John Donne Journal
Vol. 20 (2001)

The Theology of *La Corona*

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John Donne's recusant childhood was followed by the ecclesiastical agnosticism of his early manhood, famously expressed in the satire "Of Religion" of the 1590s. This, in turn, was succeeded by his public conformity to the principles of the Protestant establishment, affirmed in such works as the anti-Catholic *Pseudo-Martyr* (published in 1610) and his ribald polemic against the Jesuits, *Ignatius his Conclave* (1611). Then there was his ordination in the Church of England and Doctorate of Divinity from Cambridge (1615) and the decade as Dean of St Paul's which closed his life. In *Pseudo-Martyr*, he declared the difficulty of reforming himself:

> I had a longer work to doe then many other men; for I was first to blot out, certaine impressions of the Romane religion.[1]

In tension with the public evolution of his Christianity, several of Donne's poems prompt questions about the character and thoroughness of his personal reformation. The doctrinal, liturgical, and spiritual components of his sonnet sequence, *La Corona* (probably written in 1609), indicate his persisting Catholicism rather than a nascent Protestantism.

The "corona" (or crown) was an Italian form of linked sonnets. It was also a method of reciting the Rosary, called "The Corona of Our Lady," with seven "decades" of prayers instead of the usual five. The "Franciscan Crown," introduced in the fifteenth century, was such a sequence, consisting of meditations on "the seven joys of Our Lady." There are seven poems in Donne's *Corona*—an introduction followed

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[1]In R.C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 39.

by six meditations on standard Christian "mysteries," all of which are usual subjects of Rosary prayers. In his age of numerology, the sevenfold structure (with its biblical and sacramental connotations) may also have been influential in Donne's preference for this Rosary structure over the fivefold version. He was fascinated by the hexaemeral tradition, drawing upon it (for example) in the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions.*[2]

For an English Protestant poet to appropriate Italian literary forms was unexceptional—indeed, it was expected in the Renaissance. But in *La Corona*, Donne uses such a literary convention in the context of a specifically Roman Catholic devotion alien to Protestant teaching, which had rejected the cult and invocation of the saints, particularly the Virgin. In the sequence, as Maureen Sabine has argued, he 'husbanded the remaining fragments' of past Marian devotion.[3]

Liturgically (as Helen Gardner has observed), Donne weaves together phrases from the Advent offices in the *Breviary* in the first sonnet, while the second draws on the "Hours of the Blessed Virgin." These were part of the *Prymer*, the prayer book of the laity in the Middle Ages. Gardner also notes that the choice of subjects for meditation matches the cycles of Christ's life in medieval art, where it was "natural to pass directly from the Finding in the Temple to the events of Holy Week," omitting subjects from the Ministry.[4] Donne's selection and arrangement also conform to the more recent Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* which are reflected, too, in the details of individual meditations (there is, for example, the striking use of self-dramatization in the *compositio loci* in the octave of "Nativitie" and of an ocular *applicatio* in the sestet). Like Ignatius, Donne concludes his meditations with the Ascension and, using a favorite verb, an appeal to Christ as the knightly warrior who has "batter'd heaven for mee." In his punning, the "strong Ramme" is also the battering ram of chivalric

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[2]See Kate Gartner Frost, *Holy Delight: Typology, Numerology, and Autobiography in Donne's Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990) and Colin B. Atkinson and Jo B. Atkinson, "Anne Wheathill's *A Handful of Holesome (though Homelie) Hearbs* (1584): The First English Gentlewoman's Prayer Book," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 27 (1996): 670.

[3]*Feminine Engendered Faith* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 96.

[4]"Introduction," *The Divine Poems of John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. xxii, 59.

warfare. The militant Christ of Pauline metaphor was the principal Ignatian symbol of Jesus: "O my chevalier" wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins, the enraptured Jesuit.[5] In imagery, as in meditative structure, Donne was still under the influence of that "conclave."

The medieval, Italianate, and Counter-Reformation components of *La Corona*, intensified by combination, are a theological and cultural provocation to reformed Christianity. "Certaine impressions of the Romane religion" were not blotted out.

