

# William Ellery Channing and Slavery

*Robert Michael Ruehl*

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William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) is arguably one of the most important figures in Unitarian Universalist history. He helped to define Unitarianism with his Baltimore sermon "Unitarian Christianity" on May 5, 1819; in this sermon, he clearly stated that Unitarians deny the trinity, they support reason in religion, they believe in the unity of Jesus, and they believe in the moral perfection of God. Furthermore, he supported freedom of speech after the murder of Elijah P. Lovejoy on November 7, 1837. Even though Channing did not agree with Lovejoy's use of violence to protect his abolitionist printing press, Channing saw the destruction of the printing press as being opposed to freedom of speech; this is clear in Channing's description of Lovejoy as a citizen who had "been murdered in defense of the right of free discussion." His congregation and fellow ministers saw Channing as an eloquent and persuasive speaker; Conrad Wright informs us that Channing had "a personal magnetism that stirred his listeners almost to the point of idolatry." Channing emerges as a leader who could stand for what was right and could bring his audience new religious sentiments.

With all of these positive traits, however, we also find many condemnations of his character. Many of these negative statements arose from his involvement, or lack of involvement, in the antislavery movement. In a biography of Harriet Martineau, the editor wrote that Channing "dreaded anyone who claimed, on behalf of the slaves, that their masters should instantly renounce that right of ownership...above all, he deprecated the admission of the colored race to our ranks." William Lloyd Garrison wrote to Amos A. Phelps on December 16, 1835 about Channing's small book on slavery; in this letter he told Phelps, "It makes me laugh (there is something, too, of ineffable contempt within me) to see the parade which some of our would-be abolitionists are making about the little book of the great Dr. Channing on slavery! The only portions of it which are of the least consequence or value, are the sheer moral plagiarisms which he has stolen from the writings of the abolitionists: the rest is a farrago of impertinence, contradiction and defamation." The Southerners also registered their

frustration with Channing. They said that his style of preaching would not be popular in the South, and Rev. E.L. Bascom in Savannah declared that “Dr. Channing & The Christian Register have done much to ruin the cause of liberal Christianity—I mean—Christianity in its purity—by leading man to believe & the orthodox to say—that Unitarianism & Abolitionism are identified.”

From across the Atlantic, however, some British Unitarians supported Channing’s opposition to the institution of slavery. In fact, British Unitarian minister George Armstrong was attracted to American anti-slavery efforts because of Channing, and the British published Channing’s *Slavery* and gave it unofficial support.

With all of these various positions, therefore, one is left with a confused picture. Channing emerges as a man who took an active role in speaking out against orthodox religious oppression, slavery, and limits on freedom of speech. On the other hand, he also emerges as a person who diminished the reputation of the Unitarian denomination, a person who plagiarized ethical thoughts, and a person who failed to see the full humanity of the African slaves. The task of this paper, therefore, is to clarify who William Ellery Channing was in relation to the institution of slavery. The conclusion from this brief examination of Channing’s life will be that he was not atypical in the nineteenth century in relation to slavery. He vacillated between contempt for the institution and genuine empathy for the slaveholders. He saw the slaves as humans, but not of equal status with white people. Channing had great religious insights for his time, but his thoughts about the nature of the slaves and the freed Africans were quite common for the nineteenth century.

Most of the historical information on Channing has not explored how he could be such a representative New England clergyman with strong humanitarian beliefs based on a loving God, humanity’s likeness to God, and the progressive nature of humanity, but still hold racist thoughts. When one looks to the literature on Channing, it is clear that his strength was not his activity in the fight against slavery. The various biographies on Channing and the books on religious history and theological development in the nineteenth century focus more on Channing’s thoughts, his sickly nature, his tendency to abstain from controversies, and his agreeable and influential character. With the exception of Douglas Charles Stange’s books about slavery and the Unitarian denomination, scholars largely have overlooked the role of slavery and racial thoughts in Channing’s life. This paper will try to reverse this trend and uncover Channing’s life in regard to the issue of chattel slavery.

