

The Church in *Mansfield Park*: a Serious Call?¹

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As Mr Crawley said, entering Mr Toogood's presence in *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, I stand before you *in forma pauperis*. Perhaps I should say, *formae pauperis*, for I am at once a historian examining literature and a mid-nineteenth century governmental man evaluating the early nineteenth-century Church of England. But perhaps also like Mr Crawley's plea, there is an element of humbug in my apology. I start with the notion that a nineteenth-century novel and its contemporary surrounds, the institutions and ideas of the day, are mutually illuminating, that they throw their lights back and forward upon each other, *energetically*. This is hardly so generally accepted, or even so widely disputed, a proposition as to constitute a professionalism of any depth. We are all amateurs here, almost by definition. At the same time, this has—or may have—its special uses. Irresponsibility certainly liberates the imagination, while the avowal of comparative ignorance ought in all conscience to provide the brake. Whether such a spasmodic progress will lead, in this particular case, to uplands or an interminable marsh remains to be seen.

Perhaps the most celebrated error about *Mansfield Park* is that Jane Austen meant its theme to be ordination. I mention this with some pain, for, by collating texts and dates, I laboriously discovered this error for myself, only to learn, when I sought to electrify the world by an announcement of my finding, that the world already knew it, for a dozen years or more. Such are the absurdities when one ventures into another's field: I found myself, in effect, a Central Australian nomad re-discovering the wheel.

And yet, although the original mistake was gross—the very letter which preceded that in which Jane Austen told Cassandra that she would write next upon ordination had made it clear that *Mansfield Park* was already half-complete²—it may also have been inspired:

- 1 A paper delivered at a symposium on Jane Austen in Canberra in 1982. Professor MacDonagh's 'Highbury and Chawton: Social Convergence in *Emma*', appeared in *Historical Studies*, vol. 18, no. 70 (April 1978), 37-51.
- 2 Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 24 and 29 January 1813, in R. W. Chapman (ed.), *Jane Austen's letters to her sister Cassandra and others* (2nd edn, London, 1952), pp. 294, 298. For detailed discussion of this point see J. F. Burrows, 'Jane Austen's *Emma*: a study of narrative art' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 1967) Appendix A, pp. 284-7.

o felix culpa. There is a sense in which ordination, as the very pivot of organized religion, can be regarded as the novel's leading theme. Of course, it is part-foolish to speak of novels as having major themes. Those worth remembering are much too complex and delicate for this. Yet it is perhaps less foolish a procedure for Jane Austen's than for most other novels. *Northanger Abbey* really does satirize the Gothick mode; *Sense and Sensibility* really does express and evaluate its titular qualities; *Pride and Prejudice* no less; *Persuasion* partly so. *Emma* truly is the first and most crimeless of detective stories. The fragment of *Sanditon* is unquestionably the opening salvo of a bombardment of Political Economy and the Romantic mode.

Taking "ordination" then—if only provisionally and for working purposes—as the equivalent *leit-motif* for *Mansfield Park*, we should not confine it to the narrow usage of ceremonial appointment to the Christian ministry. On the one hand, the primary meaning of the word is classification (generally social in character) and arrangement into ranks. On the other hand, the taking of anglican orders in 1813 (when *Mansfield Park* was finished) raised many questions of ecclesiastical discipline—residence, pluralism and ceremony; of livelihood—the variation, sources and ownership of clerical income; of the nature of the parish and its duties, and the crisis presented by urbanization and manufacturing industry; of religion of the heart, conversion and enthusiasm; and, though only in a premonitory and tentative form as yet, of the sacramental and special or "holy" nature of the priesthood. It is with these narrower meanings of ordination that I am primarily concerned, although, of course, no late Georgian would have distinguished them altogether from social order and stable rank.

Let us note particularly that the religious and ecclesiastical issues of 1813 foreshadowed the great debates and endeavours of the Victorian Church. Conversely, they also signalled the profound changes which the Church of England had begun to undergo in the final decades of the eighteenth century. As it happens, both the mid eighteenth-century and the Victorian Church have received considerable historical attention; but not the intervening decades of transition.³ Thus *Mansfield Park* may throw a sudden, intense light—

3 See generally N. Sykes, *Church and State in England in the eighteenth century* (Cambridge 1934); G. F. A. Best, *Temporal pillars: Queen Anne's bounty, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, and the Church of England* (Cambridge 1964); A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and society in industrial England: church, chapel and social change, 1740-1914* (New York 1976); R. A. Soloway, *Prelates and people; ecclesiastical social thought in England, 1783-1852* (London 1969); W. R. Ward, *Religion and society in England*

however needle-thin, sharp, and subjective—upon one great turning-point in English history, as well as being itself revealed at a greater, or any rate another, depth for being scrutinized as a religious novel. In short, trying another suit of clothes, a clerical suit, upon the book. If it fits even tolerably it may tell us something about both Jane Austen's meaning and the nature of what we might term "middle" anglicanism in the closing years of the Napoleonic era. It also indicates, I think, a strangely anticipatory quality in the novel. For it seems to me to leap forward—or half-forward—to both the literature and the Church of principle and of conscience, each of which was to flourish so marvellously in the mid nineteenth century.

II

Let us begin by assembling the few surviving indications of Jane Austen's own religion, considering in turn her family, her known life and her private observations.

