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Sir Roger at Church

Introduction:

This paper enlightens us about the religious life of Sir Roger. His views regarding church discipline and the way in which he acts on these views are presented. We come to know what Sir Roger has been doing to induce regularity in church-going among his tenants. His donations to the parish church also recounted.

But above all it is Sir Roger's behaviour in the church which delights the reader most. This idiosyncratic knight disregards discipline himself in order to enforce discipline in others. All his oddities break out on such occasions. Addison ironically but without any pungence, details some of these oddities.

Addison commends the mutual understanding and friendship of Sir Roger and his chaplain and contrasts them with what he has seen in the neighbouring village. The lack of understanding between the squire and the chaplain of that village puts the church and the tenants in a very bad shape. On the whole, in spite of his obvious eccentricities, Sir Roger views of and behaviours at church are both commendable and interesting.

Critical Summary

According to Mr. Spectator a Sunday in the countryside is always welcome, for it refreshes the village folk after they spent six days of dry routine. It also refreshes the religious foe in them. On Sundays they come to the church in their d dresses and look cheerful and smart to impress their fellow-villagers.

Sir Roger is a pretty devoted Christian fond of the parish church. At his own expense he has beautified the interior of the church with some texts from the Bible and railed in the altar. Then, he has given each of his tenants a hassock and a prayer book in order to induce them to be regular at church services. Further, he has also employed a



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touring singing master to teach them the right tunes of the psalms. He also enforces correct discipline at church and does not like anybody to sleep in it except himself. He himself or his servants wake up those who happen to go to sleep there. Some slight whimsicalities of his behaviour are also visible while he is at church. For example, he lengthens out a psalm beyond the proper limit or sometimes says "amen" more than once to the prayer. Sometimes he stands up when other are kneeling so as to count them conveniently. He sometimes interrupts the sermon to warn an idle fellow who might be creating some nuisance distracting the attention of other.

Nobody minds such indiscipline on the part of Sir Roger himself. After the service it is Sir Roger who leaves the church first. He passes between a double row of his tenants asking them question about their relatives who are absent. He encourages young boys of promise with Bibles and slices of bacon. He also says that after the present clerk he will entrust his job to one who is able to show his merit. This greatly encourages young men to become religious in order to seem deserving for the job.

Mr. Spectator points out that the mutual concord of Sir Roger and the chaplain has a very salubrious effect on his tenants. This is in happy contrast to the perpetual discord between the squire and his chaplain belonging the neighbouring village. On account of the charges and counter-charges this squire and his chaplain level against each other, the discipline in their church has become extremely lax. The tenants do not feel encouraged to attend the church when they find their squire always absent from it. These simple folk are much influenced by the actions and behaviour of rich people.

The Didactic Note

Addison's aim in writing the *Coverley Papers* was frankly didactic. His purpose was to improve the manners and morals of his age. His essays generally end on didactic note, and the present essay is no exception. He holds out Sir Roger as a model for other squires to follow. Other squires should also maintain good relations with the clergy of their parish, as is the case with Sir Roger. Feuds between squires and their chaplains

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have a very adverse effect on the congregation. Such quarrels are, therefore, to be avoided. On the other hand, harmonious relations are conducive to religion and morality; and, therefore, they must be cultivated at all costs. With this end in view the example of Sir Roger must be followed.

Humour (Sir Roger's Peculiarities)

In his paper concerning the *Spectator Club* Steele has to offer the following words regarding the character of Sir Roger: He is a gentleman that is very singular in his behaviour, but his singularities proceed from his good sense, and are contradictions to the manners of the world only as he thinks the world is in the wrong. However, this humour creates him no enemies; for he does nothing with sourness or obstinacy."

Sir Roger's behaviour at church is an interesting illustration in support of Steele's appraisal of his character. At church, he gives evidence of many an oddity. Addison himself points out in the paper under consideration: "Several other of the old knight's peculiarities break out upon these occasions." All these peculiarities are amusing and give rise to humour of a charming, if not a subtle, kind. Roger's habit to lengthen sometimes a psalm for "half a minute after the rest of the congregation has done with it". We may remember here that Sir Roger has employed a touring singing master "to instruct them (his tenants) rightly in the tunes of the master psalms! Then consider his practice of saying "amen" three or four times to the same prayer!

In this humour arising out of the singularities of Sir Roger, an element of irony is also involved, and this element sometimes clearly comes to the surface. Consider in this connection the following observation:

"As Sir Roger is landlord to the whole congregation he keeps them in very good order, and will suffer nobody to sleep in it besides himself, for if by change & c."

Again, consider the following:



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"I was yesterday very much surprised to hear my old friend, in the midst of the service, calling out to one John Matthews to mind what he was about, and not to disturb the congregation."

Sir Roger is shown to be disturbing the congregation him-self when he asks John Matthews not to disturb them! In a better church this behaviour would have appeared inexcusably churlish and almost blasphemous. However, it is fortunate that the parishioners "are not polite enough to see anything in this behaviour"! We may add here that Sir Roger, too, is just like them, that is, "not polite enough" to do so!

In spite of these amusing oddities of Sir Roger's we cannot legitimately question the genuineness of his interest in the church and his piety. He has beautified the inside of the church with many biblical texts, though they are of his own choosing.[How we wish Addison had also given some examples of Sir Roger's Choice!]. He has donated a "handsome pulpit-cloth" and railed in the altar. He has also engaged a singing master to improve the intonation of the congregation. His generous awards of Bibles and slices of bacon to promising lads are also worth commendation. Above all, his judicious understanding with the chaplain and his regularity at the church services are indicative of a really pious nature which is not without a proper sense of discern.

Addison's Religion:

This paper also gives us an idea of the easy and rather shallow adherence to Addison to Christianity. Of course, we cannot charge him with hypocrisy, but his faith seems too placid and uninspiring. He lacks the all-consuming ardour of the crusader as well as the profundity of a mystic. He looks offensively certain to save his soul and have the best of the two words. Witness what he says in his essays concerning popular superstitions-

"Though I know neither the time nor the manner of the death I am to die, I am not solicitous about it, because I am sure that He knows them both and that he will not fail to comfort t and support me under them."

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This cool confidence in his own goodness is somewhat amusing and sentimental.

Addison's approach to Christianity may not be too sentimental, but it was conditioned by Lockian rationality. C. E. Lewis talks of Addison's "rational piety". In the first paragraph of the paper under consideration he defends the institution of Sunday not on completely religious grounds alone, he does so on secular and rationalistic grounds as well. We may point out here that is what Swift also does in his ironic *Argument Against the Abolition of Christianity*. Swift satirizes ironically the fictive character who does support the continuation of the practice of taking complete rest on Sunday but on purely secular considerations. He does not at all refer to the sanctity associated by the Christian tradition to the Sabbath day. Thus Swift's position is just an exaggeration of the stand taken by Addison in his defence of the institution of Sunday. But we must observe here that unlike the "arguer" of Swift, Addison does take into consideration of the religious context of the issue too.

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