A SOCIAL PROBLEM.

In studying the so-called social problems, do you see them as separate problems, or simply manifestations of one central problem? In your analysis of the situation, do you find any clear-cut relation between ‘Housing,’ ‘Graft,’ ‘Poverty,’ ‘Intemperance,’ ‘Prostitution,’ ‘Unemployment,’ ‘Crime,’ ‘Insanity,’ ‘Wealth,’ and ‘Luxury?’ Are these separate problems? Or are they simply variations of the one social problem? These are sort of test questions which one interested in modern social problems asks in one form or another to determine the extent to which a person has acquainted himself with the forces operating in society. Having seen the point of view from which Channing approached the life of his times, our next interest is to determine the depth of his insight. The following passages are selected as bearing upon this point:—

“In this country the passion for wealth is a mighty force, acting in hostility to the great idea which rules in our institutions. Property continually tends to become a more vivid idea than right. In the struggle for private accumulation the worth of every human being is over-

looked, and the importance of every man's progress is forgotten. We must contend for this great idea. They who hold it must spread it around them. The truth must be sounded in the ears of men that the grand idea of society is to place within reach of all its members the means of improvement, of elevation, of the true happiness of man. There is a higher duty than to build almshouses for the poor, and that is to save men from being degraded to the blighting influence of the almshouse. Man has a right to something more than bread to keep him from starving. He has a right to the aids and encouragements and culture by which he may fulfil the destiny of a man; and until society is brought to recognize this, it will continue to groan under its present miseries.”—“The Duty of Free States” (page 890).

“The cry is, ‘Property is insecure, law a rope of sand, and the mob sovereign.’ The actual present evil—the evil of that worship of property which stifles all nobler sentiments, and makes man property—this nobody sees; but appearances of approaching convulsions of property—these shake the nerves of men who are willing that our moral evils should be perpetuated to the end of time, provided their treasures be untouched. I have no fear of revolutions. We have conservative principles enough at work here. What exists troubles me more than what is to come.

“What offends me most is the wisdom which scoffs at all attempts to improve society, derides freedom, and wraps itself up in an epicurean ease.” “Life” (page 509).

“One thing is plain, that our present civilization contains strong tendencies to the intellectual and moral depression of a large portion of the community; and this influence ought to be thought of, studied, watched, withstood, with a stern, solemn purpose, withholding no influence by which it may be counteracted.”—“The Elevation of the Laboring Classes” (pages 64-65).

“In these remarks I do not mean to recommend to the laborer indifference to his outward lot. I hold it important that every man in every class should possess the means of comfort, of health, of neatness in food and apparel, and of occasional retirement and leisure. These

are good in themselves, to be sought for their own sakes; and, still more, they are important means of self-culture for which I am pleading. A clean, comfortable dwelling, with wholesome meals, is no small aid to intellectual and moral progress. A man living in a damp cellar or a garret open to rain and snow, breathing foul air in a filthy room, and striving without success to appease hunger on scanty and unsavory food, is in danger of abandoning himself to desperate selfishness."—"The Elevation of the Laboring Classes" (page 21).

"There is no subject on which your thoughts should turn more frequently than this. Many of you busy yourselves with other questions, such as the probable result of the next election of President, or the prospects of this or that party. But these are insignificant compared to the question whether the laboring classes here are destined to the ignorance and depression of the lower ranks of Europe, or whether they can secure for themselves the means of intellectual and moral progress. You are cheated, you are false to yourselves when you suffer politicians to absorb you in their selfish purposes and to draw you away from this great question."—"On the Elevation of the Laboring Classes" (page 65).

"I do not, then, desire to release the laborer from toil. This is not the elevation to be sought for him. Manual labor is a great good; but, in so saying, I must be understood to speak of labor in its just proportions. In excess it does great harm. It is not good when made the sole work of life. It must be joined with higher means of improvement, or it degrades instead of exalts. Man has a various nature, which requires a variety of employments and discipline for its growth. Study, meditation, society, and relaxation should be mixed up with his physical toils. He has intellect, heart, imagination, taste, as well as bones and muscles; and he is grievously wronged when compelled to exclusive drudgery for bodily subsistence. Life should be an alternation of employments, so diversified as to call the whole man into action. Unhappily, our present civilization is far from realizing this idea. It tends to increase the amount of manual toil at the same time that it renders this toil less favorable to the culture of the mind. The division of

labor which distinguishes civilized life from savage life, and to which we owe chiefly the perfection of the arts, tends to dwarf the intellectual powers by confining the activity of the individual to a narrow range, to a few details, perhaps, on the heading of pins, the pointing of nails, or the tying together of broken strings; so that while the savage has his faculties sharpened by various occupations, and by exposure to various perils, the civilized man treads a monotonous, stupefying round of unthinking toil."—"On The Elevation of the Laboring Classes" (page 39).

