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Donne's "Peace of Conscience": The Bible, *Biathanatos* and the Sermons

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In 1619, in advance of his travel to Germany as embassy chaplain, John Donne sent a manuscript of his treatise *Biathanatos*[1] to Sir Robert Ker, Earl of Ancrum. In dramatic fashion, Donne charged the Earl to keep the text both safe and secret, to "Reserve it for me, if I live, and if I die, only forbid it the Presse, and the Fire: publish it not, but yet burn it not; and between those, do what you will with it."[2] Recognizing that Ker might elect to share the book with his intimates, Donne attempted to influence his unknown readers' perceptions: "Let any that your discretion admits to the sight of it know the date of it, and that it is a book written by Jack Donne and not by Dr. Donne." In doing so, Donne seemingly created a distinction between two literary selves, differentiated by age and maturity, and implied that the secular works of Jack were the lesser of the two.

For a time, critics were eager to take hold of the distinction. Even as he argues that *Biathanatos* is Donne's "most complete philosophical statement," for example, George Williamson asserts that the book "is Donne putting off the old life so that he may put on the new."[3] Donne's letter seems to position *Biathanatos* as a work squarely in the

[1]John Donne, *Biathanatos*, ed. Ernest W. Sullivan (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1984). All references from this work come from this edition, cited by page number.

[2]John Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (London: Printed by J. Flesher for Richard Marriot, 1651), pp. 21–22.

[3]George Williamson, "The Libertine Donne," *Philological Quarterly* 13 (1934): 277, 291.

center of a life with Jack Donne at one extreme and Dr. Donne at the other. While Donne's religious and secular writings often have been treated separately, more recent scholarship embraces a more unified view. Taking *Biathanatos* as its entry point, this essay examines intertextual connections with the sermons, focusing on how the texts support one another.

Donne's extant 160 sermons have recently been the focus of significant scholarly interest that broadens the scope of scholarly activity surrounding them. The first volumes of *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*, an update to the venerable Potter and Simpson edition, have begun to appear in support of this interest.[4] Little consideration has been given, however, to the connections between Donne's sermons and his treatise on suicide. Certainly Donne never advocated suicide in a sermon as he does in *Biathanatos*, albeit in an extremely narrow circumstance.[5] But the basis for his arguments in both his sermons and *Biathanatos* is the Bible, and these works connect intertextually through shared Bible verses. Three sermons that share a connection to *Biathanatos* through reference to the same biblical verses—Genesis 2:18, 1 Corinthians 15:26, and 1 Corinthians 16:22—all focus on the primacy of conscience, a commonality so far unremarked. We might reasonably imagine that Donne's sermons naturally share a concern with conscience, given the responsibility of a preacher to guide the behavior of his parishioners and help them to understand their religious and civic responsibilities within the confines of religious doctrine. Jeffrey Johnson's study of the distinguishing theological features of Donne's sermons examines

[4]*The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*, Vol. 1: Sermons Preached at the Jacobean Courts, 1615–19. ed. Peter McCullough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*, Vol. 3: Sermons Preached at the Court of Charles I. ed. David Colclough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*, Vol. 12: Sermons Preached at St. Paul's Cathedral, 1626. ed. Mary Ann Lund (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[5]Donne argues that suicide may not be a sin only when the individual's motivation is to emulate Christ's sacrifice and is otherwise void of self-interest: "if there be cases, wherein the party is disinteressed, and onely, or primarily the glory of God is respected and aduanced, it may be Lawfull" (*Biathanatos*, p. 77).

common prayer, the doctrines of the Trinity, repentance, and grace, and the importance of sight in religious self-fashioning.[6] Johnson uses this framework to relate Donne's theological concerns to the historical and political circumstances in which he preached. In arguing that conscience is pre-eminent, this essay places a stronger emphasis on Donne's reaction to and engagement with the historical and political circumstances in which he preached. Donne's virtually identical exegesis of the biblical verses shared by the sermons and *Biathanatos*, writings that serve two very different rhetorical purposes, reflects the centrality of conscience in his moral philosophy. Donne sees and hears the voice of God in the Bible, just as he listens to the voice of God when he follows his own conscience.

Donne had good reason to be concerned about the reception of a work like *Biathanatos*. It is an exercise in case logic, or casuistry, on the subject of suicide.[7] Based on his letters, we know that Donne was intensely interested in suicide. In 1608, at around the same time he is thought to have composed *Biathanatos*, Donne wrote to Sir Henry Goodyer:

> Two of the most precious things which God hath afforded us here, for the agony and exercise of our spirit, which are a thirst and inhiation after the next life, and a frequency of prayer and meditation in this, are often envenomed, and putrefied, and stray into a corrupt disease . . . With the first of these I have often suspected my self to be overtaken; which is, with a desire of the next life: which though I know it is not meerly out of a wearinesse of this, because I had the same desires when I went with the tyde, and enjoyed fairer hopes than now: yet I doubt worldly encumbrances have encreased it. I would not that death should take me asleep. I would not have him meerly seise me, and onely declare me to be dead, but win me, and overcome me.[8]

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[6]Jeffrey Johnson, *The Theology of John Donne* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001).