One salient feature is that her life spanned an era of incipient church reform. The years 1775-1817 were marked by profound changes in anglican expectations of their clergy, and to a lesser extent in clerical practice itself. Evangelicalism was at once a cause and an effect of this transformation. But the transformation transcended evangelicalism, narrowly defined. It was also a counterpart of, and inter-connected with, the associated administrative, political, and university reform movements of the late eighteenth century, each of which took a decided shape in the 1780s. Characteristically, the Church lagged a little behind the rest. In its case the "centre of gravity" of the change was probably a decade or two decades later.

Jane Austen's own family provides, to a degree, an illustration of these developments. Her father, George Austen, appears to have passed for an exemplary clergyman in the late eighteenth century. Yet he was not ordained until the age of twenty-nine, and accepted orders then—at least the chronology would suggest as much—so that he could

1790-1850 (London 1972); D. Newsome, *The parting of friends; a study of the Wilberforces and Henry Manning* (London 1966); E. J. Evans, *The contentious tithe: the tithe problem and English agriculture, 1750-1850* (London 1976); I. C. Bradley, *The call to seriousness: the evangelical impact on the Victorians* (London 1976); and F. K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: the age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge 1961). I am much indebted to Dr A. G. L. Haig for guiding my first footsteps in this field, as well, as will appear below, for his particular findings on the Anglican Church as a profession in the nineteenth century.

accept practically simultaneously, a proctorship at Oxford and a family living. For the first three years of his rectorship of Steventon, he was an absentee. He did not come into residence until his marriage in 1764. Meanwhile, to augment his income, his uncle had bought him the reversion to whichever of the two adjoining parishes, Ashe or Deane, should fall in first; and when Deane became vacant in 1773, he must have supplied its duties, if at all, by a curate until his eldest son, James, could succeed there as his *alter ego* around 1786. Doubtless, to raise more money, the rectory at Deane was let from 1773 until James needed it for a home when he married in 1793, and again in the elder Mr Austen's final years after he had passed over the duties and a certain proportion of the income of Steventon to James. Thus George Austen was a pluralist for most of his clerical life, as well as a non-resident in its opening and closing phases. He was, moreover, only a part-time rector in the sense that he pursued other avocations. He tutored and boarded the sons of the rich at home for several years, and farmed—he was an eager and active agriculturalist—probably for the entire period of his residence at Steventon.

We know nothing certainly of his theological views and tone, but the impression gained is of a sound median high-churchman. His clerical children however bore some of the marks of a later generation. James, Jane's eldest brother, was a strict and earnest priest who actually rejected presentation to a living from scruples about simony—his father's acquisition of a second living had borne a decidedly simoniacal air. Henry, George's fourth son, intended for the church but escaping into, first, the Oxfordshire militia and then private banking, and finally accepting orders after being declared insolvent in 1815, proved to be a stern and fiery evangelical as perpetual curate of Overton. In the wider family circle, James's cousin, the Rev. Edward Cooper was a decided puritan, while another clerical cousin, George Cooke, the celebrated tutor of Corpus Christi, Oxford, and the teacher of both Keble and Thomas Arnold was recalled as "an impressive preacher of earnest awakening sermons".⁴ "Impressive", "earnest" and "awakening" are all of course revealing words. Each was important in the code language which signalled the evangelical.

It is true, of course, that the commonplace search for money and security for a large family aspiring to keep its place in the upper middle class provides much of the explanation of George Austen's clerical conduct. It is also true that it can be replicated in the records of the

4 J. E. Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen* (Oxford 1926), p. 81.

early Victorian period—for a very small minority, one need hardly say, for clerical incomes of £1000 per annum, family livings, and the opportunities to practise pluralism or simony or even (since few incumbents could afford two roofs) non-residence were comparatively rare.⁵ Nevertheless, the shift in popular expectations and accepted standards in the Church between the 1780s and the 1830s was marked and clear; and *Mansfield Park* both stands at the cross-roads in time, and must have been informed by the author's intimate knowledge of this revolutionary or evolutionary process.

Although we know little certainly of her life, there can at least be no reasonable doubt that Jane Austen was a conscientious and believing churchwoman. Her private writings suggest moreover—though merely as an impression—that her religious seriousness increased as she aged, and in particular in the final decade of her life. Her attendance at divine service was always regular; she said, and even composed, domestic prayers; she read sermons, devotedly. Her admiration of Charles the Martyr might suggest a species of proto-tractarianism. But this would be anachronistic. Her love of Bishop Sherlock's *Sermons*⁶ was probably the true index of the nature of her high or tory anglicanism. For Sherlock and his school it was not the protestantism of the Church of England but its latitudinarian (or Arian or deist) wing which was abhorrent. As her clergyman brother, Henry, an enemy of all popish things, carefully attested, "her opinions accorded strictly with those of our Established Church".⁷ To Henry we also owe the only considerable comment upon her religious disposition. "One trait only remains to be touched upon", he wrote towards the end of his *Notice* of 1817,

It makes all others unimportant. She was thoroughly religious and devout; fearful of giving offence to God, and incapable of feeling it towards any fellow creature. On serious subjects she was well-instructed, both by reading and meditation.⁸

- 5 In the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century church, however, the incomes and expectations of performance of curates were so low that a considerable number of them were in effect pluralists or non-residents or both.
- 6 R. W. Chapman, *Jane Austen: Facts and Problems* (Oxford 1948), pp. 39, 108.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 8 *Ibid.* The then anonymous *Biographical notice* of the author was prefixed to the posthumous edition of *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* (London 1818) and was slightly expanded as an introduction to Bentley's collected edition (London 1833). See Chapman, *Facts and Problems*, p. 169.