"One cause of the commonness of intemperance in the present state of things is the heavy burden of care and toil that is laid on a large multitude of men. Multitudes, to earn subsistence for themselves and their families, are often compelled to undergo a degree of labor exhausting to the spirits and injurious to health. Of consequence, relief is sought in stimulants. We do not find that civilization lightens men's toils; as yet it has increased them; and in this effect I see the sign of a deep defect in what we call the progress of society. It cannot be the design of the Creator that the whole of life should be spent in the drudgery for the supply of animal wants. That civilization is very imperfect in which the mass of men can redeem no time from bodily labor for intellectual, moral and social culture. It is melancholy to watch the degradation of multitudes to the condition of beasts of burden. Exhausting toils unfit the mind to withstand temptation. The man, spent with labor, and cut off by his condition from higher pleasures, is impelled to seek a deceitful solace in sensual excess."—"Address on Temperance" (page 103).

"Such are the evils of poverty. It is a condition which offers many and peculiar obstructions to the development of intellect and affection, of self-respect and self-control. The poor are peculiarly exposed to discouraging views of themselves, of human nature, of human life. The consciousness of their own intellectual and moral power slumbers. Their faith in God's goodness, in virtue, in immortality is obscured by the darkness of their present lot. Ignorant, desponding, and sorely tempted, have they not solemn claims on their

more privileged brethren for aids which they have never yet received? . . . Still, poverty has tendencies to the moral degradation which I have described."—"Ministry for the Poor" (page 78).

"These volumes will show that the author feels strongly the need of deep social changes, of a spiritual revolution in Christendom, of a new bond between man and man, and a new sense of relation between man and his Creator. At the same time, they will show his firm belief that our present low civilization, the central idea of which is wealth, cannot last forever; that the mass of men are not doomed hopelessly and irresistibly to the degradation of mind and heart in which they are now sunk; that a new comprehension of the end and dignity of a human being is to remodel social institutions and manners; that in Christianity and in the powers and principles of human nature we have a promise of something holier than now exists."—"Life" (page 515).

THE FUNCTION OF RELIGION.

Not only do the above passages indicate Channing's appreciation of a fundamental social problem, but also they indicate the scope of his observation and his penetrating understanding of life forces. Passages almost without number might be brought to bear for confirmation of this assertion. But the question now arises as to the relation of religion to this social problem, and especially the function of organized religion in the face of such a situation. In developing this point, attention is first called to the following passage from "On the Elevation of the Laboring Classes."

"The last ground of hope for the elevation of the laborer, and the chief and most sustaining, is the clearer development of the principles of Christianity. The future influences of this religion are not to be judged by the past. Up to this time it has been made a political engine, and in other ways perverted. But its true spirit, the spirit of brotherhood and freedom, is beginning to be understood, and this will undo the work which opposite principles have been carrying on for ages. Christianity is the only effectual remedy for the fearful

evils of modern civilization—a system which teaches its members to grasp at everything, and to rise above everybody, as the great aims of life. Of such a civilization the natural fruits are: contempt of others' rights, fraud, oppression, a gambling spirit in trade, reckless adventure, and commercial convulsions, all tending to impoverish the laborer and to render every condition insecure. Relief is to come, and can only come, through the new application of Christian principles, of universal justice and universal love, to social institutions, to commerce, to business, to active life. This application has begun, and the laborer, above all men, is to feel its happy and exalting influences."—"Works" (page 63).

Still more pointed is a passage from his address on "Demands of the Age on the Ministry."

"What Christian can look around him and say that the state of society corresponds to what men may and should be under the gospel and in an advanced age of intelligence? As for that man who, on surveying the world, thinks its condition almost as healthy as can be desired or hoped; who sees but a few superficial blots on the general aspect of society; who thinks the ministry established for no higher end than to perpetuate the present state of morals and religion; whose heart is never burdened and sorrow-smitten by the fearful doom to which multitudes around him are thoughtlessly hastening—oh! let not that man take on him the care of souls. The physician who would enter a hospital to congratulate his dying patients of their pleasant sensations and rapid convalescence would be as faithful to his trust as the minister who sees no deep moral maladies around him. No man is fitted to withstand great evils with energy unless he is impressed by their greatness. No man is fitted to enter upon that warfare with moral evil to which the ministry is set apart who is not pained and pierced by its woes,—who does not burn to witness and advance a great moral revolution in the world."—"Works" (page 276).

