Practical Christianity: Religion in Jane Austen's Novels

Erin Toal

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Fall 2017

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the
Honors Program of Liberty University.

Karen Swallow Prior, Ph.D.
Thesis Chair

Stephen Bell, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Lynnda S. Beavers, Ph.D.
Committee Member

James H. Nutter, D.A.
Honors Director

November 29, 2017

Abstract

A beloved English novelist of the late eighteenth century, Jane Austen captures the attention and emotion of readers through timeless insights into the inner workings of the human heart as characters navigate society, family life, and love. Her novels' attention to practical morality but reticence toward explicitly religious subject matter raises conjecture concerning the religion behind her values; however, Austen's Christian upbringing, Anglican practice, and Christian values suggest a foundation of faith from which the morality in her novels emanates. In *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park*, Austen demonstrates her eighteenth-century Anglican worldview in the lives of her characters as they grow in virtue and good character.

Practical Christianity: Religion in Jane Austen's Novels

Jane Austen's six published novels depict characters of the English landed gentry of the late eighteenth century, giving readers a glimpse into her time through stories now well-known and beloved both in academia and outside it. The strength of Austen's novels lies beyond simply their romantic appeal, however; though the love story central to each novel drives the plot, the real conflicts of the novels center on matters of virtue and find resolution as characters grow in maturity and character.

Though infused with biblical principles and guided by moral standards, Austen's works invite questions regarding her view of religion. Her novels contain so little overtly religious content that some who see her as a Christian writer suggest with disapproval that she should have been more outspoken about religion, while others submit that she was not a Christian writer at all but drew upon her Anglican experience in order to subvert the ideals of religion through her writing. Nevertheless, religious themes infiltrate the characters and plots of her novels, exerting an influence best understood by examining her works in light of her Anglican upbringing and the personal endorsement of religion in her prayers and practice. Her first three published novels, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and *Mansfield Park* (1814), exhibit Anglican belief and worldview and reveal Austen's Christian foundation.

Background

Because Austen lived in the very social class, time period, and setting in which her stories take place, her own background informs an understanding of her writing. The history of her family, the testimony of her family members, and her personal correspondence provide most of what modern-day scholars know about her personal life,

and while these sources do raise significant complications in discerning Austen's personal beliefs, the information they provide grants insight into her religious perspective.

Austen's family instructed her in Anglican doctrine and instilled in her the importance of religion. Her father and grandfather were priests, and several uncles, cousins, and two of her brothers were clergymen as well; at their hands, Austen received extensive religious instruction. In her book, *Jane Austen: the Parson's Daughter*, Irene Collins describes the typical education for clergy in Austen's day. Training for clergymen consisted of a general course of study supplemented with a selection of established theological texts (Collins 46). George Austen, Jane's father, studied at Oxford, where he would have been trained in Enlightenment thought (19-20). He expected his children to attend church regularly and to perform religious practices such as communal prayer and charitable service within the community. Most biographers believe that the Austens held family prayer daily, and letters George wrote to his children include admonitions to continue prayer when away from home as well. George Austen's duties as clergyman instructed Austen in Anglican practice.

Because of her father's occupation, Austen received training in Anglican doctrine married with Enlightenment influence. In a letter he sent to his son Frank upon his departure for the navy, George Austen reminds him, "The first & most important of all considerations to a human Being is Religion" (45). Religion prescribed morality within the framework of a universe governed by universal truths discoverable through the intellect. Anglicanism of Austen's day rested on Enlightenment thought, which held that the universe runs according to rational principles that may be ascertained by reason and

logic. Religious practice therefore took a practical form, directed by logical principles for living. Life for the Austens was guided by this principle: live in harmony with God and man, and personal fulfillment will follow (50). Michael Wheeler in his chapter on religion in *Jane Austen in Context* situates Austen in the late eighteenth century between Enlightenment rationalism and Evangelicalism (406). He suggests that the Anglicanism of Reverend George Austen "emphasized divine wisdom and atonement in theology, order and patriotism in politics and common sense and morality in private life" (406). While Evangelicalism represented a more radical approach to religion emphasizing conversion and transformation, Anglicanism promoted reason, common sense, and moderation as guides for religious practice (Collins 54-56). As an Anglican clergyman, George Austen would have understood the world in terms of God's sovereignty over a universe governed by natural laws, in which man can please God by exercising reason and living according to biblical principles.

Austen's family influenced not only her religious practice and philosophy but also her exposure to literature. Some of Austen's success as a writer can be attributed to her family's support of her work. In "Jane Austen and Literary Tradition," Isobel Grundy explains that though Austen experienced only a very brief stint of formal education in school, she had access to a great number of books in her father's personal library and benefited from her family members' habit of borrowing and exchanging books (192). She began writing as a child as well, developing her skills from a young age at the encouragement of her father. In contrast to some of her female contemporaries, Austen benefitted from the influence of a father and brothers who published essays, eventually providing her access to print that others did not have (Fergus 4). Reading and writing

together shaped Austen's childhood, and her household encouraged literariness in her that many girls would have had less opportunity to cultivate.

Austen's wide range of reading certainly influenced her writing, but rather than adhering to the eighteenth-century literary trend of emulating the ancients, Austen shows less affinity for classical influences than for the influence of religious authors. Austen absorbed the Scriptures through personal reading as well as through listening to religious readings repetitively in church. As an Anglican, she encountered religious literature in her daily practice through the *Book of Common Prayer*, which dictated the readings and prayers for both church and home. In *Jane Austen's Anglicanism*, Laura Mooneyham White describes the content and role of the *Book of Common Prayer*, which contains texts for the Church such as prayers, litanies, daily offices, services for particular events, the psalms, short topical prayers called collects, the catechism, and the lectionary, or schedule for the three-year cycle of readings followed by the Church (32). The *Book of Common Prayer* allowed that the congregation read through the entire Bible every three years and the Psalms and other portions even more frequently. Austen herself read the Bible and a great many sermons, as evidenced in her correspondence expressing on occasion which sermons she preferred, as well as critiquing those for which she had a distaste (47-48). Engagement with biblical texts permeated her daily life.