To accomplish this task, this paper will unfold in the following way. First, it will explore the nature of slavery in America and New England. Second, it will show how Channing’s life was not heavily impacted by slavery until he visited Virginia and St. Croix. Third, the paper will show how his temperament kept him aloof from social reforms. The final portion of this paper will explore how this analysis is important for today’s church. The significance of this paper is that it shows us that no

matter how progressive Unitarian Universalist ideas are and no matter how well respected Unitarian Universalist leaders are, there is always room for a critical examination that allows us to be sure that we are not taking an active role in supporting systematic oppression or standing by quietly while it happens. This analysis of Channing's life calls the Unitarian Universalist church and its members not only to understand the nature of oppression, but to take an active part in dismantling the institutions that create it—whether they are in the larger society or within our denomination.

To begin this process of examining Channing's life, the paper will look at his social context. During the formative years of America, an ethos of racism existed. To understand Channing and his beliefs about slaves and Africans, it is necessary to understand the larger social setting in which he was raised. To facilitate this understanding of Channing, this paper will show that racist thoughts permeated America and New England. It will then examine Channing's outlook on slavery and emancipation. This will show that Channing's focus on the inferiority of Africans was common.

To understand this belief in the inferiority of Africans, it is crucial to look at America and see how the larger culture expressed its beliefs in the superiority of Euro-Americans. Many Puritans and early religious settlers in America viewed themselves as a chosen people living in a chosen land, and many held racist ideologies at the time when they landed on North American soil. As America went through its birth pangs and tried to expand, however, the schism created by slavery and racist ideas was felt throughout the country and in most churches. The debate over slavery had a significant impact on American culture and played a crucial role in the formation of the new country. Various denominations opposed or supported slavery, and the different beliefs about the moral and religious nature of slavery caused numerous denominational splits.

In 1845, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church decided that slaveholders should treat their slaves as immortal people, but they also stated that the Bible upheld the institution of slavery. Furthermore, in 1849, the Presbyterian Church decided that slavery was a civil institution and should be addressed through political means; slavery was not a topic the church should address. Similarly, the Methodists experienced discord over the slavery debate. They strongly condemned abolitionists in 1836; antislavery Methodists seceded and formed separate churches between 1841 and 1843, and in 1844 delegates spent almost two weeks in controversy over the issue of slavery.

Even with all of this controversy, it is clear that during the first Great Awakening, Africans were given significant leeway. Since the revivals focused on immediate experiences that led to conversions, slaves had an easier time becoming a Christian. They did not have to sit through religious education classes and overcome language barriers; furthermore, these revivals allowed oppressed people to participate. It was at these religious revivals that Africans could preach; although many slaves were illiterate, the revivals provided an opportunity for them to share their religious experiences with others. They did not have to read the Bible; they only had to communicate to others how

God had touched their lives.

This emotional approach to religion, however, is quite different from the Puritan ethos and the later outlook of the emerging Unitarian denomination in New England, which promoted Christianity as a reasonable religion focused on virtue and self-culture. This focus on reason over emotion led to the condemnation of the revivals. Not only did the revivals oppose the rational nature of religion in the New England Congregational tradition, it also gave Africans a status that was unacceptable. Charles Chauncy criticized the revivals because they let Africans preach. The revivalists were not respecting the social barriers of New England: Africans should not have been allowed to preach the word of God; that was the domain of rational men who could lead people to worship in an unemotional way.

Like others who looked down upon Africans, it is clear that the revivalists also did not see Africans as equals. They believed in giving them a level of freedom, but they believed that slavery was necessary. Whitefield argued that slavery was valid according to law, and he also believed that slavery was essential to the developing nation's prosperity. He finally purchased a plantation in South Carolina with approximately seventy-five slaves; he did not feel bad about this because slavery helped to convert Africans to Christianity.

W.E.B. Du Bois commented on how African Americans have a "double consciousness." This double consciousness arises from being a person with dark skin in a country that celebrates whiteness; it arises from African Americans trying to be true to themselves, to their religion, and to a nation founded on racism. This double consciousness, however, is not an isolated problem. The burgeoning American nation also revealed a double consciousness. The country as a whole opposed and supported slavery. Churches would argue for the humanity of the slaves, yet they would also uphold the institution of slavery. These conflicting beliefs were present throughout the country and existed prior to Channing's birth and throughout his life. After viewing these conflicting beliefs in New England, the paper will turn to Channing's beliefs to show that he was as conflicted about the issue of slavery as the rest of the country.

