

A Tea-Time Inquisition

Rev. Dr. Peter Hughes
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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We travel back in time with a dramatic presentation of a play, written by Rev. Dr. Peter Hughes, based upon the record of a meeting of Unitarian ministers in 1843 at which, over tea, the fate of the radical clergyman Theodore Parker was decided. The result of that meeting ever afterward defined the way that Unitarians applied the principle of tolerance and dealt with dissent.

The Play

(Scene: The Drawing Room of the house of the Rev. Robert C. Waterston in Boston.
Time: January 23, 1843, afternoon)

PARKMAN: Thank you, Mr. Waterston, for allowing us the use of your home for this meeting.

WATERSTON: It is my pleasure. Tea, Dr. Parkman?

FROTHINGHAM: I see that we have a quorum. And Br. Parker is here.

PARKMAN: Br. Parker, have you been given some tea?

PARKER: Yes, thank you.

PARKMAN: Gentlemen, it is time for us to begin. Therefore I call this meeting of the Boston Association of ministers to order. Having said this, I ask that we dispense with any subordinate formalities, and move to our only order of business today, which is to look into the controversy that has arisen surrounding Br. Parker.

FROTHINGHAM: There has indeed been no little controversy. All of which, we feel, puts this Association, and the members of our churches in a very bad light and is the cause of much dissension within our ranks. At our last meeting we had some discussion of what we might do to deal with this situation, but we felt a delicacy in discussing you and your affairs in your absence. However, we in the Association felt a difficulty in asking you to come: for, first of all, you are entitled to come to these meetings without invitation, and, secondly, given the present circumstances, such an invitation might look like a summons. But, in the end, we felt that unless specially invited you might not attend.

ROBBINS: Perhaps it would be best at this point to read the resolution composed by Mr. Gannett, passed at our meeting of November 28, which embodied the spirit of what was said by all parties on that date: "Resolved, that the Moderator of this meeting, Mr. Pierpont, be requested to inform Br. Parker, in the course of the following fortnight, that his writings and remarks have been the subject of conversation this evening, and that it is the wish of the Brethren present that the conversation be continued at the next meeting in his presence, and with his participation." This resolution was worded with great care and was debated for some time before it was adopted.

FROTHINGHAM: Br. Parker, I must insist, before we get started, that you are not to catechize us. Nor will we catechize you.

PARKER: I take the spirit of your wish to avoid doctrinal discussion, but I do not see any good that can result from it. Nonetheless, please proceed.

FROTHINGHAM: Br. Parker, you are making trouble, so much trouble that I can no longer have ministerial intercourse with you, though I hope to have friendly and social intercourse. The reason is the character of the book you have written. I charge you with two offences. First, your book, *A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion*, is vehemently deistical, using the word in the worst sense. Secondly, the book is not only not Christian, but it is subversive of Christianity as a particular religion, for it aims to dissolve Christianity in the great ocean of absolute truth.

PARKMAN: Under the present circumstances it would be an embarrassment for us to have ministerial exchanges with you. The book is not the only offence. The article on the Hollis Street Council is also bad, for it reflects on members of the Association. However, although I agree with Dr. Frothingham about the book, the doctrines of the book are not a matter of discussion. We agreed about that at our last meeting. Let us confine our attention to matters personally at issue between Br. Parker and the Association, to which he still belongs. This is the important thing. Br. Parker's opinion concerns us no more than any man's, except as he is connected with an ecclesiastical body which we help to compose, and for the character of which we are responsible. Br. Parker has been guilty of conduct unbecoming a member of the body, inasmuch as he has said and printed things reflecting on the conduct of the brethren. Br. Parker, what have you to say to this?

PARKER: It seems that there are two sets of offences with which I am charged: those in the book and those in the article I wrote for the *Dial* on the Hollis Street Council. To each of these I will say a word. But, first of all, on the matter of ministerial fellowship: I beg you to consider that I have never complained on that account. I have never felt an ill-natured emotion, nor uttered an ill-natured word, respecting you, on account of your withheld fellowship.

