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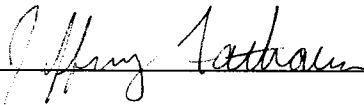
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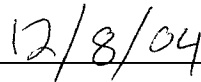
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Donne and Herbert:

Constructing a Religious Identity Amidst Powerful Cultural Forces  
(TITLE)

BY

Jeffrey J. Fathauer

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
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## Abstract

John Donne and George Herbert created stunning religious verse in the midst of a Renaissance England bustling with religion. During the century prior to their lives, Europe was engulfed with religious revolution; the Protestant Reformation was at its height; the Catholic Church had been challenged with unprecedented force. In order to fill the void left by the Church, reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin began composing a new Protestant theology.

Donne and Herbert emerged just as this invigorating theology began to solidify within the new Protestant church. However, as with any dominant force, once this fresh theology began to emerge as the primary system of beliefs, a divergent force materialized in response to a solitary authority. This antithetical force partially originated from the ideas of Joseph Arminius and became known as Arminianism, which varies with Reformed theology over the extent of human depravity and humanity's capacity to apply free will to choose salvation.

In part, Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and Herbert's *The Temple* serve as reflectors of the religious climate and discourse prevalent in early seventeenth-century England; readers can see how the religious forces of Donne's and Herbert's society both shaped and controlled their verse. This thesis explores the moments when both Donne and Herbert overcome the rigid confines of a dominant religious culture in order to construct religious voices filled with individual agency. Such an examination allows one to see the way these English poets not only reflected, but participated in the formation of religious identity.

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## Introduction

John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and George Herbert's *The Temple* serve as significant examples of religious verse produced during the early seventeenth century. These works took shape within a culture saturated with powerful religious forces. Because of the overwhelming influence these forces had on society, they cannot be ignored in the analysis of literature. In her article "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies," Jean Howard, an early proponent of New Historicism, writes:

many teachers of Renaissance literature simply have grown weary, as I have, of teaching texts as ethereal entities floating above the urgencies and contradictions of history and of seeking in such texts the disinterested expression of a unified truth rather than some articulation of the discontinuities underlying any construction of reality. (15)

Because of the need to consider historical contexts when studying literature from this period, I would argue that the religious forces and theology operating during post-Reformation England cannot be discarded. They play an integral role as both Donne and Herbert construct religious voices and identities amidst a plethora of religious forces.

I became more aware of this act of construction upon reading Stephen Greenblatt's introduction to his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*; he says that "self-fashioning...invariably crosses the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one's own identity, the experience of being molded by forces outside one's control, the attempt to fashion other selves" (3). However, the extent to which an individual possesses freedom to shape his/her identity remains ambiguous. Greenblatt



concludes his book by acknowledging that he:

intended to explore the ways in which major English writers of the sixteenth century created their own performances, to analyze the choices they made in representing themselves and in fashioning characters, to understand the role of human autonomy in the construction of identity. (256)

Yet he soon discovered that the writers he studied had “no moments of pure, unfettered subjectivity” (256). The identities they created were largely the result of cultural forces.

The question arises as to the amount of agency individuals possess in shaping their identities within a given culture. Are Donne and Herbert simply reflecting the religious theology of their time, or are they actively participating in the shaping of their own religious identities? While Donne’s and Herbert’s verse does reflect and is very much controlled by the religious theology of seventeenth-century England, moments, nevertheless, exist when individual awareness arises within the construction of their religious voices. Instead of automatically adhering to Reformed theology’s conception of God’s relationship to humanity, they question and doubt the very basis and understanding of God’s benevolence. Analyzing and placing their works within the religious framework of Renaissance England serves to illuminate the moments in which both Donne and Herbert construct their individual voices. In turn, this agency allows them to participate in the formation of religious discourse and the construction of a religious reality.

## Chapter One

### Reformation Theology

During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, religious debate and controversy among western Christians established one of the most volatile, transformational, and revitalizing periods in western civilization. The foundational moment for this turbulent period in European history began when Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Wittenberg church. His petition sparked the Protestant Reformation, which spread from Germany to the rest of Europe and into England. However, what people know today as the Protestant Reformation--a complete split with the Catholic Church--was not what Luther initially envisioned. Rather, his primary objective lay in simply reforming the Catholic Church from within.

Luther's principle, core frustration with the Catholic Church centered on the Church's sale of indulgences, consisting of a parishioner's monetary gift to the Church so that his or her sins might be forgiven. Luther saw the sale of indulgences to be in direct violation and contradiction to Scripture. His interpretation of Scripture taught that man's salvation is acquired only by the grace of God, apart from works. While arguing that man cannot gain salvation through the Church and human effort, Luther simultaneously questioned the authority of the Pope by insisting in the supreme authority of the Bible. Moreover, and perhaps most significantly, Luther contended for the priest-hood of all believers. In their book *The Protestant Mind of the English Reformation 1560-1640*, Charles and Katherine George write:

Protestant personalism brought under attack . . . the mediatorial position and

function of the Roman Catholic clergy. The Roman Catholic conception of the priest was seen as a denial both of a privilege and a responsibility which rightfully belonged to the whole Christian community. (29)

In Luther's eyes, not only was every believer capable of interpreting Scripture, but he or she also possessed direct access to God.

These radical proposals placed simple reform far out of reach. Instead, the Protestant Reformation initiated a complete separation from the Catholic Church. In England, this rift became official upon Henry VIII's establishment of the Church of England. The country was immersed in religious turmoil and divided between Protestant and Catholic believers. Many repressed their religious beliefs due to the fear of imprisonment or martyrdom.

Interestingly, the conflict did not only exist along the Protestant and Catholic battle lines, but also among the many factions within Protestantism. Ironically, one of Protestantism's founding principles--the belief in the individual's authority to interpret Scripture--helped proliferate the conflict. The Church no longer had a monopoly on theology and religious practice; rather, believers could develop their own systematic theologies.

Perhaps the most intriguing element of concern within Protestant theology dealt with the way in which humanity acquired eternal life. In his book *Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert*, Gene Edward Veith Jr. attempts to explain the primary concern of the Reformation:

Rather at its essence was the issue of salvation and a distinct understanding of the relationship between the human being and God. It is also important to realize that,

for the Reformers, this understanding was not new, but is detailed in the Scriptures, especially the writings of St. Paul, and was held by many of the Church Fathers, especially Augustine . . . although it was officially highly qualified by the scholastics in favor of a more human-centered spirituality based on “works” and “merits.” It remained for Luther to recover and to reemphasize this “God-centered” view of salvation which he found in Scripture and in his own experience. (25)

Until the Reformation, one could simply attend mass, buy indulgences, and go before the priest to receive salvation; the Church served as a mediator between God and humanity. The Reformation, however, forced people to take responsibility for their own salvation and relationship with God. This undoubtedly proved to be extremely terrifying for many individuals. The thought that the individual is personally responsible for his or her eternal salvation or damnation proved quite overwhelming. Moreover, fears certainly arose given the simple fact that people can manipulate human institutions; whereas, God cannot be pressured or bought.

In order to address the stresses of salvation, Calvinism was born. John Calvin’s theology centered upon God’s sovereignty, human depravity, and what most reformers agreed upon--man’s inability to earn salvation by merit. Yet Calvinism went a step farther by arguing that people possessed absolutely no agency in attaining salvation. This theology argues that human depravity affects the individual’s ability to place one’s faith in Christ, so that he/she might receive salvation. Without the direct intervention of God, Calvinism contends that people will never seek God of their own accord, for human nature is simply too corrupt. Therefore, the only humans to ever seek God and gain

salvation are the elect--those upon whom God has chosen to bestow his grace.

