

THE UNITY OF DONNE'S  
THEOLOGY

---

RALPH LUCAS BREWER

THE UNITY OF DONNE'S THEOLOGY

---

An Abstract

Presented to

the Graduate Council of

Austin Peay State University

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

---

by

Ralph Lucas Brewer

August 1969



## ABSTRACT

John Donne once stated that his life was divided into two parts: that of Jack Donne, the poet, and Dr. John Donne, the preacher. Because they have had great esteem for Dr. Donne, many critics, including Izaak Walton, Edmund Gosse, and Helen Gardner, have believed Donne and have adhered to the theory of the dichotomy of Donne's life. Critics such as Clay Hunt, William Mueller, Herbert Grierson, T.S. Eliot, and Edward LeComte, constituting the opposing critical bias, have not believed Donne's statement.

The problem with which this thesis is concerned is to ascertain the validity or falsehood of Donne's statement by looking at Donne's conception of God in his Divine Poems and sermons. Through examination of these works the author has come to the conclusion that there are five attributes of God in Donne's theology. God is direct, merciful, loving, powerful, and vengeful. These attributes are consistent through the previously mentioned works. In accordance with these findings, the author has come to believe that there was no dichotomy in Donne's life.

THE UNITY OF DONNE'S THEOLOGY

---

A Thesis

Presented to  
the Graduate Council of  
Austin Peay State University

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

---

by

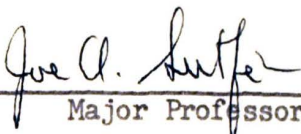
Ralph Lucas Brewer

August 1969



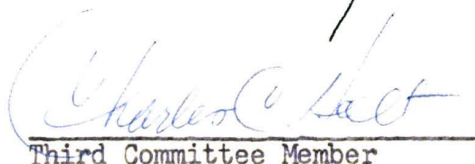
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Ralph Lucas Brewer entitled "The Unity of Donne's Theology." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

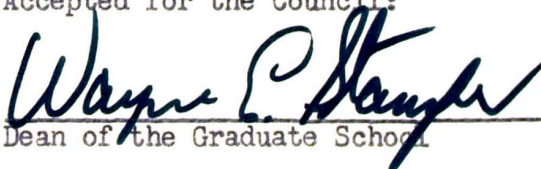
  
Major Professor

We have read this thesis and  
recommend its acceptance:

  
Second Committee Member

  
Third Committee Member

Accepted for the Council:

  
Dean of the Graduate School

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my thanks to Professors Charles Holt and D. Richard Covington, who served on my committee. To Professor Joe Sutfin for his encouragement and advice during the preparation of this thesis and for his generous and friendly treatment throughout my period of attendance at Austin Peay, I feel the deepest gratitude.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. . . . .	1
II. . . . .	6
III. . . . .	22
IV. . . . .	36
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	38



## CHAPTER I

John Donne once divided his own life and thought into two distinct parts: that of Jack Donne, the poet, and Dr. John Donne, the preacher. In conjunction with this statement, two critical points of view have arisen. Critics in the first group include those who have believed Donne and have tried to convince their readers of this dichotomy. Critics constituting the second group have called Donne's statement merely an observation which he might have wished true. Although Donne changed his form of writing from poetry to prose, to this group of critics there is no dichotomy in his thought. Settlement of the disagreement is impossible, but by the examination of his works, one can come to his own conclusions about which critical bias he will accept.

The use of Donne's ministry to rationalize his early life is characteristic of criticism by adherents to the theory of dichotomy in Donne's life. Izaak Walton, in his biography of Donne, notes a complete reversal of attitude after the minister's conversion. In an attempt to prove this change, he compares Donne to Jacob: each wrestled with, and lost to, God. There is also a comparison both to St. Augustine and St. Ambrose:

Now the English Church had gained a second St. Austine, for, I think, none was so like him before his conversion: none so like St. Ambrose after it: and if his youth had the infirmities of the one, his age had the excellencies of the other. . . .<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Izaak Walton, Walton's Lives, ed., S.B. Carter (London, 1951), pp. 29-30.

This exaggerated passage is indicative of Walton's over-zealous biography. The proof of his theory consists of nothing more than his own observations of the preacher, for he had not met Donne before this time.

The delineation of Donne's life by Edmund Gosse, the critic and literary historian, is somewhat more notable. Throughout The Life and Letters of John Donne, Gosse makes reference to Donne's conversion and the reverent life of the minister. He presents no literary evidence, though, to confirm his belief in Donne's dichotomy.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, Gosse, with Richard Garnett, makes one other division in Donne's life. In English Literature, the authors state, "After the death of Mrs. Donne, the poet 'became crucified to the world,' and adopted an ascetic mode of life which he preserved to the end." Unlike Walton, Gosse had no ulterior motive for making these divisions in Donne's life, for he did not believe him to be either a great poet or preacher.<sup>3</sup>

Helen Gardner, the editor of the definitive editions of Donne's poetry, contends that there was a dichotomy in Donne's life. After dating some of his "Holy Sonnets" as early as 1608, long before his becoming a minister, Miss Gardner surprisingly defends Donne's analysis of his life. Her division is not emphatic, though, for she sees only a gradual change in Donne's attitude:

---

<sup>2</sup>Edmund Gosse, The Life and Letters of John Donne, 2 vols. (London, 1899).

<sup>3</sup>Richard Garnett and Edmund Gosse, English Literature (New York, 1904), vol. II, p. 294.

The transformation of the Jack Donne who wrote the Satires and Elegies into Dr. John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's, was not the result of a sudden revelation of truths unknown before, or of any sudden moral crisis in Donne's works. The change was a gradual one, brought about by the circumstances of his life and the maturing of his mind and temperament.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, Donne wrote prose sermons after his conversion, but the thought behind his writings remained constant. Furthermore, he did not even change his style, for the wit and ingenuity so prominent in his Divine Poems can be recognized easily in the sermons. Yet, the previously mentioned critics either have not been cognizant of these similarities or have ignored them.

Although the argument is still alive, most contemporary critics are opposed to the theory of dichotomy in Donne's life. In Donne's Poetry, Clay Hunt notes the great power of Donne as a preacher, but he calls Donne's analysis of his life a dramatization of his new role in life or a "theatricality of Donne's imagination."<sup>5</sup> Hunt goes on to relate the similarities in Donne's works: "It is not surprising that in trying to elucidate the difficulties of Jack Donne's poems I have found some of the most helpful commentary in Doctor Donne's sermons."<sup>6</sup>

William Mueller, another critic who acknowledges the similarities in Donne's writings, declares that the themes of the "Holy Sonnets," the vastness of sin and the incomparable mercy of God, are those which appear "again and again throughout the sermons written later and over a

---

<sup>4</sup>Helen Gardner, The Divine Poems of John Donne (London, 1933), p. xx.

<sup>5</sup>Clay Hunt, Donne's Poetry (New Haven, Conn., 1962), p. 131.

