

Smith, Michael ^[1]

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by M. Jimmie Killingsworth, 1994

1698–ca. 1771

Michael Smith, preacher and poet, was born in County Meath, Ireland, the son of the Reverend Robert Smith. Educated at [Trinity College](#) ^[2], Dublin, he was ordained an Anglican priest by the bishop of London in 1747 and served five years as curate at Hertford-shire.

As a missionary of the [Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts](#) ^[3] (SPG), Smith settled in South Carolina in 1752. In the following year, during his ministry to Prince Frederick's Parish and Prince George's Parish, his wife and three of his eight children died, and from about this time rumors began to spread about his disreputable character. On 2 May 1756 the church officers of Prince Frederick's Parish wrote to the SPG charging Smith with a number of atrocities, including living with a woman whom he had not married according to law, incurring large debts, gaming, and neglecting his parish duties and his family.

Between 1753 and 1756 Smith traveled frequently and acquired for himself a good reputation in North Carolina. When the doors of the churches in Georgetown County were closed to him in 1756, he left South Carolina and began to minister to the parish of St. James in [Wilmington](#) ^[4]. He was an active and apparently popular preacher throughout the coastal region, in [Cape Fear](#) ^[5], and in [New Hanover](#) ^[6], [Brunswick](#) ^[7], and [Johnston](#) ^[8] counties. In 1756, in New Bern, [James Davis](#) ^[9] printed a sermon Smith had preached the previous year while still officially engaged by his South Carolina parishes. *[Sermon, Preached in Christ-Church in Newbern, in North-Carolina . . . Before the Ancient and Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons](#)* ^[10], though it is a standard exercise on the theme of brotherly love, typical of eighteenth-century sermons preached before such audiences, is nevertheless one of the few Anglican sermons surviving from colonial North Carolina and is a good example of the plain-style discourse. On 6 Oct. 1756 Smith preached again in New Bern, this time before the governor and both houses of the Assembly. The following day the lower house resolved to thank him and to ask for a copy of his sermon to be printed. (If the sermon was printed, it is no longer extant.)

Among his regular congregations, Smith had some difficulty competing with the persistent Anabaptists, [dissenters](#) ^[11], and other "enthusiastical sects," but in a 1758 letter to the SPG secretary, he reported some progress for the established church. In the 26 Apr.–3 May 1760 issue of the *South Carolina Gazette*, there appeared an extravagantly patriotic poem, "[On the Reduction of Guadaloupe by the Reverend Mr. Smith of Cape Fear](#)" ^[12], the earliest evidence that Smith was a poet of some talent. The 165 lines of handsomely crafted heroic couplets, replete with classical and biblical allusions, lavishly praise William Pitt and the British military.

But just as Smith was establishing himself as an author and preacher of merit in North Carolina, his bad reputation caught up with him. Acting on the complaints from his South Carolina parishioners, the SPG relieved him of his duties in 1759. His parishioners in North Carolina sent several letters defending his character and ability to the SPG. Each noted the difficulties under which he worked—the number of places he had to travel, his small salary, his large family, and the popular prejudice against the established church. When Smith went to England to defend himself, the SPG refused to grant him a hearing. He was not restored to his mission, but he did return to North Carolina. By 1762 he had been made a chaplain on a British warship.

Later Smith returned to England and became vicar of South Mimms in Hertfordshire. He found a patron in the Earl of Hillsborough and published two books. *[Twelve Sermons, Preached upon Several Occasions](#)* ^[13] (1770) is a collection of straightforward doctrinal sermons and moral lessons composed for a colonial audience. *[Christianity Unmasked; or Unavoidable Ignorance Preferable to Corrupt Christianity: A Poem: In Twenty-one Cantos](#)* ^[14] (1771) is Smith's greatest achievement as an author. The dedicatory preface to Hillsborough contains a lengthy analysis of the SPG's failures in the colonies, and the poem itself is remarkable for the wit and versatility displayed by the author. It is a long verse essay in Hudibrastic and heroic couplets blending satiric, discursive, and heroic verse in a unique way. In the poem Smith viciously attacks the "corrupt" opponents of Anglicanism (Catholics ^[15], dissenters, "enthusiasts," and Deists) and holds up the [Church of England](#) ^[16] as the most rational and least corrupt of God's instruments. *Christianity Unmasked* is Smith's last extant work. Nothing is known of his death.

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From:

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