



Watercolour drawing of Jane Austen by her sister Cassandra,
dated 1804.

JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEXT

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2007

The moderate eighteenth-century Anglicanism that Jane Austen imbibed at Steventon from her father, the Revd George Austen, emphasised divine wisdom and atonement in theology, order and patriotism in politics and common sense and morality in private life. Most Church of England clergy steered a safe middle course between Enlightenment rationalism, with its attendant dangers of agnosticism and secularisation, and Evangelical 'enthusiasm', characterised by intense personal piety. The Established Church was thus in danger of becoming simply a quiet moral presence, rather than a dynamic body which lived out a radical gospel message. (On Easter Day 1800, there were only six communicants at St Paul's Cathedral.¹) Nevertheless, in the tumultuous final years of the eighteenth century, religion still mattered to the majority of English men and women, and certainly mattered very much to Jane Austen, whose family bonds were strengthened by private and public devotions, and whose novels reflect the teaching and the rhythms of the Authorised Version of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer.

The moderation that characterises both Austen's fiction and her Anglicanism flows from a pragmatic approach to moral issues and theological truths. Aspects of modernity and progress associated with the Enlightenment project may have threatened conservative Anglican values like Austen's, but an emphasis upon freedom of thought and enquiry was reassuringly Protestant. Faith in miracles may have been weakened, but the disappearance of witch-hunters was a welcome product of rationalism within the Church, and the Test Acts ensured that a small Roman Catholic, or 'Papist' minority kept a low profile in English society.

Much of the energy associated with revivalism had gone out of the Church of England by the middle of the eighteenth century, through the departure of the Wesleys and the growth of

Methodism. In the second half of the century, however, Evangelicalism gradually strengthened within the Anglican fold, through the ministries of men like John Fletcher, Henry Venn and John Newton (Cowper's friend and collaborator). At the end of the century, William Wilberforce and the 'Clapham Sect' gave fresh impetus to an Evangelical revival which was later to have a profound effect upon the private lives and public manners of the Victorians. Sydney Smith invented the name for the group, most of whom lived near Clapham and worshipped in the parish church. (Hannah More was closely associated with the group later in her life.) These wealthy Anglicans believed that their faith should be reflected in good works. They led the campaign to abolish the slave trade, founded the British and Foreign Bible Society and supported missionary work at home and abroad.

Evangelicalism, with its emphasis upon conversion and a new life in Christ, sanctification and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, mission and acts of love (or 'charity') and a personal life set apart from worldly immorality, clearly influenced Jane Austen, but without recruiting her to its ranks. When Hannah More's popular novel *Cælebs in Search of a Wife* first appeared in 1809, Jane wrote to her sister, Cassandra: 'You have by no means raised my curiosity after Caleb; – My disinclination for it before was affected, but now it is real; I do not like the Evangelicals. – Of course I shall be delighted when I read it, like other people, but till I do, I dislike it' (L, 24 January 1809). By 1814, however, she could tell her niece, Fanny Knight, that she was 'by no means convinced that we ought not all to be Evangelicals', and that she was 'at least persuaded that they who are so from Reason & Feeling, must be happiest & safest' (L, 18–20 November 1814). 1814 was the year of *Mansfield Park*, her most overtly Christian novel, whose pious heroine has tried the patience of many readers and critics ever since it was first published. Significantly, Fanny Price meets with Edmund's approval when she raises the question of the slave trade with her uncle (MP, 2:3).

The author of *Mansfield Park* would have appreciated the title of Wilberforce's *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity* (1797), while reserving judgement on his emphasis upon the 'melancholy proofs of our depravity'.² A

regular reader of sermons, Austen was closer theologically to the successors of John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury in the late seventeenth century, whose sermons were a model for preachers in the eighteenth. 'Every Man', Tillotson taught, 'is sent by God into this World, and hath a Work given him to do in it, which he is concern'd vigorously to mind and to prosecute with all his Might. And tho' every Man be not sent to save the whole World, as the Son of God was, yet every Man is sent by God into the World, to work out his own Salvation, and to take care of that in the first Place, and then to promote the Salvation of others, as much as in him lies.'³

