

“RELIGION’S FIRM-ROOTED TRUTHS:” RICHARD POLWHELE, PULPIT ORATORY AND LOYALIST ROMANTICISM IN THE ENGLISH PROVINCE

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Abstract: This article explores the rearguard action fought by the clergyman and writer Richard Polwhele against what he saw as the threat of Anglican Evangelicalism and Methodism in Cornwall during the French Revolutionary period, highlighting the connections between religious experience, rhetorical performance and politics. Whether it be through his theorizing of pulpit oratory, his rows with those he considered Enthusiasts or his understanding of ordination oaths, Polwhele maintained that religious belief should be regulated by rhetorical distance. Explaining this stance, the article shows how Polwhele’s theological and ecclesiological opposition to the Enthusiasm he regarded as dangerously inherent in Evangelical Protestantism also led him to address shortcomings within the governance of the Church of England itself. This danger was embodied in Polwhele’s eyes by the failure of too much pulpit oratory, particularly in the provinces, to engage through its language, content and tone with its popular audience. By focusing on the neglected figure of Polwhele, the article brings together and adds to current work on regional identity, Loyalism, Romantic religion and the sermon as a performative literary form in the eighteenth century.

Keywords: Romanticism, Loyalism, Anglicanism, Enthusiasm, Methodism, sermon, politics

This article re-examines the nature and methods of Loyalism in the Romantic period by considering two neglected topics: the Cornish clergyman-writer Richard Polwhele (1760-1838) and the eighteenth-century sermon. In their day both enjoyed a higher profile and greater esteem than is now generally recognised. Both, however, have fallen by the wayside of a cultural history of the period that continues to be broadly defined in terms of progressive secularization. The sermon has suffered a double neglect: first, from an under-appreciation that it was “perhaps the dominant literary form in Britain between 1689 and 1901” (by some

estimates, eight pages of sermon were printed for every page of prose fiction in eighteenth-century Britain);¹ second, from insufficient attention to the sermon as a type of text that balances theological, rhetorical and social concerns.² This neglect is not coincidental given that the printed sermon disturbs the narrative of print culture as engine of the secular enlightenment. As Misty Anderson notes, interpretations of sermons often turn “expressions of religious belief as such into a misrecognition of other social and material impulses, which are the real historical content to be explored in literary reading and writing.”³

Polwhele’s work has suffered similar misinterpretation and neglect as a result of shifting literary fashions. He was a poet, translator and antiquarian of considerable stature: his translations of Theocritus and Tyrtæus were standard well into the nineteenth century; his nature poetry, in particular *The Influence of Local Attachment* (1796), was popular and influential early Romantic fare; while his *History of Cornwall* (7 volumes, 1816) is held in some quarters to be a founding text of modern Cornish identity. A staunchly Church-and-King counter-revolutionary and long-time contributor to the *Anti-Jacobin Review* and the *British Critic*, he is today known to literary scholars almost exclusively for his misogynist polemic *The Unsex’d Females* (1798), regarded as a paradigm of the hostility faced by radical women writers during the late eighteenth century.⁴ However, there was more to Polwhele’s reactionary politics than this: a more far-reaching and consistent

¹ William Gibson, “The British Sermon 1689-1901: Quantities, Performance and Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689-1901*, ed. Keith A. Francis and William Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.

² See Laura Davies and Emma Salgard Cuhna, “Introduction: Writing Eighteenth-Century Religion,” *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41, no. 2 (2018): 155-62.

³ Misty G. Anderson, *Imagining Methodism in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Enthusiasm, Belief and the Borders of the Self* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 27. See also Isobel Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660-1780*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁴ See Anne Stott, “Hannah More and the Blagdon Controversy, 1799-1802,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 51, no. 2 (2000): 330; Emily Lorraine De Montluzin, *The Anti-Jacobins, 1798-1800: The Early Contributors to the Anti-Jacobin Review* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1988); Stephen C. Behrendt, “New Romanticisms for Old: Displacing Our Expectations and Our Models,” *Midwest Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2000): 145-58; Janet Todd, “The Polwhelean Tradition and Richard Cobb,” *Studies in Burke and His Time* 16 (1974-75): 271-77; Judith Pascoe, “‘Unsex’d Females’: Barbauld, Robinson, and Smith,” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1740-1830*, ed. Tom Keymer and Jon Mee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 211-26.

