THE RELIGIOUS CONVICTIONS OF THE ABBÉ PRÉVOST

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Information about the Abbé Prévost is limited even for the scholar, and for the average reader who is not curious about Ph.D. dissertations and the publications of learned societies, or who does not read French or German with ease, there is practically nothing.

Of course, opera-lovers are aware that the librettos of Puccini’s Manon and of Massenet’s Manon Lescaut are based upon a sentimental novel by Antoine François Prévost, and students of French literature know the abbé as an eighteenth-century novelist, who in addition to Manon Lescaut, wrote a number of long-winded and seldom-read romances and translated the novels of Richardson into French. Histories of French literature give a few pages to Prévost as a sentimental novelist and as a journalist who by his Pour et Contre sought to promote better Anglo-French relations in literature. Encyclopedias, except for the Roman Catholic Encyclopedia, give a brief sketch of his work and of his life.

But this scant recognition is accorded him only as a writer of romances, a translator, and a journalist. His contribution to the history of religious toleration and to the development of religious liberalism has been almost entirely ignored. Those few scholars who have written about Prévost in connection with the religious and philosophical controversies of his time, have connected him with Jansenism, partly on the basis of a few passages in Manon Lescaut and partly on the basis of his quarrels with the Jesuits.¹ All critical evaluations have failed to consider the more important evidence of his later work, Le Philosophe anglais,² and they

² It should be noted in justice to both Hazard and Lasserre that they have pointed out the fact that Prévost revised a passage on grace in the 1753 edition of Manon Lescaut, ten years after he had completed Le Philosophe anglais, and that Professor Hazard in his paper “Un romantique de 1730: l’Abbé Prévost,” Harvard Tercentenary Publications: Authority and the Individual (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), says, “Il hésite; quelquesfois il est pour les accommodements qui rendent moins penible la voie du salut, comme les Jesuits;
have misinterpreted his quarrel with the Jesuits as indicating that he sympathized with their enemies.

A careful reading of Le Philosophe anglais will show that the satire of the Jesuits in this novel is a consistent part of a book which has for its purpose the exposure of narrow sectarianism, bigotry, and casuistic interpretation of dogma both Protestant and Catholic. Jansenists and Protestants come off no better than do Jesuits when judged by Cleveland’s standards for what he designates as “true religion”: that it must satisfy his reason, that it must be consistent with principles of love and justice toward fellow-men, and that it must furnish strength and comfort in time of sorrow.³

Since Prévost states in the preface to Le Philosophe anglais that his own opinions are identical with those of Cleveland,⁴ this novel becomes important in any estimate of the author’s character and religious convictions. Furthermore, it was written over a period of six or seven years when Prévost was resolving the conflict in his own mind, and although the first part was published soon after the publication of Manon Lescaut, the second part, containing the clear statement of Cleveland’s religious views, was not published until 1738–39, four and five years after Prévost apparently had resolved the conflict in his own opinions.

To understand the significance of Le Philosophe anglais as an expression of the religious convictions of Prévost, one should first look at the relation of the writing and the publication of the novel to the story of the early life of the author. The biography of Antoine François Prévost d’Exiles is a drama of intense religious conflict finally resolved by reconciliation with the church and the order which exiled him.

His life from the age of sixteen until his twenty-third year was a stormy conflict between the world and the cloister. Twice he ran away to the army from his novitiate in the Society of Jesus. After the Jesuits had forgiven him and taken him back the second time, he decided to enter the Benedictine order. We have his own words for it that he took his vows with mental reservations which he felt justified his breaking them later.⁵

After seven years as a Benedictine in various houses of that order, the abbé was at Saint-Maur where the discipline was especially strict, and he applied for papal permission to transfer to

quelquefois il pense, comme les Jansénistes . . .” p. 302. But Professor Hazard here as always when he writes of Prévost treats him as an instable person, not a serious thinker.

³ Le Philosophe anglais (Rouen: Racine, 1785), V, vii, 4–15.
⁴ Ibid. I. “Preface,” ii.
the less rigid discipline of the house at Cluny. Papal permission was slow in coming, although Prévost maintained that his superior deliberately kept the papal dispensation lying upon his desk after it arrived. Whatever may be the truth about that matter, the impatient Prévost fled to Holland and then to England, becoming for six years Prévost d'Exiles.

