

The Rev. Thomas K. Beecher and Park Church: Important Influences on Mark Twain's Ideas about Religion

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トーマス・K・ビーチャー牧師とパーク教会 マーク・トゥエインの宗教観における重要な影響

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Abstract

Mark Twain's views on religion are considered by many to be somewhat unorthodox. This paper suggests the possibility that along with other influences, Twain was also influenced in these views to some degree by the Rev. Thomas K. Beecher and the Park Church in Elmira, New York.

Key words : Mark Twain, religion, Park Church, Rev. Thomas K. Beecher

(Received September 30, 2005)

抄 録

マーク・トゥエインの宗教観は、多くの学者達が非正統的であるとみなしているところのものである。そのマーク・トゥエインが受けたであろうさまざまな影響のうち、本論は、ニューヨーク州のエルミラにあるパーク教会及びトーマス・K・ビーチャー牧師がマーク・トゥエインに及ぼしたであろう影響について言及する。

キーワード : マーク・トゥエイン、宗教、パーク教会、トーマス・K・ビーチャー牧師

(2005年9月30日 受理)

Much has been written about Mark Twain's ideas about religion. He has been called a cynic, a skeptic, and an atheist. In my view, he was none of these. There is no doubt, however, that he was a questioner. He would not accept a traditional or orthodox view simply because it was traditional or orthodox. There is also no doubt that Twain was very familiar with the Bible and began becoming familiar with it from a very early age. He tells how in his earlier days at a Presbyterian Sunday school in Missouri, he was required to memorize verses from the Bible for which coupons worth a certain number of points were given. Upon getting the required number of points, a person would receive his own new copy of the Bible. Twain says that he worked out a scheme and bartered with other children for their coupons to receive enough points. Later, though, in his works he uses verses directly from the Bible, paraphrases of the verses, and Biblical metaphors as well, all of which show that he had studied the Bible quite thoroughly. Still many of his religious references border on irreverence.

While Twain's parents, especially his mother, compelled him to attend the comparatively liberal Presbyterian Sunday school, he still found it too constraining and even at his young age began his rebellion against the acceptance of formal orthodox religion. "The editors [of *The Bible According to Mark Twain* (1995)] note Twain knew the Bible well, repeating his claim to have read it all before age fifteen, and that the fallacies young Sam Clemens observed in Biblical texts troubled him his entire life" (Britton, 1997, September).



Photo 1 Park Church, Elmira, New York

Later, when Twain lived in Elmira, New York, he and his family were associated with the Park Church, an independent Congregational church. During my recent visit to Elmira, I was privileged to be given a personal tour of Park Church by the current sexton. During the tour, he provided some insights into the character of Rev. T. K. Beecher who was the pastor of the church in Twain's time.

One insight was that Beecher's overall philosophy was that church activities and

everyday activities should not be considered as separate entities, and so the church was designed with many spacious extra rooms that could be used for town meetings, social club meetings, recreation including Beecher's and Twain's billiard games (City of Elmira, 2005), teen-age group meetings, and other meetings and activities that would otherwise have been held in city buildings.

For Twain, this was an important change from his church experiences as a child.

In April 1869, Twain praised the new and unorthodox Thomas K. Beecher "Park Church" in Elmira because "The idea is to make a child look upon the church as only another home, and a sunny one, rather than as a dismal exile or prison" (Elmira 125). Twain approved of Park Church because this "sunny" environment had not been his youthful experience in Hannibal, where Clemens learned to forever associate Christians as unyielding fundamentalists (Emerson "Quarrel" 33). What the Beechers offered was an emphasis on the "fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man" (Emerson 36) (Britton, 1997, September).

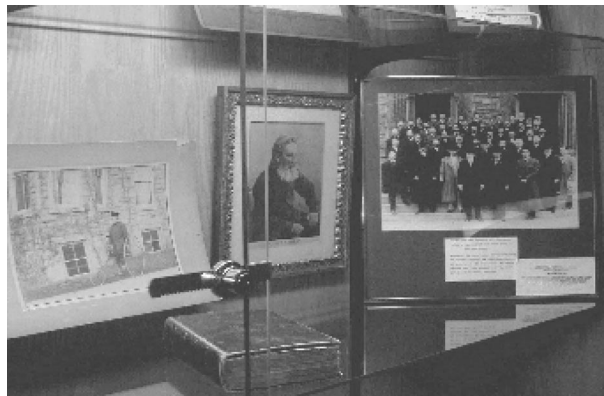


Photo 2

A display in Park Church showing Beecher and his original bicycle design (left), Beecher portrait (center), and the men of the congregation including Mark Twain (right)

The sexton also pointed out that as shown at the left in the above photo, Beecher was an inventor. He designed an original type of wheeled conveyance similar to a bicycle but which had two large rear wheels for propulsion and one small front wheel for steering. Using this unusual conveyance, he found it easier to negotiate Elmira's cobblestone streets. The sexton continued to say that Beecher had also designed a prevailing wind air circulation system into the roof of the church which caused the natural wind currents to flow through and cool the church during the summer services. These wind currents, according to the sexton, were occasionally strong enough to blow open the church doors. However, perhaps the most unusual feature of Beecher's church is that there are symbols of seven different world religions placed on the roof of the church.



Photo 3 The interior of Park Church around the time Twain attended

These features were unique, especially for the times, and they certainly peaked Twain's interest. In fact, in an article that Twain wrote for *The New York Times*, July 23, 1871 titled "A New Beecher Church," he describes the church and his feelings about it and its designer, the Rev. T. K. Beecher. At the beginning of the article, he says, "...but when a Beecher projects a church, that edifice is necessarily going to be something entirely fresh and original. It is not going to be like any other church in the world; marked with as peculiar and striking an individuality as a Beecher himself" (Twain, 1871). Beecher's well-known family including brother Henry Ward Beecher and sister Harriet Beecher Stow were considered to be individualists. As a particular example of individuality shown in the church design, Twain states that "there will be no bell, because any ignoramus knows what time church service begins without that exasperating nuisance" (Twain, 1871). Twain also points out that the church was built large enough that the "second story" of the "third building" could provide a permanent home for a "missionary" woman who will be given the charge of "looking after the poor and sick of the Church" as well as other women who will care for the church itself (Twain, 1871). Twain concludes by saying that "One could have told, with his eyes shut and one hand tied behind him, that it originated with a BEECHER—I was going to say with a lunatic, but the success of the plan robs me of the opportunity" (Twain, 1871).

Beecher's and the church's "success" are attested to by the fact that Beecher was the pastor of the church for 46 years (Sherman, 2004), and I think there can be no doubt that he and Mark Twain had a good number of personal discussions in the church. Many probably over games of pool in one of the parlors. It is logical to assume that they discussed questions of religion as well as social justice, and that some of the thoughts they discussed likely found their way into Twain's writings.

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