

Donne and Bellarmine

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Izaak Walton informs us, in an oft-quoted remark, that John Donne “believed the *Cardinal Bellarmine* to be the best defender of the *Roman cause*, and therefore betook himself to the examination of his Reasons.” Walton assures us that “about the twentieth year of his age, [Donne] did shew the then *Dean of Gloucester* . . . all the Cardinals works marked with many weighty observations under his own hand.”¹ Walton’s dating is typically improbable, since the complete set of Bellarmine’s *Controversies* did not see publication until 1593, the twenty-first year of Donne’s life. Still, the main point is correct: occasional efforts in his sermons to refute or discredit Bellarmine’s arguments provide evidence that Donne knew the *Controversies* and studied them throughout his clerical career. In fact, Donne did not confine his reading of Bellarmine to his polemical works. Donne’s sermons that take Psalm verses as their texts also reveal an acquaintance with the Italian Jesuit’s commentary on the Psalms, first published in 1611. In addition to a few explicit references, these sermons provide numerous indications of Donne’s awareness of and responsiveness to Bellarmine’s explanations of the text of Psalms and his reflections on its meaning. Of course Donne does not always agree with Bellarmine, and very often the homiletic purposes of the English preacher take him in a different direction from the devotional motives of the Cardinal.² Nevertheless, despite the fierce antagonism between the Churches of England and Rome, Donne and Bellarmine approach the Psalms with a similar reliance on the ancient Church Fathers, with a similarly Scholastic philosophical and theological orientation, and—above all—with a similar preoccupation with the

moral and spiritual meaning of the scriptural text. These features shared by Donne's sermons on the Psalms and Bellarmine's commentary are especially striking when considered in contrast to the most eminent Reformation commentary by John Calvin. Calvin's commentary makes little recourse to the Fathers, and he is less interested in a reading of "David" as a tropological figure for the wayfaring Christian than in comprehending David as an historical figure. Indeed, Calvin anticipates some aspects of the historical-critical approach to Scripture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and seems considerably more "modern" than either Donne or Bellarmine. A comparison between Donne and Bellarmine thus shows that they share important elements of a common Christian tradition despite the political and ecclesiastical disputes of the Reformation era, and that the most significant elements of the religious revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries cannot always be confidently identified by the simple labels, "Catholic" and "Protestant."

A good example of Donne's equivocal attitude toward Bellarmine (indeed toward the Jesuits in general) comes in his fifth Prebend Sermon on Psalms 66.3. The sermon begins with a critique of the Vulgate translation for changing the title from "to the chiefe Musician" to "*in finem, a Psalme directed upon the end,*" and for adding "*Resurrectionis, A Psalme concerning the Resurrection.*" Donne then mocks the explanation of the Vulgate's authority by the Jesuit Lorinus.³ Further along in the sermon, among a number of other anti-Catholic gibes, Donne attacks Bellarmine's defense of the doctrine of papal primacy by adducing the unedifying figure of Pope Liberius: "When that one Bishop, who will needs be all alone, the Bishop of Rome, *Liberius*, so far subscribed to that heresie, (as *S. Hieroms* expresse words are) that *Bellarmino* himself does not onely not deny it, but finds himselfe bound, and finds it hard for him to prove, That though *Liberius* did outwardly professe himselfe to be an Arian, yet in his heart he was none" (VIII. 117-18). As Janel Mueller points out, however, despite this attack on Bellarmine's *Controversies*, Donne not only admits that the Vulgate title is appropriate, his explanation is very close to Bellarmine's in the latter's Psalm commentary.⁴ Only acknowledge

Resurrectionis to be an addition, Donne says, and “wee are content” that it be there:

you may take knowledge too, That that addition hath beene accepted and followed, by many, and ancient, and reverend Expositors, almost all of the Easterne, and many of the Western Church too; and therefore, for our use and accommodation, may well be accepted by us also.