concern of his was the rise of Evangelical Anglicanism and Methodism and the threat they posed in both theological and ecclesiological terms to the Anglican establishment and the social order it underpinned.⁵

In bringing together the literary form of the sermon and the case of Polwhele, this article explores the relationship between religious experience, rhetorical performance and politics in the Romantic period. I will argue that Polwhele saw oratory as key to commanding the temporal and spiritual attentions of the people to the extent that he considered the relationship between faith and expression to be a litmus test for proper religious belief. That relationship was central to his understanding of both the theological meaning of his ordination oath and the importance of the sermon, whose theological and ecclesiological significance Polwhele saw in fundamentally rhetorical terms. This underpinned his belief in the mediating power of the Church of England and the need to combat threats to its power, whether they be external denial of this need for mediation or internal neglect of this communicative duty.

Viewed in these terms, Polwhele's activities demonstrate the potency of the sermon as a social, rhetorical and theological instrument. To make this case, I consider the various threats to the Anglican establishment represented by Evangelical preaching before moving on to a consideration of Polwhele's fear that the Anglican establishment was inadvertently conspiring with the forces condemning it to irrelevancy, and his campaign to reinvigorate its rhetorical power in the face of the Evangelical challenge. I conclude with some thoughts about what this means for our understanding of Loyalist Romanticism.

I

As a first step, it is worth reflecting on the political and ecclesiological status of the sermon, and why Polwhele might have been so sensitive to its status being undermined in the context of his attempts to shore up support for Church and King in the West of Cornwall between 1790 and 1820. The role of the Established Church as a bulwark of the State in the eighteenth century is well understood. As Robert Ryan has it, "while it was routinely asserted that the Church of England lived under the protection of the State, in practice the reverse was true."⁶ W.M. Jacob suggests that the Church provided "a framework of loyalty and allegiance"

⁵ See Dafydd Moore, *Richard Polwhele and Romantic Culture: The Politics of Reaction and the Poetics of Place* (London: Routledge, 2020), esp. Chapter 4.

⁶ Robert M. Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature 1789-1824* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 26.

through intercessional prayers and a liturgical calendar of fast days and political commemorations, while Emma Major has highlighted the role of the sermon in this consolidation of power: delivered (in theory at least) twice a week in every parish in the land, the sermon was central to propagating “group identity on a denominational, regional and national level” during the century.⁷ Robert Hole has emphasized the overtly political nature of this process, particularly during the French Revolutionary period, while also reminding us that the eighteenth-century Church of England was theologically, geographically and politically insecure in ways that belied its “Established” nature.⁸ Enthusiasm – summarized by Jon Mee as “the error of finding God everywhere and justifying one’s own impulses as his Word” – posed a particular challenge to the mediating and consolidating power of the Established Church, a challenge felt with new urgency in the era of the French Revolution.⁹ In Mee’s account, the “fear of the combustible matter within both the individual and body politic” led to the regulation – and partial if unstable rehabilitation – of Enthusiasm as artistic literary (usually poetic) expression.¹⁰

Building on these studies, I make the case here that in order to reinforce the power of Church and State, Polwhele sought to police Enthusiasm within the Anglican sermon, simultaneously denying the ecclesiology represented by Enthusiasts while recognizing and regulating the popular feelings, attitudes and behaviour to which the Enthusiast appealed. The notion of policing or regulating is particularly important for a more nuanced understanding of the conservative mindset, since to regulate is not to eradicate, but to acknowledge and seek to control within bounds. Polwhele recognized the need to combat Enthusiasm on its own terms, arguing for a different, socially engaged rhetoric of the sermon.

That Polwhele saw himself as fighting a tide of non-conformism is hardly coincidental. While his work exhibits a fair amount of paranoia, he had more than a little to feel paranoid about. In the far-flung parishes of West Cornwall to which he ministered, the grip of the Church of England, and indeed the State, was tenuous at the best of times, and in the 1790s the threat of insurrection and French

⁷ W.M. Jacob, *The Clerical Profession in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1680-1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 12; Emma Major, “Ithuriel’s Spear: Barbauld, Sermons and Citizens, 1789-93,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41, no. 2 (2018): 259.

⁸ Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order, 1760-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and “English Sermons and Tracts and Media of Debate,” in *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, ed. Mark Philp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 18-37.

