

Religious Attitudes in the World of *Humphry Clinker*

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If the social or political historian were to step across the corridor and ask his friend in the English Department what early novel might be especially rich in data for his study of eighteenth-century English life, his colleague might well end up naming Tobias Smollett's *Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771). Untroubled by plot (practically speaking, the novel has none), unconcerned with sentiment, and seemingly unaware of the *art* of fiction, Smollett cast his last novel into a series of letters reporting the adventures and observations of a Welsh family travelling through England and Scotland. Often the novel assumes the guise more of perceptive journalistic dispatches than of a piece of imaginative fiction. Smollett's five letter writers react vividly to the many elements of English and Scottish society to which they are exposed. Through their reactions, Smollett comments pungently on many of the salient characteristics of his own society, a society which he had carefully scrutinized during a long writing career.

Many of Smollett's comments about England of the 1760's are concerned with the changes being wrought in English society by the rapidly increasing standard of living, the rise in social status of the mercantile *nouveaux riches*, and the urbanization of English life. Smollett observes too the increasing political power of the English populace and the lessening of aristocratic controls and perquisites. His reaction to these changes and their symptoms is quite clear: he is dismayed at the tenor and tempo of English life. Like Swift and Pope of an earlier generation and like Johnson of his own, he is alarmed at the threat to established modes and institutions posed by Whiggish innovations, middle-class tampering with tradition, and bourgeois violation of established decorum. He foresees social chaos and political anarchy if England continues its reckless course.

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It is to social and political activities that Smollett gives most attention in his masterpiece. But there are occasional passages reflecting on religious matters that should be significant to anyone trying to recreate the quality of eighteenth-century English religious life and institutions. Although these passages are not central to the tone and outlook of the novel, they are certainly congruent with them and contribute meaningfully to the novel's total effect. The following discussion of these passages is not intended to be the whole truth about the religious world of England in the 1760's. Indeed more objective and distant viewers may easily prove Smollett to be in error in certain respects. But the discussion is intended to indicate what many of Smollett's contemporaries were willing to accept as valid commentary in those years. That which men of talent and perception believed to be true may be as important for understanding their world as that which later historians may tell us actually was true.

Of the established Anglican church Smollett says little in his novel, but what little he does say about its clergy is not very flattering. The glimpses the reader gets suggest the idea of a clerical system in which most of the grass-roots work was done by underpaid drudges while well-endowed sinecures allowed those in superior ranks to indulge in all the luxury of a secular aristocracy. When reflecting the system, Smollett's imagination was most stimulated by the clergy's preoccupation with worldly comforts and its adeptness at seeking temporal advantages through profitable spiritual offices. Smollett's most pointed observation describes the clerics who visited Bath, the famous health and pleasure resort of eighteenth-century England:

There is always a great shew of the clergy at Bath: none of your thin, puny, yellow, hectic figures, exhausted with abstinence and hard study, labouring under the *Morbi eruditorum*; but great over-grown dignitaries and rectors, with rubicund noses and gouty ancles, or broad bloated faces, dragging along great swag bellies, the emblems of sloth and indigestion (JM—May 17).¹

This caricature of ambitious, luxury-loving, and worldly clerics is given added garnish in the immediately succeeding account of the threatened duel by means of which Tom Eastgate, an

¹Passages in *Humphry Clinker* are referred to by initials of the fictional letter writer (MB=Matthew Bramble, JM=Jeremy Melford, LM=Lydia Melford) and by date of the letter in which the passage appears.

unlikely candidate for spiritual honors but obviously a person of worldly discretion, extorts a well-paying clerical living from his erstwhile patron, George Prankley.