During the early stages of the Reformation, Calvinism and Reformed Theology were synonymous. Calvinism served as the official doctrine of the Anglican Church as well as Protestant congregations throughout Europe. Again, however, because individuals declared to have the power to interpret Scripture on their own, slightly greater liberties were thought to exist for those questioning official church doctrine. One of the more prominent individuals to question Reformed theology was Jacobus Arminius, who allowed for a greater amount of human agency. Arminianism began to seriously influence Reformed England in the beginning of the seventeenth century. In his book *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism*, Nicholas Tyacke begins his study not at the "predestinarian disputes at Cambridge University during the 1590s" but at the 1604 Hampton Court conference because "At Hampton Court anti-Calvinism received, for the first time, an airing at national level" (9).

This newer theology taught that rather than being unconditionally chosen by God, individuals are elected based upon God's foreknowledge--God selected those whom he knew were going to believe. In his book *The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism and Salvation*, Allen P. F. Sell quotes Arminius: "God decreed to save and damn certain particular persons. This decree has its foundation in the foreknowledge of God, by which he knew from all eternity those individuals who *would*, through his preventing grace, *believe*" (11). This reasoning is very illogical, for if God's choice rests upon the individual's ultimate use of his/her free will to either choose or reject God's call, God's choice is not choice at all. Furthermore, Sell argues that the relationship between God and humanity in Arminianism "has very much to do with man's ability to respond to God's

grace--a grace freely available to all who will claim it" (6). This agency to "claim" salvation can only exist if humanity is not completely depraved and some amount of goodness to turn towards God remained following humanity's fall. Arminianism believes that "half the work is God's and half is man's" (1).

Ultimately, the opposing tenants of Arminianism forced Calvinists to further solidify their own doctrine at the Synod of Dort where they fully developed and espoused the five points of Calvinism: Total Depravity--humanity's utter sinfulness, including the will; Unconditional Election--God's choice of whom will receive grace; Limited Atonement--Christ died only for the elect; Irresistible Grace--a person cannot resist God's call to grace; and Perseverance of the Saints--an individual cannot lose salvation.

Today, Calvinism can easily be viewed with contempt because of the contemporary values of democracy and the values found in the individual's *natural right* to shape his or her own destiny. As a result, many picture Calvinism as depicting an uncaring, unjust, unmerciful God, haphazardly flipping a coin to decide the eternal destiny of humanity. Contrary to this view, Eugene Veith Jr. offers an illuminating portrait in his attempt to define Calvinism from a sixteenth-century English perspective.

He begins by asserting that "If the religion of Calvin is assumed to have been too strict in its morals, at the time, we discover, it was condemned as being too lax. If it seems oppressive today, at the time it was hailed as liberating" (11). Individuals who were once fearful of their responsibility in establishing and maintaining communion with God, no longer had any reason to fear. Predestination and irresistible grace freed individuals from the responsibility of salvation; the burden was removed from their hands and placed in the hands of the creator. With regards to its moral "lax," if Calvinism

follows a logical course, its believers may be inclined towards Antinomianism--complete disregard for moral law. Since every step of salvation is accomplished and complete by God, mandates for moral behavior and good works vanish. If the elect are chosen and secure in their salvation, people have no reason to live righteously in order to achieve or secure their salvation.

In order to eliminate Antinomianism, believers began questioning whether or not they were actually among the elect. Followers figured that if they were of the elect, moral behavior ought to ensue. However, Veith says that "the elaborate schemes of introspection and good works designed to reveal whether one is of the elect--such concerns of the later Calvinists were explicitly forbidden by Calvin himself" (28). Veith also argues his case for the refreshing nature of Calvinism by quoting C.S. Lewis:

it may be useful to compare the influence of Calvin on that age with the influence of Marx on our own; or even of Marx and Lenin in one, for Calvin had both expounded the new system in theory and set it going to practice. This will at least serve to eliminate the absurd idea that Elizabethan Calvinists were somehow grotesque, elderly people, standing outside the main forward current of life. In their own day they were, of course, the very latest thing. Unless we can imagine the freshness, the audacity, and (soon) the fashionableness of Calvinism, we shall get our whole picture wrong. It was the creed of progressives, even of revolutionaries. (33)

Even though Calvinism freed some from the fear of personal responsibility concerning salvation, others, nevertheless, were inclined to picture God as unjust and unmerciful because of his refusal to bestow his grace upon all humanity. However, from the

Calvinist perspective, representing God as in any way unjust fails to acknowledge the absolute, utter depravity, sinfulness, and unworthiness of human beings. That God chooses to save one human soul is more than humanity could ever hope for. In *Literature in Protestant England 1560-1660*, Alan Sinfield says it nicely: "The reformers established divine power by insisting that no one can merit salvation and it is up to God whom he will elect. They held that his mercy resides in the fact that he chooses to rescue any of us" (10).

While examining the strength and popularity of Reformed theology, I do not want to ignore the Catholic influence on the religious culture, for even though dissent existed among Protestants, the Catholic Church remained the primary adversary. The Georges discuss in their book the overall Catholic problem to the Protestant mind:

At this lower level, techniques--rituals and devices of automatic performance--had, in the Protestant view been substituted for the wholesale inner regeneration and the rigorous outer discipline by which alone the salvation of any one in any position of life could be achieved. To Protestant critics, Roman Catholic errors in this category appeared to have a twofold origin: they arose first, from over optimism regarding the ability of human nature to achieve its own salvation, and, second, from overconfidence regarding the effectiveness of institutional devices in the stimulation of the process. (32)

One attempt to combat the Catholic influence included the creation of the "Thirty-Nine Articles" in 1563 by the Church of England. Upon turning sixteen, students attending Oxford were required "under the Matriculation Statute to subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles and the Oath of Supremacy" before they could receive a degree (Bald 45-46).



These articles functioned as the doctrinal framework and guidelines for Reformed theology, thereby dictating the acceptable beliefs among Protestant factions. The Georges call them "England's Protestant creed" (5).

Regardless of the specific creed one professed to, faith and religion were an integral part of people's lives, if only for the reason that their society recognized no separation between church and state. Consequently, one's religion had a direct relation to social standing. To further complicate matters, the religious theologies were extremely unstable during this religiously volatile time. England was still recovering from its severance from the Catholic Church and discovering its new identity. Fortunately, this changing and evolving time encouraged the imaginative powers of Donne and Herbert in their quest for a religious voice.

## Chapter Two

## John Donne: Questioning Shapes Religious Identity

The conflicts between Catholics and Protestants as well as the theological debates among Protestants all strongly influenced John Donne's life. The foundations of Donne's inner conflict stem from his strong Catholic background. Not only did Donne receive a Catholic education, but his family included several prominent Catholics. R.C. Bald's biography, *John Donne: A Life*, does a thorough job of presenting Donne's Catholic heritage. Bald asserts that "Since Donne's ancestry and position in society were of great significance to him, and helped to frame the ideals by which he lived, they cannot be disregarded" (20).

