

CHARLES ADAMS

SOME PHASES OF
SEXUAL MORALITY AND
CHURCH DISCIPLINE IN
COLONIAL NEW
ENGLAND

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Some Phases of Sexual Morality and Church Discipline in Colonial New England

In the year 1883 I prepared a somewhat detailed sketch of the history of the North Precinct of the original town of Braintree, subsequently incorporated as Quincy, which was published and can now be found in the large volume entitled “History of Norfolk County, Massachusetts.” In the preparation of that sketch I had at my command a quantity of material of more or less historical value, – including printed and manuscript records, letters, journals, traditions both oral and written, etc., – bearing on social customs, and political and religious questions or conditions. The study of this material caused me to use in my sketch the following language: —

“That the earlier generations of Massachusetts were either more law-abiding or more self-restrained than the later, is a proposition which accords neither with tradition nor with the reason of things. The habits of those days were simpler than those of the present; they were also essentially grosser. The community was small; and it hardly needs to be said that where the eyes of all are upon each, the general scrutiny is a safeguard to morals. It is in cities, not in villages, that laxity is to be looked for.” But “now and again, especially in the relations between the sexes, we get glimpses of incidents in the dim past which are as dark as they are suggestive. Some such are connected with Quincy... The illegitimate child was more commonly met with in the last than in the present century, and bastardy cases furnished a class of business with which country lawyers seem to have been as familiar then as they are with liquor cases now.”¹

Being now engaged in the work of revising and rewriting the sketch in which this extract occurs, I have recently had occasion to examine again the material to which I have alluded; and I find that, though the topic to which it relates in part is one which cannot be fully and freely treated in a work intended for general reading, yet the material itself contains much of value and interest. Neither is the topic I have referred to in itself one which can be ignored in an historical view, though, as I have reason to believe, there has been practised in New England an almost systematic suppression of evidence in regard to it; for not only are we disposed always to look upon the past as a somewhat Arcadian period, – a period in which life and manners were simpler, better and more genuine than they now are, – not only, I say, are we disposed to look upon the past as a sort of golden era when compared with the present, but there is also a sense of filial piety connected with it. Like Shem and Japhet, approaching it with averted eyes we are disposed to cover up with a garment the nakedness of the progenitors; and the severe looker after truth, who wants to have things appear exactly as they were, and does not believe in the suppression of evidence, – the investigator of this sort is apt to be looked upon as a personage of no discretion and doubtful utility, – as, in a word, a species of modern Ham, who, having unfortunately seen what ought to have been covered up, is eager, out of mere levity or prurience, to tell his “brethren without” all about it.

On this subject I concur entirely in the sentiments of our orator, Colonel Higginson, as expressed in his address at the Society’s recent centennial. The truth of history is a sacred thing, – a thing of far more importance than its dignity, – and the truth of history should not be sacrificed to sentiment, patriotism or filial piety. Neither, in like manner, when it comes to scientific historical research, can propriety, whether of subject or, in the case of original material, of language, be regarded. To this last principle the published pages of Winthrop and Bradford bear evidence; and, in my judgment, the

¹ History of Norfolk County, Massachusetts, p. 231.

Massachusetts Historical Society has, in a career now both long and creditable, done nothing more creditable to itself than in once for all, through the editorial action of Mr. Savage and Mr. Deane, settling this principle in the publications referred to. I am, of course, well aware that Mr. Savage did not edit Winthrop's History for this Society, but nevertheless he is so identified with the Society that his work may fairly be considered part of its record. Whether part of its record or not, Mr. Savage and Mr. Deane, – than whom no higher authorities are here recognized, – in the publications referred to, did settle the principle that mawkishness is just as much out of place in scientific historical research as prurience would be, or as sentiment, piety and patriotism are. These last-named attributes of our nature, indeed, – most noble, elevating and attractive in their proper spheres, – always have been, now are, and I think I may safely say will long continue to be, the bane of thorough historical research, and ubiquitous stumbling-blocks in the way of scientific results.

