

BOOK REVIEW



Jane Austen's Anglicanism

By Laura Mooneyham White

Ashgate, 2011

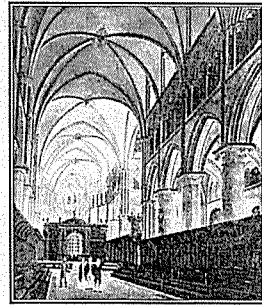
ISBN: 978-1-4094-1863-4

Hardback, 228 pp

Genre: Literary criticism

Reviewed by Michael Giffin

Jane Austen's Anglicanism
LAURA MOONEYHAM WHITE



In Austen studies, it is important to read her fiction as a representation of her religious beliefs. We need to get the methodology right, though, as most academic critics are not convinced and hard to convince. They cannot or do not want to see a link between the religion Austen professed and the fiction she wrote. They promote her as a secular author because that is what they see; that is what appears obvious to them. In challenging this tendency, Laura Mooneyham White sets a high standard for herself in *Jane Austen's Anglicanism*. She aims to be 'foundational and heuristic' (p. 7). She intends to say things no one who has written about Austen and Anglicanism has said.

Has Mooneyham White done that? Yes and No, since her book has different parts, written in different voices, which will appeal to different readers. Part One, 'Jane Austen and Anglicanism', looks at the Georgian church, Austen as an Anglican, and Anglicanism in the novels. Part Two, 'The Sins of the Author', considers how Austen's religion informs her narrative technique in relation to wit, candour, malice, wordplay, and world-making. I liked Part Two for its originality and potential to further our understanding of Austen's vocation as an author who lived in a period that did not distinguish between secular and religious. It should have been expanded to fill the whole book. I disliked Part One because it tells us what we already know and reinforces outdated stereotypes. It should have

been shortened to become a brief introduction to an expanded Part Two.

The problem with Part One is it spends all its time explaining the foreignness of the Georgian world to its 21st century readers and no time grappling with the phenomenon of Austen's extraordinary and relatively recent increase in popularity. That phenomenon is attributable, at least in part, to our recognising similarities and continuities between Austen's world and our world. Secular academics have a long list of inter-related then-and-now comparisons and contrasts to explore: women, marriage, health and wellbeing, science, capitalism, social hierarchies, the establishment, conservatism, democracy, globalisation, and even foreign policy. Religious academics need to work from the same list, not look at religion alone, since Austen's Anglicanism was integral to her society not a refuge from it.

More seriously, while the Anglosphere of the long 18th century may seem foreign compared with the Anglosphere of the early 21st century, *Jane Austen's Anglicanism* gives the impression that Anglicans no longer believe what Austen believed and are busy distancing themselves from her polity and otherwise patronising their forebears. That is a regrettable impression for such a book to give, particularly one that aims to be foundational and heuristic. Anglicanism is the third largest Christian denomination in the world, with over 80 million members. If we treat the religious aspect of Austen's polity as belonging, in Mooneyham White's phrase, to a 'particular historical moment' (p. 7), we tell only part of its story. This book does not defend the faith Austen professed or the faith Anglicans still profess.

What do I dislike about Part One? First, we hear nothing of the research of recent decades which suggests the 20th century looked at the Georgians through the prism of Victorian disapproval and censorship and misunderstood the Georgians and misrepresented the long 18th century in the process. Instead, Mooneyham White gives us a literature search of stock prejudices against the Georgian church: its being a low-water mark in Anglicanism, its being rife with structural and moral problems, its antipathy towards enthusiasm, its suffering from having fallen between the intensities before it (the civil war) and after it (the reform movements), before she moves on to absenteeism, pluralism, non-residence, patronage, the interdependence of parish and estate, and external threats to its cosy complacency. There is nothing new in any of this.

Second, concepts such as orthodoxy, natural law, great chain of being, and providence are anachronistically attached to the Georgian period and spoken about in the past tense. Orthodoxy is a particularly slippery and contentious concept Mooneyham White throws around far too loosely throughout her book, without defining whatever it means to her in whatever context she means it. Natural law, a classical method that uses natural reason to theorise ethics and morality, is still with us and cannot be spoken of in anachronistic terms. The great chain of being, a classical model of nature, which posits divinity above us, and slugs below us, with the rest of us occupying a structured place in the hierarchy, will still be recognised by academics in any university, bureaucrats in any administration, and politicians in any government, even by those who are not religious. Providence will still be recognised by those kept alive by modern medicine, or by those who believe evolution and intelligent design are the same thing: it really depends on time, since God's time is different from our time.

The significance of Part Two is the way it frames Austen's narrative technique as a moral dilemma, of author as sub-creator in relation to God as creator, and how Austen addresses this moral dilemma in different ways through her fiction, correspondence, and prayers. The key concept here (allow me to use my language to describe it rather than Mooneyham White's language) is that, like many Christians, Austen understood herself as a sub-creator made in the image and likeness of a Creator (or Logos, which means both Word and Reason). Hence the sub-creator has been given the ability and responsibility to use her logos (her word, her reason). Austen was highly aware of the moral dilemma here; the fall of humanity occurs within language; our sins flow from our speech; she knew she could destroy as well as create, damn as well as save, which is why she used language contextually.

The reader is entitled to ask Mooneyham White a question here: has anything really changed? Even in an age where the author no longer sees herself as logos in relation to Logos, as sub-creator in relation to Creator, she still believes in the power of language; she is still expected to be in control of what she writes. If this were not true, all texts would now be regarded as equal; there would be no distinction between literary or non-literary; there would be no distinction between gossip and discourse or

between babble and art. Even D H Lawrence, who once believed in Logos but subsequently dedicated his life to the Modernist journey, to exploring the post-classical (or pre-classical) gods of embodiment, was in control of his writing and understood the ideology and aesthetic that inspired it.