<sup>6</sup>Hunt, p. 131.



period of sixteen years."<sup>7</sup> Not only does he firmly disagree with the assumption of the dichotomy of Donne's life made by Walton and Gosse and argue that Donne was always intensely concerned with the subject of sin, but merely became more aware of personal sin during his ministry,<sup>8</sup> he also believes that Donne's theological position concerning the nature of God and His relationship to man remained virtually unchanged from the time of his first sermon to his last. In addition, Mueller describes Donne as genuinely devoted to theological studies during his early years and a man whose attitudes were unlikely to undergo many significant changes after his conversion.<sup>9</sup>

Herbert Grierson's attitude toward Donne, stated in the introduction to his edition of Donne's poems, is comparable to Mueller's. He argues that one cannot divide Donne's life into two parts. It is impossible, he contends, to offset Donne's early transgressions by glorifying the years of his ministry as those of the great penitent. Grierson also stresses Donne's devotion to religion before he became a divine:

The whole spirit of his work risks being misapprehended if one think of him as fundamentally insincere, or fail to recognize that neither the extravagances of his youth, the ambitious compliances of his later years, nor the sceptical sense he reveals of the contradictions in theology and science . . . ever affected the impression of his religious upbringing or corrupted the fundamental honesty and loyalty of his nature.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>William Mueller, John Donne: Preacher (Princeton, N.J., 1962), p. 18.

<sup>8</sup>Mueller, p. 168.

<sup>9</sup>Mueller, p. 148.

<sup>10</sup>Herbert Grierson, The Poems of John Donne (London, 1933), pp. xxxviii-xxxix.

T.S. Eliot is emphatic in his belief that there were not two Donnes. In his essay commemorating the three hundredth anniversary of Donne's death, he states, ". . . nobody now, I suppose, divides Donne's life into two periods, one dissolute and irreligious, the other a revulsion to intense and austere piety, a division so complete as to suggest an alteration of personality."<sup>11</sup> Eliot also takes care to note that the expression of faith in Donne's sermons is entirely consistent with that employed in his poetry.<sup>12</sup>

In Grace to a Witty Sinner, Edward LeComte notes that in one of Donne's early sermons he compares himself to Solomon, who turned to God but did not turn utterly away from his old life. Instead of taking the traditional posture of an amatory poet, Donne concentrated all his loving approaches toward God and His workings in the church:

One can say of the Holy Sonnets that Donne had been composing since 1609 that literally, at least, there was less change than would be expected. The clever sinner did not cease to be clever. He merely applied his individual style to a new object of affection, God.<sup>13</sup>

Each of the two critical positions concerning the dichotomy in Donne's life has its merits, but literary evidence shows no such division. One of the principal subjects with which Donne was concerned, both in his poetry and sermons, was God and His attributes. By looking at his conception of God in the Divine Poems and sermons, it is possible to test the validity of Donne's statement regarding the division of his life and writings.

---

<sup>11</sup>T.S. Eliot, "Donne in Our Time," A Garland for John Donne, ed., Theodore Spencer (Cambridge, Mass., 1931), p. 9.

<sup>12</sup>Eliot, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup>Edward LeComte, Grace to a Witty Sinner (New York, 1965), p. 151.

## CHAPTER II

Helen Gardner says that John Donne's Divine Poems are a product of conflict between his will and his temperament. They constitute poetry in which thought and feeling are judged by the standard of what a Christian should feel and think.<sup>1</sup> Clay Hunt cites the Divine Poems as having a lack of emotion, and describes them as "coldly intellectualized" and "dully ingenious." Therefore, Donne's Divine Poems lack the power and ecstasy of his love poetry.<sup>2</sup> But these poems do portray Donne's love and fear of God and also his conception of God's nature.

The complexity of Donne's image of God is found in the attributes given Him by the poet: God is direct; He is both Creator and Governor. While He is merciful and loving, he is also both omnipotent and omniscient; though He will not force man to love Him, He is vengeful, angry, and capable of afflicting His people.

God's relationship to man was of primary importance to John Donne. He felt that God had created man and was with him at all times. In "A Litany" Donne speaks to God, "O Thou who Satan heard'st in Jobs sicke day,/ Heare thy self now, for thou in us dost pray."<sup>3</sup> God's relationship to man is that He is within man. His directness cannot be depicted more clearly than in this quotation.

---

<sup>1</sup>Gardner, p. xxxvi.

<sup>2</sup>Hunt, p. 134.

<sup>3</sup>The Divine Poems of John Donne, ed., Helen Gardner. All poems quoted in this paper are from Miss Gardner's edition of Donne's Divine Poems; however, I have used Herbert Grierson's Roman numeral system of identification for the "Holy Sonnets" because it is so well-known. These numerals can be found at the end of each sonnet in Miss Gardner's edition.



Donne believed in God as the Creator of the universe. Although he had knowledge of the Copernican theory of the structure of the universe, Donne's faith remained constant. He was not shaken by the fact of God's not making man the center of all things. In "Holy Sonnet II," Donne says, ". . . O God, first I was made/ By thee. . . ." In the rest of this sonnet Donne relates further his ideas of God's relationship to man and to himself. In line nine, Donne asks God, "Why doth the devil then usurpe mee?" Donne was being ambiguous in the line concerning his creation. He believed that God both created his being and his character, and in essence, is asking how God, who governs life and is a part of man, can allow the devil to possess him.

In "Holy Sonnet I," Donne asks the same question, "Thou hast made me, And shall thy worke decay?" He deems himself such a sinner that he is terrified that "his flesh . . . t'wards hell doth weigh." Donne believed each man's life is guided and governed by the goodness of God, and he asked God to "repaire" him so that he would not have to undergo any of the horrors of being without Him.

In the first stanza of "A Litany" to "The Father," Donne again portrays God as the Creator and Governor of the world:

Father of Heaven, and him, by Whom  
 It, and us for it, and all else, for us  
 Thou Madest, and govern'st ever, come  
 And re-create mee, now growne ruinous:  
 My heart is by defection, clay,  
 And by selfe-murder, red.  
 From this red earth, O Father, purge away  
 All vicious tinctures, that new fashioned  
 I may rise up from death, before I'am dead.

Not only did God create, but He is asked to remake. This request shows Donne's belief both in the close relationship between God and man and in

God's capability of regenerating man's soul. Donne also asks God to take all temptations from him so that he can be assured of his salvation before his death. In stanza nine of the same poem, he describes God's selected path for man, "May they /the apostles/ pray still, and be heard, that I goe/ Th'old broad way. . . ."

John Donne felt the creation to be the revelation of the glory of God. Throughout his religious poems, he never lost sight of the fact that man was created by God and for Him. Further, he believed God capable of keeping him from sin if only He would. At times, therefore, he almost tries to seduce or trick God into accepting him. In "Holy Sonnet XIV," Donne tells God, "Batter my heart, three person'd God," and also implores God to "enthrall" and "ravish" him. These requests indicate Donne's feeling that God continually watched over and had the ability to guide man as only a direct God could. He saw no great gulf between God and man because he believed in the Christian faith which declares this gulf abridged.

Harmony between man and God had been reestablished because of the merciful God's caring for man. In Donne's "A Hymne to God the Father," there is an expression of a pervading fear of what the poet's sins may bring. But in the last stanza Donne implies a central element of his faith in God--no matter how great his sins are, the mercy of God is far greater. He expresses fears that because of his many sins he may "perish on the shore," but in the last four lines of the stanza his fears are alleviated because he realizes that the merciful God had sent his "Sunne" to earth to bear man's sins.

