

## Reflections on Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*

**George Shaduri**

Affiliated Associate Professor  
International Black Sea University  
13<sup>th</sup> km., D. Agmashenebeli Alley  
Tbilisi, Georgia  
+995 593 160393

[gshaduri@ibsu.edu.ge](mailto:gshaduri@ibsu.edu.ge)

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5276-7902>

---

### Abstract

Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* is the first renowned work by the famous author. In it, Swift allegorically treats the story of the Reformation from the 'Anglican' point of view. Along with the accepted reading of the work, this study suggests a new, non-traditional perspective. For example, we can speculate on whether Swift could have chosen two main characters instead of three, and how that could have influenced the work. Would that have enhanced the 'Protestant' idea of the *Tale*? The figure of the Father in *A Tale of a Tub* is ambiguous. Did Swift mean the God himself as often considered by the work's critics? Or, if the three brothers personify three branches of Christianity, could the Father figure imply also a religious denomination, acting as a source for the others? Is Swift aware of that, and, if not, could it lead to a new insight, shedding light on the nature of the conflict discussed in the story? The present article attempts to answer these questions.

*Keywords:* Anglicanism, Calvinism, Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy

---

### Introduction

*A Tale of a Tub* is one of Swift's most famous works. It was published in 1704 during the reign of Queen Anne, a time that was characterized by sympathy for Tories, the aristocracy, and the High Church. Already a Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral of the Church of Ireland, Swift writes his *Tale* from the perspective of the High Church. In the *Tale*, the middle brother, Martin, personifies Anglicanism, and Swift makes him the protagonist, juxtaposing him to Peter (Catholicism) and Jack (Calvinism, Dissent). The roles Swift assigns to his characters are quite clear and the background of the story is understandable, as the story serves as an allegory for the development of religion up to and including the Reformation. Nonetheless, we find it advisable to reflect upon the story to pose, explore, and try to provide answers to several questions from a perspective that has not been considered by previous research. These include:

Why does Swift choose Peter as the main antagonist?

Could Swift have considered introducing not three, but just two brothers, Peter and Paul?

How would that change the story? How can that be explained through the Protestant theology?

Which elements of the church tradition criticized in the work does Swift reject and which does he accept?

How does that match with the Orthodox tradition?

Why does Swift not name the Father? Whom/what does the Father represent allegorically?

### Method

The method of literature review is used for the article and its composition follows the mode of qualitative research. The specific methods of analysis include textual analysis (close reading), applying concepts used in religious studies to close reading; comparing and contrasting; inference, and deduction. The form chosen for the exploration of the questions posed, reflection, serves as an effective way to shed light on these questions and

provide a new perspective on the reading of the work revered and loved by admirers of Swift's legacy.

## Results

### *A Tale of a Tub in the Context of the Protestant Paradigm*

Peter informs his brothers that he is the eldest son, the only heir of their Father. This episode is based on the well-known fragment from the Gospel of Matthew, in which Christ addresses his disciple Peter, saying;

“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...”

(*THB, Matthew*, 16:18, pp. 951-952)

This is a pithy sentence for Catholicism, considering Peter the assignee of Christ and founder of the Holy Apostolic Catholic church, the only true church. By Catholic tradition, this phrase turns Apostle Peter into the first Roman Pope, infallible pontific, the Vicar of Christ on earth. Swift's elder brother is an allegorical depiction of Roman Catholicism, depending on his Father's heritage, the whole heritage. Here Swift ties the pretension of Catholicism with the medieval tradition of primogeniture, by which all the heritage of the deceased would be passed to the eldest son.

Interestingly, Swift names his heroes Peter, Martin, and Jack, alluding to the main, well-known religious movements and figures in the Christian world, consciously avoiding the person of Apostle Paul. Despite the controversy of this interpretation, if the name of Peter is still associated with Roman Catholicism then Paul also allows interesting connotations. The biography of Paul is intriguing in itself. The name of this apostle, who did not know Christ during his lifetime, is always mentioned and associated with the name of Peter. Apostle Paul is considered, with Peter, to be the main apostle. Although, strictly speaking, there are no main and lesser apostles, still, Paul and Peter are the ones who imposed much more significant influence over Christianity than the other apostles. The name and actions of Paul penetrated the Christian thought which eventually became both the philosophical concepts and the cornerstones of the Reformation.

Analyzing the New Testament Epistle to Romans, Giginishvili (2019) writes that, according to Paul, those who hope for salvation by the works of the Law of Moses, abolish Christ's cross. The idea that man is saved for eternal life only by faith and not by works envisaged by the Law serves as the refrain of the Epistle to Romans. Works of the Law are only the preparation for Christ's mission, and one must not adhere to them after the appearance of the Lord.

