

Ebenezer Gay's Natural Religion

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First Parish in Hingham/Old Ship

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This venerable church is at a crossroads; we are called to look at where we're going as we start to construct a new building to replace the Parish House and as we enter into a search for the next settled minister to replace Ken. This sermon is written and delivered in the belief that sometimes the best way to ascertain where you're going is to look back at where you've been.

In a Life Learning class, we have been talking about a newly started movement in liberal religion, that I have been a part of, called Religious Naturalism. Today's sermon will dovetail with the last meeting of that class this Wednesday in which I hope to contrast twenty-first century Religious Naturalism with Natural religion as Rev. Dr. Ebenezer Gay described it in the eighteenth century,

So today let's take a little trip into the deep history of Old Ship and visit Dr. Gay, who is the most prominent of all the ministers over there on the wall plaque and the longest-serving minister at Old Ship. The reason Dr. Gay is well-known outside the town limits of Hingham is that he was one of three Boston ministers who developed the theological perspective that today we call Unitarian.

I have been privileged to have served the two remaining churches of those three ministers in existence today, First Church Boston, pulpit of Charles Chauncy and Old Ship, pulpit of Ebenezer Gay. It is no small task to steer an old ship onto a new theological course, it is particularly remarkable when the captain can set a new course without the congregation really being aware of it. Both Chauncy and Gay were well suited by temperament to change direction, to sail into uncharted waters from the New England Way to a radical Enlightenment marriage of religion and Reason.

Dr. Gay, who served this church from 1718 to 1787 is sometimes referred to as “The Father of Unitarianism.” That does not mean that the word Unitarian ever crossed his lips during his ministry. He spent the last years of his time here hosting thinkers who opposed the doctrine of the Trinity, and his successor Henry Ware “steered Old Ship into Unitarian waters,” but Gay knew well how to create change without fomenting unnecessary controversy.

He was, by all accounts, a calm and unflappable presence in the pulpit. He was a religious liberal through and through, but that doesn’t mean he was a political one. Through all the agitation which led up to the American Revolution, Ebenezer Gay was a staunch supporter of the British Crown and offered prayers every night for the safety and health of the royal family. Yet he maintained good relations with lay people and his fellow clergyman on all sides of the issue.

Many of you have heard the story of Gay in the years leading up to the American Revolution when the Hingham Committee on public safety tried to find out which of the known Tory sympathizers in the town might have firearms. Here is how the incident was described in Solomon Lincoln’s town history:

“The Committee, led by Theophilus Cushing, Jr. of South Hingham (the Cushings were ever a thorn in Gay’s side) arrived at the parsonage and Gay received them in his study. Standing before them, the tall, dignified old man asked the purpose of their visit. The leader responded that it was the duty of the Committee to ask about any arms which he might have in the house. Then

“[Gay] looked at them kindly, perhaps a little reproachfully for a moment or two before answering, and then said, laying his hand upon a large Bible on the table by which he stood, “There, my friends, are my arms, and I trust to find them ever sufficient for me.”

The Committee retired with some [haste], discomfited by the dignified manner and implied rebuke of Dr. Gay and the chairman was heard to say to his associates, as they passed out of the yard, “The old gentleman is always ready.”

But Gay is best known for his contributions to the theological stance that would, a half-century later, come to be called Unitarian. I would like to focus here on one speech which was given at Harvard in 1759 in the endowed Dudleian lecture series,

Before diving into eighteenth century theology, let's get our bearings. Calvinism was the flavor of Protestantism which the English Puritans brought to New England. Calvin believed that everything that ever happened and everything that would happen in the future was known by God, and, more importantly, God knew who was going to heaven and who was going to hell because these things were predestined. Calvinism denied free will and asserted everything that happened was predetermined. A few humans would be saved by God's grace, but they had no choice in the matter, and in fact couldn't resist salvation or any other aspect of God's will if they wanted to. Humans were inherently depraved.

The Enlightenment was in full swing as the eighteenth century progressed. John Locke saw society as a social compact, not as divine establishment, so no divine right of kings. Sir Isaac Newton conceived of the universe as run by strict mathematical laws, rather than a divine hand. Certain scholars of the Bible began to approach it not as the inerrant Word of God but as a book which could be criticized and analyzed like any other. And Reason was seen as the highest human faculty.

God as the force that made everything go was being elbowed out of the wheelhouse by math and science.

New England's congregational ministers were abandoning the Puritan theology they brought with them from the old world for Arminianism. It is named after Jacobus Arminius, a Dutch theologian of the late seventeenth century. He disagreed with Calvin's idea that all were predestined to go to hell or heaven, or that humans were inherently depraved, and asserted that people had the free will to decide to do right or do wrong.

In the middle of the eighteenth century in New England and elsewhere, there was a conservative movement called the Great Awakening which emphasized emotional involvement in worship such as rolling on the floor or speaking in tongues.. It took place more in camp-meetings and public places than in churches, and the clergy of the established churches viewed it with suspicion. The ministers spreading this

movement said they were trying to create “enthusiasm,” which is a word with roots in theos, “-God,” and -en, “within.” The Great Awakening ministers were trying to get attendees to express the powerful emotions of God within. In reaction, the established ministers such as Gay and Chauncey were asserting that religion is rational, the creation of a rational God, and not emotional.