Henry is not to be trusted altogether. Jane herself warned against his “Brotherly vanity Love”.⁹ But however superficial or marmoreal, this particular judgment on religion can scarcely have done more than exaggerate or simplify the reality.

But much the best, if also a most fragmentary and oblique, source for Jane Austen’s views and nature is her letters. Unfortunately, these inter-familial writings say little upon the heavier matters of life, and least of all upon its spiritual dimension, which only “enthusiasts”—to use the contemporary term—would speak of ordinarily outside church walls. Moreover, it is arguable that, if anywhere, Jane would have canvassed religious subjects in her letters to Cassandra, and Cassandra destroyed the bulk of these, and almost certainly those which were most intimate or personal. None the less, a handful of religious threads survive, and it may be possible to guess at the fabric and pattern of which they once formed part.

Apart from an early note of condolence to a relative,¹⁰ as coldly chiselled as any lapidary inscription of the day, the first significant reference in the correspondence comes in 1808. A letter of 24 October describes the visit to Southampton of two of Jane Austen’s nephews whose mother had just died in childbirth. Jane told Cassandra that “as far as I can judge they are both very properly impressed by what has happened”. On the preceding day, a Sunday, she had taken them to church where “*I saw Edward was much affected by the sermon, which, indeed, I could have supposed purposely addressed to the afflicted In the evening we had the Psalms and Lessons, and a sermon at home, to which they were very attentive . . .*”.¹¹ Shortly afterwards, having read accounts of Sir John Moore’s irreligious death in Spain, she told Cassandra that “tho’ a very Heroick son, he might not be a very necessary one to her [his mother’s] happiness . . . I wish Sir John had united something of the Christian with the Hero in his death”.¹²

But the most telling references to religion, for our purposes at least, are those clustered in 1813-14, during the final stages of the composition of *Mansfield Park*, and soon after its publication. The first of these is interesting for its implicit leaning towards the sturdy protestant and John Bullish element in anglicanism. “It must be a

9 Jane Austen to Francis Austen, 25 September 1813, in R. W. Chapman (ed.), *Letters*, p. 340.

10 Jane Austen to Philadelphia Walter, 8 April 1798, Chapman, p. 19.

11 Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 24 October 1808, Chapman, pp. 225, 227.

12 Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 30 January 1809, Chapman, p. 261.

real enjoyment to you'', Jane wrote to her sailor brother, Francis, in the Baltic in mid-1813,

since you are obliged to leave England, to be where you are, seeing something of a new Country, & one that has been so distinguished as Sweden . . . Gustavus-Vasa, Charles 12th, & Christina, & Linneus—do their Ghosts rise up before you?—I have a great respect for former Sweden. So zealous as it was for Protestan[t]ism!—And I have always fancied it more like England than many Countries;—& according to the Map, many of the names have a strong resemblance to the English.¹³

A letter of fourteen months later to her sister-in-law's sister, Martha Lloyd, contains two significant passages. The first throws a shaft of light upon her personal piety.

I have seen West's famous Painting ['His Rejection by the Elders''] and prefer it to anything of the kind I ever saw before. I do not know that it is reckoned superior to his 'Healing in the Temple' but it has gratified *me* much more, and indeed is the first representation of our Saviour which ever at all contented me.¹⁴

The second is more generally interesting and suggestive:

. . . they consider it [an American war] as certain, and as what is to ruin us. The [] cannot be conquered, and we shall only be teaching them the skill in War which they may now want . . . If we *are* to be ruined, it cannot be helped—but 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 [*sic*] the Americans to possess.¹⁵

Finally a letter of 18 November 1814 to her niece, Fanny Knight, discussing Fanny's suitor, James Plumtre, contains the clearest and perhaps the best known of all the religious comments in the correspondence. "And as to there being any objection from his *Goodness*", Jane writes,

from the danger of his becoming even Evangelical, I cannot admit *that*. I am by no means convinced that we ought not all to be Evangelicals, & am at least persuaded that they who are so from Reason and Feeling, must be happiest & safest. Do not be frightened from the connection by your Brothers having most wit. Wisdom is better than Wit, & in the long run will certainly have the laugh on her side; & don't be frightened by the idea of his acting more strictly up to the precepts of the New Testament than others.¹⁶

13 Jane Austen to Francis Austen, 3 July 1813, Chapman, pp. 313-4.

14 Jane Austen to Martha Lloyd, 2 September 1814, Chapman, p. 507.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 508.

16 Jane Austen to Fanny Knight, 18 November 1814, Chapman, p. 410.

These four religious references of 1813-14 seem to carry, however faintly, these particular implications: that Jane Austen's Christianity was Christocentric in the orthodox pious-protestant sense; that she conceived of religion as also national in character; that her anglicanism and her chauvinism were mutually supportive and interpenetrating; that she rejoiced in what seemed to her the increasing religiosity and advance in public morality in her homeland; that she was—or at any rate believed one ought to be—seriously devout; and that, while she herself eschewed, she also respected and even envied the evangelical school in the Church of England, whose salvation was the more secure for the totality of their conversion.