The most significant connection occurs on his mother's side with her relation to the Heywood and More families. Her father, John Heywood, "was a staunch Catholic who suffered severely for his resistance; he was a friend not only of Donne's father, who remembered him in his will, but also of Donne himself" (Bald 24). Also, two of Donne's Heywood uncles "both gave up promising careers in England and eventually became members of the Jesuit order" (25). On the More side, Donne is a descendant of Sir Thomas More. Bald writes:

Each successive generation of Mores for two and a half centuries supplied the Roman Church with devout servants who suffered civil disabilities or exile for their religion, and among the direct descendants of More who were contemporaries of Donne at least eight--four men and four women--were members of Roman Catholic religious orders. (23)

Donne certainly had the ability and opportunities to position himself within Catholic circles. Unfortunately, however, he was born into a Catholic family during a time when Catholicism was becoming repressed by an increasingly Protestant nation. As a result of a growing Protestant society and its pressures, Catholics would find difficulty in gaining societal position, power, and status. Concerning Donne, Bald writes:

He had to come to terms both with the world in which he lived and with the conflict of religious faiths into which, by virtue of his family inheritance, he was inevitable plunged. As a Catholic the gates of preferment and success were barred to him; as he knew only too well, his religion offered him nothing in this world but exile or the patient endurance of persecution. Active participation in the life of his age could only be purchased at the cost of disloyalty to all that he had been taught to revere. (63)

Besides having the doors of worldly success closed to him as a Catholic, Donne was also familiar with the inherent dangers accompanying those of the Catholic faith--the worst being death. And he became more aware of these dangers when in 1593 Donne's older brother, Henry Donne, died while in prison. He was placed in prison when "a young priest of Yorkshire extraction named William Harrington was discovered and arrested in Henry Donne's chambers" (Bald 58). Later, Harrington was executed as a traitor (58).

Whether it resulted from the desire for societal advancement, the inherent dangers for a practicing Catholic, or a genuine encounter with faith, Donne abandoned his Catholic heritage and embraced Protestantism. However, "pin[ning] down" Donne's personal philosophical understandings of God within Protestantism proves challenging (Veith 119). Difficulty arises because scholars cannot agree on whether or not

Catholicism or Protestantism was the stronger influence on Donne. Frances Malpezzi writes:

Since the publication of Louis L. Martz's *The Poetry of Meditation* (1954), scholars have debated whether Donne's influences were largely Catholic and Continental (in the tradition of Ignatian meditation, for example) or decidedly Protestant and English, as Barbara Lewalski argues. Even scholars who agree on the latter, however, do not concur. Some see Donne as a strict Calvinist; others view him as a more moderate Lutheran or even an Arminian. (141)

As I will show, Donne, at times, writes with a deep sense of his complete unworthiness and inability to approach God, which suggests a Calvinist theology. Yet to define him as such contradicts Donne's inordinate amount of fear surrounding death and damnation, which do not characterize Calvinists who are chosen and secured by God.

Attempting to define Donne's exact theological leanings seems trivial and impossible because beliefs and ideas are malleable--constantly changing and evolving. Solid, concrete, unchanging ideas cannot be used to label, categorize, and define an individual for any length of time. Alan Sinfield suggests that "We do not have much idea in principle of what it means 'to hold a belief,' and we know that thought and behaviour are in practice criss-crossed by assumption of which we are only half aware and which, if pressed would prove radically divergent" (3). Moreover, Bald seems to suggest that Donne constantly evaluated his own beliefs. He writes:

Besides, his restless intellectual curiosity refused to allow him to accept any creed unquestioned, and it eventually drove him to a systematic examination of the issues at stake between the conflicting faiths. His investigation brought him

perilously close to complete cynicism in matters of religion, for he was not unreceptive to that Renaissance spirit of scepticism and free-thought which to many serious minds was more dangerous and deadly than heresy. (63)

People often have difficulty defining their own beliefs, let alone the beliefs of those living around 400 years ago. In addition, defining individuals through the rigid confines of a specific belief ignores the uncertainty that accompanies many beliefs. Even though one may profess a belief, one-hundred percent certainty often remains a rare commodity. Room always remains for variability, uncertainty, and indecision, and history sometimes ignores this human capacity for multiplicity. Instead, history often seeks to rigidly define the past and place individuals in tight theological boxes.

Regardless of whether or not one completely understands Donne's exact theological leanings, readers of his *Holy Sonnets* cannot help but notice the overtones of Reformed theology. The sonnets are laden with Calvinist themes and tone--ranging from human depravity to God's irresistible grace. For example, in the very first sonnet from the *Holy Sonnets*, Donne's speaker addresses God, saying, "But our old subtle foe so tempted me, / That not one hour I can myself sustain" (11-12). In this passage, the devil tempts the speaker to the point that temptation is impossible to resist. This failure to withstand mirrors the Calvinist idea that a person is incapable of sustaining or asserting his/her own will in the face of temptation. Moreover, the theology taught that not only is such resistance only accomplished through God's assistance, but that such resistance is not even desirable without God's direct intervention. Article IX. *Of Original or Birth-Sin* of the "Thirty-Nine Articles" acknowledges that "man is very far gone from original righteousness and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always

contrary to the spirit" (Grudem 1173). The depraved nature cannot resist or seek to resist temptation on his/her own accord.

Donne's poem echoes the Calvinist theology derived from the apostle Paul's epistle to the Romans. In Romans 7:18-19 Paul writes: "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature (or the flesh). For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing" (*The Holy Bible*). Just as Paul futilely struggles with his inability to live righteously and resist temptation, Donne similarly struggles with temptation in his sonnet; both anguish over the frustration of not being able to work their own goodness.

Donne's first sonnet again mirrors Paul's letter to the Romans as well as Calvinist theology when the speaker tells God that "Only thou art above and when towards thee / By thy leave I can look" (9-10). Donne affirms that humanity does not possess the agency to turn towards God; rather, an individual can only turn to God through His allowance. In Romans 3:11 Paul writes: "there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God" (*The Holy Bible*). The basic understanding exists in both Paul and Donne that human beings lack in goodness and in the ability to turn towards God, thereby further emphasizing the utter depravity of humans.

Donne's speaker's acknowledgement of his own sinfulness and inability to turn to God embodies the foundational point of Calvinist theology--Total Depravity. However, perhaps the most profound acknowledgement of Calvinism in this same sonnet concerns a slightly different but related issue. In the last line, the speaker urges God to "draw mine iron heart" (14). This request reflects the fourth point of Calvinism--Irresistible Grace--

which asserts that humans come to God only when God draws them with an irresistible calling. This calling must be irresistible, again, because of humanity's utter sinfulness and inability to approach God through its own strength. The speaker recognizes the state of his heart when referring to it as "iron"--something that cannot be easily moved. Therefore, the need for God's irresistible grace to "draw" the heart remains a part of Donne's basic understanding of the condition of humanity in relation to Calvinist theology.

In "Holy Sonnet" IV, Donne continues to acknowledge humanity's absolute depravity. He creates an extremely Calvinistic perspective of the soul when his speaker cries out: "Oh my black soul!" (1). This groan further recognizes the human soul as void of light, goodness, righteousness, completely lacking connection with God. Calvinists argue that such a soul never seeks God of its own accord. Fallen humanity will never choose salvation and devotion to God because of the corrupt, utterly depraved state of human nature.

Because of humanity's corrupt nature, the individual is not only unable to achieve salvation, but he/she cannot even begin the process which leads to salvation. Instead, in Calvinist theology, the entire process is controlled by God. And, in Donne's "Holy Sonnet" V, the reader sees the absolute control that is granted to God. The speaker begins very simply by recognizing the two aspects of human nature--both the flesh and spirit. Once this realization occurs, Donne's speaker understands that the jeopardy of his situation results from both parts becoming contaminated by sin, and the speaker is stuck in "endless night" (3), seeing that "both parts must die" (4). Within this hopeless state, the speaker very elegantly and gracefully compares himself to a world, while

acknowledging that God has the power to create “new spheres” and “new lands” (6). He then asks God to “Pour new seas in mine eyes” (7). Since God has the ability to create new worlds, Donne’s speaker wants God to create something in him. The speaker’s voice pleads for God to create sorrow, remorse, and repentance. Through this metaphor, Donne acknowledges God’s power to generate sorrow in the human heart.

