

‘Religious Love’ in John Donne’s Holy Sonnets and Other poems

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to show the spiritual beliefs of John Donne as reflected in his Holy Sonnets and other poems. Combining his love for love and his love for ideas, Donne became love’s philosopher/poet or poet/philosopher. In the context of his poetry, both profane and sacred, Donne presents his experience and experiments, his machinations and imaginations, about love. Donne’s works are better understood through the optic of Biblical knowledge, the backdrop of God’s revelation of Himself. A poet whose heart is kindled by the Spirit of his Maker and whose mind is illumined by His Word recognizes a much deeper sense of transcendent reality. As Donne uses the most potent but intimate of words to express his interaction with God, his sonnets ground the sacred. In their fluctuating moods, the sonnets reverberate as radically varied experiences of God. Grand theological truths are translated into personal and passionate encounter with God.

KEYWORDS: spiritual beliefs, love, God, Biblical knowledge, theological truths.

John Donne’s religious poetry is collectively known as the Divine Poems; among these, the largest group is the nineteen Holy Sonnets. The dramatic character of the Holy Sonnets suggests that Donne probably read them aloud to his friends, enhancing their argumentative tone, years before he began circulating them in manuscript form. Although not necessarily biographical in nature, the sonnets do reflect Donne’s meditation on his religious convictions and

address the themes of divine judgment, divine love, and humble penance. However, just as the persona of Donne's love poems speaks with passion, wit, and tenderness in seducing or praising his beloved, so the speaker in these sonnets turns to God in a very personal way, with a love passionate, forceful, and assertive yet fearful, too. Although the sonnets are predominantly Petrarchan, consisting of two quatrains and a sestet, this form is often modified by an inclusion of a Shakespearean couplet or other variation in structure or rhyme. Donne probably wrote all but two of the Holy Sonnets between 1609 and 1611.

Born into a prosperous Roman Catholic family in 1572, John Donne was educated by Jesuits before he entered Oxford and then later studied at Cambridge, and scholars find that the meditative form of the sonnets reflect his Jesuit schooling. But in his later life he was converted into Anglicanism. The typical Petrarchan theme of sex-love is found changed into masculine friendship in Shakespearean sonnets. But with Donne, the English sonnet is found to have attained a new dimension in the inclusion of the devotional theme by the side of the secular, amorous one. As the author of Holy Sonnets, Donne, along with Drummond, remains a pioneer. In fact, Christian faith and devotional fervor have found access to the English sonnet with him. Donne's Holy Sonnets like his love lyrics are not merely profound but also intimately personal. The intellectual vigor of his poetry is strongly felt in his devotional poems.

Holy sonnets are called 'holy' because God is main in Holy sonnets. Holy sonnets and love sonnets are same because the poet has used same passion, anxiety, feeling, longing, both for his beloved 'lady love' and 'God'. But the only difference is that in Holy sonnet the object of praise is God and in Love sonnets the object of praise is his beloved 'wife'. The poet has used same language for both this type of poems. We can observe same wit in Holy sonnets and Love lyrics. But there is a paradox in love sonnet Donne will go and make sexual relationship with his beloved but in Holy sonnet he writes he will be pure if God ravishes him. He says love being for a woman is equal to love for God and it is also equal to saint hood. Because the people who become saint they love God unconditionally.

The sonnet 'Thou hast made me' belongs to Donne's Holy Sonnets. This poem well bears out his depth of devotion, and it is expressed in a quite argumentative way. The main contention in the poem is the poet's complete resignation to God and his absolute faith in him to steer him through the terror of death and the temptation of evil. As he is faced with death, the poet, of course, at the outset, feels sad and despondent, but he overcomes this feeling in no time and places his full reliance upon God for his protection and salvation. His stark and optimistic vision of life eternal in God's gracious bosom constitutes the spiritual inspiration of the poem.

The sonnet is, in fact, inspired with Donne's spiritual idealism in which death is defied and the glory of god, celebrated. Death, no doubt, strikes terror at its approach, but a spiritual inspiration defies its threat and aspires only after god's grace and bounty. The gloomy thoughts of despair and death are conquered by the poet's faith that in sprits and sustains him. An inspired devotional idealism runs all through the poem and elevates its theme to a highly spiritual optimism.

The poem, indeed, has a lofty idealistic theme that brings out Donne's spiritual outlook and Christen devotion his readiness to face death and his unfailing belief in the blessing of after-life are clearly revealed in the poem. The poem is truly enriched with the ardent faith of a devout Christian, as Donne himself was. The poet's faith in God is absolute, while he remains aware of the temptation of life. His doubt, however, is conquered by his faith, and he feels sure of his salvation. God's grace must forestall the Devil, and He will like adamant draw his iron heart.

"Death Be Not Proud" presents an argument against the power of death. Addressing Death as a person, the speaker warns Death against pride in his power. Such power is merely an illusion, and the end Death thinks it brings to men and women is in fact a rest from world-weariness for its alleged "victims." The poet criticizes Death as a slave to other forces: fate, chance, kings, and desperate men. Death is not in control, for a variety of other powers exercise their volition in taking lives. Even in the rest it brings, Death is inferior to drugs. Finally, the speaker predicts the end of Death itself, stating "Death, thou shalt die."