[7]Evelyn Simpson, *A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1948), p. 159.

[8]*Letters*, pp. 49–50.

Donald Ramsay Roberts argues that Donne had a persistent, lifelong death wish, which he expresses here with the common euphemism "the next life" to indicate a positive desire to die.[9] In the Preface to *Biathanatos*, Donne reports Beza's confession of having once attempted to drown himself. In response to Beza's confession, Donne notes, "I haue often such a sickly inclination. . . . whensoeuer my affliction assayles me, me thinks I haue the keyes of my prison in myne owne hand, and no remedy presents it selfe so soone to my heart, as mine owne sword."[10] But Donne's overall purpose in this book is a broader examination of self-murder. The complete title of the work, *Biathanatos A Declaration of that Paradoxe or Thesis, that Selfe-homicide is not so naturally Sinne, that it may neuer be otherwise. Wherein The Nature, and the extent of all those Lawes, which seeme to be violated by this Act, are diligently Surueyd,* declares Donne's thesis. The work undertakes an examination and refutation of arguments drawn from civil and canon law and, most important, from scripture. Evelyn M. Simpson notes that Donne "was prudent, however, in deciding to refrain from publication, as the sharp-eyed ecclesiastical censors of the day would almost certainly have regarded the book as heretical and dangerous."[11] Although *Biathanatos* might well have been inflammatory as a public work, as a private one that reveals Donne's beliefs it is illuminating.

An examination of the book as a casuistical text in which Donne works through and describes his own practical theology suggests no dramatic shift in moral stance between Donne as a young man and as a mature clergyman. The primacy that Donne affords to the faculty of conscience in *Biathanatos* substantiates a consistent and unified stance throughout the course of his life, in which his works, both youthful and mature, glorify God and thus are moral. This understanding yields a nuanced view of Donne's works in which *Biathanatos* is not merely the central point in a linear progression from Jack to Doctor Donne but rather serves as the center of a circle encompassing all of his

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[9]Donald Ramsay Roberts, "The Death Wish of John Donne," *PMLA* 62.4 (1947): 958–76. In *John Donne: Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), Arthur Marotti describes a "yearning for death" in Donne's "A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany" (p. 279).

[10]*Biathanatos*, p. 29.

[11]Simpson, p. 166.

writing.[12] *Biathanatos* is not widely referenced when examining Donne's moral thought. However, *Biathanatos* allows an examination of Donne's emphasis on conscience and the way in which it serves as a test for moral behavior. The wide variety of cases that Donne employs in his own examination indicates that his conclusions can extend to topics other than self-murder, and thus both the methodology and conclusions of *Biathanatos* can serve as a framework to examine Donne's other works.

An educated man, Donne understood a principle central to Christian morality: conscience is the voice of reason, and thus is the voice of God in the individual. Disobeying one's conscience, therefore, is to disobey God and is sinful. Conversely, obeying one's conscience indicates a desire to glorify God and thus leads to moral acts. Donne's casuistry first acknowledges these general rules then places a finer point upon them. As Dwight Cathcart notes, "[In one kind of moral truth] the meaning is clear, the authority unquestioned, the applicability to all men decisive. But it is not the kind of truth found in casuistry . . . justifying actions which tradition or experience or authority has found unjustifiable is the moral truth [Donne] seeks."[13] Margaret Pabst Battin, a philosopher who specializes in the ethics of suicide and co-editor with Michael Rudick of an edition of Donne's *Biathanatos*, explains that additional requirements of a moral act are that "it must be done by choice, it must be done because right reason dictates it, and it must be done consciously, not through ignorance or

[12]John Donne, *The Elegies, and the Songs and Sonnets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970). Helen Gardner did much to diminish the significance of differentiating between the younger and elder Donne when she dated the Holy Sonnets as coming from the period of Donne's secular work. She explains the letter's distinction as "Donne himself was distinguishing between himself as a young man, writing as an individual, and himself as an older man in order, writing with the authority and responsibility that a profession gives and demands. In one sense all his poetry, whether amorous or religious, licentious or moral, was the work of 'Jack Donne.'" p. xix, note 2.

[13]Dwight Cathcart, *Doubting Conscience: Donne and the Poetry of Moral Argument* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), pp. 35–36.

default."[14] *Biathanatos* collocates these requirements providing both Donne's perspective on conscience and a thorough examination of cases in terms of willful choice, deliberate reasoning, and conscious action. More than an academic exercise or a philosophical discussion, *Biathanatos* is a manifestation of Donne's own conscience, an act of casuistry in which he chooses cases that reveal his own deliberate reasoning.

Donne begins, in the first distinction of *Biathanatos*, by adopting Aquinas's definition of sin as that which is counter to the laws of nature, the laws of reason, or divine law.[15] He then uses that definition as the organizing principle for his argument. Situating himself in cases pertaining to each system of law, Donne systematically analyzes the case for self-murder, but even as he does so, he makes clear that his framework also functions in a wider context because the systems of law, taken together, provide a greater understanding than each one separately. He proclaims, "Of all of these three Laws, of Nature, of Reason, and of God, every precept which is permanent and binds alwayes is so compos'd and elemented and complexion'd, that to distinguish and separate them is a Chymick work."[16] Blending the systems of law together, Donne arrives at his central argument in *Biathanatos*. Natural law demands self-preservation, whose highest form, salvation of the soul, is obtained only by observing divine law, which can be understood only by listening to reason—that is, by obeying one's conscience, the voice of God in man.

