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Analogies of Sovereignty in Herbert's "To All Angels and Saints"

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According to his friend Nicholas Ferrar and his first biographer Izaak Walton, George Herbert dedicated his collected sacred poems "to the Divine Majesty only" and offered *The Temple* to posterity as "a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master, in whose service I have now found perfect freedom."[1] Herbert's dedication to God's majesty and his service to Christ's mastery found rich and lively expression in a remarkable sequence of poems organized and patterned around biblical, architectural, and liturgical models. Of the poems that take their titles from the liturgical observances of the Christian calendar, all but one center on the life of Christ and the Trinitarian God ("Good Friday," "Easter," "Whitsunday," "Trinity Sunday," "Christmas," and "Lent"). The exception, "To All Angels and Saints," is a poem whose title suggests a conflation of the feast of St. Michael and All Angels with All Saints Day, and it stands apart precisely because of its apparent divergence from

[1]Nicholas Ferrar, "The Printers to the Reader," and Izaak Walton, *The Life of Mr George Herbert*, both in *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Tobin (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 3, 311. Quotations from Herbert's poetry are from F. E. Hutchinson, ed., *The Works of George Herbert* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941); line numbers are indicated parenthetically.

Herbert's otherwise consistent address to the Divine Majesty alone.

Situated in *The Temple* just after "Anagram" with its terse tribute to the Blessed Virgin Mary, this poem apostrophizes the angels and saints, together with the Virgin herself, and exhibits singular and tender Marian devotion. Yet, for all that, the devotion thus proffered is abruptly retracted or qualified, and the poem tensely explores the conflicted terms of the soul's prayerful supplication of the sovereign Lord. In "To All Angels and Saints," Herbert deftly engages the language of religious controversy to counterpoise and meditate those analogies of God's Kingship that would either embrace the speaker's willingness to offer his prayers to the Virgin or rebuke the inclination with the stern reminder that worship serves and belongs to the Almighty alone. Although the poem seems exceptional, it is still very much concerned with fathoming the conditions of the poet's submission and freedom in Christ.

Purporting to offer a standard Protestant argument against the invocation of the angels and saints, the poem is nonetheless addressed to those very angels and saints and assumes the form of a prayer invoking the Blessed Virgin Mary, all to explain why it is better not to invoke the Virgin at all. Although not as extensively discussed as some of Herbert's better-known lyrics, "To All Angels and Saints" has become something of a *locus classicus*, perhaps even a source of irritation, for ventures in adjudicating the balance and relationship of Catholic and Protestant elements in Herbert's verse. Moreover, the poem speaks to contemporary critical preoccupations not only by frankly engaging doctrinal controversy (a rarity in Herbert) but also in making use of some emphatically charged political language (another rarity). Yet in the last analysis the poem confounds the tendency of recent critics to pen Herbert in the sheepfold of one or another ecclesiastical party, and it similarly confutes those who would turn the parson-poet into a courtly ideologue playing a ping-pong game of subversion and containment with the dominant political culture of his time.

Despite its measured and circumspect tone and its carefully calibrated ambiguities, "To All Angels and Saints" is boldly suggestive and claims for the poet a remarkable imaginative freedom, perhaps even a certain freedom from the strictures of the established church to which he nonetheless gladly conformed.

C. A. Patrides calls the poem a "tactful censure of Mariolatry."[2] But for some readers the tact so qualifies the faint-hearted censure as to betray an abiding sympathy for the old devotional practices, while for others the force of censure is stronger and overwhelms the tact with doctrinal conviction. Helen White, Louis Martz, Stanley Stewart, and R. V. Young find in the poem at least an imaginative attraction to Catholic veneration of the saints and devotion to the Virgin Mary.[3] However, Gene Edward Veith argues that the poem is uncompromising and "nearly Zwinglian" in its rigorous Protestantism.[4] Similarly, Richard Strier, in the fullest reading of the poem to date, calls "To All Angels and Saints" the most "Puritan" of Herbert's poems in its sternly Calvinistic rebuke to the mushy allure of Catholic idolatry.[5] Christopher Hodgkins and Daniel Doerksen join the choir and take the poem as a versified theological statement illustrative of the broadly Calvinist temper of the Jacobean Church of England.[6] In the effort to forge

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[2]*The English Poems of George Herbert* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1974), p. 94 n.

[3]White, *The Metaphysical Poets* (New York: Collier Books, 1936), p. 168; Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), pp. 96-98; Stewart, *George Herbert* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), pp. 75-80; and Young, *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), p. 135.

[4]*Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1985), p. 193.

[5]"'To All Angels and Saints': George Herbert's Puritan Poem," *Modern Philology* 77 (1979): 132-145.

[6]Hodgkins, *Authority, Church, and Society in George Herbert* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), pp. 121-122; and Doerksen, *Conforming to the Word: Herbert, Donne, and the English*

a *via media* between these polarized readings, Andrew Harnack and Esther Gilman Richey both suggest that the lyric offers a classically "Anglican" synthesis or "melodic mediation" of Catholic and Protestant perspectives on the invocation of the saints.[7] Given Herbert's generally irenic temperament and his penchant for "generous ambiguity" in addressing doctrinal controversy,[8] this last approach might seem attractive. However, the poem itself sets the Catholic and the Protestant positions in the sharpest possible contrast and denies easy synthesis, much less melody, sounding a note of dissonance in the bifurcation of its tone, diction, and imagery.