Donne then expounds the meaning of the psalm according to a threefold idea of Resurrection:

We consider ordinarily three Resurrections: A spirituall Resurrection, a Resurrection from sinne, by Grace in the Church; A temporall Resurrection, a Resurrection from trouble, and calamity in the world; And an eternall Resurrection, a Resurrection after which no part of man shall die, or suffer againe, the Resurrection into Glory. (VIII, 111)

Bellarmino has conceded the point that the original text of the psalm has been altered, but he anticipates Donne’s defense of the interpretive force of the resurrection theme and specifically emphasizes the “third” of Donne’s resurrections:

The term “resurrection” does not occur in the Hebrew, and it is not read there according to Hilary; and Theodoret witnesses that it is not in the edition of the Seventy Translators, but is a later addition. Still it is so read by the the Holy Fathers Jerome and Augustine in the Commentary on this Psalm: and it seems that this singular word, whoever may have added it, was added prudently, since it indicates the theme of the Psalm. For the theme of the Psalm is the act of thanksgiving for the benefits of God, but most of all for perfect felicity after every calamity is finished: which will undoubtedly be in the resurrection.⁵

Donne’s sermon also makes “A thankfull acknowledgement of that which God hath done” a principal concern and says, “The Duty is a

Commemoration of Benefits" (VIII, 112, 113). Finally, Donne again follows Bellarmine in his interpretation of the clause, "Through the greatness of thy power shall thine enemies submit themselves to thee," as an accusation of hypocrisy against God's enemies: "*They shall submit themselves*, sayes the text, but how? *Mentientur tibi*, (as it is in the Originall, and as you finde it in the Margin) They shall dissemble, they shall lie, they shall yeeld a fained obedience, they shall make as though they were good Subjects, but not be so" (VIII, 114). "*Mentientur tibi inimici tui*" ("thy enemies shall lie to thee") is, in fact, the reading of the Vulgate, upon which Bellarmine remarks, citing Theodoret, "many there may be who lie to God about being his worshippers out of fear of his terrible works, and many will likewise accept the faith of Christ, not sincerely but with a feigned heart, for the same reason."⁶ Hence the procedure of this Prebend Sermon is typical insofar as Donne's sporadic skirmishing with Bellarmine over contested issues of ecclesiastical politics conceals a close attention to Jesuit's own unpacking of the text as well as his invocation of multiple readings from the Fathers.

The Penitential Psalms furnish both men an especially fruitful ground for moral and spiritual reflection, and the attitudes and insights they share are finally far more compelling than Donne's intermittent efforts to score polemical points at Bellarmine's expense. In a late sermon on Psalms 6. 6,7, for example, Donne spends a good deal of time disparaging the doctrine of Purgatory, and he explicitly reproves Bellarmine for defending the Vulgate's first-person rendering of the verb (*inueteraui*) against the third-person rendering taken from the Hebrew by the translators of King James's Authorized Version. Such eristic aggressiveness notwithstanding, Donne several times makes recourse to Bellarmine's interpretations of the Psalm. In fact, Donne's attack on the Vulgate is bracketed by two passages in which he follows Bellarmine very closely. In considering the theme of indignation in verse 7, "Mine eye is consumed because of griefe: it waxeth old, because of all mine enemies," Donne offers as one probable and traditional reading the following: "this indignation conceived by *David*, which withered and decayed him, was a holy scorn and

indignation against his owne sins, that such wretched things as those should separate him from his God, and from his inheritance, according to that chaine of Affections which the Apostle makes, That godly sorrow brings a sinner to care" (VIII, 206). Commenting on the Vulgate version of this verse, Bellarmine likewise maintains "that the sense would be, on account of my fury and indignation at the vileness of sin, my eye has darkened, as if it were decayed from too much weeping, and is troubled."⁷ In the first half of the next paragraph, Donne berates Bellarmine for preferring the Vulgate version, "I have grown old among all my enemies" ("inueteraui inter omnes inimicos meos"), before the Authorized Version: "[mine eye] waxeth old, because of all mine enemies." Yet in the middle of the paragraph, Donne takes up the more spiritually compelling issue of the nature of David's "enemies":

Who were his enemies, and what was this age that he speaks of? It is of best use to pursue the spirituall sense of this Psalme, and so his enemies were his sins; And *David* found that he had not got the victory over any one enemy, any one sin; Anothers bloud did not extinguish the lustfull heat of his owne, nor the murder of the husband, the adultery with the wife: Change of sin is not an overcoming of sin. . . . These are his enemies; and then this is the age that growes upon him, the age that *David* complains of, *I am waxen old*; that is, growne into habits of these sins.
(VIII, 208)

Bellarmino finds in David the same sense of defeat in the face of his sins and his sinful habits:

Clearly my eye has darkened for weeping out of the indignation that I have conceived, because for so long I have stuck fast in sins, so that I have grown old among all my enemies, as if he were to say, I am unable not to be vehemently indignant with myself, because I have until now perfectly conquered no vice, and I have defeated not a single foe of my soul, but I have become feeble among all my foes. Now he calls "foes" all those that that have urged him to sinning, whether devils, or men, or his own vices and evil habits.⁸

The parallels between the two passages are inescapable. Bellarmine's account of the Bible's spiritual vision proved cogent to Donne, even as he sought to undermine Bellarmine's defense of the Vulgate translation. For both men, "David" is most important to us as a figure for the fallen human condition, and Psalm 6 moves us as a cry of remorse and revulsion at the sinfulness that clings despite our best efforts and firmest resolutions—as a reminder of our radical dependence on God's grace.