⁹ Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

¹⁰ Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*, 5.

invasion loomed large. The geographical distance of Cornwall from the Diocesan seat in Exeter was exacerbated by a lack of confidence in dealing with Cornwall that has been traced back to the aftermath of the Prayer Book Rebellion of 1549; while the Cornish manorial system led to a more dispersed population and the absence of the influential squirarchy that were features of Parochial authority in other areas of rural England.¹¹ One economic consequence of that dispersed population was a shortage of viable individual Livings, meaning that non-residence was common (Polwhele rarely held a single parish at any one time). While pluralism was therefore often driven by economic reality in Cornwall, non-residence nevertheless fed a perception of personal and institutional dereliction. It also made countering the influence of itinerant preachers more challenging. Equally, the socio-political and economic realities of a county characterized as existing in a state of “feudal anarchy” could be just as inauspicious for the temporal authority of the State.¹² Polwhele himself could be suspicious of the motives of some of those invested in the notion of Cornish lawlessness, seeing it as propaganda designed to promote the ameliorating influence of Methodism in contrast to the failings of the Established Church. As he was ironically moved to put it on the subject of tin miners:

Before Wesley, these tanners were hurlers and robbers, murderers and smugglers; the children of the devil. Since Wesley, these tanners are neither hurlers, nor robbers, nor murderers, nor smugglers, but the elect of God.¹³

However, like many clergy of his station, he was also a magistrate and, as a committed if somewhat repetitive memoirist, he does himself paint a vivid picture of life on the institutional edge, facing down suspected French spies, smugglers, and those tin miners, who seemed always assumed to be on the verge of rioting.¹⁴

Polwhele fought his Loyalist rearguard action energetically and in multiple ways. In terms of publications these included his poetic handbook on rhetoric

¹¹ Philip Payton, *The Making of Modern Cornwall: Historical Experience and the Resistance of “Difference”* (Redruth: Dyllanstow Truran, 1992), 65.

¹² Philip Payton, *Cornwall: A History* (Fowey: Cornwall Editions, 2004), 170.

¹³ Richard Polwhele, ed. and intro., *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Considered: by Bishop Lavington* (London: A.J. Valpy, 1820), cxxiv. This comment is in response to Joseph Benson’s *Vindication of the People Called Methodists* (London: G. Story, 1800).

¹⁴ See Richard Polwhele, *Traditions and Recollections: Clerical, Literary and Domestic*, 2 vols. (London: John Nichols and Son, 1826) and *Reminiscences in Prose and Verse*, 3 vols. (London: J.B. Nichols and Son, 1836).

entitled *The English Orator* (1785-1791),¹⁵ containing over a thousand lines devoted to pulpit eloquence; his pamphlet dispute collected as *Three Letters to the Rev. Robert Hawker* (2nd edition, 1800), which was occasioned by the charismatic Hawker's preaching tour of Cornwall; the mock-heroic satirical poem and cautionary tale *Sir Aaron; or Flights of Fanaticism* (1800); and the deeply paranoid and unintentionally hilarious *Anecdotes of Methodism, with a Sermon* (1800). Long after the generality of the Church of England had calmed down about Methodists as a fifth column, Polwhele was still highly suspicious, as shown in his published sermon *The Churchman and Methodist Contrasted* (1812). As late as 1820 he produced an edition, with a long introduction by Polwhele himself, of George Lavington's classic anti-Methodist polemic *The Enthusiasm of Papists and Methodists Considered* (1749). This article will touch briefly on several aspects of these publications while emphasizing the centrality of the sermon to Polwhele's effort. Sermons were vital as a means of promoting the Established Church's position, which is why it mattered what they said, how they were delivered and by whom.

II

Unsurprisingly given his commitment to the seventy-year-old views of Lavington, Polwhele's commentary on Enthusiasm (he rarely distinguishes Methodists and Evangelical Anglicans other than to consider the latter to be more despicable) follows the standard pattern of complaints and accusations established from the mid-century onwards. The Enthusiast, preaching a gospel of emotionally embodied immediacy leading to a moment of conversion, posed both theological and ecclesiological challenges to the Church of England. The immediacy and accessibility of this experience, without the necessity of mediation between God and humankind, also threatened the temporal authority of the Church, which made this a political matter as well. Even more disastrously, the emphasis on conversion and salvation without repentance challenged a central, if sometimes wobbly, plank of orthodox Anglican theology: the compromise, on the question of sanctification, between justification by faith and justification by works. As Polwhele put it, the "depreciation of moral conduct and the exaltation of Enthusiasm or an imaginary conversion" represented by salvation without repentance is "an appeal to the profligate and corrupt and a trap for the weak."¹⁶

