RELIGION IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*
AUSTEN’S VIEW OF RELIGION THROUGH THE PORTRAYALS OF MR. COLLINS AND MARY BENNETT

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Jane Austen and her best work *Pride and Prejudice* need no introduction. Almost all of the themes of the celebrated novel have been discussed to no end and all of her characters analyzed under scrutiny. Still, different times call for different analyses, which is the reason behind the various reinterpretations of every classic that has ever been written.

The world of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is a closed world with limited number of pains and pleasures. At the outset, the goal of everyone’s life is to get married or to get one’s children and friends married. Behind this premise, however, there is more. Austen’s works also serve as great sources of social history. The mannerisms, ideas and beliefs of a certain age are perfectly reflected in the lives of her characters.

One of the most crucial of these issues is religion. Overtly, Austen refrains from either criticizing or praising religion. Rather than ideologies, she is concerned with individual characters, who are engaged in personal journeys of love and affection. But the late 18th century, in which the novel is set, was still a century in which religion was of great importance if not the prime importance.

It was an era when the first wafts of freedom were blowing through Europe after a long time. Christianity had taken hold of Europe and every aspect of life in the Dark Ages. It was a horrible time when science was banned and scientists were persecuted; artists were either killed or made to confirm to the strictures of religion; any dissent was brutally suppressed; heresy was punishable by death; misogyny was at its highest with lakhs of women burnt alive being accused of witchcraft. Beginning in the 13th century and coming into its own in the 15th century, the Renaissance, inspired from the Greek pagan philosophers first broke the stranglehold of Christianity.

This led to an explosion in arts and science. Soon, science of navigation was developed as it had never been before, Americas were discovered, looted and the resulting wealth further fuelled the growth of science. Through a cycle of unintended consequences, this explosion in scientific growth resulted in a more open society which, for the first time since the advent of Christianity, separated the Church and State. But still, religion was adamant.

A conscious change in the intellectual science of Europe was brought by the Enlightenment, the era of which Jane Austen and Charles Dickens were children of. There were no more witch burnings and public executions of heretics but still religion was important and governed the life
of most of the people. At the same time, the Enlightenment had made it possible to criticize religion, even if in hushed tones.iii In the works of Jane Austen, in Pride and Prejudice in particular, we find this criticism of Christianity in hushed tones.

Austen makes her criticism through a medium which she had mastered to perfection: characterization. She seldom made philosophical or ideological arguments directly. None of her characters engaged in ideological discussions. She made them speak through their behaviour and attitudes. The two characters through whom she makes her criticism of Christianity are: Mr. Collins and Mary Bennett.

“A pompous, generally idiotic clergyman who stands to inherit Mr. Bennet’s property. Mr. Collins’s own social status is nothing to brag about, but he takes great pains to let everyone and anyone know that Lady Catherine de Bourgh serves as his patroness. He is the worst combination of snobbish and obsequious.”iv

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. He is always preaching the Bennetts and pretty much everyone he chances upon the virtues of a Christian life. One of his favourite activities is to read from the Fordyce’s Sermon, also called as Sermons to Young Women, published in 1766. “Sermons to Young Women (1766), often called Fordyce’s Sermons, is a two-volume compendium of sermons compiled by James Fordyce, a Scottish clergyman, which were originally delivered by himself and others. Fordyce was considered an excellent orator, and his collection of sermons found a ready audience among English clergy and laity alike. It quickly became a staple of many Church and personal libraries.”v