Calvinist theology repeatedly emphasizes God’s sovereignty, thereby reinforcing humanity’s ineptitude to procure any step in the process of salvation by human effort. For the Calvinist, salvation is both begun and completed by God; people have absolutely no agency in their own salvation. Not only can people not do good works in order to assist in their salvation, but the very ability to seek God through faith in Jesus so that they might repent of their sins remains beyond their reach. In his book *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture*, Alister McGrath quotes Calvin saying that humanity has “not been deprived of will, but of a healthy will” (157). McGrath understands Calvin as saying that “it is not simply a failure to discern the hand of God within the created order, but a deliberate decision *not* to discern it and *not* to obey God” (157).

Calvinism does not necessarily teach that people do not have free will; rather, it teaches that because of humanity’s corruption a person will never freely choose God. Instead, people will always reject God. If God chooses to leave an individual to his/her own corruption or free will, that individual will never freely choose God, thus resulting in eternal damnation; likewise, if God chooses to intervene in a person’s life, this person will be saved, regardless of any work or choice made on the part of the individual.

Perhaps the holy sonnet which best encapsulates Donne’s Calvinist tone is found



in "Holy Sonnet" XIV. He begins with the lines:

Batter my heart, three-personed God  
 As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
 That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
 Your force, to break, blow, burn and make me new. (1-4)

The voice in the sonnet conveys a feeling of complete disillusionment with trying to seek fellowship with God. The only verdict seems to be that people cannot acquire fellowship with God through their own authority. The very first line expresses a will that must be broken. Again, for the Calvinist, the human heart is utterly depraved; therefore, because of its depravity it cannot choose God; therefore, the only way a depraved individual can have fellowship with God is for God to divinely elect and draw the individual through irresistible grace. Adhering to the popular theology, Donne provides the image of a depraved heart that must be "Batter[ed]" (1). This theme is further emphasized when the speaker pleads "o'erthrow me" (3). There is, again, the recognition of the speaker's complete incapacity to turn towards God. Yet not only is the individual unable to choose God in Donne's sonnet, but the reader sees that the speaker's entire will must be completely overthrown as he pleads for God to "break, blow, and burn" him (4).

For the Calvinist, salvation only occurs when God completely assaults and overcomes the human will because if left alone, the will never freely allows God in. Donne writes, "I... / Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end" (5-6). Donne recognizes the complete ineptness of his own desire. The only way his will can choose God is for it to be completely manipulated and overthrown by God's desire.

Yet even with all of the Calvinist overtones, there remains a hint of Donne's un-

Reformed leanings. Veith argues that "Donne believes strongly in human sinfulness, as his writings on the misery and hopelessness of the human condition clearly show; but, unlike Calvinists, he does believe that a measure of free will survived the fall" (119). Instead of every step of salvation belonging to God, Donne leaves room for human freedom and individual agency. This small amount of agency Donne allows, along with his sometimes not so rigid stance on the doctrine of Total Depravity, is a characteristic of the Calvinists recognized by Lewalski:

as J.F.H. New points out, many English Calvinists who remained within the established church inclined to moderation and ambiguity in regard to certain of these points: they tended to find some value (and therefore less than total depravity) in the natural faculties of man and the goods of the natural order; to see (with Richard Hooker) the realms of nature and grace as hierarchically ordered rather than dialectically opposed; and to reserve some role, however ambiguously stated, for human response to diving grace. (20)

Even though the church was Reformed in doctrine, not everyone automatically believed with complete and unwavering certainty to all its doctrines. Moreover, Bald argues that "the rejection of all the commonly accepted reasons for religious belief does not involve the abandonment of the search for truth" (71).

Donne is able to avoid the rigid constraints of a single belief system, opting instead to pursue his own system of beliefs. In her article "Donne's Transcendent Imagination: The Divine Poems as Hierophantic Experience," Frances Malpezzi explains Mircea Eliade's concept: "Looking beyond the bases of particular manifestations of religion, Eliade worked to identify what constitutes the religious impulse cross-

culturally" (142). In his book *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade writes: "Whatever the historical context in which he is placed, *homo religiosus* always believes that there is an absolute reality, the sacred, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real" (202).

In his quest for a religious truth, coupled with the freedom provided him by Protestantism to interpret scripture, Donne creates his own religious identity within the confines of a powerful religious culture. Katherine and Charles George say that "Donne, in pursuing his private genius actually departed more decisively from Calvinist predestinarianism than any other English divine" (71). Moreover, some of his leanings away from Calvinist theology may stem from his Catholic background:

The Roman Catholic position, which tends relatively to underplay the role of predestination in general, limits knowledge of election, where election exists, to extraordinary circumstances and miraculous revelation, and allows under ordinary circumstances only a hope and not an assurance of salvation. English Protestant opinion, on the contrary, probably in part merely by its antagonism to Roman Catholicism, tends to emphasize instead the certainty of knowledge of salvation in the elect and the accomplishment of that certainty through the intellectual and spiritual processes ordinarily associated with the presence of true faith. (George 61)

Unlike the Reformed Protestant, John Donne did not possess an assurance of salvation. Instead, he was plagued by the fear of uncertainty.

This fear appears in "Holy Sonnet" VI; Donne writes: "But my 'ever-waking part shall see that face, / Whose fear already shakes my every joint" (7-8). Donne creates a

persona that is terrified by the thought of death. The inherent problem for those who see Donne as a Calvinist is that the stringent Calvinist has no fear of death. Within Calvinist theology, believers possess Eternal Security--the doctrine called Perseverance of the Saints. This crucial point of Calvinism believes that once a person has been chosen by God and called by grace, one's eternal destiny is secure; an individual cannot then fall from grace. Therefore, the elect have absolutely no reason to fear death. By creating a voice of fear, Donne shows his Arminian colors because the Arminian has no assurance of salvation. Free will allows believers to lose their salvation through the choices they make; they can fall from grace.

However, one might argue that the official doctrine of Perseverance of the Saints had not yet been established. Nevertheless, the principle behind the doctrine is present in the "Thirty-Nine Articles." Article *XVII. Of Predestination and Election* states:

As the godly consideration of Predestination, and our Election in Christ, is full of sweet, and pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh, and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal Salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God. (Grudem 1174)

The elect have no reason to ever fear damnation because of the work that God is doing in their lives. For the Calvinist, the idea that eternity is not secure for the elect is not an option. However, Donne's rejection of the idea that one's eternity is secure occurs again in "Holy Sonnet" VII when Donne's speaker tells God: "Teach me how to repent; for

that's as good / As if thou hadst sealed my pardon, with thy blood" (13-14). This passage asserts that God has not "sealed" the salvation of the believer.

Yet even though one could use this passage to argue that Donne has Arminian leanings, one could just as easily argue that Donne's uncertainty does not stem from his disbelief in the ultimate salvation of the elect. Rather, his uncertainty results from doubting his status as an elect individual. From a Calvinist perspective, if he is not of the elect, he will receive eternal damnation, and there is nothing he can do to prevent this eternal torment.

