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Donne and His Master's Voice, 1615-1625

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If James I reigned over a "golden age of English pulpit oratory," his court produced the religious rhetoricians whose works defined the age. In many ways, the careers of two of his preachers, John Donne and Lancelot Andrewes, were remarkably similar: both were well known in their lifetime, both enjoyed the regard of their King and frequently preached at court, and both left a significant legacy of published works. There are equally significant differences between the two men. The two represent different styles of churchmanship, evidence of a generational gap present in the Jacobean Church.

Andrewes' ecclesiastical career advanced rapidly late in the reign of Elizabeth I; his sermons span the entirety of the reign of her successor. His rhetoric reflected both Elizabeth's ambivalence about Calvinism and James's dislike of the cultural programme of puritanism. What resulted was a style of churchmanship once mistakenly labelled as *via media*. The label is itself a polemical device that masks the fact that in the early seventeenth century, the Andrewesian "middle way" was in actuality a provocation. Convincingly and recently described as "avant garde conformity," this hybrid of ecclesiology and doctrine combined a barely-disguised distaste for predestinarian theology with an often overweening emphasis on prayer and sacrament.[1]

There were, however, other styles of divinity represented at the court of James I. John Donne presents a different strain of court religiosity from that of Andrewes, one that is somewhat less "avant garde." This is not due to Donne's opinions on Church dogma: his sermons display an unmistakable and outspoken anti-Calvinism throughout. Rather, his ecclesiology differs from that of other anti-Calvinists at court. While Donne's sermons are less sacramentally-focused than those of Lancelot Andrewes, they reflect an enthusiasm for the ministry of preaching that hearkens back to the rhetoric of earlier English reformers.[2]

This approach reflects the time and circumstance of his religious vocation. Donne initiated and perfected his craft during the second half of the reign of James I. He began his career when Calvinism was a consensual orthodoxy rather than a hotly contested theological innovation, and when any truly radical phase of puritanism had passed into memory. Preaching, the most effective tool of Protestant evangelization, was finally a widespread feature of mainstream religious culture in England. At this time, the King governed his church within certain parameters of public perception: England was Calvinist, but not officially; puritanism was tolerated, but denounced. Rhetoric, wherein all things find their balance, maintained the peace of the Church.[3]

This state of outward consensus and quiescence had been deceptive from the start and was not to last. The final decade of James's reign was marked by deepening confessional tension in England. The King's unpopular foreign policies, marked by plans to marry his son to a Catholic, and some ham-handed attempts to force ceremonial conformity upon his Church in Scotland, led to charges of crypto-popery at court and in worship. As the political situation in England deteriorated, the unresolved tensions in its "Calvinist consensus" were exposed. It was the job of court preachers to deplore the popular outcry and enjoin uniformity to the King's ecclesiastical policies. Donne's sermons provide a perspective on the religio-political destabilization of the later Jacobean reign. An examination of his position on conformity and Calvinism will reveal the fragmentation of a rhetoric designed to define and defuse extremes.[4]

It is necessary first to place Donne's sermons in the context of the court *milieu* wherein he perceived his "calling," for—the distinctiveness of his preaching voice notwithstanding—his religious concerns reflect the needs of the monarch he served as apologist. Court sermon discourse of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods had been characteristic in its erastian orientation, in which service to God was described first as service to the King. Such service was exemplified in the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity that defined the monarch's authority in church matters and the subject's duty to obedience to the King's laws in Church and State.