The first three stanzas offer a warm and apparently sympathetic evocation of the beatified company of heaven, modulating into a prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary, but then the last three stanzas seem to retract it all with tense, forensic argumentation. Where the first half of the poem is descriptive, lyrical, and bounteous, the second is prescriptive, epigrammatic, and legalistic. The concord of the Church Triumphant in which the "glorious spirits" (1) commune with "the smooth face of God" (2) gives way after stanza three to the exclusive and jealous "prerogative" (21) of a sovereign Deity who brooks no companion much less any rival in his worship. Not surprisingly, Catholicizing readers respond to the personal engagement and evocative warmth of the first half, embracing the poem's ambiguities at the expense of the hard logic in the second half. Protestantizing readers seize upon the

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Church Before Laud (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1997), pp. 29-30.

[7]Harnack, "Both Protestant and Catholic: George Herbert and 'To All Angels and Saints,'" *George Herbert Journal* 11 (1987): 23-39; and Richey, "Words Within the Word: The Melodic Mediation of 'To All Angels and Saints,'" *George Herbert Journal* 15 (1992): 33-41.

[8]See Louis Martz, "The Generous Ambiguity of Herbert's *Temple*," *From Renaissance to Baroque: Essays on Literature and Art* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991), pp. 64-83.

casuistical argument of the latter part as the normative focus and "doctrinal 'mark,'" compared to which, as Strier puts it, the "opening vision, in its rush of feeling, turns out to have been a fantasy—and an irresponsible one at that."[9] In fine Anglican fashion, those who would steer the middle course must do so by blurring and eliding precisely the contrast the poet attentively fashions. Without making large assumptions about the speaker's (and the poet's) theological disposition, the poem itself consistently frustrates efforts to reduce its language to any stable or coherent doctrinal position. Readers can quarrel about which half of the poem trumps the other, both in terms of personal engagement and cogency of argument, but "To All Angels and Saints" holds its two perspectives in delicate and balanced tension. Establishing what would seem to be a kind of impasse, both inviting and resisting interpretive choices, the poem demands scrutiny and probing beyond the putative effort to adjudicate the particular question of praying to the saints.

Commending the merits of all the angels and saints in the first stanza, the speaker directs his personal attention to the Virgin in the second:

> I would addresse
> My vows to thee most gladly, Blessed Maid,
> And Mother of my God, in my distresse. (8-10)

The third stanza then issues in a litany of praise for the Theotokos:

> Thou art the holy mine, whence came the gold,
> The great restorative for all decay
> In young and old;
> Thou art the cabinet where the jewell lay:
> Chiefly to thee would I my soul unfold. (11-15)

[9]Hodgkins, p. 122; and Strier, p. 137.

With apparent sincerity and without a hint of irony, the language here recalls the Catholic devotion evident in Henry Constable's *Spiritual Sonnets*, in John Donne's *La Corona* and "A Litanie," and in Ben Jonson's "The Garland of the Blessed Virgin Mary."[10] If Herbert's lines are meant to convey, as Protestantizing readings would have it, a *parody* of "Romish" piety, it scarcely shows. Instead of suggesting the oft-repeated Protestant claim that Catholic veneration of the Virgin detracts from the honor of her Son, the poet hails Mary precisely as the one "In whom the *Lord of Hosts* did pitch his tent" (in the words of the previous poem "Anagram," 2). She is the "holy mine" bearing the redemptive "gold" of Christ, the "cabinet" holding the incarnate "jewell," and she becomes, as Rosemond Tuve notes, an image of the tabernacle or *sacrarium* and hence a type of the Church.[11] The speaker's inclination, even his longing, to address his prayers to Mary and the saints is qualified only by its expression in the conditional, optative mood.

The apologetic and somewhat defensive tone of the speaker's forbearance—"Not out of envie or maliciousnesse"—in supplicating Virgin's "speciall aid" (7-8) scarcely softens or prepares us for the abrupt turn at line 16, where the first person singular yields to the plural for the remainder of the poem:

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[10]See Henry Constable, *Spiritual Sonnets* in *The Poems*, ed. Joan Grundy (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1960), especially the several sonnets entitled "To Our Blessed Lady" and those in honor of the saints; Donne, *La Corona*, especially "Annunciation," and "A Litany," particularly stanza V "The Virgin Mary," in *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Penguin, 1971); and Jonson, "The Garland of the Blessed Virgin," together with its companion piece titled "The Reverse on the Back Side" (both originally from Anthony Stafford's *Femall Glory, or The Life and Death of our Blessed Lady*), in *Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems*, ed. George Parfitt (London: Penguin, 1975).

[11]*A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 143.

> But now, alas, I dare not; for our King,
> Whom we do all joyntly adore and praise,
> Bids no such thing. (16-18)

The emphatic word *now* followed by the exclamation *alas* has the quality of stunned realization mingled with a hint of regret. The generous and expansive piety of the first three stanzas suddenly contracts in a kind of paralysis or tensely redirected focus. Now the speaker's "vows" (9) wait upon and serve only the "strict commands" (2), which effaced in the first stanza (in heaven) come to the fore (on earth). Alluding to Mary's *fiat*, "Be it unto me according to thy word," and citing her example *against* devotion to her, the speaker argues in the mode of academic disputation that where God's "pleasure no injunction layes, / ('Tis your own case) ye never move a wing" (19-20). In view of a Deity so imperious, *any* devotion to the saints—lacking explicit scriptural sanction, and well short of invocation—becomes not simply the misguided derogation of divine majesty but an act of sacrilegious theft: "we dare not from his garland steal, / To make a posie for inferiour power" (24-25).