It was a very pedantic work, which was often hard to follow and would be considered misogynistic and oppressive in today’s world. The fact that Mr. Collins likes to preach womanly virtues with the help of Fordyce’s sermons makes him an unpopular choice among women and the wider society in general. This activity goes perfectly well with his background as a clergyman as the Bible has a very low opinion of women in general. In Genesis, we read that woman was made from the rib of Adam, as an afterthought and for his entertainment. The very institution of misogyny is fundamental to Christianity and the Bible. Women are instructed in the Bible to accept their inferior role to men. They are also encouraged to be ashamed of themselves. The Bible is full of such quotes. From the New Testament we find "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church. . . ." (Ephesians 5:22–23) and "These [redeemed] are they which were not defiled with women; . . ." (Revelation 14:4); and from the Old Testament we find "How then can man be justified with God? Or how can he be clean that is born of a woman?" (Job 25:4) Other relevant New Testament passages include Colossians 3:18; 1 Peter 3:7; 1 Corinthians 11:3, 11:9, and 14:34; and 1 Timothy 2:11–12 and 5:5–6. Other Old Testament passages include Numbers 5:20–22 and Leviticus 12:2–5 and 15:17–33.vi
This institution is reinforced by the Doctors of the Church. Here is one quote from the Church Father Tertullian: “In pain shall you bring forth children, woman, and you shall turn to your husband and he shall rule over you. And do you not know that you are Eve? God's sentence hangs still over all your sex and His punishment weighs down upon you. You are the devil's gateway; you are she who first violated the forbidden tree and broke the law of God. It was you who coaxed your way around him whom the devil had not the force to attack. With what ease you shattered that image of God: Man! Because of the death you merited, even the Son of God had to die. . . Woman, you are the gate to hell.”

He is idiotic in general and is in complete awe of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, just because she belongs to the right aristocratic family, a remnant of the medieval feudal society. He is in utter snobbishness when he interacts with other people who are not of high birth and who are not rich or religious. He is downright insulting sometimes, even while he is making a marriage proposal to Elizabeth:

“My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish; secondly, that I am convinced that it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly—which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness. […] Thus much for my general intention in favour of matrimony; it remains to be told why my views were directed towards Longbourn instead of my own neighbourhood, where I can assure you there are many amiable young women. But the fact is, that being, as I am, to inherit this estate after the death of your honoured father (who, however, may live many years longer), I could not satisfy myself without resolving to choose a wife from among his daughters, that the loss to them might be as little as possible, when the melancholy event takes place—which, however, as I have already said, may not be for several years. This has been my motive, my fair cousin, and I flatter myself it will not sink me in your esteem. And now nothing remains for me but to assure you in the most animated language of the violence of my affection. To fortune I am perfectly indifferent, and shall make no demand of that nature on your father, since I am well aware that it could not be complied with; and that one thousand pounds in the four per cents, which will not be yours till after your mother's decease, is all that you may ever be entitled to. On that head, therefore, I shall be uniformly silent; and you may assure yourself that no ungenerous reproach shall ever pass my lips when we are married.”

Austen could have invested him with some good virtues or could have distributed the irksome qualities in other non-religious characters, but she chooses to invest the most religious character with the most ridiculous and irritating qualities. It tells of her disapproval of religion in general.

Another character which is religious and which is unlikeable is Mary Bennett, one of the least developed characters of Pride and Prejudice, and for good reason. She is ‘virtuous’ in the
Christian sense, reads her Bible daily and all the necessary texts recommended for the virtuous life of a woman. She always preaches everyone about the Christian virtue and is constantly snubbed and ignored.

“The middle Bennet sister, Mary, is strangely solemn and pedantic. She dislikes going out into society and prefers to spend her time studying. In conversation, Mary constantly makes awkward and profound observations about human nature and life in general. Some critics believe Mary was a cipher for Austen herself.”\textsuperscript{xix}

An example of her pompous judgments of others is: “Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this useful lesson: that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable; that one false step involves her in endless ruin; that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful; and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behaviour towards the undeserving of the other sex.”\textsuperscript{xv}

Just like Mr. Collins, there is little in Mary to like. But she is politely ignored by the rest of the society, the society which is not religious at all. Apart from these caricatures of religious characters, there is little mention of religion in Pride and Prejudice. Religion, missionary calling, religious philanthropy and other such sentiments do not find mention in Pride and Prejudice. The only indirect mention that religion finds is negative. From this, one can conclude that Austen though little of religion beyond its ceremonial value and her characters led a practically secular life with scarcely a mention of the metaphysical.

REFERENCES

\textsuperscript{4} www.sparknotes
\textsuperscript{5} www.wikipedia.org/
\textsuperscript{vi} The Holy Bible. RHUS Edition. 1991.
\textsuperscript{vii} Tertullian, “the father of Latin Christianity” (c160-225)
\textsuperscript{ix} www.gradesaver.com/