A Play by Any Other Name Would Be Puritan Folly: the Unitarian Embrace of Theatre

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SECTION ONE: DISSECTING HISTORICAL PRECEDENCE

As American Unitarianism grew to maturity in the early nineteenth century, what separated it from Puritanism and Trinitarianism was the tenet that God is only one being, as opposed to the Holy Trinity. Another difference separating Unitarianism from orthodox Protestantism was the acceptance of the arts, specifically theatre, which, before the pre-Elizabethan era, and with the exception of morality plays, was considered an immoral artform. The acceptance of theatre was an oddity for Unitarians, since they were already avoiding the labels of "deist" or "infidel." The absence, however, of imputed sin in Unitarian beliefs opened opportunities for Unitarians to appreciate all types of art, including forms not particularly aimed to "justify" the artist, and in such a manner as to lead Unitarian minister Reverend Henry Whitney Bellows to defend theatre in the foremost Unitarian newspaper, *The Christian Inquirer*. The current essay examines these uncollected and previously unremarked columns, drawing conclusions about Bellows's outlook on theatre and the pertinence of his observations, though tangential, for the relation between contemporary media and evangelical religion.

To understand the Puritan mindset towards theatre, we need recall that, prior to Queen Elizabeth I, theatre and its participants were ostracized by the Catholic Church and society. For instance, pre-Elizabethan Shakespearean playhouses were built outside the City of London's walls, likely because the origin of theatre was pagan, with the first occurrence of acting theorized

to have been performances by ancient tribal folk re-enacting moments of glory (i.e., slaying or tracking an animal) (Hitchcock 21). The large theatrical stage began with the Greeks in 6th century BCE in honor of the god Dionysus. Thespis, a follower of Dionysus, began competitions that invited both writers and actors to perform for large crowds—hence the term "thespian" (Fischer-Lichte 8-10). Queen Elizabeth I popularized plays by inviting Shakespeare's troupe to perform in her castle, beginning an age that welcomed theatrical performance. Still, English Puritans, angry with Elizabeth's policies governing church admission to all persons within a given parish, likely still did not find public amusements, like plays, conducive to a Christian propriety (Cooper).

When English Puritans first immigrated to New England and Virginia, establishing their Congregational and Anglican settlements, they modelled their society largely on Catholic precedent as concerned the arts. Since the Puritans did not regard as pure the public amusements popularized in the Elizabethan era, they discouraged the creative faculties. This deviation exists because American Trinitarians were under the impression that—as a group oppressed by European governments—they were the New Jerusalem, mirroring the Hebrew people whom God had chosen as his special nation in the Old Testament. The Puritans were thus preoccupied with sanctifying themselves in order to enter the kingdom of God. Sanctification led to the Puritans' being encouraged to work to show dedication to God. In that milieux, the arts (theatre, visual art, and literary writings) suffered. If one were to write in a non-sanctified fashion, as was the case with Anne Bradstreet in "Verses upon the Burning of our House," such indulgence was unusual. Bradstreet deviated from Puritanism when she wrote that her "pleasant things in ashes lie / And them behold no more shall I," thereby expressing sorrow over loss of material items (Bradstreet & Ellis 40-41). Such literature nonetheless indicated the nascent desire of writers like Bradstreet

to branch away from sanctified, approved activities. Indeed, Bradstreet's poetry illustrates the point that there are those who transcend the cultural norms and expectations of their society. However, as suggested by one commentator, a lack of personal antagonism towards the arts, in the Puritan era, was usually forfeit to overarching cultural norms (Crouch 8). That said, I offer, in this study, inquiry that acknowledges the contributions of a unique individual while also understanding that it does not represent the cultural norm as a whole.