That the Mother of God and the "glorious spirits" in the first stanza are now characterized as claiming or possessing *power* distinct from and "inferiour" to that of the sovereign God is telling. If the beatified spirits communing with God in the poem's opening can be ascribed their own power at all, that power clearly proceeds from and returns to the divine majesty; the glory of the saints *is* the glory of God, and they have their crowns not upon their heads but in their hands, both as gift from and offering to the Almighty. The poem's language and argument shifts to a very different register; the effulgence of divine glory now recedes before the circumspect reckoning of God's omnipotence conceived not only as absolute and unitary but also as exclusive and indivisible.

As the critics note, Herbert's language in this part of the poem echoes the conventional idiom of Protestant polemics against the Catholic practice of venerating and invoking the Virgin and the

saints, but there are also some notable differences. With the assertion that "All worship" is the sole "prerogative" of the King of heaven (21), the speaker apparently rejects the Catholic distinction between the kinds of worship appropriate to the saints and angels and that reserved to God alone, *dulia* and *latria*. Moreover, he seems to deny not only the possibility of their intercession and advocacy but indeed any mediation whatsoever of the transcendent will of the sovereign Judge "from whom lyes no appeal / At the last houre" (22-23). Yet herein the very severity of the speaker's conception signals something of a departure from the characteristic tenor of Protestant attacks on the invocation of the saints. With the other magisterial reformers, Calvin roundly condemns the "horrid sacrilege" of calling upon "dead saints" as detracting from God's sovereignty, but his principal objection is that the veneration of Mary and the saints "robs" Christ of "the unique privilege" of his "title of sole Mediator" with the Father.[12]

In "To All Angels and Saints," the second Person of the Trinity, evoked and adored in relation to his mother in stanzas two and three, strikingly disappears from stanzas four and five in favor of the undifferentiated *Deus Rex*. The mediation of Christ seems to leave the poem with the mediation of the saints, and the focus and meaning of prayer shift as well; in the first half of the poem, "vows" offered up to "unfold" the soul and petitions for "aid" in "distresse," ordered toward redemption in Christ, the "great restorative for all decay," give place, in the second half, to the obsequious payment of honor and never moving a wing without the King's express "injunction." Strier identifies the figure of God who dominates this part of the poem with God the Father and notes that the "sacrificial Christ is entirely absent."[13] While insisting that this nearly "Miltonic" conception of God constitutes

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[12]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 2: 878-880 (III. 20. 21-22).

[13]Strier, p. 143.

"the sober reality" of the poem as a whole, in contrast to its opening "fantasy," Strier also concedes that this kind of "Puritanism" is far from characteristic of Herbert's otherwise christocentric religious vision. Yet stanzas four and five seem calculated, even at the risk of distorting or reducing the godhead, to arouse anxiety and provoke "fear and trembling," thereby rebuking the attractions of devotion to the saints and bidding abject submission to the Most High.[14]

If the purpose of the poem were simply to confute Catholic "superstition" and to stake a clearly Protestant position, Herbert might have taken a different tack, one more in keeping with his temper and more consonant with the rounder and generally more positive theology of his poetry as a whole. He might have argued, as many Protestants did, that God the Father graciously hears the prayers of the faithful and does so immediately and directly through the assured intercession of the Son, with no need of courtly intermediaries.[15] "Of what an easie quick accesse, / My blessed Lord, art thou!," the poet exclaims in "Prayer (2)," celebrating in Christ the reconciliation of "supreme almightie power" and "unmeasurable love" (1-2, 7, and 13). In "To All Angels and Saints," by contrast, Herbert does not appeal to premises Protestants and Catholics could have shared in common, but instead he draws unsettling attention to divergent conceptions of God and suggests how those differences of inflection and emphasis were often aggravated by the polemical contexts of

[14]Ibid., pp. 137, 139, 143.

[15] Joseph Hall, for example, wrote in *The Old Religion*, "How absurd, therefore, is it in reason, when the King of Heaven calls us to him, to run with our petitions to the guards and pages of the court! ...how extreme folly is it to sue those courtiers of heaven, and not to come immediately to the throne of grace! The one Mediator *is able*, and willing also, *to save them to the utmost, that come to God by Him*": in Paul Elmer More and Frank Leslie Cross, eds., *Anglicanism: The Thought and Practice of the Church of England, Illustrated from the Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (London: S. P. C. K., 1935), p. 524.

religious controversy. Protestantizing readings of the poem are right in fixing upon the poem's image of a thunderous God of will and power, but they oversimplify and distort the poem by asserting that this image and its implications carry the burden of the poem's meaning. Still, according to the premises and logic of stanzas four and five, the opening stanzas with their homage to the "inferiour power" of the Blessed Maid constitute not only superstitious indulgence but outright sacrilege and idolatry. By such rigorism, the poet himself stands under judgment for the sentiments expressed in the first half of the poem, and the "posie" woven of words in tribute to the Virgin in stanza three must be recanted and repented.