Among late eighteenth-century divines such as John Hey, Richard Watson and William Paley – all Cambridge men – much intellectual energy was expended upon the 'evidences' of Christianity. Revealed theology explored the relationship between the truth of the gospel and the facts of the gospels – facts concerning the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Paley's frequently reprinted *Evidences of Christianity* (1794), he concluded that the 'truth of Christianity depends upon its leading facts, and upon them alone'.⁴ Natural theology, which depends upon the operation of (God-given) human reason, focused upon evidences of God in the design of the created world and the reading of the 'book of nature' as the second 'book of God'. In the opening pages of Paley's last book, *Natural Theology* (1802), he developed the famous analogy of finding a watch in a field and realising that it must have had a maker who had a purpose in mind when he made it. This made perfect sense to pre-Darwinian generations and is reflected in Fanny's celebration of a moonlit scene in *Mansfield Park*: 'When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly would be less of both if the sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene' (1:11).

Like Fanny, Austen took more pleasure in the pre-Romantic, domestic sublime of William Cowper, hymn-writer as well as poet, than in the Romantic sublimities of Coleridge or Shelley. Austen's moderate Anglicanism also shaped her response to the Gothic sublime, as worked out in her critique of Ann Radcliffe in *Northanger Abbey*, where Henry Tilney chastises the heroine specifically for

forgetting her Anglican heritage: 'Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians' (NA, 2:9). On matters of religion, Austen avoided extremes. She can be scornful not only of selfish worldliness, as in her treatment of Mary Crawford at Sotherton (MP, 1:8–10), but also of intrusive pietism, epitomised in Mary Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Some of the comedy in the fiction plays between these two extremes, as Austen acknowledges that human beings can be both spiritual and worldly at the same time. When Mrs Elton arrives at Highbury, she is first seen at church and the attention of worshippers is divided between their devotions and their curiosity as to her prettiness (E, 2:14).

Although familiar with the society pulpits of Bath and London, Jane Austen knew about the role of the Church in rural England from the inside. As Edmund explains to Miss Crawford, in the wilderness at Sotherton, 'We do not look in great cities for our best morality. It is not there, that respectable people of any denomination can do most good; and it certainly is not there, that the influence of the clergy can be most felt' (MP, 1:9). Ordination, all too often a rather casual private matter between a recent graduate of Oxford or Cambridge and his bishop, is a central theme in *Mansfield Park*, where Sir Thomas comments upon Edmund's living and the role of a 'parish priest' (Austen's only use of the word in the published novels):

Edmund might, in the common phrase, do the duty of Thornton, that is, he might read prayers and preach, without giving up Mansfield Park; he might ride over, every Sunday, to a house nominally inhabited, and go through divine service; he might be the clergyman of Thornton Lacey every seventh day, for three or four hours, if that would content him. But it will not. He knows that human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey, and that if he does not live among his parishioners and prove himself by constant attention their well-wisher and friend, he does very little either for their good or his own.

(MP, 2:7)

Regular public worship and the 'weekly sermon' were, however, very important to Jane Austen and her family, who always attended

Morning Prayer, unless prevented from doing so by abominable weather. Church-going is habitual to her heroines (*P&P*, 1:12) and leads naturally to social exchange after the service (*NA*, 1:5, *MP*, 3:11). The sacred and the secular blend together organically in Austen's life and work, in a way that was also celebrated by Coleridge, himself a clergyman's son, in *Aids to Reflection* (1825), where he discusses the role of the clergy as part of England's 'clerisy' of teachers and scholars. For Austen it is perfectly natural for Elinor and her new husband, Edward Ferrars, to ensure that the parsonage reflects their future status in rural society and has a carriage drive to accommodate their guests. Temporarily based in Colonel Brandon's mansion house after the wedding, they 'chuse papers, project shrubberies, and invent a sweep' (*SE&S*, 3:14).