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Scholarly speculation about the theological provenance of the sonnet sequence has been misled by the uncritical acceptance of a supposed reference to it in Donne's poem to Magdalen Herbert, probably also of 1609, with its typically overreaching comparison. Reminiscent of the naughty allusion to Christ and the Magdalen in "The Relique," with its witty affectation of a revulsion from Catholic "mis-devotion," Donne points out here that as Mary Magdalen was devoted to Christ, so he would ask his Magdalen, Mrs Herbert, to "Harbour these Hymns, to his dear name addrest."[6]

"Hymns," in the seventeenth century, had a broad application, to secular as well as sacred poetry, so the meditations in *La Corona* could be loosely described in this way. But it is noteworthy that in a letter to Mrs Herbert two years before, accompanying another gift of divine poetry, Donne was careful to differentiate between the enclosed "Holy Hymns and Sonnets." It is unlikely that he would now describe the sonnets of *La Corona* as "hymns" or, collectively, as a "hymn."

The text of the sequence, however, is the principal evidence against this supposed allusion to it in the poem to Magdalen Herbert which has led scholars to claim that, in *La Corona*, Donne has

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[5]"The Windhover: To Christ Our Lord."

[6]"To the Lady Magdalen Herbert, of St. Mary Magdalen, in *The Complete English Poems of John Donne*, ed. C.A. Patrides (London: Everyman, 1985), p. 317. All references to Donne's poetry are to this edition. The title of this poem has led several scholars to incorrectly ennoble Mrs Herbert as "Lady Herbert." She became Lady Danvers, on her marriage to Sir John Danvers, in 1609.

"adapted" the Rosary "into an address to Christ."[7] Apart from the fact that the Rosary, in its various forms, contains repeated addresses to Christ, so no adaptation would be necessary for that purpose, not one of Christ's scriptural names is even mentioned in the seven poems of *La Corona*. Specifically, the "holy name," "Jesus," is nowhere to be found. Indeed, Donne avoids it when it would be the obvious, scriptural choice. In the sonnet on the Presentation in the Temple, he refers to Jesus as "the Word" for the purpose of developing a witty paradox (which he had found in St Bernard[8]) from the Johannine source. In the Fourth Gospel, as in *La Corona*, Jesus is never mentioned by name, let alone addressed by name. The only address in Donne's "Temple" is to Joseph.

The principal source of *La Corona*, the Rosary, is addressed to Mary, Jesus, and the other Persons of the Trinity. But it emphasizes the Virgin by including the *Ave Maria* ("Hail Mary . . .") as a reiterated petition, with the *Paternoster* ("Our Father . . .") and the *Gloria patri* ("Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost . . ."). The idea of the Virgin as a rose—as in William Dunbar's "Roiss Mary, flour of flouris"[9]—is also implicit in its name. For these reasons, it is usually principally regarded as a Marian devotion, but it is by no means exclusively so. Most of its "mysteries" refer to Christ.

This variety of addressees is to be found in *La Corona*, too. When Christ is finally addressed by name, in the sestet of the last sonnet, it is as the "strong Ramme," "mild lambe" and "bright torch" of devout metaphor, developed from scriptural titles, rather than by any of his biblical names of "Jesus," "Christ," "Lord" and "Master." Before this, in the fifth sonnet, "Crucifying," Donne calls on Christ in the colloquy arising from the meditation, but (again) does not address him by name.

The sequence is notable for being less Christocentric in the subjects of its petitions than the Rosary itself. The opening address is to the "Antient of dayes"—that is, God the Father, who is described by this phrase in the Old Testament (Daniel 7:9). The first personal address to a New Testament figure is to the "faithfull Virgin" in the

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[7]Patrides, in *Poems*, p. 429, unnumbered footnote.

[8]Gardner, p. 61.

[9]"Of the Nativity of Christ."

second sonnet, "Annunciation." In the third, "Nativitie," Mary is also warmly apostrophized.

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Both the Annunciation and the Nativity are "joyful mysteries" of the better-known fivefold Rosary sequence. Donne's "Annunciation," the first meditation in *La Corona*, is an exultant celebration in the spirit of Counter-Reformation Marian piety, worthy of Richard Crashaw. The poet's baroque elaboration of the theological paradoxes of the Virgin's role, familiar in medieval poetry, issues in a warm sensuality of intimate physical allusion:

> Ere by the spheres time was created, thou
> Wast in his minde, who is thy Sonne, and brother,
> Whom thou conceiv'st, conceiv'd; yea thou art now
> Thy Makers maker, and thy Fathers mother,
> Thou'hast light in darke; and shutst in little roome,
> Immensity cloysterd in thy deare wombe. (9-14)

In the *Prymer*'s Matins Hymn for feasts of the Blessed Virgin, the English rendering refers to "the cloistre of marie." Donne's development of the conceit in the extreme antithesis ("little roome, / Immensity") and in the active verbal form of the substantive, "cloistre," gives it new life. Chaucer echoes the *Prymer*'s metaphor too, "withinne the cloistre blisful of thy sydis" (*Prologue to the Second Nun's Tale*),[10] but without the intimacy of Donne's "deare wombe."