I would, however, tell the result of your refusing fellowship. Soon after I preached "The Transient and the Permanent in Religion" at South Boston, ministers refused to exchange with me. I have some very curious letters in my hands relative to that affair which might be printed after my death or before it. Some came from clergymen refusing to exchange with me. They had agreed to do so before. The result is this: some members of churches in the city asked me to come and to deliver five lectures on five subjects. I pleaded youth and inability, and refused. But they were not satisfied with that plea. They said, "You are excluded from the pulpits of the Unitarians for no sufficient reason. We want to hear what you have got to say. We can't hear you in the old way. Let us try a new one." I consulted two other ministers. They said "Go," and I went. I delivered these lectures in Boston and in five other places, before thousands of people, and printed them in a book. In 1842 some young men repeated the same arguments and called me to come and preach, continuously, my old sermons every Sunday evening. I thought it better to preach six new sermons, such as were needed for the times. I did this in Boston, you have seen the result. Others in other places made the same request. I went there also. That has been the effect on the public of your treatment of me. On myself it has had no effect.

My article on the Hollis Street Council was merely my own opinion on what I consider a disgraceful affair. I merely feel that an Ecclesiastical Council has no place in a liberal church. Some of you have put forth the claim that it has been a successful piece of diplomacy. But a courageous minister has been reprimanded for taking a stand that was proper, given freedom of the pulpit, and that was morally demanded. How could he not speak out? They were storing rum in the basement of the church? Yet you claim that the Hollis Street Church could be saved in no other way. It has been a difficult situation. It is no wonder that different men take differing views of the affair. I cannot expect others to take the same views as myself.

Now let me return to my book. It is curious that a theological book is to be discussed, and we are not allowed to speak on the subjects of the book, or to discuss the doctrines on which we differ, or are alleged to differ. However, I will avoid touching doctrine insofar as possible. Since I will not be catechized, I will try to avoid catechizing others.

Let me consider the first charge put up against my book – that it is Deistical. But all Deists deny the possibility of direct inspiration from God. Therefore, as inspiration is a cardinal point in my system, and I maintain that men are inspired just in proportion to their quantity of being and obedience, then I claim that I do not fall under the Deist label.

Now, let me proceed to the second charge. Though an author's opinion of his own work is of no value to others, I sincerely think this is a most Christian book. The other argument, that the book is subversive of Christianity, surprises me even more, for I had supposed it to be full of essential Christianity.

Christianity is one of three things: either it is less than absolute religion, or it is equal to absolute religion, or it is absolute religion and something more. No one, I will assume for argument's sake, will admit the first proposition. I affirm the second, and you the third. Therefore, if you will point out the precise quiddity that makes absolute religion Christianity, you will be doing a great service.

Other sects define the shibboleths of Christianity to their mind, but Unitarians have no symbolical books. Therefore, being a young man and not learned, I find a difficulty. Tell me, Dr. Frothingham, just what is it in which Christianity differs from absolute religion?

FROTHINGHAM: But I will remind Br. Parker, that he is not to catechize me.

GANNETT: In the article in the *Dial* on the Hollis Street Council, you held up the Council to the scorn and derision of mankind, representing us as a set of hypocrites and double-dealing knaves. You called the "Result in Council" a "Jesuitical document," and as I was one of the Council, and one of those that drew up the "Result," I contend that you have betrayed me, representing me as a double-dealing and base man. You have undertaken to weaken my influence and ruin my character with the world and with my own congregation, and so far as your influence goes you have done so.

PARKER: I am not responsible for any inferences which others have drawn, only for what I have written. One man has said that I slandered the brethren in my sermon of "Pharisees"; another said that I slandered them in the conclusion of the South Boston Sermon; and now Mr. Gannett contends that I have held him up to scorn in the article on the Hollis Street Council. I am not accountable for your inferences.

WATERSTON: Br. Parker has dipped his pen in gall when he has written, and his razor in oil.

PARKER: I have never printed or preached one line which any feeling of ill-will or sourness has sullied in the faintest degree. The things which sound so hard when I say them or print them are said wholly in sorrow, not at all in anger. I weep when I write them. I wrestle with myself afterwards, say I can't say them, I won't; but an awful voice of conscience says, Who art thou that darrest disobey thy Duty! So I say them, though it rends my heart.

ELLIS: Well, I, for one, do consider that you meant the Association in the "Pharisees" and in the South Boston Sermon. An orthodox gentlemen in the country said to me, "You have maddened Parker and in this way he shows his spite. He is in your confidence, and knows what you talk about in the Association and tells your secrets."

PARKER: As regards the "spite" and the being "mad" – the facts speak – the "maddening" began in May, 1841; the sermon was written in December, 1840. The "Pharisees" spoke of six classes of Pharisees; nobody complained but the ministers. I should be ashamed to say that I meant no personalities in either the "Pharisees" or the South Boston Sermon.

GANNETT: Since Br. Parker will not say that he did not mean us – I will take it for granted that he does. And there cannot be any argument that Br. Parker did not mean us in his article on the Hollis Street Council.

