

Theology and Pipe Smoking: Meditations on the Queen of Sciences and the Noble Weed in Three Parts

Part One only; remaining parts are unavailable.

Back before fundamentalism caused much of American Christianity to go off the moral deep end and get caught in up in a fevered attempt to demonize a whole series of behaviors that are morally neutral, pipe smoking was seen as a very decent and proper thing for a theologian (& anyone else) to do. In many Christian communities which successfully fought off the tendency to condemn everything, pipe smoking has always and continues to be appreciated for the benefits it brings to moments of relaxation, conversation, and mental clarity.

In this post I will not attempt to systematize the benefits of pipe smoking. That has been done elsewhere (see below), nor will I systematically attempt to justify or defend the moderate use of tobacco against any who may criticize it either with (and wouldn't this be cute) a biblical argument, or a health argument. I will say at this juncture that most of the research done on the negative side affects of tobacco concern cigarettes and chewing tobacco. The handful of studies which have been done on pipes and cigars suggest that moderate use (defined in one study as 10 bowls a day) increases your chance of lung cancer less than 3% (mouth cancer may be a different story, however).

Nonetheless, the primary purposes of these posts are: a) to examine the intersection between that nearly mystical ritual of lighting a bowl of good tobacco, and practicing (in my case practicing amateurly) the discipline of Christian theology; and, b) to provide the gentle reader with a few resources which may help to integrate theology and pipe smoking.

The present post will include, besides this introduction, a brief, inconclusive, and hardly researched historical sketch of Christianity's relationship with pipe smoking (and smoking in general to some degree), and also modest list of (relatively) famous Christian pipe smokers. My second post will attempt to "pair" pipes and especially tobacco blends to the contemplation of certain theological ideas, and the reading of certain theological books, together with some other tobacco infused theological shenanigans. And my final post will list resources, both on-line and off, for the pipe smoking follower of Jesus.

It needs to be said that these posts owe much to the seminal work on the subject: *Toward a Theology of Pipe Smoking* by Arthur D. Yunker (see my upcoming third post [or just google it]), and I personally owe much to the man who introduced me to the quaint, curious and comforting world of pipes—a man who has travelled and is travelling that familiar path from idealistic young fundamentalist, to disgruntled bible college student, to rebellious pipe-smoker, to well-adjusted and moderate pipe-smoker, to well-adjusted and sincere Christian that many of us recognize as our own spiritual journey.

A Brief Historical Sketch

Pipe smoking and Christianity (if not Christian theology) go way back. A little over a century after Europe was introduced to that glorious weed, tobacco, one of the church's most brilliant liturgists, and one of the world's most brilliant musicians began to smoke enthusiastically. I am of course talking about Johann Sebastian Bach. Besides such masterpieces as "Chaconne," and "The 'Little' Fugue," Bach is responsible for what is probably the first written artifact describing the intersection of Christian faith and practice with pipe smoking—a poem in which Bach meditates on how certain aspects of smoking a pipe remind him of the transitory nature of human life, and of the sorrow of an eternity spent in hell. From a literary standpoint the poem or at least the English translation of the poem is no *Paradise Lost* (I'm sure the original German was better), but, like meerschaum which hasn't been smoked too fast or too slow, it ends well because the last two lines of the poem are easily the best quote concerning Christianity and pipe smoking I've ever come across: On sea, on land, at home, abroad/ I smoke my pipe and worship God. What a classic (and rhythmically pleasing) statement of a truth today's church needs badly: Our entire lives should be lived as worship to God, and anything we do, whether it be attending the Cathedral, riding our bike, drinking a beer, or smoking our pipe—if done with a heart full of thanksgiving and humility —can be an act of worship.

After Bach, the history of pipe smoking and Christianity gets hazy (much like a room when too many people are smoking without proper ventilation). Since the Church thought nothing strange about smoking a pipe for most of its history, there was very little controversy, and thus very little record of the history in question.

Then in the late 19th and early 20th century we come to the rise of fundamentalism in response to developments in biblical criticism, the so-called social gospel, and other changes in Christendom. Fundamentalists felt that what was needed to combat the forces of liberalism was a “return” to holiness and piety. As a result, campaigns against popular entertainment (movies, cards, dominoes), drinking, and smoking were launched by many early fundamentalists, and of course, the banner has been picked up by several subsequent generations on into the present day. Though, not directly about pipe smoking, a story involving Billy Sunday one of the fathers of fundamentalism will do much to illustrate, the fact however, that even within the early evangelical/fundamentalist movement there was not total consensus.