III

It is to the unadulterated eighteenth-century Church that we are introduced in the second chapter of *Mansfield Park*. Edmund, the second son, is destined for the family living, and doubtless for a life of pluralism by Sir Thomas's ownership of a second living nearby at Thornton Lacey. It is implied that probity, level-headedness and the absence of disinclination are quite enough to warrant ordination in such happy circumstances: "the character of Edmund, his strong good sense and uprightness of mind, bid most fairly for utility, honour and happiness to himself and all his connections. He was to be a clergyman".¹⁷ Only the accident that his brother's extravagance had led to the sale of the next incumbency of Mansfield renders immediate pluralism after his ordination impracticable.

In the book's first canvass of religion, Mary Crawford expresses the thoroughgoing secular version of these proceedings, though it is also coloured by her own predilection for fortune, boldness and *éclat*. Family livings she allowed, but as the asylum of the youngest of a long line of boys rather than the featherbed of an able second son. "Do you think", asks Edmund, "the church itself never chosen then?". "*Never* is a black word. But yes, in the *never* of conversation which means *not very often*, I do think it" (p. 92). In short, for Mary, already the devil's disciple, taking orders is a mere matter of adopting a career, and, at that, choosing the lowest occupation which was compatible with respectability. As for ordination for religion's sake, without a living, "that is madness indeed, absolute madness" (p. 109).

17 J. Austen, *Mansfield Park* (London 1934), p. 21. All my quotations from and references to *Mansfield Park* belong to this, the Chapman edition.

Then comes the first adumbration of a new order. Edmund attempts a twofold defence of his choice. He admits that the prospect of a good living (or good livings) may have biassed him—but not improperly.

There was no natural disinclination to be overcome, and I see no reason why a man should make a worse clergyman for knowing that he will have a competence early in life. I was in safe hands. I hope I should not have been influenced myself in a wrong way, and I am sure my father was too conscientious to have allowed it. I have no doubt that I was biassed, but I think it was blamelessly. (p. 109)

The concept of spiritual vocation is—so far—absent from Edmund's exposition, as it is indeed from Fanny Price who at this point compounds Edmund's argument with "No body wonders that they [men] should prefer the line where their friends can serve them best, or suspects them to be the less in earnest in it" (p. 109). Edmund's conscience may be tender; but it is for his own sincerity that he argues here, supporting it (like Edward Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*) by a sort of *nihil obstat* reasoning and the threadbare question, how otherwise can the church be "filled"?

Though Edmund's second defence is essentially Erastian, it is not wholly lacking in spiritual intimations. He presents the clergyman as social moulder.

I cannot call that situation nothing, which has the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind, individually or collectively considered, temporally and eternally—which has the guardianship of religion and morals, and consequently of the manners which result from their influence. No one here can call the *office* nothing. (p. 92)

But the manners which the clergy influence are not the mere externalities of taste or refinement, but—a key conflation of Edmund's—"conduct . . . the result of good principles; the effect, in short, of those doctrines which it is their duty to teach and recommend" (p. 93).

It is not precisely social control which Edmund here envisages, but rather a form of social husbandry. Fittingly enough perhaps, he sees it as practicable only in the countryside. In the larger places, not only are the clergy lost "in the crowds of their parishioners" but also vice and godlessness congregate. The greatest rising problem of the contemporary church, urbanization, is recognized but apparently without alarm—or hope. Edmund believed that it was by example, as well as tending, that the clergy would influence the rest, and in a great darkness a penny candle cannot reach far: "as the clergy are, or are not what they ought to be", Edmund concludes, "so are the rest of the nation" (p. 93). But he has already excluded the metropolis from the nation.

At first sight, this defence of taking orders might seem to march in step with Sir Thomas Bertram's celebrated exposition of the village pastor's role, much later in the book.

But 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. (pp. 247-8).

Edmund immediately agrees that his father has grasped thoroughly the duty of a parish priest. But this should not lead us to miss the generational difference between the two. Sir Thomas's exegesis lacks all spiritual reference. The phraseology seems to reduce even the ecclesiastical element to formality. So far as we are told, the lessons which Sir Thomas's conscientious, resident rector will provide are lessons in propriety and goodwill. He is the forerunner of the district officer and the social worker. A parish, as Sir Thomas said, "has wants and claims which can be known only by a clergyman constantly resident". But in his earlier discourse Edmund had added another dimension altogether. Conduct may have held the centre of the stage here, too. But the notions of salvation, of eternity and of theological instruction were at least minor characters in the cast.

But perhaps the dramatic metaphor is unfortunate for Edmund. For it is precisely at this point that he and Henry Crawford divide, in religion as well as many lesser things. Here as ever, Crawford is neither as shallow nor as irresponsible as his sister. He can see ordination positively—as opening a way to display, aesthetic satisfaction and the manipulation of other minds—whereas for her it merely led straight, idle, greedy and inglorious to the grave. But Crawford's extraordinary sensitivity and celerity of mind serve only to underline his greater subversiveness. He treats the church (as he treats all else) as a stage for role-playing, for experimentation in personality, entirely without regard to ordained order or harmony, or to religion in its proper, literal sense of "that which binds".