¹⁵ The publication history of this poem is involved. The first book was published alone (with an advertisement trailing all 4 books) in 1785 as *The Art of Eloquence: A Didactic Poem. Book the First*. By the 2nd edition of 1786 it had acquired all its books and a new title, and the 3rd edition of 1788 was also heavily revised; this version was reprinted in Polwhele's *Poems* of 1791.

¹⁶ Polwhele, *The Enthusiasm of Methodists*, ccix.

In this way, the relationship between powerful speech, emotion and belief is central to both the theological and ecclesiological challenge of Methodism. There is nothing original about this observation: the image of the field preacher moving his audience with the power of his words is familiar. More interesting is Polwhele's contention that the emotional immediacy of the Methodist preacher represents a failure of rhetoric as an aesthetic as well as moral exercise. As such, his argument with the Enthusiasts was less a rhetorical competition than a competition over the meaning and purpose of rhetoric itself. The felt immediacy of Methodist and Evangelical Bible preaching and, by extension, thought, collapsed the difference between public utterance and absolute conviction. Or, to put it another way, Enthusiasts believed what they said. For Polwhele the primitive literalness of this version of Christianity was not only unsophisticated but foolish and dangerous. As he argues about the moment in the Anglican ordination vow when the candidate declares that he is "inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost," there is no contradiction between this oath and finding "the sensible experience of an inward motion ridiculous" (the cornerstone of Enthusiasm's conversion narrative):

Well do I remember, that, when I offered myself for orders, [...] my answer was: "I come, with the sincere motive of religion, the Holy Spirit, I trust, assisting me, to take upon me the office," &c. &c. – that, his Lordship told me, I had answered right – and, that he touched upon the absurdity of those enthusiasts, who pretend to receive, literally, a call from the Holy Ghost.¹⁷

The Enthusiast is apparently unable to understand the liturgy and ordinances of the Church of England as metaphorical rhetorical acts, rather than being literally true. And Polwhele maintains that the result of an overly literal-minded reading is theologically risky internal contradiction. As he puts it to Robert Hawker:

Let me ask you, then, what you think of a passage in our Church-Catechism, "the body and Blood of Christ, which are verily and indeed taken" – If you understand this passage literally, you are, evidently a transubstantialist. But as, I presume you are not a transubstantialist, you cannot understand this passage literally.¹⁸

The emphasis on felt religious experience, on being moved by the Spirit without the meditating presence of the Church, "defined," as Anderson puts it, "the dangers

¹⁷ Richard Polwhele, *A Second Letter to the Reverend Dr Hawker* (Helston: T. Flindell, 1799), 22.

¹⁸ Polwhele, *A Second Letter*, 27n.

of misreading, particularly overly literal reading, against the civic and psychological restraint implicit in the aesthetic protocol of literary reading.”¹⁹ For Polwhele and (at least by Polwhele’s account) Bishop Ross of Exeter, Hawker and his Methodist allies are, in Anderson’s words, “failed Moderns” who fail to bring “critical distance, judgement, and taste” to their theology.²⁰ In the terms of the present article, Enthusiasts fail to recognise the proper relationship between theology and rhetoric and therefore overlook the difference between a rhetorical act (in this instance the oaths of ordination) dealing in metaphor and a thoroughly worked-through theological position. On the other hand, for the Evangelical or Methodist, the distinctions Polwhele seeks to impose between what is said in a statement of belief and what is meant by that statement in a wider context were to be expected from, in Isobel Rivers’s phrase, the “luke-warm time servers” of a later eighteenth-century Latitudinarian establishment responsible for “cobbling together the remnants of Anglicanism.”²¹

Yet, however much Polwhele might have thought it missed the point of Anglican belief, the Enthusiastic preacher’s ability to forge an emotional connection with his audience and effect the moment of emotional rapture and conversion remained a threat to stable church governance. This threat was rendered even more potent by the palpable failure of the Church of England to rise to the challenge:

Scarcely one who does not oppose himself to the parish priest as an enemy, throwing out, incessantly, aspirations on his dull morality, and unedifying doctrines, and denouncing damnation against Church people without ceremony or reserve. Our sober sermons!! What are they when compared with the furious harangues – the flaming oratory of the gospel minister.²²

As we shall see in the next section, to preserve the Church of England’s authority Polwhele therefore advocated the need for his colleagues to pay a greater care to those “sober sermons” full of “dull morality, and unedifying doctrines.” In doing so he demonstrated an unexpectedly critical perspective on those he sees as unwittingly conniving at the collapse of that authority.