In his poem, "To Mr. Herbert with my Seal, of the Anchor and Christ," Donne implies this same mercy, "But he that makes our Crosses Anchors thus,/ Is Christ, who there is crucified for us." Elsewhere, in this same poem, Donne considers the crucifixion thus:

The serpent, may, as wise, my pattern be;  
My poison, as he feeds on dust, that's me.  
And as he rounds the earth to murder sure,  
My death he is, but on the Crosse, my cure.

Because of original sin, the devil, animated in the serpent, is both a temptation to sin and the cause of death; yet because of Christ's death on the cross, man will be allowed to overcome both of these afflictions. Since God in his mercy sent Christ to earth as the Savior and Redeemer of man, he can be resurrected in heaven, defying both his sins and his death.

Donne's "Holy Sonnets" present a soul in meditation looking for salvation, a soul moving between two positions--a faith in the mercy of God in Christ and a personal unworthiness. He exemplifies this vacillation in "Holy Sonnet IX":

And my teares, make a heavenly Lethan flood,  
And drowne in it my sinnes blacke memorie.  
That thou remember them, some claim as debt,  
I think it mercy, if thou wilt forget.

In spite of an ever-present expression of unworthiness for salvation because of his sins, Donne does have faith in God's mercy. In the last line of the previous passage, he does not seem to be imploring God to forget his sins so much as simply carrying on a conversation with Him about them. In the discourse he implies both his faith in His mercy and his gratitude for it.

Apparently Donne also seems sure of his salvation in "Holy Sonnet X," in which he denies that death is "Mighty and dreadful." In



lines thirteen and fourteen of the sonnet, Donne chides, "One short sleepe past, we wake eternally,/ And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die." Whenever Donne refers to the conquering of death, or being saved, he is implicitly referring to the mercy of God, for it is only through this mercy that man is capable of being redeemed and, therefore, living eternally in God's kingdom.

The vicarious sacrifice which God made in allowing Christ to be crucified is the central subject of Donne's "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward." He contemplates the fearful death of seeing Christ die for man on the cross. Donne also notes that Christ's "miserable mother" bore half the sacrifice. In the last part of line thirty-two, Donne exposes his faith in God's mercy through the sacrifice, for it was that sacrifice "which ransom'd us." It is at this point in the poem that he realizes he can never ride far enough for the memory of the mercy of God to be extinguished in his mind:

Though these things, as I ride, be from mine eye,  
They're present yet unto my memory,  
For that looks towards them; and thou lookest towards mee,  
O Savior, as thou hang'st upon the tree;  
I turne my back to thee, but to receive  
Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.

The reciprocation of thoughts between Donne's mind and Christ is indicative of the relationship between God and man which was part of Donne's theology. Christ is depicted as being watchful over Donne and correcting his sins because God is a merciful God.

Christ was symbolic of God's love in Donne's poetry. The incarnate God, Christ, was the greatest expression of the love which God is capable of giving. In his book written in 1967, N.J.C. Andreasen reveals Donne's conception of that love:

Behind his paradoxically profane imagery is a sense of the whole system of Christian love, a system which assumes divine to be infinitely superior to human love: thus many of the poems of divine love express an awareness that God can love more than human beings ever can. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Donne portrays the love of God in this light in "Holy Sonnet XI." In the concluding couplet, he says, "God cloth'd himselfe in vile mans flesh, that so/ He might be weake enough to suffer woe." These lines are demonstrative of the great awe in which Donne held the incarnate God. To the poet, this selfless love and infinite mercy which God displayed could only be imitated imperfectly by human beings. That God, through Christ, bore man's punishment and would continue to forgive and bear this punishment as long as man continues to sin was nearly too much for Donne to believe. That God could take on human form was important to Donne, but that He would was awesome. He considers this in "Holy Sonnet XV":

The Sonne of Glory came downe, and was slaine,  
Us whom he'had made, and Satan stolne, to unbinde.  
'Twas much, that man was made like God before,  
But, that God should be made like man, much more.

The fifth and eleventh lines of "A Hymne to God the Father," "When thou hast done, thou hast not done," express far more than the simple pun usually associated with them. There is a dichotomy in this line which involves solitude and danger of damnation on one side and yearning for the generosity of Christ's love on the other. Ruth Wallerstein notes that this dichotomous conception of the individual has been defined by generations of experience and logical thought long

---

<sup>4</sup>N.J.C. Andreasen, John Donne: Conservative Revolutionary (Princeton, N.J., 1967), p. 238.

before Donne wrote the line<sup>5</sup> but his skill enabled him to express the idea poignantly and precisely in his metaphysical style. Donne felt his sins to be of such great magnitude that only by the greatest generosity of God could they be atoned. The last stanza of this poem contains the poet's statement of the ultimate love of God:

I have a sinne of feare, that when I have spunne  
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;  
Sweare by thy selfe, that at my death thy Sunne  
Shall shine as it shines now, and heretofore;  
And, having done that, Thou hast done,  
I have no more.

In this last passage of the poem, the love of God in the incarnate Christ brings to Donne his final peace and assurance.

In "Holy Sonnet XIV," Donne expresses his love for God in the same manner as that of a woman for her lover:

Divorce mee, untie, or breake that knot againe,  
Take me to you, imprison mee, for I  
Except you'enthral mee, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.<sup>6</sup>

The paradoxes in the last two lines point up the fact of Donne's seeing human love as two distinct entities. The states of freedom and chastity are not achieved by being enthralled and ravished in physical love, but they are attained by those means in divine love. Andreasen notes Donne's belief in human love's always bringing danger of bondage to sin, but God's love brought liberation from it.<sup>7</sup> Joan Bennett, in her latest

---

<sup>5</sup>Ruth Wallerstein, Studies in Seventeenth-Century Poetic (Madison, Wis., 1961), p. 171.

<sup>6</sup>There is a running literary debate among J.C. Levenson, George Herman, and George Knox on the interpretation of this poem in the Explicator in March, 1953; December, 1953; April, 1954; and October, 1956.

<sup>7</sup>Andreasen, p. 237.



book on the metaphysical poets, relates that in this poem, Donne both trusts and mistrusts God's pity on him as a sinner just as the lover wavers between the secure sense of God's love and the fear that this love might be withdrawn.<sup>8</sup>

God is actually presented as a lover in two of Donne's sonnets, both of which, according to Helen Gardner, were written after the death of his wife.<sup>9</sup> In "Holy Sonnet XVII," God takes the place of Donne's wife and, in Helen White's phrase, "tenderly wooes" Donne.<sup>10</sup> Although he feels a "holy thirsty dropsy" for more human love because he had been satisfied so fully with his wife, Donne asks, "But why should I begg for more love,/ When thou dost woo my soule, . . . ." God offers His love in place of that of Donne's wife, a love eternal and far more satisfying. But the God of the Old Testament is a jealous God, and in this poem, He becomes a jealous lover:

And dost not only feare least I allow  
My love to saints and Angels, things divine,  
But in thy tender jealousy dost doubt  
Least the World, Fleshe, yea Devill putt thee out.