Sinfield asserts that "The protestant who believed that he or she had received grace might rise above all the anxieties of this world and the next" (15) However, this elevation does not happen for Donne. Instead, he is plagued by the reality he faces that God may have not chosen him. While writing about Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, Lewalski says:

The sonnets explore the spectrum of emotional states associated with conviction of sin, conversion, repentance, faith, and spiritual struggle; and the emotions portrayed run the gamut from anguish, terror, dread, fear of God's rejection, anxiety about election, and near despair, to grief for sin, love of Christ, and dismay that the vacillations of mind and heart persist throughout life. (25)

Regardless, however, of the exact state of Donne's theological leanings, one cannot ignore the theological dialogue of which Donne found himself a part. The main point of contention within the religious debate was the issue of agency. Within Calvinism, humanity has absolutely no agency in determining its eternal destiny, while in Arminianism, humanity does maintain a small degree of agency. In "Holy Sonnet" XIV,

Donne's speaker proclaims "I . . . / Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end" (5-6). On the one hand, from an Arminian perspective, Donne's speaker tries to use his/her own individual agency to gain a relationship with God. On the other hand, from a Calvinist perspective, the attempt fails due to humanity's lack of freedom to choose God.

Interestingly, the discussion of the agency a person possesses in order to establish fellowship with God mirrors the level of agency available to a person constructing a religious voice. Just as the religious individual struggles to find the agency to admit God, he/she struggles against the surrounding religious forces to include his/her own voice against those that attempt to overwhelm it. Therefore, Donne's words, "Labour to admit you," suggest not only the struggle to admit God, but the struggle of finding and admitting his own voice amidst powerful religious forces and unflinching theology.

It would be difficult to deny that in some ways Donne is definitely shaped by social forces. The reader can see the great extent to which his *Holy Sonnets* overflow with sixteenth-century religious theology. However, within this religious climate, Donne is deeply committed to shaping his own Protestant identity. In his use of specific language and in his posing of questions within the religious discourse, he is able to construct a voice filled with individual agency. As a result, Donne is deeply invested in the shaping of a Protestant identity. Donne's poetry can be easily read in a manner suggested by New Historicism because it does not exist in "a hierarchical relationship in which literature figures as the parasitic reflector of historical fact"; instead, it exists in a world where "one imagines a complex textualized universe in which literature participated in historical processes and in the political management of reality" (Howard 25).

Donne recognizes the power his writing has in "Holy Sonnet" V when he

acknowledges God's ability to create new worlds; Donne writes that God "of new lands can *write*" (emphasis mine, 6). Donne is consciously aware of the creative power behind words, language, and writing. He recognizes, in his words, the inherent power to shape the world. He is able to work within Reformed theology to shape a new world, to construct an identity separate from the dominant religious forces dictating the construction of identity. As Donne incorporates elements of human freedom into Calvinism, he is simultaneously incorporating individual agency into the religious discourse of his time.

"Holy Sonnet" X provides a good example of the way Donne is able to manipulate language to create reality. In contrast to the abstract fear of death readers can find in his earlier sonnets, Donne creates a voice which directly confronts death as a tangible force. Confronting death helps his speaker to conquer fear and position himself as a member of God's elect. He tells Death that from his pictures, he does not look very terrifying; rather, he only appears "From rest and sleep, which but they pictures be, / Much pleasure" (5-6). Moreover, he diminishes the power of death when he calls him a "slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men" (9). Donne's final words are "Death thou shalt die" (14).

However, Donne's greater moments of agency arise when he uses questions. The opening question of "Holy Sonnet" I is: "Thou hast made me and shall thy work decay?" (1). On a basic level, Donne is talking about physical decay; in line three, the speaker proclaims: "I run to death, and death meets me as fast" (3). Donne undoubtedly fears and feels the imminence of death. Yet the question not only refers to a physical death, but it simultaneously refers to a spiritual death, for line eight reads: "By sin in it, which it

towards hell doth weigh." Donne is not simply worried about his physical demise; he is concerned about his eternal damnation, as stated in Romans 6:23-- "For the wages of sin is death" (*The Holy Bible*).

On a basic level, the question in line one simply paves the way for Donne's revelation that human beings are decaying both physically and spiritually, and they need repair. However, at the same time, a bit of cynicism appears in the question, allowing Donne to construct a subtler voice possessing greater freedom, thereby separating him from popular and accepted religious discourse of Reformed England.

By default, the question challenges God's workmanship. The question he asks is very real: should God's work decay? A natural response might be that if God is so mighty and powerful, how can something created by his very hand decay. Apparently, God's work is faulty, defective. Therefore, the logical conclusion should be that it is God's responsibility to repair his workmanship. Even though Donne uses the question to introduce his own fallenness, he, nevertheless, subtly attempts to pressure God. Donne challenges God's choice to only save some. If God's workmanship is faulty, is it not God's job and responsibility to save all humanity?

Donne also gains agency when his speaker questions God in "Holy Sonnet" II. Initially, he creates a speaker who safely espouses the doctrines of Calvinism. For instance, the first half of the poem fittingly tells how God made him and "bought" him with his blood. Apparently, God has complete agency over the speaker's destiny as he tells God, "I resign / Myself to thee" (1-2). However, the speaker then proceeds to question God. Donne writes: "Why doth the devil then usurp on me? / Why doth he steal, nay ravish that's thy right?" (9-10). On an abstract theological level, Donne simply talks



about man's battle with the devil and the frustration stemming from that battle.

Moreover, he acknowledges God's authority when he says, "Except thou rise and for thine own work fight" (11). Again, Donne sounds more Calvinist than Arminian by acknowledging his inability to fight the devil, apparently because of his own sinfulness resulting from human depravity.

However, the questions do more than simply espouse popular doctrine. Because he poses questions, Donne inherently opens a world of ambiguity. Donne does not provide concrete answers that further Reformed theology. Instead, his questions can be heard as taking a challenging tone towards God. After all, if God has bought Donne through his "blood" or the death of his son, why should God allow the devil to be in any part of the equation?

The speaker acknowledges that he is God's possession. Yet if that is the case, why does God allow the devil such influence in the life of the speaker? The frustration and concern behind these questions magnify as the speaker says, "And Satan hates me, yet is loth to lose me" (14). Again, the speaker experiences frustration; if God has paid such a dear price (the death of his son), why would God allow the devil to have a role in his eternal destiny? If God both created and loves him, why does not God fight for him as much as the devil, who hates him?

By questioning God, the voice in this sonnet challenges God's authority, motivations, and love for his creation. Donne at first presents Calvinist doctrine in a way that appears supportive. But he announces the doctrine in questions that actually challenge it and God. What he questions is the belief in predestination--that only some are chosen for salvation. For Donne, the idea that God would only choose some for

salvation is appalling.

The speaker questions why the devil, who hates humanity, fights with a greater tenacity and urgency than omnipotent God, who supposedly loves his creation. Proponents of Calvinist doctrine would argue that God's greatness and love rest in his willingness to save any because, as article IX. *Of Original or Birth-Sin* of the *Thirty-Nine* articles states: "every person born into this world . . . deserveth God's wrath and damnation" (Grudem 1173). Yet this apparently does not comfort Donne, who is terrified that he is not one of God's chosen. And, unfortunately, in a Calvinist worldview, Donne has absolutely no power to change his position.

This lack of agency within Reformed theology drives Donne to develop a theology possessing a degree of human agency and to construct a voice separate from the strong religious forces of his society. This voice stands out most loudly when he questions God directly, thereby daring to question the foundation of religion: faith. George Parfitt writes in his Donne biography: "Doubt about self is proper in a Christian but its danger lies in the temptation to doubt God" (95). Donne creates a speaker that is, at times, obviously doubting his own ability to stay connected with God. When he questions his own salvation, he asks questions of God.