Yet the poem ends with neither repentance nor recantation, but an almost apologetic, seemingly ecumenical gesture. Although others (Roman Catholics) may "court" (26) the saints in heaven, writes the poet, we (Protestants) who do not "shall not fare the worse" (27), since we are prepared to pay our debts to God "If any one our Masters hand can show" (30). The courtly register of line 26 meets the commercial metaphor of line 29 in the common service of a common Master. Where the unbending theological principle of stanza five momentarily yields to the devotional prudence of stanza six, the poem's last two lines seem to offer a kind of "escape clause," tentatively, conditionally opening the door to the possible devotion desired in the first half of the poem but firmly denied in the second half. *If* it can be shown that the saints in heaven "know / What's done on earth" (26-27), and *if* it can be shown that the prayers offered up to the saints are received and collected for payment to God alone, then perhaps we could address our vows to the Blessed Maid. But these conditional statements turn on yet another, more fundamental question implied throughout the poem and raised in its pivotal line: What kind of King is he "Whom we do all joyntly adore and praise," and how precisely are we to understand the nature and attributes of God's sovereignty?

"I believe in one God," begins the creed, and on nothing else were all Christians of Herbert's day, Puritans and Papists alike, more united than in their shared belief in a single Trinitarian God, the undisputed King of kings and Lord of lords. But the very premise of such unity perhaps concealed or obscured in the heat of confessional conflict and theological controversy what were subtle but important differences of inflection and application in working out the meanings of divine sovereignty and understanding its analogies to earthly kingship. "To All Angels and Saints" does not finally resolve the disputed doctrinal question of venerating the saints. Rather, the poem stages a moment of controversial divinity and enacts a kind of meditative dialogue between two distinct ways of conceiving the Divine Majesty. Instead of formulating a position, it imaginatively entertains two fundamentally different concepts of God with roots deep in the Bible, elaboration throughout the Christian tradition, and particular resonance in seventeenth-century England. God reigns supreme throughout the poem, but in the first half we find a King who freely shares his sovereignty, both offering and receiving crowns from his saints, but in the second half the King keeps his crown to himself, lest the prerogative of his exclusive transcendence give rein to anything other than passive obedience.

In formulating this contrast between the two conceptions of God's Kingship, Herbert seizes upon what is arguably a central issue of contention running through the religious literature of the Reformation and one that certainly inflected disputes about understanding the relationship of God and his saints. But the contrast itself was as often as not implicit and unexamined in the language of theological disputation seeking to apportion and adjudicate the modes of honoring God's undisputed omnipotence and accessing the throne of grace. For Catholics and those of a Catholic disposition, it was almost intuitively obvious that God "is glorified in his saints" (2 Thessalonians 1:10). In his *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, Thomas More devotes much of the work to defending the veneration of the saints and repeats over and over

again the proposition that "the chyrche worshyppeth not sayntes as god but as goddes good seruauntes and therefore the honoure that is done to them redoundeth pryncypally to the hounour of theyr mayster."[16] In his *Answer Vnto Sir Thomas Mores Dialoge*, William Tyndale finds himself at loggerheads with his opponent as his initial concern with the abuses of popular piety hardens into the principled position that "the moare trust we haue in saintes the lesse we haue in Christe."[17] For Tyndale and the other reformers it becomes nearly axiomatic that honoring the saints entails dishonoring God. Devotion by this account, it would seem, is a zero-sum game, and the impasse dividing More and Tyndale also finds expression in characterizations of beatitude and the kingdom of heaven.

The Jesuit Robert Persons articulates in *The Christian Directory* a vision of heaven and heaven's King strikingly different from the conventional Protestant idiom of the time, yet for all that one that found wide readership among Protestants as the work went through dozens of Protestant editions well into the seventeenth century. Persons pictures "a majesticall God, full of bountie, liberalitie, and princelie magnificence," and with him "all Saintes do raigne" as "his compartener in kinglie glorie for all eternitie," for "all must be kinges that are admitted thither."[18] For Persons, the saints enjoy "the diadem of their perpetuall glorie" as the eschatological fulfillment of the more general principle of God's creative love—that nothing in the created order "can grow, move,

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[16] *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 6, ed. Thomas Lawler, Germain Marc'hadour, and Richard Marius (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 48 (I. 2).

[17] *An Answer Vnto Sir Thomas Mores Dialoge*, ed. Anne M. O'Donnell and Jared Wicks (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), p. 118.

[18] *The Christian Directory (1582): The First Book of Christian Exercise, Appertayning to Resolution*, ed. Victor Houliston (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 69, 113, 115.

or consist without some litle streame of vertue and power come to it continuallie from God."[19] It is not surprising that Persons's words, written out of a long Catholic tradition, found widespread appeal even among Protestants, especially when his vision is set in contrast to that of Calvin with his very different view of Divine Majesty. Far from exalting his creation, Calvin argues, "God sets up his kingdom by humbling the whole world."[20] Though acknowledging that "the saints are gathered into the society of Christ," he cautions against speculation about the blessedness of the elect souls in heaven.[21] Rather, the kingdom of God pertains to this world and manifests itself in obedience here below: "this is the condition of God's kingdom: that while we submit to his righteousness, he makes us sharers in his glory." But that "sharing" confers no special agency or privilege beyond submission itself and aside from the scrupulous interpretation and adherence to sovereign commands: "because the word of God is like a royal scepter, we are bidden here to entreat him to bring all men's minds and hearts into voluntary obedience to it."[22]

In "To All Angels and Saints" Herbert captures the essential difference between these two views of God: the first three stanzas envision a sovereign God who diffuses his kingly honor in redemptive love, perceived from the perspective of beatitude and approached through his saints, and the last three depict a divine Monarch whose will absorbs all in his power, a Deity apprehended on earth through revealed injunctions demanding complete submission. But the difference between these two modes of divine kingship is not simply, as James Boyd White would have it, the contrast between the Old Testament God of power and the New

[19]Ibid., pp. 67, 128.
[20]*Institutes* 2:905 (III. 20. 42).
[21]Ibid., 2:997-98 (III. 25. 6).
[22]Ibid., 2:905-06 (III. 20. 42).