Essential to this rhetorical campaign was the derogatory power of the term "puritan"—despite the fact that these hotter Protestants were for the most part securely ensconced within the Church of England. Their security rested upon the assumption that they agreed with majority opinion in matters of doctrine: all puritans were Calvinists. Until the 1620's the idea of "puritan" was rarely freighted with theological weight. But all Calvinists

were not puritans. Puritans *were* distinct from the larger mass of Calvinists in the Church of England by their reluctance to obey the monarch in those matters of uniformity that played such a large part in defining the role of the Royal Supremacy. Therein lay their challenge to the monarchy.[5]

The assumptions inherent in the Calvinist consensus prevented court preachers from using the potent accusation of heterodoxy to discredit puritanism. They employed instead a variety of theologically neutral rhetorical devices to discredit non-conformity. This synechdochic strategy employed examples of familiar godly behavior to represent the larger dangers of puritanism. The most common example of this approach presented puritans as preferring sermons to prayer. Court preachers condensed this commonplace assumption into a shorthand formula: uniform and obedient praying was opposed to disorderly and disobedient sermon-gadding.[6]

This rhetorical strategy points up the ambivalent attitudes about preaching that characterize second- and third-generation protestant thought in England. While preaching was lauded as responsible for the spread of the Reformation, to tout it overmuch in this later period was to infer that some work of reformation remained unfinished. This sounded too dangerously close to criticism of the Royal Supremacy for conformist comfort. The stage was set for a conflict between those who preached to effect reform and those who preached to discourage further reform.

Jacobean court sermons, however, had heretofore kept faith with puritan demands. As a rule, both parties focused upon the *adiaphoric*, inessential nature of the reforms requested and denied. But this exquisitely balanced state of affairs would not survive the last years of James's reign. By this time, popular anxiety over the Spanish match had become shrill and unrelenting; the King found it intolerable. The highly charged political atmosphere of the 1620's catalyzed a significant shift in the focus of anti-puritan polemic: the Calvinist mainstream was identified with non-conformity and marginalized as puritanism. Court preaching played an essential part in the rhetorical creation of a new heterodox identity for Calvinism.

To understand John Donne's part in this transmogrification, it is best first to explore his public views on theology. That Donne held no great brief for Calvin's soteriology is amply documented in his sermons; to be specific, Donne's dislike was concentrated upon the doctrine of predestination. Preaching on Matthew 19.17, the narrative of the rich young man, Donne declares:

> When he enquired of Christ after salvation, Christ doth not say, There is no salvation for thee, . . .I have locked an iron doore of

> predestination between salvation and thee; when he enquired of him, what he should do to be sure of heaven, Christ doth not say, . . .you must look into the eternal decree of Election first, and see whether that stand for you or no. . .(6 :229)

Donne's objections to the doctrine of predestination are revealing. He does not reject it outright as untrue or unorthodox, but as impractical. He eschews the doctrine of election as too arbitrary to produce anything but despair; what Christ "doth not say" identifies what Donne refuses to teach. Thus Donne presents his anti-Calvinism as reflective of more general (and traditional) pastoral concerns.[7]

The reference to "look[ing] into the eternal decree" is not simply a warning against despair. Donne extends this practical concern to the realm of doctrinal and secular politics, denouncing by implication a style of preaching that urged hearers to examine their lives for signs of election rather than to trust divine guidance in matters of salvation. His criticism is based upon the contention that such self-examination was vain-glorious and hypocritical; inquiry into God's secret decree was "scarce [to] be disputed of in Schools, much less serv'd in every popular pulpit to curious and itching ears; least of all made table-talke, and houshold-discourse."(1:255) Coupled with his references to popular speech, Donne's condemnation of Calvinist theological "presumption" reveals a potential political subtext: that such attitudes would extend to the inappropriate discussion, disputation, and dissection of the King's policies as well.[8]

Linking predestinarian theology to political sedition is a characteristic strategy of the "avant-garde conformist" critique. During the years 1615-1625, this critique discredited by suggestion a consensus theology it could not yet hope to eradicate. Donne's political concerns place him within a conformist tradition that characterizes the polemical style of the Jacobean court; in addition, his pronouncements on the doctrine of election could have placed him within a subset of that tradition, the anti-Calvinist style of divinity represented by Andrewes, John Buckeridge, and a significant minority of churchmen who were to rise to power in the following reign. In one significant sense, however, he differs markedly from these theological brethren.