But in the case of history, as with medicine and many other branches of science and learning, there are, as I have already said, many matters which cannot be treated freely in works intended for general circulation, – matters which none the less may be, and often are, important and deserving of thorough mention. Certainly they should not be ignored or suppressed. And this is exactly one of the uses to which historical societies are best adapted. Like medical and other similar associations, historical societies are scientific bodies in which all subjects relating to their department of learning both can and should be treated with freedom, so that reference may be made, in books intended for popular reading, to historical-society collections as pure scientific depositories. It is this course I propose to pursue in the present case; and such material at my disposal as I cannot well use freely in the work upon which I am now engaged, will be incorporated in the present paper, and made accessible in the printed Proceedings of the Society for such general reference as may be desirable.

Among the unpublished material to which I have referred are the records of the First Church of Quincy, – originally and for more than a century and a half (1639-1792) the Braintree North Precinct Church. The volume of these records covering the earliest period of the history of the Society cannot now be found. It was in the possession of the church in 1739, for it was then used and referred to by the Rev. John Hancock, father of the patriot, and fifth pastor of the church, in the preparation of two centennial sermons preached by him at that time; but eighty-five years later, when, in 1824, the parish was separated from the town, the earliest book of regular records then transferred from the town to the parish clerk went no farther back than Jan. 17, 1708.

There is, however, another volume of records still in existence, apparently not kept by the regular precinct clerk, the entries in which, all relating to the period between 1673 and 1773, seem to have been made by five successive pastors. Small and bound in leather, the paper of which this volume is made up is of that rough, parchment character in such common use during the last century, and the entries in it, in five different handwritings, are in many cases scarcely legible, and frequently of the most confidential character. In the main they are records of births, baptisms, marriages and deaths; but some of them relate to matters of church discipline, and these throw a curious light on the social habits of a period now singularly remote. In view of what this volume contains, the loss of the previous volume containing the record of the church's spiritual life from the time it was organized to 1673, a period of thirty-four years, becomes truly an *hiatus valde deflendus*.²

² In 1839 the Rev. William P. Lunt prepared and delivered before the First Congregational Church of Quincy two most scholarly and admirable historical discourses on the celebration of the two hundredth anniversary of the gathering of the society. In the appendix to these discourses (p. 93) Dr. Lunt states that the earlier records of the church had never been in the possession of either of its then ministers, the Rev. Peter Whitney or himself; and he adds: "In a conversation with Dr. Harris, formerly the respected pastor of Dorchester First Congregational Church, I understood him to say that Mr. Welde, formerly pastor of what is now Braintree Church, had these records in his possession; but when he obtained them, and for what purpose, was not explained. They are probably now irrecoverably lost. As curious and interesting relics of old times, their loss must be regretted." The extent of this loss is here stated by Dr. Lunt with great moderation. The records in question cover the history of the Braintree church during the whole of the theocratic period in Massachusetts; and, for reasons which will appear in my forthcoming history of Quincy, the loss of these records causes not only an irreparable but a most serious break, so far as Braintree is concerned, in the discussion of one of the most interesting of all

For a full understanding of the situation it is merely necessary further to say that, during the period to which all the entries in the volume from which I am about to quote relate, Braintree was a Massachusetts sea-board town of the ordinary character. It numbered a population ranging from some seven hundred souls in 1673, to about twenty-five hundred a century later; the majority of whom during the first half of the eighteenth century lived in the North Precinct of the original town, now Quincy. The meeting-house, about which clustered the colonial village, stood on the old Plymouth road, between the tenth and the eleventh mile-posts south of Boston. The people were chiefly agriculturists, living on holdings somewhat widely scattered; the place had no especial trade or leading industry, and no commerce; so that, when describing the country a few years before, in 1660, – and since then the conditions had not greatly changed, – Samuel Maverick said of Braintree, – “It subsists by raising provisions, and furnishing Boston with wood.”³ In reading the following extracts from the records, it is also necessary to bear in mind that during the eighteenth century the whole social and intellectual as well as religious life of the Massachusetts towns not only centred about the church, but was concentrated in it. The church was practically a club as well as a religious organization. An inhabitant of the town excluded from it or under its ban became an outcast and a pariah.

