THE PROTESTANTISM OF THE ABBÉ PRÉVOST*

BERENICE COOPER
Wisconsin State College, Superior

André Chamson of the French Academy writes the preface to the latest biography of the Abbé Prévost by Claire-Eliane Engel. He begins by telling the rather sensational legend about the Abbé’s death. Prévost, it is said, was walking in the forest of Chantilly when he was stricken with apoplexy. There he was found by peasants who carried the body to the priest of a nearby village. Since the cause of death was uncertain and some persons suspected foul play, a surgeon began at once to perform an autopsy upon the supposed corpse. Suddenly the surgeon and his assistants were startled by a horrible cry. The corpse came to life. Unfortunately, the autopsy had proceeded so far that the Abbé actually did die soon after his brief return to life.

M. Chamson uses this story to make the analogy that the author of this latest biography of Prévost, *Le Véritable Abbé Prévost*, has chosen for her subject, not a cadaver, but a man very much alive through his great work *Manon Lescaut*.¹ For me, also, Prévost is very much alive, but he lives for me through his novel *Cleveland*. The true Abbé Prévost is for me not exactly the same person whom Miss Engel presents. Her portrait is for me only a partial one which needs to be completed by a study of Prévost’s later novel, *Le Philosophe anglais*, or *Cleveland*, as it is usually called, the story of the search for a satisfactory philosophy of life by the English philosopher Cleveland.

Miss Engel’s recent biography enlarges upon an interpretation of Prévost which she presented in a 1952 article, “La Vie secrète de l’Abbé Prévost.”² Here she argued that in 1728, just before he fled from the Benedictine order to six years of exile in Holland and England, he was a convert to Protestantism. Part of her evidence is drawn from letters she has discovered. Except for some minor reservations,³ I can accept the conclusions she draws from these letters. It is consistent with earlier events in the Abbé’s life that he may have been a proselyte at that time. He had been a Jesuit, had twice escaped from that order, been twice forgiven and reinstated

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³ Note her explanation that the reference to “Dom Prévost et il s’appelle de l’Isle-bourg,” may be an error for Prévost d’Exilès. Ibid., pp. 262–293.
before he fled again and later entered the Benedictine order, taking
his vows, he himself says, with mental reservations that would
justify breaking these vows later.

My real difference with Miss Engel's conclusions in her 1952
article concerns her use of passages from Cleveland as evidence that
Prévost was a convert to Protestantism. She fails to consider the
context of these passages and their relation to the purpose and the
structure of the whole novel.¹ The purpose of this paper is to dis-
cuss these passages in relation to the question of Prévost's Protes-
tantism and to consider the theme, plot structure, and tone of the
novel as further evidence toward reaching a conclusion as to Prév-
ost's attitude toward Protestantism, an important consideration in
any complete evaluation of his character and work.

In her recent critical biography, Le Véritable Abbé Prévost, Miss
Engel finds the real Abbé to be an extremely unstable person.² Near
the end of her book, she summarizes what she feels are his intel-
lectual deficiencies:

Une seule croyance reste inébranlable chez Prévost: sa foi en la bonté
de la nature. On peut se demander si cette idée enracinée en lui n'est pas
l'unique dogme auquel il finisse par rattacher sa vie spirituelle. La
philosophie pure ne l'a jamais tenté. Sa religion n'est qu'une morale,
qui ne le lie pas. Il discute la religion, toutes les religions, en se flan-
geant aveuglément la raison humaine, la sienne. Les croyances orthodoxes se
concilient chez lui, avec une aisance extraordinaire, avec des opinions
religieuses à la fois avancées et timides. Une nécessité intellectuelle ne lie
pas jamais. D'où son arrogance sur certains points, ses crises de certitude
et ses refus soudains de prolonger une recherche ou d'en admettre les
résultats. Lorsque l'intuition sentimentale lui fait défaut, il sombre dans
l'incohérence. Toute spéculation abstraite se révèle contraire à sa nature
profonde, le rebute et éveille sa sensibilité. La culte du vrai et de l'utile
amène Prévost à révéler avec complaisance et souvent avec génie une âme
bien curieuse: la sienne.³

Like nearly all the biographers and critics who have preceded
her, Miss Engel praises the Abbé's contribution to the sentimental
novel and the emotional power of his masterpiece, Manon Lescaut.