The poet's exultation in the Virgin's status was to reach its climax four years later in his reference to her in "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward" where she is credited with providing "halfe of that Sacrifice, which ransom'd us" (32). It is the idea of the Virgin as Co-Redemptrix. His conception of Mary's role at Bethlehem in the economy of redemption is directly offensive to the central soteriological doctrine of the Protestant Reformation, the Atonement, with its singular focus on the Redeemer at Calvary. The Reformers insisted that Mary's role should not be elaborated beyond her few scriptural appearances, with their ambiguities (for example, in Jesus's

[10]Gardner, p. 60.

apparent rebuke to his mother in John 2:4). Martin Luther attacked the glorification of the Virgin in Roman Catholicism. Donne advances it as a member of the Church of England.

Most extraordinary, in the vein of Donne's Marian devotion and contemporaneous with *La Corona*, is "The Litanie"—his "meditation in verse," as he described it to Henry Goodyer. The poem has the same title as one of the public offices of *The Book of Common Prayer*, containing the liturgy of the reformed English Church, but it was from the unreformed model that Donne derived his inspiration. "The Litany" of Thomas Cranmer, evolving from his translation from Latin of 1545 to become the official Litany in the Edwardine prayer book, is addressed to the Persons of the Trinity alone. Initially, so is Donne's, echoing Cranmer's phrases. But subsequent to that three-fold address, Donne departs from the *Prayer Book* and conforms to the hierarchical ordering of the Litany of the Saints, with stanzas on the Virgin, prophets, patriarchs, angels, apostles and so on, originally used by Cranmer but which he then pruned to invoke the Trinity alone.

In the stanza on Mary, immediately following that on the Trinity, Donne, the poet of extremity, takes the idea of the Co-Redemptrix one step further, in a phrase patient of the interpretation that the Virgin herself is our sole Redeemer:

> that faire blessed Mother-maid,
> Whose flesh redeem'd us. . . . (37-8)

As if this were not enough, he persists in the quibble, with a Crashavian flourish:

> That she-Cherubim,
> Which unlock'd Paradise, and made
> One claime for innocence, and disseiz'd sinne. . . . (38-40)

The unexceptional theology, of course, is that Jesus took fleshly form from the Virgin, in the Incarnation, to undertake the work of salvation. But Donne's expression, appearing to apply that action to the Virgin, indulges a Mariolatry outrageous to reformed divinity.

Donne closes the stanza with an explicit request for the intercession of Mary, the "high Abbesse," as he calls her in a later stanza of "The Litanie" on the virgin saints and martyrs, an approving

allusion to the religious houses dissolved at the Reformation. The mediation of the Virgin (developed as the Catholic cult of Mary as "Mediatrix of All Graces") is just as explicitly rejected in the twenty-second of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, published in *The Book of Common Prayer*. There, the "invocation of Saints" is strongly denounced as "a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God." In contradiction, Donne writes not only to affirm the teaching, but insistently so, apparently to defend it against its critics. We sense the pressure of opposition behind these lines from a poet who, simultaneously in public polemic, was presenting himself as the hammer of Romanism:

> As her deeds were
> Our helpes, so are her prayers; nor can she sue
> In vaine, who hath such title unto you. (43-5)

In *La Corona*, in an ambiguity similar to that in "The Litanie" about Mary's flesh, Donne argues that the Christ-child, in her womb,

> Can take no sinne, nor thou give, yet he'will weare
> Taken from thence, flesh. (7-8)

Donne's observation that the Virgin cannot give Jesus any sin refers both to his essential sinlessness and to the popular belief in Mary's Immaculate Conception, propagated by such as Duns Scotus (who, as Hopkins reminds us, "fired France for Mary without spot"). Alone of human beings (the teaching goes), the Virgin was born without the stain of Original Sin. Unlike an ordinary mother, she will not pass on that inheritance to her child.[11] The balanced cadence in which this teaching is embodied, "can take no sinne, nor thou give," embellishes the idea of partnership of the Son and Mother in the redemptive process.