Such restraint on artistic expression arguably led to macabre entertainment. For instance, torture and humiliation were events that the townspeople ventured out to see. While these phenomena reinforced Puritan teachings and law, people would regularly attend for the mere show of it all. The most infamous series of these punishments took place in the Salem Witch Trials, predicated on fantastical theories; the jury and judges, comprised of prominent men in both the community and Meeting Houses, would devise tests with no scientific merit to determine if a woman were a witch (i.e., hanging a person on the basis of so-called spectral evidence). When the juries heard testimony, the narratives—consider Cotton Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World*—would often contain outlandish accounts and visions of women. Otherwise, innocent bystanders would be charged with the death of livestock and vegetation, or were said to have witnessed coven meetings. These trials were subject to public viewing, making them a main source of entertainment that also fulfilled the mission of supposedly sanctifying the name of God. Equally important and entertaining was public humiliation. Humiliation took on many forms, including

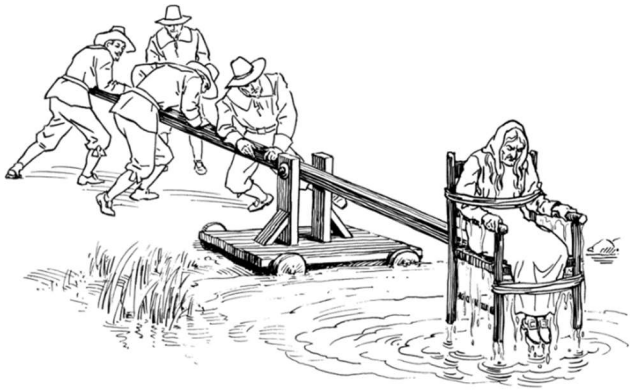

Figure 1: The Ducking Stool, a humiliation device used to torture Puritan women (Pearson Scott Foresman)

the pillory, letter-wearing (as told in *The Scarlet Letter*), and the ducking stool. I argue that such entertainment allowed Puritans to indulge in rare forms of catharsis to release stress and focus on the shortcomings of the individual being put on trial, rather than on themselves.

More conventionally, Puritans found entertainment in their own Meeting House rituals: while simple acts like singing Bible verses were common, more amusement resided in itinerant preachers who visited towns and attracted major crowds by emphasizing the fire and brimstone of hell and how all mortals deserved to perish. Among the less devout, such "shows" stood in for theatre and amusement. In examining the archetypes of *The Scarlet Letter's* Hester Prynne in relation to her town and comparing these characters to Puritanical society, one can discern the psychological impacts upon a society deprived of public amusements and, therefore, deprived of regular means of relief from mental stress (Hawthorne). The perspectives of Liberal Christians like Hawthorne signaled that a change was occurring in an American scene no longer deemed the "New Jerusalem."

The rise of Liberal Christianity soon led to the advent of Transcendentalism. It, too, valued positive outlooks on human nature. The main purpose Unitarians found in the church was that of attending to "the souls of men"[1] (*The Christian Inquirer*, April 12, 1856, p. 1 col. 2-3). This emphasis on the Church, while similar to the Puritans' view of the soul's needing to be nourished by sanctifying acts betokened mental wellness and seeing in human nature, and in the creative arts, attributes of the Creator. Such was the outlook of Rev. Henry Whitney Bellows, lead editor of *The Christian Inquirer*. He filled the newspaper with many sections promoting the arts: advertisements asking for art students and vouching for the integrity of art teachers; similar advertisements concerning musical instruments; analyses of writings by famous figures of the

[1] The Christian Inquirer, henceforth cited and parenthetically referred to as *CI* in this essay

time, such as Henry David Thoreau; poetry submitted by the audience; notices of art exhibitions; and, most surprisingly, essays defending the institution of the American theatre. [2]

I argue that the acceptance of the arts pertained to the understated need of Unitarians to keep the power of the church in American society. Also, to convert non-Christians, the Unitarians decided that, rather than shunning public amusements to keep of pure mind, Christians would have to accept both the performers and their performances. Moreover, the emphasizing of self-nature and mental health was in accord with the notion that Puritan public amusements were detrimental to Puritan believers and caused heightened anxiety. As a result of the Puritan leaders' immense need for control of the settlements' populaces, creativity was demonized while community work and God's sanctification were glorified. This led to extreme consequences, leading, for instance to Anne Hutchinson's public trial and execution as well as to the Salem Witch Trials. Hutchinson publicly spoke against works' being a form of discipleship, leading to her eventual excommunication and banishment. Her trial was, as were, of course, her banishment and humiliating accounts of her miscarriage and execution at the hands of the natives occupying the area. Stated otherwise, Hutchinson's banishment and tribulation served as forms of public amusement.

