Donne and Christ’s Spouse

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THE LIFE OF John Donne is more fully documented than that of any other English poet before the eighteenth century. Its principal stages are well known and uncontested: birth in 1572 into a family of eminent recusants and martyrs; childhood in a devoutly Catholic home; apprentice years at university, the Inns of Court, and in military expeditions; employment by Sir Thomas Egerton, the Lord Keeper, in 1598; fall from grace following his marriage to Ann More in 1601/2; years of frustrated ambition and hope; ordination to the priesthood in the Church of England in 1615; appointment as Dean of St. Paul’s in 1621; and death in 1631. Not even the abundance of documents, however, can fully reveal the history of Donne’s religious allegiances, connections, and beliefs from the time of his Catholic childhood and youth to his ordination to the Anglican priesthood and beyond.

To Izaak Walton, writing The Life and Death of Dr Donne (1640), the history of Donne’s conversion still seemed straightforward. Walton concedes and simultaneously excuses Donne’s Roman Catholic upbringing by asserting that his mother advised his tutors to ‘instil into him particular Principles of the Romish Church’. In effect, Walton apologetically adds, ‘they had almost obliged him to their faith’.1 With independent reasoning dawning at the age of 18, Walton continues, Donne ‘betrothed himself to no Religion’ and a year later began ‘seriously to survey, and consider the Body of Divinity, as it was then controverted betwixt the Reformed and the Roman Church’. As a result, Donne saw that ‘truth had too much light about her to be hid from so sharp an Inquirer; and he had too much ingenuity, not to acknowledge he had found her’ (p. 25). Henceforth, Walton can pass over in silence the awkward topic of Donne’s Catholic origins. When Donne is finally ordained, his transformation is equally smooth and absolute: ‘Now all his earthly affections were
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changed into divine love’ (p. 48). Although subsequent biographers have shown that Walton considerably telescoped the stages in Donne’s religious development,

the portrayal of Donne as a contented and loyal Anglican has remained strong, and may be summed up in J. B. Leishman’s claim that Donne was ‘never less than whole-hearted in his allegiance to the Church of England, which, for him as for Hooker, was and remained the just via media between the “paintedness” of the Church of Rome and the “nakedness” of Geneva’.3

Once Donne had been raised to an important place in the English canon, he was increasingly claimed as not just a major poet but also an exemplary Anglican. The doggedness with which the question of Donne’s conversion and his subsequent religious allegiances was discussed may be gathered from a heated debate in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1956. The reviewer of *Donne’s Poetry* by Clay Hunt thought that Donne had made a ‘conversion of convenience’,4 and unwisely suggested that Donne ‘must have felt that the death of his wife was a judgment on him for leaving the Roman Church’,5 later adding that ‘much of his scepticism might be accounted for as doubt as to whether he had done the right thing in leaving the Catholic Church’.6 Such contentious arguments came under heavy attack from Helen Gardner, J. B. Leishman, and Evelyn M. Simpson. Citing passages from *Pseudo-Martyr, Essays in Divinity* and, chiefly, from the *Sermons* (which Simpson was then editing), they did their best to show that ‘Donne was a sincere and convinced Anglican’.7 Whatever the quality of the reviewer’s arguments may have been – and his speculation about the effect of Donne’s wife’s death does seem wild – Gardner’s claim that the sermons constitute ‘the main evidence’,8 remains doubtful: if Donne had any doubts about his vocation, the pulpit would hardly have been the place for him to voice them.

The apologists’ impassioned tone suggests how much they believed to be at stake, and dissenting voices have increasingly made themselves heard. Whereas Walton saw Donne’s ordination as an answer to God’s call, John Carey reads it as a ‘capitulation’ after a long period of vain attempts to gain advancement at court.9 Arguing that Donne’s ambition was
the motive for his apostasy, Carey also insists that ‘he never, in a sense, escaped [the] grasp’ (p. 35) of the Roman Church. The term ‘apostasy’ is pertinent, not because Donne is likely to have thought of his defection from Rome in this way, but because he must have been fully aware that it would be considered as such by his former co-religionists. Dominic Baker-Smith believed that ‘when Donne ceased to be a Papist and became an Anglican it is unlikely that he thought of it as a “conversion”: it was simply a purer realization of his Christian conviction, an advance in self-awareness’. This hardly seems plausible. When adherence to a religious denomination had a decisive impact upon one’s social position, indeed when simply practising one’s religion was punishable, conversion must surely have felt like a break. Samuel Johnson’s account of conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism is very different from Baker-Smith’s:

A man who is converted from Protestantism to Popery, may be sincere: he parts with nothing: he is only super-adding to what he already had. But a convert from Popery to Protestantism gives up so much of what he has held as sacred as anything that he retains; there is so much laceration of mind in such a conversion, that it can hardly be sincere and lasting.

