

English Literature and the Church of England

Jeremy Black finds religious inspiration in the work of Jane Austen and Christie

Present-day discontents directed at the 'canon,' the set of established texts that dominate the understanding of literature, relate to a radical agenda from which charges of racism shoot in a multi-directional pyrotechnics. That approach ignores a more serious problem with the presentation of the canon, namely its secularisation and, linked to that, the tendency to downplay or misattribute an awareness of evil and a resulting moral conspectus. This tendency is seen both with works in the canon such as the novels of Jane Austen and with those denied by condescension such as a positioning such as those of Agatha Christie. This short piece is scarcely the book-length account the subject merits, but is intended to fire up interest in an important topic.

The whys are various, and any list necessarily incomplete, but I see the drawing together of tendencies from the interwar years, not least the assault by the supposed highbrow writers, such as Virginia Woolf, on the older tradition of narrative writing represented by John Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett, a related hostility to popularity and commercial success, as presented by criticism of Christie or, later, Ian Fleming, a scorn for public morality including Christianity, the nuclear family and 'Victorian values,' and a wish to be different.

Other factors of significance in recent decades include the repurposing of writers in terms of the supposed values of a later age and, more particularly, the apparent exigencies of cinema and television. Thus, for Austen, we have the 1995 BBC television series of *Pride and Prejudice*, most noted at the time for Colin Firth, who played Mr Darcy, meeting Elizabeth outside Pemberley wearing a wet shirt after a swim in the lake. This television series was closer to the novel than the 2005 film, which was more akin to Romanticism, not least in the characterisation and a scene with Elizabeth Bennet poised precariously on a cliff in the Peak District. The ITV television series *Sanditon* (2019-) is far worse.

So also with Agatha Christie, where television and film have tended to leach both morality and politics out of the context and plots, sometimes, as with the ITV David Suchet version of *The Big Four*, totally reversing the plots.

The failure to understand the moral context and dimension of what is otherwise presented as entertainment and a shimmering style of superficial sensibility, is most apparent in the case of religion. The contribution of Judaeo-Christianity to the culture is not only a matter of the lessons and language of the Bible, but also of the injunctions and the moral struggle Pious herself, as the in-



scription on her gravestone in Winchester Cathedral notes, Austen was a daughter of a rector, and two of her six brothers became clergymen. Three of Austen's prayers survive and she was to write in 1814 'I am very fond of Sherlock's Sermons, prefer them to almost any,' a reference to Thomas Sherlock, Bishop of London.

Austen's piety was the background for the judgment of individuals. Jane had scant time for those clerics who did not meet her standards. The fictional Mr Collins was in part based on a clerical cousin, Edward Cooper, an Evangelical who, self-centred, sent letters of little comfort. In *Mansfield Park*, a novel in which there is much Evangelical influence, Edmund Bertram, the young son of Sir Thomas and another positive character, is intended for the Church. He intends to reside in his parish, and provides Jane, in the voice of his father Sir Thomas, with an opportunity to denounce pluralism where one parson held two posts:

'I should have been deeply mortified, if any son of mine could reconcile himself to doing less ... a parish has wants and claims which can be known only by a clergyman constantly resident, and which no proxy can be capable of satisfying to the same extent. 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.'

Described by Jane as a 'little harangue,' this was a deeply serious account. Far from being solely Evangelical, this view reflected the strong Anglican commitment of many clerics and much of the laity both when Jane was writing and over the previous century. High Churchmen, including Robert, 2nd Earl of Liverpool, Prime Minister from 1812 to 1827, disliked pluralism and sought to remedy it within the limited means available to them.

Mary Crawford, who had designs on Edmund, was startled by the views of the Bertrams as she had hoped 'to shut out the church, sink the clergyman, and see only the respectable, elegant, modernized, and occasional residence of a man of independent fortune.' Her brother also emerges as flawed, not least through declaring that, if a preacher, he would only wish to preach occasionally. Fanny Price shakes her head.

There are clerical heroes, notably Edmund Bertram, Henry Tilney, or Edward Ferrars. Elinor Dashwood is able to assure Colonel Brandon that 'Edward's principles and disposition' deserved the living of Delaford which he was giving him. Edward indeed shows both good character and humility. Jane condemns characters who are contemptuous of the clergy, for example Robert Ferrars' attitude toward his elder brother:

'The idea of Edward's being a clergyman, and living in a small parsonage house, diverted him beyond measure; - and when to that was added the fanciful imagery of Edward reading prayers in a white surplice, and publishing the banns of marriage between John Smith and Mary Brown, he could conceive nothing more ridiculous.

Elinor, while she waited in silence, and immovable gravity, the conclusion of such folly, could not restrain her eyes from being fixed on him with a look that spoke all the contempt it excited. ... it relieved her own feelings.'



Such anti-clericalism was associated with Whigs and, in Elinor, Jane was very much expressing a Tory clericalism.

Jane expected others to be pious. Her naval brother Francis was very much so and was part of a powerful devout tendency in the Royal Navy. In 1809, she responded to the death of General Sir John Moore in battle at Corunna: 'I wish Sir John had united something of the Christian with the Hero in his death.' This response was an aspect of a wider engagement with the providential character of Britain. In September 1814, with reference to the possibility of continued war with the United States, which, on rational grounds, she viewed with much foreboding, Jane wrote to Martha Lloyd: 'I place my hope of better things on a claim to the protection of Heaven, as a Religious Nation, a Nation in spite of much Evil Improving in Religion, which I cannot believe the Americans to possess.' There was a higher proportion of Protestant non-Anglicans (Episcopalians) in North America than in England. This was very much a Tory approach, and that did not clash with the Evangelical tendency she endorsed in a letter to her niece Fanny Knight two months later.

