

The Two Herberts:
Philosophy, Religion, and Poetry in the works of George and Edward Herbert

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ABSTRACT

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In this dissertation, I compare the poetry, philosophy, and religious views of George and Edward Herbert. George Herbert's posthumously published volume of poetry, *The Temple* (1633), met with rapturous approval, lauded by Church of England stalwarts and Puritans alike. On the other hand, few were as reviled as Edward Herbert. In his metaphysical treatise *De Veritate* (1624) and his encyclopedia of religion *De Religione Gentilium* (1663), he inveighed against the authority of priests and argued that all religions were based on the same "five common notions." Both books received swift and bitter condemnations.

At first glance, then, it might seem that the brothers are quite different. In the first two chapters of my dissertation, however, I argue that both men were heavily influenced by Renaissance Christian Platonism and were responding to questions raised by the 16th-century skeptical crisis, which threw old religious knowledge into doubt: what is the relationship between God and humanity? How will I be saved? In the second half of my dissertation (chapters 3-5), I show that while they faced the same questions, they came up with diametrically opposed answers. George tries to reestablish his lost connection with God by turning the acts of reading and writing into holy rituals. Edward, on the other hand, believes he can best pursue true knowledge of God (and with it salvation) by divesting himself of traditional knowledge and relying only on his own mind. The deepest difference between the brothers, I argue, was their estimation of human power: Edward believed that he could achieve eternal life through his own feats of intellect and

will, while George consistently looks for divine aid, not only for his salvation but also for everything from maintaining his fragile health to the very act of writing poetry.

It would be the easiest thing in the world to oppose pious, backward-looking George with fearless, modern Edward. But this would do no justice to the complexity of either. Despite his claims to the contrary, for instance, Edward draws heavily on Renaissance Christian Platonism and claimed to be going back to a pure, original and ancient religion. And despite George's claims to be writing a kind of anti-poetry, in which he silences his own voice to let God speak, he was one of the greatest poetic innovators of his day. Instead, I contend that both brothers are Janus-faced: looking into the past and future at the same time. In my conclusion I consider Edward's place in the history of the study of religion, and what poetic works like *The Temple* can add to intellectual histories.

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The Two Herberts: Philosophy, Religion, and Poetry in the works of George and Edward Herbert

During the middle decades of the 17th century, the English public held diametrically opposed opinions of the brothers George (1593-1633) and Edward Herbert (1583-1648). After his death in 1633, George Herbert's book *The Temple* (1633) met with rapturous approval. He had created what many churchmen of his day deemed a contradiction in terms: poetry that celebrated divine rather than earthly love.¹ Perhaps even more than his contemporary John Donne, he inspired a whole line of poets. Henry Vaughan called him a "blessed man, whose holy *life* and *verse* gained many pious *Converts* (of whom I am the least)."² Even in an England bitterly divided by denominational disagreement, everyone from radical Puritans to staunch supporters of the established church praised and emulated his poetry. Two editions of *The Temple* appeared in its first year of publication, and ten editions over the next forty, totaling around 20,000 copies of the book.³ In an introductory note to *The Temple*, Herbert's old friend Nicholas Ferrar proclaimed him "a pattern or more for the age he lived in."⁴ On the other hand, few were as reviled as Edward Herbert. His books on truth and religion, in which he inveighed against the authority of priests and argued that all religions were based on five common notions, received swift and bitter condemnations. Apologists for

¹ In her *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: 'Divinitie, and Poesie, Met'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), Elizabeth Clarke has a good rundown of prominent divines who objected to poetry on the grounds that it might distract readers from sacred truths (see page 1).

² For a good summary of George Herbert's immediate reception, see Joseph Summers' *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 12-13. See also Clarke, 12.

³ Clarke, 7.

⁴ "The Printers to the Reader," line 27. *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007). Wilcox's book is the current and authoritative edition of Herbert's poems. I have drawn all my quotations from George Herbert's poetry from it.

Christianity like Richard Baxter noted that Christ had no role to play in Herbert's economy of salvation.⁵ Edward Herbert's infamy spread well beyond England, too. The Catholic Church placed his treatise *Of Truth* (1624), in which he exhorted readers to trust no judgment other than their own, on the index of forbidden books in 1634. In Germany, a Lutheran divine called him one of the "great deceivers," along with Baruch Spinoza and Thomas Hobbes.⁶

Frame:

It would be easy to present the conflict between the two Herberts as a window into a moment of great historical change: the moment the world became *modern*.⁷ Here stands pious George, looking back over the Reformation and medieval world, the ages of faith and ritual, sighing over all that had passed. And beside him, fearlessly facing the future, is Edward, foe of all ecclesial authority and received opinion, the first modernly religious man—in the sense of obeying only the dictates of his own conscience. Such a frame, I submit, would do justice to neither of them. It was George, after all, who translated Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* into Latin and congratulated Bacon on killing off the philosophy of the "schoolmen," those great inheritors of medieval

⁵ Richard Baxter, *More Reasons for the Christian Religion* (London, 1672), 558.

⁶ John Butler cites the Lutheran Christian Kortholt's objection to Edward Herbert in his [Butler's] *Lord Herbert of Chirbury (1582 - 1648): An Intellectual Biography* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 201. Another German professor, Johann Muses, coined the term "Cherburianism," which meant a natural theology completely eclipsing revelation. For more continental denunciations of Edward Herbert, see Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 629 and 633.

⁷ Of course, this would not be the first time the world became modern, starting with the *neoteroi* Greek poets who self-consciously rejected the conventions of epic poetry. The Latin *modernus* was coined in the 6th century, during the supposedly "dark ages," and the *via moderna* opened up in the high middle ages, the 14th century. So Edward and George lived during the transition to a relatively recent modern period.

scholasticism. It was Edward who assured his readers that nobody would ever unravel the secrets of blood circulation.

Instead, it seems to me that both brothers are Janus-faced, looking into the past and future at the same time. I will argue that both men grappled with similar questions and intellectual challenges (what is the relationship between God and humanity? How will I be saved?). Both brothers mine the past for resources to meet contemporary problems and, in doing so, create new possibilities for the future. Amos Funkenstein, in *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, has argued that reading 17th century figures as either radically discontinuous or totally continuous with the past are equally misleading options. Both “assume continuity and innovation to be disjunctive, mutually exclusive predicates. The ‘new’ often consists not in the invention of new categories or new figures of thought, but rather in a surprising employment of existing ones.”⁸ Taking Funkenstein as my guide, my basic question in this dissertation is as follows: what currents of European thought did George and Edward Herbert draw on, and how did they redirect them?

My dissertation places the brothers in the context of the intellectual upheavals of the 16th and 17th centuries. Intellectual historians like Michael Gillespie, Charles Taylor, and Hans Blumenberg have all argued that developments in late medieval thought upended settled ways of thinking about God and the cosmos: nature and grace came apart, the chain of being broke, and God appeared to recede from the universe, leaving humankind alone and uncertain about its salvation. In the 16th and 17th centuries, philosophers sought to recover lost certainties, but tried to use new methods. I will argue

⁸ Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 14.

that the brothers Herbert, too, were responding to this situation, though in ways that have yet to be fully appreciated.

How best to understand the transition into what Charles Taylor has called “a secular age” has occasioned much debate.⁹ Is what gets labeled “modern” (or Early Modern) wholly secular, a clean break with the past? Or is what appears to be new really Christian doctrine in disguise? Or is it some strange hybrid of the two? Beginning with the German jurist Carl Schmitt, some have argued that seemingly “secular” concepts emerging in the 17th century are only new names for old Christian ideas and patterns of thought. As Schmitt famously declared in his *Political Theology* (originally 1922): “All significant concepts of the modern theory of state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development ... but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts.”¹⁰ The key here is the phrase “systematic structure.” Although “modern” concepts have new names, they preserve existing social patterns. The seemingly secular sovereign, then, functions as a god, especially in his ability to make “exceptions” to the law, which are “analogous to the miracle in theology.”¹¹ The sovereign is like God, setting out the inviolable rule and laws. But although the citizens (or believers) must obey these laws exactly as they are written, the sovereign himself (like God) can suspend these laws at any moment (a miracle). The German historian Karl Löwith sees something similar in supposedly secular theories of historical progress, or indeed in any attempt to give history an intelligible unity and direction: “philosophy of history is ... entirely

⁹ Charles Taylor: *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 25-8.

¹⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 36.

¹¹ Schmitt, 36. For his whole discussion on the secularization of theological concepts, see 36-53.

dependent on theology of history, in particular on the theological concept of history as a history of fulfillment and salvation.”¹² The key point is that what appears to be a break between “theology” and secular thought was in fact an unrecognized continuity. Voltaire, Vico, Hegel, Marx, Schelling, Comte, and Proudhon—all are theologians of history.¹³ Schmitt and Löwith wrote in the first half of the 20th century, but some historians still read contemporary intellectual dilemmas as unacknowledged theology. More recently, Brad Gregory has argued that the dizzying array of contemporary beliefs about how best to live—strongly held and yet irreconcilable—are a direct consequence of the Reformation. The breakdown of medieval Christendom in the 16th century, in Gregory’s telling, led to multiple ideas about how best to understand and serve God. Unintentionally but inexorably, this led to greater and greater diversity of opinion (which Gregory regards as greater and greater confusion), resulting in a secular society resembling the world after the fall of the tower of Babel.¹⁴ Like Löwith and Schmitt, he sees continuity between the late middle ages and contemporary thought: “One of this book’s principal arguments is that the prevailing picture of a strong historical supersessionism between the late Middle Ages and the present is seriously misleading if not fundamentally mistaken.”¹⁵

Others have argued the exact opposite: there was indeed a fundamental split between a recognizably “pre-modern” and “modern” world, perhaps starting in the 16th century, but undeniable by the end of the 17th. For instance, Catherine Wilson hypothesizes that the recovery of Epicureanism in the 16th century offered a genuine

¹² Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 1.

¹³ Löwith, 18 and 191-192.

¹⁴ Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). An outline of his argument can be found on pages 5-21.

¹⁵ Gregory, 12.

alternative to traditional Christian thought of any denomination: “I want to establish that an intellectually compelling and robust tradition took materialism as the only valid frame of reference, not only for scientific inquiry but for the solution of the deepest problems of ethics and politics.”¹⁶ While Christianity had borrowed concepts from Aristotle, Plato, and other classical sources, “Epicureanism was not capable of assimilation in the same way,” because it denied providence, the gods’ interest in humanity, and declared death “inevitable and irreversible.”¹⁷ Of course, as Wilson admits, many tried to reconcile Greek atomism (whether derived from Epicurean sources or Democritus) with some form of Christianity—notably Francis Bacon. Even so, she insists, by the late 17th century, Epicureanism had changed how many understood the aims of human life and society: “Epicureanism accordingly furnished an alternative to Stoic and Christian rigorism, and it brought the issue of basic human welfare, understood as the satisfaction of non-intellectual needs, into focus.”¹⁸ The important point, for my purposes, is that Epicureanism served as an *alternative* to existing paradigms. “Modernity,” as understood by Wilson, means a substantial, if not clean, break with the old ways of thinking.

No one has argued for this break more forcefully or at greater length than Jonathan Israel, in his three-volume history of the Enlightenment. The Renaissance and even Reformation offered “only adjustments, modifications to what was essentially still a theologically conceived and ordered regional society.”¹⁹ The Enlightenment, and

¹⁶ Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), v. For a best-selling version of this argument, see Stephen Greenblatt’s *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011).

¹⁷ Wilson, 4. See also page 37.

¹⁸ Wilson, 254.

¹⁹ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, vi. The epochal importance of the Enlightenment, over against the changes wrought by the Renaissance and Reformation, is a frequent theme of Israel’s. See for example his *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3: “The Enlightenment, I maintain, was the most important and

especially the “Radical Enlightenment” whose spirit became incarnate in the person of Baruch Spinoza, caused an “unprecedented and, for some, intoxicating, intellectual and spiritual upheaval ... a vast turbulence in every sphere of knowledge and belief which shook European civilization to its foundations.”²⁰ Israel focuses on the hundred years between 1650 and 1750, which he calls, following the historian Paul Hazard, “the crisis of the European mind.”²¹ Crisis here means a “decisive breakthrough of modern rationalism and secularization to predominance in western civilization...”²² While Wilson and Israel may tell slightly different stories, both define the “modern” as a more or less clean break with almost everything that had come before.

Other scholars, however, have seen a more complicated relationship. One of the early rejoinders to Schmitt was Hans Blumenberg, a German philosopher and historian. He admitted that what he called “the modern age” had indeed emerged from medieval Christian thought, but it was not therefore Christianity in disguise. Instead, from the late medieval period to the seventeenth century, “What mainly occurred in the process that is interpreted as secularization, at least (so far) in all but a few recognizable and specific instances, should be described not as the *transposition* of authentically theological contents into secularized alienation from their origin but rather as the *reoccupation* of answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated.”²³ Transposition is what Schmitt described: the structure of divine sovereignty (absolute ruler, maker of the exception) smuggled into seemingly secular

profound intellectual, social, and cultural transformation of the Western world since the Middle Ages and the most formative in shaping modernity.”

²⁰ *Radical Enlightenment*, 3. For the importance of Spinoza, see page 12 and then pages 159-327.

²¹ *Radical Enlightenment*, 14-22.

²² *Radical Enlightenment*, 20.

²³ Hans Blumenberg. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), 65. See also pages 44-45.

political theories. Blumenberg's reoccupation is something else. Blumenberg thinks that the frustrated eschatological hopes of early Christianity forced Christians to create a "secular" world and time. He reads Christian thought, from Augustine to the late nominalists, as continual efforts (all doomed to fail, he thought) to account for God's tardiness.²⁴ The "modern age" begins, Blumenberg argues, when people like Descartes and Bacon started to try to account for this secular time and space on its *own* terms, through "methodological doubt," and "an absolute beginning founded only on itself," which may not have intended to be (but in fact was) an act of supreme self-assertion.²⁵ Christ's delayed return necessitated the creation of a "secular" realm, but that realm eventually received a new evaluation and justification: "The process of the disappearance of order and teleology in nature has undergone a revaluation; what is no longer found ready as reality benefiting man can be interpreted as a possibility open to him. The widening of this horizon of possibilities occurs precisely because the process of the disappearance of inherent purposes is no longer merely accepted and (so to speak) suffered but rather is taken in hand, as a task of critical destruction, and pressed forward."²⁶ The crucial point here is that although Christianity may have created the *saeculum*, "secular" or modern thought eventually "reoccupies" it in the sense of understanding its laws and justifying human life within it without appeal to Christian theology. So the "modern age" is not a clean break, or "swerve" (as Stephen Greenblatt would have it) but rather a dialectical, historical consequence of developments (Blumenberg would probably say failures) internal to Christianity.

²⁴ See Blumenberg's chapter on eschatology, 37-51.

²⁵ Blumenberg. The quotes come from page 145.

²⁶ Blumenberg, 211. See his key chapter on "Cosmogony as a Paradigm of Self-Constitution," 205-226.

Several later historians have concurred with Blumenberg in part. Louis Dupré, for instance, argues that “the rise of modern culture” began with the Franciscan nominalist attacks on the Thomist synthesis of intellect and will.²⁷ “We may regard religious thought of the Early Modern period—from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries—as a prolonged attempt to recover the lost unity.”²⁸ Michael Allen Gillespie also agrees that late medieval conflicts between Aristotelian and nominalist scholastics propelled Europe through a period of intellectual upheaval that resulted in a world he, too, calls “modern,” and yet also cautions that “what is missing in [Blumenberg’s] account is the recognition that the shapes that modern thought subsequently assumed were not arbitrary reoccupations of medieval positions but a realization of the metaphysical and theological possibilities left by the antecedent tradition.”²⁹ In other words, Gillespie argues that late medieval conflicts shaped the ground and positions later occupied by “modern thought,” which was necessarily circumscribed by “prevailing conceptual structures that thus continue in many ways to shape our ways of thinking about things.”³⁰

Dupré claims that modern modes of thinking arrived not all at once but “in successive waves, each one bringing its own principles.”³¹ Another historian who has tracked these waves is Charles Taylor. While also stressing the importance of nominalism, he also emphasizes the independent importance of the Reformation and late

²⁷ Louis Dupré, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 18-26. He makes this case at much greater length in his *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

²⁸ Dupré, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture*, 23.

²⁹ Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 12.

³⁰ Gillespie, 13.

³¹ Dupré, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture*, 5.

17th-century Deism.³² It was only over hundreds of years, he argues, that the “background” of European and North American thought went from “transcendent” (open to the action of God, the supernatural, and so on) to “immanent” (a closed and independent system of natural laws).³³ This shift had major implications for how countless people understood themselves and their relationship to God and/or the cosmos. Taylor distinguishes between the “porous” and “buffered” self. The former was open to all sorts of outside influences, from black bile to divine grace, while the later can stand back from the influences, judging and even controlling them.³⁴ Again, this shift did not happen overnight. The 17th century is a particular interesting chapter of this story because, as Funkenstein points out, it was a time when science, philosophy, and theology could all be done as a single occupation: “to many seventeenth-century thinkers, theology and science merged into one idiom, part of a veritable secular theology such as never existed before or after.”³⁵ It is hard to tell whether poets and philosophers have open or closed frameworks, porous or buffered selves.

My dissertation does not force me to adjudicate between these positions (clean break, secret continuation, or dialectic), throwing my lot with one model or the other overall. They have all helped me understand the Herberts. For instance, Edward is as self-assertive as Blumenberg could ask a thinker to be, and yet Schmitt and Gregory might

³² Taylor acknowledges the importance of Franciscan nominalism, agreeing with Dupré in part (94), but he also doubts that this small intellectual movement was enough to usher in a secular age. That required a broader social movement (see his epilogue “The Many Stories,” 773-776).

³³ For a brief summary of this background change, see Taylor 13-14. For a more complete discussion of the difference between the transcendent and “immanent frame,” see 542-566.

³⁴ For a thumbnail sketch of these models, see Taylor 37-45. The distinction between “porous” and “buffered” builds on his previous book, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). In that book he called the modern self “punctual” rather than buffered (see his discussion of Descartes and Locke, 143-168).

³⁵ Funkenstein, ix.

both point out that his search for the “five common notions” shared by all faiths looks suspiciously like the common Protestant effort to scrub off later accretions on the original, true revelation. And although Herbert looks like the quintessential “porous” self in a poem like “Providence,” which finds God’s work in the tiniest part of nature, he also has many poems in which God appears to have left the universe entirely, leaving behind only entropy, material disintegration, and death. The most helpful frame, however, has been Funkenstein’s. Both Herberts hew closest to his model of intellectual change: they draw on older concepts and traditions of thought (though sometimes unintentionally) even as they use these ideas in surprising ways. But what do the Herberts themselves contribute to the overall story?

Plan of the Work

The bulk of this dissertation is a close reading of the Herbert brothers’ major works. For George Herbert, this means the poetry of *The Temple* and the prose of his manual for rural priests, *The Country Parson*. I will also draw on a few of his youthful Latin poems and his translations and commentaries. Edward Herbert, though little known today, wrote considerably more surviving material. I will pay particular attention to his poetry and books on philosophy and religion. My first chapter focuses on his poetry, my second on his epistemological treatise, *De Veritate*, and my fourth on his reconsiderations of pagan religion, *De Religione Gentilium* and *De Religione Laici*. His autobiography and histories, of Henry VIII and the Duke of Buckingham’s disastrous military expedition to the Isle of Rhe, are beyond the scope of the present project.³⁶

³⁶ The other book I might have included is *The Dialogue Between the Tutor and His Pupil*. This book was originally attributed to Edward Herbert, even though it was only published in 1768, long after

These two chapters lay out what I take to be the most consequential difference between the two brothers: their estimation of human power. Can we know God and save ourselves on our own? Edward Herbert tries to grasp divine, eternal laws through his efforts alone, while George Herbert insists on the need for a mediator.

In my first chapter, I argue that both George and Edward Herbert draw categories and figures of thought from Renaissance Christian Platonism. Platonism enjoyed a revival during the 15th and 16th centuries. Drawing on the long history of Christian Neoplatonism, philosophers like Marsilio Ficino and his student Pico della Mirandola imagined God as the super-abundant source that radiates down from intellectual forms to base matter. Humanity occupied a middle place in this cosmic chain—being composed of form and matter—and could theoretically move up it, re-uniting with the divine source. Many of Edward's poems imaginatively enact this ascent to the divine. Yet even as he draws on Christian Renaissance Platonists, Edward tries to distance himself from them. If Marsilio Ficino tries to braid Christianity and Neoplatonism together, Edward Herbert tries to tease them apart again. Instead of requiring assistance, he ascends to his divine source through his own power—or with a bit of inspiration from an earthly beauty.

Themes from the Platonist revival also show up in George Herbert's *The Temple*. In many of his poems—most notably “Providence,” “Man,” “Love (I and II),” and

Edward's death. Some scholars still regard it as his (see for example Eugene Hill's *Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 47-50.) Others, however, have argued against Edward's authorship. I find them more convincing. J.A.I. Champion, for instance, has pointed out that it includes Biblical criticism dating from after Edward's death (see *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 145). Wayne Hudson also notes that the *Dialogue* draws on sources written after Edward's death but makes the intriguing suggestion that the book may have originally been Herbert's, but then extensively rewritten by the later Deist and “confirmed plagiarist,” Charles Blount (see Hudson's *The English Deists: Studies in Early Enlightenment* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 52-3). Even if some of the writing is Herbert's, it is “difficult to determine how far the radicalism of the *Dialogue* can be attributed to Herbert, as opposed to a later plagiarist such as Blount,” 53. Doubting Edward's authorship, I have chosen not to include it.

“Prayer (I)”—he imagines that he could ascend to God through the medium of nature. This may seem surprising. Critics have tended to read the *Temple* as more concerned with devotional piety than natural philosophy, with some going so far as to present George Herbert as anti-intellectual. Against this tendency, I argue that Herbert was familiar with the basics of the Platonist revival and versified its tenets in some of his lesser-studied poems. He was also familiar with the philosophy of Francis Bacon (having translated the latter’s *The Advancement of Learning* into Latin). Combining Renaissance Platonism with his friend Bacon’s new science, he imagines an orderly universe, fine-tuned by God. In several of George’s poems, as in Edward’s, the poet can ascend to his divine source through the medium of nature. Unlike Edward, however, George’s poetry always suggests that he will need divine aid.

By the beginning of the 17th century, however, the orderly Platonic cosmos was coming under considerable pressure. In fact, knowledge of every kind was becoming doubtful. The continental Reformation left old certainties about the cosmos and humanity’s place in it in doubt, spurring the so-called “skeptical crisis” of the 16th century, in which thinkers across the continent looked for new standards by which to judge truth and falsity on matters of faith. One of the most pressing questions in this period was: how shall I be saved? How can I be *certain* in my knowledge of my salvation? In my second chapter, I read George Herbert’s *The Temple* and Edward’s *De Veritate* as responses to the skeptical crisis, and in particular as attempts to reestablish certainty about salvation.

In many of the poems in *The Temple*, God appears to have disappeared from the cosmos, leaving the poet alone. This raises the terrible prospect that the poet has fallen

outside of God's providential care. He feels abandoned, even God-forsaken, and he entertains serious doubts about the ultimate fate of his soul. But paradoxically, his feeling of abandonment reconnects him to Christ, who quoted Psalm 22 on the cross ("My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"). This reunion is not a contemplative flight to the divine but an emotional bond of faith, which Herbert describes as "trust." His answer to the skeptical crisis, then, is not to despair of knowledge or claim utter certainty but instead adopt a particular attitude or disposition: trust. As he writes in "The Temper (I)": "Thy power and love, my love and trust / Make one place ev'ry where" (27-8).

In his *De Veritate*, on the other hand, Edward Herbert responds to the skeptical crisis by insisting that "truth exists" and defending his ability to achieve epistemological certainty. Like his acquaintance, Descartes, he seeks indubitable knowledge, and perhaps even more than Descartes, he claims to have established sure and certain truth independently of any presuppositions and without recourse to traditional ideas or authorities. (Whether or not he really did is another matter.) Although he seeks certainty in general, I argue that he is primarily concerned with establishing knowledge about immortality. He believes that he can learn what is necessary for eternal life on his own, and achieve it under his own mental power. What is necessary, he finds, is adherence to what he dubs the "five common notions" of religion: there is a God, this God is to be worshipped, the best worship is virtuous deeds, sins should be apologized for, and there will be rewards and punishments after death. These, he argued, were the sum of true, saving faith, available to all in any religion, anywhere around the world, at any point in world history. Intentionally or not, he developed a substantive definition of religion (all

religions are defined as such by possessing this common denominator) and took the further step of extolling his common notions apart from any particular confession.