The contrast with Calvin's commentary on this passage is revealing. To be sure, Calvin yields to no one in his preoccupation with grace, but he handles David as an historical exemplar rather than a tropological symbol. Calvin does not mention the Psalmist's enemies in his explanation of verse seven, and when he comes to verse eight ("Depart from me, all yee workers of iniquitie"), they are plainly the historical foes who exulted over David in his miseries:

Directing his discourse against his adversaries, he represents it as not the least part of his temptation, that ungodly men triumphed over him, and derided him as lost, and in a hopeless condition; for we know with what insolence their pride and cruelty magnify themselves against the children of God, when they see them oppressed under the cross. And to this Satan moves them, in order to drive the faithful to despair, when they see their hope made the subject of Mockery.⁹

Not surprisingly, the marginal gloss in the Geneva Bible follows Calvin's historical reading, whereby David in his time is an example for the contemporary faithful: "God sendeth comfort and boldnes in affliction, that we may triumphe ouer our enemies."¹⁰ More significant is the similarity between Calvin's approach and twentieth-century *Catholic* biblical glosses. According to the Jerusalem Bible, "The Psalmist's 'foes' regard the sick man's misfortunes as a punishment for some hidden sin (cf. Job's friends)";¹¹ and according to the New American Bible the Psalmist "rejects all fellowship with sinners," who are simply other human beings.¹² What all these comments have in common is the treatment of David—or the Psalmist—as a typical historical character. Like George Washington and the cherry tree, the

incidents in Psalms can serve as *examples* for men and women of every historical era; however, in the traditional view of Donne and Bellarmine, which goes back to Augustine and the other Fathers, the spiritual voice of the Psalms transcends history in a simultaneous identification of the Hebrew King David, the Incarnate Word Christ Jesus, and each member of His Body. This change in the way Scripture is understood and experienced is as significant as the more straightforward doctrinal disputes between Catholics and Protestants, and on this issue Donne and Bellarmine are on the same side.

A sermon of Donne's on Psalm 51 (Psalm 50 in the Vulgate), another of the Penitential Psalms, furnishes a final example of how the Protestant Dean of St. Paul's and the Catholic cardinal take a common approach to the Bible that distinguishes them both from the growing tendency of their age to read Sacred Scripture in the same way as a secular historical document. Moreover, in preaching on a psalm that calls to mind original sin and justification, vexed doctrinal issues during the period of Reformation, the theological implications of Donne's sermon are more compatible with Bellarmine's commentary than Calvin's. Indeed, the tropological interpretation of Scripture, which regards Old Testament figures as symbolic participants in a spiritual drama, is more consonant with a theology that sees grace as an actual force for change within the soul of the penitent, rather than Calvin's mere imputation of righteousness—God's willingness not to see the evil of the sinner.

To be sure, Donne and Bellarmine are not uninterested in the history thought to lie behind the *Miserere* Psalm: David's adultery with Bathsheba and his arranging for the death of her husband Uriah. Calvin reminds us of the admonitory force of David's example: "Well may we tremble to contemplate the fact, that so holy a prophet, and so excellent a king, should have sunk into such a condition!"¹³ Bellarmine echoes this remark: "The sin of David can strike just men with fear: for if such a friend of God sinks down so easily, who will not fear a fall?"¹⁴ Donne spends more than a page elaborating on how David becomes more and more oblivious as he becomes more deeply entangled in sin: "Who can doubt, but that in this yeares space, in which *David* continued in his sin,

but that he did ordinarily all the externall acts of religious Worship of God? who can doubt but that he performed all the Legall Sacrifices, and all the Ceremoniall Rites?" (V, 304). In fact, Bellarmine and Donne both worry about one historical element that does not attract Calvin's notice, the extent of Bathsheba's guilt. "Of how many evils," Bellarmine observes, "is the beauty of a woman joined with imprudence and easiness the cause! For if Bathsheba, the loveliest woman in the place, had not undressed her body where she might be seen, or if she had not consented so readily to David, surely such a man would have not fallen into such crimes."¹⁵ Donne begins by exonerating Bathsheba: "Certainly the limits of adorning and beautifying the body are not so narrow, so strict, as by some sowre men they are sometimes conceived to be" (V, 302). But this reminder that the preacher had once been the poet of the *Songs and Sonets* quickly gives way:

And this may well have beene *Bathshebaes* fault, That though she did not bathe with a purpose to be seene, yet she did not enough to provide against the infirmity of others. It had therefore been well if *Dauid* had risen earlier, to attend the affaires of State; And it had been well, if *Bathsheba* had bathed within doores, and with more caution. (V, 303)

Calvin may perhaps be credited with uncommon prudence in not addressing himself to this historical problem.