Donne is in danger of allowing too much love to both divine and physical things, and he sees that God's jealousy is warranted. Yet, because God's love is infinitely better than physical love, Donne feels a great need for the love of the Divine. In this same manner, Donne moves up the Platonic ladder from woman's love to the love of God.

---

<sup>8</sup>Joan Bennett, Five Metaphysical Poets (London, 1966), p. 26.

<sup>9</sup>Gardner, p. xxxvii.

<sup>10</sup>Helen White, The Metaphysical Poets (New York, 1966), p. 131.



In the less forceful "Holy Sonnet XVII," Donne prays to Christ:

Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sights,  
And let myne amorous soule court thy milde Dove,  
Who is most true, and pleasing to thee, then  
When who'is embrac'd and open to most men.

Donne is not satirizing the church in the last line; he is trying to express the miracles of God's love. The love shown in this line is quite different from that of man. In what seems to be a contrast to the previous poem, there is no jealousy portrayed. Here the church is embracing human beings rather than men embracing objects other than God as in "Holy Sonnet XVII."

Donne believed that God is merciful and loving, but he also believed that He is the Supreme Being. He had no trouble assessing the power and mercy of God in comparison to that of earthly monarchs. As he observes in "Holy Sonnet XI," the pardon of a king is only a triviality when compared to what God has done for man: "Kings pardon, but He bore our punishment." God has the power to make man follow Him and accept redemption, yet nowhere in Donne's Divine Poems is there a reference to God's forcing Himself on any man, even though the poet invites such force in several of his holy poems. Donne's conception of God's power was that He could control all life, but He would not make man give up his soul unto Him.

In the last two lines of "Temple" in "La Corona," Donne projects the power of God, "He in his ages morning thus began/ By miracles exceeding power of man." In His relationship to man, God does not, except in the person of Christ, lower Himself to the human level. Yet even though God has adopted human form, He is still more powerful than his human counterparts. As stated in "Holy Sonnet XI," God took this

form in order to be weak enough to suffer for man's sins, but the power of salvation is eternally with Him.

God's power is also expressed in "Holy Sonnet IV." Because of his sin, Donne's soul is "red with blushing." But Christ has the power to forgive sin and purify the soul, "Or wash thee in Christs blood, which hath this might/ That being red, it dyes red soules to white." As has been stated before, Donne stood in awe of the incarnate Christ, and he believed that the powers which God gave to Christ were of monumental proportion. This same redeeming power is shown in "Holy Sonnet V," "And burne me O Lord, with a fiery zeale/ Of thee and thy house, which doth in eating heale." The irony in the last two quotations exemplifies the paradox which Donne saw in the crucifixion of Christ--He died that man may live.

The fact that God in Christ is powerful but not forceful is evidenced in "Resurrection, imperfect." Once more dealing with Christ's sacrifice for man, Donne notes,

He was all gold when he lay downe, but rose  
All tincture, and doth not alone dispose  
Leaden and iron wills to good, but is  
Of power to make sinfull flesh like his.

Upon His death, Christ took on all the sins of man; hence comes Donne's image of the tinctured Christ. The key word in this idea expressed is alone. Unless man desires to be forgiven, Christ will not be disposed to purify his soul.

God also has the power to wreak vengeance on man for the sins which he has committed. God's vengeful nature gnaws relentlessly at Donne in his Divine Poems, and his never-ending fear of being cast out of God's kingdom invades even those passages involving God's loving and

merciful attributes. The wrath of God is so especially important for the full measure of the wonder of the incarnation and redemption that, quite predictably, the number of references to God's wrath in Donne's poetry exceeds that of any other attribute.

The "Ascention" sonnet contains a line which shows Donne's belief in the justice of God's wrath, "Oh, with thine own blood quench thine owne just wrath." God knows all and sees all; therefore, any punishment which He makes man suffer must be just. But even though just, it does not alleviate Donne's fear of God's vengeful nature and His power to invoke His wrath on man. As revealed in "Holy Sonnet VI":

And gluttonous death, will instantly unjoynt  
My body, and soule, and I shall sleep a space,  
But my'ever-waking part shall see that face  
Whose feare already shakes my every joynt:

Donne's "ever-waking part" is always cognizant of God's wrath, and he trembles with fear at the thought of being without God for the rest of eternity because of his sins.

In "Holy Sonnet IX," Donne asks for God's mercy in forgetting his sins. In what seems to be an argument with God, he asks why he should be subject to damnation when "poysonous minerals," the tree of knowledge, "lecherous goats," and "serpents," which have contributed to man's fall, "Cannot be damn'd." In despair he cries, "And mercy being easie, and glorious/ To God, in his sterne wrath, why threatens hee?" Though he is conscious of God's infinite mercy, he cannot forget God's terrible vengeance. He suddenly becomes conscious of what he has been doing in the poem, and in line nine, he says, "But who am I, that dare dispute with thee?" Growing aware that God might punish him for



questioning His governing of man, he concludes by exalting God and taking the posture of a humble servant and sinner.

In "Holy Sonnet III," Donne laments his sins as part of his penance. "To (poore) me is allow'd/ No ease; for, long, yet vehement grieve hath beene/ Th'effect and cause, the punishment and sinne." The origin of this grief is disclosed in "Holy Sonnet VII," "Then turne/ O pensive soule, to God, for he knows best/ Thy true grieve, for he put it in my breast." God so controls man that He can punish him not only physically, but mentally as well.

The mental affliction which Donne had incurred because of his previous sins was an even greater punishment than mere physical pain. That God could and would inflict these pains was a constant reminder of God's vengeance. In "Holy Sonnet XIX," his fear of correction is revealed to the reader, "I durst not view heaven yesterday; and to day/ In prayers, and flattering speeches I court God:/ To morrow I quake with true fears of his rod." Donne feels that he cannot be a Christian one day and rest the next; he must be true to God at all times in order to escape His wrath. Donne realizes, though, that man is incapable of being perfect and that God seeks vengeance for sins against Him. In stanza XXII of "A Litany," he divulges a few of the ways by which God wreaks His vengeance, asking to be delivered from such evil,

When plague, which is thine Angell, raignes,  
Or wars, thy Champions, swaile,  
When Heresie, thy second deluge, gaines;  
In th'houre of death, the Eve of last judgment day,  
Deliver us from the sinister way.

Plagues, wars, and heresies are but three of the outstanding ways through which God demonstrates His wrath. Also considered is a desire for some other way of making man aware of the proper Christian



way of life. As stanza XXIV of the same poem expresses it, "That musique of thy promises/ Not threats in Thunder may/ Awaken us to our just offices." Although he wants God to make man hear the rewards of righteousness and act accordingly, Donne recognizes that man will give up sin only because of a fear of the consequences which God can so ably provide.

In order to be with God eternally man must suffer punishment for his sins. Donne includes a prayer for just such punishment in "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward":

O thinke me worth thine anger, punish mee,  
Burne off my rusts, and my deformity,  
Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace,  
That thou may'st know mee, and I'll turne my face.

Donne has been afraid to look eastward toward Christ on the cross because he has felt himself unworthy. Accordingly, he asks Christ to purge his sins so that he will not be afraid of seeing "God dye."