Grierson thought that this might well have applied to Donne. Carey’s challenging but necessarily speculative study has been followed up most notably by Dennis Flynn, who shows that Donne was suspected of crypto-Catholicism well into the seventeenth century and that letters to his former employer Sir Thomas Egerton and to his father-in-law in 1602 reveal that they found nothing strange about the possibility of Donne seeking religious exile on the Continent.

Certain aspects of Donne’s poetry further complicate the question of his religious allegiance. In the autumn of 1601 Donne considered writing a satire in which he would have portrayed Queen Elizabeth as one of the world’s great heretics. In several manuscripts of ‘A Litanie’ – probably written in 1608 – the stanza on the Virgin Mary is given the distinctly Catholic title ‘Our Lady’. Gardner thinks that ‘the variant is
probably merely scribal’, a conjecture which it seems difficult either to disprove or to substantiate. Yet even if she is right, it indicates that the poem, which grants Mary intercessory powers in which most Protestants disbelieved, circulated among Catholics. ‘La Corona’, probably written around the same time, derives most of its ideas, phrasings, and structure from Roman Catholic worship, the rosary, the Roman Breviary, and the medieval Prymer. According to Gardner, ‘it is doubtful whether Donne felt there was anything particularly Catholic’ (p. xxii) about the poem, but Donne must have known what he was up to.

The poem on which debate over Donne’s religious position has particularly centred is his sonnet ‘Show me deare Christ, thy spouse, so bright and cleare’, often referred to as Holy Sonnet XVIII. It shows Donne already several years into his Anglican ministry wrestling with the question of the true Church. It is significant that the sonnet has been appropriated in order to confirm biographical prejudice. As P. M. Oliver has recently pointed out:

In many cases the very scholars who were responsible for providing the standard editions of Donne’s writing also saw it as their mission to repackage for their readers a Donne who, once he had made up his mind to throw in his lot with the church of England, was untroubled by doubt or divided loyalty.15

However, stripping Donne’s poetry of such biographical presuppositions can reveal both an artistry and a man that are more complex and problematic than previously assumed.

‘Show me deare Christ’ has had a peculiar textual history. Unlike most of Donne’s poems, it was not printed among the Collected Poems of 1633 nor in any of the subsequent seventeenth century editions of 1635, 1639, 1649, 1650, 1654, or 1669. It is extant in the Westmoreland manuscript which was purchased by Sir Edmund Gosse at the sale of the library of the earl of Westmoreland in 1892.16 The manuscript is in the hand of Rowland Woodward, a colleague of Donne’s at Lincoln’s Inn who later accompanied him to the Continent.17 Gosse printed the sonnet in his Life and Letters of John Donne.
(1899). His rendering is extremely careless, with a number of unwarranted capitalisations, two substitutions of ‘who’ for ‘which’, and many commas omitted with others added. Most distressingly, in line 3, Gosse has the nonsensical ‘robb’d and lore’ instead of ‘rob’d and tore’.

The sonnet was next printed in Herbert J. C. Grierson’s Oxford edition, *The Poems of John Donne* (1912), and then in his anthology, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler* (1921) which – partly owing to T. S. Eliot’s famous TLS review18 – rehabilitated Donne and his successors. Gosse’s mistakenly capitalised ‘She’ in line 2, referring to the Catholic Church, passes into Grierson (as do three other minor deviations from the original), a mistake of some importance as the word may have been capitalised in Catholic usage. For his edition of 1949, John Hayward does not seem to have cared to consult the original manuscript and simply reproduced Grierson without alteration.19 It was left to Helen Gardner’s edition of *The Divine Poems* to provide the first good text of Donne’s sonnet in 1952:

Show me deare Christ, thy spouse, so bright and cleare.  
What, is it she, which on the other shore  
Goes richly painted? or which rob’d and tore  
Laments and mournes in Germany and here?  
Sleepes she a thousand, then peepes up one yeare?  
Is she selfe truth and errs? now new, now’outwore?  
Doth she,’and did she, and shall she evermore  
On one, on seaven, or on no hill appeare?  
Dwells she with us, or like adventuring knights  
First travaile we to seeke and then make love?  
Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sights,  
And let myne amorous soule court thy mild Dove,  
Who is most trew, and pleasing to thee, then  
When she’is embrac’d and open to most men.

