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"Stand in the way": Seeking True Religion in John Donne's *Satyre III*

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> The theologian in Donne makes his first appearance. . . .
> —E. Gosse[1]

Donne's *Satyre III* presents considerable interpretive challenges, but most agree that the poem comprises a kind of solution to the social, political, and religious problems encountered by an aspiring Christian intellectual of the late sixteenth century.[2] Granting that the poem functions in this way, I would like to suggest additionally that it provides—perhaps beyond conscious intention—an early sketch[3]

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[1]Edmund Gosse's description of Donne's *Satyre III* (*The Life and Letters of John Donne*, I [London: William Heinemann, 1899], p. 41).

[2]See N. J. C. Andreasen, "Theme and Structure in Donne's Satyres," *Studies in English Literature* 3 (1963): 59–73 and M. Thomas Hester, *Kinde Pitty and Brave Scorn* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1982) for readings along these lines that take into account Donne's satire sequence as a whole. See also Camille Wells Slights, "Participating Wisely in 'Satire III,'" *John Donne Journal* 10.1–2 (1991): 91–95; Joshua Scodel, "The Medium Is the Message: Donne's 'Satire 3,' 'To Sir Henry Wotton' (Sir, more than kisses), and the Ideologies of the Mean," *Modern Philology* 90 (1993): 479–511; and Brent Nelson, "Courtship and the Hill of Truth: Religion, Career, and the Purification of Motives in Donne's Satyres and Sermons," *Renaissance and Reformation* 27.4 (2003): 7–30. Slights, Scodel, and Nelson construe the "solution" of *Satyre III* in casuistical, ideological, and courtly terms respectively.

[3]It has been proposed by Paul R. Sellin that Donne's *Satyre III* was composed late because of certain references in the poem which Donne would most likely not been able to make prior to 1620 ("The Proper Dating of John

of the poetic, rhetorical, and hermeneutic approach to divinity that later came to epitomize Donne's sermons and devotional writings. Following Richard Strier, I would agree that there is indeed an "Erasmian spirit" that pervades the poem, but on a careful reading it seems that this "spirit" has little to do with the supposed "radicalism" of the poem or the putative "free-thinking" of Donne's persona.[4] Indeed, Donne's vision in *Satyre III* is marked by a kind of "boldness," as Strier points out, but if Donne shows an indebtedness to Erasmus in the poem, it is in the way that he projects a form of patristic-humanistic theological learning based in the literary arts. The approach that Donne sets out through his fictional persona is precisely the one that Erasmus had so strenuously recommended by advocating the grammatical-rhetorical orientation of the patristic *antiqui* over the logical-dialectical orientation of the scholastic *moderni*. Rather than encouraging a sectarian habit of thinking or resorting to the philosophical method of the schools, Donne, in step with Erasmus, encourages his reader to follow in the way of "all the Fathers," fashioning a persona who not only recommends the careful study of patristic writings, but also envisions and partly models the lively interpretive-inventive process by which early teachers and preachers within the church participated in "true religion."

Interestingly, *Satyre III* begins with an apparent preference for philosophy over religion, pitting the ethical and intellectual rigor of ancient philosophers against the complacency of early modern Christians. In the opening lines, the speaker confesses his perplexity over the stubbornness of the world's "worne maladies" and the apparent impotence of "our Mistresse faire Religion" to offer a "cure" (4–5), fearing that the rigorous virtue of the ancient philosophers might end up outdoing the religious devotion of his Christian contemporaries:

> . . . . Alas,
> As wee do them in meanes, shall they surpasse

Donne's 'Satyre III,'" *Huntington Library Quarterly* 43 [1980]: 275–312). However, in consultation with the editors of the new Variorum edition of Donne's *Satryes*, Nelson notes that "by around the turn of the sixteenth century the five poems that we generally call the 'satires' were completed and circulating as a set in the same order that they are printed in today" (p. 6).

[4]See Strier, "Radical Donne: 'Satire III,'" *English Literary History* 60 (1993): 231.

> Us in the end, and shall thy fathers spirit
> Meete blinde Philosophers in heaven, whose merit
> Of strict life may be'imputed faith, and heare
> Thee, whom hee taught so easie wayes and neare
> To follow, damn'd?
>
> (9–15)[5]

Here, the juxtaposition of the "easie wayes" of a Christian father and the "strict life" of the "Philosophers" establishes an important tension that runs throughout the poem. It would seem advantageous to have a set of fatherly instructions that are "neare / To follow," but, as it becomes clear, the difficulty of doctrinal formulations is that they can often be a little *too* near to follow. Indeed, as Donne's speaker points out, a Christian's "devotion" ought to be as worthy "As vertue was to the first blinded age" and "heavens joyes as valiant to asswage / Lusts, as earths honor was to them" (6–9), but unreflective devotion to paternal authority can all too easily lead to moral inertia and self-flattering contentment.