In the second half of my dissertation (chapters 3, 4, and 5), I discuss one brother at a time in order to show that their different estimations of human power (can I save myself or not?), lead them to radically different understandings of religion and religious practice. In chapter three, I argue that George Herbert treats reading as a spiritual practice: he reads the Bible in order to make himself more “perfect.” In both his prose writings and *The Temple*, I argue, Herbert evinces a physiology of perfection. He describes reading as a kind of eating, whereby he ingests the substance of the Bible and incorporates it into himself. In doing so, the Word of God cleanses his heart and conscience of past misdeeds and, ultimately, can remake his heart as a temple for God to dwell in. *The Temple* sets up a co-operative relationship between God and the poet: a kind of virtuous circle in which the poet eats the Word, it works in his body, and the consequence is that the poet desires to eat (read) even more. His final goal is to have the Word of God written in his heart.

While George tries to remake himself by immersing himself in the Bible (or immersing it in him), Edward steps back to consider and compare all world religions. He remains an underappreciated theorist of world religions, who synthesized several existing strands of thought. In his *De Religione Gentilium (Religion of the Pagans)*, he draws on a wide array of sources: classical and early Christian texts, 16th-century travelogues, and encyclopedias of world religions. He argues that all “pagan” belief and rituals, far from being idolatrous, are in fact symbolic. They all point beyond themselves to a “supreme God,” and furthermore, all include his “five common notions.” He also writes an early

natural history of religions, an account of how “crafty priests” redirected peoples’ natural inclination to worship the supreme God to their own [the priests’] nefarious ends. The chapter ends with a consideration of Herbert’s contribution to the history of the study of “religion.” He sets himself up as an independent judge of all historical religions.

In my final chapter, I consider the old question of authorship in *The Temple*. To what extent are the poems George Herbert’s? To what extent is God their true author? I argue that Herbert presents the authorship of the book as co-operative. His poems operate according to the principle of the Renaissance writing practice of *copia*. Originally suggested by the Roman rhetorician Quintilian, and re-popularized by Desiderius Erasmus, *copia* is the art of taking a single sentence or phrase and then re-phrasing and expounding on it at length. *The Temple*, I argue, is full of Biblical *copia*: Herbert begins from a Biblical kernel and then expands it into a full poem. For George Herbert, the self is only understood through scripture. He repudiates his early attempts at sacred poetry, which inadvertently exalted himself as much as God. In his mature poetry, I argue, he uses the rhetorical technique of *copia*: the practice of spinning countless versions out of an existing sentence. George Herbert does not so much cite scripture as he writes from it, changing the wording and emphasis to fit his present metrical and devotional needs. He also understands himself through Biblical figures, presenting himself as a copy of Aaron or Jacob. In Herbert’s poetry the lyric “I” follows a general pattern (from despondency over sin to assurance of grace), and he invites his readers might, too. In doing so, he weaves a poetic persona out of the sense of scripture and invites his reader to become a copy of him.

Once again, the thread running through all my chapters is that the deepest difference between George and Edward Herbert is their estimation of human power. Edward's will and intellect are all he needs to climb the Platonic chain; he can establish indubitable truth based on his own intuition and reason, without any help from traditional philosophical schools; he can stand apart from all historical religions and divine their common denominator. George needs God's love to draw him up the Platonic chain; his answer to the skeptical crisis is not independent, unshakeable certainty but trust, a relationship with Christ; his health depends on eating the holy food of communion and scripture; and his poetry springs not from his own mind but from the Bible itself.

Why the two Herberts?

In his *Minding the Modern*, Thomas Pfau notes that the "impressive accounts of modernity" available in books by Blumenberg, Taylor, Gillespie and others have "unfolded as high-altitude survey of intellectual shifts...." While valuing these sweeping histories, he also stresses the importance of close, sustained readings of individual texts:

For any account of competing or intersecting intellectual traditions has to rest on the kind of close, textual analysis that, at its best, has always been the bread and butter of literary studies. To render intellectual history vivid and engaging, and so become alert to the profound stakes of its contested ideas and genealogies of inquiry, one must pay scrupulous attention to the rhetorical maneuvers, metaphoric shifts, ellipses, competing translations, and countless stylistic quirks and symptoms of its preeminent voices.³⁷

Books from theologians and philosophers in the religion department on the "competing or intersecting intellectual traditions" that diverged in the 17th century do indeed pay scant attention to poets and novelists. In his book Pfau offers close readings of both

³⁷ Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 57.

philosophers like John Henry Newman and poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge but, oddly enough, does little close reading of the latter's poetry, preferring his philosophical works in prose.

In my estimation, books on the intellectual changes afoot after the Reformation spend too little or no time on poetry, drama, or devotional materials (although there are notable exceptions).³⁸ I find this unwarranted, first because Ferrar and others found George to be representative ("a pattern or more for the age he lived in"). If so, then his poems on nature and grace, the soul and God, the means and ends of sacred poetry can potentially tell us as much about these issues as a book on natural philosophy or sacred doctrine. One of the implicit arguments of my dissertation is that if books of verse like *The Temple* were dealing with the same problems that were bedeviling philosophers, then poets might come up with interesting and different responses. I deliberately did not say "different answers," as if George's poetry provided one more argument about overcoming the 16th century skeptical crisis. Instead, he tries to reconnect with God through devotional practices: namely, by reading scripture and writing poetry. As Charles Taylor writes in his short section on Gerard Manley Hopkins, "there is something performative about poetry; through creating symbols it establishes new meanings. Poetry is potentially world-making. ... Understanding poetics in this way brings about a shift of register, which opens up a new gamut of possibilities."³⁹ I submit that the performance is as important as the new possibilities. Unbuffering the self, to borrow Taylor's term, might be an activity, something to be practiced in the form of ruminative reading or copious writing practices.

³⁸ See for example Jennifer Herdt's chapters on Jesuit drama and John Bunyan in *Putting On Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

³⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 756. Taylor has an excellent section on Gerard Manley Hopkins, 755-765.

And what about Edward? Why not compare George with Descartes? Or Locke? Or Hobbes? First, despite their differences, Edward and George share a set of central concerns and influences. Edward, no less than George, was obsessed by questions about God, the cosmos, and human salvation. And George, along with Edward, drew on the Renaissance legacy of Christian Platonism. Comparing them directly brings their similarities and differences into sharp relief.

Edward Herbert also deserves more study on his own merits. While men like Descartes and Hobbes sometimes wrote on God and the cosmos as well, none of them wrote what I take to be Edward's most valuable contribution to 17th-century thought: an encyclopedia of world religions that endeavored to favor no one of them in particular. This book deserves more attention. Books or articles on the history of the study of religion usually grant Edward Herbert only a paragraph or two, sometimes complimentary and sometimes not, and they generally focus on his *De Veritate*. This is understandable, because in *De Veritate* Edward lays out his "five common notions," yet it seems to me that *De Religione Gentilium* is of equal importance yet far less often studied. In that book, Edward brought together and synthesized several types of sources and existing lines of thought about pagan religiosity. In the process he created something new: a compendium of world religions that favored none of them (but his own). And if Taylor is right to emphasize the importance of deism to the dawn of the secular age, surely the man colloquially known as "the father of English deism" deserves a closer look.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Taylor, 221-3.

George Herbert's Crowded Temple: A Literature Review

George Herbert's *Temple* has attracted a large congregation of critics. What he once wrote about the "infinite Volumes of Divinity" could be said about the stacks of scholarly books on his poetry: they "every day swell, and grow bigger."

In this bibliographic essay, I will survey the history of scholarship on Herbert and *The Temple*. While my survey will not be comprehensive, it will identify major trends and historical periods in the scholarship. I will end with a brief consideration of how my work on Herbert emerges from these trends.

i. "One of the best lyric poets who has written in the English language": The Rehabilitation of The Temple

Although *The Temple* was a publishing sensation initially, it soon had detractors. With his verbal intricacy, religious piety, and ornate verse forms, Herbert was out of step with the ascendant empiricism of the late 17th century. In a 1650 letter, Thomas Hobbes, for instance, held Herbert up as exactly the kind of poet he disliked. He derided poets who took on "needlesse difficulty, as he that contrived verses into the forms of an Organ, a Hatchet, an Egge, an Altar, and a payer of Winges...."¹ One might expect an empiricist philosopher to scoff at intricate poetic forms, but even fellow poets were unforgiving. John Dryden clearly had *The Temple* in mind when he wrote dismissively of "Acrostick land. / There thou mayst wings display, and Altars raise, / And torture one poor word Ten

¹ *George Herbert: The Critical Heritage*, ed. C.A. Patrides (New York, NY: Routledge, 1983), 71.

thousand ways.”² Herbert’s verbal puzzles and pictures (his “acrostics”) tortured words rather than revealing their deeper sense. Neither Hobbes nor Dryden named Herbert (unmistakable though their implications were), but by the 18th century, Herbert’s detractors felt no such reticence. In a 1711 article for the *Spectator*, the poet and politician Joseph Addison, like Dryden before him, ridiculed Herbert’s pattern poems, calling them a form of “false wit,” in which “the Author seems to have been more intent upon the Figure of his Poem, then upon the Sense of it.”³ Pattern poems originated in antiquity but had been “revived by several Poets of the last Age, and in particular may be met with among Mr. Herbert’s Poems.” As the phrase “poets of the last age” suggests, Addison regarded Herbert’s poetry as hopelessly dated and happily left behind. The public seems to have agreed. As Joseph Summers reports, “There were no editions of *The Temple* from 1709 to 1799.”⁴

It took well over a century for Herbert’s reputation to recover. To be sure, *The Temple* was never without admirers, some of them quite prominent. Coleridge appreciated Herbert, as did Emerson. Coleridge admitted that he once read Herbert only “to amuse myself with his quaintness,” but after repeated reading he held Herbert’s poetry in high esteem. While some poets used “the most fantastic language” to convey “the most trivial thoughts,” Herbert used “the most correct and natural language” to convey “the most fantastic thoughts.” As a result, Herbert’s poems presented not quaint riddles but “an enigma of thought”—the enigma being how seemingly simple language

² *George Herbert: The Critical Heritage*, 137-8.

³ *George Herbert: The Critical Heritage*; excerpts from Addison’s article appear on pages 149-50.

⁴ Joseph Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 15

can convey so much.⁵ Emerson marveled at Herbert's prosody: "Every reader is struck in George Herbert with the inimitable felicity of the diction," he told a lecture audience, "The thought has so much heat as actually to fuse the words, so that language is wholly flexible in his hands, and his rhyme never stops the progress of the sense."⁶ Still, Coleridge and Emerson never championed his work at any length. Their appreciation was personal, even devotional, rather than critical or historical. In the same lecture, Emerson said "The sentiments are so exalted, the thought so wise, the piety so sincere that we cannot read this book without joy that our nature is capable of such emotions and criticism is silent in the exercise of higher faculties."⁷

Despite their sincere admiration, Coleridge or Emerson never argued for Herbert's importance to the history of English verse, nor did they seek to exalt him above his predecessors, contemporaries, or inheritors. They saw him, in Coleridge's words, as "sui generis." Herbert's reputation only began to recover in the first decades of the 20th century, when he started to receive more critical and scholarly attention. And after holding Herbert in low regard during his early years, T.S. Eliot later exalted Herbert into the ranks of the best English poets: "[he] seems to me to be as secure, as habitually sure, as any poet who has written in English."⁸ Herbert's great talent, Eliot wrote, was his ability to distinguish "between what one really feels and what one would like to feel," a special danger in devotional verse.

⁵ *George Herbert: The Critical Heritage*. Coleridge mentions Herbert in several letters and in his *Biographia Literaria*. All of his comments on Herbert may be found on pages 166-173.

⁶ *George Herbert: the Critical Heritage*, Emerson's comments on Herbert appear between pages 174 and 177.

⁷ *George Herbert: the Critical Heritage*, 176.

⁸ *George Herbert: the Critical Heritage*, 334. Eliot's article on Herbert for the *Spectator* appears on pages 333-336. Eliot also published a short volume titled *George Herbert* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1962), in which he lauded Herbert both for his "exquisite craftsmanship" and the precision with which he captured the emotional storms of spiritual conflict.

T.S. Eliot's comments on *The Temple* may be taken as a good weathervane for how critical opinion, as a whole, was shifting. Yet even an endorsement from Eliot himself, then a great old man of letters, was insufficient to rebuild Herbert's reputation. What was needed was a new critical paradigm, a rejoinder to Herbert's late 17th- and early 18th-century detractors. Such a paradigm emerged in the middle of the 20th century, with the formalist focus of the so-called New Criticism. It prized formal invention and linguistic ambiguity, both hallmarks of *The Temple*. Herbert could make a single word speak a thousand ways, and it was a good thing, too.

William Empson held up Herbert as a prime example of ambiguity. In particular, he claimed that Herbert employed a certain kind of ambiguity: contradiction. He calls Herbert's long poem on the crucifixion, "The Sacrifice," a "fireworks of contradiction, and a mind jumping like a flea."⁹ For instance, Jesus is condemned to death, but Jesus cannot die. Empson's method is to read the diction of the poem carefully, showing how one phrase or idea cannot be reconciled with another. Empson reads the ambiguities in Herbert's poems in shocking ways. For instance, he takes some of Christ's final words in the poem ("Only let others say, when I am dead, / Never was grief like mine") as meaning either "never let anyone else suffer like this" or "let the others who have made me suffer *even worse*."¹⁰ Not everyone recognized Empson's dark, even sadistic Herbert, as we shall see. But agree or disagree with him, Empson had done something important. He had found a way to make Herbert's verbal complexity, his ability to spin a single word into many senses, a mark of poetic skill rather than quaint simple-mindedness (as Hobbes or Addison would have it).

⁹ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3rd edition (New York, NY: Meridian Books, Inc., 1955), 256.

¹⁰ Empson., 258.

Empson published his essay on Herbert in 1947, adding it to the second edition of his landmark *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. F.E. Hutchinson had published a scholarly edition of *The Works of George Herbert* (1941).¹¹ Taken together, these books laid the groundwork for the Herbert resurgence. Empson had provided the justification (the pious rector of Bemerton was more complicated than he seemed) and Hutchinson had provided the raw materials.

Whole books started to appear on Herbert, and several of them might well be described as critical apologies. Joseph Summers began his 1954 monograph, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art*, with a full-throated endorsement of Herbert's excellence: "The major assumption of this book is that George Herbert, the parson-poet of seventeenth-century England, is one of the best lyric poets who has written in the English language."¹² He admits that he cannot "argue" directly for this assumption, but in the book he tries to demonstrate it all the same. More detailed in its exposition of Herbert's art than religion, Summers offers extended analyses of individual poems, their formal structures, and Herbert's techniques of representation.¹³ Another book on Herbert's verbal artistry is Helen Vendler's *The Poetry of George Herbert*. Like Summers, she judges him one of the English language's best poets: "It is scarcely credible that anyone could attribute to him more subtlety than he possessed."¹⁴ Because his was one of the first book-length treatments of Herbert's poetry, Summers spent considerable time on

¹¹ *The Works of George Herbert*, edited with a commentary by F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941).

¹² Summers, 1.

¹³ Summers, 1. He calls Herbert's art "hieroglyphic." Inspired by the sacraments and "emblem" books, Herbert's poems make "literal pictures" of theological ideas, which can then be read and understood without a long theological "explanation" (79-85). For some of Summers' best close readings, see his analysis of "Church Monuments" (134-5) and "Aaron" (137).

¹⁴ Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 5.

Herbert's biography and context. Vendler, by contrast, devotes her entire monograph to unpacking the complexities of poem after poem; she can devote more than a dozen pages to a single lyric, weighing one word at a time and asking not only what it means but also what other words might have been used, and why they would not have had the same subtle effect.¹⁵ For Vendler, each word deserves consideration and explication, and the meanings of the poem can all be found within the boundaries of its form.

Very few people today analyze Herbert's poetry in the manner of Empson or Vendler. To some degree, of course, this reflects the fallen fortunes of the formal analysis characteristic of New Criticism, but it is also the case that nobody needs to write books like Summers' or Vendler's anymore about Herbert because they succeeded in one of their principal aims: showing Herbert to be a subtle, rewarding poet. That *The Temple* bore up so well under careful analysis was exactly the point. Herbert's intricacies, his puzzles and ambiguities and formal experimentation, spoke against him in the 18th century, but they now ensure his place in the critical pantheon.

ii. *The Wars of Religion*

Which is not to say that the New Critics said all that needed to be said about Herbert. On the contrary, if the formal brilliance of Herbert's poetry had been established, it still remained to locate his poetry historically. The obvious historical and cultural backdrop for *The Temple* was Herbert's Christianity. Herbert's intense faith had always been impossible to ignore. Even if critics were more interested in form than

¹⁵ Vendler. See for example her long analysis of "Vertue" (9-24). In her remarks on "Vertue" in her introduction, she reveals what I take to be her preferred mode of reading. She asks the reader to "imagine himself composing the poem," wondering what "led the poet to see the day as a bridal, and call the rose's hue an angry one," and so on (10).

theology (like Vendler and Empson), they still had to take theology into account.¹⁶ But they generally left theological terms like “sin” and “grace” vague, meaning they avoided specifying exactly what Herbert meant by them. To do so, they would have had to associate Herbert with competing understandings of Christian theology—say as represented in the Reformation or Counter-Reformation. Summers considered Herbert’s religion at greater depth than Vendler or Empson, but he refused to nail down Herbert’s beliefs too tightly: “Like the devotions of St. Bernard and the *Confessions* of St. Augustine [Herbert’s ‘spiritual conflicts’] represented experiences confined to no one part of the church universal.”¹⁷

Not everyone was content to leave the matter at such a high level of generality. Instead, for several decades critics would argue, sometimes fiercely, over which part of the church universal could claim Herbert as its own. Did Herbert belong to Rome? Geneva? Maybe even Wittenberg?

The oldest theory presents an Anglo-Catholic Herbert. Herbert’s first biographer, Izaak Walton, made him out to be a perfect Restoration-era priest, devoted to the rituals of the church with an enthusiasm that matched Archbishop Laud’s.¹⁸ Those who follow

¹⁶ On the first page of her book, Vendler claims that a focus on Herbert’s religiosity has blinded critics to his originality. In fact, she considers Herbert something of a heretic, willing to conform Christ to himself rather than the other way around: “In spite of the defects of the final stanza of *Conscience*, it offers an instance (there are many) of Christ’s being assimilated to Herbert: not to Herbert as he would like to be, but to Herbert as he is” (Vendler, 237). Empson’s negative opinion of Christianity can be found in his anti-theodicy, *Milton’s God* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), especially in the ire he directs at “Neo-Christian literary critics,” who “interpret any literary work they admire by finding in it a supposed Christian tradition,” 229. His full discussion of “Neo-Christian” critics may be found in *Milton’s God* between pages 229 and 236. He does not mention Rosamund Tuve explicitly, but objects to her historical approach to *The Temple* (Empson, *Milton’s God*, 34).

¹⁷ Summers, 69.

¹⁸ Walton presents the young Herbert as a defender of “our Liturgy, our ceremonies, and our Church-government.” See *Walton’s Lives: of Dr. John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Mr. Richard Hooker, Mr. George Herbert, and Dr. Robert Sanderson*, revised A.H. Bullen (London: George Bell and Sons, York Street, Covent Garden, 1884), 274. Whenever he can, Walton emphasizes Herbert’s supposed devotion to the church calendar and liturgical requirements; see especially pages 297-307.

Walton, however loosely, tend to emphasize the importance Herbert ascribes to the rituals of the English church and see continuity between Herbert and the medieval world.

The first contemporary-era effort to find the right historical context for Herbert connected his poetry to medieval art forms. In a 1950 article for the *Kenyon Review* and then in a book-length study, Rosamund Tuve argued that Empson's ignorance of medieval Christian poetry distorted his understanding of "The Sacrifice."¹⁹ She insists that the meaning of Herbert's lyrics becomes clearer if one also looks at how their elements appear outside the poem, in the wider culture.²⁰ In particular, Tuve reads Herbert in conjunction with medieval Christian sources: Holy Week liturgies, the hours and breviaries, Biblical typologies, metaphors and images characteristic of medieval art. She argues that Herbert draws on these traditions, which supercharge simple images like thorns and bunches of grapes with significance, linking his poetry to medieval art and literature and consequently right back to Biblical sources. She, too, rates Herbert a poetic genius, but his genius is for re-creation rather than innovation (as it was for Vendler). Tuve writes of his poetry: "To see it in relation to the tradition out of which it sprang is only to perceive with greater pleasure those leaps and those masterful ordering actions of the single human mind by which new relationships are made and new unities created."²¹ Tuve's Herbert conserves and revitalizes the medieval traditions he belongs to. Another critic who placed Herbert in Rome was Louis Martz. In his *Poetry of Meditation*, he argued that Herbert drew on the Counter-Reformation French Humanism of Francois de

¹⁹ Rosamund Tuve, "On Herbert's 'Sacrifice,'" *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1950, pp. 51-75. Her book on Herbert is *A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1952). She discusses "The Sacrifice" on page 24 and 80.

²⁰ *A Reading of George Herbert*, 27.

²¹ Tuve, 79. See 63-5 for Tuve's discussion of "The Bunch of Grapes" for a good example of how she sees Herbert re-investing medieval art with new meaning.

Sales. Herbert's poetry works like meditative mental exercises, wherein the poet moves from an abstract consideration of God to an intimate experience of God's love.²² He also argued that Herbert's poetry operated like a catechism, instructing the reader in the manner of a medieval theologian like Hugh of St. Victor or Bonaventure.²³ Religious practice, in the form of meditation and the language of communion, unified *The Temple*, placing Herbert in line with Rome.²⁴ Several decades after Tuve and Martz, Stanley Stewart contended that Herbert's poetry should be understood in the context of its intended audience: the monastic community at Little Gidding.²⁵ In that context, its images have "Catholic and liturgical associations."²⁶ Although Stewart distances his thesis from Tuve and Martz's, I group them together because he, like they, presents a non-Protestant Herbert.²⁷

The scholars who most strongly favored a Roman or Laudian Herbert wrote from the 1950's to the mid 70's. Their view was ripe for revision. Starting in the late 1970's, and continuing until the mid 80's, the amount of critical work on Herbert grew rapidly, and most of it found in Herbert a partisan of the Reformation.

The Reformer's camp attacked the Roman position on the twin fronts of poetic form and theology. First came a deeper consideration of Herbert's theology. Summers had found hints of Protestant theology in Herbert's occasional disavowal of his own efforts to please God or become holy under his own power.²⁸ But he had not pressed the point. Stanley Fish was only too happy to do so. In his still-influential reading, Fish

²² Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954), 249-250.

²³ Martz, 257.

²⁴ Martz, 299-302.

²⁵ Stanley Stewart, *George Herbert* (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1986), iii.

²⁶ Stewart, 74-5.

²⁷ Stewart, iii.

²⁸ Summers, 61.

argued Herbert believed that human beings could do nothing (nothing, nothing) to secure or even assist their own salvation. God's will was all, and accordingly Herbert's poems were "self-consuming artifacts," which is to say they dramatized their own failures and ontological nothingness before a God who was all.²⁹ Participating in the liturgy, taking communion, or undergoing meditative exercises all ultimately achieved nothing. Many have qualified Fish's reading or taken exception to it, but written in 1972, it marked a hard Protestant turn in Herbert studies.³⁰

Equally important was a reconsideration of Herbert's poetic sources. Did they really come from the medieval world or the counter-Reformation? Barbara Lewalski's *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Lyric* argued that Herbert belonged to a pan-Protestant poetic movement, based on "biblical genre, language, symbolism, the analysis of spiritual states, and the tension over the relation of art and truth which were brought into new prominence by the Reformation."³¹ The Bible and Reformation exegetical methods, not the liturgy of the medieval church or its rituals, were the basis of Herbert's style.³² She also undermined Tuve's contention that Herbert was revitalizing medieval Christianity; the medieval forms Tuve had identified in *The Temple* also

²⁹ Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972). The core of Fish's argument can be found on pages 156-9.

³⁰ The basic problem is that Fish, like Milton's Satan, can imagine no middle ground between unadulterated self-assertion—"self-begot, self-raised" (*Paradise Lost*, Book v, line 860)—and cringing, humiliated helplessness. Much in *The Temple* recommends Fish's thesis: Herbert so often finds that Christ has "prevented" him, in the sense of already having done what Herbert wanted to do. One can also find, however, hints of a more complicated relationship. But instead of investigating these complications, Fish too often waves them away. Consider the final lines of "The Pearl. Matt. 13. 45": "not my groveling wit, / But thy silk twist let down from heav'n to me / Did both conduct and teach me, how by it / To climb to thee." Fish stops quoting the poem after "thy silk twist," ignoring the more subtle, dialectical relationship Herbert sets up between the teacher and pupil, the one who lets down the rope and the one who climbs it.

³¹ Barbara Lewalski. *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Lyric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 5.