The passage between himself and Edmund after his reading from *Henry VIII* and his exordium on the beauties of the anglican liturgy

makes this clear. The preacher, Crawford declares,

who can touch and affect such an heterogeneous mass of hearers, on subjects limited, and long worn thread-bare in all common hands: who can say any thing new or striking, any thing that rouses the attention, without offending the taste, or wearing out the feelings of his hearers, is a man whom one could not (in his public capacity) honour enough. I should like to be such a man. (p. 341)

The self-exploration and self-realization for which Crawford strove, and the sublimity of his irreligion, are revealed by his insistence upon a sophisticated “audience” (the very word he uses is significant), who would be capable, as he says, “of estimating my composition”. The preacher as actor is further emphasized by the rarity of the performance: “once or twice in the spring, after being anxiously expected for half a dozen Sundays together; but not for a constancy; it would not do for a constancy” (p. 341). It was of course the repudiation of “constancy” which caused Fanny involuntarily to shake her head, and thus become drawn into a brief but critical exchange, which is emblematic of the conflict between restlessness and control which underlies a great deal of the novel. But before all this Edmund has spoken, not (note) of preaching, but of scripture reading, and in a vein totally antithetical to Crawford’s, despite their apparent general agreement. It is interesting that Edmund stresses the change—the “improvement”, to use his specific term—which the church has undergone during the past generation. One manifestation is more theologically informed and more spiritually engaged congregations. Another is clergy concerned to convey the meaning of the word of God. Thus, although Crawford and Edmund may seem to be *ad idem* in looking for rhetorical effectiveness, the first’s hope is that the preacher’s vanity be fed, the second’s, “that distinctness and energy may have weight in recommending the most solid truths” of religion (p. 340).

The same contrast is drawn in more material terms in the discussion on the Thornton Lacey parsonage which accompanied the game of Speculation at Dr Grant’s. Edmund is not averse to spending a little money on his future home, but only to render the house and premises more comfortable at moderate expense. Crawford, however, is at once seized by the fact that the house already *appears* to be something more, far more, than a mere parsonage, far more than the material expression of a mere “few hundred a year”. The fact that the Thornton Lacey parsonage would pass for what it was not—as a county family’s home proclaiming a rental of two or three thousand pounds per annum—led him to propose such “improvement” as would render

it "the residence of a man of education, taste, modern manners, good connections . . . [with] such as air to make its owner be set down as the great land-holder of the parish, by every creature travelling the road" (p. 244). Again, Edmund accepts plain clericality, but Crawford wishes to sink it in a grandiose stage set, in the creation of an illusion and of a fresh role to play.

Edmund is indubitably on the side of the angels, but not at the extremity of the host, even in terms of Jane Austen's narrow range. This is Fanny's station. The spiritual spectrum of *Mansfield Park* would seem to run, Fanny, Edmund, Sir Thomas, Mary and Crawford, the last two being separated by their relative moral capacities and depths of mind. It is Fanny who strikes the only note of religious emotion in the book—pinchbeck though it may be in the feeble Gothicism of "nothing awful here [Sotherton chapel]".¹⁸ It is Fanny who makes the only reference to the interior workings of spiritual reflection—puerile though it may be to argue that Dr Grant's conduct would be still more gross were it not for "that knowledge of himself, the *frequency*, at least, of that knowledge which it is impossible he should escape" (p. 112) as a preacher of the gospel. It is Fanny who, first and most clearly of all in the novel, categorizes Crawford's liaison with Maria in sternly religious terms, in the language of guilt, sin and punishment.

The horror of a mind like Fanny's, as it received the conviction of such guilt . . . can hardly be described. At first, it was a sort of stupefaction; but every moment was quickening her perception of the horrible evil . . . Miss Crawford's . . . eager defence of her brother, her hope of its being *hushed up*, her evident agitation, were all of a piece with something very bad; and if there was a woman of character in existence, who could treat as a trifle this sin of the first magnitude, who could try to gloss it over, and desire to have it unpunished, she could believe Miss Crawford to be the woman! (pp. 440-41)

But although there is no question that Fanny's religious understanding and practice are superior to all the rest—just as, consequentially, her principles and moral perceptions are the finest—even she is not wholly immune from the corruption of the world's slow stain. We have seen already that, in Edmund's defence, she proclaims a prudential, not to say worldly, view of holy orders. In the end, she succumbs to the accumulated pressure to take a part in *Lovers' Vows*. In the end (the author makes it clear), she would also have succumbed to Henry Crawford, had he been constant, and his

18 "This is not my idea of a chapel. There is nothing awful here, nothing melancholy, nothing grand" (p. 85).

sister yielding—to Edmund’s suit. Thus Fanny is no saint or ranter. But she is awarded the character of earnest, strict and struggling Christian. It is made clear that within limits, very close limits of course, her principles can be overborne, though it is also made quite clear that her inner citadel is inviolable.