Mary Blackstone and Jeanne Shami have discussed the effectiveness of the "interrogative conscience" as an effective technique for audience engagement, one in which Donne constantly presents "a role model, a seeking protagonist directed toward

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[14]John Donne, *Biathanatos*, ed. Michael Rudick and Margaret Pabst Battin (New York: Garland, 1982), p. xxxi.

[15]Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 51. A. E. Malloch, "John Donne and the Casuists," *Studies in English Literature* 2.1 (1962): 57–76. Malloch helpfully points out that this definition is one of Donne's instances of elastic citation. The text Donne cites is from an index heading composed by a fifteenth-century Dominican monk, Peter Almadura, for inclusion in an edition of the works of St. Thomas Aquinas published in 1473, the *Tabula Aurea* (p. 63).

[16]Ibid., p. 51.

repeatedly troubling the conscience with questions."[17] They argue that the questions concerned "not only personal morality, but also its connection with religious allegiance, public duty, and authority," and they note that Donne's use of this rhetorical strategy was not typical, but exceptional for the period.[18] I believe that the reason for Donne's use of this strategy is the primacy that he affords to the faculty of conscience in his personal theology, the moral philosophy that guided him throughout his life. Donne himself is the seeking protagonist, the casuist in search of answers to questions that only conscience can resolve.

Biathanatos is a work deeply grounded in theology. Donne quotes from all the church fathers, "borrows wholesale from Augustine and Aquinas"[19] as Sullivan points out, and incorporates ecclesiastical history as well as commentary from more than a dozen other theologians. If Donne is claiming in his letter to Robert Ker that *Biathanatos* reflects his early thoughts—a work of Jack Donne rather than Dr. Donne—then an evaluation of the moral philosophy present in *Biathanatos* and the sermons can serve to assess the consistency of Donne's theology throughout his life. Thus, the focus of this essay is the biblical intertextual connections between *Biathanatos* and Donne's sermons.

The Intertextual Connection: Three Biblical Verses

There are ninety-two Bible verses referenced explicitly in *Biathanatos*. Of those ninety-two verses, twenty-three are never used by Donne as the focal point of a sermon; fifty-six references in *Biathanatos* share a connection with a sermon at the book level (i.e, sharing a reference to the same book), while thirteen connect with a sermon at the book and chapter level (i.e., sharing a reference to the same book and chapter). What is especially significant is that three

[17]"Donne, Shakespeare, and the Interrogative Conscience," in *Shakespeare and Donne: Generic Hybrids and the Cultural Imaginary*, eds. Judith H. Anderson and Jennifer C. Vaught (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 106. Blackstone and Shami argue that Donne's "seeking protagonist" is present in his entire performance of the sermons.

[18]Ibid., p. 106.

[19]*Biathanatos*, p. xii.

sermons share references with *Biathanatos* at the verse level (i.e., a precise match: book, chapter, verse); ordered chronologically, these verses are: Genesis 2:18 appears in a wedding sermon in 1620; 1 Corinthians 15:26 is preached in a sermon at Lincoln's Inn in 1621; and 1 Corinthians 16:22 serves as the focal point of a sermon at Whitehall in 1622.[20] These three sermons share both a biblical intertextual connection with *Biathanatos* and a thematic connection, the primacy of conscience.

The first sermon to be considered here, that on 1 Corinthians 16:22, is chronologically the last of the three but noteworthy for two important reasons. First, the verse appears in the third and most important division of *Biathanatos*, the section that deals with scriptural evidence of suicide and makes Donne's ultimate argument for self-murder as an act that may not contravene the law of God based on the word of God; and second, the sermon describes and defines Donne's understanding of the way in which conscience serves as the voice of God in man. This sermon was preached at Lincoln's Inn in the Trinity Term probably in 1621, before Donne took up his position as Dean of St. Paul's in 1622. It is the third of a course of six sermons, comprised of two sermons each on the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, although the last two sermons concerning the Holy Spirit are lost. The sermon takes as its focus 1 Corinthians 16:22: "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema, Maranatha." Donne's aim in his sermon is not to prove the deity of Christ "to a congregation that required proof in a thing doubted," but rather, to offer "edification upon a foundation received" (*OESJD* 5:73). His framework for the

[20]Bible verses are quoted as given in the sermons. Citations from the sermons on Genesis 2:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:26 are from *The Sermons of John Donne*, George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, volume 2: 1955 and volume 4: 1959). Parenthetical references will be cited by volume and page numbers. Citations from the sermon on 1 Corinthians 16:22 are from the *OESJD*, *Volume 5: Sermons Preached at Lincoln's Inn*, edited by Katerin Ettenhuber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Parenthetical references will be cited by volume and page numbers. Potter and Simpson note that it is possible these sermons were preached in 1620, but they reject the likelihood of them being preached any earlier, due to the sermons' particular "maturity of thought [and] richness of tone" (*Sermons* 3:28).

sermon is that there are three kinds of speech in both man and God: *sermo innatus* or inward speech, *sermo illatus* or speech in response to external events, and *sermo prolatus* or speech made manifest to others through behavior or action. God's three kinds of speech are all made manifest in Christ. In this sermon we can see how Donne understands conscience to be the voice of God in man. Those who attend not to this voice must be anathema, maranatha[21] as the focal text commands.