³² Lewalski, 117-150. See page 141 for the importance of typology in Herbert's poetry.

appeared commonly in Protestant devotional works.³³ Consequently, Herbert's use of them did not betray an allegiance to Rome. Fish picked up on the theme of Herbert's Protestant sources in his subsequent book on Herbert and the catechism. Against Martz, Stanley Fish argued that Herbert's form of catechesis owed more to contemporary Reformation manuals than to medieval books.³⁴

But the Protestants also fell to arguing amongst themselves (as Protestants will do). What kind of Protestant was Herbert—Lutheran, Reformed, something more exotic? By the mid-80's one could have a Herbert of almost any kind. Gene Veith insisted that Herbert's theology was thoroughly Calvinist.³⁵ In Veith's telling, Herbert held Calvinist beliefs on everything from predestination and sanctification to scripture and the priestly vocation. Richard Strier, on the other hand, argued for a Lutheran Herbert. Strier's Herbert was Protestant because he could do nothing to merit his own salvation or imitate Christ, and Strier distinguished a specifically *Lutheran* Herbert by arguing (against Fish) that being unable to save himself was not humiliating but liberating.³⁶ Strier also suggested that Herbert, while not a Quaker, felt "some of the impulses that led to Quakerism."³⁷

As Veith pointed out at the time, Herbert criticism was replaying the civil war that erupted shortly after his [Herbert's] death, pitting roundheads like Fish, Veith, Strier, and

³³ For instance, see Lewalski's discussion of emblem books, 179-204.

³⁴ Stanley Fish, *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 11.

³⁵ Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Reformed Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1985). He states his argument most succinctly on pages 11-12.

³⁶ Richard Strier, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983). For his rejection of medieval and Erasmian piety based on the imitation of Christ, see page 50. For his quarrel with Fish, page 66.

³⁷ Strier, 150.

Lewalski against the Cavalier army of Stewart, Tuve, and Martz.³⁸ Looking at the work that followed the critical “wars of religion,” it would be hard to escape the conclusion that the Protestants took the field, especially the Calvinists. In the end, the strongest evidence belonged to them, regarding individual poems, prose writings, and running themes. In poems throughout *The Temple*, Herbert did indeed deny himself the power to earn his own merit.³⁹ He also had poems with unmistakably Calvinist theology, like “The Water-Course,” in which God “gives to man, as he sees fit, / Salvation. / Damnation” (line 10). His “To All Angels and Saints” rejected mediating figures like Mary, whose intermediary function was a key part of counter-reformation spirituality. “But now, alas, I dare not” call on your aid, the poet informs her, “for our King, / Whom we do all joyntly adore and praise, / Bids no such thing” (16-8). True, as Walton had pointed out, the young Herbert wrote polemical Latin poems against the Puritan Andrew Melville, but he objected most to Melville's rejection of the English church, not his Calvinist theology.⁴⁰ In a later comment on the Spanish priest Juan Valdes’ “Considerations,” Herbert declared himself amazed that “God in the midst of Popery should open the eyes of one to understand and express so clearely and excellently the intent of the Gospell in the acceptation of Christs righteousness. . . .”⁴¹ Predestination, Christ alone, railing against

³⁸ Gene Edward Veith Jr., “The Religious Wars in George Herbert Criticism: Reinterpreting Seventeenth-Century Anglicanism,” *George Herbert Journal*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1988), pp. 19-35.

³⁹ See for example “The Thanksgiving,” when the poet promises to pay back his debts to Christ but must conclude “Then for thy passion—I will do for that— / Alas, my God, I know not what.” And in “The Holdfast” the poet must admit that “to have nought is ours, not to confesse / That we have nought.”

⁴⁰ Herbert’s polemics may be found in *The Latin Poetry of George Herbert: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Mark McCloskey and Paul R. Murphy (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1965), 3-63.

⁴¹ “Briefe Notes on Valdesso’s *Considerations*. A Copy of a letter written by Mr George Herbert to his friend the translator of the book.” Found on pages 304-5 of *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson.

“Popery”—Herbert was a man of James’ English church, and as such his theology leaned toward Geneva.

One measure of the Protestant victory is the fact that even scholars who still see church ritual as central to Herbert’s poetry, like John Wall and Chris Hodgkins, admit that the English church of Herbert’s day was Reformed, if not staunchly Calvinist, in its theology. Their strategy is to concede the Calvinism of the English church while insisting that Herbert is *best* understood in terms of the everyday life of the church, which was ritualistic to the core: “At the heart of the Church of England is not intellectual assent to a specific doctrinal position but the entering into something done.”⁴² Herbert’s poems, Wall avers, ultimately aim to push the reader toward participation in these church rituals.⁴³ Likewise, even as Hodgkins insists that Herbert valued the English church and its institutions, he admits that he finds Herbert’s theology Calvinist and thus belongs to the “Roundhead camp.” But Hodgkins offers an important caveat, one that troubles an easy affinity between Herbert and Geneva. Herbert’s church “had been both emphatically Protestant in theology *and* episcopal in church government. Thus Herbert can often sound like a ‘Puritan’ without being one or wanting to be one.”⁴⁴ In Hodgkins’ telling, the English church in Herbert’s day was falling apart, the Elizabethan synthesis of Calvinism and “episcopal church government” could not hold. The theological confusion in *The*

⁴² John Wall, *Transformations of the Word: Spenser, Herbert, Vaughan* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 11.

⁴³ Wall, 11. He hammers this point relentlessly. For a good encapsulation of his argument, see 194–197.

⁴⁴ Christopher Hodgkins, *Authority, Church, and Society in George Herbert: Return to the Middle Way* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 3.

Temple, then, follows from the impossible task Herbert set himself: trying to put the quarreling factions of his church back together.⁴⁵

In the aftermath of the Herbert wars, then, critics have generally agreed on Herbert's theological Calvinism. And yet, as Wall and Hodgkins showed, parts of Herbert's poetry did not fit the Protestant case. In short, even after the wars of Herbert's religion, his denominational identity never quite seemed to settle into a neat box.

iii. Herbert's Faith Beyond the Wars of Religion

Debates about Herbert's denominational loyalty mattered because they established the theological and historical background against which his poetry would come into focus. If you knew Herbert were a Calvinist, you could be more confident about what he meant by words like "sanctification." But in order to gain a useful critical perspective, these arguments depended on clear and distinct denominational identities: Herbert was either Roman Catholic, or Calvinist, or Lutheran. The problem, as even the combatants came to see by the end of the 1980's, was that confessional identity in early 17th-century England was in a state of constant flux. In the 1987 Fall issue of the *George Herbert Journal*, which collected papers from the previous year's MLA conference, even once fierce combatants like Strier took a more conciliatory position: "All three of the papers in the 1986 MLA Special Session on George Herbert attempt mediation," he notes approvingly. "They attempt to avoid the polemics implied in the question of Herbert's exact spiritual location on the ideologically coded map of seventeenth-century Europe."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Hodgkins, 214.

⁴⁶ Richard Strier, "Getting Off the Map," (Response to 'George Herbert's Theology: Nearer Rome or Geneva?') *George Herbert Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1, Fall 1987, pp. 41-47.

When they admitted as much, Herbert scholars participated in a larger trend in the study of 17th-century English literature. If Herbert's denominational identity seems unstable, it is because the English church itself was theologically unstable. In the words of Molly Murray, "It is now no longer possible to imagine sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English religious culture as dominated by a single struggle between two monolithic churches, one destined to defeat the other. Instead, we have come to accept that Christianity in Early Modern England was much more 'vexed' and various than once was thought, and remained so for much longer."⁴⁷ To call any poet "Catholic" or "Anglican" invites anachronism, because those terms were just taking on their current meaning.⁴⁸ As Deborah Shuger points out, none other than the high church "Anglican" Lancelot Andrewes believed, in 1610, that the Reformers (meaning the official church and Puritans alike) "held a single faith." If so, she contends, dividing poets up into denominational camps creates "as many problems as it resolves."⁴⁹ Elizabeth Clarke has pointed out that Herbert owned and admired books by a variety of authors. While she calls Herbert a "conforming Calvinist," which would place him in the mainstream of the early 17th-century English church, she also notes that he owned books along the whole denominational gamut. If Herbert sounds like Christians across the spectrum, she concludes, it is because he read them all.⁵⁰ To define Herbert's confessional identity too neatly is to ignore the complexities of denominational identities in 17th-century Europe

⁴⁷ Molly Murray, *The Poetics of Conversion in Early Modern English Literature: Verse and Change from Donne to Dryden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-2.

⁴⁸ See for example: "Vernacular Theology," Thomas Betteridge *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*. Ed. Brian Cummings and James Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 190.

⁴⁹ Debora Kuller Shuger. *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and Dominant Culture*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997). For discussion of this issue, see pages 6-9.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Clarke, *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: 'Divinitie, and Poesie, Met'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 10-15.

and, worse, turn Herbert's poetry into a mouthpiece for one or another.⁵¹ In much of the most recent scholarship on Herbert (which I will discuss in the next section) the limitations of confessional identities as analytic categories has become axiomatic.

Consequently, instead of putting Herbert into one camp or another, scholars have picked up on certain trans-denominational currents of thought in Herbert's poetry. In a way, this move echoed Summers' contention that Herbert's poetry belonged to "no one part of the church universal." But while Summers' survey of the religious thought behind Herbert's poetry was necessarily broad (being the first of its kind), subsequent scholars have pursued narrower issues.

In order to look beyond the controversies of the Reformation, several scholars have searched back further into the history of Western thought. Heather Asals was an early pioneer in this regard. At first glance, her book *Equivocal Predication* looked like another contribution to the Herbert wars. She published it in 1981, at the height of the conflict, and she declared that her intention was "partly to restore Herbert as a specifically Anglican poet."⁵² And yet, in fact, Asals focused less on denominational quarreling than on semantics and formal logic. She contented that Herbert's language worked through "equivocal predication," a term in Aristotelian logic whereby "one word equals two definitions."⁵³ So in Herbert's poem "The Sonne," Herbert draws a strong, even ontological connection between the rotation of the earth around the "sonne" and the Christian's rotation around "The Sonne," Christ. By naming both Christ and the ball of

⁵¹ For examples of this argument, see Ryan Netzley's *Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist in Early Modern Religious Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 16-17; or Kimberly Johnson's *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Philadelphia Press, 2014), 6.

⁵² Heather Asals, *Equivocal Predication: George Herbert's Way to God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 5.

⁵³ Asals, 9.

fire at the center of the solar system “the sonne,” the poet reintegrates a universe that only appears to be multifarious.⁵⁴ Asals concludes that “In the final analysis, Herbert’s verbal icon works as an ontological bridge, re-spelling the universe, and re-integrating the individuating language (which defines things separately) into the oneness which is the Being of God.”⁵⁵ For my purposes, the important thing to see is that in the course of making her argument, Asals suggested that Aristotelian logic could be just as useful for understanding Herbert as Luther, Calvin, or Lancelot Andrewes. One could understand Herbert without nailing down his denominational identity too tightly.

Richard Todd, too, has written a book on Herbert’s semantics. He finds in Herbert an Augustinian doctrine of signs.⁵⁶ The difference between Augustinian and Aristotelian semantics proves large. While the “equivocal” signs pointed to two objects, and were therefore clear if irreducible to any one meaning, Todd takes Augustine’s signs to be ultimately “opaque.” They would be legible, if not for the consequences of the Fall.⁵⁷ He reads Herbert’s poetry, then, as an effort to interpret and make sense (and poems) out of God’s signs.⁵⁸ Whatever their differences, Todd and Asals both moved beyond the Herbert wars, finding new critical perspectives (in Augustine and Aristotle, respectively).

While Asals and Todd both looked to words, William Pahlka turned to another feature of poetry: meter. Pahlka argued that Herbert drew on Neoplatonic theories about music and meter, especially as taken up and interpreted by Augustine. Human words would always fail to capture their ineffable, divine subject; but meter, the rhythm running

⁵⁴ Asals, 9. For the heart of Asals’s argument, see pages 9-16.

⁵⁵ Asals, 29.

⁵⁶ Richard Todd, *The Opacity of Signs: Acts of Interpretation in George Herbert’s The Temple* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 6.

⁵⁷ Todd, 40-1.

⁵⁸ Todd, 194.

silently beneath the poetry, could participate in the overall rationality (or *logos*) of creation: “In rhetoric, the human voice speaks alone; in poetry, the corrupt and unreliable human voice is joined by a divine voice.”⁵⁹ Yet another scholar who looked at the Platonic heritage in Herbert’s poetry was Arthur Clements. The title of his book, *The Poetry of Contemplation*, recalls Louis Martz’s, and Clements presents his argument as an extension of Martz’s. He argues that Herbert belongs to the tradition of “cataphatic theology.” Whereas in “apophatic” thought the theologian or poet’s sight becomes darker, and he knows God only by knowing more about what God is not, the cataphatic poet or theologian comes to see God more clearly through a process of moral regeneration.⁶⁰ By reading the scriptures and taking communion, Clements argues, Herbert slowly transforms himself into the kind of person who can achieve mystical union with God.⁶¹ To be sure, Asals, Todd, Pahlka, and Clements all discuss how these various influences (Augustine on poetry and music, Aristotle on logic, the Neoplatonists on divine union) appeared in the 17th century, but they are all less interested in placing Herbert in any one camp (denominationally or poetically) than they are in seeing how Herbert drew on specific thinkers and ideas.

The aforementioned authors all looked at Herbert through the lens of particular authors or traditions of philosophical thought. Chana Bloch looked at Herbert’s primary literary source: the Bible. She, too, refused to fit Herbert into a denominational identity, saying that he had a “divided mind,” and that the Roman Catholic and Reformed-

⁵⁹ William H. Pahlka, *Saint Augustine's Meter and George Herbert's Will* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1987), 17.

⁶⁰ Arthur L. Clements, *The Poetry of Contemplation: John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, and the Modern Period* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 8-15.

⁶¹ Clements, 92-98 and 117-8.

sounding elements in his poetry were “echoes of historic battle.”⁶² Instead, in a method reminiscent of Tuve and Lewalski, Bloch argued that Herbert’s *Temple* deployed numerous Biblical genres (psalms of thanksgiving and lament) and hermeneutic methods (collation and typology).⁶³ Bloch is herself a poet and translator, and her argument might best be summed up by one of her arresting images: “Herbert’s poems are written as it were in the margins of the Bible.”⁶⁴

iv. Herbert out of Church

What Bloch shares with scholars like Asals (and with nearly everyone I have mentioned with the notable exception of Vendler) is a focus on Herbert’s faith. This is understandable. It would be impossible to read Herbert’s poetry against the “secular” world of his day because, as Deborah Shuger argues, Christianity suffused English society in the 17th century. Christianity of whatever kind was “the dominant cultural matrix for explorations of virtually every topic: kingship, selfhood, rationality, language, marriage, ethics, and so forth. Such subjects are, again, not masked by religious discourse but articulated in it; they are considered *in relation to* God and the human soul.”⁶⁵ So it has made sense to study Herbert in these terms. Still, other than Vendler, critics had focused almost exclusively on Herbert’s place in the church and Christian history. Starting in the late 1980’s, however, several scholars turned their attention from the church to another important institution in Herbert’s life: the court.

⁶² Chana Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 121.

⁶³ For Bloch’s discussion of typology, and how Herbert comes to recognize himself in scriptural types, see pages 81-98. She discusses his debts to the Psalms on pages 232-265.

⁶⁴ Bloch, 90.

⁶⁵ Debora Kuller Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and Dominant Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 6.

Of course, Herbert's supposed rejection of the court and worldly fame has been a key point in his biography. Disappointed in his worldly ambitions (so the standard story goes), he rejects the promise of wealth and power and accepts his vocation as a humble servant of the poor and an obscure poet.⁶⁶ This story, in fact, was one of the first things a reader of *The Temple* would have learned. In a letter from "The Printers to the Reader," Herbert's friend Nicholas Ferrar wrote: "Quitting both his deserts and all the opportunities that he had for worldly preferment, he betook himself to the Sanctuarie and Temple of God. . . ."⁶⁷

Anyone who knows more than a little about Herbert will have heard this story. But as Herbert's most thorough and scholarly biographer, Amy Charles, has shown, Walton and Ferrar's hagiographical accounts of Herbert's life exaggerate the truth. George may have won some renown at Cambridge as an orator, and he did indeed sit in Parliament, but he also "proceeded rather steadily" towards his ordination.⁶⁸ He seems to have lacked any burning hopes for what Ferrar calls "worldly preferment." It should be said that Herbert himself had a hand in creating his own myth. In poems like "Affliction (I)" and "Submission," he seems to reject success at court or in politics: "How know I, if thou shouldst me raise, / That I should then raise thee? / Perhaps great places and thy praise / Do not so well agree" (13-16).

But could someone who was so well trained in the art of eloquent persuasion really forget how to supplicate a superior? Could those talents lay hidden? The answer, according to Marion Singleton and Michael Schoenfeldt, was "no." According to Singleton, "Critics have often acknowledged the presence of courtly style in Herbert and

⁶⁶ See Walton, 279-281.

⁶⁷ *The Works of George Herbert*, "The Printers to the Reader," 3.

⁶⁸ Amy Charles, *A Life of George Herbert* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 88-9.

sometimes read his sequence as ‘sacred parody’ of secular love lyrics. If we trace the configurations of courtliness in *The Temple*, however, we discover the power of the pattern as well as its persistence.”⁶⁹ Herbert’s suits for God’s favor follow the pattern of a petitioner at court (what Singleton calls “the culture of courtiership”), not only those of a priest making supplication in his temple.⁷⁰ Singleton argues that Herbert redirects the courtly ideal, serving God with the virtues that had before served the king.⁷¹ And yet, in the process of sacralization, the courtly virtues change, with gracefulness being a means to humility, not a higher social standing.⁷² Schoenfeldt, too, argued that Herbert used the rhetorical niceties of a courtier to win approval from the highest king of all.⁷³ Unlike Singleton, however, Schoenfeldt doubts that Herbert becomes humble through courtly appeals. On the contrary, the humility of courtly appeals masks their motives: “Herbert shows not only how social concerns constantly interpenetrate the sacred world to which they are contrasted but also how devotional postures of submission are continually infiltrated by the subtle forms of opposition or ambition they both enable and disguise.”⁷⁴ Schoenfeldt has a point: many of Herbert’s poems take the form of petitions, in which the lowly poet flatters and cajoles his divine patron. It all becomes quite complicated, because the divine subject of Herbert’s flattery knows the poet’s somewhat manipulative intentions, and Herbert knows that God knows, and so on. The opening lines of “Gratefulnesse” capture the dynamic: “Thou that has giv’n so much to me, / Give one

⁶⁹ Marion White Singleton, *God’s Courtier: Configuring a Different Grace in George Herbert’s Temple* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 5.

⁷⁰ Singleton, 6-7.

⁷¹ Singleton, 62.

⁷² Singleton, 195.

⁷³ Michael Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3.

⁷⁴ Schoenfeldt, 24. Though Schoenfeldt also picks a side in the Herbert wars, throwing his lot in with Fish and Lewalski by declaring Herbert a Protestant.

thing more, a gratefull heart. / See how thy beggar works on thee / By art” (1-4). Whereas most critics had thought it necessary to understand theology in order to understand Herbert (Schoenfeldt names Strier in particular), Schoenfeldt and Singleton argued that one really needed to understand social relations and court culture.

Schoenfeldt also breaks with older scholarship by using contemporary critical theory, rather than classical or Christian thought, as the primary lens for bringing Herbert’s poetry into focus. As one might expect, given his interest in social relationships and the power dynamics they reveal, Schoenfeldt’s theorist of choice is Michel Foucault.⁷⁵

Cristina Malcolmson has also interpreted Herbert with the help of critical theory, although of an older kind. Namely, she offers Herbert as an exemplar of Max Weber’s Protestant ethic, in which one undertakes a worldly vocation with devotional zeal. (She also draws on “cultural materialism” and the anthropology of Mary Douglas.) In addition to using new theoretical tools, Malcolmson also expanded Herbert studies by paying special attention to *The Country Parson* and “The Church Porch,” two texts usually ignored.⁷⁶ Through them, she argues that Herbert occupied a strange social position, at once an aristocrat and a country parson to a rude parish. He dealt with this tension by creating a new relationship between his outward and inward personas: an industrious, good-doing man in public, a passionately devout man in his heart. The depth of his

⁷⁵ Schoenfeldt investigates the themes of confession, pain, and subject formation in *The Temple* (see especially 128-137). These themes played large roles in Foucault’s work, too.

⁷⁶ Cristina Malcolmson, *Heart-Work: George Herbert and the Protestant Ethic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 5-6.

religious feeling, in this model, inspired him to take up and excel at his vocation.⁷⁷

Malcolmson's arresting conclusion is that "*The Temple's* principle that religious purity must dwell at the heart of a professional worker developed into the modern notion of sincere authenticity at the heart of the autonomous individual, a notion required for the 'genuine' artist."⁷⁸ In so far as critics have read Herbert's poems in "The Church" portion of *The Temple* as the private anguish of a believer, they have projected a certain kind of subjectivity back onto him. Malcolmson insists he never held this view of subjectivity himself, even though he may have helped create it.

These critics never ignore Herbert's faith. Rather, they show how political or courtly concerns enter *The Temple* (Singleton and Schoenfeldt), and how Herbert's kind of Protestant subjectivity influenced the culture we now consider secular. Herbert is still usually read as a poet of private devotions. Reasonably so, but those who ask first and foremost about his place in his larger social world have opened up new vistas for scholarship.

v. Herbert among others

Most of the authors I have cited in this essay wrote entire books on Herbert. The recent trend, however, has been away from analyzing Herbert at book length. To be sure, one can find exceptions, such as Daniel Doerksen's *Picturing Religious Experience* and

⁷⁷ Malcolmson argues that *The Country Parson* especially establishes the "plain style" of the country preacher, pages 44-45. For the relationship between the minister's inner holiness and outward fulfillment of his office, see pages 141-2.

⁷⁸ Malcolmson, 206.

John Drury's *Music at Midnight*.⁷⁹ The former, however, argues for the importance of Calvin and the Bible to Herbert's work, and therefore traverses well-trodden ground, while the latter is primarily a biography. Instead, the trend has been towards books on a certain topic (like the senses) and chapter-long discussions of those topics as they appear in Herbert and other 17th-century poets.

These books typically devote a first chapter to the history of some issue or problem in 17th-century poetry or society and then pursue the issue in the work of several poets. Of course, critics like Fish and Lewalski also used Herbert's poetry as part of a larger argument—the Protestant character of 17th-century English poetry (Lewalski) or “self-consuming artifacts” (Fish). But over the course of the 1990's, this became the prevalent, even the preferred approach to Herbert.

For example, in her 1990 *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance*, Deborah Shuger argued that the basic problem of Early Modern English thought lay in balancing a mystical, participatory account of knowledge with “demystifying” historical or empirical forms of knowledge: “For various reasons, the Renaissance was probably the last era in the West where mystical and demystifying habits of thought obtained relative parity within the central discourse”⁸⁰ She then discusses an array of poets and theologians, endeavoring to show how demystifying and participatory forms of thought were held in a precarious balance. In terms of Herbert scholarship, the important thing to note is that she treats *The Temple* as exemplary, on par with Lancelot Andrewes' sermons and Richard Hooker's theological treatises: “One notes in *The Temple* the same problems of absence

⁷⁹ Daniel Doerksen, *Picturing Religious Experience: George Herbert, Calvin, and the Scriptures* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2011); John Drury, *Music at Midnight: The Life and Poetry of George Herbert* (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

⁸⁰ Shuger, 24-26.

and loss, the same need for touch and direct participation, the same affective inwardness.”⁸¹ For Shuger, Herbert and Andrewes and Hooker all foreground “the tensions between history and desire” between intellectual and emotional distance and connection.

A subtle shift separates a critic like Debora Shuger from one like Heather Asals. Asals primarily sought to understand Herbert, and using Aristotelian logic helped her gain a new and deeper perspective on his poetry, while Shuger investigates *The Temple* primarily for what it can tell her about her larger theme: “Thus the discontinuity between ‘The Church-Porch’ and ‘The Church,’” between the person enmeshed in social relations and an isolated voice crying out to God, “corresponds to a parallel discontinuity in the cultural representation of selfhood.”⁸² In her view, *The Temple* is first and foremost symptomatic of an historical trend rather than the central object of study. This approach has yielded many penetrating studies of Herbert. In my judgment the best work on Herbert over the past twenty years has been in books like Shuger’s.

Sometimes, similar approaches have overturned long-standing assumptions about Herbert. Most critics, Shuger included, have read the lyrics in *The Temple* as the private spiritual conflicts of a single voice. Turning this argument on its head, Ramie Targoff argued that Herbert’s lyrics function like collective prayers, according to liturgical models (most obviously the Book of Common Prayer).⁸³ For too long, she argues, even contemporary scholars have judged historical figures against the (Romantic) ideal of the genius rebel poet, with the implication that poet greatness requires a wholly unique voice

⁸¹ Shuger., 90.

⁸² Shuger, 105.

⁸³ Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 6.

