

LITERARY APOLOGETICS IN ACTION:  
ENCOUNTERING THE TRINITY IN JOHN DONNE'S  
HOLY SONNETS  
Holly Ordway<sup>377</sup>

As Christian apologists, our goal is not just to communicate *facts* about God, but rather to lead others into a saving relationship with God through Christ in power of the Holy Spirit. We know that God is not the vague “spiritual force” of pantheism, nor the amoral monad of Islam, nor the disinterested Watchmaker of deism, because He has revealed Himself to be one God in trinity of Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity, then, is an important component in an apologetic argument for a specifically Christian understanding of God. Yet the doctrine of the Trinity is rarely incorporated into apologetics – perhaps because the idea of explaining the Trinity is, to say the least, daunting. Here, though, we see the role of literary apologetics.

The most holy Trinity is not a puzzle to be solved, but a reality to be experienced. Though we cannot fully comprehend the Trinity through the use of human reason, God has revealed Himself as Trinity and invites us to participate in His divine life: “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10 ESV). Poetry is ideal for exploring this tremendous mystery of faith, as a poem can hold ideas in tension without resolving them. Nothing can *explain* the most holy Trinity, but poetry can help us *experience* God more fully and more deeply.

In this essay, we will explore the doctrine of the Trinity through the poetry of Anglican poet-priest John Donne. In the process, we will see how poetry can be an entrance point for reflection on deep issues of faith, a way to confront doubts and difficulties that may be hindering the reader from turning to Christ. Poetry is not a direct apologetic argument, but its indirectness is precisely the source of its value in apologetics: to

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borrow C.S. Lewis' phrase, it can be a way of getting past the "watchful dragons" of intellectual doubt and skepticism.

John Donne, the 17th century Anglican poet and priest, is an excellent guide for approaching the Trinity. The first and most influential of the "metaphysical" poets, Donne is notable for "the wit, the imaginative picturing, the compression, the often cryptic expression, the play of paradoxes, and the juxtapositions of metaphor"<sup>378</sup> in his poetry. In contrast to the later Romantics, Donne and the other metaphysical poets are more interested in exploring ideas than in evoking emotion for its own sake. That is not to say that the metaphysical poets are entirely abstract: they "constantly connect the abstract with the concrete, the remote with the near, and the sublime with the commonplace,"<sup>379</sup> often through the use of brilliantly unexpected images, or "conceits." Such a style is well suited for meditation on the mysteries of the Christian faith.

Donne himself is a complex figure. After a somewhat dissolute youth, he married for love and as a result lost all chances for advancement in the court. Donne eventually moved from the Roman Catholic to the Anglican church and was ordained as a priest.<sup>380</sup> Was his choice, so swiftly rewarded by King James, a worldly one? Certainly Donne was concerned with getting preferment in the church, but he was aware of the conflict of motives, and struggled through a long period of indecision before concluding that he had a true calling to the priesthood.<sup>381</sup> He swiftly showed that the calling was genuine, becoming a dedicated and faithful preacher of the Gospel, persevering even when doing so risked censure from his patrons, for the "privileging of preaching ...[which] had been

<sup>378</sup> Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 202.

<sup>379</sup> Joan Bennett, *Five Metaphysical Poets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 3.

<sup>380</sup> Richard Schmidt, *Glorious Companions: Five Centuries of Anglican Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 48.

<sup>381</sup> David L. Edwards, *John Donne: Man of Flesh and Spirit* (New York: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 98.

central to church piety under Elizabeth and James... came under attack when Charles ascended the throne.”<sup>382</sup>

Donne is aware of his own weakness, and uses the sonnets to dramatize and thus bring into focus his spiritual struggles. As an intellectual, Donne would have been well aware of the difficulties involved in trying to grasp the Trinity by reason, as well as the profound importance of responding to God as Trinity, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In “A Litany,” written even before his ordination as a priest, he addresses the Trinity as “O Blessed glorious Trinity, / Bones to philosophy, but milk to faith” and calls on the Trinity to help him “to love, to know, you unnumbered three.”<sup>383</sup>