The first type of speech, *sermo innatus*, Donne defines for man as "that inward speech, which the thought of man reflecting upon itself produces within" and for God as "His eternall, his natural word, which God produced out of himself, which is the generation of the second Person in the Trinity" (*OESJD* 5:73). For Donne there is a parallel between man's conscience, his inward speech, and God's speech act that is Christ. Donne connects the inner speech on which his *casus conscientiae* depends directly to the voice of God. Lest his auditor mistake Donne's parallelism in this first instance as accidental, Donne is careful to continue the parallelism in the other two types of speech of which man and God are capable. *Sermo illatus* in man is speech of response, "which is occasioned in him by outward things from which he draws conclusion and determines," while the same speech in God is Christ as Redeemer, God's response to the fall of Adam. *Sermo prolatus* in man is speech "by which he manifests himself to other men," just as, for God, this speech is the "manifestation and application of Christ, which are his Scriptures" (*Sermons* 5:73). Through the first speech, which is Christ, man can listen to God's will. Through the second speech, man can respond appropriately to God's direction. And through the third, man can connect directly to God's speech made manifest in scripture. In this framework, scripture serves as the central element of Donne's conscience-centered moral philosophy.

Donne explicates the focal text of this sermon identically in both his sermon and in *Biathanatos*: those of the faith must understand that rejection of Christ deservedly leads to utter damnation. He connects the book of Romans with 1 Corinthians 16:22, his focal text, through a

[21]Maranatha is interpreted variously as "Come, Lord!" or "The Lord has come!" In the context of 1 Corinthians 16:22, it is often understood as an imprecation upon those who are cursed (anathema) because the Lord has come (maranatha).

thematic connection to anathema. In Romans 9:3 Paul writes "For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren," to express his willingness to be separated from Christ eternally, a spiritual suicide, if it would save the Jews. Using Paul's exclamation as his example, Donne points out that the apostles "may have done some things some times not warrantable in themselves," but he is quick to remark also that "many things are spoken by the Prophets in the Scriptures, which sound as imprecations, as execrations" but are not so, because the "Apostles had in them a power extraordinary" (*OESJD* 5:85). When Paul speaks in an "over-vehement zeale," he is excused because he is speaking out of conscientious concern for his countrymen. In being willing to sacrifice himself, to suffer the spiritual death of excommunication, Paul is modeling Christ's sacrifice, and it is here that Donne's connection to *Biathanatos* is made. In Part 3, Distinction 4, Section 10, Donne references both Romans 9:3 and 1 Corinthians 16:22 to make the same point, that Paul's wish reflects "the highest degree of compassionate Charity for others" and that "Charity will recompence, and iustify many excesses, which seeme vnnaturall, and irregular and enormous transportations."[22] To support his argument in the third part of the suicide treatise, Donne argues that conscientious action in imitation of Christ does not contravene the Law of God and thus, even self-murder (spiritual or actual) would not necessarily be sinful in these circumstances. Donne believes that Paul has acted according to his conscience, driven by "a zealous fury" to imitate Christ's sacrifice.[23]

It is important to note, however, that Donne does not exhort the auditors of his sermon to take Paul as their model. In fact, he advises, "we may not follow them, nor doe as they did, nor say as they said. Since there is a possibility, a facility, a proclivity of erring herein, and so many conditions and circumstances required, to make an Imprecation just and lawfull, the best way is to forbeare them, or to be very sparing in them" (*OESJD* 5:85). If Donne's moral philosophy is

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[22]*Biathanatos*, p. 132.

[23]In his zealous fury, Paul has "remembred not deliberately his owne Election" and thus has not resisted the will of God. His willingness to sacrifice himself in separation from God remains both charitable and conscientious (*Biathanatos*, p. 132).

centered on the primacy of conscience, why cannot his sermon audience observe a similar primacy as that demonstrated by St. Paul and, indeed, by Christ? Donne is clearly concerned about the possibility of errors of conscience should one not be able to properly work through the "conditions and circumstances" of making a conscientious determination of right behavior. It is not politic that his audience take Paul's case as their example because they are not trained casuists.

