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Religious Opinion in the Prose Letters of John Donne

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WHEN John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's, died in 1631 he was perhaps the most famous preacher in England. He was, says Izaak Walton,

A Preacher in earnest; weeping sometimes for his Auditory, sometimes with them: always preaching to himself, like an Angel from a cloud, but in none; carrying some, as St. Paul was, to Heaven in holy raptures, and inciting others by a sacred Art and Courtship to amend their lives; here picturing a vice so as to make it ugly to those that practised it; and a vertue so, as to make it be beloved even by those that lov'd it not; and all this with a most particular grace and an unexpressible addition of comeliness.¹

Donne had also achieved literary fame enough to have fathered a "metaphysical school" of poetry and to be regarded by Ben Jonson as the "first poet in the world in some things."² Preacher and Poet: this double public image of Donne is neatly put in the best known elegy on him, that of Thomas Carew:

Here lies a King, that rul'd as he saw fit
The universall Monarchy of wit;
Here lie two Flamens, and both those, the best,
Apollo's first, at last, the true Gods Priest.

Donne is known, as he should be, chiefly in his poems and sermons. In the poems, most of which were circulated only in private, manuscript form, Donne was his most intense, witty, and intricate self. They manifest an introspective habit of the closest, subtlest, and most personal kind. Although they have all the restless wit and intensity of the poems, the sermons are for general consumption and edification. In them sounds Donne's public, hortatory voice. His poems are some of the most personal documents ever composed; his sermons are the record of an important and much-admired public figure. But the simple-minded opposition of Jack Donne of the *Songs and Sonets* to Dean Donne of the sermons is a thing of the past. Especially in fundamental habits of mind and expression there was a good deal of the Dean in Jack Donne and of Jack in the Dean.

Donne's letters are not so well known.³ The majority of those surviving

1. Izaak Walton, *Lives* (Oxford World's Classics), p. 49.

2. See Ben Jonson's *Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden*, ed. R. F. Patterson (London: Blackie & Son, 1923), p. 11.

3. There is not yet a definitive edition of the letters. The chief collections are to be found in Edmund Gosse's *The Life and Letters of John Donne*, 2 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1899); C. F. Merrill's edition of *Donne's Letters to Several Persons of Honour* (New York: Sturgis & Walton Co., 1910), first collected and edited by John Donne, Jr., in 1651; *John Donne: Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*,

are to close friends; they are intimate and informal in tone and range from early to late in his career. They therefore provide a corrective to extreme, over-simple views of Donne—all the more because they are not self-conscious performances either in the personal, lyrical sense of the poems or in the public, oratorical sense of the sermons. The letters confirm the double image of Donne, both Jack and Dean, and in so doing they fill it in and stabilize it against extremes. This essay will show by implication how the letters perform just such a function; but more directly, its purpose is to fill in, from the letters, what we already know of Donne's opinions on a variety of religious matters. I should refer the reader particularly to Helen Gardner's Introduction to her edition of Donne's *Divine Poems* (Oxford, 1952) and to Chapter IV of Evelyn Simpson's *A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1948); this article offers a series of gleanings from Donne's letters which confirm and elaborate slightly the findings of these two excellent scholars. The general technique of this essay will be as far as possible to let the letters speak for themselves. The Elizabethan and Jacobean context of religious policy and controversy will be taken as understood.

At all stages in his career religious issues were very obviously of extreme interest to Donne. This is as true of the years when he was a young student-lawyer about town—"not dissolute, but very neat"—before he was committed to either Anglicanism or Roman Catholicism, as it is for his years as the Dean of St. Paul's. We should then rightfully expect Donne's letters, early and late, to say a good deal about this interest of his. In his public pieces such as the sermons a man in Donne's position would have a public responsibility to balance nicely between orthodoxy of opinion and originality of expression. The fact that James I fancied himself a theologian made matters all the more ticklish for the Dean of St. Paul's, especially in regard to what was currently orthodox. As a matter of fact, Donne's sermons did get him into trouble, although very briefly, once with James and once with Charles.⁴ But in his letters to friends Donne was obliged to be neither so careful nor so arresting. It is useless to expect from these letters a consistent theological system. They discuss matters on the level of personal opinion and temperamental preference. The exceptions to this are the few formal, consolatory letters and those carefully composed epistles to great men and potential patrons in which occur religious sentiments of one kind or another.