By conduct, reticences and sentiments alike, Edmund stands decidedly to the left of Fanny in the spiritual spectrum of *Mansfield Park*—if a word-play equating “rightness” with “rectitude” be allowed. But this should not blind us to the essential seriousness of his religion. “Seriousness” is the *mot juste*. It was the very shibboleth, the special and peculiar sectly property, of the evangelicals of the early nineteenth century. It is surely significant that Edmund’s very opening observation on religion—like a motto at a chapter head—at once rebukes and excuses Mary Crawford for not being “serious even on serious subjects” (p. 87). As we have seen, the serious breaks through, however quietly, in each of his disquisitions on the manning of the church and the disposition of its goods and duties; and his is the opposite Janus-face to Crawford’s, the face of duty as against self-indulgence, in each of their clerical discussions. Thus, the stage is long set for the dénouement in which he at last realizes the depth of the religious gulf which separates him from Mary Crawford: “it had not entered my imagination to conceive the difference could be such as she had now proved it” (p. 459). Characteristically perhaps, he begins his account of the crisis by calling Maria’s adultery a “crime”. But he ends by naming it a sin:

she spoke of the crime itself, giving it every reproach but the right, considering its ill consequences only as they were to be braved or overborne by a defiance of decency and impudence in wrong; and, last of all, and above all, recommending to us a compliance, a compromise, an acquiescence, in the continuance of the sin, on the chance of a marriage which, thinking as I now thought of her brother, should rather be prevented than sought. (p. 458)

With her usual acuity, caricaturing yet penetrating to the reality, Mary Crawford discerns Edmund’s fundamental bias in her parting words:

At this rate, you will soon reform every body at Mansfield and Thornton Lacey; and when I hear of you next, it may be as a celebrated preacher in some great society of Methodists, or as a missionary into foreign parts. (p. 458)

There was one notable if vicarious conversion, though not quite at Thornton Lacey or by Edmund’s preaching. By the book’s end, Sir Thomas has come painfully to realize that his daughters’ tragedy was rooted in the heartlessness, the mere outward appearances, of

their religion. A chain of phrases bears this out: "principle, active principle, had been wanting"; "of the necessity of self-denial and humility, he feared they had never heard from any lips that could profit them"; they "had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice" (p. 463). This seems to me pivotal in the novel. Painfully, Sir Thomas (and to a lesser extent, Edmund) has learnt the living meaning of seriousness, in religion, in principle, in duty. The lesson of the book is reinforced by Mary Crawford's unchanged spirit. In fact, she ends deepened and hardened in her levity. Her first letter to Fanny at Portsmouth rejoices in the luck that Edmund's clericality can remain undisclosed, now that the clergy no longer wear distinctive dress (p. 416); her second, in the prospect of Edmund's succession to the baronetcy. "It [his ordination] was a foolish precipitation last Christmas, but the evil of a few days may be blotted out in part. Varnish and gilding hide many stains. It will be but the loss of an Esquire after his name" (p. 434). This the petty form of her brother's ineradicable superficiality (in the strict sense of concern for surfaces) in religion, a horrible travesty of the divine. In the end, Crawford is shown to be not even the seed which springs up momentarily in shallow soil. Fittingly, he emerges as merely the *appearance* or *illusion* of such a seed. His temporary "reformation" is really grounded in self-indulgence. It knows nothing of "principle, active principle" or of "the necessity of self-denial and humility".

But we must not forget that in terms of formal anglicanism, the range of *Mansfield Park* is very narrow. There is nothing to suggest that Fanny is an enthusiast or even a positive evangelical. There is nothing to suggest that the Crawfords are positive latitudinarians or even non-attenders on the Sabbath. The religion of the heart and act, with which the book is implicitly absorbed, did not require any departure from or even much new emphasis in the received and commonplace teaching of the Church of England. By its very origin and nature, anglicanism was a median religion. By upbringing, disposition and reflection alike, Jane Austen was (our shreds of evidence suggest) a median member of the Church of England in her day. "Median" is far from "lukewarm". Hooker and Butler, to look no further, were archetypes of the median, finders of the middle yet unfenced ground. In the nature of things, this ground shifted its location imperceptibly from epoch to epoch. Clerical discipline; improvement, moral and behavioural; the priest as gospel-preacher; the "duties" of the parish and their failure in the city; the challenge of the Wesleyans and "New Reformation"—these were the burning

issues for the serious in 1812-13; and to each, the response in *Mansfield Park* is, almost classically, moderate. Root and branch reform of structures is never canvassed; but individual rectitude and earnestness in one's station is most strongly urged. The clergyman remains central to the order and government of the countryside; but both in and beyond this he is to be a true dispenser of the Word of God. Full blown evangelicalism and emotional indulgence in religion are implicitly rejected but not the great doctrines which infuse them—sin, hell, atonement and redemption.

We cannot doubt that Mr Watson in *The Watsons* spoke for Jane Austen herself, when he repudiated the preener and the ranter equally in praising a sermon delivered "without any theatrical grimace or violence".¹⁹ Mr Howard had preached "with great propriety and in a very impressive manner . . . much better calculated to inspire devotion . . . Mr Howard read like a scholar and a gentleman". This is the early nineteenth-century *beau ideal* of true-believing, excess-hating, mean-loving Anglican clericality, to be celebrated once again in *Mansfield Park*.