There is plenty of evidence to support this estimate, but I main-
tain that it is only a partial estimate and that Miss Engel ignores
qualities of the real Abbé Prévost which are revealed by a study of
his novel Cleveland. Prévost's statement of his purpose and his plan
for the novel, the structure of the plot, and the intellectual content
of the story show Prévost as an author who has a deep concern for
the intellectual life of his period, as a man who is attracted, not
repelled by philosophical speculation.

¹Ibid., pp. 299-210.
²Le Véritable Abbé Prévost, p. 46.
³Ibid., pp. 282-283.
Of the biographers and critics who have written on Prévost, only Franz Pauli has given a detailed analysis of the intellectual content of Cleveland. Even such an authority as Gustav Lanson, writing on the revolt against orthodoxy in the France of 1700–1750, groups Prévost with Marivaux and Piron among those early eighteenth century writers who were unaffected by the violent religious and philosophical controversies of their time.

It seems strange that nearly all critics have ignored the several pieces of evidence in the case of Cleveland that the author was much concerned with religious and philosophical controversy, that in spite of that side of his nature which responded to the call of the world and to the sensuous and sentimental, there was another side of his nature which has never been adequately recognized.

Important pieces of evidence for such a revised estimate of the true character of Prévost are his defense of his purpose in writing Cleveland, his statement that his views are the same as his hero’s, the structure of the plot, the content and tone of the narrative.

Prévost has made a clear statement of the theme of Cleveland. After the publication of the first four volumes (1731–32), he published an answer to the criticism that the novel was deistic in which he stated that his purpose was to show that peace of mind and true wisdom came only through religion. This defense he republished in the preface to the continuation volume of 1738. He had said in an earlier preface that his views so closely resembled Cleveland’s that their minds might be said to be cast in the same mold.

An examination of the plot structure and content of Cleveland supports Prévost’s statement of the theme and indicates an author who is concerned with religious and philosophical controversy. The views of the hero of the novel, with which the author says he agrees, are not those of a man repelled by philosophical speculation. Without minimizing the evidence for the sentimental aspects of the many-sided character of Prévost, a careful reading of Cleveland supports the contention that the usual estimate of the author’s character and interests needs to be revised and enlarged.

The reader who looks beneath the superficial plot of melodrama and sentiment finds in Cleveland a novel of ideas. The fundamental theme, obscured by the intrigue and adventure of the typical eighteenth century novel, is the hero’s search for a religious faith that is rational in its basis. The conclusion of the search is the rec-

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7 Franz Pauli, Die Philosophischen Grundanschauungen in den Romanen des Abbé Prévost im Besonderen in der Manon Lescaut, Marburg, 1912.
ognition that man has need for both intellectual and emotional satisfaction. The structure of the plot is broken into five stages

1. The period of Cleveland's faith in natural philosophy, of which the fundamental doctrine is Stoical, that the passions are responsible for all evil and that man could be happy if he could overcome the passions by the use of reason.

2. The period of disillusionment with natural philosophy because it fails to bring strength to bear great sorrow.

3. The examination of orthodox religions, all of which fail because they do not meet Cleveland's standards of rationalism.

4. A period of alliance with a group of French philosophes who are influenced by Hobbes' materialism.

5. The conversion to "true religion" which reconciles rational philosophy with religious faith, or as Cleveland puts it, shows that natural law needs to be supplemented by the law of grace.