In Donne's day the Church of England was heavily engaged on two fronts

ed. John Hayward (London: Nonesuch Press, 1949); *A Collection of Letters, Made by Sr. Tobie Mathews. Kt.*, ed. John Donne, Jr. (London, 1660); *The Losely Manuscripts*, ed. A. J. Kempe (London: John Murray, 1836), pp. 321-47; E. M. Simpson, *A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), Chap. XII. Donne's authorship of some of the letters reprinted by Mrs. Simpson is under dispute.

4. See Walton's *Lives*, 42-3. Donne's extreme surprise at Charles' behaviour is shown in a note to his friend Ker: Freely to you I say, I would I were a little more guilty: Onely mine innocency makes me afraid. I hoped for the King's approbation heretofore in many of my sermons; and I have had it. But yesterday I cam very near looking for thanks; for in my life, I was never in any one peece, so studious of his service.

of political-religious controversy against the Roman Catholics and the Dissenters. Donne was minutely versed in these controversies. As shown by his own *Pseudo-Martyr* (1910), his researches on behalf of Dean Morton⁵ had grounded him well in the matter and manner of contemporary religious polemics. Familiarity with the Scholastics was an essential instrument of anti-Roman polemics and Donne had a complete command of the Scholastics too. All this is confirmed by a letter he wrote to Goodyer⁶ from Paris in 1611/12. Here Donne mentions a notable Sorbonist, Dr. Richer, who had written a book "against the Popes jurisdiction, about three months since."⁷ This book, *De ecclesiastica et politica potestate*, was very notorious and Donne informs Goodyer that it was censured both by the French secular authorities and by the clergy, among whom were a number of Richer's fellow Sorbonists. The point is that Donne is already thoroughly familiar with Richer's very recent book and is also prepared to appeal in detail from it to the Scholastics, for he writes:

. . . yet against this censure, and against three or four which have opposed Richer in print, he meditates an answer. Before it should come forth I desired to speak with him, for I had said to some of the Sorbonists of his party, that there was no proposition in his Book, which I could not shew in Catholique authors of 300 years: . . . (Merrill, xlii, 112).⁸

This was a bold claim to have made, and it is a pity that Richer continued to put Donne off, or if he did finally grant him an interview, that we have no record of it. The letters also bear ample witness to Donne's reading in other branches of Divinity, yielding, as they do, a wide range of references that include Church history, Spanish divines, Averroes, St. Thomas, and Church Fathers such as Jerome and Augustine.

In the letters Donne speaks several times about the nature of the soul.⁹ In terms of Renaissance psychology, Donne inclines toward the Platonic organization of soul and body, with the mind as a sort of disputed area between them. Donne may be called a neo-Platonist, though not in the strictest sense, for he does not regard the body and its senses merely as the means by which to ascend to the contemplation of the essentially good and beautiful.

5. Thomas Morton (1564-1659), Bishop of Durham (1632-1659), had a considerable reputation as a controversialist against Roman Catholicism. His most important books were *Apologia catholica* (1605) and *A Catholic Appeale* (1609). Donne seems to have worked with Morton for a while as a kind of research-assistant and secretary.

6. Henry Goodyer was a member of the minor gentry. He was one of Donne's closest friends and by far his most voluminous correspondent.

7. Richer (1559-1631) was principal of Cardinal Le Moine College and Syndic of the University of Paris. The publication of *De ecclesiastica et politica potestate* was the climax of a long running battle with the Jesuits over university policy and the relation of the Gallican Church to the Papacy. Richer was bested in this quarrel, being censured by the bishops of the Province of Sens and compelled to resign his Syndicate in 1612.

8. The reference is to Merrill's edition of *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (cf. n. 3 *supra*). Roman numerals stand for the letter number, Arabic numerals for the page number. Many of Donne's letters are undated. In the references which follow, dates are given only if we know them or can make a reasonably accurate guess.

9. For a good discussion of Donne's thought on the soul, and especially on the state of the soul after death, see Helen Gardner, *op. cit.*, xliii-xlvii and Appendix A.

The opinion of the relation of soul to body in his famous poem "The Extasie" is confirmed exactly in a letter to Goodyer:

Our nature is Meteorique, we respect (because we partake so) both earth and heaven, for as our bodies glorified shall be capable of spirituall joy, so our souls demerged into those bodies, are allowed to partake earthly pleasure. Our soul is not sent hither, only to go back again: we have some errand to do here: nor is it sent into prison, because it comes innocent: and he which sent it, is just (Merrill, xvii, 40. 1612?).

