

## The Rhetoric of Passions in John Tillotson's *Sermons*

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**Abstract** As the leading member of the Latitudinarian movement, scholars have often referred to John Tillotson as the father of the reform of ecclesiastical oratory that took place in the second half of the seventeenth century. His influence as a prose writer continued in the eighteenth century and his writings were appreciated by religious and lay critics. Although his style has been often described as 'impassionate', sober and reiterative, this article shows how he adapted his style to conquer the hearts of the congregation by exploiting two passions, self-love and fear, which are impossible to eradicate in Man.

**Keywords** Tillotson. Sermons. Passions. Latitudinarianism. Eighteenth-century Rhetoric.

Public oratory in the long eighteenth century was one of the most dominant mediums for popular communication (Goring 2005, 31). Sermons had "firm and conscious ties with secular society" (Downey 1969, 10): apart from delivering the Christian message, they were also exploited to spread the Church of England's policy and to promote the reformation of manners. Sermons took on a pragmatic view of Man based on the concrete possibility of refining moral conduct via education, setting edifying examples while stressing the role of religion in building Man's happiness. To this purpose, Latitudinarian divines advocated a more simple, accessible style that could inform and instruct the parishioners in order to mould a society based on passive obedience, charity and morality. In his treatise *A Friendly Debate Between a Conformist and a Nonconformist*, published in 1669, the Latitudinarian Simon Patrick (1626-1707) provides a clarifying description of the new sermon style and of its aims:

I have been taught, that there are only two ways to come at the Affections. One by the Senses and Imagination: [...] The other is by the Reason and Judgement; Now I believe your Affections are moved in the first way very often; by melting Tones, pretty Similitudes... And the Truth is, you are like to be moved very seldom in our Churches by these means. For the better sort of Hearers are now out of love with these things; nor do they think there is any power either in a puling or whining, or in a roaring and tearing Voice. But if you can be moved by such strength of

Reason as can conquer the Judgment, and so pass to demand submission from the Affections, you may find Power enough, I think, in our Pulpits. (Patrick 1669, 15-16 quoted in Morrissey 2002, 703)

Patrick's cry for a polished style and unaffected delivery mirrored the necessity for prose writing that explained Man's 'whole duty' in a clear, understandable way, accessible to all subjects. Distancing themselves from the overelaborated metaphysical sermons, the Latitudinarians crafted a more democratic form of discourse (Goring 2005, 39) to contrast a growing disregard for morality, react against 'spiritual' preaching and combine human interest with an increasing desire of independence from providence. They were indeed aware of the limits imposed on knowledge by "inference from the will (whether faculty or function) through interests, passions and appetites" (Griffin 1992, 67), and for this reason they meant to instruct while delivering urgent messages which could "sway the mind and subdue the will" (Mitchell 1962, 93, 109). They knew how to exploit the passions to secure reasonable assent to religion.

The tripartite sermon introduced by John Wilkins (1614-1672) in his compendium *Ecclesiastes* combined the appeal to both reason and passions in sermon writing. As a member of the Royal Society and one of the most assiduous promoters of the 'plain style' sermon, Wilkins believed that the purpose of preaching is "to inform or to persuade". He therefore advised divines to open their discourse with an explication followed by confirmation and to end it with an application. Explication and confirmation serve to "satisfie mens judgments and consciences" so they have to be methodical and well-studied because they appeal to the rational faculties. The last part of the sermon, the application, is addressed directly to "eager and vehement affections" (Wilkins 1675, *Ecclesiastes* quoted in Rivers 2005, 51), the gate through which the preacher can win the audience's hearts. Being a specifically Latitudinarian device in the sermon (Lessenich 1972, 115), the application answered their necessity of increasing Man's practical morality (111). Application is often announced in the partition and it is marked by a direct appeal to the audience. In it, the preacher can deliberately employ all those rhetorical expedients which are meant to raise the audience's attention: metaphors, comparisons, exclamations and climax (117), thus applying the "sublime and pathetic style" that has the power to conquer the hearts (Rollin quoted in Lessenich 1972, 119). Confirmation and application together fulfil the purpose of the sermon, i.e. to lead Man into action by getting to the understanding in conquering and subduing the passions through reasonable judgment.