The greatest vengeance which God can impose on man is not to allow him forgiveness for his sins. In the conclusion of "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward," Donne expresses a desire to be punished in order to be united with God. He thought that without receiving punishment, man could not be redeemed. In "The Crosse," he contemplates what will happen if man does not accept God:

And crosse thy senses, else, both they, and thou  
Must perish soone, and to destruction bowe.  
For if the'eye seeke good objects, and will take  
No crosse from bad, we cannot scape a snake.

The most significant word in this passage is perish. As expressed earlier in this poem, ". . . for, no affliction,/ No Crosse is so extreme, as to have none." If man does not seek the mercy of God, He

will allow man to be taken by the devil. By going to heaven man may have eternal life with God, but in going to hell he will suffer an eternal death, thereby perishing because of his own destructive qualities. The fear of God's vengeance was most intense to Donne, but far less significant than the fear of never receiving God's forgiveness.

The "Lamentations of Jeremy" contains most of the attributes which lead to Donne's complex conception of God. The directness of God is implicit throughout the poem. It is God who governs the fate of all men, and in this poem, God directs his afflictions on Juda because, "Jerusalem hath sinn'd, therefore is shee/ Remov'd, as women in uncleanness bee." God's control is also expressed in the stanza beginning with line sixty-five:

There's none, though Sion do stretch out her hand,  
To comfort her, it is the Lords command  
That Jacobs foes girt him. Jerusalem  
Is as an unclean woman amongst them.

The strife which had been cast upon Juda was directed by God "in the day of his fierce wrath."

God's power to control man and His vengeance are offset throughout the poem by intermittent references to His mercy and love. At the end of "Chapter I," after having lamented the afflictions placed on Juda within this chapter, Donne notes the promise of retaliation on Juda's enemies: "But thy promised day/ Will come, when, as I suffer, so shall they." This type of structure is typical of many of the Divine Poems. The vengeance of God is overwhelming for Donne, but there is always the possibility for mercy, for Christ was sent, because of God's love, to redeem man.

With the inception of "Chapter II," Donne begins once more with references to the wrath of God. In five of the first six stanzas there are lines concerning this attribute. The opening lines of the first stanza bring the reader back immediately to the realism of God's vengeance: "How over Sions daughter hath God hung/ His wraths thicke cloud!" And the next stanza is even more specific:

The Lord unsparingly hath swallowed  
All Jacobs dwellings, and demolished  
To ground the strengths of Juda, and prophan'd  
The Princes of the kingdom, and the land.

In the next stanza the image is much the same, "To kill what Sion did desire,/ 'Gainst whom his wrath, he poured forth, like fire." That God would punish Israel, His most holy place, is an indication that no one is above God's vengeance, "And Sions feasts and sabbaths are forgot;/ Her king, her Priest, his wrath regardeth not." This chapter ends without the mention of either God's mercy or His love:

As to the solemn feast, all whom I fear'd  
Thou call'st about mee; when his wrath appear'd,  
None did remaine or scape, for those which I  
Brought up, did perish by mineemie.

The relentless nature of God's vengeance is carried into "Chapter III," as, "I am the man which have affliction seene,/ Under the rod of God's wrath having beene." The affliction that the speaker has is mental as well as physical. Since he lives in Juda, he is subject to being destroyed by the enemies of Israel, but the real affliction is in his mind as he views the horrors that God's wrath has brought on his land.

It is in this chapter that God's mercy reappears. After having seen God's wrath, the speaker realizes that there is some hope, "'Tis Gods great mercy we're not utterly/ Consum'd, for his compassions do not die." The Lord is good to those who seek salvation, granting it to



them because of His mercy and love. The afflictions that God places on man are not eternal, "For, not for ever doth the Lord forsake." God will take mercy on man because He has compassion, and because "His mercy is infinite."

The speaker is aware of Juda's sins; therefore, he notes the justice of God's punishing him and his people, "Thou pardon'st not; Usest no clemencie;/ Pursuest us, kill'st us, coverest us with wrath,/ Cover'st thy selfe with clouds, that our prayer hath/ No power to passe." Man must suffer for his sins to receive salvation, but there is here in cognizance that God sent Christ to save man, "Thou Lord my Soules cause handled hast, and thou/ Rescud'st my life."

These, then, are the basic attributes which make up Donne's concept of God in his Divine Poems: God is direct, merciful, loving, powerful, and vengeful. Although they may seem to approach contradiction at times, they combine ultimately to lead to the redemption of man. In the body of the Divine Poems these characteristics are not considered separately because Donne saw God as the ultimate being, precisely capable of the unity and complexity which the coordination of these attributes requires. This same complexity is an integral part of Donne's sermons.



### CHAPTER III

John Donne was not an emotional or evangelical preacher. The rhetorical style of his sermons expressed the glory of the Anglican faith and of God. Donne's greatness as a preacher involved the combination of intellectual and emotional responses in his audiences, and through appealing to their reasoning power, he expected a rational acceptance of the remission of sins, eternity of God, and damnation in hell. But he concentrated on the rewards that man may receive by acknowledging God as his creator and governor and Christ as his savior. As in his poems, Donne made no distinction between God and Christ except that Christ had human qualities as well as divine; nor did he accept the theory that the God of the Old Testament was an incompetent creator who was to be distinguished from the Father of Christ.

Clay Hunt finds Donne's sermons "lengthy, logical ingenuities" which are spiritless and unexciting.<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot says that his sermons will disappear as suddenly as they have appeared.<sup>2</sup> Neither of the critics considers Donne to be a great theologian. Even though his sermons are rhetorical, they do reveal both a great love and a great fear of God, and there are many magnificent passages of exaltation of the Lord. These sermons will not slip into obscurity, because man is eternally seeking to know God; and Donne has included a broad and complex conception of Him which appeals to all men.

---

<sup>1</sup>Hunt, p. 134.

<sup>2</sup>Eliot, p. 19.

The attributes of God in Donne's sermons are the same as those in his Divine Poems. That God is direct is expressed in many passages throughout Donne's sermons. Evelyn Simpson says that in the sermons God not only directs man's salvation but also, at times, his sin in order to form a part of a more beautiful whole.<sup>3</sup> Each man's acts must pass through God and be judged by Him. Donne uses many metaphors to express the divine-human relationship, which is so vital to man's salvation. In one of his Christmas sermons, he likens God to a potter, minter, statuary, tailor, steward, physician, neighbor, Samaritan, gardner, architect, builder, and shepherd. The metaphors symbolize God's control in every facet of man's life (I:131-132).<sup>4</sup>

In his sermon at Lincoln's Inn, written just before his going into Germany, Donne relates God's creation of the earth, giving the details of each day's work (II:240-243). When speaking of the creation in an earlier sermon, Donne reveals God in the name of Elohim:

. . . though it be a name properly rooted in power and strength, . . . yet properly it signifies his Judgment and Order, and Providence, and Dispensation, and Government of his creatures. It is that name, which goes through all Gods whole work of the Creation, and disposition of all creatures, in the first of Genesis: in all that, he is called by no other name, then this, the name of God; not by Jehovah, to present an infinite majesty; nor by Adonai; to present an absolute power; nor by Tzebouth, to present a Force, or Conquest: but onely in the name of God, his name of Government (I:235).