The medieval term for casuistry was *casus conscientiae*, "cases of conscience." The way in which medieval theologians understood the idea of conscience helped to shape the activity of casuistry. As philosophers had done in antiquity, theologians sought to answer the question: How do human beings, whose reason is lessened and whose will is weakened by sin, discover the way to salvation amidst the conflict of earthly desires? To try to answer, they refer to St. Jerome, who identified a part of the soul that the Greeks called *synderesis*, the "spark of conscience." Philip the Chancellor, who wrote one of the earliest complete treatises on conscience, explains that *synderesis* "murmurs against sin, and correctly contemplates and wants that which is good without qualifications."[24] Because *synderesis* functions without qualifications, it focuses only on the highest good without considering the detailed features of particular actions or deeds. In addition, St. Jerome identifies a second power, *conscientiae*, which combines *synderesis* and free choice.[25] The association with free choice, St. Jerome explains, means that *conscientiae* can be in error. This distinction lays the foundation for the medieval doctrine of conscience. It is Aquinas who creates the synthesis that connects *synderesis* and *conscientiae* by identifying *synderesis* as "a natural disposition concerned with the basic principles of behavior, which are the general principles of natural law" and *conscientia* as "the application of general judgments of *synderesis* to particulars."[26] As Jonsen and Toulmin explain, "in this sense, although *synderesis* cannot err,

[24]Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 128.

[25]Timothy C. Potts, ed., *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 55–60.

[26]Aquinas, "Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate," Qq. 16–17, in Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy*, pp. 122–36.

conscientia can; for the application of general moral insights requires a particular premise, and one can be mistaken about such particulars or fail to use a valid argument in reasoning from the general to the particular."[27] Aquinas's theory of conscience creates a great deal of uncertainty because it can be difficult to correctly perceive the particulars and even more challenging to reason correctly.

In response to these challenges, the art of casuistry, also called "practical theology" or "case divinity," became a way for people to resolve these conflicts by applying "a system of directives to reason and conscience that defines, interprets, and applies general laws according to the circumstances of a specific case."[28] Donne was not alone in his concern about conscience in the seventeenth century: rapidly changing political and religious environments created conflicts of allegiance and duty for people at all levels of the social hierarchy, both in England and abroad. Meg Lota Brown notes that "from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries, tens of thousands of cases of conscience were published in England and on the continent."[29] With his book, Donne participated in a genre that provided a way to confirm knowledge, arrive at judgment, and justify action—a refreshingly concrete activity for those experiencing anxiety over authority and interpretation in a tumultuous world. Of course, sermons served a similar systematic purpose; they offered parishioners advice on determining correct behavior that was grounded in the preacher's scriptural exegesis. In his advice to his Lincoln's Inn auditors to avoid imprecations entirely, Donne indicates his understanding of the complexities and challenges of properly exercised case divinity.

Donne never attempts a justification of his own works as cases under the model that he creates in *Biathanatos*, nor does he ever directly examine his own actions as cases in his text. But *Biathanatos* is not only a defense of suicide; it is a defense of Donne's position as a casuist that a human being must be able to support all of his judgments through rigorously exercised reason—in a word, conscience.

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[27]Jonsen and Toulmin, p. 129.

[28]Meg Lota Brown, *Donne and the Politics of Conscience in Early Modern England* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), p. 2.

[29]Ibid.

In his conclusion, Donne explains that he refrained from defining "particular rules or instances" for suicide "both because I dare not professe my selfe a Master in so curious a scyence, and because the Limmits are obscure, and steepy, and slippery, and narrow, and euery Error deadly."[30] Yet even as he describes the errors likely to have existed in a hypothetical text that he chose not to write, Donne excuses them using the conclusion he reached in *Biathanatos*, the text he *did* write: "Except where a Competent diligence being forevsd, a Mistaking in our Conscyence may provide an excuse."[31] Man cannot stand outside of himself to identify an error of his conscience, so he must proceed, even in error, because "this obligation, which our Conscyence casts vpon vs, is of stronger hold, and of straighter band, then the precept of any Superiour, whether Law, or Person, and is so much *Iuris Naturalis*, as it cannot be infringed nor altered, *Beneficio Diuinae Indulgentiæ*."[32] One's actions remain moral acts because they are made according to conscience. It is difficult to imagine a more direct statement of the primacy of conscience from any author. Although Donne seems to believe that his Lincoln's Inn audience was likely unable to use "competent diligence" to achieve a "just and lawfull" decision, he demonstrates his own faith in *casus conscientiae* in *Biathanatos*. Since Donne uses *Biathanatos* as a framework to assess his own hypothetical work, it is a reasonable progression to examine it in concert with his actual works—the sermons with which it has biblical intertextual connections.

The relationship between conscience and the law of reason, the second of the three systems of law to be considered in *Biathanatos*, is the point of intersection with the second of Donne's sermon focal texts considered here. The sermon was preached at Whitehall on March 8, 1621/22, on 1 Corinthians 15:26, "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." Through this verse, Donne exhorts his listeners to awareness of what prevents man from achieving the perfect peace of the resurrection. The dominant metaphor of the verse, and thus the sermon, is war. In order to achieve that ultimate perfect peace, men must make war against the influence Satan has

[30]Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 145.
[31]Ibid.
[32]Ibid., p. 102.

over them through his hold on their bodies. Donne reminds his listeners that Satan is "An enemie that is so well victualled against man, as that he cannot want as long as there are men, for he feeds upon man himselfe. And so well armed against Man, as that he cannot want Munition, while there are men, for he fights with our weapons, our owne faculties, nay our calamities, yea our owne pleasures are our death" (*Sermons* 4:46). Donne's method for combatting this "last, and in that respect the worst enemy" (*Sermons* 4:55) is conscience. He urges his auditors to be wary that