In the nineteenth century, however, Rev. Henry Whitney Bellows argued for the integration of Christians into theatre audiences in his "Address on the Relation of Public Amusements to Public Morals." A typed record of Bellows' speech appeared in the May 2, 1857, issue of the *Christian Inquirer*, accounting for the activities of a meeting of the American Dramatic Fund Association. Bellows argued that, while the theatre may not morally represent the

[2] For more general accounts of Bellows and his effort to staddle orthodox and liberal theology, see Walter Donald Kring, Henry Whitney Bellows (Boston: Skinner House, 1979), pp. 174-76); James Duban, "From Emerson to Edwards: Henry Whitney Bellows and an 'Ideal' Metaphysics of Sovereignty," Harvard Theological Review, 81.4 (1988), 389-412; James Duban, "Creative Christian Inquirers: Herman Melville and Henry Whitney Bellows (forthcoming, Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies).

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Figure 2: Musical Instrument Advertisement from The Christian Inquirer

interests of the Liberal Christian population, Unitarian patronage of theatre could productively beget change within theatrical productions. He further argued that Christians cannot continue to ignore public amusements solely on the grounds of their supposedly being morally culpable. Although this opinion was not the norm for the time, it aligns well with the idea that "amusement is not a thing to be afraid of; that it is a good and not an evil," sentiment consistent with the lack of public amusements in Puritanical society (*CI*, May 2, 1857 p. 2 col. 1-4). Bellows here affirms the belief that Puritan anxiety and a collective state of mental infirmity resulted, in some measure, from a lack of public amusements. Rather than affirming that sanctification of God leads to the justification of one's entry into the kingdom of Heaven, Bellows argued that love for one another and "brotherly sympathy with actors as a class" are valid arguments for supporting the arts (*CI*, May 2, 1857 p. 2 col. 1-4) and their importance for the wellbeing of Christian society.

SECTION TWO: THE PATH TO ACCEPTING THE THEATRE

Today's popular media show the effort of Bellows and other Unitarians to bring patronage to the arts. Not only does Christian culture accept theatre on a larger level, but many American denominations now have music as a part of their services. While the practice is

widespread, there has also been a separation of genres; for most genres of non-Christian music, a sub-genre of Christian music that evokes similar emotions has accompanied it. Music of that sort is now prominent in modern day Christian services—primarily in Baptist and Non-denominational churches—of which both experienced congregational leadership and everyday church-goers now could go so far as to consider religious music as tantamount to worship hymns. The Episcopal Diocese of Central Florida argues not only that music can teach about the Bible, but that it "allows for a direct connection with God in ways sermons can't or don't."[3] Puritan services, on the other hand, had not contained music, instead expressing liturgical readings lyrically in the form of psalms. The stark difference between music in Puritanical and other, later liturgies is best demonstrated by how open Unitarians were to music in *The Christian Inquirer*. When looking at the advertisements section in that newspaper, one encounters calls by musicians to find students. In *Figure 2*, an advertisement for a musical-instrument production company was included, as well as endorsement by someone with a doctorate in music. Considering that early Puritans discouraged the arts due to their seeming to have no productive merit for the colony. Thus, a nineteenth-century Christian newspaper promoting music and the arts connotes one vital, but often overlooked change between Trinitarian and Unitarian outlook.

I further argue that Unitarian-sponsored advertisements are vital to understanding the extreme shift of Puritanical to Unitarian outlook concerning the arts; indeed, it would be incongruous with Puritan outlook for somebody's having dedicated the years of intense study required to achieve a *doctorate* in

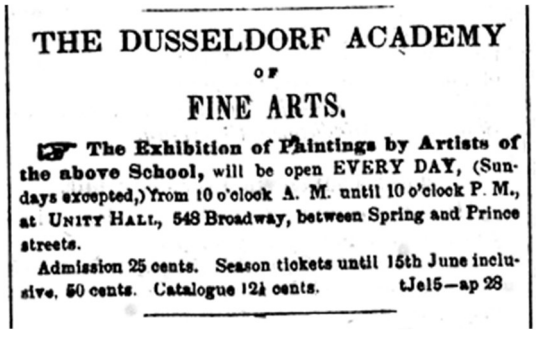
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Figure 3 An advert to attend a fine arts exhibition from The Christian Inquirer.

