

Notes and Queries

Query: Reverend

In *Tradition Today* No. 1, Sandy Hobbs raised the following points on the conventions surrounding the term “reverend” with reference to a clergyman, observing that the terminology may be changing in Britain today to reflect perceived American usage:

- a. One might say “Rev. John Smith”, “Rev. Mr. Smith” but not “Rev. Smith”.
- b. One did not employ “reverend” when addressing a clergyman, i.e. one addressed him as “Mr. Smith” but not as “Reverend Mr. Smith”.
- c. Exceptions: Rev. Smith was an Americanism; the address “Reverend sir” was archaic.

Using the search engines of Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org/), The Literature Network (www.online-literature.com/), and Google Books (books.google.com/), I have assembled some examples of former usage which illustrate and expand on these points, though fail to provide definitive answers. First, an early query on a similar subject: On the Title *Reverend* – applied to Lawyers.

The Monthly Repository of Theology and General Literature, January to December inclusive, 1815, Vol. X, Hackney, Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1815, 78:

MISCELLANEOUS COMMUNICATIONS

[All spellings and italics in the following are reproduced as printed]

“Sir, Jan 6, 1815,

It is well known that a titular sanctity is ascribed, in a regular gradation, to the established clergy. From the lowly deacon to the prebendary they are simply *Reverend*. The dean is *Very Reverend*, the bishop *Right Reverend*, and, to finish the climax, the archbishop is *Most Reverend* and *His Grace*.

There is another description of Christian ministers who, I trust, generally regard it as their highest distinction, to have been appointed by their brethren to preside in their assemblies, and to promote their religious improvement. Yet such also allow themselves to be styled *Reverend*, thus copying, not very consistently, their *Presbyterian* ancestors, who indeed were champions of Religious Liberty, according to their *partial* historians, *Calamy*, *Neal* and *Palmer*, but were only *priests writ large* according to *Milton*, who spake what he knew and testified what he had seen. Of this latter description of Christian ministers there is, however, I am persuaded, a large and increasing number who would cheerfully disencumber themselves of the title *Reverend*, could they find another concise appellation to distinguish them from busy traders and idle gentlemen.

I have taken rather a circuitous course to make some inquiries suggested by the following title-page of a small volume now before me. “A perfect Abridgment of the Eleven Books of Reports of the Reverend and Learned Knight Sir Edward Cook, sometimes Chief Justice of the Upper Bench. Originally written in French, by Sir John Davis, sometimes Attorney-General in Ireland. Done into English.” London, 1651.

You will observe that this Abridgment was published during the Commonwealth. Can any of your readers, learned in the law, inform me whether legal dignitaries were then first denominated *reverend*, or if they still claim the title? In that case the present remote successor of Sir Edward Cook should be described not only as the noble and learned, but also, or rather *imprimis*, as the *reverend* Lord Ellenborough, while the Chief Justice of Chester, the present Attorney-General may, without our incurring the charge of *garrulity*, be also stiled *reverend*.

PLEBEIUS.”

Examples of “Reverend” followed by “Mr. [surname]”, from (British) nineteenth century literature:

- Robert Traill, *The Works of the Late Reverend Robert Traill*, Edinburgh, 1810 (Google Books): p. iv: ... the late Reverend Mr. Traill ...
- George Horne, *The Works of the Right Reverend George Horne*, 1818 (Google Books):
 p. 35: “The reverend Mr. Welbourne of Wendelbury ...”
 p. 38: “The reverend Dr. Wetherell, now dean of Hereford ...”
 p. 107: “... the late reverend Mr. Parkhurst ...”
 p. 192: “... and of the reverend Mr. Curtis of Birmingham, ...”
- Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839): “the Reverend Mr. What’s-his-name” (spoken by a character)
- Mrs Gaskell, *North and South* (1855), Ch. 7: “what he did not care to do for a Reverend Mr. Hale ...”
- Anthony Trollope, *The Warden* (1855), Ch. I: a first reference to “The Rev. Septimus Harding”, thereafter both referred to and addressed as “Mr. Harding”.
- Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers* (1857), Ch. I: a first reference to “the Rev. Mr. Slope”, thereafter both referred to and addressed as “Mr. Slope”.
- Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (1865): “The Reverend Mr. Jones of Blewbury” (spoken by a character)
- Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), Ch. 2: “... with his eyes on the Reverend Mr. Crisparkle”.