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[11]Hopkins's reference to the Immaculate Conception is in "Duns Scotus's Oxford." Often confused with the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, that of the Immaculate Conception was not defined until 1854. It had been a popular belief since the Middle Ages. See R. V. Young, *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 90-91.

Helen Gardner is unpersuasive in arguing that Donne, in omitting from his Rosary sequence the explicitly Marian mysteries of the Assumption and the Coronation, because they "have no basis in Scripture," gives evidence thereby of his "rectified devotion."[12] These are but two of the fifteen mysteries of the traditional Rosary. Donne, in his choice of just six subjects, includes two that he addresses to the Virgin—"Annunciation" and "Nativitie." In the former, he includes an allusion to the Immaculate Conception (similarly without "basis in Scripture," in Protestant teaching). A devotion bent on drawing attention to its rectification would have explicitly addressed those two poems (particularly, "Nativitie") to Christ and would surely have entirely avoided the triple Romish provocation of Mariology, the medieval liturgy and the processes of the *Spiritual Exercises*. In any case, when Donne spoke of "a rectified devotion" (in a letter, probably of 1608, to Henry Goodyer) he was not claiming this phrase for his own religious position, but balancing what a rectified devotion taught with what the Roman Church held in the matter of the invocation of the saints.[13]

To argue that Donne has adapted the Rosary, in *La Corona*, to a reformed focus on Christ is a futile Procrusteanism which would turn the sonnet sequence into a work of Protestantism and the poet, *ipso facto*, into the apologist for the Reformation which his contemporary prose works appear to be revealing. The poem, like its author, is more complex and more interesting, as further reading will show. What is remarkable is that Donne, keen to assimilate himself, publicly, to the convictions of the establishment, in Church and State, should have written against the popular grain in this way, in his poetry. Mary Papazian rightly differentiates between explicitly biographical works among Donne's religious poems, such as "Since she whom I lov'd," and others like *La Corona* which speak of more general experiences of faith.[14] But the kind of Christianity they describe is also Donne's personal religion, revealing tensions and contradictions between what

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[12]Gardner, p. xxii, n.1.

[13]See Annabel Patterson, "Afterword," *John Donne Journal*, 14 (1995): 230 n.9.

[14]Reviewing Elizabeth Hodgson, *Gender and the Sacred Self in John Donne*, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 30 (2000): 290.

he judged to be expedient, publicly in prose, and the sources he drew upon in private devotion and preserved in poetry.

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Donne prays, in the first sonnet, that his sequence will be "a crowne of Glory, which doth flower alwayes." The sequential meditations of the Rosary form the chaplet—the wreath or crown—of the rosarium or rose-garden which gives the devotion its name. The principal structural conceit of Donne's *corona* of sonnets is the crown, joining Christ's crown of thorns, "which doth flower alwayes," with this floral wreath of prayer. We see it in terms of the work's circularity (the first and last lines of *La Corona* are the same—in vocabulary if not in meaning) and in the rising sequence of its subjects, through "Resurrection" and "Ascention," with the crowning glory of all the redeemed in Heaven. As in the closing stanzas of "A Valediction: forbidding mourning," where the well-managed compass inscribes a circle to celebrate a perfect human love, the circular conceit in *La Corona* is the emblem of unity with God, the third stage—after purgation and illumination—in the spiritual progress of meditation.

Donne points out that he has woven his crown "in my low devout melancholie." This is usually taken as a specific reference to a period of spiritual crisis, in 1607-10, "the most disturbed and anxious years of Donne's life."[15] It is another critical misconception. Instead of providing support for this theory, *La Corona* undermines it. Aside from the fact that it is conventional for the author of a sonnet sequence, sacred or secular, to present himself in the posture of humility at the outset (so the speaker is "low," lowly), the opening characterization is typical of Donne's presentation of his spiritual state throughout his poetry and sermons, over twenty years. It is more temperate than several self-portrayals, for example, that in "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward," written beyond the years of acute anxiety.