PARKER: If need be, I will condescend to say that I meant no particular and definite persons or body of men in

either sermon. I merely aimed to expose sin and Phariseism wherever they were – if in the Association, then there. But I had no individuals before my mind. However, the letter on the Hollis Street Council stands on different ground. There, it is plain whom I meant. I have nothing to alter or to add to that.

GANNETT: You called the “Result in Council” a “Jesuitical document.” I say it was a most Christian document.

PARKER: Then there is an honest difference of opinion between us.

GANNETT: Not an *honest* difference of opinion!

LOTHROP: You brought together a great deal of material about ecclesiastical councils, and about cowards, and knaves, and hypocrites. It means somebody – I suppose it means us. I did not read it very carefully, for I disliked it so much. To be sure you treated the writers of the New Testament in about the same way, and said the apostle James “roars like a fanatical radical.”

WATERSTON: You quoted the words of somebody who said, “Expect no justice of the Council” as if you endorsed them.

PARKER: I do not endorse them. As the words of a great and wise man, they require no endorsement of mine.

WATERSTON: But you applied them as if you expected no justice.

PARKER: I did so then, and do so now. I expected no justice from the Council at the time. When I wrote, I thought the “Result” a most “Jesuitical document,” and I think so still. However, I didn’t wish to write the article. I asked others to do so, but they refused. I consulted several persons, telling them the view that I would express and they said, “Go on.” I wrote carefully, deliberately, and conscientiously. I told one clergyman, one who has no affinity with me and is older than most of you, distinguished for his good sense and piety, what I had written before I published it. He said, “You are right, say it in God’s name.” I read it to another, one who has little theological affinity with me, and he said, “Well, it ain’t much after all for you to write, and I have but this criticism to make: that you have been too severe on Mr. Pierpont, and not half severe enough on the council.”

GANNETT: Well, Br. Parker can’t disown what he said. If he is conscientious, as no doubt he is, we can’t ask him to do so. I will say that I freely and from my heart forgive him, as I hope that God Almighty will forgive me, but I can never grasp him by the hand again cordially.

PARKMAN: Let us leave this subject and return to the book.

GANNETT: As you asked what is to be added to absolute religion and morality make them Christianity – I would add the miracles and authority of Christ, which you do not acknowledge.

PARKER: I make Christianity to be love to man and to God. Admitting that miracles were performed, for argument’s sake, I do not see how they affect the case – making true and a duty that which was not so before, or authorizing what was in fact true and a duty. But, further than that, I do not believe the fact of his working miracles as a general thing. I am by no means certain that the four Gospels come from the men to whom they are ascribed, and if they do, I cannot take their word in the circumstances of the case. I have no philosophical objection to a miracle – in my definition of it – but I only demand more evidence than for a common event.

YOUNG: This is enough. It is plain that Mr. Parker is no Christian, for Christianity is a supernatural and miraculous revelation.

PARKER: It might indeed be that, but it has not been shown to be such. It seems preposterous to make miracles the Shibboleth of Christianity. Each sect has its own shibboleth. The Trinitarians have the thirty-nine articles; the Catholics have the church, etc. Nobody has accused me of preaching less than absolute morality and religion. If these can exist without Christianity, then what is the use of Christianity? So I think it a mistake to make absolute religion one thing and Christianity something different.

WATERSTON: It is plain that we can't have ministerial intercourse with Mr. Parker. He denies the miracles!

PARKER: I don't think it depends on that. That is a theological matter at best. The difference began before the article on the Hollis Street Council, or even the *Discourses on Religion*. The theological lines were drawn immediately after the South Boston Sermon. I have a collection of curious letters on that theme, which I might publish one day. I was at first surprised at the effect that the sermon was having on the Unitarian ministers. I think the sermon was a poor one. I was sick when I wrote it. I read it to a friend before preaching it, and he said it was the weakest thing that I had written for a long time. I looked around to see who would stand by me, and in general I have not been disappointed. I knew the ministers pretty well. But in two...

BARTOL: Whom do you ...

FROTHINGHAM: Mr. Parker says there are two things, and I want to hear that.

PARKER: I have not been disappointed in general, but in two persons I have been disappointed – grievously disappointed.

ROBBINS: Since Mr. Parker finds the feeling in respect to him so general, I think that it is his duty to withdraw.

WATERSTON: Yes, he has compromised our position amongst the other churches.

GANNETT: And has hurt our usefulness in our own congregations. That is a real interference.

YOUNG: He must ask to withdraw.