The mere repetition of the Scriptures in Austen's daily practice suggests their inevitable influence on her writing. Making no argument for Austen's personal religion, Grundy affirms this influence, stating that "in their basically Renaissance English form they helped to shape Austen's style as well as her habit of thought, and constitute a living influence on her in a way that the classics do not" (198). Grundy credits biblical texts

with influence on Austen's stylistic tendencies such as "rapidity and sparseness of narrative" from the Old Testament and the art of succinctness from the New Testament. Further, Grundy recognizes the morality interwoven in the very fabric of Austen's novels, separate from dramatic outward action and rooted in the heart of a character: "The Bible, Austen's daily bread, must have helped her to plot the moral consequences…while most novelists needed at least the idea of some momentous causes for whatever was deeply to affect their heroines" (199). Grundy recognizes, even apart from a discussion of Austen's personal faith, that the nuances of Austen's morality in her novels owe to the influence of Scripture.

What Austen's family history suggests about her Christianity has been further affirmed by the testimony of particular family members. For centuries following her death, her family sought to shape her legacy through efforts perhaps intentionally misleading. Her family's descriptions of her person clearly reveal a desire to portray Austen in a very particular—conservative, pious, and innocent—manner. The first notable testimony came from her brother Henry Austen, who composed a "Biographical Notice of the Author" which was published as a preface to two of her novels in 1818. In it he spoke thus of her Christianity: "[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, and her opinions accorded strictly with those of our Established Church" (qtd. in Emsley 7). Henry clearly sought to paint a picture of Jane as a pious Christian woman, elevating her alleged Christian belief as the "one trait" which "makes all others unimportant" (qtd. in

Emsley 6). To him, assuring her readers of her religion gave merit to her novels and superseded all other personal qualities in revealing Austen to her readers.

Henry Austen's generous praise for his sister does not, however, provide a convincing argument for her religiosity; instead, it calls into question his credibility and further muddles the modern impression of Austen. Henry, who depicted Austen as devoutly religious, also spoke of her as a demure spinster novelist who had no notion of profits. Scholars such as Fergus reject such descriptions, showing plainly that these portrayals have created a myth veiling the truth that, in Austen's life, professional writing was second in priority only to her family and proved a lifelong, hard-won pursuit (2). Fergus explains, "Proper women, as Henry Austen makes clear, were modest, retiring, essentially domestic and private," and authorship and the limelight it might encourage were associated with a loss of femininity, leading women to write anonymously or publicly attest to familial hardships or illnesses, which supposedly helped to justify writing for profit (2-3). By deliberately misconstruing her aim as an author, Henry reveals his desire to subtly manipulate her public image.

Indeed, Henry was not the only member of Austen's family attempting to create a persona for Austen that he deemed more acceptable to her public. In 1869, her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh published *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, containing his memories of Austen and the first of her letters ever published. He wrote the *Memoir* in response to the overwhelming interest in his aunt, attempting to give the public a glimpse into her personal life by providing descriptions of her and her life. Austen-Leigh describes his aunt fondly based on his memories of her; but, as he was young when she died, his *Memoir* provides a very incomplete picture of her.

Along with his own recollections, Austen-Leigh provided readers the opportunity to examine Austen through her correspondence. He published a small collection of her letters in *Memoir* with the disclaimer that they contained information that would have been interesting only to the recipient of the letter, and he believed readers "would not feel that they knew her any the better for having read them" (173-174). This selection of letters relating details of social gatherings or domestic activity hardly represents the whole of Austen's correspondence. More of her surviving letters have been published, but Austen wrote an estimated 3,000 letters throughout her life, and the world has access to only 160 of them (Le Faye 33). Her family used great caution in publicizing information about her, and the letters that survive contain relatively impersonal information (33-34). Austen's letters, while arguably interesting, in no way reveal an adequate amount of information to be a real source on her character. Between sibling Henry's censored revelation and a nephew's limited recollection of an aged aunt, readers must receive testimonies of Austen's religion with measured skepticism. Her family showed a great deal of admiration in their descriptions of her religious devotion, but the bias inherent in their accounts renders these pieces of evidence less than useful for discerning Austen's personal religiosity. While her upbringing, her correspondence, and her family's contributions all fail to conclusively define Austen's view of religion, Austen's history contributes contextual understanding to analysis of her novels.

Indeed, the study of the religion in Austen's works may be best explored by examining the novels themselves as products of her cultural context in order to derive insights into her religious approach. Unfortunately, the task of reading Austen's works according to her personal values proves profoundly difficult. In his book *Jane Austen:*

Two Centuries of Criticism, Laurence W. Mazzeno chronicles the various critical approaches taken toward Austen's novels since their publication. In a chapter entitled "Traditional Approaches to Austen, 1991-2008," Mazzeno recounts the efforts of recent biographers to paint Austen in a light in which she had not been portrayed before, each taking a slant on her that seeks to be original (210). These discordant perceptions of Austen have only grown more and more diverse as schools of criticism read her as everything from a feminist subverting patriarchy to an atheist undermining the religion of her day. Indeed, many ideals can be superimposed on Austen's writing; her novels invite speculation through their sometimes-unorthodox attitudes toward marriage, family, and society. Nonetheless, it is ineffective to base an understanding of the religion of her novels on either biographical sketches that remain limited and subjective or criticism of her works that relies on modern critical theories for perspective. A conclusive answer to questions of Austen's personal faith remains elusive; however, values central to the Anglican Christianity that influenced Austen's life emerge vividly in each of her novels.