This article seeks to show how the reintroduction of the distinction between persuasion by reason and persuasion by passions commonly made in secular rhetoric (Morrissey 2002, 703) eventually brought to light the necessity of analysing passions and of rhetorically exploiting them in re-

ligious writings to encourage practical moral reformation based on reasonable assent. The sermons of Archbishop John Tillotson (1630-1694), a divine appreciated for his calmness and sobriety, are taken here as a case-study to prove that sermons provided a definition of passions and an analysis of their effects; they set a prescription to subdue and control them but also exploit them to make the audience actively participate in society.

Perfecting the rationalising potential of the tripartite sermon, Tillotson eventually “set a Pattern to Himself” (Burnet quoted in Mitchell 1962, 334): his style embodied “the earnestness of the Puritans with the rational element of the Cambridge Platonists” (Mitchell 1962, 336-7) and it gained him the reputation of being “the best polemical divine [this day] in England” (Bowden 2010, 66). His fame was declared by his preaching in a ‘plain and edifying way’ particularly appreciated by his educated, metropolitan congregations. His sentences were “short and clear”, and the “thread plain and distinct” (Burnet 1694, 12-14) with the purpose of making religion “an integral part of everyday life” (Simon 1967, 282-3). Tillotson’s sermons might appear rather encyclopedic and scientific in their approach to religion to modern readers: each topic is listed in the partition, and it is usually developed into numbered divisions which allow the reader to “knowingly follow where he [the preacher] led” (deSilva 2006, 387). Though Tillotson was often accused of writing ‘moral essays’ rather than sermons, the clear, reiterative structure he used and the implicit simplicity in his explanation of the mysteries of religion were employed to the sole purpose of eliciting from his congregations “a moral certainty in the principles of Christianity” (Bowden 2010, 68). Indeed, in the funeral sermon written to commemorate Tillotson’s eternal rest, Bishop Gilbert Burnet reminded the audience that his purpose in preaching was

the reforming of Mens Natures, and governing their Actions, the restraining of their Appetites, and Passions, the softening of their Tempers, and sweetening their Humours, the composing of their Affections, and the raising their minds above the Interests and Follies of this present World. (Burnet 1694, 30-2)

Like most of the Latitudinarians, Tillotson believed that the “rational part of the soul”, which produces “full conviction, deliberate choice, and firm resolution”, should completely govern the “sensitive” part, including the “fancy and appetite”, which operated by “some hidden *impetus* and transport of desire after a thing” (Griffin 1992, 70). Although Tillotson considered the mind of Man as “the great miracle of the world” and “the contrivance of it an eminent instance of GOD’s wisdom” (Tillotson, vol. 8, 3417,

Sermon 137), he also conceded its imperfection and short-sightedness<sup>1</sup> and acknowledged the trouble caused by the Man's "stiff and stubborn wills" (vol. 6, 1572, Sermon 98). The wills are responsible for making assent to religious precepts "easy or difficult" (vol. 7, 2231-2, Sermon 128) and Man is unaware of the liberty and power they have.<sup>2</sup> Discussions on the unpredictability of the wills are expanded in the sermons concerning covetousness, "a disease of the mind, and an unnatural thirst, which is inflamed by that which should quench it" (vol. 6, 1461-2, Sermon 91). Here the power of the wills over reason is testified because Man chooses to be driven away by inordinate desires, and completely forgets his duty to himself and, which is even more dangerous, to others:

Men resist the doctrine of the holy scriptures; not because they have sufficient reason to doubt of their divine authority; but because they are unwilling to be govern'd by them, and to conform their lives to the laws and precepts of that holy book: for the wills of men have a great influence upon their understandings. (Vol. 7, 2231-2, Sermon 128)

With humours and inclinations on their sides, the wills govern the capacity to rationally detect and accept the advantages of religion to happiness. They lead to sin which is 'a thing of so stupefying a nature as to make men insensible of their danger, although it be so near, and so terrible' (vol. 1, 247, Sermon 10). If, therefore, the passions control the wills and "the eloquence of reason" (Mitchell 1962, 336), cognition is restricted to individual needs and interests and Man neither becomes aware of his dependence upon God nor improves his moral standards to participate in the advance of society. Taken as a whole, Tillotson's intentions were therefore preeminently practical. He instructed congregations and reading public about the passions while exploiting them to bring about the reformation of manners he so strongly advocated for.