It is true that in a mood of "severer contemplation" Donne writes to Goodyer,

As I have much quenched my senses, and disused my body from pleasure, and so tried how I can indure to be mine own grave, so I try now how I can suffer a prison. And since it is but to build one wall more about our soul, she is still in her own Center, how many circumferences soever fortune or our own perversnesse cast about her. I would I could as well intreat her to go out, as she knows wither to go (Nonesuch, XII, 458, c. 1609).¹⁰

It is also true that Donne came more and more self-consciously to discipline and mortify his body in the discharge of his ghostly duties. But he regarded his body not only as his soul's instrument, but also as its partner. It was not the soul's prison, but rather the shape, or home, in which the soul had to realize, not its earthly penalty, but its earthly duty. Moreover, the soul being spiritual, and having those supreme capacities of reflecting upon itself¹¹ and of sympathetic recognition of another soul,¹² enjoys a potential independence of its earthbound and material body.

In another letter discussion about the soul brings Donne to consider the vexed question of "how the soul begun in us."¹³ He has serious criticisms to level at both the chief doctrines of the origin of the soul, which are propagation from parents and infusion from God. He does not decide between them in this letter, although elsewhere he speaks of the soul being created when infused and infused when created, thus seeming to range himself on the side of infusion from God. But the point here is not only which doctrine Donne prefers. He is also complaining about two things: first, about unessential theological notions that have come to assume disproportionate importance as the subjects of doctrinal controversy. Hence he remarks that though it is the soul's happiness in the next life that really matters, "Christian Religion . . . hath been content to accept any way which hath been obruded, how this soul begun in us." Since, however, the subject has managed to make itself of extreme if disproportionate interest Donne complains, in the second

10. The reference is to Hayward's edition of Donne (cf. n. 3 *supra*). Roman numerals refer to the letter number, Arabic numerals to the page number. Since Hayward had access to much more recent and accurate Donne scholarship than either Merrill or Gosse, I use his reprints of the letters whenever possible in preference to the other two.

11. I.e., *actum reflexum*. See Merrill, vi, 11.

12. See the beginning of "The Extasie", and also Letter 27 in Mrs. Simpson's collection.

13. Merrill, vi, 14-6.

place, that the weaknesses in both doctrines have long demanded a rigorous examination that so far has not been forthcoming:

In both which opinions there appear such infirmities as it is time to look for a better: . . . there is yet therefore no opinion in Philosophy, nor Divinity, so well established as constrains us to beleeve, both that the soul is immortall, and that every particular man hath such a soul: which since out of the great mercy of our God we do constantly beleeve, I am ashamed that we do not also know it by searching farther: But as sometimes we had rather beleeve a Travellers lie then go to disprove him, so men rather cleave to these ways then seek new: yet because I have meditated therein, I will shortly acquaint you with what I think . . .¹⁴ (Merrill, vi, 14-5, 16. 1607?).

This is not the only letter in which Donne complains about the quality of contemporary religious thought and writing. Goodyer had once left with Donne a copy of Barlow's *An Answer to a Catholic Englishman* (1609), and Donne's criticism of it was scathing:¹⁵

It hath refreshed, and given new justice to my ordinary complaint, That the Divines of these times, are become meer Advocates, as though Religion were a temporall inheritance. . . . They write for Religion, without it, . . . and in the mean time, I will adventure to say to you, without inserting one unnecessary word, that the book is full of falsifications in words, and in sense, and of falsehoods in matter of fact, and of inconsequent and unscholarlike arguings, and of relinquishing the King, in many points of defence, and of contradiction of himself, and of dangerous and suspected Doctrine in Divinitie, and of silly ridiculous triflings, and of extreme flatteries, and of neglecting better and more obvious answers, and of letting slip some enormous advantages which the other gave and he spies not (Merrill, lii, 138, 140-1. 1609?).

Closely allied to this dissatisfaction with contemporary theological thought is Donne's lasting suspicion of all forms of doctrinal exaggeration. Some notions, he thinks, may be helpful and interesting, or even extremely important, which are not vital to belief or necessary to salvation:

. . . in some cases to some men counsels become precepts, and though not immediately from God, yet very roundly and quickly from his Church, (as selling and dividing goods in the first time, continence in the Romane Church, and order and decencie in ours) . . . (Merrill, xxx, 75-76. 1607?).