The Trinity is a particularly important theme in Donne’s poetry because it is central to his relationship with God. If God is solely One, a transcendent monad, then He would be distant and unapproachable. However, God has revealed Himself to be Trinity: one being, three persons. God is “a ‘community of being,’ in which all is shared, united, and mutually exchanged” (McGrath 2001, 326). God does not just want to give us “things” to make us happy; He wants to give us Himself, to draw us into His eternal life. God is love, and in His being there is an eternal loving communion among the three Persons.<sup>384</sup>

John Donne’s most famous devotional poems are the “Holy Sonnets.” Although there are different possible orderings for the sonnets, and debate over the number of sonnets to be included in the sequence, it is at least clear that Donne intended the sonnets to be a sequence of some kind (Stringer 2005, LX-CI), and that the Holy Sonnets as a sequence explore various aspects of Christian faith, especially judgment and death.

We will look at four of Donne’s Holy Sonnets: 1, 10, 11, and 12 from the Revised Sequence of twelve sonnets.

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<sup>382</sup> Ramie Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 158.

<sup>383</sup> A.J. Smith (ed.), *John Donne: The Complete English Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1996), p. 318.

<sup>384</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (New York: T & T Clark, 1996), p. 5.

Although the poems appeared in a different order in the earliest sequence, the manuscript transmission evidence shows that the placement of poems as discussed here came about early and was preserved in later sequences.<sup>385</sup>

Holy Sonnet 1 introduces the themes of sin, death, and repentance:

As due by many titles I resign  
 Myself to thee, O God, first I was made  
 By thee, and for thee, and when I was decayed  
 Thy blood bought that, the which before was thine,  
 I am thy son, made with thy self to shine,  
 Thy servant, whose pains thou hast still repaid,  
 Thy sheep, thine image, and, till I betrayed  
 My self, a temple of thy Spirit divine;  
 Why doth the devil then usurp on me?  
 Why doth he steal, nay ravish that's thy right?  
 Except thou rise and for thine own work fight,  
 Oh I shall soon despair, when I do see  
 That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt not choose me,  
 And Satan hates me, yet is loth to lose me.<sup>386</sup>

The poet is striving to relate to God as a monad, and finding it impossible. Feeling isolated from a God he perceives as distant, he cries out almost in anger, “thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt not choose me.” Indeed, God does not seem to be handling things the way the poet thinks is best, and the poet even accuses God of passivity: “Except thou rise and for thine own work fight, / Oh I shall soon despair.”

The Trinity is referenced only obliquely: a hint of the Father (“I was made by thee”), the Son (“Thy blood bought that, the which before was thine”), and the Holy Spirit (“My self, a temple of thy Spirit divine”). These three Persons, only

<sup>385</sup> Gary A. Stringer (ed.), *Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, Volume 7, Part I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. lx.

<sup>386</sup> For readability purposes for a broader audience, the text I have used to present the poems here is the modernized version in A.J. Smith's 1996 edition. The definitive edition, which I used for the analysis of the poems for this essay, is the Variorum Edition, edited by Gary Stringer.

vaguely referred to, do not seem to recall to the poet anything of Trinity's divine communion of love, with implications for the poet's relationship with God. The poet starts to recognize himself as a temple of the Holy Spirit, but only in the past tense: he is a temple "till I betrayed / My self." There is no appreciation of what the indwelling of the Holy Spirit means for his relationship with God the Father.

Holy Sonnet 1 thus opens the sonnet sequence with an unsettled tone, beginning with a view of God as a solitary being who might or might not choose Donne, and ending on a depressed note with the poet wondering if God loves him. In sonnets 2-9, Donne grapples with various aspects of faith, sin, death, and repentance, without recognizing God as Trinity.

As we move to the final third of the sequence, Donne begins to work in a richer sense of the most holy Trinity. Holy Sonnet 10 introduces a change:

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for, you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o'er throw me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I, like an usurped town to another due,  
Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end,  
Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.  
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,  
But am betrothed unto your enemy,  
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

The key to understanding Holy Sonnet 10 is that here, Donne is moving toward the understanding that God's service is perfect freedom. The shock we feel at a sexual image – and a violent one – wakes us up out of our slumber. Do we want God as badly as Donne does, here?

In Holy Sonnet 1, Donne suggests that God has been passive; in contrast, here the poet admits that God has indeed acted, to "knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend" the poet's

soul. God, who seemed distant in the previous sonnets, is recognized as a presence who has been active all along - and not just an active presence, but a loving one. In Holy Sonnet 10, Donne explicitly calls on the “three-personed God,” the Holy Trinity. The poet sees that while Satan’s hold on him is out of hate, God’s “enthraling” will be out of love; while Satan’s hold on him is slavery, God’s “imprisonment” will make him free.