As the paper now turns to colonial New England, it is clear that the territory depended on slavery in a different way; it was not like its Southern neighbors. Because New England did not have a climate that was suitable for large-scale farming, slaves were expected to perform jobs outside of the agricultural realm. Unlike the more agriculturally focused South, the slaves in New England had to be trained in various trades. "To meet the demands of New England's diversified economy, the slave had to be more skilled and more versatile than the average plantation Negro accustomed to the routine cultivation of a single crop. The New England slave had to be equally at home in the cabbage patch and in the cornfield; he must be prepared...not only to care for stock, to act as servant, repair a fence, serve on board ship, shoe a horse, print a newspaper, but even to manage his master's busi-

ness.” Furthermore, because slavery was not as necessary for production in New England as it was in the South, the average number of slaves per household remained quite small; in fact, in 1790 (ten years after Channing’s birth in Rhode Island), the average number of slaves per slaveholding household was under two slaves.

In Connecticut in 1774, the African population was only 3.2%. In 1775, New Hampshire’s African population reached approximately 1.1%. In 1776 in Massachusetts, Africans only made up 1.5% of the population. In 1774, Rhode Island had the largest African population, which reached 6.3%. In 1790, the total African population for New England totaled 16,822. The South, however, had imported 400,000 slaves and had “an American black population of more than 4,000,000” by 1860. Moreover, since New England was not heavily dependent on slave labor like their neighbors in the South, the slaves were not subjected to forced procreation to breed more slaves. The common practice of forced reproduction was unnecessary in New England; in fact, many New Englanders tried to make sure that slaves did not procreate too rapidly because of the lack of work for them. The interaction with Africans in New England, therefore, was greatly decreased compared to the Southern states. This also means that New Englanders were less likely to experience the severity of the slave system in the South. The decreased need for slave labor, the smaller population of Africans, and the lack of slave breeding gave New Englanders a different image of slavery. Although slavery unquestionably was an oppressive system in New England, the need for extra training and more skills allowed the slaves to impact their masters in a different way.

The education of New England’s African slaves reveals that the institution put more stock in their slaves. For many masters in New England, an educated slave (one who knew elementary reading, writing, and arithmetic) was more valuable to the master because of the many jobs the slave was expected to complete. The education of the slave “was fostered by kindly-disposed masters, members of the clergy, and by religious organizations.” Although there was a racist ethos that permeated New England, masters in New England interacted with their slaves in a different way. Much of the South focused on limiting the slaves and creating laws forbidding the teaching of reading to slaves, but in New England they interacted with the slaves on an intellectual level. Although the slaves were still chattel, there was more of a “human” component in New England. Through the different needs of New Englanders, the slave was allowed to develop more talents, and more talents exhibited more personhood. Although held as chattel in New England, slaves were treated less like an animal of the field and were entrusted with greater responsibility.

Throughout this brief introduction to slavery in America and New England, clearly no matter how the slaves were treated in America, they were still seen as being less than a person. The Constitution supported this outlook in the clause that defines slaves as “three fifths” of a person. The churches also could not agree on how to address the slavery issue. They tried to make it an issue for politics,

but others felt the necessity to confront the institution from a religious perspective. Often when people did discuss the end of slavery, they did not believe in immediate emancipation. This emphasis on immediate emancipation did not develop until the 1830s, which William Lloyd Garrison strongly supported with his newspaper, the *Liberator*.