Her Novels

The strongest support for Austen's devotion to religion as a writer lies in the Christian undertones of her novels. Austen develops her characters and plots her stories through methods that evidence her Christian worldview. In his book about Austen, Stuart M. Tave asserts that "of the three duties, to God, to one's neighbors, to oneself, specified in the *Book of Common Prayer* and innumerable sermons and moral essays," the first would not demand Austen's direct attention as a novelist; rather, in her stories, the demonstration of the latter two would sufficiently fulfill the first. The two duties, Tave suggests, are not "substitutes for religion" but "the daily expressions of it in common

life" (qtd. in Emsley 8). In *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues*, Sarah Emsley expounds upon this assertion, suggesting that Austen focuses on "the ethics of ordinary life" in order to fulfill her obligation to God, neighbor, and self (8). As a novelist, Austen appears to find her purpose not in preaching sermons through her work but rather through demonstrating these "ethics of ordinary life" through her characters.

In each of her novels, Austen permits her characters to mature through adversity and through recognition of their own shortcomings, leaving them wiser and better than when they started. Characters must adapt and respond to adversity, and those who grow in virtue and good character emerge as the heroes. Austen's characters are multifaceted and fallible, yet her protagonist always progresses from a point of lesser virtue and wisdom to a place of elevated character. While there lies a danger in over-spiritualizing her works in an attempt to find her Christianity, a reader acquainted with her Anglican upbringing must recognize a foundation of religion in her novels. Her charitable dealings with her characters and their cultivation of character throughout the course of the novels evidence a worldview undergirded by a Christian perspective.

Though all of her novels and lesser known works indicate a Christian basis, three of them provide particularly good examples of the central themes founded in Austen's Christian belief. *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park*, the first three of her six completed novels, demonstrate Austen's subtle but powerful understanding of Christian principles.

Sense and Sensibility

Austen's integration of virtues, both classical and biblical, is perhaps seen most clearly in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). How she incorporates these virtues, however, is

debated among scholars. In "Ideological Contradictions and the Consolations of Form," Mary Poovey recognizes the challenge of interpreting Austen's treatment of virtue. Poovey, identifying the pervasiveness of moral virtue in the novel, comments:

> [D]espite this ground of Christian principles nearly everything in the plot of *Sense and Sensibility* undermines the complacent assumption that they are principles generally held or practically effective. Almost every action in the novel suggests that, more often than not, individual will triumphs over principle and individual desire proves more compelling than moral law. (33)

Poovey understands Austen's portrayal of virtue in *Sense and Sensibility* as undermining moral absolutes and affirming some shades of vice. She interprets the lack of strictly marginalized good and bad behavior in both Marianne and Elinor as evidence of Austen's repudiation of traditional virtue. Elinor seemingly practices classical virtue throughout the novel, yet her reserved demeanor leaves the reader unsatisfied with her character's personality and renders Elinor herself unhappy and pained. Poovey interprets Austen's portrayal of Elinor as punishing good behavior in the novel's most virtuous character and thus reads the work as a critique of virtue. If strict adherence to societal and moral principles indicates true virtue, then Austen's characters indeed call the value of such virtue into question. Yet perhaps Austen cultivates in her characters an approach to classical virtue moderated by Christian values.

Characters' growth in *Sense and Sensibility* owes itself to a synthesis of classical virtue and Christianity that permeates Austen's writing. Michael Giffin, an authority on Austen's religion, asserts, "Austen is a Christian humanist who belongs to the neoclassical Enlightenment. She is not a secular humanist whose work can be

appropriated to validate the post-Enlightenment critique of the traditional western and Christian world-view" ("Jane Austen and Religion"). To read Austen's novels as subversive misconstrues her purpose and misinterprets the text. In accordance with her father's instruction in Anglicanism and her own reading of both classical and Christian texts, Austen writes with a respect for the classical virtue she encountered in her reading, upholding classical virtue but adding to it the Scriptural principles she heard, read, and recited daily. Contrary to Poovey's assertions, Austen does not seek to undermine virtue through her characters' struggles; rather, she upholds it by exploring the nuances of classical virtue in conjunction with Christian principles.

In *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues*, Sarah Emsley argues that while Austen does employ the classical virtues in her fiction, her morality stems from her Christianity rather than from pure adherence to classical tradition. Austen's writing extends beyond simply depicting virtue, instead showing how characters grow through the challenge of balancing virtues—of balancing extremes, an idea both classical and Anglican in nature (10). Austen's characters experience the hardships of life and must cope by cultivating good character, which often means struggling to discover how they ought to behave and frequently learning to temper one virtue with another. In *Sense and Sensibility,* Austen demonstrates a respect for classical virtues indicative of her Enlightenment education while emphasizing Christian virtues reflective of her biblical foundation.

Sense and Sensibility tells a story of many characters learning to cultivate classical virtue as well as to temper the virtues they hold most strongly with those they struggle to practice. Some characters lack temperance and prudence and must increase in

wisdom through learning from their mistakes. For Marianne, wisdom means recognizing that her spontaneous expression of feelings needs to be tempered by self-control and caution. For Mrs. Dashwood, it means recognizing her "imprudence" in encouraging her daughter's "folly" (Austen 183; ch. 47). In the characters who lack wisdom in the beginning, Austen reveals the necessity of virtue by allowing them to see the folly of their actions and to recognize their need for growth.

