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The Humanism of Dr. Peter Parker

Michael B. Holmes

Departments: History and Political Science

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On the opening page of Edward V. Gulick's biography on the life of Dr. Peter Parker, he defined him as "a nineteenth-century pioneer in the contact between the West and East, a hardline religious expansionist, a daring and gifted surgeon of wide clinical experience, and a cosmopolitan well known to our great-grandfathers but now almost entirely forgotten"¹ Written by Gulick in 1973 on behalf of the Harvard Studies in American-East Asian Relations, this definition represents a rather embellished and adorned view of the life of Peter Parker that omits the type of person he was and his character. Born into the nineteenth century, Peter Parker was by all accounts the son of New England farmers who wanted to find out what it was that he wanted to do with his life, and then, after his discovery of purpose, struggled to overcome the challenges of commitment. But no character assessments of Peter Parker are advantageous without an understanding of how religion impacted and shaped his life. As this essay will explore, the religion of Parker's life shaped not only his profession, which would be the work of a foreign Christian missionary in China, but how he viewed the world, his own character through critical self-examinations, and other people around him, such as those who were non-Christians. So, in contrast to the definition of Peter Parker given by Edward V. Gulick, the humanized picture of Peter Parker shows that from a young age, Parker was filled with misgivings and deep critical self-examinations of character, but he ultimately latched onto a sense of self-driven purpose shaped from the influence of his religion.

The early life of Peter Parker was transformative for him in shaping both his character and his deep connection to religion. In relevant background, Parker was born in Framingham, MA on June 18th, 1804. In a childhood that was dominated by a nineteenth-century agrarian lifestyle, his early years would be split between work on the farm with his father Nathaniel Parker and the development of a devotion to his religion. In describing the history of religion in his own family,

¹ Gulick, Edward Vose. *Peter Parker and the Opening of China*. (Harvard University Press, 1973), viii.

Peter Parker wrote that “my grandparents on my father’s side were Peter and Ruth Parker, who were professors of religion.”² This is significant as it explains why the practice of religion in his life at an early age, influenced by his family, was so strict in manner. Moreover, the strictness of religion in his life left Parker with no deep connection to it: “Prayer and preaching had no delights for me; they were seemingly unmeaning services; usually there was nothing in sermons that gave me pleasure but their close.”³ This quotation from Parker’s journals portrays the image of a young boy who is mostly uninterested and incurious with any aspect of religion in his life. However, this disinterest would not last, as it was his accounts of early education that show a shift in his thoughts on religion. An important event of his journal that sticks out is telling of his education on the Ten Commandments: “An incident at school which made an indelible impression on my mind when, as nearly as I can recollect, I was not more than six or seven years old. My attention was arrested by the remarks of my pious instructor upon the Ten Commandments.”⁴ After Parker described how his professor lectured the students on the seriousness of sins, he found that “the interrogation filled my soul with dread.”⁵ Thus is the emergence of a young man who came from a family of strict religious practice and had no interest in it, and who, in turn, started to develop deep emotional feelings on what religion and the act of sin means in his life.

The small step that Peter Parker took on the path of religion from his lesson on the Ten Commandments quickly turned into a deep dive in personal character questioning which, with profound effect, led Parker to question his own life. In essence, this is Parker’s first major turning point as he noted in his journal that “I passed the first fourteen years of my life in a state of

² Stevens, George Barker, and William Fisher Markwick, *The Life, Letters, and Journals of the Rev. and Hon. Peter Parker, M.D., Missionary, Physician, Diplomatist.* (Kessinger Publishing, 1896), 5.

³ Stevens and Markwick, *The Life, Letters, and Journals*, 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*

carelessness and indifference, at the expiration of which I was brought by the goodness of God to *a solemn pause*.”⁶ As seen in these lines, religion served as an awakening for Parker, and the turning point, which he described as ‘a solemn pause,’ would be soon repeated in his journal entries to come: “soon after this solemn pause, I became more apprehensive that all was not right; and the more I investigated the matter, the more this suspicion was deepened. Moderate convictions of sin also set in; and these grew deeper, the more I reflected.”⁷ Self-reflection on the convictions of sin became an integral part of his character development in his teenage years. This self-reflection was felt by Parker to the extreme and left him with dark thoughts on the meaning of his own life: “Thus was I troubled with these unwelcome thoughts occasionally for the most of a year, becoming more and more intense the oftener they returned; and they would frequently extort the ejaculation, *Oh, that I had never been born!*”⁸ The despair and dark feelings Parker noted in his journal seem to peak in intensity from this previous line, but are reproached once he opened up to his parents on his inner turmoil.

In a small magnification of the young Peter Parker in this time period, we can read how he described his daily routine and initial desires to give us a deeper insight into how he truly felt. Parker’s journals provide a deconstruction of his everyday life down to core themes of how he felt at the day’s close and how he viewed his purpose from there on out: “At night, when I retired to rest, the transactions of the day preceding would pass in review before my mind, and in everything, I found that I came short of duty. I would then seek forgiveness and pray for another day of trial.”⁹ In this summarization of a day, we begin to see that he keeps falling short of his own expectations of himself. In his daily trials of character, he concluded “I had not canceled any of my past offenses

⁶ Ibid, 8.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 9.