[3] The Episcopal Diocese of North Florida is a trinitarian diocese consisting of seven parishes. For further research into this diocese, visit https://www.diocesefl.org/

discipline other than Divinity. Additionally, to allow the advertisement by such an individual is arguably tantamount to endorsing the ability to research, enjoy, and perform outside of praising God (Figure 3). *The Christian Inquirer* posted such several years before Henry Whitney Bellows published his discourse concerning the theatre. I contend that these advertisements are documentation foretelling Bellows's and, by extension, the Unitarian liturgy's acceptance of theatre as a respectable profession. The allowance of art in any form, and specifically music and the visual arts, was a vital steppingstone on the path to Bellow's call for Christians to be patrons of the theatre.

SECTION 3: MODERN IMPACT

Complemental to the Unitarian mindset are the newer traditions of some community theatres to perform Christmas specials as well as for churches to have their own auditorium to dramatize biblical stories. Theatre's successor—and now sister art-form, cinema—have also been utilized to dramatize the Bible. For instance, the movies *The Case for Christ* (2017), *Heaven is for Real* (2014), and *God's Not Dead* (2014) were exclusively made for, and marketed to, Christian audiences. These movies harken back to the Puritan belief that "sanctification evidences justification." Movies in this category similarly focus on life issues and how a "true" Christian would react to them in a way that evidences God expectations and mercy. For instance, in *God's Not Dead*, the main character defies a philosophy professor who requires each class member to declare that "God is dead." The movie focuses on the hardship of being a Christian in a course that oppresses religious freedom. These Christian films, despite their modernity, often exude Puritan resonance, especially with regard to sanctification, though such productions end up "preaching to the choir." Such aesthetic dereliction is evident in rushed storylines and blatant caricatures of true believers. Thus, there is little surprise at the low ratings of such films. The

flaw resides the fact that the producers appear to forget that movie-goers of the 21st century wish to be entertained rather than converted.

Still, some cinema productions move beyond proselytizing. *The Truman Show* (1998); *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2005); and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) are all examples of this phenomenon. The latter movies, while not explicitly Christian, draw their stories from the Bible. This integration of Christian and non-Christian stories and symbolism often results in much higher audience engagement and, often, much deeper interpretations from critics than purely Christian media would evoke. *The Truman Show*, for instance, balances religious control and self-reliance, thereby resonating with Puritan and liberal-Christian interpretation of the Bible, leading to audience identification and personal interaction with the show's themes and values. Such audience engagement caters to the denominational and cultural differences that encourages pluralistic interpretation. Such engagement stands in opposition to the less-than-inspiring impact of Christian sub-genres that continue to stay in their niche rather than transcend boundaries, and in such manner as to have a more universal appeal. Indeed, just as Bellows had argued that patronage of theatre by Christians will influence public amusements to better cater to Christian beliefs, so modern Christian media should cater to Christians and non-Christians alike.

Such reasoning is derived from the Christian value of "spreading the word of God," a core tenet of the religion. Current Christian-based media are often not widely popular as a result of the diverse mixture of orthodox and liberal-Christian denominations within an audience. Each denomination holds different values, which make scripts like *God's Not Dead* ineffective in providing entertainment to even its target audiences. An additional consideration is that demonization of art forms still exists in modernity, as with the Christian sub-sect that believes

media portraying witchcraft, such as in the *Harry Potter* series, is largely Satanist and immoral. This is a consideration that, with further research, likely can be traced back to both European and American witch hunts. Certainly, demonization of this sort further sunders Christian and non-Christian media, as well as Christian and non-Christian audiences; the lack of unification in these matters likewise contributes to higher tensions in the population, as well as to higher tension towards the church as an institution. This strain on the church's relationship with society likely reflects the decreasing Christian population in contemporary America. Thus, Bellows's argument for reunification in the arts is still applicable to current Christian establishments.