Gardner’s edition has remained authoritative, and all subsequent editions are heavily indebted to it. But even though textually reliable, the sonnet as printed by her is accompanied by critical apparatus that is far from disinterested and – passed
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on as it has been by others, if with some variations – continues to hamper a thorough understanding of the poem. Gardner’s awareness of the importance of ‘Show me deare Christ’ is shown by the fact that she devotes nearly seven pages to a detailed discussion of it while spending less than fourteen pages on the other eighteen Holy Sonnets.

The sonnet’s late date is important. While there has been no agreement on the exact year of composition, no scholar seems to have doubted that it was composed after Donne’s ordination in 1615. Its absence from the early printed editions suggests, as Gardner pointed out, that it was written ‘after his ordination, when he was anxious not to be thought of as a versifier’ (pp. 77-8). That Donne wrote some of his Holy Sonnets after 1615 is also indicated by Walton, who wrote that Donne ‘was not so fallen out with heavenly Poetry as to forsake that: no not in his declining age; witnessed then by many Divine Sonnets, and other high, holy, and harmonious Composures’ (p. 61). The sonnet that precedes ‘Show me deare Christ’ in the Westmoreland manuscript, ‘Since she whome I lovd, hath payd her last debt’, is likewise absent from the early printed editions and must have followed the death of Donne’s wife in 1617. While this does not necessarily mean, as Gosse (vol. ii, p. 106) and Grierson (vol. ii, p. 225) held, that ‘Show me deare Christ’ must also have been written around the same time, it does support a late date. Gardner argues (p. 124) that the Protestant Church ‘which rob’d and tore / Laments and mournes in Germany and here’ recalls the battle of the White Mountain near Prague in October 1620 in which the Protestants had recently suffered a crushing defeat. She shows that the military defeat was widely lamented in England, including in one of Donne’s sermons, and her suggestion makes good sense of the otherwise puzzling depiction of Protestantism in discomfiture.

Strong evidence therefore supports and no evidence contradicts the argument that ‘Show me deare Christ’ was written several years after Donne’s ordination.20

The sonnet consists of a series of questions bracketed by three petitions which the speaker addresses to Christ, the first and second being nearly identical – ‘Show me deare Christ, thy spouse’ (l. 1), ‘Betray kind husband thy spouse’ (l. 11) – the
third, ‘let myne amorous soule court thy mild Dove’ (l. 12), preparing for the extravagant conceit in the subordinate clause of the final couplet.

The opening line is by now too well known to be read with much care. Its balanced structure highlights the sonnet’s subject, the true Church, called Christ’s ‘spouse’. The latter comes in central position framed by two commas, with two feet and four words on either side. Assonance and consonance further emphasise the point: ‘Show’ – ‘so’; ‘deare’ – ‘cleare’; ‘Christ’ – ‘bright’.

The series of questions is introduced by an exclamatory ‘What’, implying that the following questions are merely rhetorical. None of the churches on offer seems in any way bridelike: the Roman Church, with its elaborate ritual, images, statues, and coloured clerical clothes, looks more like a painted whore, further suggesting the apocalyptic Whore of Babylon with which Rome was often equated. The Protestant Church seems forgotten by Christ, ‘rob’d and tore’ rather than ‘bright and cleare’. Finally, the Genevan Calvinist Sleeping Beauty, allegedly waking up to the purity of the early Church after a millennium of corruption between the sixth and sixteenth centuries, contradicts Christ’s promise that his church would always be with his followers (Matthew 28: 20) rather than in abeyance.

In carefully juxtaposing the three churches, the Roman Catholic, the Protestant in Germany and England, and the Calvinist in Geneva, the sonnet points out that all three lack the qualities belonging to the true Church. Donne does nothing to advocate the position of the Church of England rather than that of Rome or Geneva, even though the *via media*, as Hooker, Andrewes and others saw it, was not simply one of three ways, but the right one.21 George Herbert’s opening of his poem ‘The British Church’ sounds like a corrective to Donne’s ‘rob’d and tore’ woman:

*I joy, deare Mother, when I view*  
*Thy perfect lineaments and hue*  
*Both sweet and bright.*22

Here are grounds, it would seem, to diagnose, as Carey does, ‘the lasting disorientation’ (p. 30) that Donne’s apostasy
entailed. Donne’s latter-day hagiographers, however, imper-
turbably assert that nothing in the sonnet suggests that Donne
was less than a contentedly settled Anglican: Evelyn Simpson
insisted that it was ‘perfectly compatible with loyalty to the
Church of England’, a statement Gardner was eager to sur-
pass by writing that ‘the sonnet is not merely “compatible
with loyalty to the Church of England”; it could hardly have
been written by anyone but an Anglican’ (p. 122). Gardner’s
annotation and argument reveal the critical effects of such
biographical assumptions.