⁹ Ibid, 10.

but had been adding sin to sin.”¹⁰ His daily trials of character progress a cycle where he becomes more and more troubled, which comes to a pivotal moment where he finally opened up to his family. Parker wrote that while “engaged at work in the field with my father, wishing every moment an opportunity to unbosom my feelings to him.”¹¹ Parker then finally lays bare the thoughts that have been circulating in his head for quite some time. This following interaction of journaled dialogue between Parker and his father depicts the intensity and somber of his thoughts: “‘The world was not made in a minute.’ ‘True,’ said my father, ‘but we must leave it in a minute.’ Bursting into tears, I exclaimed: ‘Oh that I were prepared to leave it, and I should not care how soon.’”¹² Before Parker received transformative advice from his mother, he then asked his ultimate question to his father which was “what shall I do to be saved?”¹³ Parker wrote that “I did not ask the question because I had ever heard it before, but because it expressed the whole desire of my soul.”¹⁴ From his initial influences of religion in school to his restless daily trials of self-criticism, this moment was Parker coming to full grips with his inner demons.

Another subsequent turning point in the early life of Peter Parker comes with his mother, shortly after his previous conversation with his father, whom he described sets him at peace and onto a path to find his inner purpose. In a judge of his writings, it can be seen that Parker was suffering from a state of non-diagnosed depression. By living in a strict, nineteenth-century agrarian society, it can be assumed that his feelings were suppressed under the weight of family expectations of a sinless life to which Parker even contemplated death as a means of escape. This is shown as he later wrote in his journals “Indeed, I had secret longings to depart.”¹⁵ In a

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 11.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 13.

conversation with his parents, Parker's mother is the one who instructed him on how to deal with his troubled thoughts: "She pointed me to the Saviour of sinners and directed me how to go to him as a poor, unworthy creature; as an empty vessel desiring to be filled with his grace."¹⁶ Parker accepted this instruction to empty himself of his feelings as he wrote, "I felt helpless and undone; that I was indeed an empty vessel as it respected goodness."¹⁷ The notion of what an 'empty vessel' meant to Parker is important to discuss because through the instruction by his mother he was symbolically given an allowance to let go of all his troubling feelings and find inner peace. Following this conversation, Parker fell asleep and awoke to a feeling of rebirth: "I fell asleep and was sensible of nothing more till I awoke next morning when my first sensations were those of great nearness to God, and the Saviour seemed to me in reality . . . I felt I was not mistaken; my sins were forgiven and my distress was gone."¹⁸ This is by far the most important turning point in Parker's early life as he finally moved on from his state of depression and onto a path where he began to find his inner purpose.

From this event, Parker began to develop a strong interest in devoting his life to Christianity and in becoming a missionary. The pivotal moment that Parker experienced from opening up to both of his parents and accepting the advice of his mother had a transformative effect on his writing to come. Following his rejuvenation, Parker began to profess a newfound idea on what his life could be. Having already been significantly taken with Christianity, Parker latched upon it and found himself "willing to acquiesce in the will of god."¹⁹ This simply can be interpreted as following a life devoted to God and Christian teachings. Upon a deadly encounter with the measles, which makes Parker very sick and close to death, he bursted from the pages of his writing with a

¹⁶ Ibid, 11.

¹⁷ Ibid, 12.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 13.

newfound sense of purpose: “At length, I recovered and felt, as I never had before, a desire to profess Christ before the world, and to enjoy the privileges of the church.”²⁰ It can be inferred that Parker’s derived meaning in the church’s privileges were to be living in the graces of God, but, more importantly, this quotation is the first direct manifestation of Parker’s desire to become a missionary. We can see that there is great motivation in Parker to profess Christianity before the world and to help others be as connected to God as he is. From a young man who not long before was questioning his life, he would now go on to enter into a covenant at sixteen years old on April 15th, 1820 and would completely set his life towards the direction of missionary work.²¹

Parker’s interest in missionary work became more refined and deepened over the years as he also began to take interest in expanding his education. Parker made little mention of his early education as a young boy, but upon feeling a new purpose in becoming a missionary, Parker saw that continuing education would help to advance himself in the future. While he went on to become a graduate of both Yale Divinity School and the Yale School of Medicine in 1834, it was originally very challenging for him to conceive a secondary education given his family’s moderate socioeconomic status. This is a key part to understanding who Parker is because the circumstances of his childhood, such coming from a family of little wealth, have a monumental impact on shaping his own character as he becomes a very humble and gracious person over time. Although Parker’s father “could no way furnish the necessary means for education” he also told Parker that “it would be the first desire of his heart to give {him} a liberal education.”²² Parker eventually found other means such as sponsorships to begin his college education, but this instance of a close-knit family

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 14.

²² Ibid, 16.