Where Donne departs from the model presented by Andrewes et al. is in his own very particular enthusiasm not only for the office of preacher (an enthusiasm shared by Andrewes), but also for the process of preaching. While the avant-garde conformists at the Jacobean court delineated a kind of

"reception theory" of worship, their energies in the latter part of James's reign focused on the reception of the Sacrament—what is received, how the believer should participate in the ritual, what effects it should convey. Thus Andrewsian "conformity," described literally as kneeling in prayerful reception of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, functioned as the antithesis to sermon-hearing; it presented the tangible apprehension of the former as superior to the latter.[9]

Andrewes and his kind often condemned the "religion of the ear." Donne's sermons, however, attempt to explain the relationship of preacher to hearer, and the proper response wrought by the effect of the word—or Word. Herein we see two conformist responses to the crisis of the 1620's—one that opposed sermons to the Sacrament, and one that opposed predestinarian sermons to sermons preached to gather the Visible Church. Donne favored communication over Communion. This orientation qualifies and distinguishes his style of divinity. It also provides us with the opportunity to understand more clearly Donne's usefulness to James I and his role in late Jacobean court polemic.

Donne's reverence for the ministry of preaching is displayed in an almost-puritan disapproval of derivative or second-hand sermons. In a sermon preached at Lincoln's Inn, for example, Donne reported that bishops in the primitive Church excelled in catechesis, not homiletics, and expressed his gratitude that the same was not true of the present day:

> God hath delivered us in a great measure. . .from this penury in preaching, we need not preach others Sermons, nor feed upon cold meat, in Homilies, but wee are fallen upon such times too, as that men doe not thinke themselves Christians, except they can tell what God meant to do with them before he meant they should be Christians. . .(3: 338)[10]

Donne's approbatory focus on preaching allows him to attack first puritanism and then Calvinism by extension. To point out that the state of the preaching ministry in England was healthy was a usual device to deflect puritan demands for further reform; here Donne daringly suggests that sermons need no longer inculcate doctrine. His dismissal of the cultural programme of the godly thus shifts with rhetorical ease—facilitated by the reference to preaching—to a contemptuous allusion to the doctrine of predestination, which was held to be orthodox by a majority in the Church of England at this time. In this context, Calvinist soteriology is rendered *adiaphoric*, thus indistinct

from vestment, Prayer Book or kneeling controversies. By provocative contextualization, Donne associates mainstream orthodoxy with marginalized non-conformity.

Nevertheless, Donne's larger concerns point to the evangelistic thrust of his ecclesiology, wherein he claims that the gospel is "founded and rooted *in sermone, in verbo*, in the Word" (1: 287). He eliminates the teaching of predestinarian doctrine, but does not substitute sacramental duties for homiletic ones. Donne focuses on gospel as dissemination rather than as dogmatically-specific content. This preoccupation is idiosyncratic; it accounts for the fact that Donne's sermons reflect more consciousness of the role of court preaching (and this from a pulpit already calculated to invoke self-consciousness) than the published works of any other Jacobean divine.[11]

In his most famous sermon on the topic of preaching, given in Lent at court in 1618, Donne conjoins the purposes of Gospel and preacher:

> Christ is *verbum*, The word; not A word, but The word: the Minister is *Vox*, voice; not A voice, but The voyce, the voice of that word and no other; and so, he is a pleasing voyce, because he pleases him that sent him, in a faithfull executing of his Commission, and speaking according to his dictate; and pleasing to them whom he is sent, by bringing the Gospel of Peace and Reparation to all wounded, and scattered, and contrite Spirits. (2:172)

The effectiveness of this passage is derived from the repeated rhetorical transfer from indefinite article "A" to definite article "The." This strategy underscores Donne's construction of these phrases as a quadrilateral equation: as Christ is to word, minister is to voice. Christ is thereby related to voice; Minister is elevated to Intermediary. The movement, between written gospel (as invoked by the allusion to John 1:1) to oral transmission, is therefore a kind of transubstantiation, yet one in which the minister transubstantiates the text rather than the priest the wafer.