While Calvin has nothing to say of Bathsheba's guilt or innocence, he makes his commentary on this Psalm an occasion to argue his own doctrine of sin and redemption in sharp contrast with Catholic teaching. He and Bellarmine agree that verse 5 (6 in the Vulgate), "Behold, I was born in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me," refers to original sin, but for Calvin original sin means total depravity such that even grace will never actually restore human nature. Hence he takes the clause "blot out all mine iniquities" in verse 9 to mean that God will ignore our sins but not actually remove them: "This represents our justification as consisting in a voluntary act of God, by which he condescends to forget all our iniquities; and it represents our cleansing to consist in the reception of a gratuitous pardon."¹⁶ A corollary of this

view of grace is the doctrine of infallible perseverance of the saints. Although David appears to fear the loss of God's favor, there is no real danger:

It is natural that the saints, when they have fallen into sin, and have thus done what they could do to expel the grace of God, should feel anxiety on this point; but it is their duty to hold fast the truth that grace is the incorruptible seed of God, which never can perish in any heart where it has been deposited.¹⁷

Now Donne's language is very different. Perseverance is a contingent matter, and sins must be taken away, not merely forgotten:

David gives no man rule nor example of other assurance in God, then in the remission of sins: Not that any precontract or Election makes our sins no sins, or makes our sins no hindrances in our way of salvation, or that we are in Gods favour at that time when we sin, nor returned to his favour before we repent our sin; It is only this expeccation, this unsinning, this taking away of sins formerly committed, that restores me. (V, 308)

What is more, the language he uses is very similar to the language used by Bellarmine in defending Catholic teaching as he comments on verse 7 of the *Miserere* Psalm: "Purge me with hyssope, and I shall be clean." "This cleansing," Donne says, "is that disposition, which God by his grace, infuses into us." The second half of the verse, he continues, requires "a farther degree of cleanness": "And that grace against relapses, the gift of sanctification, and perseverance, is that that *David* asks in his other Petition, *Lava me, Wash me, and I shall be whiter then snow*" (V, 312).

Bellarmino deploys the language of infused grace and justification several times in the course of his commentary on the psalm with the specific purpose of refuting the Calvinist view. Commenting on verse 4, "Wash me yet more and more from my iniquity, and cleanse me of my sin," Bellarmine remarks that David seeks "more and more to be justified through a greater infusion of grace, that his evil habits may be

removed, his concupiscence be mortified, and his soul become whiter, and more beautiful.”¹⁸ Bellarmine links verse 12, “Create a clean heart in me, God: and renew a right spirit within my bowels,” to the verse that is the text of Donne’s sermon:

Here he responds to those words, “You will wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow”: for he asks not only that God blot out his sins, but also that He infuse justice, which will renew his soul and make it beautiful and splendid again. This is also against the heretics, who maintain that justification is remission of sins alone.¹⁹

Finally, Bellarmine reads verse 12, “Cast me not away from thy face: and take not thy holy spirit from me,” as a plea for the grace of perseverance; and he links it, like Donne, to the notion of being washed and made whiter than snow. Without the “gift of perseverance” (*donum perseuerantiæ*) the washing will be of no avail.²⁰

Since there is ample evidence that Donne frequently consulted Bellarmine’s commentary on the Psalms, the similarity in their language and their conception of grace and justification should not be regarded as a coincidence. Donne was never reluctant to attack Bellarmine and other Jesuits on contested points, so we must infer that he was in substantial agreement on these issues, and that he was deliberately, if discreetly, distancing himself from Calvin’s rigorous double predestinarian theology. There is no reason to doubt that Donne’s patriotism as well as his fidelity to the Church of England led him to regard the Roman Catholic Church, and especially the Jesuits, as a threat. However, his demurral in the face of some of the more prominent features of Calvinist doctrine, and his acceptance—albeit equivocal—of a great deal of the Catholic tradition—especially in its pre-Tridentine form—suggest that the Reformation was hardly monolithic or consistent, and that the *via media* was a reality two centuries before the Oxford Movement.