---

<sup>3</sup>Evelyn Simpson, "Paradoxes and Problems," A Garland for John Donne, ed., Theodore Spencer (Cambridge, 1931), p. 40.

<sup>4</sup>George Potter and Evelyn Simpson, The Sermons of John Donne (Berkley, 1962), 10 vols. All references to sermons in this chapter are in the Potter-Simpson edition of Donne's sermons. The volume and page number are indicated in parentheses after each reference.

All God's other attributes are subordinate to His creating and governing the universe.

In the sermons the relationship between God and man is stated explicitly. In a sermon preached at Whitehall Donne says, "God calls not upon us, to be considered as God in himself, but as God towards us; not as he is in heaven, but as he works upon earth. . . . (I:234). As Donne relates in another sermon, "For Being is the peculiar and proper name of God" (VII:76).

God's governing of man meant either eternal life or everlasting death. In an Easter sermon dated 1629, Donne explains that God is always watching over man, ". . . the eye of God is open upon me, though I winke at his light, and watches over me, though I sleep. . . ." (VII:368). For Donne, God never sleeps, and He sees both the good and evil of man. He believed that God even controlled prayers:

God hath granted all that he asked upon the first petition of his prayer, yea before he made it, (for God put that petition in his heart and mouth, and moved him to ask it, that thereby he might be moved to grant it) . . . . (VIII:181).

Donne does not say that God will grant all prayers, but He might act upon them. To pray for something a second time is fruitless, for God knows the needs of man from the beginning. Yet man must initiate the request in order for God to act.

The divine-human relationship is reciprocal. God requires man to worship Him in order to receive salvation. Man has a duty to God because he was created by Him. In a sermon concerning the teachings of St. Paul, Donne states:



First then, the duty which God, by this Apostle, requires of man, is a duty arising out of that, which God hath wrought upon him: It is not a consideration, a contemplation of God sitting in heaven, but of God working on earth; not in the making of his eternal Decrees there, but in the execution of those Decrees here. . . . (III: 258).

This subjectivity of God was important to Donne, because it involves each of the other attributes. God cares enough about man to be near him, but this nearness can be a curse as well as a blessing. While man lives, he can experience not only God's mercy and love but also the affliction of the powerful vengeance of God. Yet Donne longed for the direct relationship because he felt that man profited by it if he truly sought forgiveness for his sins. The profit gained is the fear redemption, and it is God's mercy that allows man to be redeemed.

The merciful quality of God is the subject of many of Donne's sermons and the thought behind even more of them. William Mueller states that Donne saw a vast difference between the righteousness of God and the best actions of man, because God had been so merciful and forgiving. Man would never be able to give God as much as He has given man.<sup>5</sup> In a Lenten sermon Donne discusses this gift of God:

But if we take this instrument /the world/, when God's hand tuned it the second time, in the promise of the Messias, and offer of the love and mercy of God to all that will receive it in him. . . . (II:170).

At Lincoln's Inn, Donne preached that it is possible to escape God's vengeance because of his mercy: "Sin may come to the eye, and yet, the hand be above water; we may look and last, and yet, by God's watchfull goodness, and studious mercy, escape action" (II:110). This statement

---

<sup>5</sup>Mueller, p. 184.

is something of a contradiction for Donne, because he expresses in other sermons and in his Divine Poems that man must be punished for his sins in order to be saved. In a sermon preached on the Penitential Psalms, Donne argues that God is merciful precisely because He punishes man for his sins:

. . . The Lord corrects us, not onely as he is good, but as he is gentle, he were more cruell, more unmercifull, if he did alwayes show mercy; That David intends when he sayes, Propitius fuisti, Thou wast a Mercifull God, because thou didst punish all their inventions (V:330).

This declaration contains the essence of Donne's attitude toward God's mercy. He felt that punishment for sins was needed, because without this man would become too lax and would continue sinning without the fear of being reprimanded for his actions. Therefore, Donne comes to the ironic conclusion that being too merciful would be unmerciful.

To follow traditional Christian ethical patterns was not enough to assure oneself of salvation. Donne says that no matter what one does, he must ultimately trust in God's mercy. He deals with this subject in a Christmas sermon delivered at St. Paul's:

In our great work of crucifying ourselves to the world too, it is not enough to bleed the drops of a Circumcision, that is to cut off some excessive, and notorious practice of our sin; nor to bleed the drops of Agony, to enter into conflict and colluctation of the flesh and the spirit, whether we were not better trust in God's mercy (IV:297).

The power of God to choose those who will enter into His kingdom is final, and, although His judgment is just, man must trust in God's mercy without respect to his good deeds on earth. God's justice is a reason to fear God as Donne notes, ". . . therefore he will be feared not as a wilfull Tyrant, but as a just judge" (I:262).

The mercy of God cannot be measured according to Donne; it is beyond rational capability. In a 1625 sermon, he contends that, "God is absolutely, and entirely, and essentially merciful" (VI:330). This mercy is not immutable; it regenerates itself quite often: "Truly to me, this consideration, that as his mercy is new every morning, so his grace is renewed to me every minute. . . ." (VII:368). This renewal is constant in God, for He has far greater power to be merciful than man.

To overlook the mercies of God and to cause other men to do so is a sin. At St. Paul's Crosse, Donne implied the damnation of men guilty of this sin: "Begin we with the first, the overpure despisers of others; Men that will abridge, and contract the large mercies of God in Christ. . . ." (IX:119).

In Donne's theology, it is man's duty to profess God's mercy to man and to convince him of God's goodness: ". . . God requires from us, that we make open declarations of his mercies, to the winning and confirming of others" (VI:42). God's mercy extends beyond any one religion, and it is the duty of man to win others to God rather than to a certain church. Those who would say that God only saves members of a certain religion or any religious faith, rather than all virtuous men, do not know God:

For God have revealed no other way of salvation to us, but we must be so far, from straitning salvation, to any particular Christian Church, of any subdivided name, Papist or Protestant, as that we may not straiten it to the whole Christian Church, as though God could not, in the largenesse of his power, or did not, in the largenesse of his mercy, afford salvation to some whom he never gathered into the Christian Church (X:170).



Donne calls atheistic those who would set limits on the mercy of God and urges man to recognize the incomprehensible power and mercy of God:

Accustome thy selfe to keep up the consideration of Gods mercy at the highest, lodge not sad sus-  
pition in any publique, in any private businesse,  
that God's powerfull mercy can goe but thus farre:  
hee that determineth Gods Power and his Mercy, and  
saith here it must end, is as much an Atheist, as  
he that denieth it altogether (X:218).

God's mercy is also recognizable in His sending Christ to bear man's punishment on earth. Donne is overwhelmed that God would be so merciful as to send His Son to this world so that man could be saved. In a sermon preached on the Penitential Psalms, Donne reveals, ". . . Herein is the mercy of God, in the merits of Christ, a sea of mercy. . . ." (V:318).