It was during his period of exile that he brought out the first four volumes of *Le Philosophe anglais ou histoire de Monsieur Cléleveland, fils naturel de Cromwel, écrit par lui-même, et traduite de l'anglois par l'auteur des Mémoires d'un homme de qualité*. The last four volumes were not published until 1738–39, after his return to the church in 1734, and the content of each of the two parts is related to the exile and to the reconciliation, if Prévost spoke sincerely in saying that his opinions agreed with Cleveland's.

This story of Mr. Cleveland Prévost attempted to represent as a true biography based upon a manuscript given him by Cleveland's son. He made so elaborate a pretense that he published an English translation of his French manuscript before the book came off the press. But during the controversies provoked by the publication of *Cleveland*, as the book is often called, he forgot his elaborate pretense and began to defend his purpose in writing *Le Philosophe anglais*.

The four volumes of 1731–32 tell the story of Cleveland's being educated by his mother in the principles of moral philosophy and natural religion, of the failure of this philosophy to endue his soul with strength sufficient to bear great sorrow, and of his disillusionment first with moral philosophy and natural religion and then with revealed religion as presented in turn by a Protestant minister, a Jansenist, and a Jesuit. No one of these representatives of organized religion comes off well during Cleveland's examination of what each group has to offer as a substitute for the views he has discarded.

Although Prévost is equally severe in his satire of the claims of each one, only the Jesuits seem to have expressed their resentment; the story of the exchange of letters with them is an inter-

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6 Harrisse says that friends urged him to apply for the transfer because the life at Cluny would permit him a kind of study suitable to his talents. *La Vie monastique de de l'abbé Prévost*, pp. 32–33.


8 The teachings of Elizabeth Cleveland are always designated as moral philosophy, and Cleveland all through the eight volumes refers to his opinions in his youth as "my philosophy." But he teaches a tribe of American Indians a natural religion and states several times in the novel that he believes in a Supreme Being, in loving his fellow-men, and in treating them with justice and kindness.
esting episode. Although the Bibliothéque Belge lamented the deistical tendencies of the novel, no protests from Jansenists or from Protestants are recorded in the material examined for this study.

The controversies about Prévost's satire of the Jesuits had scarcely died down before he became reconciled with the church and was received again into the Benedictine order with the stipulation that he perform a second novitiate. The remainder of his life was spent as an unattached abbé, most of the time as aumonier for Prince Conti. Apparently these obligations did not prevent his pursuing a literary career, for in addition to considerable translating, editing, and other literary work, he completed a novel, *Le Doyen du Killerin* and added four volumes to *Le Philosophe anglais*. It is in the preface to the 1738-39 volumes that he states that the purpose of the novel is to show that peace of mind can be found only through "true religion" and expresses surprise that any readers could feel that the book had done any harm to religion, and he explains at some length the plan of the book, that it shows the earlier views of Cleveland to be incomplete.11

The publication of these concluding volumes of Cleveland's story follows Prévost's resolution of the conflicts in his own religious life. His affirmation that the book represents his own views requires that any just estimate of his character take account of those volumes of *Le Philosophe anglais* which were published seven and eight years later than *Manon Lescaut* (1731) and which treat the conversion of Cleveland from a natural religion to a revealed religion.

The reader who will look beneath the superficialities that are typical of most eighteenth-century novels before 1740, can not fail to recognize that in *Le Philosophe anglais* the real theme is the conflict within the hero's mind between two philosophies of religious thought, naturalism and supernaturalism; and that the real action is not the shipwrecks, the wandering in the American wilderness, the political and love intrigues, the revenge and persecution episodes. These are only the backdrop for the drama of the evolution of the hero's progress from confidence in the power of moral philosophy and natural religion to a faith in a "true

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10 October, 1732, pp. 419-50.
11 This defense of the purpose of *Le Philosophe anglais* had already appeared as part of the preface to *Le Doyen Killerin* and when in 1738 Etienne Neaulme at Utrecht published volume six of *Le Philosophe anglais* (Neaulme's 1838 edition of the first part was five volumes instead of four) Prévost prefaced this continuation with an "Avertissement" incorporating the statement already published in the 1838 edition of *Le Doyen*. 
religion” that reconciles the best of naturalism with the best of supernaturalism.

Cleveland’s search throughout the long narrative is for peace of mind; the “true religion” which finally resolves all the conflicts in his intellectual and spiritual life is the outcome of a struggle in which the motivating forces are his experiences with the dominant philosophical and religious systems of the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries.