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Notes

1. Quoted by R.C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 68.

2. See the dedication of the volume to Pope Paul V, *In Omnes Psalmos Dilucida Explanatio* (Brixiae, 1611), where Bellarmine writes that he undertook the labor of commenting on the Psalms, "which all churchmen read daily, but few understand adequately," and which he sought to "ponder with spiritual sustenance for the mind and pious devotion" ("*quem Ecclesiastici omnes quotidie legunt, & pauci admodum intelligunt...breuitati, & perspicuitati studere...& spirituali mentis refectio[n]i, ac pia deuotioni consulere*"). See also James Broderick, S.J., *Robert Bellarmine: Saint and Scholar* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1961), p. 381.

3. *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn Simpson (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1953-1962), VIII. 110-11. Subsequent references to this edition of Donne's *Sermons* will be made parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.

4. Janel Mueller, ed., *Donne's Prebend Sermons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 305.

5. *Explanatio*, p. 377: "Non Habetur in hebræo nomen resurrectionis neque legitur apud Hilarium; & Theodoretus testatur non esse in editione Septuaginta Interpretum, sed postea additum. Legitur tamen a Sanctis Patribus Hieronymo, & Augustino in Commentario huius Psalmi: & videtur hæc vnica vox a quocunque addita sit, prudenter addita, vt indicaret argumentum Psalmi. Argumentum enim Psalmi est gratiarum actio pro beneficijs Dei, sed potissimum pro perfecta fœlicitate post omnes finitas calamitates: quod sine dubio in resurrectione erit."

6. *Ibid.*, p. 378: "multos fore, qui mentiantur Deo se illius esse cultores ob metum terribilium operum ipsius: multos item Christi fidem, non sincero, sed ficto corde suscepturos propter eandem rationem."

7. *Ibid.*, p. 25: "vt sensus sit, oculus meus propter furorem, & indignationem meam contra turpitudinem peccati, à fletu nimio quasi corrosus caligauit, & turbatus est."

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26: "& clarius oculus meus caligauit præ fletu ex indignatione quam concepi, ex eo quòd tam diu in peccatis heserim, vt inueterauerim inter omnes inimicos meos, quasi dicat, Non possum non vehementer mihi ipse indignari, quòd nullum vitium adhuc perfectè vicerim, nullumque hostem animæ meæ debellauerim, sed consenuerim inter omnes hostes meos. Vocat autem hostes, omnes qui eum ad peccandum impulerunt, siue Dæmones, siue homines, siue ipsa vitia, & habitus malos."

9. *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House, 1979), IV, 74.

10. *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*, ed. Lloyd E. Berry (Madison, Milwaukee, and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), p. 236.

11. *The Jerusalem Bible*, ed. Alexander Jones (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1966), p. 791n.

12. *The New American Bible* (Wichita, KS: Catholic Bible Publishers, 1970), p. 497n.

13. *Calvin's Commentaries*, V, 282.

14. *Explanatio*, p. 304-05: "peccatum Daudis iustis hominibus magnum timorem incutere posse: si enim tantus amicus Dei tam facile corrui, quis non timebit casum?"

15. *Ibid.*, p. 305: "quantorum malorum causa sit puchritudo mulieris cum imprudentia, & facilitate coniuncta. Si enim Bethsabea mulier speciosissima in loco vnde videri posset, corpus suum non nudasset; aut non tanta facilitate Dauidi consensisset, certè vir tantus in tam graui scelera non cecidisset." The edition of Venice, 1726, which is widely used, reads "impudentia" for "imprudentia," making the charge even worse.

16. *Calvin's Commentaries*, V, 296.

17. *Ibid.*, V, 300.

18. *Explanatio*, p. 306: "magis, & magis iustificari per maiorem gratiæ infusionem, vt malis habitibus sublatis, & concupiscentia mortificata, anima candidior, & pulchrior fiat."

19. *Ibid.*, p. 310: "Hoc respondet illis verbis, lauabis me, & super niuem dealbabor: petit enim, vt non solùm peccata deleat, sed etiam iustitiam infundat, quæ animam renouet & formosam, ac splendidam reddat; quod etiam est contra hæreticos, qui iustificationem in sola peccatorum remissione constituunt."

20. *Ibid.*: "parum enim mihi prodesset, lauabari, & super niuem dealbari, & spiritum rectum in me innouari, si tandem à facie tua cum reprobis projiciendus essem. Vt autem me non projicias à facie tua Spiritum sanctum tuum ne auferas à me, id est, donum perseuerantiæ mihi tribue."