Despite his critique, however, the speaker does not side with the "blinde Philosophers" (12). Instead, he continues to explore, eventually extending his critique of paternal authority to the "easie ways" of sectarianism. The problem with religious factions, he seems to suggest, is that they prevent a vibrant, interactive, truthful life with others since they reduce divinity to one exclusive form or method. Thus, Catholic "Mirreus" loves fair Religion's "ragges" and, "Thinking her unhous'd" in England, "Seekes her in Rome," resting content "because hee doth know / That shee was there a thousand yeares agoe" (43–46). Calvinist "Crants," on the other hand, refuses to "be inthralled" by "such brave Loves" and achieves peace of mind in a posture of haughty resistance (49). The *via media* of Anglican "Graius" is no less problematic. He "stayes still at home" and "Imbraceth her, whom his Godfathers will / Tender to him" because he is too easily convinced by ambitious preachers who have laid claim to ecclesial perfection (55–60). Even those who attempt to detach themselves from these various religious factions in a detached philosophical manner tend to generate self-satisfying reductions of their own. For instance, the skeptic "Phrygius" finds his religious identity by way of absolute negation, abhorring "All, because all cannot

[5]All references to Donne's poetry are to John T. Shawcross's edition, *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967).

be good" while the libertine "Gracchus" chooses a strategy of positive inclusion, loving "all as one" (63, 65). On the surface, Phrygius and Gracchus seem more sophisticated in their approach to doctrinal matters, riding above the difficulties of factionalism by either refusing or accepting all forms of religion. And yet, their philosophies are no less parochial. Phrygius's radical exclusion may seem to deny the false identity of sectarian allegiance and Gracchus's radical inclusion may seem to erase the pernicious boundaries that exist between factions, but they do so even while establishing their own allegiance of one.

The speaker continues his critique of religion later in the poem, cautioning the reader against absolute submission to political and religious authority. "Foole and wretch," he says, "wilt thou let thy Soule be tyed / To mans lawes, by which she shall not be tryed / At the last day?" (93–95). The answer that this rhetorical question calls forth is an emphatic "no." The speaker suggests that "mans lawes" are inherently limiting when it comes to seeking true religion. To think that true religion manifests itself in the authoritative teachings of political and religious leaders is misleading. It is like entrusting oneself to the "easie ways" of paternal authority. The inclination is to submit to the absolute word of "a Philip, or a Gregory, / A Harry, or a Martin" (96–97), but, as the speaker points out, true religion does not match any one particular ideology. In fact, as the speaker suggests, to be "humble" to the power of political-religious authority in the world is to engage in "idolatrie" (102). Instead of equipping the soul for relationship with "God himselfe" (110), devotion to worldly power tends to preclude human-divine relationship because it has a propensity to treat the mediation of authority as an end unto itself. The speaker's warning in this section is pointed. If obedience to power and authority is carried far enough, it will lead to destruction and despair, uprooting the soul and giving it over to the "tyrannous rage" of politico-religious power (106).

The speaker's solution to these problems is significant, though somewhat perplexing. He begins at line fifteen by challenging his reader to fear the possibility of unsuspecting damnation. That one's accepted means of salvation would lead directly to hell is indeed troubling, but the speaker's purpose is not to incapacitate the reader with anxious questions concerning the destiny of his soul. Quite the contrary, fear becomes the axial point of a thoroughgoing transvaluation. That is, where the reader may be accustomed to associate religious fear with weakness and

timidity, the speaker invests it with a sense of "courage, and high valour" (16). As he proceeds, he continues to modify his terms. Adventurers may dare to face the dangers of war and make themselves prey to "leaders rage, to stormes, to shot, to dearth" and explorers may dare to "dive seas and dungeons of the earth" and brave the extreme cold of "frozen North discoveries," but such daring does not actually demonstrate true courage. Rather, it is "courage of straw" (28).

Here, the typical values of the age are completely overturned. Of course, the message is ironic in a way because Donne's colorful description lends itself to a celebration of wayfaring adventure. And yet the celebration is in the service of a thoroughgoing critique. The speaker proceeds by addressing the adventurer as a "desperate coward" and goes on to interpret his attitude and actions as a sign of disgrace rather than honor:

> . . . wilt thou seeme bold, and
> To thy foes and his (who made thee to stand
> Sentinell in His worlds garrison) thus yeeld,
> And for forbidden warres, leave th'appointed field?
> (29–32)

The speaker's purpose is to restore his reader to true courage and equip him to resist the spiritual foes that he tends to treat as friends. There is indeed a battle going on, but it seems that the reader is unable to see where the battle lines have been drawn. Not only does he fail to put up a good fight in the "real" battle, but he actually yields to the enemy in fear, abdicating responsibility at the very moment he believes that he is most "bold." Rather than striving after new and unknown worlds with militaristic and scientistic confidence, those who are truly courageous will "stand / Sentinel" and fight from a fixed position in God's "garrison," waging war with his true enemies: the world, the flesh and the devil (33–42).