Later in the novel Jery Melford and his uncle, Matthew Bramble, note the absence of the clergy when they attend a levee of the Duke of Newcastle after the Duke's loss of influence in the government. The Duke had been a master of the art of dispensing governmental patronage. In fact, many of those high in the church's hierarchy owed their office to his good graces. Thus their absence at his levee is indeed worthy of note, and the reader is once again reminded that currying the favor of those in influential positions was the prime requisite for clerical advancement and that adeptness in switching allegiances at the right time was a highly necessary ability. Jery conjectures that "the gratitude of the clergy is like their charity, which shuns the light" (JM—June 5), a delightfully ironic comment on the loss of the chief Christian virtue in the Christian minister's preoccupation with his material comforts and the worldly prestige of his office.

To the most important crosscurrent of England's religious life in the eighteenth century, the Methodist movement, *Humphry Clinker* gives a much more direct—and more condemnatory—look. A few years before he began writing *Humphry Clinker* Smollett had expressed his unqualified disapproval of the movement which the Wesleys and Whitefield had begun in the late 1730's. Smollett's earlier statement serves as effective introductory comment to the treatment of the Methodists in *Humphry Clinker*:

The progress of reason, and free cultivation of the human mind, had not however entirely banished those ridiculous sects and schisms of which the kingdom had been formerly so productive. Imposture and fanaticism still hung upon the skirts of religion. Weak minds were seduced by the delusions of a superstition stiled Methodism, raised upon the affectation of superior sanctity, and maintained by pretensions to divine illumination. Many thousands in the lower ranks of life were infected with this species of enthusiasm, by the unwearied endeavours of a few obscure preachers.²

Two frequently made charges against the Methodists are suggested in this passage, the charge of what the eighteenth

²*Continuation of the Complete History of England* (London, 1762-65), IV, 121-22.

century called "enthusiasm"³ and the charge of hypocrisy. One might almost say that the handling of Methodism in *Humphry Clinker* is designed to illustrate these charges. When the Bramble travelling party sojourns in London, Humphry Clinker, the illiterate servant they have picked up along their way, is converted to Methodism. He is discovered preaching by his employer, who proceeds to berate him for his presumption and fanaticism. Matthew Bramble's admonition to Humphry is easily seen as a recasting of the sentiments and prejudices expressed by Smollett in the passage above. "What you imagine to be the new light of grace," says Bramble, "I take to be a deceitful vapour, glimmering through a crack in your upper story—In a word, Mr. Clinker, I will have no light in my family, but what pays the king's taxes, unless it be the light of reason, which you don't pretend to follow." Bramble then asserts what was frequently maintained by the deriders of Methodism, that its disciples were either hypocrites or fanatics headed for the madhouse:

Heark-ye, Clinker, you are either an hypocritical knave, or a wrong-headed enthusiast; and, in either case, unfit for my service—If you are a quack in sanctity and devotion, you will find it an easy matter to impose upon silly women, and others of crazed understanding, who will contribute lavishly for your support—if you are really seduced by the reveries of a disturbed imagination, the sooner you lose your senses entirely, the better for yourself and the community (JM—June 10).

Somewhat later in the novel *Tabitha Bramble*, the stereotyped old-maid sister of Matthew Bramble, becomes involved with the Methodists also. Her niece, Lydia Melford, usually very mild and sweet-natured in her judgments, brings up the charges of near-madness and hypocrisy again as she reports on her aunt's religious behavior:

She has been praying, preaching, and catechising among the methodists, . . . and pretends to have such manifestations and revelations, as even Clinker himself can hardly believe, though the poor fellow is half crazy with enthusiasm. . . . God forgive me if I think uncharitably, but all this seems to me to be downright hypocrisy and deceit (LM—Sept. 7).