In some characters, however, virtues emerge at the outset and must simply be balanced by other virtues. For Elinor (whom Poovey offers as an example of ineffectual virtue), wisdom comes in balancing her reserve with the need to speak at the proper time. After containing all her thoughts and feelings about Edward and Lucy's engagement for months with no release, she is finally able to express herself to Edward toward the end of the novel, saying his conduct toward her while engaged to Lucy was "certainly very wrong" (191, ch. 49). Yet rather than punishing Elinor for her virtue, as Poovey suggests, Austen allows her to realize the necessity of voicing her thoughts at the proper time. At the beginning of the story, Elinor demonstrates virtues such as prudence and temperance very well, but she stifles her own discernment. In the end, perhaps Elinor learns the virtue of courage, facing her emotions and risking her pride by allowing herself to reveal her feelings to others in the proper time. For Edward, wisdom means bridling the feelings he expresses at the outset of his acquaintance with the Dashwoods. Rather than indulge his emotions, he controls his passion and places fairness above feeling, exercising the classical virtues of temperance and justice by holding to his youthful and foolish engagement despite his growing affection for Elinor. It is virtue that makes Austen's best characters worthy of admiration.

Sense and Sensibility demonstrates not only classical virtues but also many biblical ones through an endorsement of attitudes of selflessness and faithfulness that provide the foundation for love. Elinor denies her emotions in order to respect Edward and Lucy's promise to each other; Colonel Brandon gives of himself to care first for the orphan daughter of his past love; Edward sets aside his feelings for Elinor in order to remain faithful to Lucy. Though, as Poovey points out, Elinor and others suffer because of their devotion to principles and virtue, "individual will" and "individual desire" do not triumph over virtue. Ultimately, Austen rewards the sacrifice of the virtuous. In each scenario, the character finds fulfillment and joy without forfeiting virtue. Elinor does not have to express improper feelings in order to win her beloved. Colonel Brandon, though unsuccessful in protecting his young charge from the wiles of Willoughby, continues his selfless service as long as he is able and eventually *does* help to redeem a young girl who fell prey to Willoughby's scandalous treatment. Edward, without breaking his promise to Lucy, is freed from his engagement without engaging in any impropriety. Practicing selflessness and faithfulness carries the characters to their happy ending, as all finally come to an understanding of virtues and are blessed for discovering them.

In contrast, Austen reprimands the indiscretions and sins of wayward characters. The pattern of selfless care for others above oneself is broken slightly by Marianne and blatantly by Willoughby, who both pursue their passions with little regard to others' needs, the former out of naïve negligence and the latter out of a contemptible disregard for the feelings of others. Ultimately, these wrongdoings meet with consequences; Marianne's selfish pursuit leads to heartbreak, and the villainous Willoughby's unfaithfulness forces him to enter a loveless marriage to cover over his sins. Yet initial

lack of virtue does not perpetually condemn characters; instead, Austen's characters learn their lessons and, in some cases, experience a change of heart.

Austen upholds classical virtue while incorporating the Christian practice of repentance. Rather than punishing characters who eschewed virtue and prospering those who upheld it, Austen mercifully allows characters to see the error of their ways and turn from them. Through repentance, characters like Marianne recognize their improprieties and begin to cultivate virtue. Marianne is ultimately ashamed of her behavior and desires to exercise discretion in her relationships. When she discovers that Elinor has long been aware of Edward's engagement, she is mortified at her own lack of sensitivity toward her sister (Austen 136; ch. 37). Following a terrible illness that might have resulted in her death, Marianne shows an altered perspective and a resolve to conduct herself differently, expressing a thankfulness for life and the opportunity it provides her for "atonement to my God," saying, "[M]y feelings shall be governed and my temper improved" (180; ch. 46). In this fervent reflection lies one of Austen's few overt references in her novels to a character's relation to God, distinguishing Marianne's repentance from a secular understanding of it. Marianne's change of heart demonstrates Austen's use of Christian repentance to develop virtue in her character.

Repentance not only redeems the protagonist but also serves to justify, to some degree, the villain. The scoundrel Willoughby has behaved shamefully, from his immorality and abandonment of Eliza to his conduct toward Marianne both before and after his engagement to Miss Grey. Willoughby shows no caution in his relationships and misuses the women in his life, making him a character worth despising. Yet as Marianne lies ill, Willoughby makes a shocking appearance at the house where they are staying,

seeking to talk to Elinor about all that had transpired (ch. 44). In Willoughby's account of his actions, Elinor hears the sorrow he feels for the way he mistreated Marianne. He did indeed love her, yet he chose to marry another for wealth; his greedy and selfish decision has brought him great remorse. He seems to display a repentant heart and a desire to make things right—if at all possible—with Marianne, begging Elinor, "Tell her of my misery and my penitence" (171; ch. 44). Repentance reaches the hearts of some of the unlikeliest characters in Austen's novels, working redemption in even the messiest of situations.

A significant Christian element of Austen's novels exists not merely in the hearts of the characters themselves but rather in Austen's dealings with them, for she shows grace in her treatment of her characters. Reflective of the Anglican doctrinal focus of her day, Austen does not emphasize conversion and a transformed life (a more Evangelical perspective of Christianity); instead, she causes each of her main characters to grow gradually in character. Austen recognizes the fallibility of all her characters as well as their potential, and she deals mercifully with them. In an article about the theology of the novel, Kathleen James-Cavan suggests that Marianne should have died from her illness based on her brash behavior throughout the novel, and yet she does not die—in fact, she is given what most would consider a happy ending in her marriage to Colonel Brandon ("'Cruel Comfort'"). Rachel M. Brownstein further explains this divergence from what might have been expected in a neoclassical work, observing that in its dealings with its main characters, "*Sense and Sensibility* corrects the typical didactic emphasis by refusing to choose between Marianne and Elinor. While the action of the novel is mediated by the consciousness of the prudent sister, the narrative rewards both equally" (43). Austen

takes a sympathetic approach to her characters' moral development, showing grace that models the grace shown by God toward His children. In virtue, repentance, and grace, Austen synthesizes classical virtue and biblical principles that proceed out of her Anglican worldview.