The speaker's revisioning of courage in this section certainly helps to counteract religious complacency, but it still leaves open the question of loyalty and allegiance. That is, a proper sense of courage may enable the right kind of boldness in the face of true enemies, but it does not exactly help one to know where to stand. Where, after all, is "true religion" to be

found? (43). The speaker addresses this problem further along, beginning with his exhortation to "doubt wisely":

> . . . in strange way
> To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;
> To sleepe, or runne wrong, is: on a huge hill,
> Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will
> Reach her, about must, and about must goe;
> And what the'hills suddennes resists, winne so;
> Yet strive so, that before age, deaths twilight,
> Thy Soule find rest, for none can worke in that night.
> Hard deeds, the bodies paines; hard knowledge too
> The mindes indeavours reach, and mysteries
> Are like the Sunne, dazling, yet plaine to'all eyes.
> (77–88)

Having critiqued the various religious factions of his day and the psychology of sectarianism generally, the speaker suddenly startles his reader into a new awareness by introducing a spiraling vertical dimension to "Truth."

In context, the speaker seems to be recommending a distinctly philosophical rather than religious solution to the problem of sectarianism.[6] This is signaled by the association of epistemology (i.e., "doubt wisely"; "hard knowledge"; "mind's endeavors") and ontology (i.e., "soul find rest") with the imagery of ascent. In particular, Donne's metaphor of the hill of truth recalls Plato's analogy of the cave from *The Republic* in which Socrates narrates an intellectual journey from the fallen world of common experience with its delusions and "passing shadows" up a "steep and rocky ascent" to an ontic-epistemic apotheosis where reality can be seen "just as it is."[7] Socrates describes this journey in ways that

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[6]Drawing on Plato's *Timaeus*, Hester argues that "the circularity of the progress around the hill in combination with the rectilinear movement up it . . . reproduces the spiral motion which ancient, medieval, and Renaissance philosophy alike delineated as emblematic of the motions of the rational soul of man" ("John Donne's Hill of Truth," *ELN* 14 [1976]: 101). For a list of possible sources for the hill of truth, see W. Milgate, ed., *The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 290–292, 306ff.

[7]Plato, *The Republic*, ed. Desmond Lee (New York: Penguin, 1955), p. 280. All quotations from *The Republic* are hereafter cited in the text.

closely parallel the speaker's description of the ascent up the hill of truth. The sojourners begin as "prisoners" who have had "their legs and necks . . . fastened [so] that they can only look straight ahead of them" (p. 278). From their childhood onwards, they have been told that the shadows they see in front of them are "in all respects real" (p. 279). Eventually they recognize the lie of tradition and authority, break free from their bonds, and look upwards to the mouth of the cave. Initially dazzled by the light and inclined to withdraw and take refuge in a familiar shadowy underworld, they grow accustomed to the brightness and find it easier to see the "objects themselves" (p. 280). And so they begin to make the "ascent into the upper world," the "upward progress of the mind into the intelligible realm" (p. 282). There are many distractions along the way, but when "the eye of the mind gets really bogged down in a morass of ignorance, dialectic gently pulls it out and leads it up" (p. 282). Arriving to the mouth of the cave, the prisoner is finally free. His mind has been "turned away from the world of change" and he can now "bear to look straight at reality" and see it "just as it is" (pp. 282, 280).

Indeed, Plato's dialectic seems to recall the arduous struggle up the hill of truth in *Satyre III*. However, the speaker's exhortation to "doubt wisely" and "stand inquiring right" also seems to anticipate the impulse of rationalist philosophers in the mid-seventeenth century to sweep away the foundations of an education based on the authority of ancient authors and begin anew on more rational grounds.[8] Descartes's pioneering work in *Discourse on Method* (1637) provides a good example and one that resonates strongly with the ascent to truth in Donne's poem. At the beginning of *Discourse*, Descartes relates how he had gradually become skeptical of his education in the humanities because it "embarrassed [him] with so many doubts and errors":

[8]Stephen Toulmin suggests that Descartes's philosophical pursuits were motivated in part by the need to rise above the political and religious fighting between Protestants and Catholics in the seventeenth century ("Descartes in His Time," in *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. David Weissman [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996], pp. 124–126). From this perspective, Donne's persona in *Satyre III* and Descartes seem to have much in common. As we will see, however, Donne's strategy for a more peaceful, life-giving situation is radically different than Descartes's.