Perhaps Donne's most radical questioning occurs in "Holy Sonnet" IX. His speaker wants to know why he must be damned.

If lecherous goats, if serpents envious  
 Cannot be damned; alas, why should I be?  
 Why should intent or reason, born in me,  
 Make sins, else equal, in me more heinous?

And mercy being easy, and glorious

To God, in his stern wrath, why threatens he? (3-8)

Donne creates a voice which blatantly challenges God. It does not seem fair to Donne's speaker that he should be damned for something which is outside personal control, for he recognizes that the individual did not create the person he/she will become; rather, God did. The speaker does not understand why he should be held accountable for something that was "born in [him]" (5). Yet the biggest frustration occurs over why one should have to worry about damnation at all. Why should God ever threaten to damn anyone? Why would God refuse to grant mercy since it is both "easy, and glorious" (7). For Donne, there is no reason why man ought to face damnation.

On the one hand, the questioning in this sonnet serves as a good rhetorical strategy for the second half of the sonnet. The questions allow Donne to say "But who am I, that dare dispute with thee / O God?" (9-10). The questions allow Donne to cleverly fashion this humble voice--a voice acknowledging his unworthiness to approach God with such profane questions. Nevertheless, the damage is done. Embedded within his questions is a dark cynical voice questioning the very nature of God's goodness and mercy.

Donne may appear heretical in questioning God; however, through these questions, he is able to avoid simply serving as a reflector of acceptable seventeenth-century religious discourse. Instead, he actively participates in the shaping of a religious identity. Ultimately, by asking his questions within the framework of Calvinist theology, he is able to take his place in acceptable religious discourse while giving voice to his own uncertainties about God and Reformed theology.

## Chapter Three

## George Herbert: Groaning to Attain an Individual Voice

Throughout *The Temple*, George Herbert constructs a confident voice reflecting the theological issues of English Protestants. This collection of poems serves as a generous representation of the theological outlook of Reformed England. Herbert deals with an enormous range of theological issues too numerous to list. However, he and his religious verse cannot simply be viewed as reflectors of Reformed theology. Instead, rooted within his verse are moments when he creates a separate voice independent of acceptable discourse.

While discovering George Herbert, I was bemused by the enthusiastic need on the part of scholars to understand the motivations behind the public man. There exists the need to conceptualize the genuineness of his identity. In the attempt to understand Herbert's motivations, scholars draw a distinction between his religious and secular motives. During this endeavor, they encounter a seemingly unsteady balance between his secular and religious life. Was Herbert primarily motivated by secular advancement and employment, or were his plans always focused upon a career in the church?

In *George Herbert: His Religion and Art*, Joseph Summers frequently critiques Walton's portrayal of Herbert in *Life*:

His outline of Herbert's psychological development follows a simple pattern: after a pious rearing, Herbert was dazzled by worldly ambition; after sickness and the frustration of that ambition, he decided to enter the priesthood. The sickness was important but considered alone it provides an adequate answer to none of the

questions. (36-37)

Summers challenges Walton's characterization of a Herbert who underwent a complete transformation because of an illness. Summers does not believe Herbert can be characterized the way Walton attempts to define him. Summers continues to argue:

There is no evidence that at any time during his life Herbert abandoned his early plan to base his career on 'Divinity,' to further the cause of religion; there is also no evidence that before 1626 he abandoned his hope for great place in civil affairs. Theoretically at least, there was no necessary contradiction. (37)

With the assertion that no inflexible divide must exist between secular and religious ambition, Summers recognizes the unstable complexity of human motivation. This complexity of Herbert's motivation is further addressed in Diana Benet's book *Secretary of Praise: The Poetic Vocation of George Herbert*. She writes:

Most poets are safe from the kind of canonization sometimes accorded to George Herbert. Donne's love poetry and Milton's political pamphlets prevent their being suspected of sainthood or of living far removed from the world of passion and action. All of Herbert's poetry reveals a mind concentrated on God and devout life; his best poetry gives the impression of being so personal that it seems reasonable for the reader to assume a total congruity between his life and his work. Certainly, the priesthood is in harmony with the personality we discern behind *The Temple*. But because Herbert did not become a priest until he was thirty-seven, his delay must arouse curiosity. Unfortunately, what is known with certainty about the poet's choice of vocation cannot yield indisputable answers.

(3)

The reality of the situation is that, just like in the case of John Donne, no one can be one hundred percent certain of what motivated George Herbert. In her article "Writing the History of the Present: Contextualizing Early Modern Literature," Howard asserts, "I think one need no longer argue for the inevitable interconnections between the present moment and scholarship on the past" (22). If anything, the way scholars construct Herbert's motivations is just as much a product of his/her own predispositions, ideological bias, and culture as it is of any historical reality. The construction of history is just as much a reflection of the present as it is of a supposedly objective past. In his essay "New Historicisms," Louis Montrose argues "that we can have no access to a full and authentic past" (410).

Even though a person cannot see directly into Herbert's mind because of the inability to view history objectively, free of cultural bias, the reader does know that, unlike John Donne, George Herbert belonged to a Protestant family in which he did not have to contend with the pressures of a prominent Catholic heritage. However, because he was born about twenty years after Donne, Herbert would have been exposed to the Arminian and Protestant theological debates at a young age. For example, before Herbert joined Trinity at Cambridge, he attended Westminster School. At the time "Herbert [...] entered Westminster," the Arminian "Lancelot Andrewes had probably just vacated the deanery" (Summers 30). Moreover, in *George Herbert: A Literary Life*, Cristina Malcolmson discusses the growing influence and prestige of Arminianism, acknowledging that "James had been more supportive to Arminians since mid-1622. Buckingham and Charles had not yet announced their preference for Arminianism, made evident only in 1626" (56).

Nevertheless, Herbert remained mostly Calvinist in theology. Yet Veith says that “When he departs from Calvin, Herbert generally follows Luther” (35). He further argues that “Herbert may have been influenced by Arminianism--he was a friend of Lancelot Andrewes and debated Predestination with him (Herbert would have had to defend the Calvinist side)” (35).

Some of Herbert’s theology is discernable in his collection of poems, *The Temple*. A predominant amount of Veith’s book is devoted to understanding Herbert’s theology in *The Temple* in relation to Calvinism. An obvious example of Herbert’s Calvinism is found in “Faith” when Herbert writes:

When creatures had no real light  
 Inherent in them, thou didst make the sun,  
 Impute a luster, and allow them bright;  
 And in this show, what Christ hath done. (33-36)

This passage reinforces the theology of human depravity. Darkness is inherently associated with an absence of God because God is all light and goodness. Therefore, for “creatures” to have “no real light” signifies their complete separation from God and anything good. Additionally, humans lack the agency to bring light so that they can see God; rather, it is God who “didst make the sun.” Without God’s creation of light, people would not be able to see “what Christ hath done” and receive salvation.

Ultimately, the light in this passage represents faith, and there needs to be a clear distinction between grace and faith. Both Arminian and Calvinist would argue that people are saved by the free gift of God’s grace--Jesus’ death on the cross. However, the agency individuals have to gain access to this grace through faith is a key point of contention.