What do I like about Part Two? First, it reminds us of how the moral problem of wit dominates Austen's fiction. Austen knew she was a wit herself and through her prayers she tried to atone for the consequences of her wit. Heartless and self-serving wit is a major sin Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse must overcome; it is also a ruinous characteristic in Fanny Price's romantic rival Mary Crawford. When Mooneyham White discusses the trip to Box Hill in *Emma*, where Emma uses wit at Miss Bates' expense, she argues: 'Never in an English novel has one jest, one bit of wit, functioned so didactically and with such an important consequence to the plot' (p. 143). Second, it reminds us that candour had an opposite meaning in Austen's day. Candour now means, among other things, a willingness to tell truths, even unpleasant truths, without regard for how they will be received. Back then it meant freedom from malice and not desiring to find fault. Jane Bennet is the model of this earlier meaning: 'her mild and steady candour always pleaded for allowances, and urged the possibility of mistake' (quoted p. 149). Austen found her own candour wanting because she knew her wit was problematic; how could she be generous and sympathetic when she was always on the alert for human foibles and failings?

Third, Austen was highly aware that her own moral authority was at issue in her novels, particularly at those moments when the satiric exposure of faults seems to merge with the pleasure of malice. The tendency to mock faults and eccentricities was central to Austen's personality, which we see most clearly in her letters to Cassandra; however, Mooneyham White argues, 'Post-modernist approaches tend to collapse literary hierarchies and attack the idea of literary decorum' (p. 137), which when unpacked suggests we need to distinguish what Austen said privately in her letters from what she said publicly in her novels. Fourth, Austen loved wordplay and used it on many simple and complex levels, from the double entendre to encoded anagrams. A youthful example comes from the juvenilia, where 'carpet' and 'whole' are coded references to James I and penetrative anal sex (p. 143). A mature example comes from Mary Crawford's famous reference

to 'rears' and 'vices' in *Mansfield Park* (p. 145). The young Austen never atoned for her pun at the expense of King James. The mature Austen places Mary's joke within the scope of Edmund and Fanny's judgment, which takes place on many planes of conversation, and, by also placing the joke implicitly within the reader's judgment, Austen admonishes the joke, the joker, and herself (p. 145).

Fifth, Mooneyham White writes an excellent chapter on 'world making', which discusses the long history of moral qualms associated with artistic creation, which go back at least to Plato's attack on the poets in *The Republic*, the Judaic and Islamic prohibitions against representing the divine, the Christian unease with Gnostic ideas of sub-creation, and a more diffuse tradition within the church stretching from St Jerome to Hannah More which associates fiction with untruth, temptation, and mental and moral confusion. Austen herself simultaneously helped condemn and defend the popular novel: both hers and others. The terms of her condemnation (rendered most plainly in *Northanger Abbey*, *Emma*, and *Sanditon*) focus first on the unrealistic expectations that arise when readers (including her own characters who read) cannot discern fiction from reality and second on the moral unmooring that takes place when imagination is excited without proper restraint. Austen's defence of the novel seems two-fold: first, novels can provide pleasurable, witty, and elegant moral instruction; second, they can do so while conforming to the scenes of common life and laws of probability. She was, it seems, particularly irritated by those who leapt to the putative high ground, those who declared novels immoral out-of-hand. What Austen and her contemporaries had that modern readers and critics lack was a belief that literary realism was inevitably tied to moral and religious principles.

There is much to admire in this book but much to contest. There would be more to admire had Mooneyham White used the methodology of Part Two to provide us with a close reading of all Austen's fiction, correspondence, and prayers, instead of short sections with samples of wit, candour, malice, wordplay, and world-making. There would be less to contest if Mooneyham White had not used Part One to teach us what we already know, reinforced out-dated stereotypes, and had at least attempted to grapple with the Austen phenomenon.

Speakers, Authors and Reviewers

Adrienne Bradney-Smith is a semi-retired teacher of Japanese (with several publications in this field) and a member of the Jane Austen Southern Highlands group. Her enthusiasms include 19th century English literature and collecting antique kettles. She is a frequent contributor to both *Chronicle* and *Sensibilities*, and her article *Art and the Austen Family* was also published in JAS UK's 2008 *Annual Report*. Adrienne has an LTCL Performer's Diploma in clarinet and together with her husband Robert Smith on piano, enjoys performing both classical music and jazz.

Elizabeth Ellis is a former Mitchell Librarian, is now the inaugural Emeritus Curator of the Mitchell Library, Sydney, and is an Honorary Associate of the Department of History, University of Sydney. She has a longstanding interest in early Australian colonial life and art and its relationship with English culture and society at the time of Jane Austen.

Dr Michael Giffin is a longtime member of JASA and a writer, essayist and reviewer. He is the author of several books, including *Jane Austen and Religion: Salvation and Society in Georgian England*. Michael also teaches postgraduate courses in literature and theology, and is a worker priest in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney.

Dr Beth Hanley is a retired university lecturer and lives in Sydney. Beth has a BA in History and English, a PhD in History from the University of Melbourne, and an MPhil in Fine Art from the Courtauld Institute, University of London. After working in art galleries in England and Australia, Beth taught Art History at Charles Sturt University and the University of Sydney. She is currently working on a biography of the late 18th century British singer and actress, Ann Catley. Beth has been a member of JASA for seven years.

Dr Jocelyn Harris, professor emerita at the University of Otago, is the author of *A Revolution Almost Beyond Expression: Jane Austen's Persuasion* (University of Delaware Press, 2007) and *Jane Austen's Art of Memory* (Cambridge University Press, 1989, reprinted 2003). She also edited Austen's favourite novel, *Sir Charles Grandison* (Oxford University Press, 1972 and still available).