> I have been nourished on letters since my childhood, and since I was given to believe that by their means a clear and certain knowledge could be obtained of all that is useful in life, I had an extreme desire to acquire instruction. But so soon as I had achieved the entire course of study at the close of which one is usually received into the ranks of the learned, I entirely changed my opinion. For I found myself embarrassed with so many doubts and errors that it seemed to me that the effort to instruct myself had no effect other than the increasing discovery of my own ignorance.[9]

Given his uncertainty, Descartes decides to give up "the study of letters" and "resolv[es] to seek no other science than that which could be found in [himself]" (p. 8). The difficulty with "reading the literature of the ancients" is that it stands in the way of a genuine search for the truth (p. 6). Out of a "desire to learn to distinguish the true from the false" and "to see clearly . . . and to walk with confidence," Descartes imagines that it is better to "make [himself] an object of study" rather than the "literatures of the ancients" because he is unable to find anything in the latter that could give him "settled convictions" (p. 8). And so, casting skepticism on that "which he had only been convinced by example and custom," he begins "little by little" to deliver himself of "many errors which might have obscured [his] natural vision and rendered [him] less capable of listening to Reason" (p. 8).

In the course of his philosophical reflection, Descartes eventually comes to isolate himself both intellectually and socially, not only withdrawing inwards to the mind-soul where he could be guided by reason alone, but also retreating from the social, religious and political spheres, shutting himself up alone where he could avoid the distractions of society and divest himself of all "cares or passions" (p. 8). Alone with his thoughts and "free to follow his own ideas," Descartes sets to work on a new method of science, believing that a rational scheme based on "a foundation which is entirely his own" is far better than one based on the work of "various masters" (pp. 9, 11). He does not reject opinion outright. Descartes continues to observe the received teachings of

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[9]Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 5. All quotations from *Discourse* are hereafter cited in the text.

authority and tradition while he works out his methodology on a purely rational basis. However, he does so with the intention of eventually making the commonplaces of authority and tradition "conform to the uniformity of a rational scheme," thereby enabling him to decide once and for all which ones were true and which ones were not (p. 12). The problem from Descartes's perspective is that scholastic and humanistic learning alike are vulnerable to ideas based on the probability of opinion rather than pure reason. In an effort to mitigate this problem, Descartes initiates an entirely different approach, setting logic and rational discourse over and against the literary arts which are based on mere "example and custom" (p. 8). The goal is absolute certainty. He would accept as true only "what was presented to his mind so clearly and distinctly that he could have no occasion to doubt it" (p. 13).

Indeed, the speaker's solution in *Satrye III* seems closely tied to the dialectical and rationalistic orientation of the philosophical tradition, whether viewed in Platonic or Cartesian terms. The significant difference, however, is that the speaker makes recourse to the voices of authority and tradition precisely at the point that they seem to fail. Seeking true religion not only involves striving relentlessly, but also remaining "unmoved," choosing one place to stand rather than many, and asking "thy father which is shee":

> . . . unmoved thou
> Of force must one, and forc'd but one allow;
> And the right; aske thy father which is shee,
> Let him aske his, though truth and falsehood bee
> Neare twins, yet truth a little elder is;
> Be busie to seeke her, beleeve mee this,
> Hee's not of none, nor worst, that seekes the best.
> (69–75)

Interestingly, this passage comes directly before the speaker's exhortation to "doubt wisely" and strive after the truth. Here, it would seem that the speaker is confused about how to progress. That is, he seems to waver on the fault-line between medieval authority and modern autonomy, recalling an earlier less enlightened age by upholding the binding relationships of "Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne" while at the same time advancing the "new Philosophy" that "cals all in doubt" (Donne, *The First Anniversarie,* 205, 215). Is it possible to reconcile the speaker's call

to steadfastness and a posture of inflexible resolve with the invitation to doubt, inquire, and search? Indeed, the imagery is perplexing in this section of the poem, but it is important to grasp the conventional paradox upon which Donne is drawing. The speaker's critique of sectarian thinking may seem to have a distinctly modern orientation, but the arduous journey up the hill is predicated on remaining "unmoved" in relation to one's calling. Here the speaker recalls the militaristic image earlier in the poem of "stand[ing] / Sentinell" in God's "garrison" from an earlier passage. Such a position not only suggests moral daring and unswerving devotion, but also submission to God and obedience to his will. The speaker is not calling for a philosophical solution, coaching the reader in the ways of dialectical ascent or rational methodology. Rather he is implicitly advocating a distinctly religious identity and ethic based in what Donne might call "cooperative grace."[10] The one who searches for true religion does so confidently, even boldly, yet also attentively and responsively, conditioned at the outset by a word of divine conscription mediated by the voices of Scripture, tradition, and authority.

