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Evangelical Zeal and Its Parody

Muneharu Kitagaki

Historically speaking the passion and enthusiasm which are still now current in the evangelizing spirit of some Protestant and other sects were originated in the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century. The evangelical zeal which is revealed profusely in Christian crusades and other religious movements today may be traced to camp-meetings, which were regular evangelical practice, especially among the Methodists and Baptists in early nineteenth-century America. It is said that the first “camp-meeting” was held on the banks of the Red River, Kentucky, in 1799. Since then a number of camp meetings were held in the woods and on the fields, and countless numbers were converted on the spot. Religious emotion had no limits, and the fanaticism must have been repulsive to some sanity-loving people.

Fortunately we have vivid descriptions of camp-meetings in American novels of the nineteenth century. Perhaps one of the best is given by Johnson Jones Hooper (1815–1863), the author of “Captain Simon Suggs Attends a Camp-Meeting.” Hooper was an Alabama journalist and writer. In 1845 he published Some Adventures of Captain Simon

Suggs, Late of the Tallapoosa Volunteers, whose central figure is a sort of picaro, who was, in Walter Blair’s words, “a watery-eyed, hawk-nosed dupester . . . [who once] fooled folk at a camp meeting by pretending that he had been saved.” Let us first see what happens in a camp-meeting on Sandy Creek, which Simon in financial difficulties visits on horseback. Let me quote from Hooper:

...he found the hollow square of the encampment filled with people, listening to the mid-day sermon, and its dozen accompanying “exhortations.” A half-dozen preachers were dispensing the word; the one in the pulpit, a meek-faced old man, of great simplicity and benevolence. His voice was weak and cracked, notwithstanding which, however, he contrived to make himself heard occasionally, above the din of the exhorting, the singing, and the shouting which were going on around him. The rest were walking to and fro... among the “mourners”—a host of whom occupied the seat set apart for their especial use—or made personal appeals to the mere spectators. The excitement was intense. Men and women rolled about on the ground, or lay sobbing or shouting in promiscuous heaps. More than all, the negroes sang and screamed and prayed. Several, under the influence of what is technically called “the jerks,” were plunging and pitching about with convulsive energy. The great object of all

1. This is a revised version of my paper which I read on August 3, 1982 at the American Studies Forum, sponsored by the Center for Asia-Pacific Exchange, held in Honolulu, Hawaii.


seemed to be, to see who could make the greatest noise—

You see, this can be regarded as a general scene of a camp-meeting. The din and noise prevailed during the whole meeting, but we may notice that this was a human din, not disturbed by the mechanical or electronic din of our times. Some people were walking to and fro, and some people were rolling around convulsively on the ground—a sure sign that they were having agonizing moments of overwhelming recognition of their sinful past. Hooper continues his story, to which a certain satirical tinge is attached.

“Keep the thing warm!” roared a sensual seeming man, of stout mould and florid countenance, who was exhorting among a bevy of young women, upon whom he was lavishing caresses. “Keep the thing warm, breathing!—come to the Lord, honey!” he added, as he vigorously hugged one of the damsels he sought to save. (p. 427)

Now Captain Suggs, after carefully observing the pattern of conversion, practises a scene of conversion himself. He is quite capable an actor:

For a long time the Captain stood silent, or answered the incessant stream of exhortations only with a sneer; but at length, his countenance began to give token of inward emotion. First his eyelids twitched—then his upper lip quivered—next a transparent drop formed on one of his eye-lashes, and a similar one on the tip of his nose—and, at last, a sudden bursting of air from nose and mouth, told that Captain Suggs was overwhelmed by his emotions. At the moment of the explosion, he made a feint as if to rush from the crowd, but he was in experienced hands, who well knew that the battle was more than half won. (p. 429)

By now Captain Suggs was drawing the attention of the whole congregation. Before he began his confession, there was yet its prelude to be presented. The story continues thus:

The Captain remained grovelling in the dust during the usual time, and gave vent to even more than the requisite number of sobs, and groans, and heart-piercing cries. At length, when the proper time had arrived, he bounced up, and with a face radiant with joy, commenced a series of vaultings and tumblings, which “laid in the shade” all previous performances of the sort at that camp-meeting. The brethren were in ecstasies at this demonstrative evidence of completion of the work; and whenever Suggs shouted “Glorie!” at the top of his lungs, every one of them shouted it back, until the woods rang with echoes. (p. 430)

Here Suggs' shoutings are given an epic tone: in Homer's *Iliad* the great shout of the Achaean was echoed by the Trojan walls. Now Suggs begins to confess as follows:

“Friends, ... it don't take long to curry a short horse, accordin' to the old sayin', and I'll give you the perticklers of the way I was 'brought to a knowledge'... in less'n no time... You see I come here full o' romancin' and devilment, and jist to make game of all the purceedins. Well, sure enough, I done so for some time, and... I was jist a-thinkin' how I should play some trick to turn it all into redcule, when they began to come round and talk. Long at last I didn't mind it, but arter a little that brother... spoke a word that struck me keen to the heart, and run all over me, like fire

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in dry grass—... And so from that I felt somethin’ a-pullin’ me inside—... And then... I wanted to git off, but they hilt me, and bimeby I felt so missuble, I had to go yonder”—pointing to the mourner’s seat—“and when I lay down that it got wuss and wuss, and ‘peared like somethin’ was a-mashin’ down on my back”—(pp. 430-31)

His confession went on like this, and often the congregation responded with the loud “Grace!”, “Glory to my soul!” or other utterances. He said that something awful was agonizing him, and it was not a serpent, but an alligator, which was interpreted by an old preacher present as nothing but Satan. But the Captain declared that with a great effort he threw a big rock on it and destroyed it, and “that minit I felt the weight slide off, and I had the best feelins—sorter like you’ll have from good sperrits—any body ever had!” (p. 432)

Thus, Simon Suggs was the “lion of the day.” He received enthusiastic blessings from the brethren, and “They walked, sang, and prayed together for hours” (p. 432).

The next morning, the preacher announced that “brother Simon Suggs” was determined, in mourning over his past iniquities, to take up a collection to found a church in his own neighborhood. The Captain pulled off his hat and deposited his last five-dollar note in the hat first. Remember this is in the 1840s. Urged by Simon’s highly skillful solicitation, others were obliged to donate five dollars, ten dollars, and more. It is said the total sum he collected that morning “couldn’t be much under a hundred” (p. 434). The story is concluded with this sentence: “And giving the spur to his horse, off he cantered” (p. 435).

Several critics, including Kenneth S. Lynn, Walter Blair, and Pascal Covici, Jr. pointed out that this story was most probably a model to an episode in Mark Twain’s _Huckleberry Finn_, chapter 20, where the king as a bogus convert collects money in another camp-meeting. Twain’s king, unlike Simon Suggs, is a stranger in the Pokeville camp-meeting. Again, the king’s theatrical skill is so excellent that the good men and women on the Mississippi River town are completely duped. Here is Mark Twain giving a general view of a camp-meeting preaching. But I must remind you that the narrator is Huck Finn:

“Oh, come to the mourners’ bench! come, black with sin! (amen!) come, sick and sore! (amen!) come, lame and halt, and blind! (amen!) come, pore and needy, sunk in shame! (a-men!) come all that’s worn, and soiled, and suffering!—come with a broken spirit! come with a contrite heart! come in your rags and sin and dirt! the waters that cleanse is free, the door of heaven stands open—oh, enter in and be at rest!” (a-men! glory, glory hallelujah!)

For comparison’s sake, I’m obliged to present the king’s confession, but here again, the narrator is Huck:

He [the king] told them he was a pirate—been a pirate for thirty years, out in the Indian Ocean, and his crew was thinned out considerable, last spring, in a fight, and he was home now, to take out some fresh men, and thanks to goodness he’d been robbed last night, and put ashore off of a steamboat without a cent, and he was glad of it, it was

the blessedest thing that ever happened to him, because he was a changed man now, and happy for the first time in his life; and poor as he was, he was going to start right off and work his way back to the Indian Ocean and put in the rest of his life trying to turn the pirates into the true path; for he could do it better than anybody else, being acquainted with all the pirate crews in that ocean; and though it would take him a long time to get there, without money, he would get there anyway, and every time he convinced a pirate he would say to him, "Don't you thank me, don't you give me no credit, it all belongs to them dear people in Pokeville camp-meeting, natural brothers and benefactors of the race—and that dear preacher there, the truest friend a pirate ever had!" (pp. 107–08)

Here the king burst into tears, and so did everybody. His rhetoric is superb, because he never begs money directly, but he emphasizes his pennilessness, and his zeal to convert his former comrades. Thus, not only the zeal but also the vanity of the congregation is excited, and they spontaneously start money-raising for him. On top of this, Twain shrewdly describes the sentimental side of the congregation, and the erotic aspect of the scene. Listen to Huck Finn: "and every little while the prettiest kind of girls, with the tears running down their cheeks, would up and ask him would he let them kiss him, for to remember him by; and he always done it; and some of them he hugged and kissed as many as five or six times" (p. 108). Thus, the king was successful in collecting $87.75, which was later on spent for whisky.