¹⁹ Anderson, *Imagining Methodism*, 61.

²⁰ Anderson, *Imagining Methodism*, 61.

²¹ Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment*, 87.

²² Polwhele, *Enthusiasm of Methodists*, clvi.

III

A substantial part of Polwhele's attack on the character of Methodist preachers is a rehearsal of what by the end of the century were standard slurs as to the impropriety, including the sexual impropriety, of Methodist carryings-on. But he also acknowledges the importance of the intimacy between minister and congregation and recognizes that Methodist preaching is effective because it is "so well adapted to the character of the vulgar." He is warm in his praise of Methodist church music, admitting that the music of the Church of England is not always "congenial" and, worse, frequently badly performed (psalms, lined out as metrical ballads, passed for hymn-singing in the eighteenth-century Church of England). For all Polwhele's warnings about the dire consequences (spiritual and temporal) of the "love feasts" of Methodists, he is painfully aware of how little orthodox Anglicanism offers in return (and it is worth bearing in mind that the Anglican liturgy as Polwhele knew it had yet to undergo the Tractarian reforms that give it its present form).²³ The Methodist threat gave an urgency to Polwhele's longstanding interest in the proper and effective role of the rural clergy, at the core of which is the tension between the university-educated cleric and the rural communities he serves, especially when the gentlemen-clergy might have their eye more on self-advancement or their own creature comforts than on the lives of those they should be guiding. Sermon oratory was at the heart of this, both as an instrument and a symbol of his concern.

W.G. Jacob's rather apologist account of the eighteenth-century clergy suggests that, as "the only national institution with educated and literate agents present at least weekly in almost every community in the land," the Church of England provided an "important link between the regions and London" and "mediated between the centre and localities."²⁴ Given that pivotal importance, it was vital that the message was compelling, both in manner and theology, reinforcing the status quo via an appeal to the virtues of stability and moderation. Yet, as Nigel Ashton has pointed out, in practice "temperate, moderate sermons could readily sound ponderous and lifeless in the wrong hands."²⁵ Book 4 of Polwhele's *The English Orator* concerns itself with exactly this dilemma about how to communicate from the pulpit with what it calls "the Multitude's rough Mass"

²³ I am grateful to Dr Simon Dickie of the University of Toronto for insight into the strangeness of the eighteenth-century Anglican church service to modern eyes and ears.

²⁴ Jacob, *The Clerical Profession*, 12, 304.

²⁵ Nigel Ashton, "Rationalism, the Enlightenment and Sermons," in *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689-1901*, ed. Keith A. Francis and William Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 403.

(4:109).²⁶ Latitudinarian theology, and especially the preaching of it, was, even its pomp, better attuned to the learned, commercially and politically orientated metropolitan elite than it was to the rural classes whose spiritual wellbeing was the responsibility of clergy such as Polwhele. He is forced to concede that, although those lions of Latitudinarian churchmanship John Tillotson and Samuel Clarke may “fill thy glowing mind / With solid Thought,” the inconvenient fact was that they were not good role models for preaching to the common people:

E’vn TILLOTSON’s were cold,
Tho’ thick with oratorial Beauties sown;
And CLARKE’s Exactness, rigorous and precise,
Might vainly torture the protracted Thought.

(4:459-62)

Polwhele’s sermon “On Christian Simplicity” (published 1792) chides the “cold forbidding theology” and “speculative refinement” of the Church as alienating and irrelevant. In both instances (and in others with references to “lukewarm” preaching), Polwhele’s response is to emphasize the pathos and the feeling central to the Christian message in a manner that owes much to the influence of Hugh Blair, the most popular and influential sermon-writer of the age.