Testament God of love.[23] Rather the opposition in Herbert's poem speaks to and illustrates a set of tensions arising from a scriptural foundation, to be sure, and issuing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in warring proof-texts combed from both Testaments. These tensions, though lining up along broadly Catholic and Protestant lines, cut across and through confessional allegiances to characterize a nation in the early seventeenth-century that was (paraphrasing Christopher Haigh) neither yet completely "de-Catholicised" nor fully "Protestantized."[24] The difference between the two views of Divine Majesty in Herbert's poem could be said to correspond to the contrast between the God of John Calvin and the God of Thomas Aquinas, in the full logical elaboration of both thinkers. It is the difference between a view of God animated by a metaphysics of presence and participation and a view of God underwritten by what we might call a hermeneutics of suspicion and command. Between the "I" who utters the first three stanzas of the poem and the "we" who speaks the last three, Herbert deftly segregates and distinguishes two undiluted ways of conceptualizing God's sovereignty that otherwise tended to be messily mingled at the time. And he does so by suggesting ever so subtly how the analogical perception of God's Kingship might be inflected, colored, perhaps even distorted by association with more immediate models of earthly monarchy.

It was Louis Martz, years ago, who first drew attention to the perplexing oddity of the poem's axial line without fully developing the drift of his suggestive probing:

> "But *now*, *alas*, I dare not." Why *now*? Shouldn't the argument apply always? And doesn't the "alas" show a strange regret for God's failure to supply the required

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[23] *"This Book of Starres": Learning to Read George Herbert* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 198.

[24] *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society Under the Tudors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 288-90.

> "injunction" that would make such devotion possible? For God, of course, is "our King".... Or is it as simple as this? Isn't there at the same time a lurking suggestion of another, earthly King who *now, alas*, "bids no such thing" for the Anglican? It is hard to avoid the implication, though Herbert proceeds, with perfect tact, to develop his poem with explicit reference to God alone.[25]

The implication is, indeed, difficult to avoid, and even if the ambiguity is only glancing, it is reinforced by the use of the politically charged word "prerogative" in line 21. The phrasing is all the more striking given its singularity in Herbert's poetry. Although he refers to God as King in several places and makes some reference to earthly monarchs, he carefully avoids confounding the two, and unlike some royalist divines and courtly preachers closer to the throne, Herbert never presses the analogy between the heavenly Sovereign and earthly monarchs. As Malcolm Mackenzie Ross notes, "In its social reference the royalist symbol is almost always used negatively by Herbert, although God retains his kingship in a completely otherworldly realm."[26] While Stewart notes in Herbert's poem "an undercurrent of political irony,"[27] critics have not known quite what to do with the possibility. Virtually no one has pursued the implications of Martz's questions, and the "lurking suggestion" he finds in the poem has been summarily dismissed.

Strier leads the charge to rebuke Martz's insinuation that Herbert's kingly God has anything to do with "another, earthly King." Perish the thought, exclaims Strier, noting that Martz himself observes that the rest of the poem after line 16 proceeds

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[25] *The Poetry of Meditation*, p. 98.

[26] *Poetry and Dogma: The Transfiguration of Eucharistic Symbols in Seventeenth Century English Poetry* (1954; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1969), pp. 143-44.

[27] Stewart, p. 79.

with clear reference to God alone: "Even the most committed Erastian," writes Strier, "would hardly have asserted that the king of England rules the angels and saints in heaven."[28] Just so. But Martz never claimed the *identity* of God in heaven with King James on earth, but merely their *association* by way of indicating how that association colors the poem's ambiguities and contributes to its "modulated tension."[29] To Martz's other question about Herbert's perplexing use of the word *now* in line 16, Strier replies, "'Now,' in the context of the poem, clearly means, 'now that the principles of true religion—about to be enumerated—are known to me' (or 'are generally available')."[30] Again, just so, but Strier's answer begs the very questions the poem raises, if ever so obliquely: What exactly are the principles of "true religion"? And how, indeed, has "true religion" become known or generally available?

In the shift of pronouns in "To All Angels and Saints" from the personal "I" of the first half to the communal "we" of the second, Herbert evokes the dynamics of conformity and suggests the process by which sovereign injunctions came to assume authority and to demand both individual and collective obedience. The seventeenth-century Church of England was not held together by any single, authoritative account of "true religion," nor even much doctrinal consensus, but by a delicate and essentially political process of accommodation, equivocation, and compromise, all confirmed in the principle of the monarch's supremacy in the church. As Patrick Collinson phrases it, "The English church settlement rested primarily on the principles of autonomy from Rome and royal supremacy, not in the reception of true doctrine and conformity with the community of Reformed churches."[31]

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[28]Strier, p. 136 n. 9.

[29]*The Poetry of Meditation*, p. 97.

[30]Strier, p. 135.

[31]Collinson, "England and International Calvinism 1558-1640," in Menna Prestwich, ed., *International Calvinism, 1541-1715* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 198.

"The one definite thing which can be said about the Reformation in England," affirms Maurice Powicke, "is that it was an act of State,"[32] and while a fully Erastian view of the church never completely prevailed in the first decades of seventeenth century the prerogatives of royal supremacy increasingly came both to sustain and divide the fragile *Ecclesia Anglicana.*[33] Although no king of England ever claimed authority to command the saints in heaven, the fortunes of the saints and their supplicants on earth were very much the subject of royal injunctions.