The mercy of God in Christ is also mentioned in Donne's most famous sermon, now called Deaths Duell. Known as Donne's own funeral sermon, it contains the preacher's attitude toward the mercy of God in His deliverance of man from death. The soul which is saved by God does not die; it gains eternal life in heaven. And it is in this context that Donne relays the mercy of God to his readers. After having defined the "Almighty Father" as the "God of Power," Donne states, "And then, as the God of mercy, the glorious Sonne rescued us, by taking upon himselfe this issue of death. . . ." (X:231). Christ's taking on the sins of man indicates the depth of God's mercy in that God allowed himself the degradation of becoming human.

Christ's coming is also the epitome of God's love. The mercy that God shows man is the result of His love for him. Michael Moloney notes that in Donne's sermons Christ is the force joining God's will

and man as well as the sign of God's loving nature.<sup>6</sup> Christ cannot be separated from God as a distinct entity, but He is the only being in whom are found both human and divine attributes. He is the human and essential instrument of man's salvation, but also an integral part of the Trinity. In a sermon at St. Dunstan's, Donne quotes from Ephesians, "When you were without Christ, you were without God" (VIII:59).

God's love is expressed explicitly in a sermon preached at St. Dunstan's: "The love of God begins in fear, and the fear of God ends in love; and that love can never end, for God is love" (VI:113). In the same sermon Donne finds God's love infinite: "The love of God Passeth all things, saith the Wise man. . . ." (VI:111). When speaking of the Creation, Donne terms the making of the earth a sign of God's love:

In the fourth daies work, let the making of the sun to rule the day be the testimony of God's love to thee, in the sunshine of temporal prosperity, and the making of the moon to shine by night, be the refreshing of his comfortable promises in the darkness of adversity. . . . (II:242).

Donne saw all the wonderous things on earth as indicators of God's love for man, but the redemption of man through Christ surpassed all forms of love. In a passage from a sermon preached at St. Paul's, Donne expresses the great wonder felt when contemplating the Holy Ghost and the Church:

---

<sup>6</sup>Michael F. Moloney, John Donne: His Flight from Mediaevalism (Urbana, Ill., 1944), p. 116.

. . . The simplest man, as well as the greatest Doctor, is bound to know, that there is one God in three persons, That the second of these, the Sonne of God, tooke our nature, and dyed for mankind; And that there is a Holy Ghost, which in the Communion of Saints, the Church established by Christ, applies to every particular soule the benefit of Christ's universall redemption (V:276).

The results of God's love are also monumental. Donne preached of the love of God and the rewards that a righteous life may bring:

. . . to him that beleeves aright, and overcomes all temptations to a wrong belief, God shall give the accomplishment of fulnesse, and fulnesse of joy, and joy rooted in glory, and glory established in eternity, and this eternity is God; To him that beleeves and overcomes, God shall give himselfe in an everlasting presence and fruition (V:277).

These rewards from God, which Donne sought throughout his life, are the ultimate blessings that God can bestow on man.

Although God's love is infinite, it can be withdrawn if man does not love Him in return. Donne indicates the results are dire if man does not reciprocate:

All the sunshine, all the glory of this life, though all these be the testimonies of God's love to us, yet these bring but a winter's day, a short day, for except we love him too, God doth not love with an everlasting love. . . . (I:244).

Although man is not capable of the magnitude of God's love, Donne warns him:

. . . except God love us first, we cannot love him; but God doth love us all so well, from the beginning, as that every man may see the fault was in the perverseness of his own will, that he did not love God better (I:244).

God's love is ever-present in Donne's sermons, an element which he states should be in all sermons. Donne's conception of his own duty to God is found in a Christmas sermon preached at St. Paul's: "God sends



us to preach forgiveness of sinnes. . . ." (III:364). In essence, Donne believed that all preachers are sent to preach the love of God in the form of salvation.

Whether called upon to do so or not, Donne also preaches the power of a God who is both omnipotent and omniscient. He knows all that man does and is capable of dictating his actions. A particular problem for Donne results from the fact that man sins. Does it not follow that God makes man sin? Donne allows for this apparent paradox in his theology in that man, because he is man, has been given the gift of free will by God, a gift by which he can choose good or evil or any degree between the two. Although He is powerful, God is not always forceful. He seldom controls life to the extent of making man's decisions for him, but He has the power to do so. In a Whitehall sermon, Donne notes that God does not make man receive salvation:

. . . for God saves no man against his will, nor any man who thinks himself beholding for nothing, after the first decree. There is a name of force, of violence, of necessity attributed to God, which is Mauzzim: but it is the name of an Idol, not of the true God. The name of the true God is Dominus tzeboath, the Lord of Hosts, a name of power, but not of force (I:261).

God will not force man to accept the good and reject the evil of this world; He merely passes judgment on man's actions after he has performed them.

God's decision either to damn or redeem is always just. He is omniscient; therefore, man must realize that the action He takes is unquestionable. In a Trinity Sunday sermon, Donne argues to this effect:

But if God, that judges all the earth, judge thee, there is no error to be assigned in his judgment, no appeal from God not thoroughly informed, to God better informed, for he alwaies knows all evidence before it is given (III:148).

God is never wrong, for all men's actions must pass through Him.

As with His mercy and love, God's power is infinite. Donne says, "Our God is so Omnipotent, Almighty so, as that his Power hath no limitation but his own will" (VIII:57). In his relegation of attributes to the Trinity in Death's Duell, Donne declares that the Almighty Father is the power of God (X:231).

The earth itself is testimony to God's power, for it was He who created the earth and all its creatures. Donne gloried in God's acts, feeling them evidence in themselves as affirmations of God's love. But he reminds man that God also has the power to overturn the world if He so chooses:

. . . and then remember that he can make thy sun to set at noon, he can blow out thy taper of prosperity when it burns brightest, and he can turn the Moon into blood, he can make all the promises of the Gospel, which should comfort thee in adversity, turn into despair and obduration (II:242-243).

This power to destroy the good that has been done for man is mentioned by Donne to try to make people realize just how powerful God is. It is also intended to make man re-evaluate himself, and to show him what God can do in retaliation for sins against Him. Donne reveals his purpose more plainly in a sermon preached at St. Dunstan's in which his subject is the afflictions placed on may by God:

. . . Thy affliction is his, The Lords; And the Lord is infinite, and comprehends all at once, and ever finds something that thou hast done, or something that thou wouldest have done, if the blessing of that correction had not restrained thee (X:202).

Donne is dealing here, and in the previous passage, with the power of God to inflict punishment on man for his transgressions. The fear of being the focal point of this type of power was very real for Donne, and he tried to instill this fear in his listeners so they, too, would realize that God's vengeance is nothing to be scoffed at. Because man is without excuse for sin, he has no hope for salvation unless he surrenders to the redemptive power of God.

In two of his earliest sermons, Donne specifically warns those people who continue their sinning under the misconception that they will not be punished. The worst condition for man is that of the sinner who does not fear the vengeance of God. His wrath is as real in Donne's sermons as it is in the Divine Poems, although Donne makes reference to it sparingly. In a sermon preached at Greenwich in 1615, Donne plots the fate of an unrepentent sinner:

. . . if we have seen a man prodigal of his own soul, and run on in a course of sin, all his life, except there appear very evident signs of God's grace, at his end, . . . we have just reason to be afraid, that he is disinherited (I:156).