Donne's was a sensibility perpetually prone to melancholy. The adjective, "devout," in the overlooked oxymoron here, indicates that this is "melancholie" which has been elevated from an emotional condition to a spiritual discipline. The derivation of the word (from

[15] Bald, p. 235.

μελας, "black"), also, is a sign that this melancholy of "devout" character, as opposed to an irreligious kind, may be derived from the deliberately cultivated "dark night of the soul" of the mystics. It is certainly in the same spirit. The disabling state of psychological depression is transformed. Donne's "strenuous cultivation of this kind of poetry," Louis Martz writes, was "part of his lifelong effort to transcend and resolve his grievous sense of the fickleness, the dissolution, the transiency and fragility of all physical things" (including, we may add, himself).[16]

This is why, a few lines later, Donne speaks of his "white sincerity", changed from blackness, through grace. The process is enacted in the better-known *Holy Sonnet*, "Oh my blacke Soule" (probably one of the six sonnets sent to the Earl of Dorset in 1609, the same year as the composition of *La Corona*[17]). In both cases, he is confident to postulate the reward which the sincerity of his mourning deserves. We particularly note the direction to himself, in a rite of repentance, as he dons the dark vesture of melancholy:

> Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lacke;
> But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?
> Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke. (9-11)

"Holy mourning" and "devout melancholie" are less important as the signs of a crisis than as revealing the *response* to the crisis of a spirit well-versed in the disciplined processes for the eradication of sin and suffering. There is no justification for Bald's sweeping assertion that these poems reveal a "period of Donne's life where he had no vocation and felt keenly that he had no place in the divinely ordered scheme."[18] They contradict such despair and abandonment. So far from indicating the poet's sense of his elimination from God's purposes, their clear structure reveals the schema of faith by which incorporation in the Body of Christ is assured. The ringing affirmation which immediately succeeds Donne's confession of "devout melancholie" is neither

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[16]"The World as Meditation," in M.H. Abrams, ed., *Literature and Belief* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958), p. 157.

[17]John Carey, *John Donne*, "The Oxford Authors" (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press), p. 454

[18]Bald, p. 236.

theologically unjustified nor stylistically indecorous, in these circumstances, but inevitable:

> Thou which of good, hast, yea art treasury,
> All changing unchang'd Antient of dayes. (3-4)

Donne's spirituality *in extremis* recurs and, as surely, he returns to the paradoxical *via negativa* to resolve the turbulence of his despondency. Ten years later, in May 1619, on his "last going into Germany," he writes of his conscientious choice of this discipline:

> Churches are best for Prayer, that have least light:
> To see God only, I goe out of sight:
> And to scape stormy dayes, I chuse
> An Everlasting night.[19] (29-32)

Commentators have puzzled over this apparently unredeemable negativity concluding the poem, failing to note that it is enclosed in divinity—like the darkness of the best churches, guaranteeing one's invisibility (to all but God). It is the willing hiddenness of the believer, commended in Scripture (Colossians 3:3) and sought in hymnody ("let me hide myself in Thee"[20]). The absoluteness is essential to the discipline, wittily signaled by Donne's appropriation to his condition of one of the absolute epithets of the Godhead: "Everlasting". In apparently denying God (by going out of sight, into perpetual night), he has affected His presence, linguistically, by the term he uses to describe the situation. Implicit, also, is the anticipated resolution, beyond the poem, of the closing rhyme and of the spiritual exercise itself, as "night" will become "light". "The darkness shall be the light," as T.S. Eliot writes in his lines on the *via negativa*, "and the stillness the dancing."[21] Donne's "devout melancholie" is not a text of hopelessness, but its contradiction, which is all the more exultant for having been won from despair.

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[19]"A Hymne to Christ."
[20]Augustus Toplady, "Rock of Ages."
[21]"East Coker," III, *Four Quartets*.

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In the introductory, invocatory sonnet to *La Corona*, Donne engages with two principal teachings of the Protestant Reformation: justification by faith alone and predestination of the elect. He uses key words from those controversial doctrines: "workes," "salvation" and, most importantly, "will." Both Luther and Calvin taught justification by faith without works (*sola fide*) and denied human free-will after the Fall. To these doctrines, Calvin added those of absolute predestination, to heaven of the elect and to damnation of the rest, their identities having been eternally determined, and of the inadmissibility of grace.