Two years after the Act of Supremacy naming Henry VIII Supreme Head of the Church of England, the eighth of the Ten Articles of 1536, formally titled the "Articles devised by the King's Highest Majesty," sought to curb the excesses of popular devotions to the saints, while specifically encouraging prayers to Our Blessed Lady, the angels, and saints, in conformity with long-standing Catholic practice.[34] But then in 1538 the second set of royal Injunctions, issued by Cromwell in the king's name, commenced an assault on the traditional veneration of the saints and commanded a militant campaign to crush devotion to St. Thomas à Becket, seeking to wipe that particular saint clean out of

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[32]*The Reformation in England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 1.

[33]See Kenneth Fincham and Peter Lake, "The Ecclesiastical Policy of King James I," *The Journal of British Studies* 24 (1985): 169-207; and Henry Chadwick, "Royal Ecclesiastical Supremacy," in *Humanism, Reform and the Reformation: The Career of Bishop John Fisher*, ed. Brendan Bradshaw and Eamon Duffy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 188-190.

[34]See the seventh article, "Of honouring of saints," and the eighth, "Of praying to saints," of the Ten Articles, 1536, in *Religion and Society in Early Modern England: A Sourcebook*, ed. David Cressy and Lori Anne Ferrell (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 21-22.

memory.[35] Cranmer's English litany of 1544 issued by royal edict included prayers and petitions to the Virgin and "all the blessed company of heaven," yet the first Prayer Book of Edward VI in 1549 pointedly deleted and prohibited all such invocations.[36] Queen Mary, of course, restored the traditional *cultus sanctorum* in her short reign, but then after the accession of Elizabeth the Convocation issued with her personal endorsement the Thirty-Nine Articles, including the twenty-second which condemned the invocation of the saints as "a fond thing, vainly invented, grounded upon no warranty of scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God."[37]

James I while seeking to pacify the church insisted more forcefully than Elizabeth ever did on his prerogatives as Head of the Church, yet without quite claiming the quasi-sacerdotal authority of Henry VIII. Although he continued to endorse the Elizabethan Articles, he also took a personal interest in theological disputation (thereby arousing both the hopes and fears of Puritans and Papists alike), and in 1621 he assigned Richard Montagu the task of preaching in favor of a qualified form of devotion to the saints.[38] Isaac Casaubon reported to Cardinal Du Perron that the

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[35]See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 406-12.

[36]Ibid., pp. 443 and 464-66.

[37]See the Thirty-Nine Articles, 1563, especially the twenty-second, in *Religion and Society in Early Modern England: A Sourcebook*, pp. 59-70.

[38] Montagu's sermon and the controversy it provoked illustrate the ambiguities and equivocations that sometimes attended discussions of honoring the saints in the Jacobean church. Preached before the king, Montagu's discourse was also heard by Marco Antonio de Dominis, Archbishop of Spalatro, who understood Montagu to support the Catholic practice of invoking the saints. Irritated that Puritans were accusing him of advocating "popish" doctrines, Montagu revised and published his sermon with James's approval under the title *Immediate Addresse unto God Alone. First delivered in a Sermon before his Maiestie at*

king himself honored the saints and martyrs and believed steadfastly in their prayers on his behalf but did not think those prayers obliged him in turn to pray to them.[39] Although the Jacobean Church of England included a wide spectrum of opinions on the appropriate manner of honoring the saints,[40] the force of Article Twenty-Two held sway, and otherwise faithful conformists could only wait on the injunctions of the sovereign's inscrutable pleasure.

Despite the vacillations of royal policy, the state-sponsored Reformation in England worked over the course of a century the systematic suppression of devotion to the saints and the equally systematic consolidation of monarchical authority. A Protestant tendency to emphasize the unmediated transcendence of the sovereign Deity went hand-in-hand with the more secular development of the unmediated prerogative of the sovereign monarch. In the 1559 Book of Common Prayer, reauthorized by King James, all invocations of the saints and allusions to their merits had long since been excised, and in their place the Communion service prominently featured a collect for the King's Gracious Majesty. In 1615, an anonymous Latin dialogue entitled

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Windsore. Since revised and inlarged to a just Treatise of Invocation of Saints. Occasioned by a false imputation of M. Antonius De Dominis upon the Authour, Richard Montagu (London, 1624). For a summary account of the provoking and ensuing "pamphlet war," see Peter Milward, *Religious Controversies of the Jacobean Age: A Survey of Printed Sources* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), pp. 192-94.

[39]*The Answere of Master Isaac Casuabon to the Epistle of the Most Illustrious and Most Reverend Cardinal Peron* (London, 1612), quoted in Harnack, p. 35.

[40]For an overview and discussion of this spectrum of opinion, see Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought 1600-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 206-209. See also the passages excerpted on the invocation of the saints in More and Cross, eds., *Anglicanism*, pp. 524-540.

Deus et Rex, soon translated into English as *God and the King* and issued by royal authority, provoked a "pamphlet war" with Recusants stemming from its support of the Oath of Allegiance on the argument that submission to God required submission to the king.[41] By a curious reversal of Protestant strictures against devotion to the saints, honoring the king now became the precondition for honoring God. But the visual evidence spoke as loudly as the many volumes of controversial divinity: one could see all over England the ruins of shrines and empty niches where once saints had stood, together with rood lofts previously appointed with images of saints and martyrs now replaced by the king's coat-of-arms, usurping the holy rood itself and displacing the sacrificial Christ with the painting of earthly power.[42] It is only a bit of an exaggeration to say that the cult of the saints had to be destroyed to make way for the cult of kings.