> in the enemie that reserves himselfe until the last, and attends our weake estate, there is more danger. Keep it, where I intend it, in that which is my spheare, the Conscience . . . if I doe not fuell, and foment that sin, assist and encourage that sin, by high diet, wanton discourse, other provocation, I shall have reason on my side, and I shall have grace on my side. (*Sermons* 4:55)

Reason and grace here are indications of the divine in man, and further reinforce the connection Donne acknowledges in his sermon on 1 Corinthians 16:22.[33] It is difficult, of course, in such an imperfect world, to maintain conscientious behavior, but Donne has advice for his listeners on this topic:

> Let the whole world be in thy consideration as one house; and then consider in that, in the peacefull harmony of creatures, in the peacefull success, and connection of causes, and effects, the peace of Nature. Let this Kingdome, where God has blessed thee with a being, be the Gallery, the best roome of that house, and consider in the two walls of that Gallery, the Church and the State, the peace of a royall, and a religious Wisedome; Let thine owne family be a Cabinet in this Gallery, and finde in all the boxes thereof, in the severall duties of Wife, and Children, and servants, the peace of vertue, and of the father and mother of all vertues,

[33]See "reason" II.5.(a)(b) "The intellectual power, the capacity for rational thought, and related senses, in various mystical and transcendental uses [as indication of divine power]" *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2016; accessed: 14 July 2016.

> active discretion, passive obedience; and then lastly, let thine owne bosom be the secret box, and reserve in this Cabinet, and find there the peace of conscience, and truelie thou hast the best Jewell in the best Cabinet, and that in the best Gallery of the best house that can be had.
>
> (*Sermons* 4:49)

Here Donne draws upon the *ars memoria* technique of architectural mnemonic to reinforce the importance of conscience upon his audience, while explicitly identifying conscience itself as the "best Jewell," deserving of the most scrupulous observation and protection. Only the peace of conscience destroys death, "the powerfullest, the fearefulest enemy" (*Sermons* 4:56), even as death physically overcomes man, by providing for the first resurrection, the resurrection from sin.

Man's ultimate defeat of death is also Donne's focus when he refers to 1 Corinthians 15:26 in *Biathanatos*. In Part 2, Distinction 4, Donne addresses the reasons that others have given to reject self-murder as a conscionable act. He addresses first St. Augustine, whose declaration against suicide seems incontrovertible,[34] but determines that he has no disagreement with Augustine because Donne, too, excludes avoidance of sin as an acceptable justification of suicide. Instead, he focuses in *Biathanatos*, as he does in the sermon, on death's role as God's necessary agent, noting how Wolfgang Musculus had understood 1 Corinthians 15:26: "Yet Musculus says vppon that place [text] *It is often commended in Scriptures, because, towards the faithfull, God vseth it to good ends, and makes it Cooperari ad salutem*."[35] God's "good end" comes only to those who have listened to the voice of God throughout their lives, and thus through scripture Donne is able to emphasize once again the importance of conscience, even though this text offers

[34]Donne offers the following Augustinian text from a letter to Donatus: "we haue power to endeuour to saue thy Soule against thy will, as it was Lawfull to vs to saue thy body so. If thou were constrayned to do euill, yet thou oughtest not to kill thy selfe. Consider, whether in the scriptures thou find any of the faithfull that did so, when they sufferd much from them who would haue forced them to do things to theyr Soules distruction" (*Biathanatos*, p. 76).

[35]Ibid., p. 80.

justification for suicide rather than a message of comfort to those who struggled with fear of dying.

The grim topics of war and death are far from the subject matter of the third of Donne's sermons that share an intertextual biblical connection with *Biathanatos*. The sermon centered on Genesis 2:18 was preached in 1620 at the wedding of Sir Francis Nethersole, whom Donne knew through his connection with James Hay, Viscount Doncaster, and Lucy Goodyer, the daughter of one of Donne's oldest friends, Sir Henry Goodyer.[36] Despite Donne being well acquainted with the marital couple, the sermon is not one of his most scintillating. Potter and Simpson describe it as "flat and unattractive," calling it "unenthusiastic" in its assessment of marriage as an institution and its careful insistence that scripture does not imply that marriage is necessarily better for a man's personal good (*Sermons* 2:43). Modern critics find little that is appealing in its homily that focuses on defining "wife" in terms of what she is not and must not be: not equally excellent, not a principal but an accessory, not a governor but the governed.[37] Donne even uses Latin grammar to make his distinction. Man is *faciamus*, first person plural *made* by the triune God, whereas woman is *faciam*, first person singular *made*, requiring only the effort of God the Father. But it is the exordium of the sermon rather than the homily that collocates Donne's perspective on conscience in

[36]Sir Francis Nethersole served as secretary to James Hay, Viscount Doncaster (in Pursell, B. C., "Nethersole, Sir Francis (*bap.* 1587, *d.* 1659)" *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, ed. David Cannadine, Jan. 2008; accessed: 12 July 2016). Through his marriage to Lucy Percy, James Hay was the son-in-law of Donne's friend, Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland. Henry Percy carried Donne's letter to George More, his employer, announcing Donne's elopement with Anne More. We might imagine that Henry Goodyer was pleased that his daughter and her groom had not followed Donne's own example.