The English Laudians, in sympathy with, if not directly indebted to the continental teachings of Arminius and his followers, challenged the denial of free-will and of the repudiation of works, and opposed the doctrine of absolute predestination as unbiblical. They contended that God elected those who believe and persevere by grace in faith and works, and that divine sovereignty was compatible with human free-will.

Works, in Donne's teaching, are placed in subordination to grace, avoiding the Pelagian heresy which held that the initial and fundamental steps towards salvation may be taken by human beings alone. Donne asks, instead: "who shall give thee that grace to beginne?" Yet he regarded works not only as worthy but essential to the Christian's life, arguing, in a late sermon, that faith and works must be combined and that faith without works is "a *dead Faith*, as all Faith is that is inoperative and workes not":

> No man is justified, that works not; for, without works how much soever he magnifie his faith, there is *Dolus in spiritu, Guile in his spirit*.[22]

The particular work for which Donne asks to be rewarded, in *La Corona*, is the poetic labour of the composition of the sequence itself—a crown of poems which he trusts will be judged worthy, not of the pagan laurel wreath, but the "crowne of Glory, which doth flower

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[22]22 November, 1629, in *The Sermons of John Donne*, 10 vols, eds Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press), 9:265.

alwayes." To complete our works is to crown them. At the end of that sequence, we are crowned by God: "The ends crowne our workes, but thou crown'st our ends."

As a poet is a maker (we remember the Greek derivation), so the Christian engages in the work of prayer and worship (where "liturgy," also from Greek, means "the work of the people"). Donne unites these concepts, literary and liturgical, in *La Corona*, which itself combines his works as poet and man of prayer, as it combines sources in public worship and personal experiences of faith. Vital to this understanding of the theology of faith and works in *La Corona* are its first and last lines, identical in vocabulary, different in meaning: "Deign at my hands this crown of prayer and praise." The first refers to the poet's works; the second to his hoped-for reward, the sign of the grace of redemption in which he expresses his faith. The two are different, but interdependent. As Donne commented in a sermon, speaking of faith and works, in another but related metaphor:

> Neither of these can be said to justifie us alone . . . that we may take the chaine in pieces, and thinke to be justified by any one link thereof; by God without Christ, by Christ without faith, or by faith without works.[23]

The last line of the poem takes us back to the beginning, as faith entails works in Christian life in this world. The circle of unity is completed, aesthetically and theologically.

At the end of the first sonnet is the theological pivot and climax of *La Corona* in its entirety, which the subsequent sonnets, with their specific meditations, elaborate and confirm:

> 'Tis time that heart and voice be lifted high,
> Salvation to all that will is nigh. (13-14)

Donne's focus is on the word, "will." Salvation is available to all who *will* do so—that is, lift up their hearts and voices, engaging in that offering, initiated and inspired by grace, then cooperating with it. Equally importantly, salvation is offered to those who exercise their free-will in this process and *want* it to be so, making the choice to offer

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[23] *Sermons*, 7:228.

themselves and to receive grace. We notice, further, how the generosity ("to all") is augmented by immediacy (salvation "is nigh"), as Donne opens up his meditation from a personal reference—"with a strong sober thirst, my soule attends"—to a universal application of the doctrine. It is a triple contradiction of Calvinism: of the denial of free-will, of the inadmissibility of grace and of the exclusivist doctrine of election. When Donne writes that "Salvation to all that will is nigh," he is protesting against the Protestants.

Later in the sequence, in the sixth meditation, "Resurrection," he ponders the second of the four "Last Things," the Judgment. Now, Donne's contingency seems to deny the generosity of God, anticipated before:

> nor shall to mee
> Feare of first or last death, bring miserie,
> If in thy little booke my name thou enrole. (6-8)

This "little booke" has proved a big stumbling-block to scholars, Helen Gardner describing it as "a difficulty I cannot . . . explain,"[24] Carey and Patrides side-stepping it and A.J. Smith misreading it in Calvinistic terms as the "little booke" of the elect.[25] Donne repeatedly refuted the exclusivity of Calvinist election. "There is little doubt in the *Sermons*," Jeffrey Johnson writes, in the most recent study of Donne's theology, "that Donne believes Christ's redeeming blood was shed 'for all that will apply it' and that the Holy Ghost descends to disperse the salvific effect of the crucifixion 'upon all that do not resist him.'"[26]

The solution to the "difficulty" is simple and, as we would expect, witty. The "little booke" is, indeed, the Book of Life, the roll of the redeemed, seen not from Geneva, but *sub species aeternitatis*. It is "thy" little book, in the possession of God. In "Temple," Donne wrote of Jesus that "He in his ages morning thus began / By miracles exceeding power of man." As that eternal time-span has finite expression in our time-bound world, so what we are inclined to see as a "little booke" is,

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[24]Gardner, p. 63.