Even with this strong support for immediate emancipation, many abolitionists were guided by racism. Even the Unitarian Theodore Parker, a strong supporter of immediate emancipation and an armed protector of fugitive slaves, believed that “the African race is greatly inferior to the Caucasian in general intellectual power, and also in the instinct for Liberty which is so strong in the Teutonic family,” and he also believed them to be “a very docile people.” Furthermore, the reason that black abolitionists formed separated voluntary associations to fight chattel slavery is because white abolitionists failed to understand the true severity of the slaves’ plight. Africans understood that emancipation was just the beginning; it was a necessary step. More action, however, was necessary. They knew that the struggle would have to continue. Freedom did not mean equality; they were aware of the fact that political, economic, and legal equality were things for which they would have to fight. As they struggled for full humanity and dignity, they often had to separate from the white abolitionists because of the racism they experienced. This conflicted thinking was not just part of the larger American ethos, nor was it only a small part of New England’s culture, but it also permeated Channing’s thinking.

As Channing grew up in this racist American atmosphere, he encountered slavery at an early age. His family held slaves; in fact, one of their slaves carried the young boy to school, and they tended to his needs during his youth. Many merchants in his home state of Rhode Island took part in the rum trade in exchange for human merchandise, so his home town was accustomed to seeing slaves. This atmosphere, however, did not allow him to see the full evils of slavery. In other words, Channing had experienced slavery as a youth, but the different nature of slavery and the smaller African population did not give him a full picture of slavery. He experienced it in a very limited way, yet he experienced a “towering psychological wall” that kept him somewhat separated from black people. Slavery, undoubtedly, had been removed from Channing’s life at an early age; the racial component, however, would remain with him. His experience of slavery was brief, but the racial attitudes in New England became his own. This limited experience and the dominant racist view formed the Channing we have come to know through his writings and as a leading minister.

After graduating from Harvard in 1798, he went to Richmond, Virginia to work as a tutor; it was during this period that he encountered slavery in a different way. Up to this time, there is little evidence to show that Channing had thought much about the institution of slavery. In his memoirs, it is clear that his time in Richmond awakened him to the evils of slavery. He stated that the condition of master and slave was not natural and that slavery was degrading. These insights arose from

visiting the slaves on his employer's plantation. He would take food to the slaves, sit and talk with the slaves, and once when his employer was gone, Channing was put in charge of them. Because of his experiences, he wrote, "The influence of slavery on the whites is almost as fatal as on the blacks themselves." This, however, did little else than awaken his moral sentiments; it would be another thirty-two years before he seriously would feel confronted morally by the institution of slavery as he was visiting St. Croix.

As one looks at his writings from his visits to St. Croix, it is clear that Channing is trying to understand the institution of slavery. His approach was ethical. In fact, on March 10, 1831, he wrote to Miss Roscoe, "I am more and more satisfied that the great evils of slavery are of a moral nature. It has sore physical sufferings, but these may be traced chiefly to moral causes." This ethical perspective is typical of Channing; he tended to look at social issues in an idealistic way. "The fatal defect of the idealistic view – that all problems are essentially those of man's relation to divinity – made... Channing... comparatively unaware of whole realms of experience." This lack of ability to see the fullness of the slaves' experiences was present in the same letter: "I believe that the enemies of slavery have exaggerated the bodily pain inflicted by the master on the slave... The slaves have food in sufficient quantities... In regard to labor, they never work as our mechanics and farmers do, who turn off twice as much work in a day. Still, they are overworked, I think, as the laboring classes are in all countries." It is this perspective that shocked many people. By placing the problem of slavery in an ethical, idealistic realm, Channing was incapable of seeing the true nature of suffering that the slaves were experiencing. By maintaining this idealistic outlook, he was able to compare the institution of slavery with other institutions and to come to the conclusion that others suffered more, and this helped to tone down the wickedness of the institution. In the end, one of the greatest evils he attributed to the institution of slavery in St. Croix is that the slaves work without any break "...from the beginning to the end of the year..."

This shows that Channing was dealing with the situation of the slaves in an abstract way. Instead of coming to understand slavery as an institution that was an assemblage of millions of suffering Africans, he looked at slavery and compared it to other institutions. He did not see the individuals who suffered; the suffering slaves largely were absent from his comprehensive image of the institution. It was the "institution" that confronted his moral sensibilities, not his ability to see the slaves as humans who suffered individually under oppressive conditions. It was this ability to turn the situation into an abstract ethical question that led him to sympathize with the slaveholders because he thought that the enemies of slavery had embellished the wrongs of chattel slavery.