(quite the opposite of liturgy). But for Herbert, she argues, “writing devotional verse was simultaneously personal and communal, faithful and formal; in poem after poem of *The Temple*, the speaker intertwines the expression of his inner self with the creation of skillful texts that might be shared by fellow worshippers.”⁸⁴ By studying Herbert alongside several popular devotional and liturgical books—she has chapters on the Book of Common Prayer, *The Temple*, and the Massachusetts Bay Psalter—she makes her argument stronger than it would have been had she focused on Herbert alone.

While Targoff connected Herbert’s *Temple* to devotional reforms that defined the lives of his fellow Christians, Regina Schwartz saw in Herbert’s poetry evidence of another monumental change: by the 17th century, God no longer occupied nature. Her overall argument is that Protestants, after rejecting transubstantiation, tried to reestablish their bridge to the divine in sacramental poetry.⁸⁵ As case studies she uses Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, and Herbert. Schwartz, as is now customary, treats Herbert as a Protestant but of no particular denomination. The question for him, she says, is not “ontological” (the real presence of the Roman church or the symbol of Geneva?) but rather semantic. His poems ask “how the signifier, the word, which is the word of God, could point to the mystery of man joining God. The poems asked, not *what* does this word stand for, but *how* does this verse evoke mystery?”⁸⁶

The sacraments, such as holy communion, and what they meant to Herbert and his art, have been a perennial topic. At first the issue played a large role in the wars of religion (“real presence” or “in, with, and under”?), but more recently Ryan Netzley, like

⁸⁴ Targoff, 87-88. See also 96-99.

⁸⁵ Regina Mara Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 11-14.

⁸⁶ Schwartz, 119.

Schwartz, has been less interested in “what” communion meant to Herbert than in “how” it functioned in his poetry. In his *Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist in Early Modern Religious Poetry*, Netzley surveys several poets. In his chapter on Herbert, he contends that taking communion and reading the Bible are, in *The Temple*, done for devotional purposes rather than study. In Netzley’s telling, Herbert is less interested in the exact mechanics of God’s presence in the bread, wine, and words of the Bible than he is in the practice of reading and communion transform his heart and desires.⁸⁷

Netzley was concerned with the experience of communion, especially how it affected the senses. Kimberly Johnson, in her *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England*, also writes about the Eucharist, but she uses it as a way of getting to questions about the verbal signs of lyric poetry. Along with communion, “The lyric poem becomes a primary cultural site for investigating the capacity of language to manifest presence.”⁸⁸ She argues that the Reformation’s unresolved questions about Holy Communion centered on the relationship between signifiers and the signified. The problems of Protestant sacramental theology and semiotics, she argues, were productive for poets, especially Herbert. Even more than his contemporaries, he insisted on Christ’s power to manifest his presence through words. His poetry, then, “makes a ritual of material immanence against the absence of the divine.”⁸⁹ The result, she claims, is a poetry that insists on its own object-hood. Like Schwartz, she thinks sacraments compensate Herbert for the troubling absence of the divine. She goes beyond Schwartz in suggesting that for Herbert, reading the Bible (and perhaps his own Biblically-inflected poetry) could also reunite the poet and reader with the seemingly absent divine:

⁸⁷ Netzley, 23-28.

⁸⁸ Johnson, 6.

⁸⁹ Johnson, 27-30.

“Herbert’s poetics endorses a representational system wherein the material is not supplanted by spiritual significance but persists as a site of sensory participation.”⁹⁰

While Netzley focuses on how communion transforms the body of the believer, and Johnson investigates the relationship between verbal and physical signs, Michael Schoenfeldt writes about communion in the context of Early Modern physiology. Like the other authors in this section of my essay, he first sets out a general theme (in this case the medical theories of Galen) and then shows how a few poets, including Herbert, make sense in light of that theme. Schoenfeldt’s exact interest is in eating and digestion, the process by which poets engaged in “very literal acts of self-fashioning.”⁹¹ With its descriptions of eating the bitterness of affliction or tasting the sweetness of communion wine, devotion was a bodily activity rather than merely intellectual pursuit: “Whether suffering consuming agues or consuming the fruits of divine suffering, the body is for Herbert the substance in which devotional interiority lives, and moves, and has its being.”⁹² The importance of the digestive process to Herbert’s poetry then feeds back into Schoenfeldt’s larger (again Foucault-inspired) argument: in Early Modern England, ritual behaviors like communion were meant to form a specific kind of “subject,” one that understood freedom to consist in self-regulation of diet, emotion, and so on.⁹³

As should be apparent, these books range over a broad field. Critics like Johnson, Schoenfeldt, and Netzley have taken advantage of the current state of Herbert studies, in which it is fair game to connect *The Temple* to everything from 17th-century politics to patristic theology. The flexibility of their form and its wide reach are its principle

⁹⁰ Johnson, 60.

⁹¹ Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 8-11.

⁹² Schoenfeldt, 105.

⁹³ Schoenfeldt, 16-18.

strengths. Putting Herbert alongside new sources, as Targoff does when she groups *The Temple* with the Book of Common Prayer, can overturn old ideas about how the poet of Bemerton should be read. And yet, the treatments of Herbert can also feel perfunctory. The strength of the old, book-length studies was the way they systematically organized Herbert's poetry as a whole and made arguments big enough to match. The difference between Schoenfeldt's books is instructive. Both contain close analysis and surprising new perspectives, but although I have found his work on physiology a helpful source, only *Power and Prayer* forces the reader to think anew about *The Temple* as a whole.

vi. Conclusion

What I have learned from each of these critics individually will become apparent from how I cite them in the coming chapters. Even so, my work will follow some of the general trends I've identified above, while touching less on others. On the issue of Herbert's faith, I do not re-wage the wars of religion. I agree with those who say Herbert's theology looks Calvinist, but I agree more strongly with scholars like Shuger, who argue that pinning him down into one confessional identity or another will distort him. Consequently, my work instead follows critics like Asals, who look for narrower philosophical and theological currents in *The Temple* and then show how Herbert repurposes these currents to his own ends. Hence I argue that Herbert was more familiar with Renaissance Neoplatonism than has hitherto been recognized (chapter 1), and that he turns Erasmus' writing technique of *copia* into "a principle of composition" in his *Temple* (chapter 4). As should be evident from my discussions of natural philosophy and rhetoric, like Schoenfeldt or Malcolmson I decline to draw hard lines between "sacred"

and “secular” topics in *The Temple*. Finally, breaking with the recent fashion of reading only a subset of Herbert’s poetry related to a larger theme (as Netzley, Johnson, and others do) my dissertation discusses the majority of Herbert’s English-language poetry. In doing so, I throw in my lot with T.S. Eliot, who said Herbert’s poetry was best read “entire.” This is because I find *The Temple* to be, in a sense, systematic. It does not, like *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, tell a single story, nor does it, like Descartes *Meditations*, proceed by a systematic method of thought, and yet the ideas I find in *The Temple* are interrelated, with one idea leading to another. As we shall see, he understands sin and death as a progress of dis-integration. So he needs to be remade, which is what happens when he reads the Bible and thereby ingests the Word of God. And then, when the Biblical maxims are written on the tablet of his heart, he can look into himself and copy out a kind of poetry that is at once his and God’s. When I read Herbert’s *Temple* “entire” I can see how his various thoughts fit together in a way I could not if I only focused on one central theme.

Edward Herbert: a literature review

Though more famous than his brother in life, Edward Herbert has received far, far less posthumous attention from scholars. Books about him alone have mostly tried to understand his views, outline his relationship to his Christian context, and untangle his many classical influences. He was the quintessential Renaissance man, drawing freely from Neoplatonic, Stoic, and Aristotelian sources, even as he loudly proclaimed his liberation from all sources of inherited authority. Histories of philosophy mention him, if at all, as a transitional figure: he felt the need for a new way of thinking, freed from traditional authorities and methods, but never developed one himself, despite his own belief that he had. Due to his interest in the history of religion and novel theories about it, he has also received some attention from religion scholars, especially those interested in tracing the development of the field's historical development.

This essay surveys scholarly work on Herbert. I begin with his relationship to Christianity, consider his philosophical influences, and finally summarize what other scholars have argued about his place in the history of the study of religion. Along the way I will note what each author takes Herbert's chief philosophical contributions to be.

i. Edward Herbert and Christianity

Eugene Hill has championed Herbert as a man far before his time and a consistent critic of Christianity. According to Hill, Herbert's constant goal was to debunk any faith's claim to an exclusive, revealed truth. Even when he writes about epistemology,

Hill argues, “the whole point of *De Veritate* is to make the reader see Christianity as one particular religion among many particular religions, none of which can appeal to the reasonable observer.”¹ Herbert was offering a new doctrine of natural religion, a forerunner for deism, and Hill goes as far as to call Edward Herbert an “enemy” of Christianity. Again and again, Herbert rejects the need for any kind of mediation (priest or savior) between humanity and God.²

Hill knows that some of Herbert's writings, especially his histories and autobiography, can seem silly, or more orthodox, than he would like. For instance, in his autobiography, Herbert describes himself as smelling especially sweet. But according to Hill, even comic moments in Herbert's books were really covert criticisms of the Christianity of his [Herbert's] day. In this case, Edward's sweetness parodies the sweetness typically attributed to the bodies of saints.³ In the same way, the revelation at the end of Herbert's autobiography (he asks God if he should publish the book, and a thunderclap responds), spoofs claims to direct, personal revelations.⁴ So if Herbert sometimes appears foolish or like an unorthodox but recognizable Protestant, then “One cannot overestimate the importance for Herbert of the need to conceal and reveal at the same time. Herbert's thrusts at Christianity did not go unnoticed, but they were all implicit or indirect.”⁵

The trouble with Hill's argument is that it relies on constantly reading Herbert against the grain. Anywhere Herbert appears to be a more conventional Christian, he

¹ Eugene Hill, *Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1987). 32-3. See also page 119: “One cannot overestimate the importance for Herbert of the need to conceal and reveal at the same time. Herbert's thrusts at Christianity did not go unnoticed, but they were all implicit or indirect.”

² Hill, 45.

³ Hill, 109-113.

⁴ Hill, 114-5.

⁵ Hill, 119.

must be joking. And anywhere he appears more critical, he must be telling the truth. Hill's argument rests on a sharp distinction between Herbert's private thoughts and his public writings, but in his private writings, Herbert often sounds like less of a skeptic about Christianity than Hill would have him be. Along with drafts of his books, the National Library of Wales also possesses many of Herbert's private notes, brief pieces of writing akin to intellectual doodling. If Herbert really had as deep a private antipathy for Christianity as Hill claims, it ought to come out here. It does not. True, he seems to feel genuine antipathy towards the Roman church. He complains that the Pope sets himself up as an object of reverence and that "all discourse of Purgatory seems to mee to bee but ye Mythology of ye Roman Church, and a morall application of pious and usefull fables."⁶ But in other private writings he cites Moses and the epistle to the Ephesians as authorities, and in another set of notes on obedience to magistrates, he quotes 1 Pet. 2:18, arguing that if servants must obey their masters, citizens must obey their sovereigns.⁷ Finally, in his notes on "ye Kingdome of Scotland and of ye present Troubles," he lauds the early reformers of the Scottish church: "After that God had wonderfully blessed ye labors of ye first Reformers in Scotland (Knox, Willoc, Priuram, etc.) and ye their Religion had recovered ye primitive and apostolic purity..."⁸

This last comment especially matches what I will take to be the general thrust of Herbert's writing on religion: his effort to recover an original, unmediated connection between the human and divine. Such a stance will include criticisms of priests and institutions, but it does not require him to be an "enemy" of Christianity or any other

⁶ National Library of Wales, Herbert family papers, E2/5/3. Listed as a "religious dissertation," compiled some times between 1640 and 1648.

⁷ For his notes on sovereignty, see the National Library of Wales, E5/3/44.

⁸ National Library of Wales, E5/3/44.

faith, as Hill argues. It also does not make him a thoroughgoing skeptic. In his travels through Europe, Edward attended lectures by the Italian Aristotelians Cesare Cremonini and Lucillo Vanini, both of whom were often accused of atheism, chiefly because they denied the immortality of the soul (or at least thought its immortality could not be proved).⁹ Vanini also believed that Nature, rather than God, had created us, and God had retreated from the cosmos. As we shall see, Herbert held none of these 17th century atheistical positions, arguing strenuously for the immortality of the soul instead.

So Herbert must have had a more ambivalent relationship to his Christian context. While Hill sees in Herbert a clear break from Christian theology, R.D. Bedford sees Herbert as a transitional figure. “It is quite possible,” writes Bedford, “to think of Lord Herbert as in the mainstream of English religious thought in the seventeenth century when in fact he was one of those pioneers who were helping to divert the current.”¹⁰ Bedford argues that Herbert’s main intellectual background is Christian Platonism, which would put him in the company of more orthodox figures like Thomas Brown and Thomas Traherne.¹¹ Bedford ultimately concludes that Herbert could justly be called a Christian, though of a somewhat heretical kind: “Despite Herbert’s stance of disinterested enquiry into our mental processes, the stimulus to his speculations is at bottom a theological one. His thought revolves around what are essentially theological questions, the fundamental scholastic problems of God, of freedom and immortality.”¹² Another scholar who places Herbert within the Christianity of his [Herbert’s] day is Wayne Hudson. According to

⁹ Butler, John. *Lord Herbert of Chirbury (1582 - 1648): An Intellectual Biography* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 103.

¹⁰ R.D. Bedford, *The Defense of Truth: Herbert of Cherbury and the Seventeenth Century* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1979), 11-12.

¹¹ Bedford, 20.

¹² Bedford, 82-3.

Hudson, Herbert was “a Renaissance eclectic, immersed in Platonism and Stoicism, who combined theistic naturalist and liberal Protestant ideas.”¹³ But such eclecticism, Hudson insists, was within the bounds of Renaissance Christian thought, perhaps not strictly orthodox but in line with continental figures like Hugo Grotius, a Protestant political theorist, and Marin Mersenne, a skeptically-inclined Catholic priest. Hudson even avers that Herbert subscribed to a “minimalist Christology.”

And yet if Hill claimed too much for Edward’s philosophical originality, seeing Herbert as a recognizable if somewhat unorthodox Protestant would be equally mistaken. In *De Veritate* he tried to find a method for deducing religious belief without any recourse to established authority or special revelation.¹⁴ In light of Herbert’s skepticism about miracles and priests, his pointed silence when it came to traditional Christian doctrines like the atonement (or the nature of Christ), and in his willingness to champion his own religious “common notions,” Bedford argues that Herbert set out a path many others would follow in the coming century.¹⁵ I would only add that this put him far outside of mainstream Christianity, Roman Catholic or Protestant, liberal or otherwise.

Like Bedford, John Butler argues that Herbert belongs to what he [Butler] calls “the Platonic heritage.”¹⁶ Unlike Bedford, however, Butler does not treat Herbert as even an unorthodox Christian. Instead, he points out that Herbert intended his five “religious common notions to be taken as a basis for a new religion, or rather a return to an older

¹³ Wayne Hudson. *The English Deists: Studies in Early Enlightenment*. (London, UK: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), 42.

¹⁴ Bedford, 12.

¹⁵ Bedford, 254-6.

¹⁶ Butler, 130. Butler finds Platonism across Herbert’s oeuvre. For the Platonic elements in Herbert’s poetry, see pages 96-7 and 308-310. In Herbert’s epistemology, the Neo-platonic world soul unites human faculties with the divine (see 153 and 405-8).

one than Christianity.”¹⁷ The tenets of this religion were to be determined by individual, unfettered reason: for Herbert “what is true as opposed to what the priests claim to be true, may be determined by judicious application of right reason, which is how we apprehend the truths which God has imprinted upon all (normal) minds.”¹⁸ Taken as a whole, Butler argues, Herbert’s books on religion aim to remove “Christianity from its pretensions of preeminence in the European cultural tradition.”¹⁹

In my judgment, Edward Herbert had one foot in and one foot out of Christianity, but (to extend the metaphor) his weight was on the outer foot. His inquiry may have been, as Bedford suggested, theological, concerned with the nature of God and human immortality. But he also did his best to move these questions outside of any confessional framework. In his private writings he did quote from the Bible, but he decisively rejected basic tenets of Christian orthodoxy, such as the divine inspiration of the Bible, original sin, and the subsequent necessity of Christ’s atonement.

ii. Edward Herbert in the History of Philosophy

Edward Herbert proudly proclaimed that he belonged to no party or school and claimed to base his thought on no authority other than his own mind. As Bedford has pointed out, however, Herbert could also be justly called “a true child of the Renaissance.”²⁰ As such, his writing, whether poetry or philosophy, in fact mixes together several ancient philosophical schools. At times he will sound Aristotelian, at

¹⁷ Butler, 223.

¹⁸ Butler, 415.

¹⁹ Butler, 410.

²⁰ Bedford, 259.

other times Neoplatonic, and at other times Stoic, and sometimes he will sound like a devotee of the mystery philosophy, Hermeticism.

The most comprehensive scholarly work devoted to Herbert and his background is M.M. Rossi's three-volume, Italian language *La Vita, Le Opere, I Tempi di Edoardo Herbert of Cherbury* ("The Life, Works, and Times of Edward Herbert of Cherbury").²¹ Rossi's book combines biographical research with an analysis of Herbert's philosophy and sources. He pointed to Stoicism as the clearest influence in Herbert's works, especially in his moral thought.²² At the same time, Stoicism was hardly the only ancient school evident in Herbert's books. Herbert's Platonism, Rossi thought, was a hopelessly confused mixture of Plotinus, Augustine, and various contemporaneous Italians. Like Rossi, Bedford believes Herbert blended many classical schools. "His intellectual inheritance," Bedford writes, "is the amalgam of many historical processes."²³ Even so, Bedford differs with Rossi in finding Herbert's main philosophical influence to be Platonism. And making sure that no ancient school goes unrepresented, Butler points out that Edward's "zetetica," an appendix to *De Veritate* in which he lays out a methodological procedure for identifying truth, borrows heavily from Aristotle's categories.²⁴ Meaning that even as Edward railed against the schoolmen, he was following their lead.

Because he relied so heavily on classical philosophy, Herbert can start to look wholly unoriginal. Despite studying Herbert at such length, Rossi concludes that

²¹ Mario Manlio Rossi, *La Vita, Le Opere, I Tempi di Edoardo Herbert di Chirbury* (Firenze: G.C. Sansoni, 1947).

²² Butler, 131-2.

²³ Bedford, 20. See also pages 70-71 for the influence of Platonism on Herbert's understanding of the "common notions."

²⁴ Butler, 127.

Herbert's books made scant contributions to the history of philosophy, poetry, or the study of religion. Bedford concurs in part, writing that Herbert's contribution to early modern philosophy, particularly epistemology, was scant: "His contribution is by any standards a brave one—even if its bravery, like the author's dueling propensity, may be several parts rashness and its actual achievement in meeting the skeptics, like the much-vaunted duels, more and more doubtful."²⁵ Richard Popkin, in his study of the 16th-century skeptical crisis and 17th-century responses, decides that Edward did not grasp how deeply the revival of Pyrrhonian skepticism had undermined the foundations of knowledge, and was therefore unable to offer a convincing defense of indubitable truth.²⁶

It is all a rather harsh reassessment of a man once known as the "father of English deism."²⁷ The best way to think about Edward Herbert's contribution to the history of philosophy, then, is not to look for particular conclusions or arguments (which mostly fail), but for a certain attitude or new approach to old problems. In his introduction to *De Veritate*, Meyrick Carré admits that the book is an indiscriminate mix of Stoicism, Neoplatonism, and Aristotelianism. And yet, "in spite of its traditional modes of thought, *De Veritate* breathes the modern air. Herbert's approach to his investigation of truth is modern in spirit. He rejects all authority and tradition and applies himself to an independent examination of the facts as he finds them. He begs his readers not to rely on words, but on inspection of events."²⁸

²⁵ Bedford, 50.

²⁶ Popkin, 128.

²⁷ Richard J. Serjeanston, "'Herbert of Cherbury before Deism: The Early Reception of the *De Veritate*,'" *The Seventeenth Century*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 217-38.

²⁸ Meyrick Carré, "Introduction" to *De Veritate* by Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (Bristol, UK: J.W. Arrowsmith Ltd., 1937), 65.

So while later scholars have tended to play down Herbert's importance to 18th-century deism, they have remained interested in how he prepared the way for it. It would be anachronistic, Bedford admits, to call Edward Herbert an 18th-century rational deist because he keeps God immanent in nature and insists on the immortality and coming judgment of the soul.²⁹ Even so, Bedford argues, if Herbert is hard to define exactly with words like "deist," it is because his thought went a long way toward giving the word its later sense.³⁰ Likewise, Butler argues that Herbert's reduction of all true religion to the five common notions led directly to the 18th-century deists' search for a "natural religion" with as few tenets as possible.³¹

Some have also claimed that his epistemology, however flawed, also anticipated later developments. Like everyone who writes on Herbert, Bedford admits that *De Veritate* fails in its chief task. But in his aim, Bedford insists, Herbert anticipated everyone from Descartes and Reid to Kant and the Cambridge Platonists. Herbert's writing on philosophy and religion was part of the broad movement toward a "rational" religion that made "the paradoxes and mysteries of the Christian faith acceptable to the lay philosophic mind until corporate religion, in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, looks suspiciously like little more than good solid sense, natural, rational, full of enlightened optimism and general sociability."³² Hill especially emphasizes Herbert's anticipation of Kantian epistemology, arguing that Edward's

²⁹ Bedford, 253.

³⁰ Bedford, 239.

³¹ Butler, 429.

³² Bedford, 205.

“common notions” are not so much truths met in experience as they are the conditions for perceiving truth in experience.³³

Hill is perhaps too generous here. Herbert certainly believed that he could intuit truth, including religious truth, directly—not only lay out its preconditions. I’m afraid I must concur with those who find in Edward Herbert only a modest contribution to fields like epistemology.

iii. Edward Herbert’s Poetry

Compared to the crowded congregation of critics in George’s *Temple*, Edward’s flock seems thin indeed. His greatest champion was his editor G.C. Moore Smith, who in 1923 wrote: “while admitting the unequal character of Herbert’s verses, I am inclined to claim that in poetic feeling and art Edward Herbert soars above his brother George.”³⁴

At this time Edward Herbert’s star was on the rise. In 1921, T.S. Eliot grouped Edward with the other so-called “metaphysical poets” in a justly famous review. Eliot avoids defining the metaphysical too neatly but he does associate it with ingenious extended metaphors: “instead of the mere explication of the content of a comparison, a development by rapid association of thought which requires considerable agility on the part of the reader.”³⁵ It is a poetry, Eliot says, that can form wholes out of such disparate experiences as falling in love, reading Spinoza, the sound of a typewriter, and the smell of cooking. He offers a few stanzas of Herbert’s “An Ode upon a Question moved,

³³ Hill, 30.

³⁴ G.C. Moore Smith, “Introduction,” *The Poems English and Latin of Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), xvii.

³⁵ Thomas Stearns Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets,” *Homage to John Dryden: Three Essays on the Poetry of the Seventeenth Century* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1927), 25.

Whether Love should continue for ever?" saying they would be "immediately pronounced to be of the metaphysical school."

So when from hence we shall be gone,
And be no more, nor you, nor I,
As one another's mystery,
Each shall be both, yet both but one.

This said, in her uplifted face,
Her eyes, which did that beauty crown,
Were like two starrs, that having faln down,
Look up again to find their place: (lines 129-136)

What interested Eliot was the great metaphorical leap from the lover's eyes to the stars and then right back again. As Eugene Hill notes, after Eliot's essay, most of the critical commentary on Herbert focused on whether or not he really was a "metaphysical poet," and, if so, what kind.³⁶

Scholars who have written whole books on Edward Herbert have, as a rule, had less to say about his style and more about how his poetry expresses his basic philosophical convictions. So both Butler and Bedford find evidence of Herbert's Platonism in his poetry.³⁷ Out of the lines above, they would pick out the close relationship of desire and knowledge: each seems to lead to the other. Both might also note the poet's promise of an even closer union after death, when the lovers will presumably rejoin the source of all love, "both but one." Hill, by way of contrast, reads Herbert's poetry as heavily ironic, lancing received doctrines or beliefs whenever he can. For example, he argues that in Herbert's "An Ode upon a Question moved" he replaces

³⁶ Hill, 66-7.

³⁷ Bedford, 119-120. Butler, 96.

the “artificial ecstasy of a revealed religion” with a separation of body and soul characteristic of “a natural religion.”³⁸

My own reading of Edward Herbert’s poetry will steer between Hill and the Bedford and Butler readings. I concur with the latter on the centrality of Platonism to Herbert’s verse, but while his predecessors like Marsilio Ficino found a deep concord between the Neoplatonic tradition and their Christianity, Edward Herbert tries to tease them apart.

iv. Edward Herbert and “Religion”

Having looked at Edward Herbert’s relationship to Christianity and his place in the history of early modern philosophy, I will now consider what scholars have said about his place in the history of the study of religion. Although I will discuss *De Veritate* and *De Religione Gentilium* at much greater length in chapters 2 and 4, I offer a brief summary of them here. In *De Veritate*, Herbert argues that everyone has, implanted in them by God’s providential design, five “common notions” about religion. These are universal and timeless, the same in all people, all over the earth, all throughout human history. Then whence the emergence of different beliefs and rites? According to Herbert’s *De Religione Gentilium*, some beliefs and rituals refer symbolically to the five common notions. If they do not, then they are the product of tricky priests, who have invented these doctrines and rites in order to accrue power for themselves.