[25]"there is room for few names in it," *John Donne: The Complete English Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 621.

[26]*The Theology of John Donne* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), p. 134.

in fact, voluminous beyond our imaginations. It is expedient that we should speak of its littleness, nonetheless, in case our aspiration to enrolment should slacken in recognition of God's boundless mercy, but in Donne's theology it is ultimately more important to recognize the abundance of grace. Donne was the last to deny the difficulty of entering Heaven, but in commenting on scriptural "metaphors of narrow ways, and strait gates," he taught that these are "not to make any man suspect an impossibility of entring, but to be the more industrious ... in seeking it."[27] We encounter the same eternal perspective again in "The Relique" where "nature, injured by late law" has set free the sexual seals originally placed on the unfallen Adam and Eve. That late (or recent) law is the experience of humanity through time, since the Fall. It is as yesterday in God's sight, in eternity, but to us, of course, it seems like eons. As in his reference to "thy little booke" in *La Corona*, Donne is seeing the matter from God's perspective.

What is striking in the closing lines of *La Corona*, surrounding the "little booke," is the confidence of the speaker, not his sense of exclusion. The ascending Christ does not enter Heaven alone, Donne is keen to point out there, but leads his flock:

> Behold the Highest, parting hence away,
> Lightens the darke clouds, which hee treads upon,
> Nor doth hee by ascending, show alone,
> But first hee, and hee first enters the way. (5-8)

The path is "mark'd" in order that all who will may follow, and this includes Donne: "that I the way may see."

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The most subtle but, finally, the most important indication of Donne's theological position, in *La Corona*, is the literary character of the work. Differentiating the sequence from the *Holy Sonnets*, Helen Gardner argues that it is "inspired by liturgical prayer and praise—oral prayer; not by private meditation and the tradition."[28] This is to

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[27]In Gardner, p. 63.

[28]Gardner, p. xxii.

overstate the difference—the Ignatian meditative components are clearly present in *La Corona* and its several petitions are decidedly Donnean in flavor, unreminiscent, in the distinctive portrayal they advance and their particular metaphorical character, of any liturgical prayer:

> Now thou art lifted up, draw mee to thee,
> And at thy death giving such liberall dole,
> Moyst, with one drop of thy blood, my dry soule. (12-14)

The peculiar genius of this work is that, unlike the *Holy Sonnets* (primarily personal) and "The Litanie" (essentially liturgical), it strikes a balance between public and private prayer. George Parfitt argues that *La Corona* lacks "the sense of urgency of the greatest religious lyrics" because Donne "is writing to a predetermined pattern and these patterns are ones outside the poet."[29] It is precisely because they are "outside the poet" that they are so personally important to him. Several patterns are indeed predetermined here—of the liturgy and the Rosary—but those restraints stir up the experience and expression of personal ardor in faith, vividly dramatized, instead of suppressing it. Paradoxically, the personal utterances have more impact for being discovered within structured designs and in the context of familiar subjects. The topics of the Nativity and Flight are given a new immediacy by the present-tense involvement of the speaker in the drama of the occasions and by elements of poetic technique (the use of the imperative, searching rhetorical questions, onomatopoeia assisted by alliteration) vivifying the Gospel narrative:

> Seest thou, my Soule, with thy faiths eyes, how he
> Which fils all place, yet none holds him, doth lye?
> Was not his pity towards thee wondrous high,
> That would need to be pittied by thee?
> Kisse him, and with him into Egypt goe,
> With his kinde mother, who partakes thy woe. (9-14)

The poised combination of scriptural, liturgical and meditative material with the urgency of Donne's personal voice is not only evidence of literary accomplishment but a text of the *via media* of the

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[29] *John Donne: A Literary Life* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 99.