To start with, she ingeniously attempts to manipulate the
sonnet’s meaning by proposing an analogy between Israel and
the unbridelike woman who ‘rob’d and tore / Laments and
mournes in Germany and here’: ‘I would suggest that Donne
has seen a parallel between the captivity of Israel and the total
collapse of the Protestants after the defeat of the Elector in the
battle of the White Mountain, outside Prague, on 29 October
1620’ (p. 124). What sense would such a parallel make if we
are not to extrapolate from it the idea that the German and
English Protestant Church, though temporarily discomfited,
really is God’s chosen people – the very people whom the
prophet Isaiah refers to as God’s spouse (Isaiah 54: 5)?
Donne’s parallelism, however, is clearly not a far-fetched one
between the captivity of Israel and the collapse of a Protestant
army but the obvious one between the sonnet’s three churches
which are all equally unbridelike.

A more flagrant and highly influential misreading by
Gardner concerns the two lines which occur at the heart of the
sonnet:

Doth she,’and did she, and shall she evermore
On one, on seaven, or on no hill appeare?

The central position of these lines is important. The first six
lines have shown Donne’s cynical speaker – similar to the one
we find in such love poems as ‘Goe, and catche a falling
starre’, ‘The Indifferent’, and ‘Womans Constancy’ – getting
more and more impatient as his questions become increasingly
elliptical and brief: one and a half lines, one line, half a line.
Yet after line 6 the mood changes as the speaker seems to take
stock, realising that the three churches, all equally unlike
Christ’s spouse, are not, may never have been, and may never be the true Church. That the three churches of line 8 stand successively for the Roman Catholic, the Anglican and German Protestant and the Genevan Calvinist churches seems at least a natural inference. Gardner, however, having previously perceived a parallel between Israel – temporarily in captivity but nevertheless the chosen people – and the Church in ‘Germany and here’, is eager to dissociate the latter from her ungodly companions: whereas ‘the Church on seven hills is the Roman Church, and the Church on no hill is the Genevan’, the Church on one hill, she flatly asserts, ‘is Mount Moriah, where Solomon built the Temple’ (p. 80). Gardner explains that ‘there was dispute between the Jews who worshipped there, and the Samaritans, who worshipped on Mount Gerizim; cf. Christ’s words to the woman of Samaria: “The hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father” (John, iv. 21)” (p. 80). From where in the poem does one derive the knowledge that the one hill is Mount Moriah? How is it relevant to the rest of the sonnet? The footnote seems itself to require a footnote. For help, one turns to Gardner’s detailed Appendix C (pp. 121-7) devoted to ‘The Interpretation of Donne’s Sonnet on the Church’, only to find that it neither mentions Mount Moriah nor explains in any other way how a reference to Solomon’s temple could be relevant in the given context.

The problem Gardner is trying to solve is clear enough: if Rome is on seven hills, as it surely is, and Geneva is on no hill, we are left with a hill which ought to be in ‘Germany and here’. Neither Wittenberg nor Canterbury, the two places that would most readily qualify, can in any way be said to be ‘on a hill’. The chief difficulty with Gardner’s reading, however, is that the greatest part of what constituted Geneva in the sixteenth century is situated upon a conspicuous hill. It is true that, in another context, Donne opposed the Church of England to ‘a Church in the lake, [and] a Church upon seven hills’ and Herbert, in ‘The British Church’, even refers to Geneva as ‘in the Valley’ (l. 19), but there need be nothing inconsistent about these different geographical descriptions. Geneva is, of course, on a lake. From a wider perspective, Geneva can be said to be ‘in the valley’ since the city and its
surroundings are set between two mountain chains, the Alps in the south-east, and the Jura, to the north-west.

Donne must have known that Geneva is also on a hill. Logan Pearsall Smith may have exaggerated when claiming that in the seventeenth century 'no good Protestant . . . would complete his foreign trip without a visit to this heroic city, the capital of continental Protestantism', but Donne, even if his travels did not take him to Geneva, may have had opportunities to learn about the place from the numerous Marian exiles who returned from Geneva to London after Elizabeth ascended the throne. Fynes Moryson’s massive Folio Itinerary (1617), dedicated to William, earl of Pembroke, the Lord Chamberlain, points out that the greatest part of Geneva is situated ‘vpon a Hill’ (p. 181). Most positively, Donne would have heard about Geneva through Sir Henry Wotton, ‘Donne’s lifelong friend’. Wotton had spent fourteen months there in 1593/4, living in the house of Isaac Casaubon, the exiled French Huguenot theologian who was Professor of Greek at the Académie, which was situated on top of the hill. Given that the friendship between Donne and Wotton, begun in Oxford, was, in Walton’s words, ‘continued in their various Travels, and more confirmed in the religious Friendship of Age’ (p. 15), had Donne ever entertained the idea that Geneva is on ‘no hill’ Wotton would surely have corrected it.