Other points in this passage strengthen this reading. Donne's reference to "scattered" spirits gives the preacher's "voyce" the power to gather the congregation. Such a contention implies that the sermon is the centerpiece of the worship service, and that the congregation is defined by their relationship to the sermon rather than to the Sacrament. Donne's sermons frequently examine the complex and mysterious relationship of congregation, preacher, and God that comes together at the sound of the spoken word. In a sermon

preached at Lincoln's Inn, he applies the sacramental idea of the "Word made flesh" to the process of text interpretation:

> The Word of God is made a Sermon, that is, a Text is dilated, diffused into a Sermon; but that whole Sermon is not the Word of God. But yet all the Sermon is the Ordinance of God. (5: 56)

This exegesis of transubstantiation supports Donne's contention that the power of preaching begins with the duty of the preacher to represent the Divine. The stress here is on the mingling of Word and word, wherein the text is literally opened up, "dilated," and the preacher combines his language with God's. What results is a collaboration, which takes on a force not unlike the amalgamation of human and divine that occurs in the Communion service. The reference to divine law renders the similarity of Sermon to Sacrament complete.

Related to the above is Donne's notion of the importance of the public nature of worship. In a sermon preached in 1624, Donne praises the "*communicablenesse* of God," conflating the concepts of "sociableness," language, and Communion (6: 152). His criticism of private worship carries with it an implicit swipe at puritan conventicles, but Donne is more concerned with a doctrine that restricts the membership of the *ecclesia* to a minority of the elect within the larger confines of the Church of England. "He that fils his *Militant* Church thus," said Donne, speaking of the company of saints to the Earl of Carlisle and his company, "would not have his *Triumphant* Church empty" (6: 158). The effect is to emphasize that the boundaries of the invisible church were not to be considered narrower than those of the visible.

While this emphasis on public worship is a common feature of conformist sermons, Donne's definition of public worship differs from conformists' like Andrewes. "Our private meditation is but a wilderness, though we contemplate God there," Donne explained to a congregation at St. Paul's in 1622, "if our service end so, if we do not proceed to action and glorify God in the public." Donne often describes the boundaries of Visible Church as created by the range of a voice, not the span of communion rails. In a sermon preached at St. Dunstan's in 1624, he expands upon the notion of the public arena as the *locus* of scriptural interpretation:

> He also is a perverse servant, that will receive no commandment, except he have it immediately from his Masters mouth; so *is he too*,

> that pretendeth to rest so wholly in the *Word of God*, the *Scriptures*, as that he seeks *no interpretation, no exposition, no preaching*, All is in the *Scriptures*, but all the *Scriptures* are not alwaies evident to all understandings. (6: 102)

In these words we can detect the condemnation of "private humours" and "household" divinity that also comprise the elements of Donne's anti-predestinarianism. The counteraction for rigid puritan scripturalism is public worship centered upon preaching.

Donne's focus upon a Visible (and "vocal") Church defined by proclamation led invariably to a definition of the congregation as audience, or *audientes*. The following passage suggests that the role was an important and reciprocal one:

> there is a knowledge, an art of hearing, as well as of speaking. Students make up the University as well as Doctors: and Hearers make up the Congregation, as well as Preachers. A good hearer is as much a Doctor, as a Preacher: A Doctor to him that sits by him, in example, whilst he is here: A Doctor to all his family, in his repetition, when he comes home. (4: 118)

Here Donne outlines the transmission of the sermon, from its first public audience to its reception in the arena of private divinity. Thus the "table-talk and household-discourse" that could have centered upon unseemly discussions of the doctrine of election and might have served as a breeding-ground for political obstructionism has been transformed. The sermon becomes the alternative voice, the antidote to predestinarian theology.