A sentence from his address at the dedication of Divinity Hall, Cambridge, 1826, brings this general idea to point in the ministry:—

"How often does preaching remind one of child's ar-

row's shot against a fortress of adamant! How often does it seem a mock fight! We do not see the earnestness of real warfare; of men bent on the accomplishment of real good. We want powerful ministers, not graceful declaimers, not elegant essayists, but men fitted to act on men, to make themselves felt in society."—"Works" (page 258).

Still another passage from the same address on the ministry but confirms the former:—

"We consecrate this institution, then, to that spirit of martyrdom, of disinterested attachment to the Christian cause through which it first triumphed, and for want of which its triumphs are now slow. In an age of luxury and self-indulgence, we would devote these walls to the training of warm, manly, generous spirits. May they never shelter the self-seeking slaves of ease and comfort,—pupils of Epicurus rather than of Christ! God send from this place devoted and efficient friends of Christianity and the human race."—"Works" (page 268).

"Everywhere I see a demand for the power on which I have now insisted. The cry comes to me from society and from the Church. The condition of society needs a more efficient administration of Christianity. Great and radical changes are needed in the community to make it Christian. There are those who, mistaking the courtesies and refinements of civilized life for virtue, see no necessity of a great revolution in the world. But civilization, in hiding the grossness, does not break the power of evil propensities. Let us not deceive ourselves."—"Works" (page 268).

THE VIRILE AGGRESSIVENESS.

These passages on the work of the ministry leave no doubt as to what Channing hoped from its efforts. Yet even these passages do not fully set forth his fearless and virile aggressiveness,—an aggressiveness the more impressive because of its tremendous reserve power and its broad-mindedness. An illustration of this is found in a letter to Rev. Adin Ballou in reference to the Hopedale community:—

"Your ends, objects, seem to be important. I see, I

feel, the great evils of our present social state. The flesh predominates over the spirit, the animal over the intellectual and moral life. The consciousness of the worth of the human soul, of what man was made to be, is almost wholly lost; and in this ignorance all our social relations must be mournfully defective, and the highest claims of man very much overlooked. I earnestly desire to witness some change by which the mass of men may be released from their present anxious drudgery, may cease to be absorbed in cares and toils for the body, and may so combine labor with a system of improvement that they will find it a help, not a degrading burden. I have for a very long time dreamed of an association in which the members, instead of preying on one another, and seeking to put one another down, after the fashion of this world, should live together as brothers, seeking one another's elevation and spiritual growth. But the materials for such a community I have not seen. Your ends, therefore, are very dear to me."

But perhaps the greatest witness to his virile faith in the principles of liberty are to be found in those passages in which he speaks of general social conditions. In a letter to William Rathbone, Esq., of Liverpool, July 29, 1836, he shows this virility.

"You write of the agitation and excitement in your country. I look on this state of things in the Old and New World calmly, not only from a general trust in Providence, but from considering the causes of excitement. It is the progress of intelligence, arts, wealth, and especially the waking up of men to the rights of human nature, to which we are to ascribe the present heaving agitation of society. That there are perils in such a period we see. Men open their eyes to discover such abuses and learn their rights, only to learn how they have been trodden under foot. They have the presentiment of a better state of things, and imagination founds on this extravagant expectations which it burns to realize in a moment. Here are dangers; but it cannot be that the development of the highest powers of human nature can ultimately prove anything but good. I rejoice,—not indeed without trembling—but still rejoice."

"The present is a new Era, and there must be jarring

till the new and the old have time to adjust themselves to one another."—Letter to George Ticknor, Esq.

"The late untoward events to which you refer do not discourage me as much as they do you. I expect the people to make a great many mistakes. It seems the order the Providence that we should grow wise by failures. Sometimes we learn the true way by having first tried the wrong one. I see vast obstacles to be overcome. To reconcile freedom and order, popular legislation and an efficient executive power, manual labor and intellectual culture, general suffrage and stable administration, equality and mutual deference, the law of population and a comfortable subsistence for all—this is the work of ages. It is to undo almost the whole past, to create society anew. Can we expect it to be done in a day?"

"What you call social science is in its infancy, I feel; and our whole civilization is so tainted by selfishness, mercenariness and sensuality that I sometimes fear that it must be swept away to prepare for something better. But amidst these evils, have not some higher impulses been given to the world? Is there not agrowing intelligence? Are not great ideas striving, however vaguely, in the common mind? The idea of human rights can never be stifled again. True, the vagueness of grand thoughts is perilous; but must they not pass through this stage before they become precise and practical? The spirit of Christianity seems to me to be more and more extricating itself from the pernicious dogmas in which it has been so long imprisoned. Christianity is becoming a new power in society. I expect from these causes no wonderful change. You and I shall not see the Millennium. The French Revolution may have been but the first volcano; but has not this terrible volcano done good?"