Donne pleads with man to recognize the power of God's wrath and the horrible outcome of his vengeance. In a sermon at St. Dunstan's, he asks man to heed the vengeance of God: ". . . let God's threatening thy self, thine inwardest self, thy soul, with hell, make thee to stop even upon thy fear of the Lord, the fear of Torment" (VI:112)

God's vengeance is portrayed in various forms in the sermons, and one of those preached on the Penetential Psalms contains David's exhortation of God in an effort to escape punishment:



34  
... that David, in the apprehension, and under the sense of the wrath and indignation of God, came to this vehement exclamation, or deprecation, O Lord rebuke me not in thine anger, neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure (V:319).

Donne is showing the wisdom of fearing God's wrath, for man is doomed if he does not acknowledge the power of God's vengeance and overcome his sins.

God does not forget the sins that man has committed against Him, although He may wait in seeking retribution. Donne cautions man that afflictions which have come upon him in old age may be the result of youthful transgressions:

... Though all Afflictions upon God's children, be from him, yet, take knowledge that this /affliction/ is from him, more intirely, and more immediately, and that God remembers something in thee, that thou hast forgot; And, as that fit of an Ague, or that pang of Gout, which may take thee to day, but may be the effect of some former disorder, so the affliction which lights upon thee in thine age, may be inflicted for the sinnes of thy youth (X:202).

Donne does not say that all man's afflictions are placed upon him by God, but he does emphasize that possibility. Above all, it is better to suffer the earthly afflictions than to be punished after death.

This post-mortem affliction is the greatest to be inflicted on man; it consists of being estranged from God for eternity. Donne's mind could not comprehend the extent of the horror of this punishment. The fear of dying an eternal death was his most pertinent reminder of God's wrath. The depth of this fear is shown in a sermon which he preached to the Earl of Carlile:

... when all is done, the hell of hells, the torment of torments is the everlasting absence of God, and the everlasting impossibility of returning to his presence; Horrendum est, says

the Apostle, It is a fearefull thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Yet there was a case in which David found an ease, to fall into the hands of God, to scape the hands of men: Horrendum est, when God's hand is bent to strike, it is a fearfull thing, to fall into the hands of the living God; but to fall out of the hands of the living God, is a horror beyond our expression, beyond our imagination (V:266).

This possibility of total divorce was devastating to Donne. Throughout his life, Donne feared that the vengeful God might bar him from His kingdom. This separation is the zenith of God's wrath and the primary factor of Donne's conception of God.

Helen White summarizes Donne's theological conception of God rather well in a passage dealing with his sermons:

. . . Donne's conception of God should, on the whole, be an austere one. That deep sense of the "otherness" of God that runs through the Protestant Reformation fills Donne's heart with awe. The Creator and the Governor of the Universe, God is for Donne . . . defined in terms of power and will. He is the Judge who fills the sinner's heart with terror when he asks himself, "What if this present were the world's last night?" The wrath of God is for the sinner John Donne an ever-present terror, not to be forgotten in the many beautiful things he has said and sung of the mercy and love of God.<sup>7</sup>

Although Miss White subordinates God's loving and merciful qualities more than she should, her position is generally sound. Donne's emphasis on God's mercy is always subject to alteration by his profound fear of God's vengeance.

---

<sup>7</sup>White, pp. 128-129.

## CHAPTER IV

No matter what the poet-preacher wanted to call himself, Jack Donne's, or Dr. John Donne's, conception of God is the same, both in his holy poetry and sermons. There is no doubt that Donne became more concerned with sin after he entered the ministry, but at that time the salvation of his congregation became his responsibility. But God was no more significant to the preacher than to the poet: Donne's reverence toward Him never changed.

Donne's failure to supply specific literary evidence to support his statement concerning the division of his life began a tradition followed religiously by critics believing him. Walton and Gosse, who make definite delineations in Donne's life, and Helen Gardner, whose delineation is rather obscure, neglect to prove their critical theories dealing with the dichotomy of Donne's life. These critics merely point to the life of Dr. Donne and rationalize that he must have changed completely. But critics such as Hunt, Grierson, Eliot, Mueller, and LeComte have not let the ministry of Donne sway their literary opinions. Following metaphysical thought, they have examined Donne's work and have come to the logical conclusion that there is no dichotomy in his thought.

Donne's Divine Poems, written in the metaphysical style, are filled with conceits which logically lead the reader to the contemplation of God. Through the examination of these poems, one is led to Donne's theological conception of Him. The strikingly beautiful passages



concerning God almost indicate a physical as well as spiritual love for Him.

Although in prose, Donne's sermons are inspired by the same themes as his holy poetry, and indeed employ figurative language of the same type, nearly in identical terms. Because he meant for his sermons to be read, the Dean argues his case for the acceptance of God more explicitly and elaborately than he does in his divine verses, although no more eloquently. As with the Divine Poems, the purpose of the sermons is to bring the audience to the rational, perhaps emotional as well, conclusion that eternal life with God is far better than an everlasting death in hell. Donne skillfully manipulates his listeners through both love and fear in presenting the attributes which constitute his conception of the Divine.

Donne's conception of God is highly complex. In both his poetry and sermons God is direct, He both created and governs the universe, He is merciful to man and has great love for him. God is powerful in his mercy and love, yet His power is also evidenced in His wreaking vengeance. These attributes are consistent in Donne's works, and they can be seen readily without delving deeply into his incomparable wit.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andreasen, N.J.C. John Donne: Conservative Revolutionary. Princeton, 1967.
- Bennett, Joan. Five Metaphysical Poets. London, 1966, pp. 26-27.
- Donne, John. The Divine Poems of John Donne, ed. Helen Gardner. London, 1933.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Poems of John Donne, ed. Herbert Grierson. London, 1933.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Sermons of John Donne, ed. George Potter and Evelyn Simpson. 10 vols. Berkley, 1962.
- Eliot, T.S. "Donne in our Time," A Garland for John Donne, ed. Theodore Spencer. Cambridge, Mass., 1931, pp. 11-19.
- Garnett, Richard, and Edmund Gosse. English Literature, Vol. II. New York, 1904, pp. 293-294.
- Gosse, Edmund. The Life and Letters of John Donne. 2 vols. London, 1899.
- Hunt, Clay. Donne's Poetry. New Haven, Conn., 1933.
- LeComte, Edward. Grace to a Witty Sinner. New York, 1965.
- Moloney, Michael F. John Donne: His Flight from Mediaevalism. Urbana, Ill., 1944.
- Mueller, William. John Donne: Preacher. Princeton, 1962.
- Simpson, Evelyn. "Paradoxes and Problems," A Garland for John Donne, ed. Theodore Spencer. Cambridge, Mass., 1931, pp. 40-41.
- Wallerstein, Ruth. Studies in Seventeenth-Century Poetic. Madison, Wis., 1961, pp. 170-172.
- Walton, Izaak. Walton's Lives, ed. S.B. Carter. London, 1951, pp. 29-30.
- White, Helen. The Metaphysical Poets. New York, 1966, pp. 129-132.