IV

Unlike Maria Bertram, I shall not try to cross the ha-ha or climb the iron gate into the pleasure ground. In other words, I shall not be so impudent as to attempt literary criticism. The preliminary wilderness of History, winding and serpentine like Sotherton's own, is daunting enough. But I cannot forbear from pointing out that at least four of the acknowledged master scenes in the novel are calibrated, so to speak, upon the measures of seriousness and ordination. First, the afternoon of illicit companionships and vain pursuits at Sotherton, with all its bold imagery of bounds-breaking and passing from the ordered to the unrestrained, is both preceded and inaugurated by lengthy expositions of the clerical role and

19 *Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon* (Penguin edn, Harmondsworth 1974), p. 134. The specific question, whether or not *Mansfield Park* is an "evangelical" novel, has been much debated (see P. Garside and E. McDonald, "Evangelicalism and *Mansfield Park*", *Trivium*, x (May 1975), 34-50, and D. Monaghan, "*Mansfield Park* and Evangelicalism: a Reassessment", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, xxxiii (September 1978), 215-30, for recent arguments on either side). There would seem to be no evidence to support the view that either the novel or Jane Austen herself, was "evangelical" in the sectarian sense. The utmost that can be said for the first is that characteristically evangelical language is often employed

responsibility. The Church, as Edmund specifically says, is the ordained guardian of the public morality which is here, symbolically, defied. As the clergy are, or are not what they ought to be, he specifically concludes, so are the rest of the nation (p. 93). The second set-piece is Crawford's characteristically sudden, whim-driven return to Mansfield. Incapable of guessing at, let alone comprehending such a mode of judgment as Fanny's, he at once launches into a delighted reminiscence on the interrupted theatricals, "such an interest, such an animation, such a spirit diffused! . . . I was never happier": ". . . never happier than when behaving so dishonourably and unfeelingly!", Fanny responds in silence, "Oh! what a corrupted mind!". This critical scene of moral antithesis reaches its climax, its ultimate expression, in ordination. Crawford jeeringly assumes that the gentleman-rector will be non-resident, sybaritic, monied and idle—Christmas and Easter services, "I suppose, will be the sum total of the sacrifice"—and proposes an expedition to mock Bertram's first sermon. Edmund is saddened by this unwitting self-revelation. "No, he can feel nothing as he ought" is Fanny's wondering, appalled reaction (pp. 225-7).

In a third tableau, the game of Speculation at Mansfield Parsonage, Jane Austen uses sport for theme-unfolding, as she was to do again with the child's alphabet in *Emma*. Crawford vainly attempts to seduce Fanny into avarice and aggression; Mary proclaims, "No cold prudence for me". Again, the crescendo of the scene is cast in religious terms. The adroit speculator, Crawford, proposes to use a good clerical house and income to produce much larger secular displays. Mary, "not born to sit still and do nothing", as she says herself, hopes "to shut out the church, with the clergyman and see only the respectable, elegant, modernized, and occasional residence

in *Mansfield Park* (cf. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 394). But though the Evangelicals themselves may have used the word "serious" to mean "evangelically committed" (Garside and McDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 45), it was in no sense their special property. Other anglicans used it freely in the much larger and looser sense of taking their religion seriously, and of practising it devoutly. As to the author, she once specifically observed, "I do not like the Evangelicals" (*Letters*, p. 256, Jane to Cassandra Austen, 24 January 1809), and later that "We do not much like Mr Cooper's new Sermons;—they are fuller of Regeneration and Conversion than ever—with the addition of his zeal in the cause of the Bible Society" (*ibid.*, p. 467, Jane to Cassandra Austen, 8 September 1816). Respect for total commitment was certainly compatible with distaste, theological, moral and social alike, for the ideas and conduct which were manifested by Evangelical zealots.

of a man of independent fortune''. To these, Edmund opposes a sturdy, ordinary ecclesiasticism, Sir Thomas, a correct but severe statement of clerical duty, in terms of service as against aggrandisement. It was time, as Mary Crawford in her chagrin put it to herself, "to have done with cards, if sermons prevailed" (p. 248).

Fourthly, as we have seen, the final demonstration of Crawford's role-playing, the reading of *Henry VIII* in which he becomes the king, queen, Buckingham, Wolsey and Cromwell rapidly in turn, also culminates in ordination (pp. 337-43). In effect, Crawford hopes to transfer this plastic, centre-less activity to the very part of clergyman itself. Edmund tacitly resists. For him, the intrinsic message of the Gospel and the priest's capacity to communicate it livingly to his people were the points at issue. Mere pulpit performances would have seemed a grotesque irrelevance. It is the inconstancy of which Crawford implicitly boasts which outrages Fanny. That he would play the clergyman occasionally and for applause epitomized not only the actor's versatility but also his ultimate amorality and emptiness of being.