Tillotson's willingness to ensure active conversation and engagement in the public can be definitely uncovered in the use of the passions. He draws on fear and self-love, "the two great principles of religion" (Tillotson, vol. 1, 2, Sermon 1), to engage people's hearts and feelings. Scripture itself asserts the need of these drives to be led to virtue because "the most powerful arguments, that GOD ever used, to persuade Men to any thing, are

1 "Our best reason is but very short and imperfect: but since it is no better, we must make use of it as it is, and make the best of it" (Tillotson, 4: 834, Sermon 56).

2 "There are many things likewise in our selves, which no man is able in any measure to comprehend, as to the manner how they are done and performed: as the vital union of body and soul [...]. The like may be said of the operations of our several faculties of sense and imagination, of memory and reason, and especially of the liberty of our wills" (Tillotson, 3: 376, Sermon 48).

the promise of eternal happiness, and the terror of everlasting torments” (vol. 5, 1022-3, Sermon 66).

Fear is the gate through which “religion usually makes it’s first entrance”. It is described as “a passion that is most deeply rooted in our natures, and flows immediately from that principle of self-preservation which GOD hath planted in every man” (vol. 1, 5, Sermon 1). A persuasive divine knows that “fear ariseth from within, from the nature of man which is apt to imagine dreadful things” (vol. 1, 35, Sermon 1), and that it helps to “shake off [man’s] sloth and security” (vol. 2, 441, Sermon 34). Man is portrayed as living “in the fearful apprehensions of an invisible judge” (vol. 1, 48, Sermon 1): displeasure of God is stronger than “desire, love and hope” (vol. 1, 5, Sermon 1) as Man has lost his impressions of a paradisiacal past but not the sensation of pain and misery:

There is no passion in the heart of man more infinite than our fear, it troubles us with jealousy and suspicion of the utmost that may happen; but when we have extended our fears to the utmost, the power of GOD’s wrath reacheth farther. (Vol. 8, 3702, Sermon 152)

When Tillotson depicts the passions, he ensures that the fearful prospect he delineates encouragingly threatens his audience to consider their mischief. He either rephrases some biblical metaphors or depicts other menacing pictures related to the field of physiology and warfare. Moreover, the tone is harsh and the scenario the audience can easily envision is rather calamitous. A passionate Man is like a troubled sea:<sup>3</sup>

Nothing is more turbulent and unquiet than the spirit of a wicked man; it is like the sea, when it roars and rages through the strength of contrary winds; it is the scene of furious lusts, and wild passions, which as they are contrary to holiness, so they maintain perpetual contests and feuds among themselves. (Vol. 8, 3522, Sermon 142)

The operations of the passions are often associated with blindness and physical impairment. Bodily reactions are immediately visible: Man becomes “very hot and impatient” and feels he is in “a very unnatural and uneasy state” (vol. 3, 91-2, Sermon 38). Man’s “degeneracy and weakness” (vol. 2, 277-8, Sermon 28) become an incurable disease when the “inferior faculties, our sensitive appetite and passions are broke loose and have got head of our reason” (vol. 2, 274, Sermon 28). Once conquered by its lusts, the mind of Man is “almost as hard to be rectified as it is to recover a body

<sup>3</sup> Tillotson often portrays the passions as a troubled sea drawing inspiration from Isaiah 57:20. Cf. vol. 2, 118, Sermon 23; vol. 1, 283 and 293, Sermon 12; vol. 1, 115, Sermon 4; vol. 3, 179, Sermon 41.

bowed down with age to it's first streightness" (vol. 1, 243, Sermon 10). Tillotson claims that "fleshly lusts [...] pollute and defile, [...] quench and extinguish" (vol. 5, 1069, Sermon 69) Man's divine part and he compares the "clouds and mists" which impede sight to "the lusts and corruptions of men [are] to the understanding", as they "hinder it to a clear perception of heavenly things" (vol. 6, 1391, Sermon 87).<sup>4</sup> Their effects, too, allude to mental disorder and physical suffering:

Sensual pleasures soon die and vanish; but that is not the worst of them, they leave a sting behind them; and when the pleasure is gone, nothing remains but guilt, and trouble, and repentance. (Vol. 9, 3792, Sermon 158)