The equation of "hearers" with "students" in the passage quoted above presents in addition a view of the preacher as persuader. Donne's carefully crafted examination of the complex process of turning text into sermon alludes also to the rhetorical composition of the sermon—as words that stimulate action. In acknowledging the sermon's capacity to influence behavior, Donne is compelled to refer to the multi-directional responsibilities of the preacher:

> [Preaching] is a debt, not onely to God, but. . .to *you*: and indeed there is more due to you, then you can claime, or can take knowledge of. For the people can claime but according to the *laws* of that State, and

> the *Canons* of that Church, in which God hath placed them; such preaching, as those Laws, and those Canons enjoyn, is a debt which they can call for: but the Pastor himself hath another Court, another Barre in himselfe, by which hee tries himselfe, and must condemne himselfe, if hee pay not this debt, performe not this duty, as often, as himself, knowes himselfe, to bee fit, and able to doe it. (6: 93)

The obvious reading of this passage focuses upon Donne's invocation of individual conscience, and to the preacher's ultimate responsibility to God. The passage admits, however, another layer of meaning. It is tempting to see in Donne's reference to "another Court" (as it is tempting to see in the passage quoted earlier concerning the preacher's "pleasing Commission" (2: 172) a sly reminder to his congregation at St. Dunstan's that he obeyed not only God in his vocation, but also God's Vicegerent on earth, James I. If the "good" in Donne's sermons depended upon the dictates of Donne's conscience, the "responsible" in them issued from his own obedience to the monarch.

Donne was ironically well suited, therefore, to defend the King's decision in 1622 to ban the preaching of the doctrine of predestination along with any discussion of foreign policy. By stressing the importance of preaching to the ongoing work of the Church, Donne redirects the force of the "Directions to Preachers" away from its problematic repudiation of orthodox doctrine:

> we are bound to *teach*, and. . .this *teaching* is to *preach*. . .Wo to *them*. . .who by their *distemper*, and *Schismaticall* and seditious *manner* of preaching, occasion and force *others to silence them*; and think. . .That as forbidden books sell best, so silenced Ministers thrive best. (6: 104)

Given the nature of Donne's views on preaching and its influence, it is not surprising to find his anti-preaching polemic aimed at the prevention of silence.[12]

The dictates of court policy rather than the dictates of private conscience determined the broad themes of Donne's sermons and many of the implications he drew from those themes. But his quasi-sacramental theory of the reciprocal operations of preaching lend a unique quality to his conformist polemic. Contradistinct to the predominant ecclesiastical style of the reign of Charles I, a style presaged by a minority of anti-Calvinist sacramentalists at the Jacobean court, Donne's divinity is oriented towards the power of the

minister's voice, and of the word preached. His sermons are, therefore, almost perfectly suited to deliver the frustratingly mixed messages of the 1620's—a decade poised between Calvinist consensus and Laudian provocation.

Above all, the decade represents the final years of ecclesiastical flexibility in seventeenth-century England. Donne's churchmanship points not so much to the presence of one authoritative style of divinity at the Jacobean court, but to the many disparate strands of acceptable theology and practice in that place and at that time. It is misguided, therefore, always to interpret his complex sermons as the products of a divided or subversive mind; rather, they give eloquent testimony to Donne's powers of creative construction.

James I tolerated a broad range of ecclesiastical possibilities in order to balance competing claims and achieve consensus—if not quiescence. Donne's preaching-centered ecclesiology was (to borrow a phrase) politically correct from 1615-1625; his theology less so, at least until 1622. After James's death, however, the situation was neatly reversed. Donne's theological soulmates at the Jacobean court, anti-Calvinists like Andrewes, John Buckeridge, and William Laud, would come to represent the idea of the "beauty of holiness" and the narrowing of religious options in the reign of Charles I. Their sacramentalist leanings identify them as spokesmen for the political provocations of the Caroline Church. Donne may be seen as the true representative of a Jacobean *via media*, as long as we remember that after 1625 the "middle way" was a road less travelled.[13]

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Notes

[1] P. Lake, "Lancelot Andrewes, John Buckeridge, and Avant-Garde Conformity at the Court of James I," in L. Peck, ed., *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 113-134. In this essay, for the purpose of simplicity, I have chosen to use the broad term "ecclesiology" to indicate the *praxis*—in this case, sacramental practices and/or preaching—of the Church of England, as distinguished from its theology.