There can be no reasonable doubt then that Donne’s ‘one hill’ refers to Geneva rather than to Gardner’s far-fetched ‘Mount Moriah’. Nevertheless, her misreading remains entrenched. Five editions, all published in the last fifteen years or so, provide the following glosses to ‘On one, on seaven, or on no hill’:

- Mt. Moriah, where Solomon’s temple stood; the seven hills of Rome; the Genevan church stood on no hill.
- Mount Moriah, where Solomon built the Temple; or the seven hills of Rome; or Geneva, by its lake.
- Mount Moriah where Solomon built the Temple, the seven hills of Rome, and Calvin’s Geneva, where there is ‘no hill’.

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Solomon’s temple was built on Mount Moriah (2 Chronicles 3: 1), Rome is a city built on seven hills, and Geneva is on no hill.33

The one hill alludes to Mount Moriah on which Solomon built his temple; seven hills, to Catholic Rome; no hill, to Calvinist Geneva.34

Most annotations are necessarily highly derivative, but it is surprising that an edition which first appeared as far back as the 1950s can still exert such a pervasive and powerful influence. Its recent reprint in the Oxford Scholarly Classics series (Oxford, 2000) does nothing to diminish this influence.

If ‘one hill’ refers to Geneva, the church on ‘no hill’ appears logically to be the Protestant one ‘in Germany and here’. It is understandable that Gardner should wish to dissociate the latter from its disreputable Roman and Genevan company, but Donne himself is less than generous to the church whose minister he had already been for several years. It is twice mentioned as on a par with Rome and Geneva, all three being equally unbridelike and, it seems, all equally unlikely to be in the one location where Christ’s spouse was in the past, is now, or ever will be.

Christ’s spouse, of whom the speaker twice prays to be granted a vision, is a biblical image of the true Church that is used in analogy to the Old Testament equation of Israel with God’s spouse.35 Editors, following Gardner, quote Revelation: ‘the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white’ (Rev. 19: 7-8). Just as pertinent, however, is St. Paul’s admonition in his letter to the Ephesians:

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. . . . For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his
wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. (Eph. 5: 25-32)

As Christ’s spouse in Donne is ‘bright and cleare’, so the glorious Church in Ephesians is without blemish; and whereas the latter has neither spot nor wrinkle, Donne’s Roman Church needs to be ‘painted’.

The passage from Ephesians shows that the spouse is as much the church that has existed in history since Christ’s incarnation – the Church Militant that is – as it is the apocalyptic Church Triumphant. The speaker’s petition to see and unite himself with the true Church, therefore, is in earnest and of great urgency (a point that is poetically emphasised by the number of trochees in the first foot), rather than a rhetorical device that allows for the subsequent realisation that the true Church will only come into existence at the end of time. Misinterpretations that follow from Gardner’s identification of Christ’s spouse with the figure in Revelation rather than the Church Militant of Ephesians attempt to take the sting out of Donne’s petition to be united with the true Church. If the latter has no earthly existence, then the fact that Donne finds no resemblance between the true Church and the church he represents is far from disconcerting. It is no surprise, then, to find that Leishman, an ardent defender of Donne’s ‘whole-hearted . . . allegiance to the Church of England’, argues that ‘it is upon the vast and painful difference between these Churches on earth, whether mourning or rejoicing, and the Spouse of Christ, the promised Bride of the Apocalypse, that he is chiefly insisting’. Interpretations of ‘Show me deare Christ’ that depart from his reassuring assessment of Donne’s attitude towards the Anglican Church are based, Leishman adds, upon ‘a complete misapprehension’.36

The same misunderstanding is at the heart of an analysis by Claude J. Summers who believes that the sonnet ‘exposes the poet’s recognition of the preposterous irony involved in any quest for true religion that identifies Christ’s spouse with a temporal institution’, and, accordingly, understands the sonnet’s argument to be ‘that true religion may not be found in
any earthly institution at all' and can only be found 'after the dangers and difficulties of life'. However, the true Church is not Christ's spouse because it is made up of sinless parts (it is not), but because it was 'sanctified' and cleansed by Christ's death on the cross. So if 'true religion' is to be coterminous with 'the true Church', then Summers does justice neither to Donne's sonnet nor to his theology. Divines may have disagreed furiously about what the true Church was – whether it was visible or invisible, or whether the visible and the invisible Church were two aspects of the same church, whether it consisted of the baptised, of the elect, of the sum of orthodox Christians, or of the adherents to the Nicene 'One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church' – but Christians have always held, and so does Donne's speaker, that the true Church is a crucial object of humanity's earthly quest for the transcendent.