Prévost’s treatment of Cleveland’s reactions to these controversial ideas is one of the best sources of information on his own religious convictions since he has asserted that his ideas agree with Cleveland’s. To examine Le Philosophe anglais as such a source of information is the purpose of this paper.

Cleveland’s mother taught him a moral philosophy akin to Neo-Stoicism: happiness may be attained through the right emotions and the right ideas and through the solid principles of virtue and the constant rules of wisdom and reason. To live by these principles means educating the heart as well as the mind for irregular impulses, or passions, must be controlled. Cleveland says that if we could have on this earth men without passions, we would have a society of happy persons.\(^{12}\)

At one period in his early adventures, Cleveland lives among a friendly tribe of American Indians and teaches them a religion of nature similar to seventeenth-century Deism. It was this part of the book to which the reviewer in Bibliothèque Belge took exception.

Throughout his youth Cleveland finds this moral philosophy and natural religion adequate as a source of inner strength. Cromwell’s plots against his former mistress and her son, even the death of his mother, and a long series of misfortunes following that sad event do not shake the equanimity of Cleveland.

But when he is led by circumstantial evidence to believe that his beloved wife, Fanny, has eloped with his best friend, Gelin, Cleveland finds that moral philosophy has no comfort for him. He renounces it as sophism, an evil illusion, a false phantom which has failed to endue his soul with strength in time of greatest need. Re-examining his philosophy, he finds no logical flaws in it, but the fact remains that when the wound is to the tenderest affections of the human heart, moral philosophy has no consolation to offer; its power is limited. What Cleveland asks is a faith that can bring him comfort for sorrow and assure him peace of mind.

\(^{12}\) Le Philosophe anglais, I, 1, 43.
After denouncing philosophy for its failure, Cleveland plunges into a period of despair so dark that he is about to commit suicide and also to kill his two little sons in order to save them from such a horrible world as this; but the pleas of the children weaken his resolution, and he again learns that the heart is more powerful than reason, for his suicide had seemed perfectly logical to him. The logic of suicide is supported by Cleveland’s study of philosophy and constitutes another influence of Stoicism, since the Stoics approved suicide under certain circumstances. Cleveland also cites the examples of Cato, Demosthenes, Mithridates, and Mark Anthony as authority for suicide’s being consistent with virtue and wisdom.

The household of Cleveland is so alarmed by this frustrated desire for suicide that two women, Mrs. Bridge and Mme. Lallin, beg him to listen to the consolations of religion. Having discarded his old philosophy and natural religion, Cleveland has nothing to lose by an examination into what revealed religion has to offer, and he agrees (since Mrs. Bridge is a Protestant and Mme. Lallin, a Catholic) to listen to Minister C., a Protestant clergyman, and Father Le Bane, a Roman Catholic priest, who holds Jansenist views as it later transpires. Finding that listening to them alternately confuses him, Cleveland decides to hear the Protestant entirely through first and then to hear the Catholic faith expounded.

The Protestant proves to be a bigoted, intolerant man, who presents religion so that it seems to Cleveland dark and forbidding. The doctrines Minister C. expounds do not agree with Cleveland’s standards of love of fellowmen, justice, and reason.

Suddenly, before his conferences with Minister C. are concluded, Cleveland is served with a lettre de cachet and is taken to the house of the bishop of Angers, not as a prisoner, he is told, but as a guest; his children are put in a Catholic school and his niece in a convent. He learns that the Catholics, knowing that he was listening to a Protestant minister, think that his desire to receive religious instruction should be gratified, but that they wish him to receive sound instruction.

Cleveland happens to be an English citizen, and after demanding his rights and appealing to the king through the English-born Duchess Henriette, he is released.

Now if the Abbé Prévost had a strong Jansenist bias, it is impossible to think that he would use an episode like this, one in which the hero’s vigorous resentment of his treatment by the Jansenist ecclesiastics might be interpreted as representing the author’s opinion.\(^{13}\)

Neither can one argue on this basis that Prévost was partial to the Jesuits. One can sympathize with their objections to the characterization of Father Ruel, a Jesuit suggested by the Duchess Henriette as a good antidote for the sombre picture of religion given by Father Le Bane, the Jansenist.

Father Ruel advises Cleveland to fall in love as a means of curing his despair, and he introduces him to Cecile, with whom Cleveland does fall in love. This Jesuit is a casuist in religious philosophy and a treacherous intriguer; making use of information gathered in the confessional from Mme. Lallin, he plots against Cleveland's escape to England and from Roman Catholic influence.