Such cases are not worth intemperate dispute, and when they arise, reason and moderation must be the deciding issues. Orderly and decent conduct of church affairs is the natural result of consultation with reason.¹⁶ In all this

14. In *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* this letter is addressed to Sir T. Lucy but it is almost certainly to Goodyer. (See R. E. Bennett's two articles on the letters in *Philological Quarterly*, XIX (1940), 66-78 and *PMLA*, LVI (1941), 120-40). As far as I know we have no other letter in which Donne does further acquaint Goodyer with his opinion in this matter.

15. In fairness to the theological thought of the time it should be noted that Barlow was very far from being one of its best representatives.

16. In questions of Church discipline and conduct Donne of course appeals to the New Testament Epistles, but I am not sure whether he would regard them as precept "immediately from God" or as counsels come "roundly and quickly from his Church."

Donne is following Hooker and anticipating Browne, who wrote in the *Religio Medici*,

I condemne not all things in the Councill of Trent nor approve all in the synod of Dort. In briefe, where the Scripture is silent, the Church is my Text; where that speaks, 'tis but my Comment; where there is a joynt silence of both, I borrow not the rules of my Religion from Rome or Geneva, but the dictates of my owne reason (I, v.).

Donne's idea of prayer, and of the whole notion of communion with God, rests firmly upon the motion of God in His grace toward us, especially as it is evident in the Incarnation.¹⁷ It does not rest at all upon any motion of ours towards God:

Though therefore some extreme contemplative philosophers have thought itt to be the highest degree of reverence which man could use towards God to abstaine from outward sacrifices and from verball prayer, because nothinge but our purest thoughts, before they are mingled with any affections and passions, can have any proportion to God or gett within any distance of him, yett they errd, because they thought we went to God in these actions when indeed God comes to us (Nonesuch, XV, 462. 1610).

Donne is strongly protestant in this matter. We are infected and unworthy of a hearing with God. The dignity of our motions of repentance and contrition lies not in our offering them, but in God's accepting them:¹⁸

Yea words which are our subtillest and delicatest outward creatures, being composed of thoughts and breath, are so muddie, so thick, that our thoughts themselves are so, because (except at the first rising) they are ever leavened with passions and affections: And that advantage of nearer familiarity with God, which the act of incarnation gave us, is grounded upon Gods assuming us, not our going to him. (Merrill, xxxvi, 95)

From this he goes on to the matter of fixed devotions, which should be spent rather in praise and thanksgiving than in petition and prayer. Prayers in general should be short, "though God can neither be surprised nor besieged, . . . for, after in the beginning we have well intreated God to hearken, we speak no more to him."

The letters also show Donne much exercised over the correspondence between the ideal form of belief and the outward ethical form of behaviour.¹⁹

Religion is Christianity, which being too spirituall to be seen by us, doth therefore take an apparent body of good life and works, so salvation requires an honest Christian²⁰ (Merrill, xi, 25-6).

17. For a further discussion of Donne on prayer see Simpson, *op. cit.*, 92-3.

18. See Merrill, xxxii, 82.

19. This is implied in his very use of the word "religion," which sometimes seems to be a synonym for Christianity and sometimes to stand for the outward forms of belief in differentiation from "Christianity" as the inward belief itself. The letters certainly complement Gardner's assertion (*op. cit.*, xix) that "in his sermons [Donne] is far more remarkable as a moral than as a dogmatic theologian, and on mystical theology he has almost nothing to say."

20. In this same letter Donne goes on to warn Goodyer not so much against "those who are in other clothes then we" as against those who "are not onely naked, without any fashion of such garments, but have neither the body of Religion, which is moral honestly [*sic*], and sociable faithfulness, nor the soul, Christianity."

The Christian is under an extra obligation to make his outward actions adequate to his inward convictions. The man who is already morally strong and ethically responsible, and who weds this strength to his beliefs—that man will be a superior Christian:

All our moralities are but our outworks, our Christianity is our Citadel; a man who considers duty but the dignity of his being a man, is not easily beat from his outworks, but from his Christianity never . . . (Nonesuch, XXV, 474. 1622).