Clergymen in Jane Austen are both addressed and referred to simply as “Mr”: “Mr. Collins” (*Pride and Prejudice*); “Mr. Elton” (*Emma*); and I have been unable to find even one reference to the word “reverend” in her entire oeuvre.

Usage in nineteenth century American literature:

In the classic literature of nineteenth century America, clergymen are referred to as in England at the same period: “Rev. Mr. (or Christian name) (X)”:

- Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Ch. VIII: “ ‘And there is a weighty import in what my young brother hath spoken,’ added the Rev. Mr. Wilson.”

Ch. IX: “... the Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale ... was haunted either by Satan himself or Satan's emissary ...”

“ ‘Were it God's will,’ said the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale ...”

- Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), Ch. 5: “After the hymn had been sung, the Rev. Mr. Sprague turned himself into a bulletin-board ...”

However, I can find no instance of the use of the appellation “Reverend” in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Moby Dick*, or the works of Henry James.

An exception?

P. G. Wodehouse, “Work” in *Tales of St. Austin's*, London, Adam and Charles Black (1903) (a collection of essays and short stories previously published in the schoolboy magazines *The Captain* and *Public School Magazine*):

“In the dear, dead days (beyond recall), I used often to long to put the case to my form-master in its only fair aspect, but always refrained from motives of policy. Masters are so apt to take offence at the well-meant endeavours of their form to instruct them in the way they should go.

What I should have liked to have done would have been something after this fashion. Entering the sanctum of the Headmaster, I should have motioned him to his seat--if he were seated already, have assured him that to rise was unnecessary. I should then have taken a seat myself, taking care to preserve a calm fixity of demeanour, and finally, with a preliminary cough, I should have embarked upon the following moving address: ‘My dear sir, my dear **Reverend Jones or Brown** (as the case may be), believe me when I say that your whole system of work is founded on a fallacious dream and reeks of rottenness. No, no, I beg that you will not interrupt me. The real state of the case, if I may say so, is briefly this: a boy goes to school to enjoy himself, and, on arriving, finds to his consternation that a great deal more work is expected of him than he is prepared to do. What course, then, **Reverend Jones or Brown**, does he take? He proceeds to do as much work as will steer him safely between the, ah--I may say, the Scylla of punishment and the Charybdis of being considered what my, er--fellow-pupils euphoniously term a swot. That, I think, is all this morning. Good day. Pray do not trouble to rise. I will find my way out.’ ”

Wodehouse was 22 at the time of writing, decades before he became a US citizen, so this usage was probably not influenced by any change in the American convention. But was this imagined form of address simply facetious?

Examples of reference to “the Reverend [Christian name]” when speaking of the character:

- Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1850): “the Reverend Horace” [Crewler]
- Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (1865): “the Reverend Frank” [Milvey].

- E. Nesbit, *The Incomplete Amorist* (1906), Ch. X: “The Reverend Cecil” [Underwood]

This mode of reference can convey very subtle impressions depending on context: sometimes a pleasing blend of the respectful and the familiar is understood, at other times the term can have a marked sardonic edge.

Modern internet search engines make hunting for single words and phrases in digitised works of literature comparatively simple. However, the above clearly is by no means an exhaustive compendium even of literary sources, and includes no examples from the mass media, which might well be instructive. I have found multiple examples to support Mr. Hobbs’s first two observations (with the possible exception of Wodehouse) but have notably failed to pinpoint if, and when, and where, usage changed from the earlier “Reverend Mr. X” to the simple “Reverend X”, and thus go only part way to addressing his query.

Janet E. Alton
Centre for English Traditional Heritage