

CONTEXT TALK: CHURCH OF ENGLAND CLERGY IN JANE AUSTEN'S ENGLAND



"ALMA MATER."

Dated 1857 (Punch):

Young Punccheonby "cuts" the army, and goes to Oxford to read for "The Church."

Tutor. "You are prepared to Subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles —"

Punccheonby (with alacrity). "Am 'th please 'ah, — ah — how mu-ch —"

Punch here mocks the religious commitment — and here also, knowledge — of some clergy in the Established Church.

Picture & Text: Victorianweb.org

Outline for Talk:

- I. "The Church" = "Church of England"
- II. Jane Austen's Connection to the Church
- III. Church as a Profession
- IV. Clergy Revenues
- V. Conclusion

Benefices in the Church of England*:

- Church authorities: 2, 500
- Oxford and Cambridge colleges and important public schools: 600
- King or Queen: 1,100
- Private Citizens: 5,500

(A Few) Key Terms*:

- **A Rector** was the priest of a church in a parish that was self-supporting.
- **The Vicar** would be in a church in a parish that was **not** self-supporting.
- **The Curate** could be hired by a clergyman to assist him with the overwhelming duties of a large parish or, more frequently in this period, to serve in his place as resident clergyman for the parish.¹

For Discussion:

1. Read this passage, followed by Edward's response:

"I think, Edward," said Mrs. Dashwood, as they were at breakfast the last morning, "you would be a happier man if you had any profession to engage your time and give an interest to your plans and actions. Some inconvenience to your friends, indeed, might result from it—you would not be able to give them so much of your time. But" (with a smile) "you would be materially benefited in one particular at least—you would know where to go when you left them."

(Chapter 19)

¹For more on Jane Austen's connection with the Anglican church and religion, see: Collins, Irene. *Jane Austen and the Clergy*; Giffin, Michael. *Jane Austen and Religion: Salvation and Society in Georgian England*, "Jane Austen's Clerical Characters," "Jane Austen's Religious Imagination: A Balance of Reason and Feeling"; *Melnyk, Julie. *Victorian Religion: Faith and Life in Britain, 1829-1901*; White, Laura Mooneyham. *Jane Austen's Anglicanism*.

- How do we read Edward's response to his sister's statement? Is there much to be desired in a man destined for the church who admits that: "But unfortunately my own nicety and the nicety of my friends, have made me what I am, an idle, helpless being"? Or can we read him in a better light since he has chosen this profession (in spite of his family's disapproval)?
2. Read the following two passages where Lucy Steele discusses with Elinor Dashwood how she desires that her fiancé Edward Ferrars should find a living...and soon!

"...I dare say you have seen enough of Edward to know that he would prefer the church to every other profession. Now, my plan is that he should take orders as soon as he can, and then through your interest, which I am sure you would be kind enough to use out of friendship for him, and, I hope, out of some regard to me, your brother might be persuaded to give him Norland living; which I understand is a very good one, and the present incumbent not likely to live a great while. That would be enough for us to marry upon, and we might trust to time and chance for the rest." (Chapter 24)

"...Edward have got some business at Oxford, he says, so he must go there for a time: and after that, as soon as he can light upon a bishop, he will be ordained. I wonder what curacy he will get!—Good gracious!" (giggling as she spoke) "I'd lay my life I know what my cousins will say, when they hear of it. They will tell me I should write to the Doctor, to get Edward the curacy of his new living. I know they will; but I am sure I would do no such a thing for all the world.—'La! I shall say directly, I wonder how you could think of such a thing. I write to the Doctor, indeed!" (Chapter 38)
 - In light of today's context talk, can we better sympathize with Lucy's maneuvering for her fiancé? Why does Austen present Lucy doing this "behind-the-scenes" work but we never see Edward engaging in the same type of behavior?
 3. Read the following exchange between Colonel Braddon and Elinor that begins with these lines (read through the end of the chapter): *"The cruelty, the impolitic cruelty," [Colonel Braddon] replied, with great feeling, "of dividing, or attempting to divide, two young people long attached to each other, is terrible..."* (Chapter 39)
 - Does Colonel Braddon's decision to give Edward the living at his disposal seem rather careless (after all, he barely knows the young clergyman)? Do we really believe Elinor's response to her brother's baffled queries on the subject that "[the Colonel's motive for giving the living to Edward was] to be of use to [him]"? (Chapter 41)
 - Michael Giffin argues that, "[Edward being at odds with worldly values] in choosing to be true to his principles over his earthly happiness," [i.e. remaining engaged to Lucy despite external social pressures] makes him a good clergyman. Do we agree or disagree with Giffin's assessment here?
 4. As Colonel Braddon made clear in the above passage, the living that he offers to Edward is not enough to support a wife and, as Mrs. Jennings' puts it, "[Edward and Lucy] will have a child every year! and Lord help 'em! how poor they will be!" (Chapter 38). Yet, Austen writes at the end of the book: *"With an income quite sufficient to their wants thus secured to them, they [Elinor and Edward] had nothing to wait for after Edward was in possession of the living, but the readiness of the house, to which Colonel Brandon, with an eager desire for the accommodation of Elinor, was making considerable improvements; and after waiting some time for their completion..."*
 - Is this simply a case of the patronage system at work? How do we read Colonel Braddon's treatment of Lucy/Edward versus Elinor/Edward?

5. Based upon the historical context described in today's context talk, why or why not will Elinor make a good clergyman's wife?