With that context, let us proceed to Dr. Gay’s Dudleian lecture in 1759. His title is “Natural religion, as Distinguished from Revealed.” That title immediately invokes a distinction made by St. Thomas Aquinas in medieval times, though Aquinas never actually used the words “natural theology.” But Gay roughly has it right in his introduction which Mike Dwyer just read: “... Religion is divided into natural and revealed – *Revealed* Religion is that which God hath made known to Men by the immediate Inspiration of his Spirit, the declarations of his Mouth, and Instructions of his Prophets: *Natural*, that which bare Reason discovers and dictates: As ‘tis delineated by the masterly Hand of St. *Paul*, the Apostle of the Gentiles, in the words of holy Scripture now read – which I take as a proper and advantageous introduction to my intended Discourse on this head...” Revealed religion is in the Bible; Natural religion is outside your window.

But in the New Testament quote which forms the epigram of Dr. Gay’s discourse, St. Paul doesn’t quite stick to the distinction commonly made in theology between natural and revealed religion. Paul introduces a third concept, the Law. There was a crisis in early Christianity around the question of whether a non-Jew who wanted to convert to the Jesus movement had to convert to Judaism, which meant accepting the strict dietary and ritual laws and for males, undergoing circumcision. In the passage that Dr. Gay quotes from Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, Paul seems to want to give Gentiles a wide latitude in their Christian practice: “Gentiles who have not the Law, do by nature the things contained in the law, those having not the Law are a Law unto themselves, which does the work of the law written in their hearts.” The phrase “a law unto themselves” strikes the modern ear as a put-down, for we use that phrase to describe outlaws in the Wild West before the sheriff arrives. But I think Dr. Gay is using it to suggest that Paul means to say that Gentiles are by nature inclined to follow the law.

Dr. Gay tells an anecdote of a hermit in the desert being asked how he could “profit in knowledge” without people or books anywhere around him, and the hermit replied “I have one book which I am always studying and turning over Day and Night: the Heavens, the Earth and the Waters are the [pages] it contains.” Dr. Gay summarizes the lesson: “The Characters of the Deity are plainly legible in the whole Creation around us. And if we open the volume of our own Nature, and look within, we find a Law there written – a rule of Virtuous Practice prescribed.”

Now I need to put a word in here about this word “nature.” In my dictionary it has 14 meanings, not counting all the meanings for the adjective form “natural.” It can be a character or kind – as in, “he has a good nature.” It can mean all things which are not man-made as in, a “natural barrier to flooding.” It can mean the essence of something, as in “what is the nature of human consciousness?” To say that the book of our own nature has Law written on it is to use the words in two different senses in the same sentence, it seems to me.

And Dr. Gay agrees with me in the very next sentence of his discourse: “Religion and Law (divine) are words of promiscuous use.” I love that phrase. We would today say ambiguous, but promiscuous captures the meaning of ambiguous and adds a little spice to it. Gay goes on to say that these promiscuous words denote in general “An Obligation lying upon Men to do those things which the Perfections of God, relative unto them, do require of them.” Now what does that mean? How can the perfections of God require men to do anything?

Remember that he is comparing and contrasting revealed religion with natural religion. One of the startling things about the Bible is how specific it can be. The Torah, the five books of Jewish law, have long list of crimes and other controversies and the proper resolution of those cases. So you could expect to read them to find what they prescribe in particular cases that might come up in real life.

But you would get no such help from the so-called book of nature. Science can tell us a lot about what makes things work in the world but it cannot usually tell us what to do. “Is” does not lead to “ought.” The book of nature, it seems to me, is going to be short on specific remedies for specific problems.

Put it this way: you could take a bit of scripture, say the book of Leviticus, and run a court system out of it. You could not take a nature book like Audubon's Birds of North America and run a court system out of it.

Dr. Gay's first substantive argument is that Religion is, in some measure, "discoverable by the Light, and practicable in the Strength, of nature." You don't have to be circumcised as Mosaic law requires. You don't have to make a public confession of a conversion experience as you had to do in the early days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. So Gay gives us a religion that naturally provides knowledge and prescribes action. "The religion which is possible to be discovered by the Light and practis'd by the Power of Nature, consists in rend'ring all those inward and outward Acts of Respect, Worship and Obedience unto God, which are suitable to the Excellence of his all-perfect Nature, and our relation to him who is our Creator, Preserver, Benefactor Lord and Judge." Those are the things we owe to God. What are the things we owe to our neighbor? "Yielding to our Fellow-Men that Regard, Help and Comfort, which their partaking of the same Nature, and living in the Society with us, give them a Claim to." And lastly, what we owe to ourselves: "...in managing our Souls and Bodies, in their respective Actions and Enjoyments, in a way agreeable to our Maker, and conducive to our Ease and Happiness." This is not laid out in a book, but rather it springs from a natural "Sense of the Deity, imposing the Obligations and approving the Discharge of it."