The following entry is in the handwriting of the Rev. Moses Fiske, pastor of the church during thirty-six years, from 1672 to 1708, and it bears date March 2, 1683: —

“Temperance, the daughter of Brother F — , now the wife of John B — , having been guilty of the sin of Fornication with him that is now her husband, was called forth in the open Congregation, and presented a paper containing a full acknowledgment of her great sin and wickedness, – publicly bewayled her disobedience to parents, pride, unprofitableness under the means of grace, as the cause that might provoke God to punish her with sin, and warning all to take heed of such sins, begging the church’s prayers, that God would humble her, and give a sound repentance, &c. Which confession being read, after some debate, the brethren did generally if not unanimously judge that she ought to be admonished; and accordingly she was solemnly admonished of her great sin, which was spread before her in divers particulars, and charged to search her own heart wayes and to make thorough work in her Repentance, &c. from which she was released by the church vote unanimously on April 11th 1698.”

The next entry of a case of church discipline is of a wholly different character. The individual subjected to it bore the same family name as the earliest minister of the town, the Rev. William Tompson, who was the first to subscribe the original covenant of Sept. 16, 1639, but was not descended from him. Neither must this Samuel Tomson, or Tompson, be confounded with Deacon Samuel Tompson, who, born in 1630, lived in Braintree, and whose name is met with on nearly every page of the earlier records. The Samuel Tompson referred to in the following entry seems to have been the son of the deacon, and was born Nov. 6, 1662. His name frequently appears in the town records, and usually (pp. 29, 35, 39, 40), as dissenting from some vote providing for the minister’s salary or the maintenance of the town school. He was, though the son of a deacon, evidently a man otherwise-minded. This entry, like the previous one, is in the handwriting of Mr. Fiske.

“Samuel Tomson, a prodigie of pride, malice and arrogance, being called before the church in the Meeting-house 28, July, 1697, for his absenting himselfe from the Publike Worshipe, unlesse when any strangers preached; his carriage being before the Church proud and insolent, reviling and vilifying their Pastor, at an horrible rate, and stileing him their priest, and them a nest of wasps; and they

the problems connected with the origin and development of the New England town, and system of town-government. There is room for hope that the missing volume may yet come to light.

³ Proc. Mass. Hist. Soc., 2d series, vol. i. p. 239.

unanimously voated an admonition, which was accordingly solemnly and in the name of Christ, applyed to him, wherein his sin and wickedness was laid open by divers Scriptures for his conviction, and was warned to repent, and after prayer to God this poor man goes to the tavern to drink it down immediately, as he said, &c.”

Then, under date of August 27, 1697, a month later, Mr. Fiske proceeds: —

“He delivered to me an acknowledgment in a bit of paper at my house in the presence of Leif’t Marsh and Ensign Penniman, who he brought. ’Twas read before the Church at a meeting appointed 12. 8. They being not willing to meet before. Leif’t Col. Quinsey gave his testimony against it, and said that his conversation did not agree therewith.”

The next entry, also in the same handwriting, is dated Dec. 25, 1697: —

“At the church meeting further testimony came in against him: the church generally by vote and voice declared him impenitent, and I was to proceed to an ejection of him, by a silent vote in Public. But I deferred it, partly because of the severity of the winter, but chiefly for that his pretended offence was originally against myself, and [he] had said I would take all advantages against him, I deferred the same, and because 4 or 5 of the brethren did desire that he might be called before the church to see if he would own what they asserted: and having the church, 1 April, 98, he came, brought an additional acknowledgment. Of 15 about 9 or 10 voted to accept of it, &c.”

This occurred on the 11th of April, 1698; and on the 17th Mr. Fiske proceeds: —

“After the end of the public worship his confession was read publickly, and the major part of the Church voted his absolution.”

The next case of discipline in order of the entries relates to an earlier period, 1677. It records the excommunication of one Joseph Belcher. The proceedings took place at meetings held on the 7th of October and the 11th of November.

“Joseph Belcher, a member of this Church though not in full communion, being sent for by the Church, after they had resolved to inquire into the matter of scandall, so notoriously infamous both in Court and Country, by Deacon Basse and Samuel Tompson, to give an account of these things; they returning with this answer from him, that he would consider of it and send the church word the next Sabbath, whether he would come or no; on which return by a script, whereunto his name was subscribed, which he also owned to the elder, in private the weeke after, wherein he scornfully and impudently reflected upon the officer and church, and rudely refused to have anything to doe with us; so after considerable waiting, he persisting in his impenitence and obstinacy, (the Elders met at Boston unanimously advising thereto) the Church voted his not hearing of them, some few brethren not acting, doubting of his membership but silent. He was proceeded against according to Matthew 18, 17,⁴ and rejected.”

