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## **Religious Poetry of John Donne**

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**Abstract:** John Donne is one of the greatest of English religious poets and the poets of the 17<sup>th</sup> century on whom his influence was most deep and lasting were all religious poets. As Joan Bennett tells us this is so because his temperament was essentially religious. A man of religious temperament is constantly aware, constantly perceiving the underlying unity, the fundamental oneness of all phenomena, and the perception of such a relationship such an inherent principle of unity is revealed even by the imagery of the earliest poetry of Donne. No doubt Donne's religious poetry belongs to the later part of his career, to the period after his ordination, and the gloom, despair and frustration which resulted from the death of his wife, poverty, and ill-health. The earliest of his religious poems are the sonnet-sequence called La Corona and the Litanie; the best of his religious poetry is contained in the Holy Sonnets the Divine Poems and the three Hymns. The best of Donne's religious poetry was written only during the last phase of his career, but the nature of his imagery, even the early one, clearly indicates that his genius was religious and he was bound to take to religious poetry, and to the pulpit.

**Keywords:** Religious, Donne, Poetry, God

### **The Element of Conflict and Doubt**

The La Corona and the Litanie are in accord with many aspects of contemporary thought and sensibility, besides constituting a remarkable expression of Donne's own speculation, skepticism and melancholy. But Donne's chief power as a religious poet is shown in the Holy Sonnets and the last hymns. "Only in the Hymn to God the Father do we find an

assured faith; elsewhere there is always an element of conflict and doubt or fear." The best of the Holy Sonnets express these struggles with unparalleled force. "There is no essential change of style; Donne can stop to remember that the round world's corners" are in again 'd' without destroying the power of his vision of Judgment Day ; he treats God as a or employs the kind of wooing used to his 'profane mistresses'."

### **Variety of Tone and Method**

As in the love poetry, in religious poetry, too, there is a considerable variety of tone and method, ranging from mere casuistry and debating tricks to a profound urgency and conviction, and some-times both may be found in the same poem. They best show the characteristic with reinforcing the emotional intensity:

Only thou art above, and when, towards thee  
By the leave I can looke, I rise againe;  
But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,  
That not one houre my selfe I can sustain;  
Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his art,  
And thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart.

As Grierson points out there is no striking difference between Donne's religious poetry and the love poetry, satires and elegies of his early years. All that Donne wrote, whether in verse or prose, is of a piece; the same mind which earlier analyzed the experiences of love is at work in the latter religious poetry on a different experience. "To be didactic is never the first intention of Donne's religious poems, but rather, to express himself, to analyse and lay bare his own mood of agitation, of aspiration and of humiliation, in the quest of God, and the surrender of his soul to Him. The same erudite and surprising imagery, the same passionate, reasoning strain, meets us in both"

### **The Introspective, Anglican Note**

And as Donne is the first of the 'metaphysical' love poets, he is, likewise, the first of the introspective, Anglican, religious poets of the seventeenth century. Elizabethan and a good deal of Jacobean, religious poetry is didactic in tone and intention, Protestant and Calvinist, but not distinctly Anglican. "With Donne, appears for the first time in poetry a

passionate attachment to those Catholic elements in Anglicanism which repressed and neglected, had never entirely disappeared, and from Donne, Herbert and his disciples inherited the intensely personal and introspective tone to which the didactic is subordinated, which makes a lyric in 'The Temple', even if it be a sermon also, and primarily, a confession or a prayer"

## **The Themes**

The theme of the frailty and decay of this world is generally the subject of Donne's religious poems. Like many of the intellectual of his day, Donne felt that the times were out of joint. And it seemed obvious that the world was rapidly accelerating in its process of degeneration and decomposition as it approached the end of its course. Other important themes of Donne's religious poems are the insignificance of man himself, the antithesis between the world and the spirit, the transitoriness and unsatisfactoriness of all earthly enjoyments, the pangs suffered by the soul in the imprisoning body. Thus he writes in Second Anniversaries.

And what essentially joy can't thou expect  
Here upon earth ? What permanent effect  
of transitory causes? Dost thou love  
Beauty! (Any beauty worthy'st is to move)  
Poor consendedcousenor, that she, and that thou,  
Which did begin to love, are neither now ;  
You are both fluid, changed since yesterday;  
Next day repaires, {bat ill) last dayes decay.