A number of critics suggest that Donne is drawing on the mystical tradition in these sonnets, especially given his Roman Catholic background.<sup>387</sup> If that is the case, then Donne may be using his own fruitless searching for an experience of God to express the profound “otherness” of God. However, the concerns raised by the poet in Holy Sonnet 10 suggest not a dark night of the soul, but a state of confusion about God’s love. He says that he loves God and wants God to love him, not realizing that human love is a response to divine love, not the other way around. Likewise, in the image of the “usurped town,” Donne fails to recognize that Christ has already overcome Satan; Donne is already free, if he would turn to God—which is indeed what he is doing in this poem, even if he is not quite sure of himself.

A more nuanced view is that Donne “used an interplay of the two mystical traditions – the *via affirmativa*, which emphasized the similarity and continuity of the human and divine spheres; and the *via negativa*, which stressed the ultimate discrepancy between the two levels.”<sup>388</sup> With the *via negativa*, Donne affirms the value of seeking God in all circumstances, even when he feels lost in darkness. However, in the Holy Sonnets, the poet does not remain in that dark night throughout the whole sequence, but moves – with a deepening

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<sup>387</sup> Lawrence Beaston, "Talking to a Silent God: Donne's Holy Sonnets and the Via Negativa" in David Galens (ed.) *Poetry Criticism*, vol. 43 (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 1999), p. 161.

<sup>388</sup> David J. Leigh, "Donne's 'A Hymn to God the Father: New Dimensions'" in Harold Bloom (ed.), *John Donne: Bloom's Major Poets* (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House, 1999), p. 91.

awareness of the Trinity – toward the experience of communion with God, as we see in Holy Sonnet 11:

Wilt thou love God, as he thee? then digest,  
My soul, this wholesome meditation,  
How God the Spirit, by angels waited on,  
In heaven, doth make his temple in thy breast.  
The Father having begot a Son most blessed,  
And still begetting, (for he ne'er begun)  
Hath deigned to choose thee by adoption,  
Coheir to' his glory, 'and Sabbath's endless rest;  
And as a robbed man, which by search doth find  
His stol'n stuff, must lose or buy it again:  
The Son of glory came down, and was slain,  
Us whom he had made, and Satan stol'n, to unbind.  
'Twas much, that man was made like God before,  
But, that God should be made like man, much more.

We now see the poet grasping the truth: God loved him first. The poet includes the reader in his address, offering a challenge, or perhaps an invitation: Do you want to love God, the way that He loves you? If so, consider this...

Holy Sonnet 11 moves toward an appreciation of the communion of the blessed Trinity, referencing the eternal relationship of the Son to the Father: "The Father having begot a Son most blessed, / And still begetting, (for he ne'er begun)." Here is no static, distant God, but a God who is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What's more, the activity of the Trinity expands outward to draw the poet into the life and love of God. The Holy Spirit, "doth make his temple in thy breast," the Father "Hath deigned to choose thee by adoption," and the Son "came down, and was slain, / Us whom he had made, and Satan stol'n, to unbind."

Holy Sonnet 11 closes with a profound reflection on the Incarnation, "'Twas much, that man was made like God before, / But, that God should be made like man, much more." The harshness of language in the previous sonnets has eased. Rather than straining for an explanation of why God hasn't acted in his life, the poet recognizes that indeed He has acted

decisively in human history through the Incarnation, not just for the poet himself but for all humankind.

The sonnet sequence closes with another deeply Trinitarian poem, Holy Sonnet 12. Indeed this is the only poem in the sequence in which the Trinity is specifically named.

Father, part of his double interest  
 Unto thy kingdom, thy Son gives to me,  
 His jointure in the knotty Trinity  
 He keeps, and gives me his death's conquest.  
 This Lamb, whose death, with life the world hath blessed,  
 Was from the world's beginning slain, and he  
 Hath made two wills, which with the legacy  
 Of his and thy kingdom, do thy sons invest.  
 Yet such are thy laws, that men argue yet  
 Whether a man those statutes can fulfil;  
 None doth, but thy all-healing grace and Spirit  
 Revive again what law and letter kill.  
 Thy law's abridgement, and thy last command  
 Is all but love; oh let that last will stand!