"But I stop. I wanted only to say that I see bright as well as dark aspects in the times, and that I approach the grave without the gloom which so often gathers over the mind in advancing years. On one subject I wish much to communicate with you, and that is the condition of the laboring classes, with whom I sympathize much. Important changes must take place in their state. They

must share more largely in the fruits of their toil and in the means of improvement. How this is to be accomplished is a problem which often exercises my mind. I wish I could see the way growing clearer."—Letter to J. C. Simonde de Sismondi, 1841.

These thoughts are not only to be found in letters, but also in public speech. In his address on "The Present Age," delivered before the Mercantile Library Company of Philadelphia, May 11, 1841, is contained the following powerful passage:—

"Communities fall by the vices of the great, not the small. The French Revolution is perpetually sounded in our ears as a warning against the lawlessness of the people. But whence came this revolution? Who were the regicides? Who beheaded Louis the Sixteenth? You tell me the Jacobins; but history tells a different tale. I will show you the beheaders of Louis the Sixteenth. They were Louis the Fourteenth and the regent who followed him, and Louis the Fifteenth. These brought their descendants to the guillotine. The priesthood who revoked the edict of Nantz, and drove from France the skill and industry and virtue and piety which were the sinews of her strength; the statesmen who intoxicated Louis the Fourteenth with the scheme of universal empire; the profligate, prodigal, shameless Orleans; and the still more brutalized Louis the Fifteenth, with his court of panders and prostitutes—these made the nation bankrupt, broke asunder the bond of loyalty, and overwhelmed the throne and altar in ruins. We hear of the horrors of the French Revolution; but in this, as in other things, we recollect the effect without thinking of the guiltier cause. The Revolution was indeed a scene of horror; but when I look back on the reigns which preceded it, and which made Paris almost one great stew and gaming house, and when I see the altar and throne desecrated by a licentiousness unsurpassed in any former age, I look on scenes as shocking to the calm and searching eye of reason and virtue as the tenth of August and the massacre of September. Bloodshed is indeed a terrible spectacle; but there are other things almost as fearful as blood. There are crimes that do not make us start and turn pale like

the guillotine, but are deadlier in their workings. God forbid that I should say a word to weaken the thrill of horror with which we contemplate the outrages of the French Revolution! But when I hear that Revolution quoted to frighten us from reform, to show us the danger of lifting up the depressed and ignorant mass, I must ask whence it came; and the answer is, that it came from the intolerable weight of misgovernment and tyranny, from the utter want of culture among the mass of the people, and from a corruption of the great too deep to be purged away except by destruction. I am also compelled to remember that the people, in this, their singular madness, wrought far less woe than kings and priests have wrought, as a familiar thing, in all ages of the world. All the murders of the French Revolution did not amount, I think, by one-fifth, to those of the massacre of St. Bartholomew's. The priesthood and the throne, in one short night and day, shed more blood, and that the best blood of France, than was spilled by Jacobinism and all other forms of violence during the whole Revolution. Even the atheism and infidelity of France were due chiefly to a licentious priesthood and a licentious court. It was religion, so-called, that dug her own grave. In offering this plea for the multitude, I have no desire to transfer to the multitude uncontrolled political power. I look at power in all hands with jealousy. I wish neither rich nor poor to be my masters. What I wish is the improvement, the elevation of all classes, and especially the most numerous class, because the most numerous class, because the many are mankind, and because no social progress can be hoped for but from influences which penetrate and raise the mass of men. The mass must not be confined and kept down through a vague dread of revolutions. A social order requiring such a sacrifice would be too dearly bought. No order should satisfy us but that which is in harmony with universal improvement and freedom."—"Works" (page 170).

"No man has a right to seek property in order that he may enjoy, may lead a life of indulgence, may throw all toil on another class of society. This world was not made for ease. Its great law is action, and action for

the good of others still more than for our own. This is its law, and we violate it only to our own misery and guilt."—C. L., 510.

"The sun, which is to bring on a brighter day, is rising in thick and threatening clouds. Perhaps the minds of men were never more unquiet than at the present moment. Still I do not despair. That a higher order of ideas and principles is beginning to be unfolded; that a wider philanthropy is beginning to triumph over distinctions of ranks and nations; that a new feeling of what is due to the ignorant, poor, depraved, has sprung up; that the right of every human being to such an education as shall call forth his best faculties, and train him more and more to control himself, is recognized as it never was before; and that the government is more and more regarded as intended not to elevate the few, but to guard the rights of all; that these great revolutions in principle have commenced, and are spreading, who can deny? And to me they are prophetic of an improved condition of human nature and human affairs. O, that this melioration might be accomplished without blood!"—"Honor Due to All Men." Works, page 72.