William “Billy” Sunday was a famous baseball player in the 1880s until he was converted to Christianity. He heard the call to ministry and became an evangelist. He was a charismatic preacher, a fund raising genius, and reportedly told more individuals his version of what the gospel was than any other person up to that time. By the 1910s and 20s he was America’s most famous evangelical Christian. He was outspoken about social issues of the day, and was an especially voracious

supporter of prohibition.

At some point just before the turn of the 20th century, Billy Sunday was invited to visit Charles Spurgeon's church in London. During the course of his sermon, Billy began to preach against the "evils" of drinking and smoking, and how Christians could not do it, and expect admission into heaven. It is reported that though he was polite all the way through the sermon, Spurgeon went to the pulpit at the end, looked at Billy and said, "Be that as it may, sir. I will go home to tonight and smoke a cigar to the greater glory of God!"

An Annotated List of Christian Pipe Smokers *(or A Fundamentalist's Field Guide to Pipe Smoking Heretics, And Why They're Going to Hell)*

And Charles Spurgeon was only one of the many evangelical "traitors." What proceeds is an annotated list of some theologians, pastors, evangelists, Christian authors, and other personalities in some way connected to Christendom who smoke or have smoked (both Pipe and Cigar smokers are included). One caveat is that inclusion on this list does not constitute an endorsement of an individual's theology or teachings, as some of these guys are total whack jobs, while others are modern day Fathers (if you'll indulge me to throw that term around). And, what an edifying and uplifting theophiliac endeavour it would be to expand this list for the benefit of posterity!

Bach, Johann Sebastian- the aforementioned genius.

Barth, Karl- Do you really think he couldn't have written all 98 volumes (I approximate, of course) of Church Dogmatics without the help of Lady Tobacco?

Chesterton, G.K.- One of my favorite Christian authors. Not only did he smoke pipes and cigars, but could also allegedly write one thing with his pen sitting at a desk, while simultaneously dictating an entirely different piece of writing to his secretary. I know Tony has mentioned his Orthodoxy in one of his posts.

Colson, Chuck- owns one of C.S. Lewis' pipes.

Erskine, Ralph- Scottish Presbyterian, what else is there to say?

Frassati, The Blessed Pier Giorgio- Italian Catholic social justice advocate and anti-fascist. Called the Man of the Eight Beatitudes by JP II (who beatified him in 1990); don't think he was a pipe smoker? Commenter Peter gives us definitive proof: proof

Hewitt, Hugh- conservative political commentator, claims to be Christian, I suppose we'll take him on his word; wouldn't want to be judgmental or anything, but can a Republican be a Christian?

Lewis, C. S.- probably the guy on the list with the most evangelical clout (despite being Anglican); another great piece of ammunition to use against stuffy fundies is that Lewis' Narnia books took shape in a pub o'er many a pint. More on C.S. Lewis' pipe smoking later.

Moltmann, Jurgen- Don't have too much evidence for this just some off hand comment I think he made one time, and

a general sense gotten by looking at the man that a pipe seems natural and fitting on him.

Ogden, Schubert- *Methodist minister. Author of “May a Christian smoke?” {The Log 9, no.14 (1959): 2}, and I believe his answer (and mine) was “yes.”*

Scott, Gene- *(www.genescott.com) – this dude is (was?) crazy. He charged admission into his church. He had a Bible study TV show, on which he was fond of smoking a cigar and drinking a glass of wine. Favorite Bible study passage: you guessed it, the Wedding Feast of Cana.*

Spurgeon, Charles- *the aforementioned Cigar aficionado –speaking of which, I once saw Chuck Norris (conspicuously missing from this list of Christians, most of whom are Christians and thinkers) on the cover of the magazine Cigar Aficionado, why not have Charles Spurgeon on there?*

Tolkien, J.R.R.- *Catholic, as we all know.*

Williams, Charles- *probably the least known, and arguably the most talented (Lewis certainly thought so) of the “Inklings,” writer of speculative theological fiction; wonderful stuff, really. He was Anglican, and in fact wrote a fascinating church history called the Descent of the Dove. I did a research paper on it one time for Amos Yong’s theology class; totally B.S.ed it, but...if only I had been allowed to smoke my pipe (not that I didn’t anyway)...how much smarter I would have been!*