Helen Gardner's argument about the typically Anglican quality of Donne's sonnet needs to be questioned from yet another angle. In a letter to Goodyer (tentatively dated 1609 by Gardner and Timothy Healy), Donne professed that he considered 'Rome', 'Wittemberg', and 'Geneva' all 'vital beams of one Sun'. Although the tripartite division is analogous to that in 'Show me deare Christ', the images employed are markedly different. While the sonnet stresses the unbridelike aspect of each of the three churches, the letter to Goodyer emphasises the unifying source from which all three originate. The two texts are complementary rather than either identical or contradictory: by providing access to the Christian life through baptism and professing the basic truths of Christianity, the three churches derive from the same centre, but by ministering to the faithful without mutual union in form or content, they are equally unbridelike. In the Essays in Divinity, Donne wrote:

I do zealously wish, that the whole catholick Church, were reduced to such Unity and agreement, in the form and profession Established, in any one of these Churches (though ours were principally to be wished) which have not by any additions destroyed the foundation and possibility of salvation in Christ Jesus.
In fact, the plea for ‘Unity and agreement, in the form and profession Established’, though Gardner’s biographical prejudice leads her to see it as bolstering the claim for Donne’s loyal Anglicanism (p. 123), was more of a Roman Catholic than an Anglican priority. While Rome unwaveringly asserted that Christ wanted his church to be catholic, that is universal, in matters of doctrine and of church government (pointing to Christ’s prayer ‘that they all may be one’, John 17: 21), Anglican divines (invoking the “Cyprian Privilege” to be governed by [their] own patriarch’) tended to stress the rights of ‘independent’ or ‘particular churches’ based on a ‘formal separation’ with independent church government and ‘provincial synods’ with the right ‘to issue decrees in causes of faith’. Donne does not advocate a return to pre-Reformation times under papal authority, but he does insist on the desirability of a unified church in matters of faith and orders. He seems to have been fully aware that what Carey calls his ‘desire for a church that would swallow up all existing churches’ (p. 279) would be perceived as a Roman Catholic rather than an Anglican instinct: ‘Let a man be zealous, and fervent in apprehension of sin’, Donne writes,

and there flies out an arrow, that gives him the wound of a Puritan. Let a man be zealous of the house of God, and say any thing by way of moderation, for the repairing of the ruines of that house, and making up the differences of the Church of God, and there flies out an arrow, that gives him the wound of a Papist.

Another, darker, reading could reinforce the suggestion that the sonnet displays a return of what Donne’s conversion – or apostasy – had repressed. The sonnet’s ending is disturbing on several counts. In its use of a sexual image whose spiritual tenor is opposed to its physical vehicle, it is paralleled by the ending of the Holy Sonnet ‘Batter my heart’:

for I
Except you’enthall mee, never shal be free,
Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.
As ravishment implies chastity, so, in ‘Show me deare Christ’, multiple adultery means truthfulness:

let myne amorous soule court thy mild Dove,
Who is most trew, and pleasing to thee, then
When she’is embrac’d and open to most men.\(^{44}\)

Far from uniting with his spouse the Church, Christ is invited to stand by as a *mari complaisant*, if not to act as a pander. Even though he recognised the sonnet’s ‘perilous balance’ at this stage, Frank Kermode thought that ‘the main point is the *glorious* difference of this from a merely human marriage’.\(^{45}\)

Yet the glorious implication of the marriage between Christ and his spouse the Church is not normally a promiscuous wife but a polygamous husband. As the Church is Christ’s spouse, so are her members. The address ‘kind husband’ exemplifies this glorious extension, allegorically illustrated by Christ’s parable of the ten virgins and the (polygamous) bridegroom.\(^{46}\)

In line 11 ‘Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sights’ takes up the plea of the opening line, but gone are its straightforward meaning and balanced structure. The petition is not simply ambivalent, the word ‘betray’ wavering between disclosure and disloyalty; it is paradoxical. The passage from ‘kind husband’ to ‘thy spouse’ records a kind of apostasy. Whereas ‘kind husband’ implies the maximum intimacy and presupposes belonging to the Church, the need for Christ to betray his spouse to the speaker implies that the latter has unchurched himself. The line suggests a third betrayal apart from Christ’s revelation or abandonment of his spouse: the speaker’s own disloyalty to the Church.