It is also important to notice that the ascent up the hill of "Truth" is not a movement up and away from historical embodiment. Instead of seeking to establish a private, intellectual connection between God and the soul, the speaker opens himself to others and thus becomes a participant in the *vita activa*, rooted in social, political and ecclesial life. This kind of posture is distinctly religious in orientation. The practice of divinity requires steadfast commitment based on a divine calling, but it also necessitates one place to stand and involves listening to the voices of tradition and authority in community. The speaker is not being cynical when he concludes his critique of factionalism and sectarian thinking by asserting the need for choosing one way. Nor is he being facetious when he exhorts the reader to "aske thy father" where true religion is to be found. There is one way to "true religion" and it has something to do with paternal authority, and yet somehow it does not require adherence to one narrowly defined set of doctrines or allegiance to one particular religious faction against all others.[11] Rather, it entails rootedness in a

[10]See Jeffrey Johnson's discussion of "cooperative grace" in *The Theology of John Donne* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), pp. 119–148.

[11]Others have read *Satyre III* as a reflection of Donne's religious beliefs and sectarian allegiance (or lack thereof) rather than a general strategy for pursuing

church community as well as an ongoing, intensive exploration of religious truth within the horizon of authority and tradition. Along with Scripture, the present voices of authority and the past voices of tradition provide important fiduciary parameters within which to search for religious truth. At first this is puzzling given the speaker's earlier scorn for the "easie ways" of paternal authority, but the problem of religious complacency and self-satisfaction does not originate with the influence of a "father." Apparently, the difficulty is psychological and spiritual in nature and results from the blithe acceptance and tactless execution of hardened, bureaucratized interpretations as though they were totalizing instantiations of divine truth. And so, from Donne's perspective it is important to welcome a word from "thy father" and to heed the words of other fathers in the Christian tradition, and this is presumably because trust rather than suspicion is the rudimentary posture of the one who would participate in religious truth-seeking.

Donne conveys a similar view of patristic divinity in a sermon preached at Lincoln's Inn on Psalm 38:4. While this sermon was composed and delivered long after Donne completed *Satyre III*, he repeats some of the same language and implies a comparable frame of reference:

> Good ways, and good ends are in the plurall, and have many examples; else they are not good; but sins are in the singular, He [that] walk'd in the way of his father is in an ill way: But carry our manners, or carry our Religion high enough, and we

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true religion. See James Baumlin, *John Donne and the Rhetorics of Renaissance Discourse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991), pp. 67–85; Hester, "'Ask Thy Father': Rereading Donne's 'Satyre III,'" *The Ben Jonson Journal* 1 (1994): 201–218; Thomas V. Moore, "Donne's Use of Uncertainty As a Vital Force in *Satyre III*," *Modern Philology* 67 (1969–1970): 41–49; Slights, pp. 91–95; and Strier, pp. 283–322. If we are to read the poem biographically, Hester seems correct when he suggests that Donne "finds 'No where' in England a church 'true and faire'" at the point of writing. But this is not really the point of the poem. As we know, Donne eventually embraced the Protestant faith, becoming ordained as a clergyman in the Church of England. And yet, he continued to consult all the fathers, and this included those patristic and medieval sources that would have given shape to his Catholic upbringing. On the basis of the strategy that Donne outlines in *Satyre III*, we should not be surprised that his later religious works would seem to fluctuate between Roman and Reformed extremes.

> shall finde a good rule in our fathers: Stand in the way, says God in Jeremy, and ask for the old way, which is the good way. We must put off *veterem hominem*, but not *antiquum*; Wee may put off that Religion which we think old, because it is a little elder than our selves, and not rely upon that, it was the Religion of my Father. But *Antiquissimum dierum*, Him, whose name is, He that is, and was, and is for ever, and so involves, and enwraps in himself all the Fathers, him we must put on.[12]

There are important hints in this passage concerning the danger of the father's "easie ways" in *Satyre III*. Donne places the emphasis above on the plurality of "our fathers" rather than the singularity of "my Father," suggesting that conforming to the latter is problematic given that "sins are in the singular." It seems that the problem with the son's deference to the father in lines 11–15 of *Satyre III* is not that he has a place for tradition, but that he has thoughtlessly acquiesced to the parochial view of one father—his own. The speaker later exhorts the reader to "ask thy father" where true religion may be found since "truth a little elder is" (73), but clearly this is not enough. In fact, as Donne points out above, it might be entirely appropriate to "put off that Religion . . . which is a little elder, and not rely upon that," since it is merely the "Religion of my Father." And yet, true religion will surely escape the one who does not have ears for "all the Fathers." The speaker of *Satyre III* agrees: to "aske thy father" is a good place to begin the search for true religion, but even more important than this is to "Let him aske his." The implied plurality of fathers in this line is crucial for understanding the ensuing ascent up the hill of truth. It suggests an approach to divinity that is based in a hermeneutic of trust since an individual's search for truth proceeds within the bounds of a received tradition.