PARKER: If my personal feelings alone were concerned, I would gladly resign. But, as the right of free inquiry is concerned, while the world standeth I will never do so.

FROTHINGHAM: If this were a body of free inquirers, and not of Christian brethren, I myself would soon withdraw.

PARKER: Why then ask me to withdraw? Theological agreement in all things is not necessary to our union. Look at the case of Dr. Freeman. Dr. Freeman was for so many years a member of the Association, disagreeing with the rest so much in opinion, that they never exchanged with him.

FROTHINGHAM: The case is not in point, for Dr. Freeman was not alone in being a Unitarian among Trinitarians.

PARKER: Indeed! Did *they* say so?

FROTHINGHAM: But the difference between Trinitarians and Unitarians is a difference within Christianity; the difference between the Association and Mr. Parker is a difference between Christianity and no Christianity.

BARTOL: But that is the very point in question. What is Christianity? And what is it that puts Mr. Parker outside of it?

GANNETT: We do not deny that you are a Christian man, but only that your book is a Christian book. This is on account of the miracles being rejected.

PARKER: But the man belongs to the Association, not the book. And, besides, what makes the book unchristian?

WATERSTON: But, Mr. Parker, were you not a member of the Association, you certainly would not, with your known opinions, be admitted. Now, either you have changed your opinions since you came in, or concealed them when you entered. Whichever be the case, you should withdraw.

PARKER: I was not examined as to my opinions on admission, and I was not asked to promise never to change them. If I have done you an injury then you have the remedy in your hands. You can pass a vote of expulsion at any time. But it is a new thing to make miracles the Unitarian shibboleth of Christianity. A few years ago, it was said in the Association that "Christianity once rested on two grand pillars – prophecy and miracles. Dr. Noyes knocked down the first; George Ripley, toppled the latter; yet Christianity stood." If I remember right, it was Dr. Frothingham who said that.

FROTHINGHAM: True. I do recollect something about the two pillars. But I did not say that I was one of them who said Christianity did not rest on the two. Still less did I say that George Ripley had knocked down the miracles.

PARKER: That is not how it was understood. A few years ago Dr. Frothingham, I asked you how you reconciled the conflicting accounts in the four gospels about the appearance of Jesus after the resurrection. You told me that you don't attempt to reconcile them, that you look upon them as mythologico-poetical, fact and fiction jumbled together. Are you not yourself an infidel?

PARKMAN: Mr. Parker, it was understood that you were not to catechize us.

PARKER: It is not my wish to do so. Only to relate what was said at a meeting of this body.

PARKMAN: But Dr. Frothingham's private views are not to be the subject of our conversation.

PARKER: They are not private, he said them to me, and not in confidence. Dr. Frothingham, do you not to some degree share my liberal sentiments?

FROTHINGHAM: Mr. Parker, ever since I saw that the new liberality was employing itself in defacing the monuments and breaking the images of the ancient reverence—in flouting the holy guides of the past and making inroads in the "vast obscure" of mystic or philosophical speculation, I ceased to be a liberal.

PARKMAN: Dr. Frothingham, there is nothing that you need explain. Let us get back to business. The issues before the Association are fairly plain. Mr. Parker will you resign or no?

PARKER: As I told you before, no. My duty is clear.

PARKMAN: It appears that it would be pointless to go on like this. I move that we release Mr. Parker from further examination.

YOUNG: But a decision must be made. And it must be for him to resign.

PARKER: I will make no such decision.

BARTOL: I think he has decided. There is no uncertainty in his mind. And he is quite sincere. The confusion

must lie on our side. Mr. Parker has taken what I consider to be a courageous stand. I do not stand with him in many of his opinions, but I greatly respect the manner in which he upholds his conscience. Since we are unable to reject his doctrine, I think that we ought to rejoice in the fellowship of a man whose sincerity and conviction lends credit to us all.

GANNETT: I have concluded that it is time to put aside our disputes. No one can say that we have kept them hid. For months we Unitarians have been urged from without and within to denounce, or renounce, Mr. Parker, and we have as of yet not found out a way to do it. It is indeed strange work for us. It is not our way to pass votes of ecclesiastical censure. Nor can we exclude any man on a theological basis, as we were ourselves excluded from fellowship with the Trinitarians. I believe that even as we are distinct from them in doctrine, much more are we separate in ecclesiastical practice. Therefore, no matter what the world might say of our association, I think that we must be willing to take the principle of free inquiry with all its consequences.