Such a plan for a novel is scarcely evidence that Prévost was not concerned, as Lanson has stated, with the controversial matters in the philosophy and religion of his period, or, as Miss Engel has stated, that he becomes incoherent when sentimental intuition fails him and is repelled by philosophical speculations. In fact so many pages of Cleveland are given to long discussions of philosophical and religious controversies that a sort of Reader's Digest condensed novel was published in 1788, which omitted all pages of intellectual discussion and gave the reader only the melodramatic story of Cleveland's adventures in England, America, and France.

Cleveland's natural philosophy is summarized and the deistic religion, which he taught to a tribe of American Indians during his period of rationalism, is explained in detail. In his period of disillusionment, he carefully analyzes his former views to see if he can find any flaw in them. He finds no logical flaw, only their failure to bring comfort in his time of great sorrow. When, to please two members of his household, he listens to the views of both a Protestant clergyman and a Catholic priest, the conversations and expositions are painstakingly recorded. The philosophes are treated at less length. But the resolution of the conflict between rationalism and religious faith through Cleveland's conversion to a religion that satisfies his reason and gives him a comforting faith, produces pages of discussion of philosophy and religion.

This emphasis upon the religious and philosophical controversies of the early eighteenth century does not support Miss Engel's conclusion that pure philosophy never holds Prévost, that abstract speculation is contrary to his nature, that it repels him. This novel
of ideas presents a side of Prévost’s character which is a part of any just estimate of Prévost. The real Abbé Prévost is more than a sentimentalist.

Another point upon which I disagree with Miss Engel’s interpretation is her use of Cleveland’s conversations with the Protestant minister as evidence for Prévost’s being a convert to Protestantism. The speech of Minister C., says Miss Engel, could have been written only by a Protestant.11

Here, I feel, Miss Engel has lifted the words of Minister C. out of the context of the novel and has not considered the manifest theme of the novel, the contribution of this conversation to the development of the theme, and the satirical tone of all the incidents concerning Cleveland’s investigation of orthodoxy. Miss Engel states that Cleveland sends for the Protestant clergyman,12 but Cleveland says that his sister-in-law and his friend Mme. Lallin were so concerned over his depression and his attempt at suicide that they arranged to distract his mind by conversations with some of the intellectuals residing in Saumur. Since Mrs. Bridge, the sister-in-law, was a Protestant and Mme. Lallin was a Catholic, Cleveland agreed to discuss religion with both the Protestant Minister C. and the Jansenist priest Father LeBane.13

These conversations about orthodox religion are a contribution to the third step in the evolution of Cleveland’s ideas from natural philosophy and deistical religious belief toward the “true religion” which he finally accepts. The theme of the search for a satisfying religion is worked out by a plan of eliminating one by one the views that either fail to satisfy his reason or to meet the needs of his heart after he has suffered great personal loss. The conversations with Minister C., with Father Le Bane, and later with a member of the Jesuit order are all parts of the eliminating process in the search for the truth.

The tone of Cleveland’s comments in introducing these conversations is satirical. On the matter of the many Protestant sects, he says that sectarian differences have hitherto prevented him from examining orthodox religion. If the total number of religious sects were reduced to fifty, each one would consider the other forty-nine in error and itself the sole possessor of the truth. Where, he asks, can I find light enough to discover which one does possess the truth?

Supposons, avois-je dit, que le nombre de toutes les Sectes se réduise à cinquante. Il n’y en a pas une seule qui ne condamne toutes les autres, & qui ne se croye seule en possession du vrai culte. Mais les quarante-neuf autres, qui s’ attribuent le même avantage, la condamnent aussi. Si je les interroge séparément, ou toutes ensemble, je trouve toujours quarante-

12 Ibid., p. 209.
neuf voix, qui sont contraires à chacune, et une seule voix qui lui est favorable: encore n’est-ce que sa propre voix. J’ai donc toujours quarante-neuf motifs contre un, pour les rejeter toutes, & les croire fausses sans exception. Je veux néanmoins supposer encore qu’il n’y ait que quarante-neuf Sectes dans l’erreur, ce qui est absolument nécessaire, s’il est vrai qu’il y en ait une qui n’y soit point: Suis-je plus avancé après cette supposition? Où trouverai-je assez de lumieres pour démêler celle qui possède le précieux trésor de la vérité?24

As Cleveland has anticipated, both the Protestant Minister C. and the Catholic Father Le Bane attempt to demonstrate that his church represents the only true religion.