But to scramble back quickly to my cobbler's last: what lights does the ecclesiastical or spiritual historian gain from the lancet windows of *Mansfield Park*? First, the clerical profession was on the threshold of important structural changes in 1813. The statistical information is incomplete but it does seem likely that the number ordained had been more or less static for over a century, and close to the total number of parishes throughout this time. Almost all were graduates of the ancient universities, and the great majority of them comparatively or truly poor. Dramatic changes were at hand. A steady climb in the number of clergy was beginning, and would continue until 1901; and this increase was to be not merely absolute but even relative to population in England and Wales down to 1870. Moreover, the expansion was one of prestige, training and generally income too, in the first half of the century at least. The university population more than doubled between 1810 and 1850, and though the proportion taking orders may have declined, they still accounted for the great bulk of Oxford and still more of Cambridge graduates. The church was even growing in fashion after 1830. The aristocratical and squirarchical element was of course always small, but it was probably larger, even proportionately, in the next two or three decades than ever before or later. Internally, there was a corresponding advance in the enforcement of residence, in the increasing provision of curates (and thereby career training and ladders in many cases), in educational

requirements, and even in the creation and augmentation of stipends.²⁰

In turn, much of this would soon disappear, and other elements grow markedly. The climacteric was probably the 1860s. But in *Mansfield Park* we have one depiction of a clerical world on the very eve of revolution which produced the extraordinary phase. It is a view from the top of this world, and also the view of a poor gentlewoman, whose experience—Bath excepted—was confined to the south-eastern corner of the island and almost all of whose adult life was lived in wartime in the peculiar circumstances of high agricultural demand and buoyant tithes. But this was her familiar world from birth to death; and depending on the analytical, imaginative and descriptive capacities of the observer, and the rarer he or she is, in terms of time or condition, the more is the evidence to be prized.

Of special interest to the historian is the fact that while *Mansfield Park* contains no reference to—let alone recommendation of—structural or organizational changes in the church, these are implicit in its values. Edmund's preparation for ordination has been casual and perfunctory. Apart from the years of tedium in the college chapel, it apparently consisted of what might be fitted into a week's visit to his friend at Peterborough (pp. 88, 255). Similarly, Dr Grant, having bought the Mansfield living, retained it after he removed to London, to the Westminster stall gained by the "interest on which he had almost ceased to form hopes" (p. 469). We may perhaps take it for granted that Edmund succeeded him as pluralist and let Thornton Lacey, unless he in turn sold the second living for the lifetime of some clerical speculator. All of this was recounted as if these were the most ordinary, even inevitable, proceedings. And so doubtless it was regarded by the author. Jane Austen could not or would not think outside the customary categories. Yet the sacerdotal doctrine *Mansfield Park* preaches is implicitly corrosive of the *ancien régime*. The insistence on residence is ultimately incompatible with pluralism. The serious performance of parish duties is ultimately incompatible with a traffic in livings based on the accident of possessing capital: so too are even hereditary rights to presentation and the use of political or social "interest" for clerical advancement. The absence of training for the priesthood is ultimately incompatible with Edmund's call for a counterpart to educated laity and effective clerical exegesis of the scriptures (pp. 339-40). The very word "improvement", as used by

20 A. G. L. Haig, "The Church of England as a profession in Victorian England" (Ph.D. dissertation, unpublished, Australian National University, 1980), pp. vii-ix, 503-11.

three of the novel's main protagonists, is a touchstone. The Crawfords speak the mid eighteenth-century language at its worst. For Mary, "improvement" in religion means less obligatory devotion (pp. 86-7); for Henry, grander rectories and rhetorical display (pp. 243-4, 341). But for Edmund, it is conduct rooted in religion (pp. 339-40). An ecclesiastical framework built or maintained in the spirit of the first two cannot long endure, at least in its entirety, as the spirit of the third advances.

There is one other dimension to be considered. In 1813, the church was still generally regarded, as in *Mansfield Park*, as a plain profession. It was moreover still clearly the leader of professions. Only law presented any challenge; and the English bar was both relatively lower in prestige than, say, the Irish or the Scottish, and weighed down by a mass of disreputable attorneyism and counsel out of work. Again, we are on the brink of a revolution, or at least unsettlement. Clerical orders were about to become infused by two additional and contradictory concepts on the one hand, the concept of service—as with the higher military and civil services with stipend certain and duties illimitable as against rewards proportionate to individual exertion and success—and on the other, the concept of vocation or divine calling, according to the ideal of the Roman priesthood. Moreover, not merely law but also medicine, engineering and a number of similar occupations would soon be regularized, meritocratic and, in effect, unionized in a way that holy orders never could; and in so doing they would rapidly come to overshadow and outbid the church as a profession.²¹

But *Mansfield Park* was not written for posterity. Nor was it much in tune with the novels of its day. Almost contemporaneously the Honourable Mr Listless in *Nightmare Abbey* welcomed "modern books":

There is, as it were, a delightful north-east wind, an intellectual blight breathing through them; a delicious misanthropy and discontent, that demonstrates the nullity of virtue and energy . . .²²

Mansfield Park may not have been "modern" by such a formula. But was, in my view of the matter, a prophetic work, anticipating the high Victorian themes of duty, principle and religion. This is no more than we should expect in a work seriously designed in the most

21 Haig, *op. cit.*, pp. 513-18.

22 T. Peacock, *Nightmare Abbey* (Halliford edn, London 1924), p. 41.

serious of senses. At the same time, its anglican breadth and balance have a perennial air, as again we should expect from medianism erected into a principle of theological interpretation. One of the hero's nightmares in *Changing Places* is troops of protesting undergraduates parading under the banner "Fanny Price is a fink".²³ Barbaric though the language and repellent though the sentiments may be, are not these phantasmagorical student-oafs bearing an unconscious witness to William Law, after all?

23 D. Lodge, *Changing Places* (Harmondsworth 1978), p. 46.