Pride and Prejudice

Pride and Prejudice (1813) similarly demonstrates the capacity for personal growth in classical and Christian virtues, but its story also features characters who unswervingly demonstrate questionable virtue under the guise of religiosity. In an article written for a multidisciplinary journal, Dr. Bharati Karnik examines *Pride and Prejudice*'s two most apparently Christian characters and from their behavior draws provocative conclusions about Austen's perspective toward religion. Situating Austen in her eighteenth-century context, Karnik suggests that the Enlightenment allowed for the criticism of Christianity, a criticism he says Austen performs "in hushed tones" in the novel (13). Pointing to Mr. Collins, the clergyman who is to inherit the Bennets' estate upon Mr. Bennet's death, Karnik asserts that the unwanted guest with his ridiculous manners and poor character represents Austen's disdain for religion. Likewise, as the character who professedly reads her Bible and other Christian texts with diligence, Mary Bennet would seem the next most pious figure, yet Mary passes pompous judgments upon those around her and proves a generally unlikeable character. Karnik suggests that Austen's attributing negative character qualities to the two most religious characters in the novel indicates her disdain for religion and those who practice it. Further, Karnik states, "From this, one can conclude that Austen thought little of religion beyond its ceremonial value and her characters led a practically secular life with scarcely a mention

of the metaphysical" (15). Karnik's reading results in an anti-religious Austen; however, Karnik looks exclusively at outward displays of piety rather than to inward reflection as the hallmark of Austen's religion.

Pride and Prejudice illustrates a feature of Austen's writing common to most of her novels: a reticence toward religion that relegates Christianity to the inner conflicts of the heart rather than public practice and that manifests itself in the endeavor to know oneself and to practice probing self-examination. As Tave suggests, duty to neighbor and to self serve as the natural outworking of devotion to God; accordingly, Austen's religion manifests in characters' engagement with others and struggle within themselves. Through her struggle to overcome her sin of prejudice against Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth Bennet's internal conflict pervades the story and models a desire for self-awareness espoused by Austen herself.

In perhaps the most informative piece of evidence scholars have concerning Austen's personal faith apart from her novels, Austen composed three prayers that exemplify the internal reflection that marks the development of Elizabeth and other of her heroines. In an article for *Persuasions*, Bruce Stovel illumines the powerful testimony of Austen's three prayers preserved since her death. Though they are not all in her own hand and their exact dates of composure are unknown, the testimony of Cassandra her sister supports the fact that they belong to Austen, and scholars generally accept her as author ("'A Nation Improving in Religion'"). Her prayers utilize communal language and were likely written for her family's occasional use in place of those found in the *Book of Common Prayer* during their organized time of family prayer (White 69). What her letters fail to provide concerning evidence of her religion, her prayers supply amply both

in their testament to her practice of prayer and in their content, which hints at the personal religious concerns of Austen's heart. Both Stovel and White recognize that the prayers are closely modeled after the sentiments and structure of the collects in the *Book of Common Prayer*, but, as White says, are also "marked by her own concerns and personality" (70). Austen's prayers, faithful to Anglican tradition and style, yet personal and relevant to her own heart, provide insights into her faith.

Austen's prayers follow the pattern of the collects closely but reveal a concern with self-knowledge absent from the originals. In the first of these prayers, Austen makes a unique plea to God: "Teach us to understand the sinfulness of our own Hearts, and bring to our knowledge every fault of Temper and every evil Habit in which we have indulged to the discomfort of our fellow-creatures, and the danger of our own Souls" (Stovel). This idea of self-examination is the central theme of *Pride and Prejudice*, in which Austen's prayer for understanding is realized in the life of her novel's protagonist. Elizabeth demonstrates the posture of reflection and repentance inherent in Austen's petition, and while characters such as Mr. Collins and Mary give the most verbal attention to religion, it is Elizabeth who internalizes and contemplates its truths.

Elizabeth, believed by many scholars to be the character most patterned after Austen herself, proves a lively protagonist whose spirit has sometimes caused critics to esteem the character as rather unchristian. Poovey describes Elizabeth as an "outspoken champion of the prerogatives of individual desire," characterized by a "liveliness" that Poovey understands as contrasting virtue. Elizabeth's ever-present wit, her droll response to the Bingleys' estimation of women's accomplishment (ch. 8), her bold declaration to Lady Catherine de Bourgh concerning her intentions toward Mr. Darcy (ch. 14), and

numerous other examples of her conduct demonstrate little of the reserve that characterizes other of Austen’s protagonists. Poovey asserts that by showing an affinity for Elizabeth as a character, Austen endorses her untoward opinions and actions at the expense of virtue. If, contrary to Poovey’s claims, Elizabeth is indeed a vehicle for religion in the novel, the character’s religion must lie beneath her spunk.

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy both struggle with pride and prejudice that must be overcome through circumspection and repentance. Pride surfaces almost instantly in Mr. Darcy when, in his snobbish and superior attitude, he says to Bingley of Elizabeth, “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*” (Austen 205; ch. 3). His abominable arrogance, however, gives rise to pride in Elizabeth upon overhearing; her wounded pride leads her to form an opinion of Darcy that, while not unfounded, underestimates his character. When Elizabeth becomes aware of the strife between Wickham and Darcy, her prejudice against Darcy directs her trust toward the fiendish character whose charm and deception win some of her affections. Darcy too experiences prejudice that interferes with his affections as he falls in love with Elizabeth but cannot wholly move past the inferiority of her family and social situation (300; ch. 11). Due to their mutual struggles with the vices for which the novel is named, Elizabeth and Darcy lash out at one another with words that leave wounds felt long after they are inflicted.