Cleveland finds that the Catholics look upon the Protestants as rebels who have risen against a good king, a king who ruled with a code of laws that had for its purpose the happiness of all people. This rebellion was incited by obscure persons motivated either by resentment or a love of change. On the other hand, the Protestants regard themselves as patriots who have put down a usurper, one who overthrew the legitimate king, instituted new laws, and denied the people the right to read the laws of the legitimate king.16

Both Catholic and Protestants lack logical proofs for their views, Cleveland thinks. He says of the Protestant minister that “his system seemed reasonable enough to make me wish he were able to support it with some solid proofs.”

... son Système parut assez raisonnable pour me faire souhaiter qu’il pût l’appuyer dans la suite par des preuves solides.36

After talking with the Jansenist, Cleveland remarks that since he had never been disposed to believe without proofs, it would take something less general to persuade him.

Cependant comme je n’étais pas disposé à croire sans preuves, je lui fis connaître qu’il fallait quelque chose de moins général pour me persuader.37

He later characterizes the picture he received of orthodox religion as “sad and repulsive.”18

The tone throughout the novel is equally satirical and objective whether the orthodox views are Protestant or Catholic.

Satire of the Protestants is introduced even before the conversations on orthodox theology by incidents and characterization. Cleveland is the natural son of Oliver Cromwell, who abandoned his mistress, Elizabeth Cleveland; and it is his malicious plotting against the lives of Cleveland and his mother that initiates the action in the

24 Ibid., pp. 75-76.
25 Ibid., pp. 82-86; 88-91.
26 Ibid., p. 86.
27 Ibid., p. 86.
28 Ibid. (Rouen: Racine, 1785), VIII, 205. It is necessary to refer to a different edition for this passage as the last volume of the 1739–38 continuation volumes is missing.
superficial melodramatic plot. Bridge, another illegitimate son of Cromwell, has an experience in the Protestant colony on St. Helena which shows the Protestant minister of the group to be one of the most bigoted and cruel of men.

In satirizing the Catholics, Prévost is just as severe. Because Cleveland becomes confused by listening alternately to Catholic and Protestant dogma, he decides to hear all Minister C. has to say and then to listen to Father Le Bane’s counter-arguments. When the Catholic hears this decision, he takes action. Cleveland receives a lettre de cachet and with his two sons is made a prisoner by the church. The reason given him is that he has showed so great an interest in religion that the church wants him to receive correct instruction. Standing on his rights as a British citizen and appealing to the British-born Duchess d’Orléans, Cleveland gets his freedom.

Then, through the Duchess, Cleveland is introduced to a worldly Jesuit who, the Duchess assures him, will give him a cheerful view of religion. A series of episodes here satirize this Jesuit. He recommends light reading and falling in love as a cure for Cleveland’s melancholy. With convenient casuistry, he persuades the Catholic Mme. Lallin to betray Cleveland’s plan to escape to England. (These passages and all passages satirical of the Catholic religion were amended or omitted in the censored editions of 1757–1785)

The relation of Cleveland’s examination of orthodox religion to the theme and structure of the whole novel argues rather for an objective disapproval of all bigotry and dogmatism and any kind of narrow sectarianism than for a sympathetic attitude toward Protestantism on the part of Prévost. It may indeed be true that he was for a period a proselyte to Protestantism but the content and tone of Cleveland is such that it is difficult to accept Miss Engel’s argument that the speech of the Protestant Minister C. could have been written only by a Protestant. In relation to the development of the plan for the whole novel, the conversation with Minister C. appears to be one incident of several which reveal the weakness of orthodoxy.