If the conceit in the remaining lines evokes the possibility of the speaker embracing or entering Christ’s spouse the Church, it thereby turns the spouse into a prostitute reminiscent of the whore of lines 2 and 3. The painted Roman woman of the beginning of the sonnet – initially denied to have any resemblance with the true Church – ends up in association with the spouse who is ‘embrac’d and open to most men’ at the sonnet’s close. Moreover, the whore’s openness ‘to most men’ appears to make her an advocate of the catholicity which Donne knew would be associated with the Roman Church. Perhaps it is not
by accident that Helen Gardner refrains from commenting on how the image of the whore, once referring to the Roman Catholic Church, once to Christ’s spouse, goes full circle.

As its absence from the early printed editions implies, ‘Show me deare Christ’ was not intended for a wide readership. Grierson, followed by Douglas Bush, thought that ‘it is clear enough why this sonnet was not published. It would have revealed Donne, already three years in orders, as still conscious of all the difficulties involved in a choice between the three divisions of Christianity’ (vol. ii, p. 235). It seems unlikely that we shall ever be able to determine why Holy Sonnets XVII to XIX in the Westmoreland manuscript were not included in any of the early editions. The bold conceit in the final lines, the attitude it displays towards Protestantism ‘in Germany and here’ and, perhaps, the date of composition may all be partly responsible. It is even possible that manuscripts did exist but that none could be procured in 1633.

Other examples confirm that the opinions Donne expressed were deeply affected by their expected recipients. The readers of a Donne eager for preferment or of Dr. John Donne, Dean of St. Paul’s, could not expect to be told as much as private friends addressed in letters or as the ‘very restricted audience’ Arthur F. Marotti believes ‘Show me deare Christ’ to have been designed for. Where private Donne can put the Church of England on an unbridelike par with the churches of Rome and Geneva, public Donne made sure of advocating the church he represented against its opponents:

> the Church of God, is not so beyond Sea, as that we must needs seek it there, either in a painted Church, on one side, or in a naked Church, on another; a Church in a Dropsie, overflowne with Ceremonies, or a Church in a Consumption, for want of such Ceremonies, as the primitive Church found usefull.

Donne seems similarly divided in his attitudes towards the question of whether or not Catholics should be obliged to take the Oath of Allegiance to the monarch. In a letter to Goodyer of 1609, Donne writes that ‘there is a perplexity (as farre as I see yet) and both sides may be in justice, and innocence; and
the wounds which they inflict upon the adverse part, are all se
defendendo'. Here Donne is surprisingly balanced and
understanding towards the Catholic position. He makes it
clear that his opinion is for his friend’s ears only: ‘To you that
are not easily scandalized, and in whom, I hope, neither my
Religion nor Morality can suffer, I dare write my opinion of
that Book in whose bowels you left me’ (p. 160). However,
Donne’s refusal to come down on either side of the question in
his letter to Goodyer did not prevent him from defending
James’s cause in Pseudo-Martyr (published January 1610),
dedicated to the monarch himself, in what seems to have been
an attempt to recommend himself for social advancement.

In a letter to Sir Robert Ker of 1619 Donne insisted that
Biathanatos, his treatise on suicide of 1607/8, had been ‘written by Jack Donne, and not by Dr. Donne’, a distinction
Walton was only too happy to take up and construct around it
his narrative of Donne as a latter-day St. Augustine, sinning
Jack turning miraculously and irrevocably into the saintly
Doctor. If the distinction between Jack Donne and Dr. Donne
is useful, it is in distinguishing not the sinner from the saint,
but the private from the public man. Where the former, in
private letters or poems, could allow doubts and divided
allegiances to transpire, balance the arguments of different
factions and hint at possible Catholic connections, the latter, in
his more public writings, held the party line. Mark Twain said
that ‘biography is the clothes and buttons of the man, but the
real biography of a man is lived in his head twenty-four hours
a day, and that you can never know’. The final admonition is
true enough, but in the quest for the ‘real biography’ we can
do better, surely, than to mistake the clothes and buttons for
the man. To claim then with Gardner that Donne’s sermons
constitute ‘the main evidence’ of his religious allegiances is
to miss the more interesting part of his complex mind and
personality.