The turning point for Elizabeth comes in searching her own heart and recognizing the vices that have taken root. When Darcy provides the true account of his dealings with Wickham in a letter, Elizabeth is enlightened regarding Wickham’s deception and her mistaken judgment of Darcy and begins to examine her heart:

> She studied every sentence: and her feelings towards its writer were at times widely different. When she remembered the style of his address, she was still full of indignation; but when she considered how unjustly she had condemned and upbraided him, her anger was turned against herself; and his disappointed feelings became the object of compassion. (312; ch. 14)

Acutely aware not only of the contents of the letter but also of her own fluctuating feelings, Elizabeth begins to experience a change of heart that involves remorse for her past actions and a newfound compassion for the person she had so long abhorred. As Austen described in her prayer, Elizabeth here begins to "understand the sinfulness of [her] own Heart" and to recognize the faults that had caused her to inflict pain upon Darcy and indeed endanger her "own Soul" (Stovel). Elizabeth's self-awareness and repentance mirror Austen's prayerful inspection of the heart before God.

Though Austen indulges Elizabeth's wit and quickness throughout the novel, she does not allow even this most beloved character to avoid the consequences of her impetuosity. In contrast to Poovey's assertion that Austen encourages a lack of virtue in Elizabeth, several characters subtly check Elizabeth's boldness. In an insightful article about Austen's moral imagination in *Pride and Prejudice*, Alison Searle points out that Elizabeth's sister exhibits a humility and charity that contrast with her own. Searle infers, "Jane Bennet's generous and at times indiscriminating charity… stands as a critique of Elizabeth's arrogant pretensions to immediate discernment of character in relation to both Darcy and Wickham" (20). Darcy too is himself a rebuke to Elizabeth's folly in his character that far outshines her appraisal of it. When Lydia runs off with Wickham and Darcy provides for their marriage from his own resources, Elizabeth finds herself

humbled to the point of grief for her hasty judgments and brash behavior (Austen 371; ch. 10). Though Elizabeth's personality moves unhindered throughout the novel, Austen subtly reprimands her indiscretions through others and creates in Elizabeth a softened heart.

Ultimately, Elizabeth secures the respectable husband and the happy ending characteristic of Austen's heroines, but the true satisfaction of the novel lies in her change of heart and growth in character. Searle notes that despite the matrimonial happiness that always concludes Austen's novels, marital happiness is "never the supreme motivating factor in Austen's work"; rather, Austen requires characters to "acknowledge principles higher than their own happiness, often involving a denial of self" (21). Religion in *Pride and Prejudice* mirrors Austen's, exhibiting the kind of internal piety veiled by modest outward expression that characterized Anglicanism and governed Austen's own practice in her writing. Her religion did not require superfluity of expression but rather humble introspection.

Elizabeth denies her own pride, prejudice, and obstinacy in order to bridge the divide between her and Darcy and to appreciate his impeccable character. She discovers the joy that comes from a heart softened toward others. Austen affirms this notion in her third prayer:

> Give us grace to endeavour after a truly Christian Spirit to seek to attain that temper of Forbearance and Patience, of which our Blessed Saviour has set us the highest Example and which, while it prepares us for the spiritual happiness of the life to come, will secure to us the best enjoyment of what this World can give. (Stovel)

Overcoming her vices by cultivating forbearance and patience, Elizabeth embodies the Anglican aim to live in harmony with God and man and thus secures happiness in the world. Elizabeth and Austen herself knew the importance of self-examination and a soft heart.

Mansfield Park

Mansfield Park (1814) boasts a slightly less memorable heroine but introduces complicated topics regarding defects in officers, difficulties in discerning character, and complications of social status. One key subplot of *Mansfield Park* touches the important topic of Austen's view of the clergy. Many scholars and casual readers alike identify the less-than-impressive clerical figures found in several of Austen's novels and read their shortcomings as evidence of Austen's rejection of the Church. Karnik, speaking of Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, states, "The fact that Austen chose a clergyman as the butt of ridicule in her most celebrated work, testifies to the theory that she does not think well of the Church and her servants much" (13). Indeed, figures such as Mr. Collins stimulate debate about Austen's purpose in producing such poor representations of the Church. However, in this novel, Austen's characters indulge in lengthy conjecture about the Church and the clergymen who are charged with serving it, revealing a respect for the Church and its officers, despite their flaws, that is foundational to Anglican belief. While some of Austen's clerical figures appear ridiculous, Edmund Bertram stands in stark contrast, proving himself a sincere and devout young man whose commitment to the Church stems from personal devotion.

For Edmund, the position of clergyman represents a conviction more than an empty vocation. As the second son of Sir Thomas Bertram, and thus not heir to his

father's wealth, Edmund knows the necessity of making a living for himself and plans to be ordained as a clergyman; however, his expression of respect for the occupation shows that finances are not his sole impetus. Throughout the novel, Edmund engages in conversations in which he defends the calling of the clergyman against the flippant and sometimes pointed judgments Mary Crawford makes against it. In one of their early conversations in which Mary states her opinion that "a clergyman is nothing," Edmund expresses his thoughts concerning the office:

> 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. If the man who holds it is so, it is by the neglect of his duty, by foregoing its just importance, and stepping out of his place to appear what he ought not to appear. (Austen 95; ch. 9)

Edmund's impassioned defense of the office of clergy, despite the abuses or insufficiencies of the man who holds it, avows a belief perhaps not improperly attributed to Austen herself, for she expresses it through a respectable character whose opinion on the topic holds through the end of the novel without alteration. Rather than modify Edmund's opinions on the topic throughout the novel, Austen enforces them through the novel's heroine, who holds Edmund in high regard for his deep conviction and even chimes in with her agreement on occasion (ch. 9). Edmund, a rare example of a devout clergyman in Austen's novels, declares sentiments not dissimilar to those of her own father, who felt the gravity of his clerical responsibilities and carefully fulfilled his duties

to the Church. Edmund's high esteem for the clergy demonstrates the respect for the role of clergyman modeled by Austen's own family members.