Here the Trinity is likened to knotwork, in which there is no clear beginning or ending; Donne might have been influenced by Celtic representations of the Trinity as an interlocking, beginningless knot that nonetheless has three distinct parts. Interestingly, “knotty” is often used to describe difficult or insoluble problems, and indeed the Trinity cannot be figured out by reason. However, as we said at the beginning of the essay, the Trinity is only “knotty” in a negative sense if we see the Trinity as a problem to be solved. Seen rightly, as a reality to be experienced, then the “knotty” nature of the Trinity is strangely reassuring. The image of the knot connects the idea of infinity with that of security: things knotted are made secure, bound tightly.

We can thus see the poet coming to the realization that God, fully experienced as the most holy Trinity, is a dynamic communion of love. Donne begins to see that God is continually pouring out His “all-healing” grace and love, to which the poet can respond through the power of the Spirit.



One of the applications we can draw from reflecting on the Holy Sonnets is that we do not need to have perfect understanding in order to love God and to be drawn into His love for us. Donne's poetry, like that of the other metaphysical poets, can often be very abstract and intellectual, even when dealing with emotion. Especially in these early poems, written before his ordination as a priest, Donne seems to be striving to understand the mysteries of faith, and falling short. While faith should always go seeking understanding, and we are directed in Holy Scripture to understand the reasons for the hope we have (1 Peter 3:15), we must not fall into the error of thinking that just because we ought to use our minds to the fullest, that this full use of our minds will enable us to "understand" God completely. Donne seems to have realized this, later in life as a priest: he writes, in a sermon on John 1:8, that "We may search so far and reason so long of grace and faith, as that we may lose not only them but even our reason too, and sooner become mad than good."<sup>389</sup>

Donne's Holy Sonnets never quite reach assurance, and in many of Donne's other poems we find the same hesitant quality, the wavering between faith and doubt, between the desire to know God and the feeling of being trapped by desire for the world. As we read and reflect on the Holy Sonnets, we can use them as a scaffold to grow in our own faith; Donne helps us see that doubt and struggle need not be feared, if we offer them up to God for Him to use them to bring us closer to Him. Donne's uncertainties about his faith, his sense of his own sinful and rebellious heart, his experiences of loss, his own frequent ill health, were things that he offered up to God – and God used him to do a mighty work of preaching and teaching. Not only that, but Donne came at last to a sweet certainty of God's love and grace, so that he did not fear death, even though he had grappled with it, "stalked it"<sup>390</sup> in his poetry and sermons throughout his whole life.

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<sup>389</sup> Schmidt, *Glorious Companions*, p. 52.

<sup>390</sup> Schmidt, *Glorious Companions*, p. 48.

In Holy Sonnet 1, he had exclaimed in anguish, “Except thou rise and for thine own work fight, / Oh I shall soon despair, when I do see / That thou lov’st mankind well, yet wilt not choose me,” giving a sense of frustration at God’s apparent distance from his need. In contrast, Holy Sonnet 12, closes with an affirmation of God’s love: “thy all-healing grace and Spirit / Revive again what law and letter kill.” When the poet cries out “oh let that last will stand!” it is in desire rather than despair, for he knows now that “Thy law’s abridgement, and thy last command / Is all but love.”

Donne does not present us with a neat, tidy explanation of the Trinity; instead, he sidles up to the Trinity, looks sideways at it, writes around it and gradually draws closer to it – and becomes drawn, by grace, into that eternal loving communion. What Donne discovers, he encourages us to discover also: that “God is not some remote, unknowable Deity, a prisoner in his aloofness or shut up in his solitariness, but on the contrary the God who is free to go outside of himself, to share in the life of his creatures and enable them to share in his own eternal Life.”<sup>391</sup>

The doctrine of the Trinity, then, is far from being an doctrine of interest only to professional philosophers and theologians. Rather, it is a doorway into the heart of the Christian faith, a reality to be experienced with joy, love, and awe. Poetry can help us to open that door, so that a glimpse of what lies beyond may draw the doubter and the seeker into a saving relationship with God who has revealed Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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<sup>391</sup> Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 4.