The first quatrain of Donne's "Holy Sonnet 10" focuses on the subject and audience of this poem: death. By addressing Death, Donne makes it/him into a character through personification. The poet warns death to avoid pride (line 1) and reconsider its/his position as a "Mighty and dreadful" force (line 2). He concludes the introductory argument of the first quatrain by declaring to death that those it claims to kill "Die not" (line 4), and neither can the poet himself be stricken in this way.

The second quatrain, which is closely linked to the first through the abba rhyme scheme, turns the criticism of Death as less than fearful into praise for Death's good qualities. From Death comes "Much pleasure" (line 5) since those good souls whom Death releases from earthly suffering experience "Rest of their bones" (line 6). Donne then returns to criticizing Death for thinking too highly of itself: Death is no sovereign, but a "slave to Fate, chance, kings, and desperate men" (line 9); this last demonstrates that there is no hierarchy in which Death is near the top.

The final couplet caps the argument against Death. Not only is Death the servant of other powers and essentially impotent to truly kill anyone, but also Death is itself destined to die when, as in the Christian tradition, the dead are resurrected to their eternal reward. Here Donne echoes the sentiment of the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 15:26, where Paul writes that "the final enemy to be destroyed is death." Donne taps into his Christian background to point out that Death has no power and one day will cease to exist.

In "Holy Sonnet 14" the poet begins by asking God to increase the strength of divine force to win over the poet's soul. He requests, "Batter my heart" (line 1), metaphorically indicating that he wants God to use force to assault his heart, like battering down a door. Thus far, God has only knocked, following the scriptural idea that God knocks and each person must let him in, yet this has not worked sufficiently for the poet. Simply to "mend" or "shine" him up is not drastic enough; instead God should take him by "force, to break, blow, burn" in order to help him "stand" and be made "new" (lines 3-4). This request indicates that the speaker considers his soul or heart too badly damaged or too sinful to be reparable; instead, God must re-create him to make him what he needs to be. The paradox is that he must be overthrown like a town in order to rise stronger.

The poet then moves from the political to the personal in the last six lines. He loves God, but he is “betroth’d unto [God’s] enemy” (line 9), the Satanic desires of the selfish heart (if not the devil himself). He seeks God’s help to achieve the “divorce” from his sinful nature and break the marriage “knot” (lines 10-11). In the final couplet, he gives voice to the paradox of faith: the speaker can only be free if he is enthralled by God (line 13), and he can only be chaste and pure if God ravishes him (line 14). The poet uses this dissonance of ideas to point out just how holy—in this case, otherworldly and spiritual in a carnal world—God truly is. In other words, a relationship with God requires being reborn and rebuilt from the ground up, in but not of the world.

According to the medieval mystical conception, 'ecstasy' means a trance-like state in which the soul leaves the body, comes out, and holds communion with the Divine, the Supreme or the Over-soul of the Universe. The poem is an expression of Donne's philosophy of love. Donne agrees with Plato that true love is spiritual. It is a union of the souls. But unlike Plato, Donne doesn't ignore the claims of the body. It is the body that brings the lovers together. Love begins in sensuous apprehension, and spiritual love follows the sensuous. So the claim of the body must not be ignored. Body is the medium to experience love. So spirits must act through bodies. If love is to be free, it requires physical as well as spiritual outlets. When love joins two souls, they mingle with each other and give birth to a new and finer soul, which removes the defects and supplies whatever is lacking in either single soul. The new re-animated soul made up of their two separate souls gives them the ecstasy. But they cannot forget the body, which is the vehicle, and container, cover and house of the soul. He makes an appeal to his readers to nourish their souls through their bodies and reach towards the point of extreme joy, or 'ecstasy'.

Canonization is the catholic practice of conferring sainthood on certain extraordinary persons for their service to God and mankind, the most recent example is that of Mother Teresa. Here poetry, and not the Catholic Church, will canonize Donne and his partner for their unique love.

In the poem ‘Canonization’ the supreme status allocated to lovers rightly inspires the votaries of love but it obscures from view the fact that it is a hierarchic self-deification that shuts out all other discourses of love. Donne’s love is the only exemplary model that the rest will “invoke”, his love epitomizes “peace”, the rest is “rage”; he is God (saint), others are more votaries. An interesting aspect of this canonization is the agency of poetry. If they cannot enter the “chronicle” of history, the lovers will nevertheless be immortalized in “verse”. By making Donne and his mistress of “sonnets little rooms” the poem itself will be elevated to the status of a “hymn”.

In ‘Holy sonnet’ Donne apparently may seem to us as an anti petrarchan poet. He always possesses a realistic attitude to ‘physical love or sex’, but at the same time he never ‘deny’, ‘derogate’ or ‘refuse’ love for God and this is the foundation of his religious belief and spiritual love.

No doubt the time in which Donne lived and worked was at an intellectual crossroads. The tectonic plates undergirding Western civilization were shifting, and Donne, who possessed

“the mind of a man of his own time” (Eliot 8), recognized the magnitude of the transformation taking place from medievalism to modernity.

Donne’s love thus sublimates both himself and his art that places them far beyond the reach of mere humans. In all his love poems love for woman has been elevated to God which is a peculiar feature of Donne’s poetic art and this extraordinary quality cannot be seen in any other poet of his time.

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