To the satire of orthodox religion, both Catholic and Protestant, should be added a passage lamenting the divisions of religious people into sects separated by narrow dogmatism; this passage occurs at the end of the story of Cleveland’s conversion and was omitted from the censored editions published between 1757 and 1785.

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19 Ibid., (Neaulme, 1788), V. 92-94: 102.
20 Ibid., pp. 102-108.
21 Ibid., pp. 257-289.
Je tremble néanmoins que ce ne soit faire tort à la religion que d'en resserrer les éléments dans les bornes si étroites. ... J'ajoute que, n'étant encore qu'à l'entrée de la Foi, je ne pouvais être arrêté par la concurrence de quelques Religions monstrueuses qui sont opprobre de la Raison; et quand mon objection aurait eu quelque force, ce ne pouvait être qu'à l'égard des différentes sectes qui partagent le Christianisme.24

These passages are representative of many others which deal with the principal religious and philosophical controversies in the thought of the early eighteenth century. On the one hand is the rationalism of natural religion; on the other, the supernaturalism of the revealed religion of orthodoxy.

An analysis of the "true religion" to which Cleveland is converted shows that he resolves the conflict by accepting the best in each but without becoming a convert to any orthodox church.25 He appears to have no connection with any organized group. He is converted by a layman, Lord Clarendon, who at this time is living in exile in France. There is no mention of any clergyman or any church. Orthodox ideas such as a conviction of sin, salvation through repentance and the vicarious sacrifice of Christ, the sacraments of baptism and communion play no part in the discussions of this "true religion." Conversion seems to be an individual matter of intellectual acceptance of the fact that man needs supernatural help in order to lead a good life and to bear the sorrows that are a part of life.

Cleveland discovers that his earlier views are incomplete and need to be supplemented, although they are consistent with his new views and have prepared the way for them.

... sans abandonner l'étude de la nature, dont je n'avais guère moins de fruits à tirer pour les mêmes vues, puisqu'à des yeux bien éclairés par le Religion l'ordre naturel se raporte à Dieu comme celui de la grace ... cette disposition, dans laquelle il [le Chrétien] est soutenu par les secours intérieurs de la Religion, lui fait conserver cette paix & cette égalité d'âme dont la seule Philosophie ne donne que l'ombre, & qui est déjà comme une anticipation de bonheur auquel il aspire.26

Again, I can partially agree with Miss Engel, for she says that Cleveland almost returns to his first position of rationalism.27

But she does not note that Cleveland has reconciled the differences between rational philosophy and revealed religion, that he is in agreement with many English and French rational theologians of his period in maintaining that a true religion can stand the tests of the rational point of view.

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24 Ibid., p. 187.
26 Le Philosophe anglais (Rouen: Racine, 1785), VIII, 213–214; 215.
Cleveland's unorthodox religion retains his earlier beliefs that the reason must be satisfied, that love of God and of fellow men, regard for principles of justice, and a high standard of ethics are more important than dogma. But I can not agree with Miss Engel that this is a reconciliation of orthodox views with religious opinions that are at the same time advanced and timid, a reconciliation attained with extraordinary ease. A reconciliation of conflicting views which has been attained through years of search for a satisfying faith that will meet the needs of both head and heart, has not been easily attained.

In using Cleveland's final statement of his religious views as evidence for a fairer estimate of the character of the real Abbé Prévost, it is important to remember these words from the author's preface to the novel:

Je trouvais en effet de rapport entre les inclinations de Mr. Cleveland & les miennes, tant de ressemblance dans notre maniere de penser & dans nos sentiments, que je confessai au Fils, que je me l'étois reconnu dans les traits de son Pere, & que nos coeurs, si l'on me permet cette expression, étoient de meme trempé & sortis de même moule.