In “On Christian Simplicity” Polwhele invokes Christ’s own Sermon on the Mount as the ideal of religious oratory to which all should aspire: it is, says Polwhele, a performance marked with “a simplicity and pathos, little according with the elaborate disquisitions of the modern preacher.”²⁷ *The English Orator* sets its models for emulation a little more in reach – Bishops Horne, Porteus and Hurd – but the overall message is the same: there is a danger in over-rationalising Christianity, and for abstract reasoning to overwhelm the central pathos of the message encapsulated in the Passion. As *The English Orator* has it:

To prove
Religion’s firmly-rooted Truths, by long
Elaborate Deduction, were to freeze
That feeling Tear!

(4:581-84)

²⁶ Richard Polwhele, *Poems: Namely, The English Orator* (London, 1791). This and subsequent references are to book and line numbers of this edition.

²⁷ Richard Polwhele, *Discourses on Different Subjects*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: T. Cadell and C. Dilly, 1791), 1:29.

However, as befits someone who spent so much time attacking the emotional incontinuity of Enthusiasts, Polwhele was alive to the dangers of a position with the potential to lead to the kind of emotional investment in theological rhetoric that he diagnosed as unnecessary, embarrassing and hypocritical in Methodists. Even as *The English Orator* advocates the use of pathos, it is aware of the follies of the "Sweetness of Moravian Love," the "secret poison" (4:952-53) that comes from the wrong sort of feeling.

Polwhele makes two proposals for regulating the uncomfortable proximity of these positions. The first is to recommend, and here he explicitly references Blair, a balance between the extremes of rationalism and enthusiasm. The challenge, he says in a sermon "On Prudence," is to preach Christianity as a moderate religion of the heart, "equally remote from the apathy of the stoic, and the reveries of the visionary" and to convey "simplicity without folly, and pathos without enthusiasm."²⁸ The second is more significant in its recommendation to shift the focus of attention away from theological argument towards the more immediate concerns of everyday life. As he puts it in a sermon "On the Dangers of Miscellaneous Reading on Religious Subjects" (printed in 1791): "be it considered, that Christianity was not revealed to man, as theory, on which he might exercise his wit or genius. It was, chiefly, imparted to him, as a rule for the conduct of life."²⁹ Accordingly the emphasis in preaching should be, in the words of *The English Orator*, to

[...] (as it suits thy Auditors) inspect
Life's shifting circumstance. The social Ties,
The Duties that reciprocally bind
The human Race

(4:520-23).

The qualification "as suits thy Auditors" is important. Tailoring the Christian message to what the poem has earlier called the "the Springs / Of human Conduct in familiar Life" (4:94-95) involves an engagement with that familiar life. It also involves mediating, rhetorically and theologically, between the thinking of the leading lights of Anglican theology and the language and experience of common people.

As Polwhele noted in relation to his own record of producing two sermons a week for thirty-six years in which "one of the two has been for the most part, my own composition":

²⁸ Polwhele, *Discourses*, 1:41-42.

²⁹ Polwhele, *Discourses*, 1:88.

It was at one time my favourite relaxation exercise to reduce [...] a learned disquisition to a popular discourse, or to raise the too familiar address to a becoming elevation. I have preached, on the prophecies, with Bagot and Jackson, in a style adapted to a country congregation and, by the omission of colloquial terms and useless repetition I have rendered the sermons of Bishop Wilson not unpleasing [...] to men of taste, though not less intelligible to common hearers.³⁰

This belief that the parish priest should engage with the lives of his charges and make his theology and ministry attuned to their needs is contrasted in *The English Orator* with the “the light, / The volatile, the modish Churchman” who, in pursuit of advancement “scarcely knows (nor strives to know) / His blunt unfashion’d People” (4:665-66, 679-80). Such individuals have an entirely different focus to their rhetorical efforts. This “modish Churchman”

stoops

In fulsome Adulation to caress
A Patron, who with Benefices, fat
And flowing as the Land of Israel’s Hope,
Repays the Homage of the fawning Slave.

(4:697-701)

These do not sound like the words of a Church-and-King man defending the Church of England. It is hard to know which of his sarcastic analogies is more provocative: “bloated” priests and “fawning” slaves compared to exiled Israel; a more lucrative living equated to the Promised Land; or a Patron who must be equivalent to Jehovah himself. The longstanding self-image of the Anglican Church as suffering Israel, oppressed by Roman Catholicism (and latterly Jacobin atheism), only heightens the potentially blasphemous drama of the moment, further testament to Polwhele’s anger at the travesty of true devotion such preferment-seeking represents.