Passions are assimilated to the worst political catastrophe ever, as "cross and perverse inclinations from within", like "a tyrant at home, and always ready at hand to domineer over [Man]" vol. 2, 276 and 285, Sermon 28). When carried out by his lusts, Man becomes like a horse "that has no understanding; yea in this more brutish than the beast, that he rusheth into the battel without any consideration of death or danger, and destroys himself without a syllogism" (vol. 1, 390, Sermon 16). These threatening images suggest the necessity of obedience to God to ensure guidance and help in time of distress. If read on a broad, national level, they remind the audience of the political necessity of having an upright leader to govern the reign. If the country is crawling with "undutiful children, slothful and unfaithful servants, scandalous members of the church" who are "unprofitable to the commonwealth, disobedient to governors both ecclesiastical and civil; and in a word burthens of the earth, and so many plagues of human society" (vol. 3, 436, Sermon 50), it is because education is defective and ignorance is spreading. The lack of proper religious teachings generates "new and wild opinions, a factitious and uncharitable spirit, a furious and boisterous zeal" (vol. 4, 487, Sermon 52) and increases Man's degeneracy:

great part of us are degenerated into beasts and devils, wallowing in abominable and filthy lusts, indulging ourselves in those devilish passions of malice and hatred, of strife and discord, or revenge and cruelty,

<sup>4</sup> 'Only religion can purify man's mind by "quenching the fire of lust and suppressing the fumes and vapours of it, and by scattering the clouds and mists of passions" (vol. 1, 111-12, Sermon 4). "Therefore it concerns us to put on meekness, and humility, and modesty, that we may be able to judge impartially of things, and our minds be preserved free and indifferent to receive the truths of GOD, when they are offer'd to us: otherwise self-conceit and passion will so blind our minds, and bias our judgements, that we shall be unable to discern, and unwilling to entertain the plainest and most evident truths" (vol. 7, 1972-3, Sermon 117).

of sedition and disturbance of the publick peace to that degree, as if the grace of GOD had never appeared to us to teach us the contrary. (Vol. 6, 1579-80, Sermon 98)

Being often associated with the description of future punishments, fear is therefore employed to stress the role of religion as the sole guarantee of social order, a pleasurable life and of eternal happiness. When the misguided Man departs from religion, all he can enjoy is loss of pleasure, confusion and horror:

Without religion the life of man is a wild, and fluttering, and inconsistent thing, without any certain scope or design. The vicious man lives at random, and acts by chance: for he that walks by no rule can carry on no settled and steady design. [...] They hurry from one vanity and folly to another; and plunge themselves into drink, not to quench their thirst, but their guilt; wretched and inconsiderate man! (Vol. 2, 292, Sermon 28)

Recalling the dangers and calamities that befall the prodigal son once he decides to leave his father, Tillotson provides a visual description of the horrors of hell and damnation: once Man has passed away and the pain in his body has finished, his soul will suffer atrociously to eternity. The exact description of the torments of hell while claiming the impossibility of describing its monstrosity makes the picture even more effective to the amazed minds of his parishioners:

Could I represent to you the horror of that dismal prison, into which wicked and impure souls are to be thrust, and the misery they must there endure, without the least spark of comfort, or glimmering of hope, how they wail and grone under the intolerable wrath of GOD, the insolent scorn and cruelty of devils, the severe sashes and stings, the raging anguish and horrible despair of their own minds, without intermission, without pity, without hope of ever seeing an end of that misery, which yet is unsupportable for one moment; could I represent these things to you according to the terror of them, what effect must they have upon us? (Vol. 7, 1854, Sermon 112)

While threatening the audience's imagination in this way, Tillotson reminds them that "the interest of our everlasting happiness should lie near our hearts" (vol. 1, 309, Sermon 13). It is happiness, indeed, that he takes as the criterion to judge one's actions and present situation:

Art thou sure thou art in the right? thou art a happy man, and hast reason to be pleased: What cause then, what need is there of being angry?