“Where is boast then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”

(*THB, Romans* 3:37, p.1087)

Justification by faith, about which Paul speaks, will become the primary position of Protestantism, the thesis which Martin Luther will make the starting point of his struggle against the Catholic abuse of “works,” the very works mentioned in Paul's Epistle.

In addition, the Epistle to Romans contains another important message that will become the source of another fundamental Protestant doctrine and which has become the source of numerous theological debates. The extreme emphasis of the Epistle on the issues of divine grace leads to an understatement of the free will of the human being and the significance of personal initiative. It can proceed from this that not only election depends on God, but also that man is not free to choose God, resulting in the theory of “double predestination”, according to which God predestines some to salvation, and others to death.

“For whom he foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

Moreover, whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified”

(*THB, Romans*, 8:29, 8:30, p. 1091)

In other words, the starting points of two theological schools are imprinted in Paul's Epistle:

justification by faith and double predestination, the main theses of Lutheranism and Calvinism. This will lay the foundations of so-called Reformed Christianity, which spread on the continent, the British Isles, and North America.

In his sermon *On the Trinity* (1744), Swift explicitly speaks about faith; he considers faith the cornerstone of the spiritual life of a Christian. He recalls that the Savior constantly reminded his disciples about faith, criticizing them for the lack of it, and referring to the importance that Paul ascribed to it. "For faith is an entire dependence upon the truth, the power, the justice, and the mercy of God", asserts Swift (Swift, 1763, p.23). According to Paul, faith is "virtue" through which everything that God commands man can be understood and ascertained.

On the other hand, pre-determination has little value to Swift. He was High Church Anglican, and by the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, High Church Anglicanism abandoned Calvinism, embracing Arminianism (Tyacke, 2001). Even more so, he despises Puritans and British Calvinists, and in *A Tale of A Tub*, he makes a spiteful satire on them. Therefore, Paul's thesis on pre-determination finds no development in Swift's system. He cannot fit this into the worldview of his hero, Martin, and lets Martin take potluck with the Lutheran development of the theses of Paul's Epistle.

We do not know whether Swift intended to create the character of Paul. What we can infer though is that the use of the name of Martin is a bit incongruous regarding Anglicanism. Although it was Martin Luther who proclaimed justification by faith and gave a start to Protestantism, still Lutheranism is not Anglicanism, although they bear a certain resemblance in their societal context. We think that if Swift intended to name the character in another way, he would abstain from doing so because he did not share Paul's thesis on pre-determination. At the same time, Paul, just like Peter, was affiliated with the whole denomination and movement. Paul is much more 'Protestant' than Peter. If Peter was the rock on whose foundation the new church was built, Paul's justification by faith and pre-determination served as the pillars on which the new Reformed Church was founded, combining the teachings of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin,

through the mediation of St. Augustine of Hippo (Hägglund, 2007; Gonzáles, 1987).

Swift might have had another reason to name his character Paul rather than Martin. Although it is not historically proven, it is alleged by several authors (Eusebius, St. Jerome, Theodoret) that St. Paul visited Britain to lay the first brick in Christianizing the local heathens (Thackeray, 1843, pp. 80-81). The proven historical fact is the arrival in Britain of St. Augustine of Hippo in 597. Paying special tribute to St. Paul's concepts in his writings, Augustine did not arrive alone but with monks from Rome. One of them, Mellitus, was personally consecrated by Augustine as the first Bishop of London under Ethelbert, King of Kent, who founded a cathedral to bear the name of St. Paul (Milman, 1868). It was to become the main spiritual landmark of England in medieval and post-medieval Reformation times, thus ascribing to Paul a special, rather Protestant, significance. Compare this to Peter, unveiling the grandeur and magnificence in the realm of Anglicanism, the medium way between High-Church Catholicism and low-church Calvinism. Swift desperately strived to obtain a holy order at St. Paul's, aware that being a Bishop in the spiritual heart of England would give him much more influence than a Deanship at, albeit Anglican, St. Patrick's in Dublin. He probably had a presentiment that sooner or later the High Church in Ireland would be brought down to the low church towards which he felt nothing but acute disdain.

Thus, Swift preferred to label this medium way, Anglicanism, by antonomasia 'Martin'. He did so because Paul's terminology led us to what would become the sources of both Lutheranism and Calvinism, both moderate and radical Protestantism. Had he named the middle brother 'Paul', it could have been seen as a combination of both high and low Protestant churches. Then he would have been able to create just one character juxtaposed with Peter, instead of the two whose views contrasted with each other's. Martin and Jack would have been combined into Paul, and there would have been only two brothers, Peter and Paul, making a completely different story.