The Arminian believes that a person can choose to put his/her faith in God's grace. Meanwhile, the Calvinist emphasizes God's sovereignty, arguing that the very act of choosing functions as human effort. Such an effort is impossible in a depraved state; instead, choosing to place faith in God's grace can only be accomplished by means of God's direct and forceful intervention--his Irresistible Grace. In the "Thirty-Nine Articles," Article X. *Of Free Will* states that "The condition of Man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith, and calling upon God" (Grudem 1173). Benet asserts that "Anglican theologians and priests like George Herbert referred to *prevenient* and *subsequent* grace to distinguish between the stages of willing and of doing good, and to emphasize once again that all initiative and credit belong to God" (25). Ultimately, the absence of light in Herbert's poem symbolizes human beings' complete inability to place their faith in Christ, thereby reinforcing the individual's inability to use free will to seek salvation.

Strong Calvinist theology also appears in "The Water-Course." Summers proclaims that "*The Temple* shows that Herbert believed . . . strongly in predestination" (58). Referring to God, Herbert writes: "That so in pureness thou mayst him adore, / Who gives to man, as he sees fit {Salvation. Damnation." (9-10). This passage leaves little room for ambiguity on the Calvinist issue of Unconditional Election. Very clearly, Herbert's God chooses a person's eternal destiny based upon his own desire. Furthermore, Herbert is not simply acknowledging that God chooses some for salvation, but the poem suggests that God actively chooses some for damnation--he "gives to man . . . Damnation" (10). This is a significant point because some argue that God does not choose to damn individuals; rather, he only chooses to save. If this is the case, humanity's



damnation is a product of a free will that will never choose God. Nevertheless, one could argue that by knowingly refusing to save some, God is by default choosing their damnation.

Because of Herbert's strong proclivity towards predestination, as one of the elect, he has no reason to fear death, for the elect have been chosen by God to receive eternal salvation. In *The Poetry of Meditation*, Louis Martz establishes that "In all Herbert's poems on death there is no trace of fear or horror at the prospect, but a calm, mild acceptance of the inevitable" (143). In Herbert's "Justice (2)," the speaker proclaims, "But now that Christ's pure veil presents the sight, / I see no fears" (13-14). Before the speaker had a clear view of Christ, fear was at the forefront of his vision; however, once Christ became visible through God's intervention, fear ceased to be a factor.

Herbert's belief in predestination and his confidence in being among the elect places him in direct contrast to Donne; Veith contends,

For Herbert, predestination was a corollary of grace, and the foundation of the believer's assurance. Herbert's sense of security before God, in such contrast to the Arminian Donne, is related directly to Calvin's doctrine of predestination and the perseverance of the saints. (84)

He further asserts that "This 'Calvinist certainty' affirmed by Herbert and explicitly rejected by Donne, is the central theological and emotional difference between the two religious poets" (119). It appears that Calvinist theology has allowed Herbert to avoid the fear and turmoil that so readily appeared in Donne's *Holy Sonnets*.

In his article "Donne and Herbert: Vehement Grief and Silent Tears," Martz attempts to "reinforce some essential differences between Donne and Herbert" (21). He

argues that Herbert does not face and deal with his struggles and doubts the way Donne does. He says that “stress upon Herbert’s hang-ups and anxieties inevitably tends to obscure the differences between Donne and Herbert.” Even though there are moments when Herbert seems to be suffering from angst, his concerns pale next to Donne’s anguish. Martz says that “We lose an important key to the enjoyment of Herbert’s art if we allow an emphasis upon his frequent sighs and tears and groans to obscure our sense of his basic, achieved security” (29)

Still, even though Herbert does appear to be generally confident in his own salvation, there are, nevertheless, moments of uncertainty. In “Grief,” Herbert’s speaker tells of his “griefs and doubts, / Which want provision in the midst of all” (11-12). Even though Herbert’s doubts do not compare in degree to Donne’s, they are still present. Herbert’s worries also appear in his poem “Perseverance”—a significant poem left out of *The Temple* sequence. It may have been left out for the very reason that the reader sees Herbert’s worries and fears in this poem more than perhaps in any other. Herbert writes:

For who can tell, though thou hast died to win  
 And wed my soul in glorious paradise;  
 Whether my many crimes and use of sin  
     May yet forbid the banes and bliss

Only my soul hangs on thy promises  
 With face and hands clinging unto thy breast  
 Clinging and crying, crying without cease,  
     Thou art my rock, thou art my rest. (9-16)

These lines do reiterate Herbert's reliance on God, resulting from Christ's sacrifice. However, that reliance does not involve Herbert resting in the comfort and the security that comes with certainty. The speaker is not conveying an optimistic, unwavering, and confident front. Rather, one can see the speaker's anxiety as he is "hang[ing]," "Clinging and crying." Even though the speaker concludes by proclaiming that God is his "rest," his prior unease contradicts any assurance of rest. Nevertheless, despite these moments of lapses in his confidence, Herbert has constructed a persona that ultimately relies upon and believes in Calvinist predestination and eternal security.

More of Herbert's Calvinist leanings appear in "The Reprisal." In this poem, Herbert's speaker begins by acknowledging that his attempts to accomplish what Jesus Christ has done would fall far short. He recognizes that Christ's sacrifice far exceeds his own; "For though I die for thee, I am behind; / My sins deserve the condemnation" (3-4). The speaker sees that his death would not in any way compare to Christ's death because unlike Christ, he deserves the death that he receives. While these lines do not point to a strict Calvinist theology and instead represent the theology of a larger Christian community, they do prepare the reader for the following stanza. Herbert writes: "And yet thy wounds still my attempts defy, / For by thy death I die for thee" (7-8). His own "attempts" to earn his salvation serve as an embarrassment when viewed next to Christ's redeeming work.

However, Herbert's apparent Calvinist theology does, at times, unravel. Near the end of "Denial," Herbert constructs a Calvinist voice, saying:

Therefore my soul lay out of sight,

Untuned, unstrung:

My feeble spirit, unable to look right,

Like a nipped blossom, hung

Discontented. (21-25)

This passage confirms what continues to be one of the foundational points of Calvinism-- Total Depravity. The speaker is completely separated from God--“out of sight.” And like a musical instrument, his soul is in disharmony; it cannot create a harmonious connection with God. Yet a strict Calvinist theology is lacking when the speaker says that he is “unable to look right.” This passage by itself definitely reinforces the uselessness of turning towards God, thereby reaffirming the need for God’s intervention. However, in the rest of the poem humanity is given agency to seek God, which is denied by a strict Calvinism. Herbert begins: “When by devotions could not pierce / Thy silent ears” (1-2); he then pleads, “crying night and day, / *Come, come my God, O come, / But no hearing*” (13-15). Herbert is Calvinist by constructing a God that does not hear the pleas of depraved man. Nonetheless, a hint of Arminianism appears as Herbert gives depraved humanity agency to seek God through devotions, tears, and pleas. Calvinism does not grant such autonomy, for as I pointed out earlier, Romans 3:11 states that there is “no one who seeks God” (*The Holy Bible*). Instead, humanity can only take initiative when God has initiated the desire from within, and no such initiative was granted in Herbert’s poem.

Herbert also grants his speaker agency in “Redemption.” In this poem, Herbert tells a parable similar to the biblical parables. The speaker is a tenant to a wealthy landowner. And in this parable the speaker actively seeks out the “rich Lord” (1) to acquire the purchase of a “new small-rented lease” (4). The agency is granted through the active, continuous search for the landlord. Herbert’s writing includes the tenant searching

for the landlord three times; the speaker proclaims, "I resolved to be bold /.../...at his manor I him sought" (2-5), and "I straight returned, and.../ Sought him accordingly" (9-10).