[37]"She will be content to learn in silence with all subjection" (*Sermons* 2:345); "If she think her self more then a Helper, she is not so much"; "She was not taken out of the *foot*, to be troden upon, nor out of the *head*, to be an overseer of him; but out of *his side*, where she weakens him enough, and therefore should do all she can, to be a Helper:" (*Sermons* 2:346).

both the sermon and *Biathanatos*. Donne's enthusiasm lives not with the institution of marriage but with the faculty of conscience.

In establishing the context of his chosen text, Donne points out that, in Genesis 1:28, God has blessed his creatures with the desire to propagate their species, to "be fruitful and multiply." It is only in man, however, that God "contract[s] and limit[s] that naturall desire" (*Sermons* 2:335) through marriage, which is a reflection and affirmation of God's action of bringing a woman, Eve, to a man, Adam.[38] Donne explains that God's care for man results in several considerations that place man forefront in God's creations: first, that God applies his care and study to determine what is good for man, and second, that God provides what is necessary for man (*Sermons* 2:336). But conscience is what allows a man to determine if a wife is necessary for him.

Conscientious behavior, Donne argues, requires that man make his actions in support of the public good. He notes that God makes allowances: "in regard of the publique good, God pretermits private, and particular respects" (*Sermons* 2:336). Donne again makes his distinction using Latin grammar to separate his cases. He explains that God does not say that it is not good for *every* man or for a *particular* man to be alone. Rather, Donne suggests that God has determined that "it is not good *in the general*, for the whole frame of the world, that man should be alone" on the basis that God's purpose for man would not be fulfilled: being glorified by man in this world and of glorifying man in Heaven.[39] It is necessary for the public good that some men marry in order to propagate the species, but men must make that determination for themselves because God does not intend for all men to marry. Conscience is the means of making that determination.

Donne believes that man's nature is inherently solitary, but that for some men, going against their nature and choosing to marry is a sacrifice that must be made in service of the public good, and it is conscience that demands this sacrifice. In considering God's creation of Eve as a companion to Adam, Donne notes that man "got not so much by the bargaine, (especially if we consider how that wife carried her selfe towards him)" (*Sermons* 2:339). Instead, some men must follow God's example of setting aside private respects in consideration

[38]"*Adduxit ad Adam*, God brought her to man," (*Sermons* 2:335).

[39]*Non bonum homini; non bonum hunc hominem esse solum* (*Sermons* 2:339).

of the public good. Some men must acknowledge that "the Kingdome of God is within [them]," (*Sermons* 2:337) depart from private affections, and marry in order to conserve God's kingdom. It is in this exhortation that we can see another connection to the moral philosophy reflected in *Biathanatos*. God's singular example of having set aside His own private respects in favor of the public good is in having allowed the suicide that Donne argues Christ's sacrifice constitutes. In the sermon, Donne challenges his auditors to recognize this example of God going against his own nature: "But take the example nearer, in God's bosome, and there we see, that for the publique, for the redemption of the whole world, God hath (shall we say, pretermitted?) derelicted, forsaken, abandoned, his own, and onely Sonne" (*Sermons* 2:337). For some men, the acceptance of marriage is an emulation of God's sacrifice of his only son in service of the public good.

In support of man going against his nature and choosing to marry in order to listen to his conscience, Donne offers a nautical analogy. He notes that "ordinarily ships goe many leagues out of their direct way, to fetch the winde," and then converts his analogy to connect to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, Donne says, "blowes where he will" and "blowes where thou wilt too, if thou beest applicable to his inspirations" (*Sermons* 2:338). The voice of God in man, the *sermo innatus* or second voice of Christ outlined earlier, is made manifest through man's conscience and through the Bible verses upon which Donne depends. It is the key to a right decision concerning marriage, and indeed, concerning all things.

In the context of the marriage sermon, Genesis 2:18 applies directly to man's generative function, his responsibility to have increase. In *Biathanatos*, Part 1, Distinction 2, Section 2, Genesis 2:18 arises in connection with the moral question of man's requirement toward self-preservation as Donne argues that self-murder is an example of a sin against nature, but only on the basis that self-preservation is a natural law. He asserts that "Naturall Law is so generall, that it extends to beasts more then to vs, because they can not compare degrees of Obligation, and distinctions of dutyes, and Offices, as we can."[40] Thus, he concludes, "*Some things are Naturall to the*

[40] *Biathantos*, p. 45.