Such an approach to divinity is radically different from the metaphysical thinking of the Greek philosophical tradition. The speaker of *Satyre III* suggests that progress in knowledge can be made and it is important to "Keepe the'truth which thou hast found" (89), but this is not somehow akin to achieving epistemic mastery according to a totalizing metaphysic. That is, in the process of ascent, the speaker does

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[12]Donne, *Sermons*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953–1962), 2:103.

not gradually acquire the confidence of the Cartesian rationalist who has found the key to absolute certainty or the Platonic philosopher who achieves divinity once and for all through dialectical ascent. On the contrary, he continues to gain sustenance from the voices of tradition and authority even as he pursues divine truth. Where Plato and Descartes show an aversion for texts of tradition and authority and the socio-historical realm of *communis sensus*, calling for a direct, unmediated encounter with the "thing itself," the speaker encourages his reader to consult "all the Fathers," not only to draw from their wisdom generally, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to become a fellow participant in the theological life to which they aspired.

This is precisely the kind of approach that Erasmus had recommended a generation before. It is easy to overlook a figure like Erasmus in the theological tradition since he did not produce a systematic theology and seemed to advocate a more humanistic approach to learning generally. However, like many of his humanist contemporaries, Erasmus held the discipline of theology in the highest esteem and reacted against the modern dialecticians or "schoolmen" for reasons that had little to do with establishing a newer, more improved rationalism.[13] In fact, what he disdained was the dominance of logic and metaphysical thinking in theological study since it undermined the study of Scripture and tended to foster intellectual pride and unnecessary quibbling rather than personal piety and ecclesial harmony.

He makes this clear in a brief summary of the theological tradition that he incorporated into a letter addressed to Cardinal Lorenzo Campeggi in 1520:

> In olden days the Christian philosophy was a matter of faith, not of disputation; men's simple piety was satisfied with the oracles of Holy Scripture, and charity, a natural growth, had no need of complicated rules, believing all things and never coming to a stop. Later, the management of theology was taken in hand by men nurtured in humane learning, but mainly in those fields of learning which today we commonly

[13]That Erasmus disparages the "schoolmen" with the term "*moderni*" is telling; doubtless, he would be have been as critical of a rationalist like Descartes in the seventeenth-century as he was of a Thomist, Scotist or Okhamite in his own day.

> call rhetoric. Gradually philosophy came to be applied more and more, Platonic first and then Aristotelian, and questions began to be asked about many points which were thought to pertain either to morals or the field of speculation about heavenly things. At first this seemed almost fundamental, but it developed by stages until many men, neglecting the study of the ancient tongues and of polite literature and even of Holy Writ, grew old over questions meticulous, needless, and unreasonably minute, as if drawn to the rocks on which some siren sang. By now theology began to be a form of skill, not wisdom; a show-piece, not a means toward true religion; and besides ambition and avarice it was spoilt by other pests, by flattery and strife and superstition.
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> Thus at length it came about that the pure image of Christ was almost overlaid by human disputations; the crystal springs of the old gospel teaching were choked with sawdust by the Philistines; and the undeviating rule of Holy Scripture, bent this way and that, became the slave of appetites rather than the glory of Christ. At that point some men, whose intentions certainly were religious, tried to recall the world to the simpler studies of an earlier day and lead it from pools most of which are now sullied to those pure rills of living water. To achieve this object, they thought a knowledge of the tongues and liberal studies (as they call them) were of the first importance, for it was neglect of them, it seemed, that brought us down to where we are.[14]

In this passage, Erasmus not only critiques the speculative theology of the schools, but also hints at a program of theological reform leading to "true religion." That is, while he regrets the dialectical method of the schools and how it eventually became synonymous with theology, he holds out hope for a retrieval of true divinity, guided by those with "a knowledge of the tongues and liberal studies." Such a retrieval was not simply a matter of drawing upon the right sources; more importantly, it aimed at a thoroughgoing revisioning of language and learning. As Erasmus points out, the theology of the early church was based in the grammatical and rhetorical arts, and this was because it involved an

