



Channing Primer One

The questions and answers in this religious primer were compiled and adapted from Rev. William Ellery Channing's sermon entitled "The Religious Principle in Human Nature". Rev. Channing's very words are incorporated as the answers to the questions. To read the sermon online visit: [The Perfect Life E-Book](#)

The Channing Primer Project is an initiative researched and facilitated by Maurisa Brown-Latham

Question: What sort of standards should a religion be measured by?

The following questions should be put forth:

Does it raise our thoughts to a Perfect Being?

Does it exalt us far above our own nature?

Does it introduce us to a grand and glorious Intelligence?

Does it expand our minds with venerable and generous conceptions of the Author of existence?

Question: What are some human limitations when we attempt to formulate religious beliefs?

All human systems are necessarily defective. They partake of the limits of the human mind?

We talk indeed of Truth, as if we held it in its fulness; but in religion, as elsewhere, we make approaches only to the truth.

Question: How do we see God?

in the mirror of our own minds

in His works

Question: How does God speak to us?

by His spirit in scripture and the human heart

in human language

Question: What is the earliest idea of God in the child and what does this reveal about our spiritual evolution?

The Religious Principle itself, by which we perceive and love God, is as limited at birth as are our other faculties, and is gradually unfolded.

As we advance, we throw off more and more our childish notions, purify our thoughts of God, divest Him of matter, conceive of Him as mind, refine away from Him our passions, and especially assign to Him the attributes which our growing consciences recognise as righteous and holy. Still, we are making approaches only, and slow approaches, towards God.

Question: What are the natural human faculties, affections, and powers that bear testimony to the existence of God and persuade us to be religious?

#1 Reason

Reason reveals that there is a:

unity of nature

unity of thought, design, and intelligent power

Reason proclaims that there is a:

One Omnipotent, All-comprehending Creator

#2 Conscience

Conscience reveals that there is a:

Ruler above us

Supreme Lawgiver

Conscience proclaims that there is a:

higher Legislator

#3 Affections

Affections reveal:

That our first affection awakened in the human heart **in relation to God** is a filial love, a grateful sense of parental kindness

We feel Approbation with which we look on disinterested benevolence

We feel compelled to revere what is higher than ourselves, to wonder at the incomprehensible, to admire the vast, to adore the majestic

We feel a sense of the love of the beautiful

Affections proclaim that there is an:

All-Beautiful

higher, holier Presence

Question: Why were these human emotions or impulses designed?

to be devoted peculiarly to the Creator

They delight in the infinite, and never can they find repose but in an Infinite Being, who combines all good.

Question: What are the two central motive principles that the human soul has that are fitted to raise it to God?

an insatiable desire for Happiness

...the longing for Perfection, for deliverance from all evil, for perpetual progress, the desire to realise in character that bright Ideal of which all noble souls conceive.

Question: What is the strongest love which the human heart has ever felt?

has been that for its Heavenly Parent

Question: What constitutes a wise man or woman?

...the wise man is distinguished by detecting continually whatever is low in his apprehension of God, and by casting it away for more exalted views.

Question: How is truth constantly exerted upon us?

Truth is exerted in every dictate, encouragement, warning, reproof of conscience and reason, in every secret longing of the soul for freedom from error and evil and for growth in wisdom and virtue.

Question: As far as religion is concerned, what should be our highest aim?

to give it life and vigour

Question: How is love towards God placed within our reach?

...it is so placed by the Inspiration which He incessantly pours on every human being.

Question: Man has the power to combine and direct the spiritual elements of his/her being. Name two ways in which this power can be used to spiritually uplift him/herself?

his power to free the intellect from prejudice and open it to the influx of Truth

his power to disengage the heart from degrading selfishness and to commune with God by disinterested love

Question: Does man possess his/her spiritual power without needing assistance?

No.

His power consists in ability to seek and use assistance from nature and from fellow-creatures.

Above all it consists in ability to seek and to use Spiritual Influence from God.

Question: How is Spiritual Influence gained from God?

by aspiration and by effort

Question: What kind of relationship can we attain with God?

We may cherish a reverence and attachment to Him more profound and devoted than the affections with which we embrace parent, and child, and dearest human friends.

Question: How do human beings achieve spiritual death?

The saddest spectacle in this or in any world is a rational and moral being, smitten with spiritual death, alive only to what is material and earthly, living without God and without hope. Beware of this inward death, this insensibility to the Presence, the Authority, the Goodness of our Heavenly Father.

Question: What is the remedy for spiritual death?

Let us retire into ourselves, and become conscious of our own nature and of its high destinations. Let us not profanely debase or destroy it.

Question: Name four mental ways in which we can enter into a living communion with God?

Let us each put forth our best force of Intellect in gaining clearer and brighter conceptions of the Divine Being. We must consecrate our loftiest powers of thought to this sublime reality.

We must not leave to others the duty of thinking for us.

We must not be contented to look through other's eyes.

We must exercise our own minds with concentrated and continuous energy.