[2] David Norbrook, "The Monarchy of Wit and the Republic of Letters," *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, E. Harvey and K. Maus, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 22-3. For anti-Calvinism in the Jacobean Church, see N. Tyacke, *Anti-*

Calvinists (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, rptd. 1991), pp. 9-28; for Calvinism, see P. Lake, "Calvinism and the English Church 1560-1640," *Past and Present* 114 (1987): 32-76.

[3] Donne's clerical career followed a brief but influential stint as a religio-political controversialist: A. Patterson, "All Donne," *Soliciting Interpretation*, p. 60. For a provocative discussion of the state of reform in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Church, see D. MacCulloch, "The Myth of the English Reformation," *Journal of British Studies* (1991): 1-19. The phrase "Calvinist consensus" is modern; see G. Bernard, "The Church of England c. 1529-1642," *History*, vol. 75, no. 244 (June 1990): 192n.

[4] T. Cogswell, *The Blessed Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 21-32; S. Adams, "Foreign Policy and the Parliaments of 1621 and 1624," in K. Sharpe, ed., *Faction and Parliament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 139-141.

[5] P. Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 84-91.

[6] Lake, "Avant-Garde Conformity," p. 119.

[7] The debate over Donne's Calvinism has been largely confined to literary scholars; this reflects their keener interest in Donne to date. An explicit treatment of the doctrine of predestination is a common feature of most Calvinist sermons preached in this period; Donne's sermons, even those preached in Germany and the Hague in 1619, during the Synod of Dort (2: 250-310), forgo this explicitness and instead weigh in against doctrinal "innovation" and the sin of "pride," topics which often presented veiled anti-predestinarian arguments. (These sermons may also reflect their 1630 revision [2: 269]). Overall, Donne's doctrines of grace and divine omnipotence are more indicative of protestantism than they are specifically of Calvinism. But cf. Norbrook, pp. 21-2; Debra Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 164-5. Shuger's argument, that Donne "could not have preached successfully from the major pulpits of the day. . .if his religion had not seemed to his contemporaries acceptably orthodox and pious," would be correct except insofar as she believes this proves Donne was a "High-Church Calvinist." There was, as this essay tries to show, a broader range of acceptable theology preached from the English Church's influential pulpits at this time.

[8] For Andrewes' similar view, see Lake, "Avant-Garde Conformity," pp. 118-120.

[9] For Andrewes' dissimiliar view, see Lake, "Avant-Garde Conformity," p. 125.

[10] Parenthetical volume and page reference refer to G. Potter and E. Simpson, eds., *The Sermons of John Donne*, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962). Subsequent references will be made in the text.

[11] Eiléan Ní Chuilleanain, "Time, Place, and Congregation in Donne's Sermons," in J. Scattergood, ed., *Literature and Learning in Medieval and Renaissance England* (Blackrock, County Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1984), pp. 214-15.

[12] A reading of the situation in 1622 that stresses the coercive power of royal opinion and Donne's reputation as less "conservative" (by which it appears the author means "less avant-garde conformist") can be found in Norbrook, p. 22.

[13] For the monarchical balancing act, see K. Fincham and P. Lake, "The Ecclesiastical Policy of King James I," *Journal of British Studies* 24, no. 2 (April 1985): 173-92. On Donne and the *via media*, cf. Norbrook, p. 16; Norbrook accepts the Andrewesian, avant-garde definition of the "middle way" and thus describes Donne as "not finding the correct position within it." Donne's pro-preaching, anti-Calvinist public stance resembled much more James I's position than did Andrewes's.