The next entry also records a case of excommunication, under date of May 4, 1683: —

“Isaac Theer, (the son of Brother Thomas Theer) being a member of this Church but not in full communion, having been convicted of notorious scandalous thefts multiplied, as stealing pewter from Johanna Livingstone, stealing from John

⁴ “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”

Penniman cheese, &c., and others, and stealing an horse at Bridgewater, for which he suffered the law, after much laboring with him in private and especially by the officers of the church, to bring [him] to a thorough sight and free and ingenuous confession of his sin; as also for his abominably lying, changing his name, &c., was called forth in public, moved pathetically to acknowledge his sin and publish his repentance, who came down and stood against the lower end of the foreseat after he had been prevented (by our shutting the east door) from going out; stood impudently, and said indeed he owned his sin of stealing, was heartily sorry for it, begged pardon of God and men, and hoped he should do so no more, which was all he could be brought unto, saying his sin was already known, and that there was no need to mention it in particular, all with a remisse voice, so that but few could hear him. The Church at length gave their judgment against him, that he was a notorious, scandalous sinner, and obstinately impenitent. And when I was proceeding to spread before him his sin and wickedness, he (as 'tis probable), guessing what was like to follow, turned about to goe out, and being desired and charged to tarry and hear what the church had to say to him, he flung out of doors, with an insolent manner, though silent. Therefore the Pastor applied himself to the congregation, and having spread before them his sin, partly to vindicate the church's proceeding against him, and partly to warn others; sentence was declared against him according to Matthew 18, 17.”

The next also is a case of excommunication. It appears from the records (p. 658) that “Upon the 9th day of August ther went out a fleet Souldiers to Canadee in the year 1690, and the small pox was aboard, and they died, sixe of it; four thrown overbord at Cap an.” Among these four was Ebenezer Owen, who left a widow and a brother Josiah; and it is to them that this entry relates: —

“Josiah Owen, the son of William Owen (whose parents have been long in full communion), a child of the covenant, who obtained by fraud and wicked contrivance by some marriage with his brother Ebenezer Owen's widdow, as the Pastor of the church had information by letters from the Court of Assistance touching the sentence there passed upon her (he making his escape). And living with her as an husband, being, by the Providence of God, surprised at his cottage by the Pastor of the Church with Major Quinsey and D. Tompson (of whom reports were that he was gone, we intending to discourse with her and acquaint [her] with the message received from the said Court informing her their appointment of an open confession of their sin in the congregation), he was affectionately treated by them, and after much discourse, finding him obstinate and reflecting, he was desired and charged to be present the next Sabbath before the Church, to hear what should be spoken to him, but he boldly replied he should not come. And being after treated by D. Tompson and his father to come, and taking his opportunity to carry her away the last weeke, after a solemn sermon preached on 1 Cor. 5. 3, 4 and 5,⁵ and prayers added, an account was given to the church and congregation of him, the Brethren voting him to be an impenitent, scandalous, wicked, incestuous sinner, and giving their consent that the sentence of excommunication should be passed upon and declared against him, which was solemnly performed by the Pastor of the Church according to the direction of the Apostle in the above mentioned text: this 17 of January, 1691/2.”

⁵ 3. “For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed. 4. “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, 5. “To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”

The above, four in number, are all the cases of church discipline recorded as having been administered during the Fiske pastorate. Considering that this pastorate covered more than a third of a century, and that during it the original township had not yet been divided into precincts, – all the inhabitants of what are now Quincy, Randolph and Holbrook as well as those of the present Braintree, being included in the church to which Mr. Fiske ministered, – the record indicates a high standard of morality and order. The town at that time had a population of about seven hundred souls, which during the next pastorate increased to one thousand.