In his final analysis, Channing did agree that the slaves should gain their freedom, but this had to be done in a responsible way. In his book *Slavery*, Channing wrote, "Slavery ought to be discussed... Slavery, indeed, from its very nature, must be a ground of alarm wherever it exists... But we may not,

must not, by rashness and passion increase the peril.” He believed that it would be wrong to free the slaves and to leave them to their own devices; they were not prepared for freedom. In a letter from St. Croix, he wrote, “In this degraded condition of the negroes, their friends must proceed with the greatest caution. They are now incapable of self-government, and may bring the cause of emancipation into utter disrepute, if trusted at once with privileges which they must abuse.” Because of the likely unethical nature of the freed slaves in Channing’s eyes, he believed that the best course was to allow the slaveholders to establish how the slaves would gain their freedom.

He argued that they knew the slaves’ tendencies better than anybody, and the topic of emancipation was to be left to slaveholders without interference from others. In other words, emancipation should not be immediate, the slaves needed guidance, and the slaveholders should be compensated for their losses. We see that Channing was ready to allow the power structure to remain unchanged. The slaveholders would still guide the freed slaves, and they would be compensated; the slaveholders would have the authority to define the limits of freedom, which would determine in what ways the freed Africans were “equal.” From these views, we see that Channing was not ready for a radical change in social structures and failed to acknowledge and analyze the racist ideologies that helped to keep chattel slavery alive in America.

In fact, Channing simply redefined the institution of slavery; he clearly supported the power structures that gave the institution of slavery its existence. The slaveholders remained in power, which the government would support. When the slaveholders freed the slaves, the former masters would be compensated and given the privilege of being the overseers of the slaves. Their knowledge would be invaluable; it would allow the slaveholders to control a supposedly morally immature African people. Channing’s inability to see the full humanity of Africans allowed him to replace one oppressive institution with another.

All of this shows that he replaced the institution of slavery with a newly defined power structure that kept Africans as social, intellectual, and moral inferiors. Instead of having the Africans defined as “slaves,” they would now be “free” under the watchful eye of their former master. Channing’s redefinition left the slaves in the same precarious situation; they would still be unable to guide their own lives and to make their own decisions. In Channing’s eyes, the awareness of the white race was needed to guide the more inferior race. Channing’s racist views guided his conclusions on how to eradicate the institution of slavery. In the end, he was ready to form a new racist institution with a different name. This “new freedom” gave neither freedom nor equality to the African people. His racist beliefs, however, were not the only obstacle that kept him detached from the anti-slavery movement. Channing also tended to become disheartened because of evil and to become skeptical of enthusiastic groups. He, therefore, preferred to address social issues on his own instead of seeking others to pursue social reform, and this had to be done on his own terms as his melancholy and

austere nature would allow him to act.

In fact, in 1842, Channing wrote, "I am too prone to shrink from the work. Reform is resistance of rooted corruptions and evils, and my tendency is to turn away from the contemplation of evils. My mind seeks the good, the perfect, the beautiful... You see I am made of but poor material for a reformer." Because reform included the contemplation of evil and kept his mind from the good, he had a difficult time taking part in reform movements. Such extended contemplation would bring him great suffering and the desire to turn away from reform. This tendency to become negatively affected by the wrongs of humans toward other humans, however, was only part of the problem.

Channing's Unitarian temperament also kept him from connecting with abolitionists. The theology of the Unitarians, as described in "Unitarian Christianity," shows that they are fond of reason in religion. In fact, the early ancestors of Unitarianism condemned the religious enthusiasm of the Great Awakening. This strain of unenthusiastic religious sentiment is found in Channing's condemnation of the abolitionists. In his book *Slavery*, he states that he approves of the abolitionists' cause, but he feels that they have done wrong. "They have fallen into the common error of enthusiasts, that of taking too narrow views, of feeling as if no evil existed but that which they opposed, and as if no guilt could be compared with that of countenancing or upholding it." He condemns them further by arguing, "Another objection to their movements is, that they have sought to accomplish their objects by a system of agitation; that is, by a system of affiliated societies, gathered and held together and extended by passionate eloquence... Truth can hardly be heard unless shouted by a crowd." In this, it is clear that Channing did not agree with the more boisterous nature of the abolitionist movement. He would rather see gradual emancipation through education and personal transformations than through movements that directly confronted chattel slavery. He supported this when he wrote, "One of their errors has been the adoption of 'Immediate Emancipation' as their motto."