Kanye West successfully unified artistry and liturgy in his *Jesus is King* (2019). This was the first album by the rapper in which he sings about his religious affiliation. Rather than performing at traditional venues in a modern concert format, West performed what he coined as "Sunday Service," a series of concert-like performances with accompanying choirs and re-written Christian versions of well-known pop songs. *Time Magazine* describes the album as mixing "choral refrains, soul samples, trap drums, and West's signature autotune, as he raps about not only Jesus but Chick-Fil-A and the IRS" (Chow). West was able to appeal to both his original audience with his original way of songwriting and performing, but also to reach new fans as he relates to everyday issues. Doctor Alisha Lola Jones, a University Lecturer in Music at the University of Cambridge, finds that West's performances and lyrics "play to a 'multiple consciousness' for younger black listeners who grew up listening to both gospel textures and hip-hop one-liners" (Chow). Jones' assessment of West's music is consistent with Bellows' view that Christians would enjoy a theatre that caters at once to the Christian psyche's craving for entertainment and religious gratification. In modern times, that bisociative Christian psyche is omnipresent among the American youth that are more likely going to listen to or know about

West's music due to the relevance of his main genre, that is, Hip-Hop/Rap, via popular channels of communication and interaction for young adults such as Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter.[4]

However, Kanye's entertainment-focused church services are not as far removed from mainstream Church liturgy as one might think. Recently, many Protestant church leaders have either begun "contemporary-style" places of worship or, at the very least, referenced pop-culture to relate to the parishioners and their everyday lives. In many church settings, traditional organs and stained-glass windows are now replaced with drum sets and colorful stage lights; hymns, with popular Christian music. This strategy was conceived by the Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement, specifically the Neo-Charismatism of the late 20th century, in which large congregations would be led by leaders emphasizing *charismata*, otherwise known as God-given gifts (i.e., speaking in tongues, healing, prophecy, etc). Gone were the liturgical rites that so often accompanied a sermon and, in their place, was an open space for church attendees freely to cry out and profess their emotions and vigor to a crowd appreciative of such excitement (Bartoş 26).

SECTION FOUR: CONCLUSION

Charismata, then, was arguably a "last straw" to fully integrate the stage and its theatrical associations with a religious doctrine that once fully shunned its showy nature. The presence of this integration appears throughout the United States in what is colloquially referred to as "megachurches." Although the megachurch has its own complicated history, the presence of stages and loud proclamations can be traced back to both Neo-Charismatism and perhaps even the production-like qualities of Puritan Meeting House Trials (Eagle 601; Resane 9). Modern

[4] This essay was largely finished before Kanye West's antisemitic social media posts in October 2022. However, it would be remiss to discuss his work in a cultural context without providing a disclaimer that this essay is only an investigation into West's Christian music and its influence, not a concession that West's hate speech on social media is an appropriate, nor Unitarian, means of outreach. All works in this essay are similarly evaluated.

protestant churches are often outfitted with a prudent communal area, whereas many megachurches feature light-adorned stages and elevated pulpits from which ministers can address large crowds.

Bellows' argument for the patronage of the arts was thus an act that has effectively pioneered the integration of Christian and non-Christian artistic cultures. The Unitarian and Trinitarian views of the arts are still vastly different and, as newer denominations of churches develop, such as the institutional form of the megachurches, more nuanced views have formed alongside them. Bellows did not know the Christian cultural impact of his words when addressing his fellow Unitarians, but it is now upon our generation to decide how such acceptance of the arts can either enhance or depreciate religious experience. Such implications fall onto the artists, writers, and ministry to discern whether created media transcends and creates work that can proverbially "reach across the aisle," provide relief and catharsis to audiences looking to find entertainment, and unify denominationally-divided Christian communities. Knowledge of Trinitarian and Unitarian views, the history of theatre, and how such knowledge relates to other artforms are all key concepts that inspire deeper analysis of more modern forms of the arts and their reception by American audiences.

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