Species, and other things to the perticular person."[41] Men must use their reason and judgment to arrive at the course of action that is best, even if that course of action seems to fly in the face of what is best for mankind in a more general sense. Genesis 2:18 indicates that "It is not good for man to be alone," because such solitude would frustrate God's purpose of multiplying mankind. But Donne points out that although remaining solitary would have bad consequences for continuation of the species, it "may be very fit for some particular man to abstayne from all such conversation of Mariage or men, and retire to a solitude," and he borrows authority from Chrysostom to make his distinction.[42] Each man must use his reason and his conscience to determine whether he should marry, despite the Bible's general implication that men should not be alone, since "all the precepts of Naturall Law, result in these, Fly Euill, Seeke Good. That is, Do according to reason."[43] Donne argues that the general interpretation of this particular scripture must be tempered by reason, and a man's decision must be made according to his own conscience. Even though self-murder may seem to contravene natural law, which demands propagation and continuation of the species, just as Donne has argued in his marriage sermon, there are instances in which man must listen to his conscience to determine his right behavior.

Conclusion

In the biblical intertextual connections between Donne's sermons and *Biathanatos*, the importance of scripture in Donne's moral philosophy becomes clear. Scripture is the manifest voice of God, which aids man's conscience, the internal voice of God, in determining right behavior. Regardless of the rhetorical purpose of his writing—a court sermon, a marriage sermon, a sermon at the Inns of Court, or a treatise defending an ostensibly indefensible position—Donne continually returns to conscience, supported by scripture, as the

[41]Ibid.

[42]"For some may need that councell of Chrystostom Depart from the high way, and transplant thy selfe in some inclosed ground: for it is hard for a tree which stands by the way side to keepe her fruict, till it be ripe" (*Biathanatos*, p. 46).

[43]Ibid.

central tenet of the moral philosophy that guides his own behavior as a poet and preacher and his teaching as a clergyman. This consistency of exegetical connection to conscience allows us to consider a different view of Donne's works throughout his life as reflecting a holistic and unified perspective, rather than one that changes with age, financial or social circumstance, or confessional affiliation.

Reconsider for a moment the sermon on 1 Corinthians 16:22. Donne preached this sermon at Whitehall in a rather precarious time for clergy, especially those who might be chosen to preach at court. The King's patience with sermons touching on matters of politics was already frayed and would result later that year in his issuance of *Directions for Preachers*, which placed strict limitations on sermon topics. Although Donne could not have known that illness would keep the King from chapel that day, his sermon seems prepared for the king's presence. He reminds his auditors that both this world and Heaven are imperfect by God's design: this world because men's bodies are under Satan's dominion and Heaven because men's bodies are not yet arrived there through the resurrection (*Sermons* 4:46). Then, in admonishing them not to fear the final enemy, death, Donne uses loaded political language:

> . . . it is enough that the morall man says, *Mors lex, tributum, officium mortalium*.[44] First, it is *lex*, you were born under that law, upon that condition to die: so it is a rebellious thing not to be content to die, it opposes the Law. Then it is *Tributum*, an imposition which nature the Queen of this world layes upon us . . . And so it is a seditious thing not to be content to die, it opposes the prerogative. And lastly, it is *Officium*, men are to have their turnes, to take their time, and then to give way by death to successors; and so it is *Incivile, inofficiosum*, not to be content to die, it opposes the frame and form of government. (*Sermons* 4:53)

Admonitions to observe the law, avoid rebellion and sedition, and affirm prerogative are the very picture of political obedience in a

[44]Donne's "morall man" here is Seneca, and the reference is to "Quaestiones Naturales - Liber VI." (*Latin Wikisource*, Wikimedia, 25 June 2013; accessed: 14 July 2016).

preacher chasing preferment and avoiding entanglement in religious politics, and we can see why Donne may have been read as politically expedient based on this sermon alone. The political expedience of the sermon, however, is tempered by its admonition to preserve the integrity of one's conscience and to adhere always to it. Perceptions of Donne as politic, opportune, or grasping are further diminished when one considers the intertextual connection to *Biathanatos* and Donne's perspective outlined there: "this obligation, which our Consyence casts vpon vs is of stronger hold, and of straighter band, then the precept of any Superiour, whether Law or Person."[45] Donne's sermon is not politically facile or unctuous. It is simply one more expression of a moral philosophy that is presented consistently throughout his work.

We must also reconsider the issue of Donne's confessional affiliation in the light of this unified philosophical stance. In appreciating the consistency of Donne's moral philosophy, we can reassess perception of Donne as driven by ambition and guilt over his resulting apostasy[46] or as a fractured artist whose works are disjointed from one another, divided by genre and generation. Understanding that Donne used conscience as the central tenet of his moral philosophy allows a greater understanding of his handling of confessional concerns in his personal and professional lives. Provided that a person is observing the instruction of his conscience, his actions cannot be sinful; Donne would have had few concerns about changing his confessional affiliation once he had determined that he was acting in accordance with his conscience and thus following God's dictates.

Although he makes much use of the teachings of the church fathers in both *Biathanatos* and in his sermons, Donne's casuistry is grounded, first, in scripture. In his use of these three biblical texts, we can see that Donne's virtually identical exegesis of these verses to serve very different rhetorical purposes reflects the centrality of conscience in his moral philosophy. The stance that Donne articulates at length in *Biathanatos* is borne out in his other works when examined using the same casuistical lens that Donne uses to make his arguments. Man must, above all things, act according to his conscience, because to do

[45]*Biathanatos*, p. 102.

[46]This is a central contention of John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011).

so is to obey the voice of God, which can only lead to moral acts, not sinful ones.

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