Hath a man reason on his side? what would he have more? Why then does he fly into a passion? (Vol. 3, 92, Sermon 38)

Tillotson, therefore, plays upon their self-love that governs Man's search after happiness as it generates "a natural dread and horror of everything that can destroy [his] being" (vol. 1, 4, Sermon 1). Man should meditate upon the truth of divine promises to fight vicious inclinations by opposing "to the present temptations of sense the great and endless happiness and misery of the other world" (vol. 5, 994, Sermon 64). In trying to subdue the audience's self-love, Tillotson's tone is mellifluous, and the images he represents to their minds are joyful and alluring, as he seeks to convince them of the advantages of a religious life. When self-love is subdued to reason, Man understands that the most profitable way to attain eternal happiness is by securing honest and charitable behaviour in this life, thus making morality the hinge on which religion turns. Tillotson insists on the pleasure derived from living a satisfactory life in which people are able to meet the requests of their passionate and spiritual sides. "Spurred on by the powerful incentives of eternal reward and punishment" (Scholtz 1998, 204), Latitudinarian morality is therefore unavoidably linked to self-interest. The benefits derived from morally upright conduct are health, peace of mind and liberty. The gospel can cure Man's inadequacy as it "would raise us to the perfection of all virtue and goodness, [...] to relieve the infirmities and weakness of human nature" (vol. 6, 1578, Sermon 98). Moreover, Man can be blessed with a holy state which is "the essential and principal ingredient of happiness", "a state of peace and happiness, the very frame and temper of happiness" (vol. 7, 3519, Sermon 142). When Man becomes his best companion, if he is at ease with the world and in peace with his own conscience and with his Creator, he lives "a continuous feast" (vol. 3, 98, Sermon 38).

As Man is too easily tempted by "the allurements of the world and sensual pleasures" and he is carried away by his own "heart's lusts" (vol. 7, 1903-4; 1911): the only means he has to contrast these pretences is by being educated in a Christian environment. This principle can be applied particularly to children: as human beings are "naturally inclined to evil", neglecting children's education results in their habituation to "sin and vice" whose effects extend to "the publick, and to posterity" (vol. 4, 514-15, Sermon 53). Fear is once more used by Tillotson to report the cry of a neglected child on the day of judgement:

Had you been as careful to teach me the good knowledge of the LORD, [...] to instruct me in my duty, I had not now stood trembling here in a fearful expectation of the eternal doom which is just ready to be pass'd upon me. Cursed be the man that begat me, and the paps that gave me

suck. It is to you that I must in a great measure owe my everlasting undoing. (Tillotson, vol. 4, 518, Sermon 53)

When confronting his congregation, Tillotson acts like the model father he describes in his sermons on education: following what seems a scientific methodical analysis, he encourages them to observe, identify and check their passions and appetites. This idea implies a participating effort on Man's side, a proneness to self-analysis and the consequent necessity of active participation in social life, while perfection to the divine law is not wholly required, mitigated by a sincere obedience to it according to one's capacity, as the covenant of leniency claims:

By the happiness of a good education, and the merciful providence of GOD, a great part of many mens virtue consists in their ignorance of vice, and their being kept out of the way of great and dangerous temptations; rather in the good customs they have been bred up to, than in the deliberate choice of their wills; and rather in the happy preventions of evil, than in their resolute constancy in that which is good. (Vol. 1, 380, Sermon 16)

This method seems to work so well that Tillotson can affirm that even those tempers that are next to desperate are "not utterly intractable to the grace of GOD and to the religious care of Parents" (vol. 4, 502, Sermon 53).

To conclude, we might assert that human depravity is the only motive to employ self-love and stir fear in sermons, as the power of passions cannot be defeated just by reasonable lucidity. Tillotson had to give these concessions to frail human nature to the sole purpose of promoting reformation, and this defeat proved the absolute necessity of including passionate appeals in sermons to make them effective. He justifies the use of these drives because he acknowledges their interdependence: "Religion [...] directs men to their duty by the shortest and plainest precepts of a good life; it persuades men to the obedience of these precepts, by the promise of eternal happiness, and the threatenings of eternal misery in case of obstinate disobedience; it offers us the assistance of GOD's HOLY SPIRIT, to help our weakness" (vol. 7, 2012, Sermon 119).

Taking into consideration the mutable and inconsistent nature of Man and of his thoughts, as well as that of the world, the only thing a wise divine can do is to act like the Holy Spirit that leads Man to virtue "by opening our heart to let in the light of divine truth upon our minds, by representing to us the advantage of such arguments and considerations as are apt to persuade us to embrace it, and yield to it; by secret and gentle reprehensions softening our hard heart, and bending our stiff and stubborn wills to a compliance with the will of GOD, and our duty" (vol. 6, 1572, Sermon 98).

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