As an Anglican clergyman, Edward is now a 'minister of religion' in the Established Church of England. In place of a medieval rood screen, the royal arms will be displayed. Instead of pre-Reformation prayers for the Pope, intercessions for the 'King and members of the Royal Family' are prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer. Thomas Herring, a successor of Tillotson's as Archbishop of Canterbury, when preaching before the House of Lords, invited his congregation to 'consider, what is the Duty of a Subject': 'Is it not, from the clearest Reason and Policy in the World, and by the strongest Injunctions of Religion, to honour the King, to pay the proper Duty and Deference to his high Character, to which he has been raised by the Order of Government, by the regular Claim of Royal Birth-right, and by the Sanction of God's Providence?'⁵ Two of Jane Austen's brothers became clergymen and one of her two 'sailor brothers', Francis, who served King and Country in the Napoleonic Wars and eventually rose to be Admiral of the Fleet, was known as the 'officer who knelt at church' – something that was unheard of.

One of the few books that we know was owned by Jane Austen herself, and not simply borrowed from her father's library of 500 volumes or from a circulating library, was William Vickers's *A Companion to the Altar*, later referred to by a great-niece, Miss Florence Austen, as a 'book of devotions always used by Jane Austen'.⁶ The *Companion*, a slim volume designed to slip into the pocket or the reticule, prepares the reader for the service of Holy Communion,

which in Austen's time was celebrated only occasionally. Again, the national significance of the sacrament is emphasised, when Vickers invites the reader to reflect upon the circumstances in which it was instituted by Christ: 'From that hour they who dwelt in the uttermost ends of the earth, strangers to the covenant of promise, began to draw nigh. In that hour the light of the Gospel dawned from afar on the BRITISH ISLANDS!'⁷

Vickers's aim is to encourage religious reflection among worshippers, not only upon God's gift of grace, but also upon man's response, in the form of good works. The main text begins:

All the blessings which we now enjoy, and hope hereafter to receive from Almighty God, are purchased for us, and must be obtained, through the merits and intercession of the Holy JESUS, who has instituted the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, for a continual Remembrance of his Death and Passion, to our great and everlasting comfort, *Luke* xxii. 19, *1 Cor.* xi. 24. But then we must remember, that these blessings are no where promised, but on condition that we ourselves are first duly qualified for them. (*A Companion to the Altar*, p. 13)

The 'first part' of a communicant's duty, he argues, is 'Self-Examination': 'we must search our hearts, and examine our consciences, not only till we see our sins, but until we hate them' (pp. 15–16).

Jane Austen's three extant prayers strike a similar note. They appear to have been written for family worship in the evening. Each contains some or all of the following elements: a plea for grace, a petition for mercy on the day's sins, thanksgiving for blessings, a petition for protection this night and a petition for a heightened awareness of God's grace in the redemption of the world. Each then closes with the Lord's Prayer. As in the Anglican service of Evening Prayer, which they echo, the petitions for mercy are the longest and most urgent sections of these prayers:

Almighty God! Look down with mercy on thy servants here assembled and accept the petitions now offered up unto thee. Pardon oh God! the offences of the past day. We are conscious of many frailties; we remember with shame and contrition, many *evil* thoughts and neglected duties; and we have perhaps sinned against thee and against

our fellow-creatures in many instances of which we have no remembrance. Pardon oh! God whatever thou hast seen amiss in us, and give us a stronger desire of resisting every *evil* inclination and weakening every habit of sin (my emphases).

To the modern ear, 'evil' perhaps seems too strong a word to apply to Emma Woodhouse's upbringing ('The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself', *E*, 1:1), or to the invalided Mrs Smith's 'power of turning readily from evil to good' (*P*, 2:5) or to Anne Elliot's misery at the concert in Bath, as she thinks of Mr Elliot's attentions ('Their evil was incalculable', *P*, 2:8). The scrupulousness with which Austen sifted the 'evils' of each day in her prayers, however, indicates that we need to retune.