Some have seen, in Edward’s writings on religion, an early theory of “natural religion.” Eugene Hill, for example, calls it “a philosophical charter for the religious

³⁸ Hill, 98.

doctrine called natural religion or deism.”³⁹ As divinely implanted in each human being, it is “natural,” and as ostensibly independent of any historical confession or revelation, it is deistical. To be sure, Christian philosophers such as Aquinas had long noted a human propensity to religious belief, but Herbert’s distinguished itself by *not* finding natural religion insufficient, thereby requiring revelation.⁴⁰

Ivan Strenski, on the other hand, claims that Herbert did *not* formulate a theory of natural religion because he still relied on revelation of a kind: the *intuitive* knowledge of the common notions.⁴¹ Peter Byrne likewise argues that Herbert offers a revealed religion (imprinted by divine providence as the common notions) rather than a faith based on reason alone. In Herbert “the human mind is not autonomous in relation to God in its discovery of truth, relying on a directly given deposit of truths from God before it can discover anything for itself.”⁴²

This dispute hinges in no small part on what is meant by “natural religion.” In his *Attitudes to Other Religions*, David Pailin notes that the phrase “natural religion” could mean several different things in the 17th and 18th centuries. It might mean the truths about God that all could reach by their own reason. It could mean truths revealed to Adam, or the beliefs and practices that were found outside of (European) civilization.⁴³ In the sense that his theory of true religion (adherence to the common notions) required no super-

³⁹ Hill, 19.

⁴⁰ Hill, 24.

⁴¹ Ivan Strenski, *Thinking about Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 25-27. Strenski could also point out that in his autobiography, Herbert claimed to have asked for a sign from heaven that would tell him whether or not he should publish *De Veritate*.

⁴² Peter Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013). His full discussion of Herbert may be found on pages 22-33. The quote appears on page 33. See also page 8 for his definition of natural religion as a faith that can be deduced without divine aid from the readily available facts of nature.

⁴³ David A. Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative Religion in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984), 23.

human revelation or church, Pailin holds that Herbert did indeed formulate a new understanding of “natural religion.”⁴⁴ The difference between Herbert and later theorists and proponents of natural religion was that Herbert thought he could grasp these principles through introspection, whereas Byrne rightly points out that later thinkers tried to derive their beliefs about God from an empirical study of the principles of nature. Yet Byrne and Strenski are too quick to lump Herbert in with earlier figures. Even if he did allow for some sort of revelation, points out Wayne Hudson, it was purely personal rather than mediated through any ecclesial structure. And furthermore, one had to test even a personal revelation by use of reason, judging it true or false in accordance with its agreement with the common notions: “Herbert was not the first to claim that the fundamental truths of religion could be arrived at by reason, but he was the first European thinker to publish works advising the layman to base his religion primarily on right reason rather than on revelations alleged to have been made to priests.”⁴⁵

It might be best, then, to say that Herbert’s writing on religion offers an early, even nascent form of what came to be known as “natural religion”: it was independent of any historical faith, but did not yet derive the principles of his new religion from a study of (non-human) nature.

Broadening his scope beyond debates about “natural religion,” the anthropologist Talal Asad endeavors to place Herbert in the broader context of the whole history of the study of religion. In Asad’s estimation Herbert takes a “significant step in this definitional history [of religion].” He offers a “substantive definition of what later came to be formulated as Natural Religion—in terms of belief (about a supreme power),

⁴⁴ Pailin, 37. See also page 40.

⁴⁵ Wayne Hudson, *The English Deists: Studies in Early Enlightenment* (London, UK: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), 45.

practices (its ordered worship), and ethics (a code of conduct based on rewards and punishments after this life)—said to exist in all societies.”⁴⁶ A “substantive” definition delineates what a religion includes, as opposed to a functionalist definition that explains how religion operates in individual lives or in society as a whole. So Herbert’s definition is “substantive” because it distills true “religion” into its essence: the five common notions. With such a tool, it would be possible to identify a religion and distinguish it from society as a whole (if one were, say, an explorer encountering an unknown people). A definition like Herbert’s could also set up the basis for a comparison of religions, meaning how they express the five common notions. It could also set up a basis for comparison in which one was judged to be better than another.⁴⁷ Herbert will say that he judges that religion best which expresses the common notions most directly, without doctrinal or ritual ornament.

Salvation, in Herbert’s books on religion, is a matter of knowing the five common notions and living accordingly. By defining religion with five propositions, argues Brent Nongbri, Herbert was indicative of a broader shift: “By shearing away all the practices of ancient people in his discussions of what was essential and original in these religions, Herbert contributed to the growing sense that religion was a matter of beliefs *apart from* ‘various Rites, Ceremonies, and Sacred Mysteries.’”⁴⁸ *Religio*, from late antiquity through the Middle Ages, had many possible meanings but primarily referred to an inner disposition, piety, expressed through ritual or prayer. As we shall see in my fourth chapter, the intellectual disputes that came along with the Reformation placed great

⁴⁶ Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 40.

⁴⁷ Asad, 41.

⁴⁸ Brent Nongbri. *Before Religion: A History of the Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 95-96.

emphasis on right belief, which made belief more and more essential for distinguishing between denominations, and eventually between whole religions, and declaring them right or wrong. Nongbri states that Herbert's "view of religion as a set of beliefs that could be either true or false would become standard in the next century."⁴⁹

Yet it would be a mistake to think that Herbert had nothing to say about ritual, even though what he had to say about ritual was not so much new as very old. He revived the idea that pagan rituals (and beliefs) were frequently symbolic. They might appear absurd, but in fact they were expressing one or another of the common notions in a disguised form. His *De Religione Gentilium* can be read as a defense of pagan religion. Wayne Hudson suggests that "Herbert's re-evaluation of pagan religion made an important contribution to the birth of comparative religion by finding concealed rationality in pagan ideas and practices, and by offering a natural history of the development of religious ideas and institutions."⁵⁰ Likely deriving this view from Varro (who Herbert read about in Augustine's *City of God*), Herbert disagrees with those who saw pagan rites and beliefs as nothing but idolatry.

It should not be thought, however, that Herbert was a consistent apologist for pagan beliefs and practices. He thought that most of pagan religion was not only wrong but also malicious, the product of tricky priests who duped the common people in order to accrue power. This was not in itself an original position. (Augustine says much the same to Varro about Roman religion.) What was unexpected, though, according to Guy Stroumsa, is that Herbert extended the charge of imposture to everything that was not in accordance with his common notions. This meant that parts of Christianity and Judaism

⁴⁹ Nongbri, 96.

⁵⁰ Hudson, 48.

(not only paganism or Islam) were deceptive.⁵¹ But Stroumsa and Asad, despite noting Herbert's contributions to the history of the study of religion, devote little attention to his sources and immediate predecessors. By doing so myself, I hope to get a clearer idea of Edward's place in the history of the study of religion, and argue for the originality of his contributions.

⁵¹ Guy G. Stroumsa. *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), 34.

Chapter One: George, Edward, and the Platonic Revival

The poetry of Edward and George Herbert shares a Platonic understanding of the cosmos and humanity's place in it. This chapter first establishes the brothers' common worldview, but then investigates an important difference between them. Edward looks to ascend to God through his own intellect and love, while George subtly suggests that union with God requires the prayers and liturgies of his church. This chapter is vital to my dissertation because their respective estimations of their own powers (do their divine ascents require assistance or not?) will lead them to fundamentally different religious outlooks and lives.

Renaissance Platonism underlies both George and Edward Herbert's understanding of the cosmos and the place of human beings within it. This should come as no surprise in Edward's case. R.D. Bedford rightly calls the Lord of Cherbury "a true child of the Renaissance."¹ The late 16th and early 17th centuries included as many (if not more) competing cosmologies as it did Christian denominations, but though Edward's cosmology contains more than a hint of Stoicism, it is essentially Neo-Platonic.² In keeping with a long tradition of Platonic thought, Edward thinks that God has ordered creation as a great chain of being, with each part fitting together neatly into the whole. The only really variable element in this well-tempered universe is him (and humankind more generally). It was a commonplace of Renaissance thought that human beings can rise or fall along this chain.

¹ R.D. Bedford, *The Defense of Truth: Herbert of Cherbury and the seventeenth century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), 259.

² Bedford, 20.

Again, that Edward held these beliefs (and some rarer ones, too) should hardly surprise us. But one of the things I hope to show in this chapter is how much Renaissance Platonism, both cosmological and anthropological, one can find in *both* Edward *and* George Herbert's poetry. In George's cosmos, which he lays out most clearly in one of his longest poems ("Providence"), God is simultaneously immanent and transcendent in creation. In keeping with Renaissance Platonist thought, God is present in everything, both ordering and sustaining it. And in poems like "Man" and "Man's Medley," George no less than Edward shows humankind's ability to move up or down the cosmic scale.

But despite their seemingly similar Platonism, George Herbert differs from his brother in one all-important way. In Edward's poetry, he ascends to the divine under the power of his own desire and intellect. George's ascent marries desire and intellect, too, but even in his most Platonic poems he suggests what will emerge as the hallmark of his poetry: the need for divine assistance.

This chapter has three sections. In the first, I sketch out the fundamentals of Renaissance Platonism. In the second and third, I look at themes from Renaissance Platonism in Edward's and George's poetry, respectively.

i. The Platonist Revival

Before I can argue that George and Edward Herbert shared a Platonic view of the cosmos, I must first lay out the basic tenets of Platonism in the Renaissance. I will discuss its revival in the 15th century, its view of God, the created order, and humanity.

The philosophy of Plato received renewed interest in the late 15th century. From the patristic period through the middle ages, Platonism mostly survived outside of the

university, and especially in negative theology and mysticism.³ Its survival should come as no surprise: no less an authority than St. Augustine had said that of all the pagans, Plato came the closest to recognizing Christian truth.⁴ Even so, few of Plato's works were widely available in western Europe until the 15th century, when scholars in western Europe acquired new Greek manuscripts from the Byzantines and encountered Platonic thought at the council of Ferrara-Florence, where a last-ditch attempt to unify the eastern and western churches failed.⁵ For the first time the complete works of Plato had arrived in western Europe and could be translated into its *lingua franca*, Latin.

The Florentine physician Marsilio Ficino undertook this massive project, completing it 1469 (although it was not printed until 1484). He also translated figures like Plotinus and pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite,⁶ all of whom owed Plato a large intellectual debt. With the influx of new texts from Plato and Neoplatonists, Platonism became a viable alternative to Aristotelianism and other scholastic systems of thought.⁷ At the same time, one should not over-emphasize the conflict between Aristotle and Plato in Renaissance philosophy. More often, they were thought to complement each other.⁸

³ Christopher S. Celenza, "The Revival of Platonic Philosophy," *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 73-74. For difference between medieval and Renaissance Platonism, see D.P. Walker's *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 12-13. For a fuller history of how a central Platonic concept like *theoria* becomes Christian *contemplatio*, see Kevin Hart, "Contemplation: Beyond and Behind," *Sophia*, vol. 48, 2009, pp. 435-59. Especially pages 436 – 445.

⁴ Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, Book VIII, chapter 5.

⁵ Celenza, 80. For differences between eastern and western Christian understandings of Platonic contemplation see Hart, 443-444.

⁶ Tamara Albertini, "Marsilio Ficino: The Aesthetic of the One in the Soul," *Philosophers of the Renaissance*, ed. Paul Richard Blum, trans. Brian McNeil (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 83.

⁷ Celenza, 77.

⁸ There is a long history of treating Aristotle and Plato as complementary rather than opposed, especially in so-called "Neoplatonism," which flourished between 300 and 700 CE. Although Neoplatonists disagreed amongst each other about the right way to understand the relationship between Aristotle and Plato, Lloyd Gerson has argued that "the idea of harmony rested on a

For instance, Ficino recommended that his students read Aristotle before approaching the truths of Plato. Still, the recovery of Platonic texts opened up new vistas in everything from natural philosophy and cosmology to ethics. Edward Herbert was well aware of this Platonic revival. The library he bequeathed to Jesus College in his will included Ficino's complete translation of Plato into Latin, along with the former's detailed commentary on the latter. (He also had books by so-called "Neoplatonists," like the Syrian Iamblichus.) Edward Herbert's understanding of Plato and the whole Platonic tradition was in all likelihood heavily indebted to Ficino.⁹

The Renaissance historian James Hankins holds that Ficino's Platonism, though adapted for the 15th century, "is broadly speaking that of late antiquity."¹⁰ To be sure, late antiquity had various Neoplatonic schools, which frequently disagreed with each other, but according to the classicist Lloyd Gerson, they also shared a few elements in common. They all thought the universe had a "systematic unity." That is, every part operated according to more general rational and inter-related laws, which create a seamless garment of ontology, metaphysics, ethics, and so on. This system has a hierarchical and explanatory structure, in which the simple and unitary (and intellectual) precede and ultimately explain the complex and fragmented (and material). At the top of this

perception of a sort of division of labor. Roughly, it was held that Plato was authoritative for the intelligible world and Aristotle was authoritative for the sensible world." See his *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), page 4.

⁹ A complete record of Edward's books is available in C.J. Fordyce and T.M. Knox, "The Library of Jesus College, Oxford: with an Appendix on the Books Bequeathed thereto by Lord Herbert of Cherbury," *Oxford Bibliographical Society: Proceedings and Papers*, vol. V, part II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), 49-115. These were his books in London. He also had a substantial library at Montgomery Castle in Wales.

¹⁰ James Hankins, "Ficino and the Religion of the Philosophers," *Rinascimento*, vol. 48, 2008, pp. 101-122. As Hankins points out, this means that Ficino's "Platonism" also contained many strands of Neoplatonic thought, making his *Platonic Theology* an "amalgam of Plato, Plotinus, [and] the later Neoplatonists," to which Hankins also adds Ficino's immediate predecessors, "Avicenna and Thomas Aquinas."

explanatory pyramid sits some divine source, be it called “God” or “The One.” The immortal human soul belongs to this hierarchy and aspires to become like its original divine source. Moral and aesthetic judgments should follow this hierarchy, too, with what is beautiful and good corresponding to what is simple, unified, and ultimately divine.¹¹

Ficino argued for what the Renaissance scholar Paul Oskar Kristeller called “a basic harmony between the Christian religion and Platonic philosophy.”¹² Instead of trying to distinguish carefully between different schools of Platonic and Neoplatonic thought when he founded his academy near Florence, Marsilio Ficino attempted to harmonize them all. He presented a grand “Platonic tradition” that endeavored to reconcile both the usual suspects like Plotinus, Socrates, and Plato, but also more obscure figures like Hermes Trismegistus and Zoroaster. (And all of these figures had derived their correct views from God’s revelation to Moses!¹³) His goal was to knit these seemingly disparate sources into one, seamless garment.¹⁴ Fundamental to Ficino’s understanding of Platonism was the idea that the universe was arranged in an ontological hierarchy, beginning with God and descending to physical matter. Borrowing heavily from Plotinus’ conception of God as “The One,” Ficino argued that all existence

¹¹ This account of post-Plato Platonism is derived from Gerson’s *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, 32-34. For a much longer account of how Plato’s inheritors systematized his works, see Gerson’s *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), especially Plotinus’ influential interpretations of Plato in chapters 10 and 11 (255-304).

¹² See Paul Oskar Kristeller’s introductory essay to *Marsilio Ficino and His Work after Five Hundred Years*, ed. Leo S. Oschki (Florence: National Institute for the Study of the Renaissance, 1987), 9.

¹³ As D.P. Walker points out in his classic book on *The Ancient Theology*, Christians since Clement of Alexandria (at least) had argued that Greek and Roman philosophers had derived their (correct) views from ancient Egyptian thought, which in turn came from God’s revelation to Moses. See *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 1-12. See also Clement Salaman’s essay on “Echoes of Egypt in Hermes and Ficino,” *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, ed. Michael J. Allen and Valery Rees with Martin Davis (Leiden: Brill, 2002), especially pages 116-117.

¹⁴ Sophia Howlett, *Marsilio Ficino and His World* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), x-xi, 101-2.

emanates from God, which for Ficino was “a hyper-charged form of the good grafted onto Aristotle’s Prime Mover.”¹⁵ Ficino understood God to be a super-abundant unity, unchanging itself but also overflowing into all the lower levels of being. He divided the hierarchy of the universe into the levels of: God, the Angels (the forms), the Soul (the psychic realm), Quality, and Body.¹⁶ Although these realms were distinct, they also shaded into one another, creating an integrated *universe*. As in the Neoplatonic tradition, the integration of the levels of the universe meant that it was possible for the human mind to rise from a consideration of nature to higher realms of abstraction and unity, ultimately ending in contemplation of the divine itself.¹⁷ The key thing to understand is that a mind, by cognizing an abstract form, in fact participates in the being of that form: the unity of the mind and what it conceptualizes “seems to be a simple allegory, but Ficino conceives it as a real procedure. The corporeal being is really lifted to the sphere of the intellectual being by the intellect, and in this way the mind can overcome the gulf between the sensible world and the intelligible world and in a new dynamic sense realize the unity of the universe.”¹⁸ At the highest point of this flight up the cosmic hierarchy is the contemplation of God. Neoplatonists, both in antiquity and in the Renaissance, may have differed on many points, but they all assumed “the presence in time and in the finite world of the Eternal and the Infinite, to which the knowing soul must draw near.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Celenza, 86.

¹⁶ These levels are based on Plotinus’ cosmic hierarchy of One, Mind, Soul, Sensation, nature and Body. Ficino is following the medieval substitution of the Angelic realm of intelligible forms for Plotinus’ Mind. For a further account of Ficino’s heavenly hierarchy, and how it both borrows and modifies Plotinus’, see Paul Oskar Kristeller’s *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. Virginia Conant (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1943), 106-107. See also Michael J.B. Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino: A Study of his Phaedrus Commentary, Its Sources and Genesis* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 144-5.

¹⁷ Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 109-110.

¹⁸ Kristeller, 109-110.

¹⁹ Paul Richard Blum, “Introduction,” *Philosophers of the Renaissance*, 5.

Consequently, even though there is a hierarchy of being, God is immanent in every part of creation, and potentially accessible to the human soul.

One thing that connects the various levels in the hierarchy of the universe is light. Like the sun, God was thought to be the source of light, which diffused throughout the rest of the cosmos as it descended down the cosmic chain: “The light of the empyrean [the highest heaven] derives immediately from the Spirit of God and is diffused through all the spheres.”²⁰ Ficino in particular described the forms as a divine ray, single at first as they left their divine source but then fragmenting as they descended, eventually breaking into the multiplicity of matter. Just as light fragmented as it left its source and spread throughout the physical cosmos, so too God’s divine soul, overflowing the levels of the universe, fragmented into individual human souls.²¹ (As we shall see, because it connects God to the human world, light becomes a metaphorical road, which a poet could follow back to God.)

Aside from the recovery of Plato’s entire corpus, Edward and George Herbert also lived at a time when old astronomical certainties, most of them based, however roughly, on the physics of Aristotle, were coming into question. Copernicus had famously hypothesized that the solar system centered on the sun instead of the earth (a theory George knew, as we shall see), and comets proved that the heavenly, not only the sub-lunar sphere, were subject to change.²² None of this, however, changed the basic structure of the cosmological hierarchy: changeable matter at the bottom, the unchanging God at

²⁰ Robb, 66.

²¹ For the analogy between light and the soul, see Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 111 and 116. For the history of comparing God to light in Greek and Christian sources, see pages 94-95

²² Edward Grant, *A History of Natural Philosophy: From the Ancient World to the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 275 and 280-85. See also Miguel A. Granada’s “New Visions of the Cosmos,” *Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 270-1.

the top. Nor did it change what will be the crucial point for George and Edward Herbert's poetry: humanity can ascend from earth to heaven.

Human beings can ascend to God because they are a unique meeting point between the higher and lower realms of being, a meeting point of every level between the divine and the earth. In the first volume of his *Platonic Theology* Ficino wrote:

We shall compare these five stages of all things with one another, namely the bodily matter, the quality, the soul, the angel, and God. Since however the species of the rational soul occupies the middle place between these stages and can be seen to be that which binds together the whole of nature, ruling the qualities and the bodies and uniting itself to the angel and to God, we shall show that it is entirely indissoluble, as it unites all the stages of nature; that it is the most excellent of all things, as it heads the structure of the world; and that it is the most blessed of all things, as it joints itself to the divine.²³

The rational soul, what distinguishes a human being from other animals, sits in the middle of the hierarchy of being because it unites the perceptible and intelligible.

Although the cosmic hierarchy was often described with a spatial metaphor (a great chain²⁴), it also had a temporal aspect. Ficino believed that the human soul stood at the intersection of time and eternity, capable of occupying both at once: time in its physical body, eternity in its apprehension of the eternal forms and/or God.²⁵ It ensures that while there may be an ontological distinction between nature and God, the two never come completely apart.²⁶

But though humanity occupies the midpoint on the chain of being, it is not stuck there. On the contrary, according to Ficino a human being can move up or down the

²³ Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology* 1.1 vol. 1: 39.

²⁴ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 59. See especially pages 45-66 in his second chapter for his account of how Christian theologians appropriated the Platonic chain.

²⁵ Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 106.

²⁶ Alfonso Ingengo, "The New Philosophy of Nature," *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, 237-239.

chain. As Michael Allen explains, the soul ascended to God by passing through each level of being, a process that Ficino, borrowing directly from Plato's *Phaedrus*, described as a chariot flying toward the sun: "The chariot's flight is not only a mystical ascent from darkness into light but a cosmic ride through the hierarchy of being, inspired by love for the whole. The soul wishes not merely to flee to the One but to reach the One by way of a graduated ascent that takes her from one end of creation to the other and thus into all things."²⁷ This flight up the hierarchy of being became a Renaissance commonplace, most famously articulated by Ficino's student, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Mirandola proclaimed that human beings were the most variable of all animals, capable of being anything. In his oration *On the Dignity of Man*, God tells Adam that he alone of all creation can change his place within creation: "Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable art the molder and maker of thyself; ... Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul's reason into the higher natures which are divine."²⁸ Adam, and by extension all his progeny, could move higher and lower on the great chain. This is not to say that Mirandola and Ficino agreed on every point. In Mirandola's opinion a soul could move up and down the cosmic hierarchy under its own power, while Ficino suggests that God must continually entice the soul, drawing it along the way.²⁹

So how might the soul ascend to God? It might be either through the will or the intellect. The pagan Neoplatonists tended to emphasize the intellect, a purely mental consideration of the divine forms. Especially in his later, mature works, however, Ficino

²⁷ Allen, 97.

²⁸ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis (New York, NY: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1965), 4-5.

²⁹ Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 245-6.

emphasized the importance of the will, and with it, love. “The enjoyment of the highest good seems to concern the will rather than the intellect,” Ficino wrote. “Nobody in this life achieves a real knowledge of God, but he achieves a real love for God.”³⁰ This was the case because in Ficino’s view, love always pushed the lover to unite with the object of his or her affections. The power of the intellect, by way of contrast, lies in making distinctions, meaning a complete intellectual union with the divine would entail a paradoxical loss of the intellectual faculty.³¹ By emphasizing the will and love at least as strongly as he emphasized intellect, Ficino followed Augustine more than the pagan Neoplatonists.³² And far from being his view alone, “The theory that the supreme good could be attained by means of love was one of the most influential doctrines of Renaissance Neoplatonism.”³³ So where the Platonist revival spread, the idea of love reuniting the soul and God spread, too.

Though Ficino’s emphasis on love rather than the bare intellect may have aligned him more with Augustine than Plotinus, he certainly did not leave the Greeks behind. On the contrary, he also draws his theory of love from Plato’s *Symposium*. This book was enormously important for the Platonist revival; Ficino explicitly modeled his Florentine Academy on its all-male feasting and conversation club.³⁴ Speaking at a kind of dinner party, Socrates tells the assembled guests how his mentor, a priestess named Diotima, taught him about how to move from the love of beautiful bodies to the love of wisdom:

One always goes upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all

³⁰ Quoted in Kristeller *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 272-3.

³¹ Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 264.

³² Allen, 90.

³³ Kraye, 352.