### *A Tale of a Tub and the Eastern Orthodoxy*

Swift says that the idea of the change of the caftan's design belonged to the brother, "who happened to be more book-learned than the other two" (Swift, 1889, p. 75). Of course, it was Peter, personifying Catholicism. The bookishness of the Catholics in the person of Peter can be explained through the philosophic system which the Catholics created based on Aristotle's philosophy. Why does one need to change the appearance of the caftan? First, to sew on the shoulder knots to make one appear more attractive in the eyes of Covetousness, Ambition, and Pride. These traits unambiguously point to the earthly origin of the motivation of the story's heroes. "What is a man himself but a microcoat?" (Swift, 1889, p. 73). This rhetorical question suggests the religion's glorification of the beauty of the human body. 'Microcoat' is 'microcosm' in the language of heathen Neo-Platonism (Wilberding, 2006) whose realm, by the beginning of the second millennium, will have matured into anthropological Neo-Platonism, from which, first, the Eastern, and then, the Western Renaissance will have ripened.

The Renaissance would become exactly the paradigm that, deifying the earthly, would put man and his passions in the center of the universe, making the whole cosmos bow before him.

When suddenly gold laces came into fashion, the brothers again faced the challenge: of how to deal with it. Peter finds the solution again. He concludes that, apart from the written bequest (the will written by the Father), there should also exist the oral will. Here Swift alludes to the creation of the Catholic *tradition*. The tradition originally goes back to the well-known expression of Jesus Christ from Mark 7:9 (THB, 1990). It should be noted that Swift did not campaign against the church tradition, as such. As a clergyman of the Church of England, he

- (1) believed in the apostolic succession of his church,
- (2) acknowledged the authority of the Ecumenical Councils,
- (3) revered the writings of the Holy Fathers.

The tradition for Swift as an Anglican was those provisions and postulates which were brought to the church in the early Medieval Ages, together with the Anglican tradition proper. Swift digresses from his hero Peter at the point where the Catholic tradition starts, where the high priest, *primus inter pares*, is converted to the infallible Vicar of Christ on earth.

The brothers introduce one more innovation, the wearing of the embroidery with Indian figures of men, women, and children. According to Wotton's comments on Swift's text, that is Swift's direct allegory to the icons of the Roman church (Wotton, 1705). We confirm such an interpretation of the allegory. It is known that the Anglican church in its High-Church form, approaching Anglo-Catholicism, acknowledges and accepts the use of the church practice of images and icons. Being an Anglican priest of the Church of Ireland, Swift was a follower of this practice.

In his text, Swift does not go against the church images in general, but those which characterize mainly Roman Catholicism, specifically religious figures and sculptures. As Haynes (2017) writes, Anglicanism acquired the *Orthodox* (italics are ours) tradition of icon painting. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the art was revived in the church when individual congregations decided that fine art could be a useful and appropriate means of expression in Christianity. At the same time, they understood that this could lead to idolatry. The major negative criterion for this was, of course, the inner decorations of Roman Catholic temples; however, despite this, pictures entered the church. Haynes (2017) writes that there was an essential difference between sculpture and painting and their use: three-dimensional art was considered much more seductive than 'plain art.' In confirmation of her opinion, she refers to the words of Thomas Tennyson, who in the treatise of 1678 "On Idolatry" clearly asserts that the more features of roundness and sculpture are carried by the image, the more danger it entails (Haynes, 2017).

As the famous scholar Aleksey Losev writes, the sculptural understanding of the being is a feature of paganism. The sculpture is not an absolute expression of an idea, but rather "inasmuch

as it is needed to comprehend body” (Losev, 2005, p. 422). The ideas are formalized and emptied and have materialized into petrified matter, “an expression of the beautiful sculpture” (p. 422). Catholicism is seen by Losev as paganism in Christianity, representing the heathen Platonism in Orthodoxy. Heathen Platonism does with ideas and matter what Catholicism does with spiritual-personal beings.

“This concept is juxtaposed by Orthodoxy, which not sculpturally, but musical-verbally, meaning reasonable (and not corporal) embodiment of apophatic Abyss in the reasonable (and not sculptural-corporal) Word and the embodiment of this Word in the artistic, i.e. iconographic image.”

(Losev, 2005, p. 422)

Icon painting as an authentically Christian tradition stems from no one other than Luke the Evangelist. St. Luke, who is venerated as an artist, especially in Orthodoxy, is believed to have painted various biblical images and icons, including Peter and Paul, and illustrated a gospel book with miniature pictures. For these reasons, Luke was also venerated in Western Christianity and the medieval Guild of Saint Luke considered him the patron of painters (Howe, 2007). This is another reason to believe that Swift was not against icons as such, rather he would be against the misuse of images, especially in their sculptural form, in the Catholic tradition. From the beginning, the Anglican tradition had a less strict attitude towards images than sculptures; it allowed them unless they led to idolatry (see, for example, Rev. Thomas Cranmer’s “Thirteen Articles” of 1538 with the additional article “C” titled “Images” (Bray, n.d.) until this attitude was finally revived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### Discussion

The three brothers portrayed by Swift portray the three branches of Christianity. They carry meaningful names, each representing a different denomination. The elder and junior brothers, personifying the two poles of Christianity, the two opposites never capable of finding compromise, are treated by Swift most harshly.