But this episode in the story comes at the end of the volumes published in 1731–32, and the most important evidence of Prévost's religious convictions is found in that part of the novel that he completed after he had been reconciled with the church and the Benedictine order.

It is true that the Jesuits are treated with more consideration in the last four volumes. There are elaborate explanations in the preface regarding the use of a Jesuit as a character in the story. Cleveland visits his sons who are students in the Jesuit College de Louis-le-Grand, where they had been forcibly placed through Father Ruel's machinations. There Cleveland is impressed favorably with the Jesuits in charge, with the general conduct of the students, with the general atmosphere of the school, and with its prestige in France at a period when the order is being persecuted.14

Lord Clarendon, a Protestant, approves the college for the splendid training it gives, and makes a perhaps mildly satirical remark, that until children reach the age of reason and can think for themselves, it makes little difference what ideas of religion are presented to them.15

Father Ruel, killed during another misguided intrigue against Cleveland, repents and confesses that the motive for all he did was personal pride in making Cleveland a convert. Gelin, a once treacherous friend but now a convert and a Jesuit, becomes the devoted tutor of Cleveland's sons at the College de Louis-le-Grand.16

Cleveland's wife, with whom he is reunited after charges based upon circumstantial evidence have been refuted, becomes a devout Catholic, and her father confessor is characterized sym-

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14 Ibid. VII, xii, 164.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid. VIII, xv, 230.
pathetically by the author, although there are a few sly bits of

good-humored satire about his zeal to make converts.\textsuperscript{17} Cecile,

who has been discovered to be Cleveland’s daughter lost in her

infancy and mourned as dead, becomes a convert to Catholicism,

although she has been reared a Protestant by her foster parents.

Hers is a death-bed conversion. Cleveland respects the religion

of his wife and envies her the consolation which she derives from

it at the time of their mutual bereavement.

Still searching for peace of mind and a religion that will sat-

sify his reason as well as comfort his heart, Cleveland has made

in the meantime a brief investigation of the philosophy of mate-

rialism as taught by Hobbes and kept alive in France by a group of

philosophes whose experiments only convince Cleveland that it is

best to recognize the limitations of human intelligence.\textsuperscript{18}

Finally Cleveland’s conversion to a fully satisfying faith is

accomplished by Lord Clarendon, to whom he turns with the plea

that this friend will not offer vague and uncertain suppositions

but reveal in the attributes of the Sovereign-Being, or in man’s

nature, or in the ideas of reason and the nature of things, an

appearance of proof, a quality of justice, a shade of truth that

will reconcile the frightful contradictions of life.

Although he has envied Fanny the consolations of her religion,

has discussed with her the relation of nature to grace, and has

listened with approval to her sage comment, that the bonds of

nature are not destroyed by the gift of grace, Cleveland seems

never to have considered becoming a Catholic; and Fanny seems

undisturbed by the fact that his conversion to “true religion” is

accomplished by the exiled Lord Clarendon, noted for his perse-

cution of Catholics during the period of his power in England.

If there is any truth in the story, reported by Professor

Harrisse, that Chancellor Aguesseau permitted the printing of

Le Philosophe anglais in France only upon the condition that

Cleveland be converted to Catholicism in the last volume,\textsuperscript{19} the

Chancellor can not have read the book, for while Cleveland’s

views might be accepted as orthodox Catholicism as far as they

go, they omit many doctrines fundamental in Catholicism, and

the book contains a spirited plea for the breaking down of sec-
tarian divisions because these controversies do the cause of true

religion great harm.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. VII, xii, 187.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. VIII, xv, 53–67.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. 203.

\textsuperscript{20} Le Philosophe anglais in Oeuvres Choises (Amsterdam and Paris: Serpente, 1783) IV, 438. This passage was deleted from all editions published at Amsterdam and Rouen from 1757–85.
One of the most obvious omissions of fundamental Catholic dogma in Cleveland's full statement of his religious views, is that Christ is never mentioned, nor is salvation through acceptance of His vicarious sacrifice. The statement could easily be a Unitarian creed. Neither is there any mention of the Virgin Mary and the Immaculate Conception. There is no talk of sin, of confession, and of repentance.