The reader soon sees that the landowner represents Christ and that the tenant represents humanity; hence, the story involves humans searching for Christ. Once the tenant finds the owner, the "*suit is granted*" (14). Just as when the individual finds Christ, salvation--made possible by God's grace--is settled, reinforcing God's involvement in a person's salvation apart from his/her actions. However, contrary to Calvinism, again, is the notion that humanity can begin the search for God/Christ. While one might argue that the search Herbert makes possible results from God's calling, this argument does not hold-up, for the parable never hints that the tenant's search for the owner is in any way initiated by the owner; rather, the search is initiated by the tenant/person who "*resolved to be bold*" (emphasis mine, 2). Herbert's construction does not possess the extreme depravity found in Calvinism, which proclaims that if left alone, people will never turn from their sins to seek God.

Even though Herbert does create a voice that possesses some degree of agency, thereby reflecting Arminian theology, he, nevertheless, does remain strongly Calvinistic. One cannot deny that Herbert's theology reflects Reformed theology. Furthermore, the Arminian leanings and agency granted do not step outside the bounds of acceptable religious discourse. However, Herbert does step outside the bounds when, just like Donne, he constructs a multi-layered voice within his work. On the surface, he espouses the theology imposed by strong religious forces of his time. Yet another more subtle voice arises, which embraces a degree of independence separate and contrary to the

acceptable religious discourse of his culture.

For example, in "Grace," Herbert echoes Donne as he adheres to Reformed theology by acknowledging the need for God's grace as he proclaims to God, "O let thy graces without cease / Drop from above!" (3-4). In addition, Herbert maintains the depraved condition of humanity by showing the involvement of both Death and Sin in his life. He writes that "Death is still working like a mole, / And digs my grave at each remove" (13-14). He then shifts to Sin, saying, "Sin is still hammering my heart / Unto a hardness, void of love" (17-18).

Then, also like Donne, Herbert asks questions that seriously problematize God's status as a benign, loving creator. While he does not question the love God bestows upon his elect with the sacrifice of his son, Jesus Christ, he does question the manner God bestows his grace upon humanity. Herbert's speaker compares God's grace that "Drop[s] from above" (4) with the dew that falls in the morning; he questions "The dew doth ev'ry morning fall; / And shall the dew out-strip thy Dove?" (9-10). This passage hints at frustration that God's grace does not dispense as much as it ought, suggesting an apparent laxity on the part of God. If an omnipotent God loves humanity, how could other forces surpass his benevolence?

When taken in context with the rest of the poem, Herbert's questioning that God can be outdone proves to be even more stinging. As already mentioned, Herbert does not shy away from the reality of Death and Sin working for the overthrow of humanity, thereby reinforcing Reformed theology. However, in the process of creating these two forces attempting to destroy Herbert's speaker, Herbert makes them more powerful than the not so abundant dispersion of God's grace. Herbert creates a Death and Sin that labor

over the speaker's soul. The speaker says that they are "*dig[ging] my grave*" and "*hammering my heart*" (emphasis mine, 14, 17). He pleads for God to "Let grace work too, and on my soul / Drop from above" (15-16). Unfortunately, dropping from heaven does not compare to the work, force, and urgency exerted by Death and Sin. Still more, he has to appeal for that grace: "O come! For thou dost know the way" (21); the pathway is easy. For Herbert, if God is a loving God eager to bestow his grace upon humanity, no hindrance should exist. The speaker questioning the nature of God's outpouring of grace serves as a conduit for Herbert to step outside the bounds of acceptable discourse.

For the most part, George Herbert serves as an exemplary example of a devoted Protestant Christian during the early seventeenth century in Reformed England. Lewalski writes:

George Herbert's *The Temple* . . . has as its primary subject the whole, lifelong process of sanctification, presented under the metaphor of building the temple in the Heart. The speaker is devoted to the visible church--its ritual, architecture, sacraments--but his theology is Calvinist: he affirms the double predestination (in "The Water-course") and he struggles hard throughout the volume to relinquish any claim to any good thing as emanating from himself: all is from God. (25)

Yet even though Herbert serves as an important religious voice reflecting popular theology, there remain moments when he overcomes the strong religious and cultural forces of his society. Instead of being completely controlled by cultural forces, he maintains an individual agency that allows him not only to influence his society's understanding of human freedom and agency, but to question and subtly put forth doubts about the nature of God's connection to and relationship with humanity.

This agency, however, does not come easy. One of the thematic repetitions in *The Temple* includes the use of groans. Again, Martz argues that the reader should not “allow an emphasis upon his frequent sighs and tears and groans to obscure our sense of his basic, achieved security” (“Donne” 29). Although Martz argues a strong point, the groans cannot be ignored. In “The Sinner,” Herbert writes: “Yet Lord restore thine image, hear my call: / And though my hard heart scarce to thee can groan, / Remember that thou once didst write in stone” (12-14). Groaning is necessary for Herbert and other Calvinists due to the difficulty an individual has in communicating with God. In her article “Silent, Performative Words: The Language of God in Valdesso and George Herbert,” Elizabeth Clarke asserts that “most theologians were all too aware of the fallen-ness of human language” (355). Besides groaning, the corruption of language coupled with a depraved nature leaves Herbert with few options.

For the Calvinist, groaning represents the lack of voice and freedom an individual has in both establishing and maintaining a relationship with God. If anything, groaning suggests an inner frustration of being unable to in any significant way participate and have a role in one’s own salvation. Moreover, this groaning to acquire reflects the desire to gain agency amidst the powerful forces of Herbert’s society. In *Heart-Work: George Herbert and the Protestant Ethic*, Christina Malcolmson writes that “Despite Fish’s claims, Herbert’s poetry does not assert and then relinquish autonomous, independent authorship. Herbert’s culture made such autonomy a near impossibility” (213). Nevertheless, Herbert is able to take Reformed theology, push the limits of human agency, and construct a voice independent of acceptable religious discourse, all while participating in the construction of a theological reality.



## Conclusion

Through their construction of religious voices, Donne and Herbert grant “literature real power. Rather than passively reflecting an external reality, literature is an agent in constructing a culture’s sense of reality” (Howard 25). Neither reflects a purely Reformed doctrine because each sees it through the lenses of his own inquiries and concerns. In their world, faith required unquestioning devotion; however, what they perceived to be God’s seeming allusiveness did not always allow for unwavering faith. As the Georges argue, in an inherent problem with Christianity, they write:

To be sure, the pronouncements contained in any Christian doctrine tend, by virtue of their religious character, to be insistent and emphatic; and yet, as soon as one begins to analyze many if not most of these pronouncements, one finds that they exist not as granitic structures of demonstration and logical consistency, but as mere points of argumentative attachment in a sea of tensions and contradictions. For every thesis there is an equally valid antithesis, and however thoroughly Christianity as faith may appear to the believer to have accomplished the needed synthesis, Christianity as logic or philosophy appears, to the neutral observer, still to hover uncertainly between two antagonistic poles. (23-24)

In Donne and Herbert’s world, not only are the opposing forces of Calvinism and Arminianism pitted against each other, but the very foundations of Calvinism begin to unravel. Donne, while grappling with the fear of damnation and uncertainty of his election, cannot bring into harmony the concept of a loving God who would allow the damnation of his creation. Meanwhile, Herbert struggles with what he sees as God’s lack

of urgency to reach out to humanity.

Because of their inability to completely reconcile themselves to the accepted and powerful religious doctrine of early seventeenth-century England, Donne and Herbert shaped their own religious identities. Just as Arminianism was slowly gaining prominence over Calvinism, thereby affording individuals greater freedom to shape their destinies, Donne and Herbert were gaining authority over theological dictates, allowing them to subtly construct voices independent from popular religious discourse. They possessed the agency to shape their own religious realities.

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