Mr. Fiske died on the 10th of August, 1708, and the Rev. Joseph Marsh was ordained as his successor on the 18th of the following May (1709). At this time the town was divided for purposes of religious worship into two precincts, the Records of the North Precinct – now Quincy – beginning on the 17th of January, 1708. It then contained, “by exact enumeration,” seventy-two families, or close upon four hundred souls. The record now proceeds in the handwriting of Mr. Marsh: —

“The first Church meeting after my settlement was in August 4, 1713, in the meeting-house. It was occasioned by the notoriously scandalous life of James Penniman, a member of the Church, though not in full communion. The crimes charged upon him and proved were his unchristian carriage towards his wife, and frequent excessive drinking. He behaved himself very insolently before the church when allowed to speak in vindication of himself, and was far from discovering any signs of true repentance. He was unanimously voted guilty and laid under solemn admonition by the Church.”

The next entry is one of eight years later, and reads as follows: —

“1721. Samuel Hayward was suspended from the Lord’s supper by the Brethren for his disorderly behaviour in word and deed, and his incorrigibleness therein.”

Up to this time it had been the custom of the Braintree church that any person “propounded” for membership should, before being admitted, give an oral or written relation of his or her religious experience, – a practice in strict accordance with the usage then prevailing, with perhaps a few exceptions, throughout Massachusetts.⁶ The record, under date of December 31, 1721, contains the following in relation to this: —

“Dr. Belcher’s son Joseph, junior Sophister, [admitted.] He made the last Relation, before the brethren consented to lay aside Relations.

“Because some persons of a sober life and good conversation have signified their unwillingness to join in full communion with the Church, unless they may be admitted to it without making a Public Relation of their spiritual experiences, which (they say) the Church has no warrant in the word of God to require, it was therefore proposed to the Church the last Sacrament-day that they would not any more require a Relation as above said from any person who desired to partake in the Ordinance of the Lord’s Supper with us, and after the case had been under debate at times among the brethren privately for the space of three weeks, the question was put to them January 28 1721/2 being on a Lord’s Day Evening in the Meeting-house, whether they would any more insist upon the making a Relation as a necessary Term of full communion with them?

“It passed in the negative by a great majority.”

Two months later the case of James Penniman again presented itself. It was now nearly nine years since he had been solemnly admonished; and on the 4th of April, 1722, —

⁶ Ellis, *The Puritan Age in Massachusetts*, 206-208.

“Sabbath day. It was proposed to the church last Sabbath to excommunicate James Penniman for his contumacy in sin, but this day he presented a confession, which was read before the Congregation, and prayed that they would wait upon him awhile longer, which the Church consented to, and he was again publicly admonished, and warned against persisting in the neglect of Public Worship, against Idleness, Drunkenness and Lying; and he gave some slender hopes of Reformation, seemed to be considerably affected, and behaved himself tolerably well.”

The following entries complete the record during the Marsh pastorate of sixteen years, which ended March 8, 1726, Mr. Marsh then dying in his forty-first year: —

“September 9. Brother Joseph Parmenter made a public Confession, in the presence of the Congregation for the sin of drunkenness.

“September 21. At a Church meeting of the Brethren to consider his case, the question was put whether they would accept his confession [to] restore him; it passed in the negative, because he has made several confessions of the sin, and is still unreformed thereof: the Brethren concluded it proper to suspend him from Communion in the Lord’s Supper, for his further humiliation and warning. He was accordingly suspended.

“March 3d, 1722-3. Sabbath Evening. Brother Parmenter having behaved himself well (for aught anything that appears) since his suspension, was at his desire restored again by a vote of the Brethren, *nemine contradicente*.

“March 10. Joseph, a negro man, and Tabitha his wife made a public confession of the sin of fornication, committed each with the other before marriage, and desired to have the ordinance of Baptism administered to them.

“May 26. The Brethren of the Church met together to consider what is further necessary to be done by the Church towards the reformation of James Penniman. He being present desired their patience towards him, and offered a trifling confession, which was read, but not accepted by the Brethren, because he manifested no sign of true repentance thereof: they came to (I think) a unanimous vote that he should be cast out of the Church for his incorrigibleness in his evil waies, whenever I shall see good to do it, and I promised to wait upon him some time, to see how he would behave himself before I proceeded against him.

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