Donne’s poem ‘To Mr. Tilman after he had taken orders’
suggested to Gardner ‘an accent of warm sincerity . . . as in all
Donne’s references to his late-adopted profession’, where
Marotti, more convincingly, has seen a ‘characteristic self-persuasive urgency rooted in Donne’s uncomfortable mixture of
secular and religious motives and his ambivalent feelings about
his own vocation’. Even though his picture is altogether more complex, Bald also clings to the conversion narrative that accompanies Donne’s ordination. Commenting on the years 1607-10 and on the inner conflicts displayed in the Holy Sonnets datable to these years, Bald writes:

The frequent outcome of such crises is conversion, either sudden or gradual, but Donne still had some years to wait before he was secure in the conviction of God’s ever-present mercy. As yet there is no sense of release, or that his prayers have been fully answered. When the true date of most of the ‘Holy Sonnets’ is recognized, however, a host of difficulties vanishes. One is no longer startled by the utter absence of inward peace, nor puzzled by the lack of any sense of priestly vocation. These sonnets were not written, as was earlier supposed, by a man in holy orders, but during a period of Donne’s life when he had no vocation and felt keenly that he had no place in the divinely ordered scheme. His integrity, too, is vindicated, and one understands far better his prolonged hesitation to enter the Church.

But even though most of the sonnets ‘were not written . . . by a man in holy orders’, Donne’s sonnet on the Church was. ‘Show me deare Christ’ conveys neither post-conversion ‘inward peace’ nor a ‘sense of priestly vocation’. On the contrary, the outrageous final conceit clearly marks it as a poem by Jack Donne. Date all the Holy Sonnets to 1607-10 and the difficulties it presents vanish. Consider ‘Show me deare Christ’ as written ten years later and they reappear.

Left out of a biographical account whose narrative it does not fit, interpreted and annotated so as to conform to biographical prejudice, ‘Show me deare Christ’ fares badly in what are still the standard biography of Donne and the standard edition of his Holy Sonnets. It is a richer and more disturbed poem than it has been made out to be, and shows, several years after his ordination, how complex and divided a person Donne remained.

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NOTES

5 *TLS*, 16 March 1956, p. 164.
8 Ibid.
12 ‘John Donne and the “Via Media”,’ *MLR* 43 (1948), 305.
15 *Donne’s Religious Writing: A Discourse of Feigned Devotion*, Longman Medieval and Renaissance Library (London and New York, 1997), p. 6. See also Oliver’s reading of ‘Show me deare Christ’ (pp. 205-8).
16 The manuscript is now in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. I would like to thank Diana Burnham of the Berg Collection for providing me with a facsimile.
17 See Bald, *John Donne*, pp. 74-5, 146.
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Larry Pebworth (eds.), ‘Bright Shootes of Everlastingnesse’: The Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric (Columbia, 1987), p. 77, have questioned Gardner’s dating without suggesting a plausible alternative. They agree, however, on the plausibility of a late date.


27 There is no extant document proving that Donne ever visited Geneva. He may well have undertaken continental travels to Italy as early as c. 1590. Even though Bald (John Donne, p. 52) speculates that he may have passed through Switzerland, he may well not have visited Geneva considering he was still a Catholic at the time. His travels with Sir Robert Drury in 1611/12 and as chaplain to Viscount Doncaster in 1619 do not seem to have gone further south than Heidelberg, but if, as seems likely, he travelled from Paris to Venice with Sir Walter Chute during their stay on the Continent in 1605 and early 1606 (Bald, pp. 148-53), he may have passed through Geneva then.

28 John Evelyn likewise noted – though after Donne’s death – that the city was ‘built on a rising ground’. The Diary of John Evelyn, ed. E. S. de Beer, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1955), ii. 524.
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28 Bald, John Donne, p. 13.
36 The Monarch of Wit, pp. 269-70.
39 Selected Prose, p. 139.
42 Sermons, ii. 58.
43 Donne’s conceit seems to have been striking enough to be taken up by Thomas Carew who, in ‘An Elegie upon the Death of the Deane of Pauls, Dr. John Donne’, first printed in the Collected Poems of 1633, addresses Donne’s ‘brave Soule, that . . . committed holy Rapes upon our Will’ (pp. 15-17).
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49 *Sermons*, vi. 284.
50 *Letters to Several Persons of Honour*, p. 160.
52 *Selected Prose*, p. 152.
54 *TLS*, 25 May 1956, p. 320.
55 *Divine Poems*, p. 132.
57 Bald, *John Donne*, p. 236.