Another notable characteristic of Cleveland's conversion is that no minister or priest has any part in it and that there is no recognition in any manner of a church or any organized religious group. Cleveland is converted by a layman who expounds to him a religion that reconciles natural and supernatural religion and that includes may views similar to those of Neo-Stoic Christians and Latitudinarians of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

The best that is offered by natural religion and by the moral philosophy taught to Cleveland by his mother, is recognized as an anticipation of the tranquil mind which can be attained only through religion, for although the law of grace does not deny the natural law, nature alone is insufficient and must be supplemented by supernatural grace.\(^{21}\)

This "true religion" meets all the tests of reason and overcomes Cleveland's objections to Minister C.'s Protestantism, Father LeBane's Jansenism, and Father Ruel's interpretations of religion.

The ethical principles to which Cleveland has subscribed all his life, and without which no religion can appeal to him, are fundamental in this "true religion": justice, moderation, and toleration. Dogmatism, narrow sectarianism, and persecution of groups holding opposite religious views are irrational and do harm to religion.

Asceiticism and enthusiasm are equally inconsistent with "true religion." Here Cleveland seems to be opposing both the cloistered orders of the Catholic church and the fanatical evangelistic spirit of much Protestantism.

What, then, are we entitled to conclude regarding the religious convictions of the Abbé Prévost? His prefatory statement that the views of Mr. Cleveland agree with his own and the fact that the book containing the final statement of Cleveland's faith was published four years after the Abbé's reconciliation with the Catholic church and the Benedictine order, justify the conclusion that the religious convictions of Prévost were exceptionally lib-

\(^{21}\) The story of Cleveland's conversion may be found in the Rouen edition, 1785, VII, xii, 135-40; VIII, xv, 202-215.
eral for a man of his affiliations, since they place no emphasis upon the church as an institution through which men find God.

Religion appears to be for the Abbé Prévost a private affair. No peace of mind has come to Cleveland through the authority of the church or through its representatives. He has lived and searched for a faith that satisfies his reason. He has learned the limitations of human intelligence, that man lives not alone by his head but must live also by his heart, that he is not strong enough through his own nature to bear the sorrows of life or to reconcile the contradictory claims of head and heart, or to control his passions wisely, that he needs the aid of divine grace to supplement the resources of his own intelligence.

In these ideas of the power of the passions to cause human misery and the need to control them by reason, in the emphasis upon ethical living as more important than dogma, and in the affirmation of belief in a Supreme Being, who may be discovered in the operations of natural law, there is the influence of both Neo-Stoicism and Deism; in the emphasis upon Christian unity through recognition of beliefs that are common to all faiths, there is the influence of the Latitudinarianism of the Age of Reason; and in the synthesis of all these ideas of the early eighteenth century lies the unique contribution of the Abbé Prévost.

Certainly these views are not orthodox Catholicism, for they omit too much vital Catholic doctrine; they are not identical with those of natural religion or any of the forms of Deism, for they recognize the supernatural and revelation.

But does not the treatment of the theme of Le Philosophe anglais merit for the Abbé Prévost recognition as a man who in his own way solved the conflict among the religious ideas of his period?

At least, the sentimental romanticism of Manon lescaut, effective as it is of its kind, fails to represent the mature Prévost, the eighteenth-century religious liberal, who has synthesized the best of pagan philosophy with the best of Christian and who reconciled in his own thinking naturalism and supernaturalism in religion.

As modern criticism re-examines and re-evaluates other long accepted estimates of literary men, it is time to compare the work of the mature Prévost with the work of his romantic immaturity and to realize that after the writing of Manon lescaut there is another Prévost.

I am ready to concede that Le Philosophe anglais is cluttered with too much melodrama of the popular eighteenth-century plot, that the style of Manon lescaut rises to emotional heights not reached in Le Philosophe anglais, that as far as technique of
writing the novel is concerned, *Manon Lescaut* is superior; but there is another basis of evaluation by which *Le Philosophe anglais* is superior to *Manon Lescaut*, an estimate based upon the universal significance of the theme, the contribution of that theme to the history of ideas, and the value of the book as a spiritual biography of an eighteenth-century liberal.

Perhaps it is unfortunate that Prévost chose to bury in an eight-volume novel the story of the development of Cleveland's religious opinions, but perhaps discretion dictated this disguise, since the opinions which are so far from being consistent with the author's religious affiliations, receive the Abbé's endorsement in the preface to *Le Philosophe anglais*. 