Of all the religious matters discussed in the letters, perhaps the most interesting are those of conscience and toleration.²¹ Donne feels that it is more important not to go against one's conscience and to be charitable of the beliefs of others, than to be always disputing over the truth to which various consciences are holding various people:

Their [the Spaniards'] autors in Divinity, though they do not show us the best way to heaven, yet they thinke they doe: And so, though they say not true, yet they do not ly, because they speake their Conscience. And since in charity, I beleeve so of them, for their Divinity, In Civility I beleeve it too, for Civill matters, that therein also they meane as they say . . . (Nonesuch, XXVII, 479. 1623).

Once the conscience has assented to what is true for the individual, it is certainly right for him to hold to his truth, even though, from someone else's point of view, he is in error:

. . . yet, as in some cases to some men counsels become precepts, and though not immediately from God, yet very roundly and quickly from his Church, . . . so to me who can do nothing else, it seems to binde my conscience to write; and it is a sin to doe against the conscience, though that erre (Merrill, xxx, 75-6).

It is hard to escape the conclusion that, in this sense, the truth was for Donne a relative matter. For the individual, however, the truth is not relative. This kind of double perspective is expressed by Donne as a young man in his *Satyre III*, which chiefly attacks false attitudes to religion. According to this poem family environment, learning, decisive action, and close inquiry should all collaborate to help the individual climb her steep hill and win to a view of Truth. But "the truth which thou hast found" may be, from someone else's vantage point among the crags and steeps, a total or partial error. Both searchers must keep the truth they have found. Once two or more people arrive in sight of Truth, she will appear more or less different to each one. From this point of view, the truth is relative. The necessity of striking a balance between a suitable toleration and a firm adherence to one's own truth is very well put in a letter to Goodyer:

. . . yet let me be bold to fear, that that sound true opinion, that in all Christian professions there is way to salvation (which I think you think) may have been

21. On Donne's toleration and the related matters of his Anglicanism and feelings about the Roman Church, see especially Gardner, *op. cit.*, xviii-xxi, and Simpson, *op. cit.*, 98-104.

so incommodiously or intempestively sometimes uttered by you; or else your having friends equally near you of all the impressions of Religion, may have testified such an indifferency, as hath occasioned some to further such inclinations, as they have mistaken to be in you. . . . And when you descend to satisfie all men in your own religion, or to excuse others to al, you prostitute your self and your understanding, though not a prey, yet a mark, and a hope, and a subject, for every sophister in Religion to work on (Nonesuch, XXI, 467-8, 469. 1615?).

This view of conscience and of truth is the basis of Donne's religious tolerance. He was peculiarly fitted by circumstance, inclination, and ability, to achieve his remarkably tolerant attitude. He had been brought up a Roman Catholic; he was naturally averse to schism and disorder. Having studied massively in Divinity, and having doubted wisely, he found his truth in the Church of England and kept it there. But to him the Anglican Church was merely a reformed wing of the holy Catholic Church. There was to him fundamentally only one Church—one Body of Christ being plagued by dissension among its parts. This is shown very clearly in a note to Ker, written in 1627, after a slight cloud of the king's disfavour had safely blown over. "My tenets," he writes, "are always for the preservation of the Religion I was born in, and the peace of the State, and the rectifying of the Conscience." Obviously Donne is referring here to the universal Catholic Church as the religion he was born in. He explicitly identifies both the Roman and Anglican communions as parts of the same Church universal:

I will not, nor need you, compare the Religions. The channels of Gods mercies run through both fields; they are sister teats of his graces, yet both diseased and infected, but not both alike (Nonesuch, XXI, 468).

In writing to a Roman Catholic friend of his Donne says,

That we differ in our wayes, I hope we pardon one another. Men go to China, both by the Straights, and by the Cape. I never mis-interpreted your way; nor suffered it to be so, wheresoever I found it in discourse. For I was sure, you took not up your Religion upon trust, but payed ready money for it, and at a high Rate (*Tobie Mathew Collection*, 68-9).²²

The effectual charity and tolerance displayed here also extends the other way to include the dissenting wing of the Church. Temperamentally, Donne was perhaps nearer to the Roman Catholics than to the Presbyterians and Lutherans, but he did not in the least discount these as members of the Church universal, or their establishments as "channels of Gods mercies":

You know I never fettered nor imprisoned the word Religion; not straightning it Frierly . . . nor immuring it in a Rome, or a Wittemberg, or a Geneva; they are all virtuall beams of one Sun, and wheresoever they finde clay hearts, they harden them, and moulder them into dust; and they entender and mollifie waxen (Merrill, xi, 25).