Without addressing the particular issue of the worship of the saints, one of the few critics to take up Martz's suggestion that the kingly God of Herbert's poem is shadowed by "another, earthly king" is a scholar poles apart from Martz and one who deploys the possibility to almost opposite effects. Michael Schoenfeldt essentially concurs with Strier's Calvinistic reading of the poem while conceding more fully than Strier the speaker's regret at refraining from the prohibited devotions. Schoenfeldt argues rather convincingly that "the attributes that Strier associates with the Puritan deity reverberate with the appurtenances of Jacobean absolutism."[43] However, Schoenfeldt primarily makes the association *not* to investigate the poet's approach to understanding the Divine Majesty, but rather to reveal Herbert's uneasy

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[41]See Milward, pp. 118-19.

[42]See John Phillips, *The Reformation of Images: Destruction of Art in England, 1535-1660* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 88, 119, 128-29, 138, 204-05

[43]*Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 69.

implication in the invidious structures of secular power. Proceeding from such a premise, Schoenfeldt's interpretation of "To All Angels and Saints" cannot avoid misconstruing the substance of the contrast between the two parts of the poem, and his error tellingly reflects Strier's own misleading characterization.

Seizing on the contrasting images of kingship in the two halves of the poem—the difference between a heaven "Where ev'ry one is king" (4) and one where the king brooks no mediation of his personal "prerogative" (21)—Strier writes, "The opening vision of heaven as a democratic realm...[gives] way to a vision of a single absolute monarch reigning equally over both heaven and earth."[44] Schoenfeldt picks up Strier's idea of heaven as "democratic," and writes, "Herbert's vision of an egalitarian heaven evaporates before the extensive prerogative of the principal sovereign."[45] Reading the second half of the poem in a political register—Schoenfeldt unabashedly and Strier more reluctantly—both project that register back upon the first and hence miss the point of the contrast altogether.

Herbert's evocation of beatitude in the opening stanza of the poem is neither "democratic" nor "egalitarian," but rather fundamentally traditional, medieval, and even biblical. Herbert, like Persons in his account of the kingdom of heaven in *The Christian Directory*, depicts the "glorious spirits" arrayed in the celestial hierarchy ("after all your bands" [1]),[46] partaking of the

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[44]Strier, p. 135.

[45]Schoenfeldt, p. 68.

[46]Noting that both Luther and Calvin rejected the idea of celestial hierarchy inherited from Pseudo-Dionysus, Strier (p. 138) insists that the phrase "after all your bands" means "after having been delivered from the bands of sin," a possibility mentioned by Hutchinson (*The Works of George Herbert,* p. 503). However, as Hutchinson also points out, if the "glorious spirits" are sinless angels then a notion of celestial hierarchy is certainly implied. Yet both Hutchinson and Strier fail to conceive that the "glorious spirits" consist of both the angels and the saints mentioned in the title and that both compose the hierarchy of beatitude, as in

presence of God and participating in his sovereign Being. Neither critic pauses to examine the obvious biblical allusion to Revelation, chapter four (part of the sequence issuing in the readings for All Saints Day in Herbert's Prayer Book)[47] where the twenty-four elders fall down before God's throne, worshipping him and casting their crowns before him in praise and gratitude and saying, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created" (Revelation 4:11). The vision of sovereignty here is distinct both from that of early modern absolutism and that of egalitarian democracy. Far from derogating God's transcendence and omnipotence in the crowns of the saints, the perspective here, as in Persons and Herbert, amplifies the Divine Majesty by communicating God's glory, honor, and power to the whole created order, only to receive it all back again.

This conception of sovereignty implies a certain exchange and reciprocity of presence and participation, together with an appreciation of divine immanence as the necessary complement of divine transcendence. It is compatible, moreover, with the teaching of Thomas Aquinas that each creature has the capacity to participate in the supreme goodness of the Creator according to the manner and mode of the proper perfection of its being. The inarticulate awareness of such an impulse seems to animate the speaker's desire to pay homage to the saints and to entrust his soul

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Dante's *Paradiso*. The inclusion of the angels with the saints in Herbert's title also provides additional evidence that the poem is not to be taken as versified Calvinism. Noting the scriptural warrants for believing in the agency and awareness of angels, Calvin pointedly objects to the Catholic tendency to group the angels with the saints as objects of devotion and prayer. See the *Institutes* 2:881 (III. 20. 23).

[47]See the readings appointed in the lectionary and the epistles at Communion for the feasts of St. Michael and All Angels (Revelation 12) and All Saints (Revelation 7 and 19), in *The Book of Common Prayer 1559*, ed. John Booty (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), pp. 32, 239, 244-45.

to the Blessed Maid in praise and gratitude for the special manner and mode of her participation in the Incarnation. She is the "holy mine, whence came the gold" (11) and "the cabinet where the jewell lay" (14). Significantly, Christ the Mediator—the very embodiment of the principle of divine-human participation—is evoked only here in the poem; he is conspicuously absent from its second half. The first three stanzas offer more than a "rush of feeling" and something more substantial than an "irresponsible fantasy." Similarly, the last three stanzas provide much less than the full presence of God and, arguably, less than the full presence of the speaker himself and less than the full assent of the poet.