So far as our denomination is concerned we have little fear of the result; so far as Christ and his religion are concerned, none. Truth is stronger than error. Christianity is too divine to be overthrown by the mistakes or the denials of men. All that is required of us in the present exigencies – either as its defenders or its disciples – is to speak the truth in love: “the truth,” for that is what we owe to our Master; “in love,” for that is what we owe to our brethren; “speak,” for that is what we owe to ourselves.

I wish that I could embrace you as sincerely as my heart urges me to, Mr. Parker. While I still cannot exchange my pulpit with yours, our differences being so great, I cannot hold to my earlier rash statement. Your bravery and sincerity cannot be entirely divorced from a true Christian nature. Mr. Parker, please give me your hand. (shakes hands)

ROBBINS: I am sorry, my dear friend, whose feelings and whose virtues I so much esteem and love that we differ so much in our opinions on theological questions. It may be that you are in advance of us all in theological knowledge. It may be that your soul is purer and more virtuous than ours and that this lifts you out of the reach of our sympathy. Or, my brother, it may be that you have speculated too boldly—that an intensely active intellect and much learning have carried you beyond the safe foundations of the Eternal Word. These are questions which await the judgment of the Spirit of Light. I do not wish to attempt to answer them. I only wish to regard you without a “beam in my own eye.” I cannot satisfy myself with this expression of my state of feelings towards you—being a sad bungler in speech. I wish my breast had a window ...

PARKER: (in tears) Please ... I’m sorry ... excuse me, Br. Robbins. Please do not get up. I thank you all for your kind words. It is all too much ... Let me go now. Thank you, Mr. Waterston, for your hospitality. (shakes hands with him)

WATERSTON: Good-day, Mr. Parker.

(Parker reaches the door. Frothingham is already there)

FROTHINGHAM: (shaking hands) I should be really grieved if this difference between us should interrupt any feelings of personal good will. It was necessary that I should be honest and candid with you. I feel easier now that I have spoken. It will give me great pleasure to see you in communications as cordial as they ever were. I hope to have a visit from you very soon.

END

Commentary

Let me tell you a bit more about Theodore Parker. After the 1843 meeting he always remained a Unitarian minister. A special huge congregation, with Sunday attendance over 2000, was created for him in 1845. In the 1850s he became a more political figure. A staunch abolitionist, he assisted fugitive slaves and led a demonstration against the abduction of a prominent ex-slave. In a sermon called "Of Justice and the Conscience" he said,

"I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

This, of course, was borrowed by Martin Luther King. Another statesman indebted to Parker was Abraham Lincoln, who borrowed and refined Parker's description of true democracy as a government "of all the people, by all the people, for all the people." Parker was not a pacifist. He raised money to promote slave rebellion and was one of the "Secret Six" who sponsored John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry.

He died in 1860, in Italy, where he had traveled for his health. He is buried in the English cemetery in Florence, along with Elizabeth Barrett Browning and many other famous writers and artists.

But his story does not end with his death. His radical theological views were preserved in a collected works edition, edited in the 1860s by the pioneering British feminist Frances Power Cobbe. She said that Parker "helped me most importantly by teaching me to regard Divine Inspiration no longer as a miraculous and therefore incredible thing; but as normal, and in accordance with the natural relations of the infinite and finite spirit."

After the American Civil War, Parker inspired generations of young Unitarians. One of these, the minister Eleanor Elizabeth Gordon, said that she preferred Parker to Emerson. As a young woman she found Emerson's generic use of the words "man" and "men" irritating. But she read Parker's works with a "thrill of moral and religious enthusiasm." When she was much older she claimed that Parker was a hero "I have never been compelled to take down from the pedestal."

In his prayers Parker appealed to God, not only as a father or as an abstract power, but as a mother as well.

“O Thou who art our Father and our Mother, may we know you as you are, as you reveal yourself in the clear depths of our soul. ... O Infinite Mother, who is the parent of our bodies and our souls, we know that you have us always in your charge and care, that you cradle the world beneath your eye, which never slumbers or sleeps. We would be conscious of your presence within us, that thereby we may enlighten what is dark, raise what is low, purify what is troubled, and strengthen every virtue that is weak in us, until, blameless and beautiful, complete and perfect, we can present ourselves before you.”

Parker is famous for having written the sermon, “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity.” There is much that is transient in the thought of Parker, as there is in that of any person. But, greatly in advance of his times, his ideas continue to shape post-Christian Unitarian thought. And his story tells us that we cannot reject anyone for divergence of thought, for those very ideas, though unpopular now, may, in the end, be the ones that lead us onward into the future.

-- Peter Hughes