Jane has little time for the laity who are wanting in piety or, more particularly, behavior. Some faults are minor. Typically self-centered, Lady Bertram, crying herself to sleep 'after hearing an affecting sermon,' achieved little. Vice receives more attention. Jane is critical of the adulterous elopement of Henry Crawford and Maria Rushworth, and, both in *Lady Susan* and in her correspondence, Jane is hostile towards adultery. Mr Price remarks 'so many fine ladies were going to the devil now-a-days that way, that there was no answering for anybody.' As an instance of observance of the Sabbath, Anne Elliot is critical of Sunday travelling.

The disagreement at Sotherton Court over chapel attendance reflects Jane's values. Mary Crawford jokes, when told that the chapel was formerly in constant use, both morning and evening, but that the late Mr Rushworth had stopped this, 'Every generation has its improvement.' This leads Fanny to respond:

'It was a valuable part of former times. There is something in a chapel and chaplain so much in character with a great house, with one's ideas of what such a household should be! A whole family assembling regularly for the purpose of prayer, is fine!'

The immoral and selfish Mary replies, bringing up social control:

'It must do the heads of the family a great deal of good to force all the poor housemaids and footmen to leave business and pleasure, and say their prayers here twice a day, while they are inventing excuses themselves for staying away... it is safer to leave people to their own devices on such subjects.'

Edmund Bertram ably answers Mary's points, as he also later does when discussing his sister's elopement with

her brother. Edmund also shows a grasp of human flaws in describing Mrs Norris not as cruel, but as having ‘faults of principle ... and a corrupted, vitiated mind.’ Such remarks capture Jane’s insights into personality, insights that drew on experience. Yet, Edmund is able to draw attention to ‘a spirit of improvement abroad,’ both in preaching and among the laity:

‘It is felt that distinctness and energy may have weight in recommending the most solid truths; and, besides, there is more general observation and taste, a more critical knowledge diffused, than formerly; in every congregation, there is a larger proportion who know a little of the matter, and who can judge and criticise.’

In a broader sense, alongside such criticism, Jane’s novels are Anglican works, not least in their faith in human nature and their desire to be positive:

‘Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest.’

The discussion of sin is very much restrained, even in the somewhat amoral *Lady Susan*. Nevertheless, according to her brother Henry, Jane objected to what he presented as the low moral standards in the work of Henry Fielding, whose approach was certainly very different, while her favour for Samuel Richardson was a key indicator of preference in style and content. Moreover, Jane makes explicit reference to evil in *Emma* and *Persuasion*, and, more potently so in *Sense and Sensibility*, when Elinor’s response to John Willoughby’s revelations leads her to consider the origins of evil:

‘Her thoughts were silently fixed on the when irreparable injury which too early an independence and its consequent habits of idleness, dissipation, and luxury, had made in the mind, the character, the happiness, of a man who, to every advantage of person and talents, united a disposition naturally open and honest, and a feeling, affectionate temper. The world had made him extravagant and vain—Extravagance and vanity had made him cold-hearted and



selfish. Vanity, while seeking its own guilty triumph at the expense of another, had involved him in a real attachment, which extravagance, or at least its offspring, necessity, had required to be sacrificed. Each faulty propensity in leading him to evil, had led him likewise to punishment.’

The religious theme is brought forward melodramatically soon after by Marianne Dashwood who wishes to have time ‘for atonement to my God.’

The moral quality of Jane’s work fits into a strong tradition of pragmatic Anglican didacticism.

With *Christie*, there is a murder in a vicarage, but, although present, as in Archdeacon Brabazon, the Reverend Dane Calthrop, and Canon Pennyfather, clerics play only relatively minor roles, and the formal requirements of Christianity and still more the Church of England are not a significant theme. Poirot is Catholic while in *Harley Quin* there is a mystical figure who offers a supernatural assistance.

And yet, religious themes of evil, justice, and judgment are repeatedly present. Evil appears in the title in *Evil Under The Sun* (1941). The citation of both the Bible as in *The Pale Horse* (1961) and Shakespeare are frequent with *Christie*, and in one of her last novels, *Nemesis* (1971), the former is very much to the fore. Christie’s essential approach is that of a clear moral universe, one established in a and through goodness, but challenged by the evil of a sinful individualism, which in turn, in her ‘political’ novels, such as *Passenger to Frankfurt* (1970), can be exploited by extreme political forces. The latter are both secular and yet offer a pseudo-religion. Christie’s villains fail not only due to the brilliance of her detecting protagonists but also due to the inherent flaws of evil, notably hubris and a desire for control. The cruelty and malice of evil are also abundantly present. Few of the murderers are other than disturbed and disturbing, and the reader achieves fulfilment in the detection. When that rule is broken in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), there is a different fulfilment, that of a true justice by a ‘jury’ of twelve. Possibly it is the sense of moral certainty that makes Christie unpopular with some critics, but it was a certainty shared by most of her readers, one based on a conviction of the difference between Good and Evil. These are never abstractions in a Christie novel. ND



A retired academic and historian, Jeremy Black’s many books include *The Importance of Being Poirot and England in the Age of Austen*.