## **The Personal Element**

Like Donne's love-poetry, his religious poetry also bears an unmistakable stamp of his personality. It is not written in a conventional, didactic style, bringing home to the readers certain religious doctrines. On the other hand, it is highly individualistic and personal as all Donne's poetry is, and it gives expression to his highly complex personality. Leishman remarks, "Donne's best religious poetry intensely personal; not an exposition of Christian doctrine, but a passionate and dramatic prayer to be delivered from temptations and distractions, to be made single-hearted, to find in God's will his peace". There was

always the other worldly element in Donne certain detachment from life, or non-attachment to it; but although he increasingly felt that the world was vanity, he could never quite liberate himself from it, and in this oscillation between this worldliness and other worldliness, in this increasing longing to make the -unworldly element in himself prevail over the worldly, lies the drama of his religious poetry, poetry which transcends ecclesiastical differences. "If we define religion, in the widest sense, a man's effort to bring his own will into conformity with a transcendent will and purpose which he apprehends and which he believes to be - divine, we may say that Donne's poetry .is in this widest sense religious, but only accidentally or incidentally Christian."

### **Stress on Religion in the True Sense**

Indeed, one of the most beautiful passages in Donne's sermons and several in his letters, where he felt able to express himself more freely, are on those <sup>1</sup> things in which all religions agree.....Donne is concerned, not with subtleties of doctrine, but with the infinite subtleties of temptation from which he asks to be delivered, with the innumerable wandering by-ways and mazes that would entice him from the straight and narrow path. The religion which gives such passion to his poems is religion in Us most primary and fundamental sense; what Donne asks for is purgation, purification, illumination - a directing of heart. We are even more aware of Donne's comply personality in his religious than in his secular poetry, but the religion of this complex personality is ultimately for all his learning and m subtlety, very simple. One might almost say that what he longs for is to exchange the complexity of a personality for the singleness and simplicity of a soul.

### **Consciousness of Sin**

According to **Helen Gardner**, "In Moral and psychological terms. Donne's problem was to come to terms with a world which alternately enthralled and disgusted him, to be the master and not the slave of his temperament. Like Wordsworth in the middle years, he came to long for, "a repose that ever is the same. He did not look to religion for an ecstasy of the spirit which would efface thememory of the ecstasy of the flesh; but for an "evenness" of piety which would preserve him from despair. The struggles and conflicts to which the Divine Poems witness did not lead to the secret heights and depths of the contemplative life, but to the public duty and charity which Walton describes. That Donne had to wrestle to

the end is clear. Like Dr. Johnson, with whom, in his natural melancholy and as a practical moralist, he has much in common; he remained burdened by the consciousness of his sins and aware of his need for mercy at the judgment.

### **The Parallel with Love poetry**

Donne's divine poems are the product of conflict between his will and his temperament. In his love-poetry, he is not concerned with what he ought or ought not to feel, but with the expression of feeling itself. Passion is there its own justification, and so is disgust, or hatred or grief. In his divine poetry feeling and thought are judged by the standard of what a Christian should feel or think. As a love poet, he seems to owe nothing to what any other man in love had ever felt or said before him; his language is all his own. As a divine poet, he cannot escape using the language of the Bible, and of hymns and prayers, or remembering the words of Christian writers. Christianity is a revealed religion, contained in the Scriptures and the experience of Christian souls; the Christian poet cannot voyage alone. The truth of Donne's love-poetry are truths of the imagination, which freely transmutes personal experience. They are his own discoveries. The truths of revelation are the accepted basis of his religious poetry and imagination has here another task. It is, to some extent, fettered.

### **Moral Intensity**

But although the Divine poems are not the record of discoveries, but of struggles to appropriate a truth which has been revealed, that truth does not, "defeat all Poetry," but gives us a poetry whose intensity is a moral intensity. Some religious poetry, Herbert's perhaps can be regarded as a species of love poetry; but Donne's in only two not of that kind. The image of Christ as Lover appears in only two of his poems—both written soon after the death of his wife. The image which dominates his divine poetry is the image of Christ as Savior, the victor over sin and death. The strength with which his imagination presents this figure is the measure of his need, and that need is the subject of the finest of his religious poems.

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