After line 16, "But now, alas, I dare not," the whole preceding vision and the experience it conveys stand under suspicion. With a fierce precision, worthy of Calvin himself, the speaker cedes the place of Divine Being to the active, absolute, and inscrutable agency of Divine Will. The Virgin, the angels, and saints (although still addressed) effectively disappear from the poem, and with them the beatific vision itself, just as the category of beatitude largely disappears from Calvin's theology and that of the magisterial Reformers. The praise of the Divine Will, thus conceived, is no longer to be understood as the bountiful natural impulse or the privilege of either the saints or their earthly counterparts below. Rather "All worship is prerogative, and a flower / Of his rich crown, from lyes no appeal" (21-22). As Strier notes, the lines mean "not only that God decrees how He is to be worshipped, but also that to be worshipped is God's 'prerogative' alone, that only God is be crowned with worship."[48] Such worship, moreover, serves only God; human desires and satisfactions count for naught. Here the speaker joins the ranks of those standing in timorous submission to absolutist injunction; the possibility of participation in the King's "rich crown" recedes before the speaker's suspicion of his own inclinations to honor the Virgin and the saints. Indeed, in much Calvinist theology, that such inclinations

[48]Strier, p. 139.

are natural is a sure sign that they are suspect. Since man's instincts are corrupt, he must scrupulously interpret and humbly obey God's stern injunctions. Noting as much while still insisting on Calvinism as the poem's normative center, Strier remarks that Calvin's God "transforms the chain of being into a chain of command."[49] The metaphysics of participation and presence gives way, and the poem's implicit questions acquire a certain poignancy with stakes beyond the possibility of invoking the saints in prayer: What kind of King is he whom we adore and praise? And where can we discern the Master's hand?

If the second half of Herbert's poem invites us to see not only the Almighty God of Calvin's theological voluntarism but also "the lurking suggestion of another, more earthly King," together with "the appurtenances of Jacobean absolutism," then perhaps those very associations further qualify the assumption that the God limned in stanza three carries the poem's meaning. In the figure of this imperious Sovereign God, we may perceive something of the model of the nature and attributes of God invoked by King James I to analogize his own absolutist kingship and to rationalize his distinctive secularization of divine authority. In his famous speech before Parliament in 1609, the sovereign spoke:

> Kings are justly called Gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of Divine Power upon earth: For if you will consider the Attributes to God, you shall see how they agree in the person of a King. God hath power to create, or destroy, make, or unmake at his pleasure, to give life, or send death, to judge all, and to be judged nor accomptable to none: To raise low things, and to make high things low at his pleasure, and to God are both soule and body due. And the like power have Kings.[50]

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[49]Ibid., p. 138.

[50]*The Political Works of James I*, ed. Charles McIlwain (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1918), pp. 307-08.

Although Herbert seems at the end of "To All Angels and Saints" to concede something to the public force of this understanding of what Debora Shuger calls "absolutist theology,"[51] at least in the speaker's disposition to refrain from invoking the angels and saints, nothing in the poem quite refutes the vision or disposition of the first three stanzas; Herbert still might have hoped for a heaven where "ev'ry one is king." In fact, much of the first half subtly confutes the second, calling into question not so much its juridical logic but the very premises from which that logic proceeds. And virtually all of the rest of Herbert's verse could be cited to make the case that Herbert's own devotion to the Divine Majesty moved along very different lines. The poem itself, though, holds its two visions of Divine Sovereignty in tension but also in a kind of openness, provoking, inviting a choice. Martz notes that the last lines imply "a feeling of readiness, almost a hope, perhaps, that some way could yet be found to make these old devotions possible."[52] The hope, however, is chastened with caution, and while the voice of the poem seems to acknowledge that the conditions are not propitious for such a return or a wholesale effort to re-imagine the old analogy between God and king along a nexus different from that of will and power, there is in the meantime prudent waiting and the expectation that the troubled *now* will yield to a more glorious *then,* if not here below then in the beatific vision hereafter. "To All Angels and Saints" is a poem written out of the unsettled intersection of speculative theology and devotional practice, at a moment when theology and politics met in unstable and volatile combinations, yet it strikes through the confusion with delicacy and insight.

Whatever the reservations he may privately have entertained about the royal supremacy and James's absolutist pretensions, we

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[51] *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), esp. pp. 120-168.

[52] *The Poetry of Meditation*, p. 98.

may account George Herbert a loyal son of his church and a faithful servant of his king, both the one in heaven and the one on earth. Yet he understood how the terms and conditions of his obedience to each monarch crucially differed. He knew that analogical thinking subsists as much in the ordinate discernment of *differences* as in the perception of *similarities*.[53] While the dominant political theology of the times insisted that God and the king were near allied, Herbert understood the incommensurable distance between his kingly Creator and the most kingly of creatures. Far from the court and distant from corridors of power, in his remote little church at Bemerton, he had a sense that in the business of God's "Praise," as he puts it in the first of his poems with that title, "there is no such thing / As Prince or King" (9-10). The onetime orator of Cambridge and erstwhile member of Parliament, who knew the ways of learning, honor, and pleasure, found a kind of freedom practiced with principled quietism and realized in his poetry through his special imaginative asceticism, weeding out and pruning away everything extraneous to the one thing needful, such that he could "plainly say, *My God, my King*."

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[53]On the importance and quality of analogical thinking in Herbert's verse (and as a useful corrective to the arguments of Heather Asals's *Equivocal Predication*) see R. V. Young, "Herbert and Analogy," in *George Herbert: Sacred and Profane*, ed. Helen Wilcox and Richard Todd (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995), pp. 93-102, together with *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, pp. 122-40.