[14]Erasmus, *The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 993 to 1121 (1519–1520)*, The Collected Works of Erasmus, vol. 7 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), pp. 196–197.

ongoing interpretation of Scripture with a view to moral and spiritual transformation. In Erasmus's view, the fathers were worth studying not only because they practiced this approach, but also because they caused it to proliferate, devoting their training in "humane learning" to the service of theological study. Some patristic writers may have flirted at times with metaphysical thinking in their attraction to Plato and Aristotle, thus prefiguring later developments in the theological tradition, but generally the fathers viewed the Scriptures as the wellspring of divinity and sought to practice a biblical hermeneutic and rhetoric that served to move the whole person—heart, soul, and mind—into a dynamic, responsive relationship with God.[15]

Erasmus makes his preference for this theological orientation clear in the *Enchiridion*:

> If your interest in sacred doctrine revolves more about what is vital and dynamic rather than merely dialectical, if you incline more toward what moves the inner man than to what leads to empty arguments, then read the Fathers. Their deep piety has withstood the test of time. Their very thoughts constitute a prayerful meditation, and they penetrate into the very depths of the mysteries they propound. I do not mean to condemn modern theologians; I am merely pointing out that in view of our purpose, namely, a more practical piety, they are hardly to be recommended. Let us not forget that the Divine Spirit has its own manner of speaking and its own figures of speech. Learn these from the very outset. The Divine Wisdom speaks to us and, like an attentive mother, adjusts Her language to

[15]Erasmus's friends and admirers were grateful for his efforts to revive the study of Scripture and the theology of the fathers, and over time they came to understand what was at stake. Urbanus Rhegius writes, "[Y]ou [i.e. Erasmus] urged us to study the theologians of antiquity, then led us . . . upstream to the crystal springs of the original Scriptures. . . . It is a wonderful sight to see humane and sacred studies so interconnected that they can be pursued together without conflict, though previously the machinations of the ignorant made them worse than enemies. All this we owe to your efforts; you have left no stone unturned to secure that in place of their empty philosophizing the schools of theology, at long last, should recognize the theology of the cross" (*The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 1252–1355*, The Collected Works of Erasmus, vol. 9 [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989], p. 4).

> our infancy. For the tiny infants She provides milk and for the sick, herbs. To receive solid food you must grow up to spirituality. She lowers Herself to your humility. You must raise yourself to Her sublimity.[16]

Again, Erasmus is sharply critical of the dialectical approach of "modern theologians," suggesting that it results in "empty arguments" and fails to bring about a "practical piety." However, rather than combating its abuses by setting out a more authentic logical-discursive approach, he recommends "the Fathers" for their spiritual hermeneutic. In Erasmus's view, the fathers are an important theological resource not because they have all the right answers, but because they set the reader on the right path. Their approach to theology opens up what is "vital and dynamic" in "sacred doctrine" because they direct the reader to Scripture and guide interpretion into "prayerful meditation," encouraging a lively, interactive encounter with the "Divine Spirit" as well as an ongoing contemplation of the sacred mysteries of the Christian faith.

Indeed, Donne's persona in *Satyre III* has a distinctly "Erasmian spirit," but his outlook suggests both more and less than what Strier claims. That is, Donne's persona, like Erasmus himself, seems to combine the approach of a staunch traditionalist and a free-thinking radical into one. In a distinctly conservative strain, he counsels the reader to follow the teachings of the fathers, but not so as to establish a final word. Rather, the fathers, considered in concert together, form a necessary horizon for reflecting on the "Truth," enabling an intellectual and spiritual search that requires many hermeneutic passes, rather than a direct dialectical ascent upward. It is important to notice that the process of ascent in *Satyre III* never opens out into a situation of final completion. Nor does it entail steady progress from beginning to end. The emphasis throughout is on a kind of hermeneutic activity that attends to a *copia* of perspectives within the bounds of an unfolding interpretive tradition. In this respect, the finding of truth is more akin to poetic and rhetorical invention rather than dialectical ascent since discovery occurs at a socio-historical level in the midst of a polyphony of voices, present and past. Again, the speaker is harshly critical of factionalism and sectarian thinking throughout, but he recognizes that

[16]Erasmus, *Essential Erasmus* (New York: Mentor, 1964), p. 37.

the search for "true religion" requires certain bounds and that theological understanding comes from a lively, ongoing interpretation of what has been revealed rather than a penetrating speculation into what has never been known.