Methodism's reputation for driving men mad was based on its evangelistic emphasis on a vital spiritual conversion to re-

³The *OED* defines this usage thus: "Ill-regulated or misdirected religious emotion, extravagance of religious speculation."

place the dead ritual of the established church and to reach the lower classes, whose lives were often virtually untouched by any religious influence. Although the Wesleys and other leaders of the revival tried to check excesses and themselves saw the danger of delusion, there were those among the unlettered converts who, in their fervor, gave way to emotional extravagances, while others, with no qualification for the work but their zeal, abandoned themselves to itinerant preaching of the rudest form. Apparently Smollett wants his reader to accept the excesses as the norm in such passages as the grotesque description of Humphry mounting the rostrum, encouraged by the example of a weaver, and finding himself "under such strong impulsions, as made him believe he was certainly moved by the spirit" (JM—June 10).

It is clear that Smollett denounces Methodism because he considers it an offense against both order and reason, two of the principles of human life most cherished by him and by many of his contemporaries. To Smollett Methodism was a further pernicious force in the threatened breakdown of a rational, ordered society. Like the levelling of social classes and the extension of political liberties, it could only result in a loosening of the restraints necessary for a smooth-running, rationally controlled society. The Methodist's emphasis upon supernatural enlightenment was inimical to the orthodox faith in rational religion. (It is worth remembering that by the mid-1700's the deists were no longer the controversial group they had been earlier, largely because the orthodox had assimilated many of their tenets.) And the pretensions of the lower classes to religious authority or religious enlightenment were considered a threat to the established order. The self-appointed minister was a menace to ecclesiastical decorum just as the *nouveau riche* was to social decorum and the member of the mob was to political decorum. Matthew Bramble is constantly outraged at the impertinence of the mob in imitating their betters; it is not surprising that he becomes indignant at the thought of his untutored servant presuming to step out of his appointed office to become a spiritual adviser to others.

From the charge of irrationality it was easy for the opponents of Methodism to make the jump to the charge of hypocrisy. Because the appeal of the new religion was allegedly to the irrational, it was natural to suppose that the Methodists found it easy, in Bramble's words quoted above, to "impose

upon silly women and others of crazed understanding." Since it was a common opinion that the Methodists were most successful in imposing on silly women and ignorant men, the reader of 1771 would have immediately picked out Tabitha Bramble and Humphry Clinker as the characters in the novel most apt to succumb to the histrionics of the Methodists. Neither would it have been surprising to contemporary readers of the book to find that Lady Griskin, with all her social foibles, was their escort to the first meeting, since ladies of fashion were frequently pictured toying with Methodism as with a new hobby or fad and using their new religious professions as a cloak for less spiritual activities. This type of hypocrisy is especially well demonstrated by Tabitha Bramble, who affects Methodism to give her a sanctified gloss, but to whom it is most useful as a possible man-trap. One suspects that the eighteenth-century reader was inclined to a risqué snicker when he read, "[Tabitha] has had the good fortune to come acquainted with a pious Christian, called Mr. Moffat, who is very powerful in prayer, and often assists her in private exercises of devotion" (JM—Aug. 8).

In his *Travels Through France and Italy* Smollett introduces a passage on fanaticism that is valuable for the light it throws on the antipathy in *Humphry Clinker* to any religious profession tinged with enthusiasm and on the relation that Smollett believed to exist between fanaticism and hypocrisy:

For my part, I never knew a fanatic that was not an hypocrite at bottom. Their pretensions to superior sanctity, and an absolute conquest over all the passions, which human reason was never yet able to subdue, introduce a habit of dissimulation, which, like all other habits, is confirmed by use, till at length they become adepts in the art and science of hypocrisy. Enthusiasm and hypocrisy are by no means incompatible. The wildest fanatics I ever knew, were real sensualists in their way of living, and cunning cheats in their dealings with mankind.⁴

Smollett's strong predilection for the rational and orderly, which gives bite to his treatment of the Methodists and his hatred of fanaticism, is given further expression in an exposé of Scottish folk superstitions during the Bramble party's travels through Scotland. Bramble writes that while around the supper table at the Duke of Queensberry's castle, "The conversation turned upon the vulgar notions of spirits and omens, that

⁴*Travels Through France and Italy* (London, 1766), I, 75 (Letter V).