An examination of the principles of this "true religion" shows that they are more advanced in tolerance and breadth of ideas than is the dogmatic sectarian religion of orthodoxy, but the satire of orthodoxy which precedes Cleveland's conversion is far from timid.

The story of his examination of Protestant and Catholic orthodoxy occurs in the volumes published in 1731–32 when Prévost was an exile from France and the church. The story of Cleveland's conversion concludes the continuation volumes of 1736–38, published after Prévost's reconciliation with the church and the Benedictine order in 1734.

The satire of the Jesuits in these continuation volumes is milder and more tolerant in tone than the previous satire of orthodoxy, but the tone is not timid; it is mildly amused over the inconsistencies of human beings and it accepts the fact that there are great differences of opinion in matters of religion; it is the tone of a man who views life as it is, not as it ought to be. As mentioned above, Cleveland still regrets the many sectarian divisions among religious people.

In his fairly detailed summary of the principles of his new religion, Cleveland arranges in order of rank according to importance

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27 Ibid.
28 Le Philosophe anglais (Utrecht: Nealeme, 1736), I, iii–iv. The explanation of the reference to Cleveland's son is that Prévost first represented the novel to be the memoirs of an actual person, Mr. Cleveland, published from a manuscript obtained from his son.
30 See footnote 23.
the desires of his heart and the duties and pleasures of life: first, love of God and heavenly things; then, in order of descending importance, religious duties, love for his wife, duties toward friends and society, study of the Bible without abandoning the study of nature, and last the moderate use of pleasures of the world. He stresses moderation in the use of pleasure and condemns absolute withdrawal from the world, although he does not specifically mention monastic life in his condemnation of such withdrawal as excessive zeal, and a fanaticism which wounds religion as well as nature.21

These views are closer to Deism than to orthodox Protestantism. They are very far from Catholicism, and it is interesting to note that Cleveland’s wife has been converted to Catholicism, that before his own conversion Cleveland envied his wife the comfort she drew from her religion; also it is interesting that his wife shows no zeal for converting Cleveland to Catholicism and seems to approve of and agree with many of the ideas of his “true religion” after his conversion. In this respect the narrative is an example of the principle of tolerance.

Cleveland’s religion has much in common with the views of various free-thought groups of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In the emphasis upon belief in God with no mention of Christ or of any Trinitarian ideas, this religion has the characteristics of Unitarianism which was influencing thought in Europe and England during this period. English Latitudinarians would agree with Cleveland’s emphasis upon beliefs fundamental to all religions and his disregard for sectarian creeds.

On the basis of the principles of Cleveland’s religion, with which Prévost states he agrees, on the basis of the theme of the novel as stated in the preface and the structure of the plot which consistently supports this theme, and on the basis of the tone toward orthodoxy, the conclusion offered by this paper is that Prévost was a protestant without the capital letter. He protested narrowness and unreasonable views in matters of religion. He protested the intolerance and bigotry of those who called themselves religious leaders. He protested pure materialism and an exclusively rational philosophy. He asserted that both reason and emotion must be the basis of any satisfactory religion.

For the reader who will consider the integration of theme, structure, intellectual content, and tone of the novel Cleveland, there is evidence that the Abbé Prévost was not only a master of the sentimental novel, but a writer so deeply concerned with the issues in the intellectual controversies of his time that he wrote a coherent

21 Le Philosophe anglais (Rouen: Rouen, 1785), VIII, 213–214.
argument for a religion purified from the corruption of narrow dogmatism. The novel *Cleveland* emphasizes ethical living rather than orthodox creed as the basis of true religion.

The evidence presented in this paper is only a small part of the evidence which exists in the bibliographical history of Cleveland, in the structure, and in the content of this novel to support the thesis that a complete portrait of Prévost and a fair estimate of his work recognizes his contribution to the intellectual history of his time. From an examination of the novel *Cleveland*, this reader cannot accept a characterization of the author as a shallow thinker to whom abstract speculation is repulsive.