Some clergymen, both in Austen's day and in her novels, fail to live up to their calling. The flaws of these figures do not necessarily point to insufficiencies in the Church, however. White suggests that Austen's varied depiction of the clergy reflects her understanding of the Articles of Religion found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, which asserted that the inadequacy of clergymen did not damage the Church itself (55). The Articles proclaim that the clergy's wickedness does not diminish God's gifts or grace, which are preserved by God in spite of the failures of men (55). Austen recognizes the faults of some clergymen, and she does not hesitate to portray their ridiculous behavior in her novels; but in the praiseworthy character of Edmund she reveals the piety that ought to govern a clergyman's conduct. Though Edmund himself exhibits some errors of judgment throughout the novel, his respect for the office of clergyman in keeping with Anglican doctrine never wavers.

Though Edmund does not lack in zeal, he does fail to exert a significant influence on those around him. Throughout the novel, Edmund stands for what is good and proper and seeks to be a stabilizing force for his family in the absence of their figurehead, Sir Thomas, during his time in Antigua. Edmund's efforts often fail to truly influence those in his company, however, and ultimately his piety seems somewhat ineffective. In an article entitled "A Distracted Seminarian: The Unsuccessful Reformation of Edmund Bertram," Paul Byrd addresses Edmund's failure to bring about the kind of reforms to clerical practice that his beliefs entail. Yet rather than read this failure as a denunciation of Anglicanism, Byrd suggests that the novel's endorsement of Edmund's strong beliefs,

yet failure to see them actualized, serves to represent the religious undercurrent in England, where Anglicanism needed reform but had not yet experienced it. Acquainted with the imperfections of her own religion, Austen perhaps nods at the problems evident in the church of her day yet still defends its importance through Edmund's conviction. Edmund's lack of success in reforming church practice may represent the religious situation in England, but within the novel, it serves primarily as an indication of his failure to enact change among his peers as he fails to convince them to uphold his values.

Edmund exercises great wisdom in his principles but not in his assessment of people, a flaw through which Austen explores certain virtues important to the individual and society. Though Edmund can easily distinguish bad behavior, he falls prey to the beauty and charm of Mary, whose character is sorely lacking but veiled behind a façade of propriety. In her book *Understanding Austen: Key Concepts in the Six Novels*, Maggie Lane discusses two virtues, propriety and decorum, in a chapter dedicated to them. Lane informs readers that while our contemporary society values them little, "Jane Austen's society…put a much higher store on *propriety* and *decorum* as the essential means of preserving that degree of social harmony within which the individual is enabled to lead the most useful and happiest life" (178). She defines *propriety* as a term encompassing both behavior and "moral and mental tendencies" and *decorum* as the term referring more narrowly to the "visible aspects of conduct" (178). Though Lane addresses these virtues in Austen's writing collectively, in few of the novels do they seem to play a more integral role than in *Mansfield Park* and its conflict between Fanny's insight and Edmund's blindness. Edmund fails to discern rightly the character of those around him because he fails to distinguish between propriety and decorum.

Edmund prizes good manners and decorum, but he errs in judgment by equating them with true propriety. His affection for Mary, though sincere, emanates from a misplaced confidence in her morality and good character. Upon first becoming acquainted with the Crawfords, Edmund and Fanny deliberate concerning their impressions of them. In this first conversation, Edmund displays good judgment, discerning an indiscretion of Mary's in speaking ill of her uncle. When Fanny makes note of it, he responds, "I thought you would be struck. It was very wrong—very indecorous" (Austen 64; ch. 7). However, he goes on to defend Mary, explaining that he does not begrudge a person her opinions but rather condemns her "impropriety in making them public" (65; ch. 7). Here Edmund makes his key mistake: he dismisses Mary's misconduct by excusing her comments as "untinctured by ill humor or roughness" and finding in Mary's manner "nothing sharp, or loud, or coarse" but judging her "perfectly feminine, except in the instances we have been speaking of" (65-66; ch.7). Divorcing this slip into indecorous behavior from her nature, Edmund falls for her usually well-maintained display of decorum instead of recognizing her underlying lack of propriety, which becomes clear throughout the novel as she uses her manners to manipulate others' impressions of her. When Mary reacts to a family scandal by showing more concern at its being discovered than at its innate sinfulness, Edmund realizes, "[I]t had been the creature of my imagination, not Miss Crawford, that I had been too apt to dwell on for many months past" (479; ch. 47). Recognizing his substitution of outward decorum for the propriety born of true character, Edmund identifies true propriety not in Mary but in Fanny.

Austen reveals the importance of propriety and decorum not only to the individual but more importantly to society and to family life. Fanny, a most humble and self-effacing heroine, serves as a model of both Austen's eighteenth-century worldview and her Anglican belief. Received into Lady Bertram's household at Mansfield because of her own family's poverty, Fanny remains at all times aware of her social standing and respectful of those above her, reinforcing the hierarchical social structures that still governed England. Though Austen sometimes allows her characters to marry above their station and obtain greater social standing, her novels nonetheless demonstrate a respect for the social structures that maintain society.

The idea of hierarchy stems not merely from English society but ultimately from the neoclassical and Christian belief in the Great Chain of Being famously articulated during the medieval era. White suggests that the Great Chain of Being is a metaphor deeply embedded in the novels, its expression of God's orderly and hierarchical creation of the world providing the basis for even the "'natural' hierarchies of social rank" (76). The gradation inherent in that framework of the world translates into the society in which Fanny lives. Fanny understands her place in the Bertram family, reminded constantly by her Aunt Norris and occasionally by the behavior of the rest of her inferiority to Maria and Julia Bertram. Though overlooked and mistreated throughout much of her life, Fanny's propriety in knowing her place serves her well: Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram come to respect and rely upon her because of her propriety and her selfless service to her family, and Edmund falls in love with her, despite her social inferiority, because of the propriety she shows even in embracing it. Fanny's propriety makes her the pride of the Bertram family and elevates her without her needing to pull rank in society.