Martin, who is most dear to Swift because of his Anglican affiliation, is dealt with more gently. However, even Martin is considered as the one who is not altogether infallible and who transgressed against his father.

As for the father, he is given the least attention in the unfolding of the story, but whose personality determines the main idea of the narrative. Critics of *A Tale of a Tub* agree that the character depicted through the father is God himself. This idea is not as simple and obvious as it may seem at first glance. Who is the father? The Holy Trinity, God the Father, or maybe the Son? And if he is an immaterial spiritual God, then why are his children not angels? Why is he not given a name by Swift? In our opinion, the character called “father” is not simply God. Personifying the divine truth, this character should essentially be of the same peerage as his sons. If He is God, then his sons should be angels. Or if the children represent a particular religion, then He should also be a religion, albeit the one rising above the religions He gave birth to. Father, just like His children, is an allegory on religion: What is meant in reality is not ‘children’ but the ‘offspring’ the religion produces.

Being brought up in Western Christian tradition, Swift was not well acquainted with Eastern Christianity. Otherwise, he would have known *who* was the one whose opinions the brothers neglected so easily and quickly. It was Orthodoxy which fragmented first into Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. It later fragmented into what is known as Catholicism, Protestantism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, or Anglicanism. Swift is Anglican, for him Anglicanism is the truth. However, he feels the deficiencies of the truth, feels how easily this truth changes clothes, adds shoulder-knots, or sews on figures of people. Historically, it was Orthodoxy from which all other branches of Christianity came, its offspring. Father gave birth to brothers and asked them not to change their original garments. This is the answer Swift seeks, vaguely understands, but still cannot (or, maybe, dare not?) find. There was just one step Swift could have taken to define the essence of the Father. However, for the insightful reader, it becomes clear who the Father is and to whose ideals His offspring ought to have aspired.

## References

- Bray, G. (n.d.) *The Thirteen Articles*. From *The Churchman*, 244-262. <https://apostles-creed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/the-thirteen-articles.pdf>
- Gigineishvili L. (2019). "Apostle Paul". A chapter from *An Introduction to Contemporary Thought*, 70-77. Ilia State University Press.
- González, J. L. (1987). *From Augustine to the Eve of the Reformation: A history of Christian thought*. Abingdon Press.
- Haynes, C. (2017). Anglicanism and Art. *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume II: Establishment and Empire, 1662-1829* (Jeremy Gregory, ed.), 371-391. Oxford University Press.
- Hägglund, B. (2007). *History of theology*. Concordia Publishing House.
- Howe, E. D. (2007) St. Luke. *Grove Art Online*. <https://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart>. Oxford University Press.
- Losev, A. (2005). Filioque as the basis for Latin Platonism (Aristotelism). From *Anthology of Comparative Theology*. Moscow.
- Milman, H. H. (1868). *Annals of St Paul's Cathedral*. Murray.
- Swift, J. (1889). *A Tale of a Tub: and Other Works*. Routledge.
- Swift, J. (1763). *The Sermons of the Reverend Dr. Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin. Carefully Corrected.*: Robert Urie.
- Thackeray, F. (1843). *Researches into the ecclesiastical and political state of Ancient Britain under the Roman Emperors: with Observations upon the Principal Events and Characters Connected with the Christian Religion, during the First Five Centuries*, Vol. I. Cadell.
- The Holy Bible* (1990). The New King James Version. The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, 1085-1098. American Bible Society.
- Tyacke, N. (2001). *Aspects of English Protestantism, c. 1530-1700*. Manchester University Press.
- Wilberding, J. (2006). *Plotinus' Cosmology: a Study of Ennead II.1 (40). Text, translation and commentary*. Oxford University Press.
- Wotton, W. (1705). *A defense of the reflections upon ancient and modern learning, in answer to the objections of Sir W. Temple, and others. With observations upon the Tale of a Tub*. Printed for Tim. Goodwin at the Queen's Head against St. Dunstan's Church in Fleetstreet.

#### Author's Note



**George Shaduri** was born in 1973 in Tbilisi, Georgia. In 1995 he graduated from the faculty of Engineering Economics at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. However, in 2004, he graduated from the faculty of English Language and Literature at Tbilisi State Ilia the True National University. In 2010 he defended his Ph.D. dissertation in American literature at International Black Sea University in Tbilisi. Currently, he is employed at the same university as an Affiliated Associate Professor in the Department of American Studies.

Apart from Anglo-American literature and culture, George's interests encompass such authentically American forms of music as jazz, blues, and rock'n roll, having been performing in these genres at different venues both in Georgia and abroad.