³⁴ Howlett, 17-18. In fact, Ficino considered himself a new Socrates, both because he identified with the Greek sage’s great wisdom and shared his ugly appearance (57).

beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, so that in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful....There if anywhere should a person live his life, beholding that Beauty.³⁵

Socrates begins from matter, a single beautiful body, and then moves to higher and higher levels of generality. These higher levels of generality include custom, what a society calls beautiful, and then at an even higher level ideas and theories about beauty. Socrates arrives eventually at the imperishable form of beauty itself, which resides “not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself, it is always one in form; and all the other beautiful things share in that...” (211B). It is easy to see how Diotima’s lesson shapes later thinking about the chain of Being. Beauty is singular, “one in form,” and never changes. Physical things (animals or even the earth and stars) cannot contain it. Furthermore, everything else is beautiful not on its own merits but by virtue of instantiating, to greater and lesser degrees, that form. As read by Ficino and his academy, the *Symposium* suggested that love of beauty was the initial motivation for the ascent through the universe, an ascent which could culminate in union with God.³⁶ Ficino also interpreted the love in the *Symposium* to be spiritual rather than carnal.

The end of this flight, more often than not, was indescribable. Ficino, like Plotinus before him, conceived of the divine One as “beyond all predications, light in its

³⁵ Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989). 211C - 211D. This is a summary of a discussion that goes from 210A to 212B.

³⁶ For a discussion of how love, and especially the love of beauty, was thought to motivate the ascent from the earthly to heavenly realms, see Allen 190-203.

enfolded, unradiated, unsplendored essence.”³⁷ If God was truly beyond all predication—beyond all goodness, intellect, or even light—then to the eyes of the human mind and heart, divinity was invisible. Hence in the Christian Platonic tradition, God was both pure light and, paradoxically, experienced as total darkness. God was “dwelling in an inaccessible darkness, unknowable and unfathomable.”³⁸ So at the highest reaches of the ladder between God and humanity, human cognition broke down and had to proceed in the dark.

Ficino and his academy popularized Platonism, spreading it across Renaissance Italy.³⁹ Although this Platonic revival may have begun in Renaissance Florence, it soon made its way to 15th- and 16th-century England.⁴⁰ Although the 17th century was, in the words of Sarah Hutton, “an age of transformation,” English humanists and philosophers still endeavored more often than not to stress their continuity with the past.⁴¹ And, as in Italy, this meant that Englishmen could borrow liberally and without apparent contradiction from a whole array of Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Stoic sources (even the Jewish Cabbala was acceptable).⁴² The English humanist Jean Colet corresponded with Ficino, and Thomas More read and translated works by Mirandola. Colet disparaged scholastic attempts to know God and instead insisted (following Ficino) that God could

³⁷ Allen, 146.

³⁸ Dermot Moran, “Nicholas of Cusa (1401 – 1464): Platonism at the Dawn of Modernity,” *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity*, ed. Douglas Hedley and Sarah Hutton (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 20.

³⁹ Robb, 270.

⁴⁰ See Ernst Cassirer’s *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, trans. J.P. Pettegrove (New York, NY: Gordian Press, 1970). Most of the book is on the Cambridge Platonists, who wrote in the latter half of the 17th century, who wrote after the Herberts, but see his useful account of the Platonic Academy of Florence’s influence on English philosophy, 8-24.

⁴¹ Sarah Hutton, *British Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). See her first chapter (7-25) and especially pages 18-20. See also Meyrick H. Carré’s *Phases of Thought in England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), 180-181. He, too, argues that English humanists and schoolmen mostly assumed the continuity between recovered classical texts and Christian doctrine.

⁴² Carré, 206-210.

not be known, but could be loved.⁴³ Ficino's emphasis on love made him especially attractive to poets such as Edmund Spenser and Philip Sidney.⁴⁴ Sir Walter Raleigh echoed Ficino and Mirandola in *The History of the World*, proclaiming that "because in all the little frame of mans [*sic*] body there is a representation of the Universall, and a kind of participation in all the parts thereof, therefore was man called *Microcosmus* or the little world."⁴⁵ Edward Herbert would have been familiar with Ficino and the Renaissance Platonist revival from his reading, but it is also likely that George Herbert knew the basic tenets of the movement, widely spread as it was through English intellectual culture, and in particular in 16th-century English poetry.

In the rest of my chapter, I will argue that Renaissance Platonism makes its way into Edward and George Herbert's poetry. Many of their poems present God as the exalted source of being and humankind at the midpoint of the cosmic order (between God and matter). The speakers of these poems both try to ascend to God, sometimes through intellect but most often through love. Two crucial differences, however, will emerge from a close analysis of their poetry. First, while Edward Herbert will claim that the unaided human mind can soar into the spheres, knowing even "the methods of God," George Herbert will consistently invoke God's aid. Second, both of their ascents begin on the lower rungs of being, in the corporeal realm. But while George Herbert begins with church rituals, Edward Herbert begins with beautiful women. Edward ascends to God

⁴³ Cassier, 17. According to Cassier, "Precisely this was the chief service of the Platonism of the Florentine Academy to English thought at the time of the Renaissance. Florentine Platonism freed English thought of the narrowness and fetters of ecclesiastical tradition [i.e. scholasticism]..." (24). Unfair as this characterization of scholasticism may be, Edward and George Herbert will both adopt it.

⁴⁴ For Ficino's influence on English philosophy and poetry, see Howlett, pages 170-172 and 183-188.

⁴⁵ Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World*, ed. C.A. Patrides (London: Macmillan, 1971).

outside the church and through his own power, while George ascends in church with God's help.

ii. Platonism and the Poetry of Edward Herbert

A. The Ambitious Flame: the Flight to God through intellect and love

R.D. Bedford writes that Platonism “forms a kind of bass to Herbert's speculation.”⁴⁶ That is to say, it is everywhere in his philosophical writing, and therefore hard to locate exactly. Although one can certainly unearth ideas from various Neoplatonic sources in his *De Veritate* and *De Religione Gentilium*, they are in fact most apparent in his poetry. I will first discuss a poem that lays out his Platonist understanding of the human body, soul, and its ascent back to the divine. I will then look at poems that explain *how* Herbert thinks one can return to the divine. In some of his poems he ascends through a marriage of love and intellect that occurs when he contemplates a lover. In other poems he reaches the divine directly through his intellect, apprehending what he calls “the methods of God.” The crucial point is that no matter how Edward Herbert approaches God (through intellect and will or by intellect alone), he approaches by his own power. He never requires supernatural aid, or the mediation of Christian ritual.

Edward Herbert's Platonism informs nearly every poem he writes, and so although I could cite any number of his poems for evidence, I will look closely at one example. I find the clearest and most complete instance of Herbert's understanding of the cosmos and his place in it in “A Meditation upon his Wax-Candle burning out.” In this poem he speculates on the ultimate fate of his immaterial soul. The poem begins, though, with his thoughts about a candle:

⁴⁶ Bedford, 20.

While thy ambitious flame doth strive for height,
 Yet burneth down, as clogged with the weight
 Of earthly parts, to which thou art combin'd,
 Thou still do'st grow more short of thy desire,
 And do'st in vain unto that place aspire,
 To which thy native powers seem inclined. (1-6)⁴⁷

In this stanza, the candle and its flame “seem inclined” in opposite directions; both tend to their places in the cosmic hierarchy. Ficino placed matter at the very bottom of the Platonic chain.⁴⁸ At the opposite pole, the traditional Platonic chain of being culminates in light.⁴⁹ Material falls and decomposes, while light ascends back into the unity of the One. As a material substance, then, the candle melts downwards and eventually dissolves into ashes (lines 7-10). The bright flame, though, strives “for height,” a return to its source in the heavens. Will it arrive? To “strive” after all guarantees no success, and the flame’s ardent desire appears to have an ironic effect: as it burns upward, the candle descends downward. If this were one of George Herbert’s poems (full as they are of sudden reversals of ascent and descent) the tension would probably remain unresolved, at least until the poem’s conclusion, but Edward Herbert is less interested in the drama of the candle (will its light reach heaven or won’t it?) than in its mechanics (how does it work?). So a few lines later we find that “Though thy terrestrial part in ashes lies, / Thy more sublime to higher Regions flies” (10-11). The phrase “native power” answers his question. “Native power” has an important double sense: both the flame’s desire to fly upward *and its ability to do so* are intrinsic to its nature. The universe is so ordered that

⁴⁷ I have taken all of my quotations of Edward’s English-language verse from *The Poems English and Latin of Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury*, ed. G.C. Moore Smith (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1923).

⁴⁸ Celenza, 88-89.

⁴⁹ Granada, 276.

light must ascend and matter must fall. The flame requires no additional (divine) assistance to rise. It ascends by its own power.

In the fourth stanza the candle turns out to be a metaphor for human life. It is a conceit, of course, but not a fanciful one. When Herbert meditates on his candle, he is meditating on the workings of the Platonic cosmos in miniature. Like the candle, the human body is material, yet something in it aspires to rise above that condition:

Much more our Souls then, when they go from hence,
And back unto the Elements dispense,
All that built up our frail and earthly frame,
Shall through each pore & passage make their breach,
Till they with all their faculties do reach
Unto that place from whence at first they came. (19-24)

Like Mirandola and Ficino, Herbert sees human beings as embodying all parts of the universe, from the physical to the purely intellectual. “Our frail and earthly frame” is nothing more than wax, a collection of elements, which will disperse after our deaths. Our souls, however, will breach the walls of their physical confinements and return to their place of origin. This Platonic understanding of humanity is not only a feature of Edward Herbert’s poetry. In his epistemological treatise *De Veritate* (hereafter *Of Truth*), he writes: “Man is a highly intricate structure, and accordingly borrows or derives his temperament from the elements, his form and growth from the vegetable world, his coarse physical sensations from the brutes, and his understanding, will, conscience, and spiritual intellectual faculties from the realm of reason.”⁵⁰ Humanity runs the gamut of creation, from the elements and vegetable world up to the eternal realm of the forms.

⁵⁰ Edward Herbert, *De Veritate by Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury*, trans. Meyrick H. Carré (Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith Ltd., 1937), 178. I will discuss “Of Truth” in depth in chapter 2.

This poem is a “meditation,” meaning that it is speculative, but for Herbert speculation does not mean uncertainty. I think it impossible to miss the confidence in these lines: if the flame will rise, *how much more* will the soul rise. The verb “shall” is in the future tense (the poet’s soul will only ascend after his bodily death), but at the same time it sounds a note of assurance. The soul *shall* ascend until it *does* reach its divine source. No less than the “ambitious flame,” the poet’s soul too “shall” escape his body and return to its divine source.⁵¹ And as with the flame, there is no suggestion here that the soul will require anything beyond its own native power.

Herbert’s assurance culminates in the poem’s last stanza. The poet imagines ascending to the highest rungs of the chain and uniting with God:

Or if as cloid [clad] upon this earthly stage,
Which represents nothing but change or age,
Our Souls would all their burdens here divest,
They singly may that glorious state acquire,
Which fills alone their infinite desire
To be of perfect happiness possess.

And therefore I, who do not live and move,
By outward sense so much as faith and love,
Which is not in inferior Creatures found,
May unto some immortal state pretend,
Since by these wings I thither may ascend,
Where faithful loving Souls with joys are crown’d. (48-60)

In his metaphysical treatise *Of Truth* Herbert defines God according to the Platonic tradition, in terms of infinity and unity: “God is beyond all things, and alone independent of all. He transcends transcendence, and fills, informs, and encompasses the infinite itself in the vastness of His unity.”⁵² Eternity and unity characterize the One at the top of the

⁵¹Unlike Ficino, Edward Herbert believed in the transmigration of souls. Such a belief was arguably faithful to Plato, but it certainly put Edward outside Christian orthodoxy.

⁵² *De Veritate*, 330.

Platonic cosmos, and here, at the end of the poem, Herbert contrasts his current “earthly stage,” with all its variable changes and ages, with his eventually “immortal state.” The poet aims at this immortal state: beyond the changing, physical world, he will join an infinite, unified divinity. Once again, though this poem is a speculative meditation, it is the kind of speculation that comes to firm conclusions. Eternal happiness “alone” could fulfill our soul’s desires, so “therefore” our souls will attain it.⁵³ As Herbert suggests in this poem, human beings alone of all creatures desire immortality, and for him this unique desire proves the soul’s heavenly origin and destiny.⁵⁴

Following Ficino’s insistence that only a combination of intellect and will could lead him to God, Herbert achieves a balance between intellect and will in this poem. He lives by “faith and love.” His beliefs, the articles of his (unorthodox) “faith” and his will, his desire for and love of “perfect happiness,” act as his “wings.” The image of wings, of course, recalls Plato’s *Phaedrus*, further suggesting just how deeply Edward Herbert had imbibed the Platonic understanding of the cosmos. On the wings of desire and intellect he shall ascend to that glorious state of perfect, immortal happiness. John Butler argues that Herbert’s poetry is “above all, an intellectual rather than an emotional experience.”⁵⁵ But it seems to me that Herbert maintains the importance of the will, and especially of love and desire.

⁵³ Herbert may have believed in the transmigration of souls, but his belief in the soul’s immortality shows that his heterodoxy had limits. As a young man in Europe Herbert attended lectures by Cesare Cremonini and Lucilio Vanini, famous “atheists” who not only denied that reason could prove the immortality of the soul but also called Christ and Moses frauds (see Bedford page 245 and John Butler’s *Lord Herbert of Chirbury (1582 – 1633): An Intellectual Biography*, page 103). Cremonini and Vanini denied the immortality of the soul on Aristotelian grounds, while Herbert’s Platonism leads him to affirm the soul’s immortality.

⁵⁴ This point requires much more elaboration, which I will provide when I discuss his *De Veritate* in Chapter 2. In brief, however, Herbert is offering something like an ontological argument for God’s existence.

⁵⁵ Butler, 79.

B. Kindling Desires: Love's Knowledge and its Limits

So far, Edward Herbert's Platonism appears to be a carbon copy of Renaissance Christian Platonism, as exemplified by Ficino. Ficino thought that prayerful meditation led to God, but Herbert, though he uses the same Platonic cosmology and the same combination of intellect and will, charts a way to the divine outside of Christianity.⁵⁶ Surprisingly, Herbert also lays out a de-Christianized *via negativa*. This section will show that while Christian thinkers from Augustine to Ficino saw Platonism as compatible with Christianity, Edward Herbert considered it an alternative.

Herbert addresses the majority of his poems to beautiful women, and his most explicitly Platonic poems are no exception. All three of his poems titled "Platonic Love" begin with an address to a lady, and in these poems Herbert lays out the proper relationship between desire and the intellect. In short, earthly love can act as a precursor to divine love.⁵⁷ In "Platonic Love (II)" for instance, the poet tells his lover that physical beauty can draw them both to a purer, intellectual love, that is, if they can check their sexual appetites:

Whereas true Lovers check that appetite,
Which would presume further then [*sic*] to invite
 The Soul unto that part it ought to take,
 When that from this address it would but make
Some introduction only to delight.

For while they from the outward sense transplant

⁵⁶ Celenza, 92.

⁵⁷ On rare occasions Herbert will dismiss earthly beauty as nothing more than a distraction. In the opening lines of "The Idea (Made of Alnwick in his Expedition to Scotland with the Army, 1639)" he proclaims "All Beauties vulgar eyes on earth do see, / At best but some imperfect Copies be, / Of those the Heavens did at first decree" (1-3). For the most part, however, he follows the path of Socrates in *The Symposium*. Ephemeral, material beauty kindles our desires for eternal, heavenly beauty.

The love grew there in earthly mould, and scant,
To Souls spacious and immortal field,
They spring a love eternal, which will yield
All that a pure affection can grant. (11-20)

The lovers' earthly appetites should only *introduce* them to the powerful and delightful influence of love. "True" lovers eventually leave the "outward sense" of beauty behind in favor of what is unperceivable: eternity and immortality. As in the *Symposium*, carnal love is not wrong but simply misdirected. True lovers, rather than succumbing to their sensuous appetites, "transplant" or move their affections from their "earthly mould" into the "immortal field." The love remains the same, but the lovers have directed their wills elsewhere. The other poems on Platonic love make much the same point. In "Platonic Love (I)" the poet tells his lady that "For as you can unto that height refine / All Loves delights, as while they do incline / Unto no vice, they so become divine" (7-9). The point, once again, is that sensual love requires redirection, not outright rejection.⁵⁸

Just as significant as what Herbert includes in his Platonist poetry is what he leaves out. Throughout all his poems on love and divinity (save one reference to an angel in "Platonic Love (I)"), Herbert never uses any unequivocally Biblical or Christian

⁵⁸ I do not wish to undersell the erotic charge of Herbert's poetry. The first stanza of "Parted Souls," for instance, includes double-entendres so obvious they hardly deserve the name: "I go, but dying, and in this our death / Where soul and soul is parted, it is I / The deader part that fly away, / While she alas, in whom before / I liv'd, dyes her own death and more..." (3-7). In 16th-century love poetry "dying" was a common pun. Borrowed from the French *le petit mort*, "dying" was a euphemism for orgasm and subsequent drowsiness. And if the poet's death refers to post-coital drowsiness, then the sense of having "liv'd" in her before his death is pretty clear, too. Still, even "Parted Souls" and other frankly sexual poems move toward Platonic conclusions, in which physical love gives way to ideal, intellectual love. But make no mistake, *le petit mort* might prove fatal. In his *Brief Lives*, John Aubrey had this to say about George Herbert: "He was a very fine complexion and consumptive. his [*sic*] marige I suppose hastened his death, my kinswoman was a handsome bona roba: and ingeniose." "Bona roba," as Aubrey's elsewhere defined it in his *Lives*, meant: "as we say good stuffe, a good wholesome plum-cheeked wench." In Aubrey's telling, then, Jane Herbert was perhaps too much for George (*Brief Lives with an Apparatus for the Lives of our English Mathematical Writers*, vol. 1, ed. Kate Bennett. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). See page 694 for an account of George's death and 1660 for the meaning of "bona roba."

terms. There is no talk of Christ or sacraments, grace or sin.⁵⁹ Of course, Platonism and Christianity had long been intertwined, so it was impossible for Herbert to talk about the eternal, infinite, source of being and light without overlapping significantly with Renaissance Christian understandings of God. However, where Ficino and others saw compatibility between Christianity and Plato, Herbert's poetry tries to establish Platonism as an alternative: union with the divine without a church.

In a trio of sonnets ("To Her Face," "To Her Body," "To Her Mind") Herbert makes it clear that approaching immortality through earthly love is an alternative to finding immortality through any church. "To Her Face" begins by describing the god-like affect of his lady's features:

Fatal aspect! that hast an Influence
More powerful far than those Immortal Fires
That but incline the Will and move the Sense,
Which thou alone constraint, kindling Desires
Of such holy force, as more inspires
The Soul with Knowledge, than Experience
Or Revelation can do with all
Their borrowed helps. (lines 1-8)

In these lines Herbert exalts his lady's beauty over "Revelation," knowledge given by God through scripture.⁶⁰ He calls "Revelation" a "borrowed" help, by which he means that those who aspire to divine knowledge through revelation can only receive it as second-hand, mediated knowledge. Herbert can find knowledge of the divine in other ways, too, such as by contemplating his lover's beauty. Later in the poem he also rejects original sin: "Sure *Adam* sinn'd not in that spotless Face" (13-14). Adam's sin supposedly passed from him to the rest of humanity; nobody could escape it. But in her

⁵⁹ Three of his nearly 100 poems sound surprisingly pious: "A Sinner's Lament," "Echo in a Church," and "October 14, 1644." These, however, are clear exceptions in his poetry.

⁶⁰ He also rejects "experience," but I will address his quarrel with empiricism in chapter two.

spotlessness she stands outside this lineage. Traditionally, Adam's fall divided humanity from God and made it impossible for his descendants to reunite with God or know God under their own power. By rejecting original sin and scripture, Herbert announces that he will reach God independently.

It may seem that this poem entirely rejects the goal of reunion with the divine. After all, his lady appears to have more influence with him than God. But it is important to distinguish here between the enthralled speaker of this poem and Herbert the philosopher. The lover thinks that the object of his affection is the divinest thing in creation, more lovely than the stars. The Platonic philosopher, however, knows with Diotima and Socrates that the lover has set his mind on an inferior object, no matter how enchanting her face may be. The poet in "To Her Face" mistakenly worships her face when he should turn his mind to immortal beauty. This is precisely what happens in the next poem, "To Her Body." While her "spotless face" seemed unique in its sinlessness, her body is beautiful because it instantiates laws of beauty: "State sits inthron'd in thee, / Divulging forth her Laws in the fair Book / Of thy Commandments, which none mistook" (3-5). Putting "Laws" and "Commandments" in a book, the poet clearly contrasts her book with the Bible. He clearly prefers her book: if "none mistook" her laws and commandments, it would compare quite favorably to the Bible, especially in the post-reformation period when people not only disagreed but died for interpretations of law and commandments. The lady's beauty expresses a certain kind of laws, namely the laws of beauty:

Oh! how can I
Enough admire that Symmetry, exprest
In new proportions, which doth give the Ly
To that Arithmetique which hath profest

All Numbers to be Hers? thy Harmony
Comes from the Spheres, and there doth prove
Strange measures so well grac'd, as Majesty
Itself, like thee would rest, like thee would move. (7-14)

Note that the poet has followed Socrates' pattern. Where he before admired her for her unique beauty, he now admires her body for its symmetry. That is to say, he admires her not for her individual beauty but because she embodies more general laws. She is a "new" proportion, like a triangle that, however unique it may be in size or angle, remains a triangle, conforming to mathematical rules. The poet erred in thinking that "all numbers" were hers alone, as if other symmetrical objects were deviations from her original. Instead, she expresses in miniature a larger cosmic harmony: her beauty conforms to the cosmic pattern. She moves the poet, that much remains true, but now he realizes that the spheres move him through her. Whereas in "To Her Eyes" the poet saw a conflict between the influence of his lady and the influence of the spheres, now he realizes that their influence was one and the same. He has taken the step up the Platonic chain, from material to law. And whereas before her beauty drew him in, in these lines the arithmetic and harmony of the spheres move him directly.

The final poem, "To Her Mind," completes the ascent. The poet now moves from mathematical and musical laws to even more exalted levels of abstraction. By the end, the poet's intellect will fail him. First, though, he returns to a point made in "To Her Face." His lady is perfect: "Exalted Mind! whose Character doth bear / The first Idea of Perfection, whence *Adam's* came..." (lines 1-3). As in the first poem, she has Adam's original perfection without his subsequent fall. By saying that Adam's perfection came from the "Idea of Perfection," the poet seemingly accepts the Biblical account: Adam

instantiates perfection. But what I think he really suggests is that by contemplating her mind, he can get just as close to perfection as he could by considering Adam. Adam may instantiate perfection, but his lady does equally so. The poet also says “there’s no difference / In telling what thou art, and what shall be” (6-7), meaning that her mind is unchanging and eternal, both characteristic of the summit of the Platonic cosmos. She is already there, and by admiring her he aspires to her divine condition. And if her mind bears “the Idea of Perfection,” which is to say it instantiates the very summit of the great chain, the poet can reach the divine outside of Christian thought and sources.

C. Amazed I cease thus —: Edward Herbert’s via negativa

So far, Herbert’s poetry has shown an ascent to the Platonic source of being, and in doing so he has endeavored to strike a path independent of any church tradition. Now within the Christian contemplative tradition, there is a strong sense that God is ultimately unknowable. Apophatic theology, which includes late-classical authors like pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Renaissance figures like Nicholas of Cusa, teaches that one can only know God negatively, by stating what God is not. Herbert’s poetry also has an apophatic strain. But in keeping with the poetry I have discussed thus far, Herbert separates his apophaticism from any Christian confession.

If Herbert’s “Idea of Perfection” in “To Her Mind” seemed so abstract as to be unclear, it is. In fact, over the rest of the poem, the poet claims that the Idea of Perfection exceeds his ability to cognize and name it. He asks of her “how canst appear / In words?” How can his words, which divide and specify, capture her mind, which touches the total unity of the One at the top of the chain? The answer is they cannot:

Then pardon me that Rapture do profess,
At thy outside, that want, for what I see,
Description, if here amaz'd I cease
Thus—
Yet grant one Question, and no more, crav'd under
Thy gracious leave, How, if thou wouldst express
Thy self to us, thou shouldst be still a wonder? (8-14)

The dash marks the place where the poet's intelligence fails him, as if he had entered a state of wordless awe. He has no words that can do justice to the perfection of her mind. According to the form of the poem, the line should be ten syllables long. Instead it is a blank space where his words, and in fact anybody's words, would follow if they were able. It seems that his words belong to the lower orders of difference and distinction, not to the realm of pure thought. The poem ends, appropriately, with a question rather than a conclusion. If her mind were comprehensible, how would it still remain a wonder to him? The way she escapes his intellect turns out to be a blessing. He can now wonder at her, a state that enjoys its object without ever exhausting it. I think what we see here is a flight beyond the intellect, beyond even the abstractions of mathematics, to realms that are only available to a disposition of the will, an unintelligible wonder.