Though Austen upholds the importance of propriety and decorum and social structure, she does not permit abuse of one's position in society. In her book, Lane claims that Austen respected propriety and decorum but was conscious of their abuse at the hands of those who would use such rules for personal power (178). She says that Austen in her works despises "mean-spiritedness sheltering behind a mask of social convention" but prizes manners and proper conduct when they "proceed from attention to the comfort of others" (179). Practice of propriety and decorum should be tempered by Christian charity. Fanny's Aunt Norris, who championed the principle of knowing one's place in society most enthusiastically, displays a lack of kindness and compassion that Austen denounces. Despite suggesting Sir Thomas's charitable act of taking in Fanny, Aunt Norris lacks true charity that comes from the heart. Though she enters the story as Sir Thomas's trusted advisor, she eventually falls from favor as he recognizes that her endorsement of the notion of high rank polluted Maria and Julia's character (Austen ch. 48). Aunt Norris suffers the consequences of her indulgent treatment of her nieces and her abuse of Fanny: her role at Mansfield becomes superfluous, and she must pick up the pieces of Maria's shattered reputation following her affair. Austen's treatment of her characters in *Mansfield Park* demonstrates a respect for the church and for the virtues of propriety and decorum tempered with charity as they contribute to character and uphold society.

Conclusion

Austen's religion has long perplexed those who study her works, yet reading her novels within the context of Georgian England through the lens of traditional Anglican practice reveals a natural and unaffected synthesis of Christianity and daily life. In *Sense*

and Sensibility, Austen teaches her characters to exhibit classical virtue undergirded by Christian ideals; in *Pride and Prejudice*, she demonstrates the importance of a lively personality moderated through circumspection and Christian humility and contrition; in *Mansfield Park*, she affirms the need for religious and social structure through discernment of true Christian character manifested in decorous behavior. Austen does not discuss Christian doctrine or preach the gospel in her novels, but through her penetrating gaze into the hearts of her characters and her foundation upon Christian principles that govern human interaction, she teaches virtues and morality that stem from her Christian worldview through timeless, enthralling stories of redemption and love.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. [circa 1814]. Bantam Dell, 2008.

---. *Pride and Prejudice*. [circa 1813]. *Four Classic Novels*, Fall River Press, 2012, pp. 199-405.

---. *Sense and Sensibility*. [circa 1811]. *Four Classic Novels*, Fall River Press, 2012, pp. 3–198.

Austen-Leigh, James Edward, and Kathryn Sutherland. *A Memoir Of Jane Austen: and Other Family Recollections*. Oxford University Press, 2002. Oxford World's Classics. EBSCO*host*, ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=100287&site=ehost-live&scope=site. Accessed 25 Sept. 2016.

Brownstein, Rachel M. "*Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*." *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, edited by Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 32-57.

Byrd, Paul. "A Distracted Seminarian: The Unsuccessful Reformation of Edmund Bertram." *Persuasions On-line*, vol. 35 no. 1, 2014, http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol35no1/byrd.html. Accessed 25 Sept. 2016.

Collins, Irene. *Jane Austen: the Parson's Daughter.* Hambledon Continuum, 2007.

Emsley, Sarah. *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Fergus, Jan. "The Professional Woman Writer." *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, edited by Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster, Cambridge University

Press, 2011, pp. 1-20. *Cambridge Collections Online*, doi: 10.1017/CCO9780521763080.001. Accessed 25 Sept. 2016.

Giffin, Michael. “Jane Austen and Religion: Salvation and Society in Georgian England.” *Persuasions On-line*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2002, www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol23no1/giffin.html. Accessed 2 Sept. 2017.

Grundy, Isobel. “Jane Austen and Literary Traditions.” *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, edited by Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 192-214. *Cambridge Collections Online*, doi: 10.1017/CCO9780521763080.013. Accessed 1 Sept. 2017.

James-Cavan, Kathleen. “‘Cruel Comfort’: A Reading of the Theological Critique in Sense and Sensibility.” *Persuasions On-line*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2012, www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol32no2/james-cavan.html. Accessed 25 Sept. 2016.

Karnik, Bharati. “Religion in *Pride and Prejudice*: Austen’s view of religion through the portrayals of Mr. Collins and Mary Bennett.” *New Man International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 2, no.10, 2015, www.newmanpublication.com/br/2%20New%20Man%20Publication-%20NMIJMS%20%20Oct%202015_www.newmanpublication.com_.pdf. Accessed 26 Sept. 2016.

Lane, Maggie. *Understanding Austen: Key Concepts in the Six Novels*. Robert Hale Ltd., 2012.

Le Faye, Deirdre. “Letters.” *Jane Austen in Context*, edited by Janet Todd, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 33-40.

Mazzeno, Laurence W. *Jane Austen: Two Centuries of Criticism*. Camden House, 2011.

Poovey, Mary. "Ideological Contradictions and the Consolations of Form." *Jane Austen*, edited by Harold Bloom, Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009, pp. 28-58.

Searle, Alison. "The Moral Imagination: Biblical Imperatives, Narrative and Hermeneutics in *Pride and Prejudice*." *Renascence* vol. 59, no.1, 2006, *ProQuest*, ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=23789426&site=ehost-live&scope=site. Accessed 19 Oct. 2016.

Stovel, Bruce. 1994. "'A Nation Improving in Religion': Jane Austen's Prayers and Their Place in Her Life and Art." *Persuasions*, no. 16, pp. 185-196. *Jane Austen Society of North America*, http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/printed/number16/stovel.htm Accessed 24 Sept. 2016.

Wheeler, Michael. "Religion." *Jane Austen in Context*, edited by Janet Todd, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 406–414.

White, Laura Mooneyham. *Jane Austen's Anglicanism*. Ashgate Publishing, 2011.