Donne's love of toleration, Catholic unity, and orderliness is most sharply

22. The numerals in this reference (cf. n. 3 *supra*) refer to the page numbers. The correspondent of this letter may well have been Tobie Mathew himself.

offended by the divisions within the English Church itself. In a letter to Goodyer of 1608, he remarks on the conversion from the Church of England to Rome of Hugh Broughton, a great Hebraist of the time who was also notable as a controversialist against the Jews. Donne is here concerned less about the fact that Anglicanism has lost a good man to Romanism, than he is about the interbodily strife within the English Church. This strife not only drives men from the English Church but also leaves neglected much more important causes such as the conversion of the Jews:

. . . you shall see in that course of opposing the Jews, he will produce worthy things: and our Church will perchance blush to have lost a Souldier fit for that great battell; and to cherish onely those single Duellisms, between Rome and England, or that more single, and almost self-homicide, between the unconverted Ministers, and Bishops (Nonesuch, X, 453. c. 1608).

Notwithstanding his tolerance, love of order, and mistrust of schism, Donne could be strongly critical of both Roman Catholicism and extremes of Protestantism. In the same letter to Goodyer that described the controversy in the Gallican Church over Dr. Richer, there is a good illustration of both Donne's hatred of schism and his adverse criticism of the Roman Church. At this point he is discussing yet another occasion for controversy within the French Church:

I doe (I thank God) naturally and heartily abhorre all schism in Religion so much, as, I protest, I am sorry to find this appearance of schism amongst our adversaries the Sorbonists; for I had rather they had held together, to have made a head against the usurpations of the Ro[man] Church, then that their disuniting should so enfeeble them, as the Parliament should be left alone to stand against those tyrannies (Merrill, xlii, 113-4).

In the midst of his criticism Donne is quite discriminating. He does not, for instance, think highly of the general run of French Roman Catholics, but this does not lead him into any blanket condemnation of all adherents to Rome:

And that which affects them as much, as any of these affronts done to the swordmen, is a danger, Servin, the King's Attorney. He is a Catholic, but a French Catholic, and, Sir, French papistry is but like French velvet—a pretty slack Religion, that would soon wear out, and not of the three-piled papistry of Italy and Spain (Gosse, I, 288).²³

Elsewhere, charity and criticism mingle in Donne's reference to the Schoolmen as the "best of ill Divines."²⁴

The common Protestant opinion that the Roman Church catered to the senses at the expense of reason was shared, to some extent, by Donne.

And it is as imperfect which is taught by that religion w^{ch} is most accomodate to sense (I dare not say to reason (though it have appearance of that too)

23. I use Gosse, who was in some respects a very careless editor, only when the letter in question is available neither in Nonesuch nor in Merrill.

24. Simpson, Letter 25, p. 236.

because none may doubt but that that religion is certainly best, which is reasonablest) That all mankinde hath one protecting Angel; All Christians one other, all English one other, all of one Corporation and every civill coagulation or society one other; and every man one other (Merrill, xvii, 38).

It is a little hard to sympathize with Donne's opinion here since the whole scholastic past, if nothing else, is one great monument to reason and the rational method.

Another fairly typical Protestant criticism that Donne makes is aimed against the complexities and accumulations of doctrine which seem to defeat the good effects to exaltation of the "Roman profession":

. . . so the Roman profession seems to exhale, and refine our wills from earthly Dr[e]gs, and Lees, more then the Reformed, and so seems to bring us nearer heaven; but then that carries heaven farther from us, by making us pass so many Courts, and Offices of Saints in this life, in all our petitions, and lying in a painfull prison in the next, during the pleasure not of him to whom we go, and who must be our Judge, but of them from whom we come, who know not our case (Nonesuch, XXI, 468-9).

This letter also contains a flash that lights up his opinion of what are to him the two extremes of Romanism and Protestantism. "This I have feared," he writes, "because heretofore the inobedient Puritans, and now the over obedient Papists attempt you." The inobedience of the Puritans implies, to a man of Donne's convictions and tastes, dissension, schism, and disorder, while the over obedience of the Papists implies a lack of reason and wise doubting, which results in the perpetuation of error. The Puritans were temperamentally as well as doctrinally unsatisfactory from Donne's middle-of-the-road point of view. He shared the common Anglican opinion, developed again very much later by Swift, for instance, in his *Tale of a Tub*, that in external matters such as form, ritual, and Church government, the Puritans were completely over-reformed. Such an opinion is complemented in passages like the following from Donne's *Satyre III*:

Crantz to such brave Loves will not be intrhall'd,
But loves her onely, who at Geneva is call'd
Religion, plaine, simple, sullen, yong,
Contemptuous, yet unhansome; As among
Lecherous humors, there is one that judges
No wenchs wholesome, but course country drudges (11. 49-54).