More Wisdom From Rev. William Ellery Channing

Thus we see that human nature is impelled by affections of gratitude, esteem, veneration, joy, not to mention various others, which prepare us to be touched and penetrated by the infinite goodness of God, and which when directed to Him, constitute piety.

More Wisdom From Rev. William Ellery Channing

This the heart was made for worship, and worship it will.

The Infinite Spirit must be revealed to us in the unfolding and operation of our own Spirits, or we shall never truly know Him.

This emotion of Reverence is a perpetual impulse in the soul towards God.

Channing Primer Two

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Question: What is Channing's advice concerning the study of the Christian Revelation?

Again, in studying the Christian Revelation, we must take our views of God from what is clear rather than what is obscure, from the simple teachings of Jesus rather than from the dark reasonings in some parts of the Epistles. Still more we are to learn the Divine Character in Christianity, not merely from passages which expressly describe Him, but from the character of Jesus Christ, who came to be an image of the Father, and also from the character which Jesus thinks to form in us-that is from the precepts of this religion; for these are intended to exalt us into the likeness of God.

Question: What are the three sources of knowledge that guide us toward an understanding of the Character of the Supreme Being?

the express declarations concerning God-the virtues manifested in Jesus Christ- and the virtues which he inculcates

Question: Is Revelation our only source of spiritual light, explain?

No.

The great design of Jesus Christ is to teach us to see God everywhere, in Nature, in Providence, and in the Human Soul.

Question: What does Jesus teach us about God?

He perpetually points to God's works for instruction, and to His manifestations through humanity. And we cannot comprehend him aright, if we do not go beyond Revelation, and take lessons in religion from all that we observe, enjoy, and suffer. Jesus came, not to shut us in a Book, but to open the universe as our School of spiritual education.

Question: What are the most important precepts when utilizing our intellect for the sake of acquiring just views of God?

With this we must join obedience to God's Will, so far as we know it, or all intellectual effort will avail us little. We may indeed by study, or by living among enlightened people, acquire a just theory in regard to our Creator. But it will be Theory only. It will be a knowledge of words more than of realities—a vague superficial apprehension—unless the mind prepare itself by purifying obedience for an intimate knowledge of God.

Intellectual learning helps a man not a step towards God unless conjoined with inward spiritual discipline—government of the passions, reverence for conscience, and growing development of good principles and affections within.

Question: How might we come to know God's Purity?

God Purity, or aversion to sin, may be read and talked of, but is never understood, until conscience within us is encouraged to reprove all forms of evil. The solemn and tender reproof of this inward monitor alone enables us to know the moral displeasure of the righteous Lawgiver, in whose name and with whose authority it speaks.

Question: How might we come to know God's Goodness?

...we know nothing of it intimately, until a Spirit of Love, bearing some resemblance to His own, springs up within; until, through some conquest over the selfish principle, virtuous benevolence begins its work in our minds. This it is that helps us to comprehend the Father, to recognise and respond to that Love, which shines forth from every region of creation.

Question: How might we develop a love of God with all thy heart, soul, mind, and strength?

Let your fervent prayer be to Him to animate you in your conflict with bad passions and habits, and in steadfast obedience to His Will. With this purifying purpose of obedience, read the Scriptures; and the simple passages, in which Jesus speaks of his Father, will open on your minds with new brightness. In this temper study the character of Jesus; and in him, who was the image of the Father, you will learn to see more and more distinctly the fulness and freeness of Divine

Benevolence. In this spirit of obedience look on nature, and observe the works of the Creator, and their beauty and harmony will become more touching, till gradually heaven and earth will grow eloquent in their Author's praise. In this spirit look into your own minds, observe what is good and great in the minds of others, and the Infinite Mind will more and more appear to you in his crowning creation, the human soul. And finally, with this purifying purpose of duty, pray for the Divine Spirit, and you will receive it. A secret Influence will aid your efforts after oneness with the Holy One. Peace, silent as dew, will distill on you from heaven.

Question: What is the religious experience of someone who has ascended by degrees to a living communion with our Creator?

...you may be favoured with those blessed seasons of universal light and strength, of which good men have often spoke, in which the mind seems warmed by a new flame, and quickened by a new energy from on high, and which, though not miraculous, still bring with them a near consciousness of the Divine Original, and come like the very Breath of God upon the soul.

Concluding this Primer: One and Two With the Closing Words of Rev. William Ellery Channing

I close with re-affirming the truth that I have aimed to impress. Religion is not an unnatural or unattainable good. Its germs exist in us all. We have, each of us, the spiritual eye to see, the mind to know, the heart to love, the will to obey God. We have a Spiritual Nature that may bear the image of Divine Perfection. Glorious privilege! Let us not cast it away. Let us not waste our souls on perishable objects. For these souls may become Temples for indwelling Divinity. They may even partake of the glory and the blessedness of the Living God. May we all, through a just exercise of intellect, and a sincere and purifying obedience, enjoy this gradual illumination and sanctification, which are the beginning of Heaven! You will then learn how cold is the most earnest language of the preacher, and how inadequately the loftiest human eloquence can unfold the blessedness of a spirit making progress towards fellowship with the All-Perfect One.