One of Herbert's primary symbols for the limit of the intellect is blackness, which he uses extensively in four apophatic poems ("To her Eyes," "To her Hair," "Sonnet of Black Beauty," and "Another Sonnet to Black Itself"). "The darkness of God" is a common trope in the Christian apophatic tradition.⁶¹ It is best exemplified by St. John of the Cross, a poet who approaches this dark God by divesting himself of his senses and intellect, becoming dark himself. Unsurprisingly, Herbert approaches the subject of blackness through physical beauty. Reversing the old Petrarchan ideal of fairness, his

⁶¹ Arthur L. Clements, *The Poetry of Contemplation: John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, and the Modern Period* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 9.

lyrics are full of dark-eyed and dark-haired beauties. In extolling blackness Herbert deliberately distinguishes himself from his predecessors, but even more importantly, in both Neoplatonic philosophy and Renaissance optics, blackness represented what could not be known.⁶² In “To Her Eyes” the titular black eyes are windows not only to her soul, but also into the secret laws of creation:

As you then joined are
 Unto the Soul, so it again
 By its connexion doth pertain
 To that first cause,
 Who giving all their proper Laws,
 By you doth best declare
 How he at first b’ing hid
 Within the veil of an eternal night,
 Did frame for us a second light,
 And after bid
 It serve for ordinary sight (12-22)

A direct line runs between her black eyes, her soul, and the “first cause,” which once again for Herbert combines both Aristotelian causation and the Platonic chain of order (those “proper Laws”). But the blackness of her eyes conceals greater mysteries. I submit that here, once again, Herbert is quarreling with Biblical revelation. Genesis, of course, begins with light, but in the darkness of the lady’s eyes, the poet sees the veil that separates creation from its cause. There are things to know which precede even the creation story. He wants to discover the “proper Laws” that shine obscurely in her eyes (“Black eyes if you seem dark, / It is because your beams are deep” (1-2), while Genesis can only tell him what happened after the “second” light (*fiat lux*).

In his three other poems on blackness, Herbert likewise extols the beauty of blackness and declares it inaccessible to human eyes, and the poet’s mind. In “To Her

⁶² Butler, 310-313.

Hair” he writes “that when we should your Glories comprehend / Our sight recoils, and turneth back again” (15-16). The light of blackness blinds mortal eyes, sending them back down from heavenly to earthly things. In “Another Sonnet to Black itself” he combines his criticisms of empiricism and revelation: “But when Earth’s common light shines to our eys, / Thou so retir’st thy self, that thy disdain / All revelation unto Man denys” (12-14). And in “Sonnet of Black Beauty” he doubts his poetry’s ability to represent blackness rightly: “Black beauty, which above that common light, / Whose Power can no colours here renew / But those which darkness can again subdue” (1-3). Color, in Renaissance rhetoric, means that many words can express and bring forth an idea. But the poet here laments that even his most brilliant colors will not “renew” blackness, capture and represent it for the reader.

D. To Know the Methods of God: the flight of the intellect alone

In his erotic poetry Herbert holds together the intellect and will, suggesting that both are necessary for union with the divine. In fact, love seemingly ascended to regions where the intellect could not follow. However, Herbert’s Latin poetry suggests that the soul could apprehend what he calls “the methods of God” without any remainder. And furthermore, while his love poetry marries desire and knowledge, his Latin poetry suggests that it is possible to know God through the intellect alone.

Herbert wrote two long cosmological poems in Latin, “De Vita Humana Philosophica Disquisitio” (“Philosophical Disquisition on Human Life”) and “De Vita

Celesti, ex isdem principiis conjectura” (“Conjectures Concerning the Heavenly Life”).⁶³

He begins the “Philosophical Disquisition” with an account of how the soul enters the body. As befits a disciple of Ficino, Herbert describes both matter (“First, life stirred within the genial seed,” line 1) and “qualia” (“Next, ... fermenting spirit puts on tender limbs, / And, earnest, now prepares, of wonderous fabric, / The powers of sense,” lines 7-10). The soul then descends from heaven to inhabit this body. Its goal, however, is to re-ascend into the heavens, which the poem describes as grasping the laws that govern the whole cosmos:

From its own impulse,
It is permitted to the soul to circle,
Hither and thither rove, that it may see
Laws and eternal covenants of its world,
And stars returning in assiduous course,
The causes and the bonds of life to learn,
And from afar foresee the highest will.
How he to admirable harmony
Tempers the various motions of the world,
And Father, Lord, Guardian, and Builder-Up.
And Deity on every side is styled. (17-27)

Here are all the elements of the well-ordered, Platonic universe. Above the chaos of matter and sense, the supra-lunar cosmos runs according to “eternal covenants,” unchanging laws of motion. The stars run in their predictable courses, and below them the hidden “causes and bonds” of life hold matter and sense together. It is in all a harmonious, well-tempered universe made by a Deity characterized by power: a “Father, Lord, Guardian, and Builder-Up.” In his “Conjectures” Herbert calls these laws the methods of God: “If *fixed contemplation* be chosen rather in the mind, / All the mysteries of the high regions shall be laid open to us, / And the joy will be to know the methods of

⁶³ For their translations I am indebted to Margaret Fuller Ossoli. They can be found in a collection of her work: *Art, Literature, and the Drama*, ed. Arthur Fuller (Boston, MA: Brown, Taggard and Chase, 1860), pages 36-39.

God” (47-49). The poet’s intelligence no longer draws back before a blinding divine light. Instead, the mind apprehends “all the mysteries” of the cosmos, and it appears that these mysteries are just those eternal covenants, “the methods” by which God has ordered the world.

At the end of his “Philosophical Disquisition,” Herbert describes believing in God rightly as participating in eternal life: “But neither is Faith empty, endowed with so much strength, / that, penetrating the whole of heaven, it fixes itself in the Divine itself, / Until it participates and shares in the life to come” (52-4).⁶⁴ In this poem Herbert pairs “faith” (*fides* in the Latin) with the contemplative path to God. “Faith” in these lines does not mean assenting to the doctrines of any church. Rather, faith seems to mean trust in the fruit of one’s own contemplative investigation, faith in his intellect. Crucially, the lines on contemplation make no mention of love. He has unmade the marriage of intellect and will he insisted on in his “Mediation” on the candle. He can participate in the divine life and have a foretaste of eternity through his intellect alone.

Though Herbert’s Latin cosmologies decouple will from intellect, they do not reject the possibility of reaching the divine through love. After the lines in his “Conjectures” on “fixed contemplation,” Herbert turns to love: “If we are more delighted with celestial *love*, / We are dissolved into flames which glide about and excite one another / Mutually, embraced in sacred ardours” (52-4). Love, too, can lift the poet into the heavens, but note how much the results of “love” and “contemplation” differ. In Herbert’s contemplative approach to God, “all the mysteries” are laid open, as if he stood apart from them and comprehended them. But “celestial love” collapses this distance.

⁶⁴ Ossali does not translate the last twenty or so lines of Herbert’s “Disquisition.” I am indebted to Peter Moench for his translation of the remaining lines.

The poet dissolves into fire that mingles with other flames, and in this embrace it becomes hard to tell the lover poet from the divinity he loves. The one who ascends through love also achieves eternal life: “Nor does Love go fruitlessly, which, arisen from heaven / returns to the Divine, and, contracting mutual commerce, / unites intimate covenants with continuous life” (49-51). While contemplation discovers eternal covenants (keeping the poet at a slight remove), love pulls the poet into a covenant with the Divine (dissolving the poet in heavenly fire). What is crucial here is that in these poems love and intellect are two distinct ways of reaching the divine.

Aside from the division of intellect and will, another point deserves mention. In both poems the soul reaches the divine “from its own impulse.” That is to say, no less than the candle, it is in the nature of the soul to apprehend the heavens and the eternal covenants that govern it. The soul seems to retain some divine potency (which makes sense since it originally descended from God). Remember the lines in which Herbert claimed that the contemplative soul has “so much strength” that it can penetrate the heavens. It is the engine of its own ascent, “fixing itself” in the Divine. Here Herbert suggests no need for an intermediary, no need even of a feminine beauty to engage him and draw his mind to higher things. In his “Philosophical Disquisition” he describes himself as “free in my own will” (43) and describes Herbert’s “Conjectures” sound the same notes:

Only our labor and industry can vivify,
Polishing [our minds] with learning and with morals,
That they may return all fair, bearing back a dowry to heaven,
When, by use of our free will, we put to rout those ills
Which heaven has neither dispelled, nor will hereafter dispel. (33-37)

And a few lines later:

For, if *liberty* be dear, it is permitted
To roam through the loveliest regions obvious to innumerable heavens... (44-5)

Setting aside for now Herbert's understanding of ethics, it is evident that "learning" the methods of God, roaming the heavens in thought, is within the power of the human mind. Of course, God has planted the "impulse" to explore the divine in Herbert. But Herbert needs no other mediator, no dark-haired lady, to apprehend the "eternal covenants" of creation. No third party need come between Herbert and the divine source of all.

So what can we say of Herbert's poetry? It reveals a mind deeply familiar with 16th-century Platonism, both its cosmology and its understanding of a human being's place in that cosmos. The poet has the power to ascend to the divine through a marriage of intellect and love. In some of his poems the intellect must eventually fall back, and love alone seek reunion with the divine source of being. All of this is well in line with the history of Christian contemplative thought. However, we have also seen rumblings of Herbert's dissatisfaction with Christianity, evidenced in his belief in the transmigration of souls and subtle disparaging of Biblical revelation. And in his Latin cosmologies, he has suggested that the human mind can penetrate divinity without any aid: the adventurous soul can know, love, and live eternally with God independently of any Christian confession.

ii. George Herbert and Renaissance Platonism

Transition

Readers already familiar with *The Temple* might think that Edward Herbert's Platonism is about as far from his brother's simple, devout verse as one could get. Critics

have seldom considered George Herbert a philosophical poet. Helen Vendler set the tone of Herbert criticism for years to come when she wrote:

The odd thing about these poems [Herbert's 'discursive or speculative lyrics'] is that they are not, for all Herbert's intellectual brilliance, very successful. Readers with a philosophical bent, like Coleridge and Emerson, may be attracted to a poem like *Man* or *Providence*, but these poems are not the first we would anthologize. ... The speculative poems are not, on the whole, good enough to solicit or reward sustained attention: they versify what they mean, sometimes unremarkably and sometimes well, but they rarely contain those crosscurrents of powerful feeling that vex and freshen Herbert's best poetry. Once we have read all the curious natural lore in *Man* or *Providence* and approved the compactness and symmetry of the presentation, there is nothing more, no echoing residue or precipitate of feeling.⁶⁵

As far as I can tell, "Providence" and "Man" are indeed seldom anthologized; they may have caught the attention of Emerson and Coleridge (brilliant poets and philosophers both), but because they have seemed unremarkable, critics have devoted too little attention to the exact content of "what they mean."

Going one step farther than Vendler, some have found George Herbert downright anti-intellectual. Richard Strier, who reads Herbert as a doctrinal Lutheran, argues that he shares Luther's antipathy towards scholasticism, and toward speculative thought more generally.⁶⁶ As Strier points out, "The Parson's Library" chapter of *The Country Parson* opens with the words "The Countrey Parson's Library is a holy Life."⁶⁷ Piety matters, not book learning. In this chapter one finds no mention of a book other than the scriptures. No divinity, no natural philosophy. In *The Temple*, the poem titled "Divinitie" (which

⁶⁵ Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 180.

⁶⁶ Richard Strier, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 189.

⁶⁷ George Herbert, *The Country Parson: His Character and Rule of Holy Life, The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson, chapter xxxiii (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

would have been George's word for what we now call theology) seems to support Strier's assessment.⁶⁸ Herbert spent a great deal of his short life in Cambridge, yet in "Divinity" the poet sounds thoroughly sick of academic quibbling. In the first stanza, he sarcastically asks if divines have supplied spheres for the stars because they are afraid the stars will trip without guidance. Then he asks:

Just so the other heav'n they also serve,
Divinities transcendent skie:
Which with the edge of wit they cut and carve.
Reason triumphs, and faith lies by.

Could not that wisdom, which first broacht the wine,
Have thicken'd it with definitions?
And jagg'd his seamless coat, had that been fine,
With curious questions and divisions? (5-12)

Here are all the tools of scholasticism, Aristotelian or otherwise: a wit that slices and dices heaven itself with definitions, questions, and divisions. All of this separation tears the "seamless coat" of divine "wisdom" apart. The implication is that a scholastic attitude is simply inappropriate for the subject of divinity. In fact, scholastic reason ironically makes it harder to know divine "wisdom." Thickening a wine means darkening it until it becomes opaque, so all the questions and definitions of "Divinitie" (which should make the poet's understanding of God clearer) only makes God more difficult to see. "Divinitie" should be easily understood: "*Love God, and love your neighbour. Watch and pray. / Do as ye would be done unto. / O dark instructions; ev'n dark as day!*" (lines 17-19). To serve "Divinities transcendent skie" rightly, one needs only simple faith and a willingness to love God and neighbor. The final lines of the poem

⁶⁸ See Strier pages 40-8 for his discussion of "Divinitie." Camille Wells Slighter likewise reads this poem as an attack on rationality in matters of faith in *The Casuistical Tradition in Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, and Milton* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 196.

advise destroying the very instruments by which natural philosophy and astronomy are possible: “Then burn thy Epicycles, foolish man; / Break all thy spheres, and save thy head” (25-26). “Epicycles” and “spheres” are hallmarks of the astronomy of Aristotle and Ptolemy. So when the poet exhorts the divine to burn his epicycles and break his spheres, he is asking him to abandon all knowledge of how the cosmos as a whole works. That wisdom ironically belongs only for “foolish men” because only faith will “save thy head.” This poem follows St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians, in which the apostle implies that while they may appear foolish in the eyes of the Gentiles, the truth is the other way around.⁶⁹

Likewise, in early Latin poems addressed to Francis Bacon, Herbert compliments him for “killing” the ancient philosophers.⁷⁰ He describes Lord Bacon as a conquering hero: “Although through ancient authors’ wrack and ruin / You hurry to your fame’s true rewards, / Still with so much charm and wit you slay your foes, / Each one considers, as it were, death a gift for him.”⁷¹ It would be the easiest thing in the world to draw a neat conclusion about rebellious Edward and pious George.

And yet the fact that Herbert knew Francis Bacon, a scientist and philosopher in his own right, should give us pause. It was more than a passing acquaintance. In his translation of the Psalms, Lord Bacon thanked George for helping him to translate *The Advancement of Learning* into Latin.⁷² In *The Advancement of Learning*, Herbert would have read Bacon’s broadsides against the “schoolmen” (scholastics), and perhaps

⁶⁹ 1 Cor. 1:23

⁷⁰ Joseph Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 195.

⁷¹ George Herbert, “To the author of *Instauratio Magna*,” *The Latin Poetry of George Herbert. A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Mark McCloskey and Paul R. Murchy (Athens, HO: Ohio University Press, 1965).

⁷² Summers, 196.

borrowed his language for “Divinitie”: “with the edge of wit they cut and carve” (7).⁷³ I bring up Bacon because I want to suggest that George Herbert, no less than his brother, was familiar with the best thought of his day. Nor was Bacon’s natural philosophy incompatible with a Neoplatonic cosmology. On the contrary, according to Stephen A. McKnight, Bacon no less than Ficino tried to recover Neoplatonic sources and use them to move people to a proper and reverent understanding of God.⁷⁴ Rejecting scholasticism, as George Herbert did in “Divinite” was common, almost *pro forma*, in the Renaissance, but it did not entail rejecting natural philosophy or the study of divinity.

Furthermore, in *The Country Parson*, despite his insistence that the parson’s library is a “holy life,” Herbert in fact requires the parson to be exceptionally well-read. In the chapter on “The Parsons Knowledg [*sic*],” Herbert writes that the complete Parson “hath read the Fathers also, and the Schoolmen, and the later Writers ... out of all which he hath compiled a book and body of Divinity, which is the storehouse of his Sermons...”⁷⁵ By “Fathers” Herbert presumably means that the parson should read the early patristic theologians, and, even more surprisingly, he also recommends “the Schoolmen,” those scholastic theologians who he elsewhere appeared to reject. He recommends reading certain ancient Greek philosophers, too. In his chapter on catechizing, he admires the dialogues of Plato and Socrates for the way they lead their interlocutors to insights: “To this purpose, some dialogues in *Plato* were worth the

⁷³ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (London: William Pickering, 1881), 36-7.

⁷⁴ Summers, 196. For McKnight on Bacon’s kinship with Renaissance Platonism see *The Religious Foundations of Francis Bacon’s Thought* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006), pages 65-79. Bacon objected to Aristotelian accounts of sub-lunar nature. He preferred ancient atomist accounts, such as the one he found in Democritus. He insisted that ancient atomism was compatible with Christianity. See Catherine Wilson’s *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), 22.

⁷⁵ *The Country Parson*, chapter v, 229-30.

reading, where the singular dexterity of *Socrates* in this kind may be observed, and imitated.”⁷⁶ So although Herbert may at times strike anti-intellectual poses, he also endorses an extensive education in the history of Christian “divinitie,” and even pagan philosophy.

So even if Herbert rejected whatever “Divinitie” he learned at Cambridge, he did learn it. His courses of divinity might inform his poetry whether he meant them to or not. Finally, in “Divinitie” Herbert rejects scholastic method (questions and divisions) and the Ptolemaic system (Epicycles and spheres), but by the late 16th century, other systems of thought and cosmology were available. Specifically, there was Platonism. While scholastic philosophy cut and carved its subjects, Platonism in the Renaissance forever pursued the cosmic whole. In this half of the chapter, I will argue that the cosmology and anthropology in *The Temple* are closer to Edward Herbert’s than one might expect. The difference, though, is that while Edward Herbert ascended to the divine through the medium of a female lover, George Herbert’s ascents in *The Temple* begin in liturgical and devotional settings, using all the whole conceptual, historical, and dogmatic apparatus of his faith.

A. Herbert’s “Providence”

In the next two sections I will focus at length on Herbert’s poems with the strongest philosophical bent (to borrow a phrase from Vendler). I shall argue that these poems evince a Renaissance Platonist understanding of the earth, the cosmos, and humanity in it. In fact, if anything, George Herbert appears to have known the newest

⁷⁶ *The Country Parson*, chapter xxi, 256.

natural philosophy (with Copernicus and Bacon) at least as well as his brother. To be clear, I am not opposing Herbert's Platonic natural philosophy to a Biblical view of God, humanity, and nature. It was possible to hold both, as Ficino did. But in order not to distract from the main point of my sections on the poems "Providence" and "Man," I will contrast the two Herberts only at the end of each section.

In "Providence," one of his longest poems, Herbert directly addresses the divine guidance that "strongly and sweetly movest" everything. Herbert insists that "Providence," the governing and guiding force of God, is immanent in everything:

Thou art in small things great, not small in any:
Thy even praise can neither rise, nor fall.
Thou art in all things one, in each thing many:
For thou art infinite in one and all. (41-44)

Chana Bloch has rightly noted that "Providence" draws on cosmological Psalms, like Psalm 104.⁷⁷ Yet it also echoes nature as understood in Renaissance Platonism in several ways. First, if one considers the workings of even the smallest part of it (say, rain falling on a flower) one can see, in miniature, the entire pattern. Second, because creation is one interlocking system, consideration of any part can lead one to distant parts. As the first line of the poem says, "Providence" moves everything "from end to end," including the poet whose musings take him in every direction: "The hills with health abound; the vales with store; / The Southe with marble; North with furies and woods" (95-96).

Most importantly, though, to say that providence is "infinite in one and all" is to say that God remains immanent in the world, though often unnoticed. These lines about the presence of the infinite in the finite reveal Platonist understanding of creation implicit

⁷⁷ Chana Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 252-4.

in “Providence.” No matter how far from the source of all being something might be, it remains connected to God. In fact, here George Herbert sounds exactly like Edward in the latter’s *Of Truth*, in which he argues that the infinite is in the finite and vice versa.⁷⁸ Surprising as it may seem, “Providence” and Edward Herbert share the Renaissance Platonist understanding of God’s immanence in a carefully patterned creation. The idea that God remains active in creation also appears in George Herbert’s *The Country Parson*, a “rule of holy life” for English priests. In the chapter on “The Parson’s Consideration of Providence,” Herbert exhorts the parson to teach his people to see “God’s hand in all things.”⁷⁹ Country people should know that God has not only created but also even now sustains and governs everything from the growth of their crops to the milk of their cow. In fact, so important are God’s sustaining efforts that they constitute a continuous new creation: “For Preservation is a Creation; and more, it is a continued Creation, and a creation every moment.”⁸⁰

That everything in the world fits together so well is the result of God’s having fitted it all together, down to the last detail. Lovejoy (conveniently for my purposes) actually cites Herbert’s “Providence” as a perfect example of 17th-century thought about the great chain.⁸¹ He cites these lines:

Thy creatures leap not, but expresse a feast,
Where all the guests sit close, and nothing wants.
Frogs marry fish and flesh; bats, bird and beast;
Sponges, non-sense and sense; mines, th’earth & plants. (133-136)

⁷⁸ *Of Truth*, 330.

⁷⁹ George Herbert, *The Country Parson: His Character and Rule of Holy Life in The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), chapter xxx, 270-272.

⁸⁰ *The Country Parson*, 281.

⁸¹ Lovejoy, 60.

There are no gaps in the chain, no “leaps” between “creatures.” Frogs link fish to “flesh”, bats birds to mammals, and so on. It is all one great system, emanating from the divine source. I, however, think the best evidence for the Renaissance Platonism in “Providence” comes from its picture of God as an artisan and musician. For instance, in the space of two stanzas Herbert insists three times that “all” is God’s handiwork:

For either thy *command* or thy *permission*
Lay hands on all: they are thy *right* and *left*.
The first puts on with speed and expedition;
The other curbs sinnes stealing pace and theft.

Nothing escapes them both; all must appeare,
And be dispos’d, and dress’d, and tun’d by thee,
Who sweetly temper’st all. If we could heare
Thy skill and art, what musick would it be! (33-40)

“Nothing” in creation “escapes” God’s providential design. God either forces (commands) or allows (permits) every event, as if God’s hands were everywhere. All of creation appears to be and in fact is (“appeare / And be”) ordered by God. The verbs in the second stanza all suggest that the designer of the universe is a kind of craftsman. At the time of Herbert’s writing, “disposed” could mean arranged or placed, and here, as so often elsewhere in Herbert’s poetry, “dress” is more than an external covering: it is also the state of being well-prepared or finished. But God’s providence most closely resembles the “skill and art” of musicianship. To temper or tune an instrument is to bring its parts into a harmonious unity, and so it appears that God has designed the world as one perfectly tuned instrument. Nor are God’s tempering and tuning only preliminary to music. Herbert suggests that the music is playing around him constantly, whether he hears it or not (the music is sweet “if” Herbert can hear it, but if he can’t, the fault is wholly with his ear).

The analogy of musical and cosmic order has been a feature of Christian Platonism since the time of Augustine. William Pahlka has argued that Augustine's *De musica* is of great importance to Herbert's poetry. For Augustine, music and math were part of the very fabric of creation. Both worked according to laws of proportion that revealed unity behind seeming multiplicity.⁸² Because meter is both musical and mathematical, its structure is analogous to the structure of creation. It follows that meter can ultimately participate in the divine Logos: "The maker of verse creates an object in which language, a human institution based on conventions, comes to be imitative in the same way the natural world imitates the Logos; that is, the poet imposes on language number, measure, proportion, self-likeness."⁸³ I doubt that Herbert draws such a clear line between the "conventions" of language and mathematical harmony (after all, the *logos* of Christ is supposed to be both cosmic order *and* human word), but Pahlka's analysis is especially applicable to a poem like "Providence."

In fact, Edward Herbert also likens the cosmos to a great and well-made instrument. In his *Religion of the Gentiles* (which I will discuss in chapter 5) he writes:

We might compare the world to the instrument, and the stars shining in the sky to the strings; if no-one touched the strings and made the sharps and flats sound in proportion, thereby producing a melody, Nature would either be completely dumb, or her voice would be awful. ... A god who so evidently and continually shows himself in all his works cannot be said to be hidden or obscure; indeed he demonstrates through the tiniest animals and insects that he is the greatest Maker.⁸⁴

A good instrument, of course, depends on a precise relationship between its parts, so that each individual note plucked on a string will harmonize with all the others. Instrumental

⁸² William H. Pahlka, *Saint Augustine's Meter and George Herbert's Will* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1987), 17-29.

⁸³ Pahlka, 21.

⁸⁴ Edward Herbert, *Religion of the Gentiles: A Translation of De religione gentilium*, ed. John Anthony Butler (Ottawa, Canada: Dovehouse Editions, Inc., 1996) 277-279 (quote on 279).

and musical metaphors were therefore common in Renaissance Platonism like Edward Herbert's: the harmonious system of music reflected the harmonious cosmos as a whole. What is important for my purposes is how close Edward's description is to "Providence." Both imagine the universe as a well-ordered instrument, capable of making sweet music. And both find this orderly design in "the tiniest animals and insects."