All of these duties of religion stem from an appreciation of the perfections of God. But what about people who are not convinced of God's perfections or even of God's existence? Some people may be too stubborn, or too enmeshed in their own problems, to see God's perfection. Dr. Gay: "It may be questioned whether the reasoning Faculty, as it is in the bulk of Mankind, be so acute and strong, as from the necessary eternal Existence of the deity (which is as evident and uncontestable, as that any thing is) to prove all other perfections do belong to God to an infinite degree." This is a classic example of a circular proof. He asks his audience to assume the existence of God and the perfection of the world, and then tries to use each to prove the other.

Dr. Gay goes on to have some good things to say about the power of Reason, which was highly thought of in those Enlightenment times: "Reason

may know its divine Right to Govern, to maintain its Empire in the Soul, regulating the Passions and Affections; directing them to proper Objects, and stinting them to just Measures.” But the passions must always be under the control of the reason. No uncontained enthusiasm here.

What about right and wrong? Dr. Gay says:“ There is an essential Difference between Good and Evil, Right and Wrong, in many Cases that relate to moral conduct toward our Maker, Mankind, and ourselves, which the Understanding (if made use of) cannot [help] but discern. The obvious Distinction is founded in the Natures and Relations of Things. And the Obligation thence arising to choose the Good, and do that which is Right, is not (as I conceive) antecedent to any Law or Institution enjoining this upon us.

What does he mean, “antecedent?” I think Dr. Gay is here saying that the distinction between good and evil is found in nature before any laws are written to make it permanent or institutions are developed to enforce such laws, and it can be obvious to anyone who has the power of reason. This is “nature” used as “the state of nature,” a state before history or civilization begins. But it all sounds very vague. The law written on the heart of the Gentiles may be hard to access.

It is because the source of this good/evil distinction, Gay argues, is divine that it is accessible to all:“It primarily originates from the Will and Appointment of the Author of those natures, and founder of those relations, which are the grounds and Reason of it. And This Will is signified by his apparently wise and good Constitution of Things, in their respective Natures and Relations.”

In other words, Gay is here describing the effects on the cosmos and on all creation of having a God of Nature. “The Law of Nature is given by the God of Nature, who is Lord of All. He enacted it by creating and establishing a World of Beings in such Order as he hath done. He publishes it to rational Creatures ... in making them capable to learn from his Works, what is good and what is required of them.”

But religion is more than knowledge, it is also action “There is doing, as well as knowing, by Nature the Things contained in the Law of it. Knowing them is but in order to the doing of them.” Indeed, he observes, the knowing of them would be in vain if there were no capacity to do them.

The Deity set up the world to allow for the practice of virtue, and the proof of that is the soul and the self. “That Man is not merely so much lumpish Matter, or a *mechanical* Engine that moves only by Direction of an impelling Force; but that he hath a Principle of Action within himself, and is an agent in the strict and proper Sense of the Word. The special Endowment of his Nature, which constitutes him such, is the Power of Self -determination, or Freedom of Choice; his being possessed of which is as self-evident, as the Explanation of the Manner of its Operating is difficult. He feels himself free to act one Way, or another. And he is capable of distinguishing between different Actions, of the moral Kind; so is he likewise if choosing which he will do, and which he will leave undone.” In these words, Dr. Gay has given a clear nod to Arminianism, which is based on freedom of the will. Dr. Gay may be a veteran of debates on free will for he refers to the difficulty of explaining it.

After such an eloquent defense of Natural Religion, Dr. Gay goes on to say that there is a place for Revealed religion as well, for Natural Religion doesn't answer all questions. Consider Adam in the Garden of Eden: he would not be able to figure out the intricacies of God without some help from the Creator himself; “God made Himself and his Will known to Adam in some other way beside that of his creation.”

So Dr. Gay concludes there is room for both sides, for Natural Religion which we can have by using our five senses, and our faculty of reason and Revealed Religion which we can get from the Bible. He wants us to be as “Proficient” in religion as we might be in any other discipline. “It concerns us all to make Proficiency in Religion, answerable to our Capacities therefor, and the means and Helps afforded us thereto – that, having the Foundations of it well laid in our Minds, by convincing Reasons, and authentic Testimonies of Scripture, we go on to perfection: Which that we may do; -- Let us, as the Discourse now had, admonishes us, have a due Respect both to natural and revealed Religion: And not suffer our Zeal to swell so high, and move in so strong a Current towards the one, as shall prove a Drain from, and lower the Regard, which we owe to the other – He ends with a paraphrase of a well-known benediction: “Let us faithfully improve all the Light and Strength which natural Reason and divine Revelation supply, toward our knowing and doing *whatsoever things are true – honest – just – pure – lovely – and of good Report – in which there is any virtue, and any Praise*; and so make continual

Advance in Religion, 'till we come upon a *perfect* Man, in the reintegrated state of Nature – unto the *measure of the Stature of the Fulness of CHRIST*.

Amen.