Ultimately, the goal of such an approach involves choosing "God himselfe to trust"—or, as Donne puts it in the above sermon, to "put on" the "*Antiquissimum dierum*" who "enwraps in himself all the Fathers"—but the speaker does not press us to choose between God and his Word on the one hand and the language of authority and tradition on the other.[17] This becomes clear as the speaker shifts to a discussion of power represented by a mighty stream that originates at a "calme head" and cascades to the sea below (104). Here, the emphasis is no longer on a search for truth, but rather a proper relation to political and ecclesiastical authority. And yet, the speaker suggests that comporting oneself appropriately to such figures of authority, learning to "rightly'obey power" has something to do with participating in a religion that is true (100). The speaker makes it clear at the outset of this section that devoting oneself to specific political and religious authorities is unhelpful since such reverence is an "excuse for mere contraries" and so leads to singularity of opinion and, presumably, from there to schism (98). And yet, it is impossible, and it seems, undesirable, simply to escape the influence of such authority figures. Rather than recommending either

[17]Donne's perspective here is similar to Gadamer's in his discussion of "historically effected consciousness" and the "I-Thou relation" in *Truth and Method* (1960; New York: Continuum International, 1989), pp. 360–361. The speaker's openness to "God Himself" in *Satyre III* parallels his openness to the fathers. Concerning his relationship to God, the speaker forgoes a preemptive understanding of divinity (i.e. an "easy" interpretation) that would "rob [God's] claims of their legitimacy" and instead endeavors "to experience Thou as Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something." This does not mean that the speaker seeks to do "blindly what the other desires." Rather, the "openness to the other" that he exercises simply involves a recognition "that [he] . . . must accept some things that are against [him], even though no one else forces [him] to do so." The speaker takes a similar posture to tradition. Rather than "smoothing out [texts] beforehand, so that the criteria of [his] own knowledge can never be called into question by tradition," he allows "tradition's claim to validity, not in the sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness, but in such a way that it has something to say to [him]."

absolute submission or seditious revolt, the speaker suggests a posture that resonates with what he has said earlier concerning the necessity of standing in one place and consulting the fathers. To respect the "proper bounds" of power is to root oneself like so many delicate "flowers that dwell" at the "calm head" of the stream of power that flows from God himself (103–104). In this peaceful setting, no single authority is sufficient, but the voices of authority together stimulate growth and vitality and enable responsive participation in a religion that is true.

Throughout this essay, I have argued that Donne's speaker in *Satyre III* not only defends against a sectarian spirit in his quest for "true religion," but advocates a distinctly patristic-humanistic approach to this end. At the outset, I claimed that such an approach anticipates the style of Donne's sermons and devotional writings, and this would suggest a common outlook and sensibility between Dean Donne and the speaker of *Satyre III*. I would like to conclude by setting out an "impressionistic" thesis concerning Donne's mature religious prose. Donne was indeed a kind of theologian, but he was no "schoolman," as some have suggested,[18] and he did far more than simply repeat the doctrines set forth by Roman or Reformed camps.[19] The work of Jeffrey Johnson has helped to make this clear. As Johnson points out, the "eclecticism" of Donne's approach to divinity "defies assigning him too precise a sectarian definition," and this is partly because it "develops from an idiosyncratic blend of ideas and authors."[20] More than that, though, Donne seeks to understand and appreciate texts of tradition and authority in their original contexts while

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[18]Most notably, see Alfred Alvarez, *The School of Donne* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961) and Terry Sherwood, *Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

[19]This is precisely what the critical history of Donne's religious prose would suggest. Mary Papazian gives a sense of the contours. For perspectives that view Donne as "a crypto-Catholic for whom the Jesuit influences of his early life remained forever present," she recommends essays by Dennis Flynn, Anthony Raspa, Robert Young, Thomas Docherty, John Carey, and Thomas Hester. By contrast, Protestant perspectives that treat Donne as a "Calvinian with sympathies to sister Reformed churches on the Continent" can be found in essays by E. Randolph Daniel, Barbara Lewalski, and Paul R. Sellin. See Mary Papazian, "Donne, Election, and the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 55.4 (1992): 604, 617.

[20]Johnson, p. 146.

inventing (i.e., discovering) them anew for himself and others within a present community of faith. Strangely, Donne manages to be innovative and existentially relevant precisely at points where he is most attentive to and appreciative of ancient texts. In the *Essayes*, *Devotions*, and *Sermons*, he does not simply agree or disagree with his theological sources. Instead, he looks for ways to make them useful, disposing them mainly for the purpose of moral-spiritual edification rather than speculative inquiry or doctrinal debate. At all points, he strives after the ultimate goal of *Satyre III*: trusting "God himselfe." With Erasmus and other Christian humanists who looked to the example of the fathers, Donne takes a responsive stance in relationship to the living God, seeking not only to remain attentive to God's originating, creative voice reverberating through the Scriptures and the tradition of interpretation that had grown up around them, but also to respond inventively within the bounds of his calling.

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