prevail among the commonalty of North-Britain" (MB—Sept. 15). Most of the conversation is taken up with a report by one of the diners of an incident involving the second sight, a supposed supernatural gift for seeing forthcoming events in visions. The guest tells of having arrived unannounced with four companions at the home of a friend. He claims that he found his friend already prepared to entertain him and his four companions, who were strangers to the host. Bramble skeptically proposes that the supposed seer, being of a visionary turn, probably claimed numerous visions which never materialized and that the fulfillment of one out of many might be ascribed to coincidence. Thus Bramble characteristically provides a rational, natural explanation for this amazing event.

The "debunking" attitude expressed in this natural explanation of a supposedly supernatural event is continued in the next sequence of events in the novel. During the conversation at the supper table another gentleman tells of an apparently supernatural event that recently occurred in the neighborhood. The ghost of a gentleman fifteen years dead is reported to have visited his grandson and chastised him with a horse whip and later to have been seen hovering over his own tomb in the churchyard. The next day the travellers re-encounter Lismahago, a Scottish soldier who had travelled with them earlier. He tells them of a recent visit to the home of his late father. Finding to his chagrin that his nephew had turned the home into a weaving manufactory, he encountered the nephew, whipped him, paid his respects to his father's tomb, and departed. Thus Lismahago provides again a natural explanation for supposedly supernatural occurrences.

As can be readily seen, the treatment of religion in *Humphry Clinker* is basically satiric; that is, it is an attack upon defects and abuses, follies and fallacies which the author believes to be dangerous and destructive to individual and social well-being. The emphasis is upon the negative; the positive must be elicited by implication. About the nearest Smollett comes in *Humphry Clinker* to any statement of positive religious values is a statement of Lydia in reflecting upon her aunt's Methodist leanings:

If I could put faith in all these supernatural visitations, I should think myself abandoned of grace; for I have neither seen, heard, nor felt anything of this nature, although I endeavour to discharge the duties of religion, with all the

sincerity, zeal, and devotion that is in [my] power (LM—Sept. 7).

Matthew Bramble, despite his crotchety temperament, wins the affection of the reader because of his disposition to such charitable actions as his relief of a poor ensign's widow in an early episode and his generous concern for his tenants and servants throughout the novel. These instances of practical religion are markedly contrasted with the covetousness of Tabitha, who endeavors to thwart her brother's charitable endeavors and who undergoes no diminution of selfishness and self-righteousness when she turns Methodist. In the world of *Humphry Clinker*, doctrine may yield to the irrational and discipline may decay, but charity never faileth.

A statement Smollett made when surveying the recent history of England in the *Continuation* of his history provides an apt summary of the conservative, rational core of thought which lies at the center of the novel's picture of the religious elements of English society and relates these elements to the total picture of a society in danger of deterioration and tottering on the brink of chaos and anarchy:

From the frivolous pursuits of the people, their rage for novelty, their admiration of shew and pageantry, their ridiculous extravagance, their licentious conduct, their savage appetite for war and carnage which they had for some time avowed, and the spirit of superstition with which they began to be possessed, one would be apt to believe that the human mind had begun to degenerate, and that mankind was relapsing into their original ignorance and barbarity.⁵

The harshness of this pronouncement is tempered by the humor of *Humphry Clinker*, but the basic point of view remains. Condemnation, expressed or implicit, is dealt to everything tainted with enthusiasm, superstition, greed, or irrationality. Perhaps had there existed in the eighteenth century a religious group with the traditional dignity of the Anglican church without its secular preoccupations and with the practical charity of the Methodists without their enthusiasm, Smollett would have found the state of organized religion more satisfactory and would have given a more affirmative view of the religious currents of his day. Be that as it may, *Humphry Clinker* clearly reflects an important segment of the religious thought of its day and stands up well as a pungent and significant comment on the English religious milieu of the 1760's.

⁵*Continuation*, V, 19.