It is Mrs Rushworth's reference to the fact that her late husband had 'left off' the custom of having prayers read in the chapel at Sotherton by a domestic chaplain, morning and evening, that elicits such contrasting responses from Miss Crawford ('Every generation has its improvements', *MP*, 2:9) and Fanny Price ('A whole family assembling regularly for the purpose of prayer, is fine!'). Although Austen's sympathies are clear in *Mansfield Park*, where the Christian heroine is finally rewarded with marriage and happiness, she eschews the kind of fervent religiosity that characterised much of the religious fiction of her day, particularly Evangelical fiction. Again, her own position is closer to that of the Anglican divines she would have read on Sundays, some of whose arguments are decidedly down-to-earth. Tillotson, for example, preaching on 'The present and future Advantage of an Holy and Virtuous Life', lists 'temporal Interest' among his six 'eminent Advantages':

- I. It brings great Peace and Contentment of Mind.
- II. It is a very fit and proper Means to promote our outward temporal Interest.
- III. It tends to the lengthning our days, and hath frequently the Blessing of long Life attending upon it.
- IV. It gives a Man great Peace and Comfort when he comes to die.
- V. After Death it transmits a good Name and Reputation to Posterity.
- VI. It derives a Blessing upon our Posterity after us.

(Tillotson, *Works*, vol. II, p. 54)

Similarly, there was a 'vein of shrewd sense' in Thomas Sherlock's sermons, of which Jane Austen was 'very fond', preferring them to 'almost any' (*I*, 28 September 1814).⁸

Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century preachers also dwelt upon the heavenly reward for which those who strive for holiness may hope, through the atoning work of God in Christ's passion. Following Marianne's brush with death, she says: 'My illness has made me think – It has given me leisure and calmness for serious recollection . . . I wonder at my recovery, – wonder that the very eagerness of my desire to live, to have time for atonement to my God, and to you all, did not kill me at once' (*S&S*, 3:10). The four last things of eschatology – death, judgement, heaven and hell – figured prominently in the religious discourse of Austen's day, and novelists often played God in writing 'last judgements' for their characters. Austen was clearly conscious of this when throwing Mrs Norris and Maria together in a 'remote and private' place, where, 'shut up together with little society, on one side no affection, on the other, no judgment, it may be reasonably supposed that their tempers became their mutual punishment' (*MP*, 3:17). This chapter begins, however, with an important disclaimer: 'Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest.' The service of Morning Prayer that Jane Austen knew so well includes the words, 'Restore thou them that are penitent.'

As in other aspects of her religious life and understanding, then, Austen is moderate in her representation of her characters' fallen state and future hope: most are 'not greatly in fault' and deserve 'tolerable comfort' (*MP*, 3:17). In the service of Holy Communion, the priest says to the congregation: 'Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours . . . Draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort.' At the end of *Persuasion*, Captain Wentworth trusts to 'being in charity' with Lady Russell soon, adding: 'But I too have been thinking over the past, and a question has suggested itself, whether there may not have been one person more my enemy even than that lady? My own self' (*P*, 2:11). Christian doctrine, expressed in the language of the Prayer Book and the Bible, underpins the novels of one whose family included these words in the inscription on her

gravestone in Winchester Cathedral: "Their grief is in proportion to their affection, they know their loss to be irreparable, but in their deepest affliction they are consoled by a firm though humble hope that her charity, devotion, faith and purity have rendered her soul acceptable in the sight of her REDEEMER."⁹

NOTES

1. See Stephen Prickett, 'The Religious Context', in *The Context of English Literature: The Romantics*, ed. Stephen Prickett (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 116.
2. William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity* (1797), p. 24.
3. *The Works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson, late Lord Archbishop of Canterbury*, second edition (1717), vol. I, p. 326. Subsequent references are included in the text.
4. William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity, in Three Parts*, twelfth edition, 2 vols. (1807), vol. II, p. 376.
5. Thomas Herring, *Seven Sermons on Public Occasions* (1763), p. 105.
6. See David Gilson, *A Bibliography of Jane Austen*, reprinted with additions (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies, 1997), p. 445.
7. [William Vickers], *A Companion to the Altar: Shewing the Nature & Necessity of a Sacramental Preparation in Order to our Worthy Receiving the Holy Communion* (1793?), p. vi. Subsequent references are included in the text.
8. Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols. (London: Hart-Davis, 1962), vol. I, p. 189. See Section II, 'From the Sermons of the Right Revd Thomas Sherlock, D. D. Lord Bishop of London', in *Family Lectures; or, Domestic Divinity, being a Copious Collection of Sermons*, 2 vols. (1791-5), vol. I, pp. 266-99.
9. See Michael Wheeler, *Jane Austen and Winchester Cathedral* (Winchester: Winchester Cathedral, 2003), p. 2.