It is clear that Channing did not see Africans as equal to whites, but he also abstained from supporting abolitionism because it offended his tendency to want to ponder the good; and too many abolitionists were enthusiastic and supported immediate emancipation. From this it is clear that his racist views kept him aloof from opposing chattel slavery. Immediate emancipation was clearly wrong because Africans were incapable of self-governance, and those who felt passionately about the abolitionist cause offended his sensibilities of how to oppose an unjust institution politely. Channing's tendency to want to retain the social order and his romantic racism allowed him to take a very minimal role in the slavery debate. Approximately, the last twelve years of his life contributed to the cause of abolitionism; this, however, was largely through writings and sermons. It is clear, therefore, that Channing's efforts were truly minimal in the fight for freedom and equality for African people. In fact, his lack of support arguably could have hurt the fight for the abolition of slavery more than his limited energy supported it. His prejudices and lack of vision are a warning to all Unitarian Universalists in today's age.

The life of Channing and his failure fully to support the antislavery cause reveal that blind spots can still affect one's liberal theology. Within the UU church, it is common to hear people praising the liberalness and openness of the church. It is common to hear how wonderfully accepting the denomination is and how all people are welcome. The life of Channing, however, demands that a careful examination of today's church be conducted in order to see if the Unitarian Universalist denomination is truly open to all people. Once this brief examination is complete it will be clear that the church is not as welcoming as many would like to think.

Statistics reveal a different story of the denomination's openness to African Americans. In 1998, only 1% of the ministers in the denomination were African Americans, and approximately the same percentage occurred in the congregations. This is the same percentage found in 1968. The least likely person to attend the UU church is a person who is a "person of color" and "under age 35." Furthermore, out of the 495 Unitarian Universalist churches that responded to the survey, 32% had no African Americans in their congregation, and only .4% had a congregation where African Americans amounted to over 40% of the congregation. To rectify this problem in 1992, the UUA General Assembly decided to start a "Racial and Cultural Diversity Task Force," which was meant "to Support a vision of a Unitarian Universalist faith which reflects the reality of a racially diverse and multicultural global village."

The low numbers of African Americans and the need for a racial taskforce can only lead the denomination to analyze carefully what is broken in our faith. By looking at Channing's racism and the few African Americans in our faith, all members of the UU denomination should be asking why the denomination has remained so "white." Could it be our worship and theology are not amenable to the larger African-American community? Could it be the less enthusiastic worship that keeps African Americans from worshipping in UU churches on Sunday? Or, could it be more insidious? Could it be that the UU denomination is racist? Conrad Wright addresses this issue tangentially; he wrote, "We talk a lot about our churches being open to all, regardless of social origins. Religion, we say, should transcend human divisions of class, color, or national origin...But when we choose Bach instead of Moody and Sankey, that's not what we are saying. What we are actually saying is this: we welcome everybody, but most especially we welcome those who prefer Bach to 'Amazing Grace' accompanied by arpeggios on the piano."

After examining Channing's commonplace thoughts on race and briefly looking at the statistics for African Americans in the UU denomination, it is more than possible that racism is present. It may not arise through the direct actions of the congregants as they interact with minorities who enter the church, but the denomination has to start examining how it interacts with minorities through its theology, worship services, and church functions. By choosing Bach over "Amazing Grace," is the denomination making a clear statement about who is welcome? After looking at Channing—a revered

religious leader—and seeing his racism, it is necessary for UU churches to carefully examine their conduct to ensure that they do not inadvertently continue the racism that was present in nineteenth century. It is imperative that Unitarian Universalist churches examine their assumptions and grow in a way that truly welcomes all people regardless of race. The UU faith needs to make sure that it does not proceed as Channing did, namely, with a life affirming theology buttressed by racism.

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