I have given two stories of fake converts who play tricks with the evangelical zeal of the campers. In these stories the evangelical zeal of the camp is presented under the satiric light of parody. Before I present a third story, I would like to draw your attention to the dates of the two publications: Hooper's *Simon Suggs' Adventures* was published in 1845, and Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* appeared in 1884. My third story, which is not a fiction but a historical fact, took place between the two dates. Actually it occurred in October 1874 in Rutland, Vermont, where the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions held its sixty-fifth annual meeting. The meeting lasted for four days, and on the final day, Dr. N. G. Clark, the Corresponding Secretary of the American Board, introduced five missionaries who were about to leave America to respective mission fields. They were asked to give five-minute farewell addresses to the audience. One of the five was a former samurai from Japan, Joseph Hardy Neesima (1843–1890), who was born in Edo, the present Tokyo, and escaped the country at the risk of his life, came to America, and was educated in Phillips Academy, Andover, Amherst College, and Andover Theological Seminary, and was ordained. Now when he was introduced to the congregation for a farewell greeting, Neesima made an appeal instead for funds for a Christian school in Japan. I quote from the contemporary *Rutland Weekly Herald*: Neesima said:

6. The fact that the October 15, 1874 issue of the *Rutland Weekly Herald* contained the detailed report of the sixty-fifth annual meeting of the American Board, came to light only in the 1970s, thanks to the correspondence between Professor Otis Cary of Doshisha University and the Grace Congregational Church of Rutland, where Neesima and other missionaries gave farewell addresses on October, 9, 1874. The text of Neesima's address is reprinted in *Doshisha Hyakunenshi, Shiryōhen* (centennial history of the Doshisha—collection of documents), publish-
In the parting of the Savior with his disciples he commanded them to go forth and preach his Gospel. But I find to my sorrow a small number of Christians who are not willing to obey this command, but you of this board are not of this number, for had not it been for this board I should have been a heathen today and there would have been no hope for my country. If the Christians in this country will continue to give even but a little of their substance, my people will be fed with the bread of life.

Our country has sent about 300 students to different parts of the world to learn the best things they can, but I am sorry that most of them are under infidel influence in Europe. But we need more than education, we must have spiritual teaching for our nation. Japan is your youngest daughter or your faint young sister, and yet she is already self-supporting.

In a country like Japan the devil will sow seed early. So we must go ahead of the devil and sow gospel seed.

The church in Kobe has no educational institution, but she must have something of the kind. It is repulsive to the Japanese mind to beg, but I fear we must beg for that, for Christ says, ask and ye shall receive. Therefore I ask you to give help enough to start this training institution, to raise up teachers and preachers to help some 33,000,000 people.

Will you do it? I will not sit down until you promise it.

This was, I believe, a most embarrassing situation to the officers of the American Board, because there were two more missionaries awaiting their turn; moreover, this sort of appeal had not been arranged in tightly scheduled four-day meeting. Nevertheless, Neesima declared, "I will not sit down until you promise it." But somehow, the audience responded to him, led by Dr. Peter Parker, a veteran missionary who had worked in Canton, China. He arose and nobly promised $1,000 for Neesima's school. Then Neesima said, "I was sleepless last night over this, but I shall sleep better to-night." A wonderful humor! A lady of Vermont promised $100. Then, Neesima said, "I am strong enough to carry back $100,000." Another delightful invitation! A Massachusetts lady promised $50, and another Massachusetts lady promised $100, and a lady from Rhode Island $100. Then the ex-governor of Vermont, John B. Page said, "Vermont wants to be counted in and I promise $1,000." Neesima continued:

I want to say more, but my heart is too full to say more. It is painful to part with many friends. It is hard to go from the light of day to the gray dawn of morning, but I must imitate my Savior, who left the Jerusalem of heaven for that on earth. I will follow him and weep no more.

Then Neesima offered the Lord's prayer in Japanese, and thus the scene came to an end. The pledge he received that day came to $5,000, and this became the precious cornerstone of the present Doshisha in Kyoto.

This event took place in New England, and the majority of the participants were Congregationalists, descendants of the New England Puritans. This was not a camp-meeting with amens and hallelujahs, but an annual meeting, held in a substantial church building in a New England town. No doubt, Neesima's sincerity and zeal appealed to the heart of the congregation. His English, learned with effort, uttered from a Japanese face, perhaps produced an appealing effect. His...
identity was wellknown to many important people of the meeting. So there is no room to make a parody of this story, and I have no intention at all to suggest that this event might have induced Mark Twain to write that amusing episode. The only possible moral which may come out of this story is: if his school, the Doshisha, my alma mater where I now teach, betrays Neesima's original lofty aim and principle, to become a mere secular educational enterprise, then, Neesima's inspired performance becomes a parody in reverse.