In this way Polwhele sees the rhetorical function of the parish priest as an essential bulwark against irreligion. He is clear that Methodism’s popularity is in part the result of the Church of England neglecting its role in speaking to the people

³⁰ Polwhele, *Enthusiasm of the Methodists*, clcviii, clxix. What today would be called plagiarism was recommended practice amongst the clergy of the eighteenth century: for the Deanery it ensured consistency of message and it had practical advantages for those delivering two sermons a week, every week. See Gibson, “The British Sermon 1689-1901,” 14, 23.

in ways they understood on subjects that mattered. When the Church abrogates this responsibility – a responsibility articulated first and foremost through acts of address – it creates a vacuum within the spiritual and political order into which poured Methodists, Evangelicals and other types of wrong-headed reformers intent on setting up rival institutional structures, including National Schools, Bible Societies and even Sunday Schools (for Polwhele saw danger in all these).

It would be foolish and naïve to overlook the conservative values Polwhele felt it important to impart to those congregations. He was a scion of the ancient Cornish landed gentry, albeit fallen on hard times, with the class prejudices to match. "The social ties" and "Duties that reciprocally bind" (4:521, 522) are "link'd with peculiar Stations" (4:524). The central messages of his religious writing are the importance of knowing one's place; of doing what one is told and accepting one's lot; and the over-riding conviction that an Anglican British King at the head of the British Constitutional State was a divinely appointed and perfectly arranged system of government. As he writes to Hawker, chastising him for unsettling the minds of the people:

With us, Christianity is a religion of action, not of speculation. Instead of elevating us above the duties of our station, it enforces the strictest attention to our several callings. It teaches us, for instance, that the poor labourer in the fields, who serves his master with fidelity [...] has a fairer prospect of an inheritance with the saints in light, than he that neglects his labours and deserts his dwelling, led astray by some itinerant preacher.³¹

Polwhele's insistence on direct engagement with the lives and language of common folk does not make him a Wordsworth in a cassock. Rather it shows that an appeal to the language and experience of "the people" was not uncontested territory in the 1790s, that it was possible to locate in the "language of common men" an appeal to Burkean localism, and that the call for a reforming reinvention of expression could be made in the interests of a profound political quietism.

IV

This article has demonstrated that the sermon was a site of religious, social and political contest in Cornwall in the 1790s and that the challenge from Methodism and Evangelical Anglicanism to the authority of the Established Church can be read in rhetorical terms: who spoke, how they spoke and what they could achieve

³¹ Richard Polwhele, *A Letter to the Rev. Robert Hawker* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1799), 53.

through the power of their oratory were central to the dispute. While Polwhele recognized and sought to control the appeal of Enthusiasm on its own terms, he also saw it as exploiting the inability or unwillingness of the Established Church to engage meaningfully with working-class provincial life.

Polwhele's efforts to get his fellow clergy to take seriously the threat posed by the Evangelical Movement and his stern critique of the attitudes and behaviour of the Church he was defending are a vivid example of what David Eastwood calls "the ideological ambiguities of loyalism."³² They illustrate clearly the "constitutive tensions" posited by Kevin Gilmartin within a political class caught between an "unyielding confidence in the viability of the old regime, and a realisation that new social forces and cultural forms must be enlisted in its defence."³³ As my analysis has shown, the case of Polwhele involves a complex interplay between politics, religion and the specifics of place across the nations and regions of the British Isles.³⁴ It reveals the contingent nature of what are often still generalized as 'Romantic' categories of attitude, belief and politics; and it questions "the presumed equivalences between 'metropolitan' and 'national' politics so aggressively asserted by eighteenth-century Londoners and rather uncritically adopted by their historians."³⁵ Polwhele's emphasis on lived experience and his insistence on the importance of speaking to the people in a manner they understand, pressed into the service of political Reaction, are a reminder of the contested nature of all arguments in the Romantic period over who should presume to speak to and for the good of the people.

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³² David Eastwood, "Patriotism and the English State in the 1790s," in *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, ed. Mark Philp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 147.

³³ Kevin Gilmartin, *Writing against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10. On the complexity of counter-revolutionary expression, see also Matthew Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³⁴ For more on Polwhele and archipelagic criticism, see Moore, *Richard Polwhele and Romantic Culture*.

³⁵ Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 288.

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