In *Ignatius his Conclave*, like a boulder braving the torrent of anti-Roman satire, there stands this brief sharp criticism of over-zealous Protestantism:

. . . in the Church of God, some men proceeded so farre in that Reformation, that they endeavoured to draw out, not onely all the peccant and dangerous humours, but all her beautie, and exteriour grace and Ornament, and even her vitall spirits, with her corrupt bloud, and so induce a leannesse, and il-favourednes upon her, . . . (Nonesuch, 388-9).²⁵

25. The general context of this passage is as follows: Machiavelli, newly arrived in Hell, has just put forward his claims to preference, and here Ignatius Loyola is presenting a rebuttal of these claims in a long speech to Lucifer.

In all these things: his tolerance, hatred of schism, emphasis upon reason, assurance of the rightness of the *via media*, and broad but critical sympathy with what he regards as religious extremes, Donne reminds one of Browne, who loved "to use the civility of my knee, my hat, and hand," who thought that "Every man is not a proper Champion for Truth,"²⁶ and who, as we have already seen, emphasized the dictates of his reason in matters of religion.

The consideration of the whole question of religious toleration brings us to the oecumenical quality of Donne's thought.²⁷ He would have been right at home, by temperament and by studied opinion, in the contemporary revival of interest in oecumenicity. His phrases that describe the parts of the universal Church as "virtuall beams of one Sun" and "sister teats of his graces," are physical and material metaphors, emphasizing that to him Christian unity is more than a matter of theoretical, mystical oneness. There is also an effective existential unity in which all members of the Body participate, no matter how diversified:

You know, we say in the Schools, that Grace destroys not Nature: we may say too, that forms of Religion destroy not moralitie, nor civill offices. . . . It is some degree of an union to be united in a serious meditation of God, and to make any religion the rule of our actions (*Tobie Mathew Collection*, 337).

Thus this letter, written to a Roman Catholic, Tobie Mathew, indicates the double unity, essential and existential, of all believers, regardless of their denomination. We are essentially one as natural creatures under the influence of Grace, and united in serious meditation of God in whatever form; and we should also be outwardly one, in practical, ethical terms, by the common obligation to Christian action. We must be indivisibly united in the Christian conduct of "civill offices."

The opposite fault to a limited and ineffectual doctrine of mystical unity is an overemphasis upon material manifestations of unity, and a corresponding anxiety about the lack of them. Such a fault tends to underestimate the importance, and miss the reality, of the essential unity of the Body. It also tends toward a preoccupation with the existential situation at the expense of essential beliefs. Donne is careful to maintain the balance, or the compromise, between the two kinds of Christian unity. The result is that he can maintain a realistic attitude towards oecumenicity; he takes full account of both spiritual and temporal reality, of mystical unity and its material and ethical correlatives.

I know (as I begun) I speak to you who cannot be scandalized, and that neither measure Religion (as it is now called) by Unitie, nor suspect Unity, for these interruptions. . . . God himselfe, who only is one, seems to have eternally delighted, with a disunion of persons. Those whose active function it is, must endeavour this unity in Religion: and we at our lay Altars . . . must beg it of [God]: but we must take heed of making misconclusions upon the want of it:

26. From *Religio Medici*, I, v and vi respectively.

27. Although she does not mention it specifically, Mrs. Simpson makes some very just remarks pertinent to Donne's oecumenicity. See *op. cit.*, pp. 108 and 111.

for, whether the Maior and Aldermen fall out, (as with us and the Puritans; Bishops against Priests) or the Commoners voyces differ who is Maior, and who Aldermen, or what their Jurisdiction, (as with the Bishop of Rome, or who-soever) yet it is still one Corporation (Merrill, lii, 141-2).

The Corporation is as real, in its own way, as the members of whom it consists. Through them it has a genuine existential impact and in it, though they fall out and divide among themselves, they have a real and continuing order of unity.