English Church. Liturgical order and much of the material of the pre-Reformation rites and ceremonies, vernacularized, were retained in combination with a new appreciation of the individual's intimations of faith. So, in *La Corona*, Donne expresses his spiritual condition in his customary terminology of extremity:

> Moyst with one drop of thy blood, my dry soule,
> Shall (though she now be in extreme degree
> Too stony hard, and yet too fleshly,) bee
> Freed by that drop, from being starv'd, hard, or foule. (1-4)

But these personal lines modulate into a general theological teaching:

> And life, by this death abled, shall controule
> Death, whom thy death slue . . . (5-6)

issuing in the personal petition (or colloquy):

> May then sinnes sleep, and deaths soone from me passe,
> That wak't from both, I againe risen may
> Salute the last, and everlasting day . . . (12-14)

which is linked, in the next sonnet, to the song of the redeemed in the company of heaven, as Donne's private prayer is joined to that of the Church Triumphant:

> Salute the last and everlasting day,
> Joy at the uprising of this Sunne, and Sonne,
> Yee whose just teares, or tribulation
> Have purely washt, or burnt your drossie clay. (1-4)

So far as we can arrive at any definite statements about Donne's theology and spirituality, it is best to describe it in terms of the discriminating Catholicism of Anglicanism, with "certaine impressions of the Romane religion" blotted out, others retained. Modern scholarship too sharply divides seventeenth-century English divinity, and the lives and works of its exemplars, into "Protestant" and "Catholic" (by which is meant usually, but compounding the inaccuracy, "Roman Catholic"). It misses the genius of the English

Church, its "virtuous mediocrity,"[30] as defined by Richard Hooker in *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* and which George Herbert expressed succinctly in "The British Church," which he placed, appropriately, at the very center of *The Temple*, differentiating Canterbury from both Rome and Geneva:

> But, dearest Mother, what those misse,
> The mean, thy praise and glorie is,
> And long may be.
>
> Blessed be God, whose love it was
> To double-moat thee with his grace,
> And none but thee. (25-30)

Donne's thought and the corpus of his writing, with its complexities and contrariety, cannot be definitively consigned to either side of the great theological divide of the Reformation. In a sermon at Lincoln's Inn preached on Trinity Sunday, 1620, Donne praised the Church of England for pursuing "a middle and a moderate way."[31] Eccentric by nature, he inevitably responded to the individuality of Protestantism, but he rejected its Lutheran and Calvinist orthodoxies. Always alert to his idiosyncratic sensibility and frequently railing against his perversity as a "motley humorist,"[32] he keenly understood the necessity for strict discipline. His childhood experience of the old faith, in a family of martyrs obedient to "the Teachers of Romane Doctrine,"[33] provided rich resources, in liturgy and meditation, for the straitening of a wayward spirit. In the Church of his adoption, these traditions of private prayer and public liturgy could be adapted, with some blotting out of references to such as the papacy, transubstantiation and purgatory. Donne's retention of a veneration for Mary, a female focus of meditation obviously appealing to a man of his sexual temperament, may appear to challenge the "rectified devotion" of his Anglicanism.

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[30]Simon Patrick, *Account of the New Sect of Latitude-Men*, 1662.

[31]In Jeanne Shami, "'The Stars in their Order Fought Against Sisera': John Donne and the Pulpit Crisis of 1622," *John Donne Journal* 14 (1995), 12.

[32]"Satyre I," "Away thou fondling motley humorist. . . ."

[33]Donne, in John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 20.

But we should remember that Mary was not banished from the liturgy of the English Church, her feasts were observed, the calendar year being dated from that of her Annunciation, 25 March, "Lady Day," and her song, the "Magnificat," being said every day in the office of Evening Prayer. And it was simply politic for Donne, in public utterances, to offset the suspicion of divided allegiances, which attended a person of recusant stock, with some sharp attacks on Romanism and the Jesuits in his polemical prose works.

La Corona expresses Donne's theology, synthesizing objective patterns and designs of belief and prayer, with the distinctive personal notes of his spirituality and some doctrinal emphases obviously attributable to the faith of his fathers, never entirely blotted out. This combination and balance speaks of the reasonable divinity of the English Church and its tolerance of a degree of doctrinal and liturgical diversity. This was increasingly under threat in Donne's lifetime and was to be obliterated, for a period in the next generation, when the world was turned upside down.

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This essay is written *in memoriam* Wesley Milgate, 1916-1999.