The orderliness of creation is also apparent in the versification of "Providence," which is remarkably well-ordered. George Herbert's poems are usually a riot of uneven rhythms, mutating rhyme schemes, and strangely-shaped stanzas. But in "Providence" each stanza is exactly the same: four lines of iambic pentameter with an *a b a b* rhyme scheme. This regularity both doubles the orderliness he sees in nature and suggests one pattern running beneath it. God's providence, like the lines of the poem, is unvarying. The one order of providence is inherent and implicit in all created particulars. It is inherent because it is the underlying architecture of creation. And it is implicit because like rhythm or number, it may not be obvious to the untrained eye or ear.

In "Providence" as a whole, however, Herbert spends less time pondering God's relationship to creation than he spends on investigating how creation fits together. The poem's ambition is to track how "Providence" "strongly and sweetly movest" (line 2) all of creation. This dual focus on strength and sweetness matches Francis Bacon's ambition in *The Advancement of Learning*. Bacon wrote that "It is so, then, that in the work of the creation we see a double emanation of Virtue from God; the one referring more properly to Power, the other to Wisdom."⁸⁵ By "power" Bacon means the laws governing matter's interaction and subsistence, and by "Wisdom" he means the "beauty of the form" of matter. Herbert hears the sweetness of "Providence" in its music, and he sees the strength

⁸⁵ Francis Bacon, *Of The Advancement of Learning* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1934). Page 36.

of providence most clearly in the way the world is exceptionally well-ordered. To take two representative stanzas:

Each creature hath a wisdom for his good.
The pigeons feed their tender off-spring, crying,
When they are callow; but withdraw their food
When they are fledge, that need may teach them flying.

Bees work for man; and yet they never bruise
Their masters flower, but leave it, having done,
As fair as ever, and as fit to use;
So both the flower doth stay, and honey run. "Providence" (61-68)

Throughout the poem, Herbert marvels at how every animal works for its "good" naturally. A pigeon knows how to rear its young seemingly without assistance. Bees know how to find their food in flowers. Some animals can find food even in winter, and those that cannot sleep through it (55-56). Furthermore, Herbert shows how all the different parts of creation fit together perfectly. Bees use flowers without damaging them, and sheep, he explains, both eat the grass and "dung the ground for more" (69). Richard Strier is surely right to say that "Providence" is "oriented remarkably strongly toward use rather than beauty."⁸⁶ (Even "a rose, besides his beautie, is a cure" (78)). Everything Herbert considers is useful for something: thorny bushes make good hedges, silk is pleasantly smooth, and stone makes for good foundations (121-124). Fundamental to Bacon's natural philosophy was the idea that nature should benefit humanity.⁸⁷ Herbert is even thankful for poisons, because they teach creatures caution and, without poison, there would be no need for healing antidotes (85-89)! Yet the usefulness of everything in creation only more strongly suggests that it is one, unified system, in which every part is

⁸⁶ Strier, 169.

⁸⁷ McKnight, 70.

related to every other, just like the traditional systematic cosmos of Ficino's Platonic tradition.

One gets the sense, reading Herbert's "Providence," of a system in peaceful balance. Yet although creation may be perfectly arranged and balanced, it is anything but static. On the contrary, nature is always in motion, but this motion follows a regular, cyclical pattern. "How finely dost thou times and seasons spin, / And make a twist checker'd with night and day!" Herbert exclaims. And in what are surely the sweetest lines of the poem, Herbert turns his attention to rain and flowers, how they work together in a cycle of growth, decay, and renewal:

Rain, do not hurt my flowers; but gently spend
Your hony drops: presse not to smell them here:
When they are ripe, their odour will ascend,
And at your lodging with their thanks appeare. (117-120)

"Providence" shows us a creation that is at once ever in motion and ever the same: God has made a kind of perpetual motion machine.

While Edward Herbert's cosmological poems spent more time in the heavens than on earth, and while "Providence" has much to say about bats and birds and bees, George Herbert's "Providence" has nothing to say about creation on a cosmic scale. Even so, Herbert could not have been wholly ignorant of recent astronomical discoveries. In "The Sonnet," which defends the English language as fit for poetry, he also evinces an understanding of the Copernican, heliocentric universe. The poem explicates the double meaning of its title: it can refer either to a child or to a star. Or the single word can refer to both at once:

So in one word our Lords humilitie
We turn upon him in a sense most true:
For what Christ once in humblenesse began,

We him in glorie call, *The Sonne of Man*. (11-14)

The devotional and astronomical points are one and the same here: we rotate around “the sonne.” Christ is the center of the poet’s life just as the sun is the center of his solar system. The helio-centric cosmography of Copernicus and Kepler gained popularity throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, in no small part, Lovejoy suggests, because it granted the sun an exalted place.⁸⁸ Most divines at the time thought that the sun was analogous to God. Putting Christ at the center of the cosmos, and doing so with a pun, is pure Herbert. Still, I must emphasize that the idea of a heliocentric cosmos was relatively new, popularized in England only a few decades before Herbert’s birth.⁸⁹ The faculty at Oxford and Cambridge taught it alongside other cosmological theories. My point is that even though Herbert occasionally strikes anti-intellectual poses, the evidence of his excellent education appears everywhere in his poetry. Though he rejects scholastic methods, Herbert’s poetry has as a background in the new natural philosophy and cosmology of his time.

If words like “Sonne” and the rhythm running under “Providence” can clue the poet in to the very being of God, then where does the author of these poems stand in relation to creation’s general hymn? What is their part in the great cosmic symphony? In the poem humanity plays a unique and essential role. “Man” alone can make the music of creation an *explicit* hymn to God:

Onely to Man thou hast made known thy wayes,
And put the penne alone into his hand,
And made him Secretarie of thy praise.

⁸⁸ McKnight, 103-8.

⁸⁹ Allan Chapman. *Stargazers: Copernicus, Galileo, the Telescope, and the Church* (Oxford: Lion Books, 2014), 240-255.

Beasts fain would sing; birds dittie to their notes;
Trees would be tuning on their native lute
To thy renown: but all their hands and throats
Are brought to Man, while they are lame and mute.

Man is the worlds high Priest: he doth present
The sacrifice for all... (6-14)

The key words here are “to thy renown.” Of course beasts and birds have throats and sing with them, and of course trees have their “native” lutes (trees and lutes both being made of wood). But these lines include some important conditional “*woulds*”: beasts *would* sing and trees *would* play their lutes to God if they could. But their hands and throats are “lame and mute,” unable to transform their native music into something that explicitly adds to God’s renown. Only “Man” can do that, because only he can hear their music, know the providential order underlying and sustaining it, and make the music intelligible in verse. It is as if God has created the world as a harmonious instrument, and given it to the poet to play on. “Man” is therefore a “secretarie” for the rest of creation: capable of putting the “native” or natural music around him into words. He is a “secretarie” because he need only record in words what is implicit in nature. Along with calling himself a secretary, the poet of “Providence” also calls himself a priest. As a secretary he records, but as a priest he presents God with a “sacrifice,” which in the Bible (and especially in the psalms) can mean offering up praise and thanksgiving.⁹⁰ Herbert is suggesting that the poet here plays a role in nature analogous to the one the priest plays in church: acting as a mediator. Just as the priest offers the thanks and praise to God on behalf of the whole congregation, so, too, the poet offers thanks and praise on behalf of the beasts and birds and trees.

⁹⁰ See for example Jer. 17:26, Ps. 50:23, or Heb. 13:15.

If imitating the divine sounds like too large a task for any poet, Herbert agrees. The end of “Providence” tells us what one can and cannot expect from a poetic priest and secretary:

But who hath praise enough? nay who hath any?
None can expresse thy works, but he that knows them;
And none can know thy works, which are so many,
And so complete, but onely he that owes them.

All things that are, though they have sev’rall wayes,
Yet in their being joyn with one advise
To honour thee: and so I give thee praise
In all my other hymnes, but in this twice. (141-148)

In the line “nay who hath any?”, I hear a note of exasperation. Creation is simply too large to praise all at once! Even this, one of Herbert’s longest poems, cannot come close. The reason is that no one can praise each part of creation without “knowing” it, which in this poem (recall the discussions of flowers and rain, sheep and grass) means knowing how each part fits together in the cosmic whole. The task becomes even harder if we remember that each part of creation works in myriad ways: “The Indian nut alone / Is clothing, meant and trencher, drink and kan, / Boat, cable, sail and needle, all in one” (126-128). Nobody could follow all these “sev'rall wayes.” But the poet need not despair. The word “advise” here has the now obsolete sense of showing or bringing something into view, and everything advises, or shows, the work of a providential God. In order to honor God properly, then, the poet needs only to record how this or that piece of creation joins the general hymn. Because this poem is at once a recording of this hymn and another hymn itself, it gives God honor “twice.” To put it in other terms, the hymn of “Providence” is “double” because it refers to both the secretarial act of recording

creation's music and to the priestly act of offering it as a sacrifice to God on behalf of all of mute creation.

George Herbert may share Edward's Renaissance Platonist understanding of creation and the cosmos, but I think we can see that the brothers differ in a few important ways, too. In Edward's "Meditation" on the candle, he declared that he lived by "faith and love," not "outward sense." Though faith and love are doubtless vital to George Herbert as well, his emphasis on music and hearing bespeaks a subtle but important difference. Edward's love and beliefs were always ultimately under his control. But in order to honor "Providence," George must become receptive: hear the music of creation. In Edward's Platonic love poems, he always imagined himself soaring up to God under the power of his own intellect and love. In "Providence" George Herbert does not attain unity with God at all. Rather, as a secretary he copies out the rest of creation's hymns to God, and in doing so he acts as the mediator between God and creation, not the one ascending to God.

B. Herbert's "Man"

The poem "Providence" and Edward Herbert shared a Renaissance Platonist view of creation, the earth and the cosmos. Perhaps even more surprisingly, some of George Herbert's poems also share his brother's Renaissance Platonist view of humanity. In these poems, no less than in Edward's, humanity is at the midpoint of a cosmic scale, capable of rising or falling in it. While some critics have read poems like "Man" and "Man's Medley" as ironic, I will read them as a more straight-forward poetic rendering of

Renaissance Platonist anthropology, reminiscent of Mirandola.⁹¹ George Herbert also concurred with Edward in thinking that earthly joys should ultimately lead us to better, heavenly ones.

In “Providence” the human poet was unique because he alone could understand the murmurings of creation and put them into words. In the poems “Man” and “Man’s Medley,” we find that while birds and beasts are only part of nature, “Man” is a microcosm of the whole. He is “ev’ry thing, / And more”:

Man is all symmetrie,
Full of proportions, one limbe to another,
And all to all the world besides:
Each part may call the farthest, brother:
For head and foot hath private amitie,
And both with moon and tides.
...
His eyes dismount the highest starre:
He is in little all the sphere.
Herbs gladly cure our flesh; because that they
Finde their acquaintance there. (“Man,” 7-12, 21-24).

The great chain in “Providence” stretched all the way from earth to heaven and included everything in between. “Man” is a microcosm of this universe because he, too, has earthly and heavenly parts: his body is “flesh” but his mind can soar straight up past the stars. With regard to his physical self, Herbert’s “Man” seems remarkably at home in nature. His body is perfectly composed, symmetrical and proportionate in its limbs. His limbs, head, and feet are different parts yet all work together; in this easy unity “Man”

⁹¹ In keeping with his overall presentation of Herbert as a poet who distrusts rational attempts to understand God, Strier draws a clear line between the poem’s instrumental “humanism” and its more important “invocation of God” (Strier, 36-7). Even harsher is Lawrence J. Dessner, who says that “Man” presents a poet who has forgotten his basic duties to God. See his “A Reading of George Herbert’s ‘Man,’” *Concerning Poetry*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1972), pp. 61-3. On the other hand, I concur with Louis Martz, who reads the poem as praising “the wonders of man.” See his *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 60.

again mirrors the natural world we saw in “Providence.” But unlike the bee, who relates only to the flower, “Man” has an intimate, brotherly relationship with all of nature at once. Things that seem to have nothing to do with him, like the distant “moon” and “tides,” have a secret friendship (“amitie”) with him. In sum he “is one world, and hath / Another to attend him” (47-48). One could derive the idea that the world “attends” “Man” (that is to say, it can be put to our uses) from Baconian or Platonist natural philosophy with equal plausibility. This is only to emphasize, once again, that Herbert must have been familiar with the continental Platonic revival and with Bacon’s natural philosophy.

“Man” also lives and moves in the non-material part of creation:

The starres have us to bed;
Night draws the curtain, which the sunne withdraws;
Musick and light attend our head.
All things unto our *flesh* are *kinde*
In their *descent* and *being*; to our minde
In their *ascent* and *cause*. (33-36)

This stanza once again affirms the basic idea, seen in “Providence,” that the universe is a great cosmic chain. The things of “flesh,” or matter, descend from the final “cause,” which of course, is God. But in this stanza Herbert adds the idea that “Man” is like in “kinde” to the higher parts of the great chain, too. His head is attuned to incorporeal “light,” the traditional top of the Platonic cosmos, and “musick,” precisely the kind of well-tuned and tempered music that Herbert heard in “Providence.” In another poem, “Man’s medley,” Herbert says that only “man” connects the sensory and incorporeal realms: “Man ties them both alone, / And makes them one, / With th’ one hand touching

heav'n, with th' other earth" (10-12). The combination of "heav'n" and "earth" makes man a "medley" or mixture.

An important point in Renaissance Platonism, both in Ficino and in Edward Herbert, was that human loves and pleasures were not in themselves wrong, but ought to be directed to their divine source. In "Man's Medley" George Herbert makes the same point. Human life may be pleasurable, but true joy resides in heaven:

Heark, how the birds do sing,
And woods do ring.
All creatures have their joy: and man hath his.
Yet if we rightly measure,
Man's joy and pleasure
Rather hereafter, then in the present, is. (1-6)

For the first three lines, "man's" joyful song blends together with the birds and woods. In the third line, though, Herbert reconsiders his position. It may seem that in this poem Herbert rejects earthly joys entirely. Diana Benet, for one, reads it as having a "somber tone."⁹² And to be sure, in one line we learn that "man hath" his pleasures, but the very next line corrects us: a right measurement of our joy would place it hereafter *rather than* in the present. While birds have their pleasures here and now, "Man's" joy is in the "hereafter," when his soul will ascend to God. To the tropes of taste and music, Herbert also adds dress. Herbert uses a clothing metaphor to contrast the soul and flesh: "He wears a stuffe whose thread is course and round, / But trimm'd with curious lace, / And should take place / After the trimming, not the stuffe and ground" (15-18). There is a contrast here between the rougher, material stuff of the body and the (literally)

⁹² Diana Benet, *Secretary of Praise: The Poetic Vocation of George Herbert* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 71.

insubstantial stuff of the soul, which like a lace trimming is attached to the body and yet seems always about to float free of it.

The next stanza of the poem, however, nuances this hard separation of heavenly and earthly joys. Herbert reconsiders the harsh divide between the two:

Not, that he may not here
Taste of the cheer,
But as birds drink, and straight lift up their head,
So he must sip and think
Of better drink
He may attain to, after he is dead. (19-24)

Herbert's ambivalence about earthly pleasure is apparent in the double negatives of line 19. Saying we are not forbidden to "taste of the cheer" is hardly a ringing endorsement of worldly pleasure! The relationship between worldly and future joys becomes clearer over the next few lines. "As birds drink, and straight lift up their head," so too must "man" lift his eyes whenever he tastes earthly pleasure, in expectation of better, heavenly joy.

Herbert doubles the point in the way he orders his analogy. Just as birds drink and then look up, so too the poet looks at birds and then lifts his thoughts to consider it as an analogy for the relationship between present and eternal joys. So "Man" is not cut off from creaturely pleasure, but the poet insists that "man" orders earthly and heavenly joys properly. The former ought to be an occasion for reflection on the latter, and a foretaste of them.⁹³

According to all these tropes (music, taste, and dress), "man" is ultimately exhorted to follow his heavenly rather than earthly part. This is a way in which humanity is unlike the rest of creation. In "Providence," nothing needed to be told to follow its

⁹³ For a consideration of pleasure in Herbert's poetry, see Michael Schoenfeldt's recent "Herbert and Pleasure" in *George Herbert Journal*, vol. 38, no. 1 & 2, Fall 2014/Spring 2015, pp. 145-157.

nature; it simply did. But “Man” can move up and down the cosmic scale. As “Man’s medley” puts the point succinctly: “In soul he mounts and flies, / In flesh he dies” (13-14). “Man’s medley” and “Man” replay Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s oration: the human being is the most variable of all animals, capable of being anything.⁹⁴ People could become more beastly or more angelic, depending on their habits.

The stanzaic form and rhyme scheme of “Man” suggests that variability, while also affirming humanity’s proportionality. In other words, the poem shows that “Man” is paradoxically set in his form and enormously variable. Each of the stanzas is seemingly the same. Six lines with three end rhymes apiece, and the line lengths further show that “Man” is indeed “all symmetrie”: 6, 10, 8, 8, 10, 6. Within this solid frame, however, the rhyme scheme never repeats itself. Take the first two stanzas:

My God, I heard this day,
That none doth build a stately habitation,
But he that means to dwell therein.
What house more stately hath there been,
Or can be, than is Man? to whose creation
All things are in decay.

For Man is ev’ry thing,
And more: He is a tree, yet bears more fruit;
A beast, yet is, or should be more:
Reason and speech we onely bring.
Parrats may thank us, if they are not mute,
They go upon the score.

These stanzas have different rhyme schemes: the first stanza runs *a b c b c a*, while the second goes *d e f d e*. Neither of these schemes repeats in any of the next seven stanzas, nor are any of *those* rhyme schemes repeated. The form of the stanza, like the human body, remains stable, but the rhyme scheme expresses the enormous variety possible

⁹⁴ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis (New York, NY: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1965), 4-5.

within that frame. To say that the form underscores Herbert's description of humanity's simultaneous "symmetrie" and variability would be too modest: by playing the mutating rhyme scheme against the perfectly symmetrical line lengths, Herbert *performs* the simultaneous symmetry and variability he describes. Call it "versifying what he means" if you wish, but I am hard-pressed to think of another poem that does such justice to Renaissance Platonist anthropology.

Much like Edward, then, George Herbert's poetry shows a Neoplatonic view of "Man," in which he is a mixture of heavenly and earthly parts, can move up or down the cosmic chain, and should aim for heavenly rather than earthly joys. And as we shall see in my next section, whereas Edward Herbert ascends to heaven through the medium of a beautiful, dark lady, or through the power of his intellect, George Herbert calls for divine assistance and ascends through the medium of church ritual.

C. *"Heaven in Ordinary": Platonism in the Temple*

It may seem that "Providence" and "Man" are rather uncharacteristic poems for Herbert. Strier argues that the universe of "Providence" (well-ordered, showing God's loving power everywhere) and the poet within it (self-assured, finding God in nature) both lie far "from the devotional center of Herbert's concerns."⁹⁵ It is certainly the case that in the rest of *The Temple* Herbert seldom acts as creation's "secretarie." Even so, the Renaissance Platonism of "Providence" recurs in quite a few of his poems about poetry, in both "Love (I)" and "Love (II)," for instance.

⁹⁵ Strier, 170.

As critics like Mary Ellen Rickey and Brian Vickers have pointed out, “Love (I)” draws extensively on the images and conventions of 17th-century love poetry.⁹⁶ I would only add that the conventions of secular love poetry, especially as we saw them in the poetry of Edward Herbert, draw on some of the commonest themes of Renaissance Platonism: the immortality of love. “Love (I)” begins:

Immortal Love, authour of this great frame,
Sprung from that beautie which can never fade;
How hath man parcel’d out thy glorious name,
And thrown it on that dust which thou hast made,

While mortall love doth all the title gain!
Which siding with invention, they together
Bear all the sway, possessing heart and brain,
(Thy workmanship) and give thee share in neither. (1-8)

The imagery and ideas reminiscent of the Renaissance Platonic cosmos, running from God to base matter, are unmistakable. At the top we have immortal love and beauty on a cosmic scale (“author of this great frame”), and at the bottom we have division (parcel’d) and dust. The poet laments that “man” has directed his loves wrongly, dividing it between mortal things. And in line with the Renaissance Platonist tradition, we find a concern for both “heart and brain,” will and intellect. So far, there is nothing in “Love (I)” that Edward Herbert would disagree with. He, too, tried to ascend from earthly to heavenly love. The only hint of difference is that George seems to personify love: “and though thy glorious name / Wrought our deliverance from th’infernall pit, / Who sings thy praise?” (11-13). Edward Herbert, as we shall see in his philosophical treatises, has no time for “th’infernall” pit, or a mediator who rescues humanity from it. But there is a more important, and subtler, difference between George and Edward Herbert in these lines.

⁹⁶ See Mary Ellen Rickey, *Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert* (Lexington, KY: Kentucky University Press, 1966), pages 19-21. And Brian Vickers, *Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1970), 127.

Edward Herbert's poetry treated the love at the top of the Platonic cosmos as an abstraction, a fire that consumes and confuses identity ("we are dissolved into flames that glide about and excite one another"). But here George Herbert attributes action to this love: "thy glorious name *wrought* our deliverance." "Love" has a name and has done something; George Herbert's poem has personified divine love, while Edward's poetry never did. Within the history of Christian thought, of course, the one who "wrought our deliverance" was Christ. My point is that even when George Herbert is drawing on the images and themes of Renaissance Platonism, he is fusing them with Christian doctrine. And of course in this he was in line with the broader thrust of Renaissance Platonism, Ficino in particular. Edward Herbert struggled to separate the Platonic cosmos, and poetry about it, from Christian doctrine, history, and ritual. Here George Herbert laments that they have come apart, lamenting that "mortall love doth all the title gain!" (5) and wonders who will sing "thy praise" (13). The question might be rhetorical, but it also sets him up to reassert the complementarity of Renaissance Platonism and Christianity.

"Love (II)" reveals another important difference between the brothers. While Edward consistently ascended under his natural power, George Herbert calls for heaven to first remake him:

Immortal Heat, O let thy greater flame
Attract the lesser to it: let those fires,
Which shall consume the world, first make it tame;
And kindle in our hearts such true desires,

As may consume our lusts, and make thee way.
Then shall our hearts pant thee; then shall our brain
All her invention on thine Altar lay,
And there in hymnes send back thy fire again: ("Love (II)" 1-8)

The language of heat and flames, familiar from Edward's meditation on a candle, underlies the basic conceit of this poem, in which "Immortal heat" stands for the divine source of all heat. But unlike in Edward's poems, in which his own burning ardor propelled him up to the immortal fires, in "Love (II)" it is the immortal flame that acts on the poet. The greater flame attracts the poet's "lesser" flame. And furthermore, the greater flame must transform the lesser. It must "tame" the poet, "consume" his sinful desires and replace them with "true desires." Only after this transformation will the poet be able to "pant" and long for immortal fire alone. My point is that the poet in "Love (II)" is not the initial agent; he must be acted upon before he can act rightly. Only then he will "send back" what has been given him in "hymnes": his desire will become poetry. The end of this poetry, its aim and resting place, will be a vision of God: "Our eies shall see thee, which before saw dust; / ... / All knees shall bow to thee; all wits shall rise, / And praise him who did make and mend our eies" (9, 13-14). Note again how these lines attribute agency. The poets will kneel, pour their wit into hymns, and see God, but the making and mending of those eyes, which is to say the condition of possibility for the beatific vision, belongs to God.

Renaissance Platonist images and ideas reoccur whenever Herbert's poetry imagines a flight from earth to heaven. What we see in other poems, however, is an equal emphasis on the rituals and doctrines Herbert takes as occasions for a return to God. Chief among these poems are "Mattens," "The Starre," and "Prayer (I)." The short lyric "Mattens" begins with themes familiar to the reader of "Providence": God's nearness and the poet's sacrifice. "I cannot ope mine eyes, / But thou art ready there to catch / My morning-soul and sacrifice: / Then we must needs for that day make a match" (1-4).

“Mattens,” in Herbert’s English church, was the first service of the day. (Thomas Cranmer, in compiling the Book of Common Prayer, had condensed three services from the medieval Hours (Matins, Laud, and Prime) into one Morning Prayer service.⁹⁷) One of the very first things a priest like Herbert did after waking up, then, was offer a prayer of thanksgiving. So here, as Herbert promised in “Providence,” the poet acts as priest, making a sacrifice, though now in a liturgical setting rather than outdoors. As in “Providence,” there is a subtle play between the general and particular here. On the one hand, each prayer must be unique because each day needs its own “match,” a prayer just for the occasion. But on the other hand, because the priest was expected to perform the morning service daily, each prayer also follows the overall form of the others. As in “Providence,” where a single pattern ran beneath all the variety of nature, so in Herbert’s life a rhythm of daily prayer remained constant throughout the year. The liturgical setting (the “Mattens” of the title) is the meeting point between the temporal and eternal, specific and general. It mediates the encounter.

The next two stanzas of “Mattens” include rhetorical questions about why God should choose to be so near (“My God, what is a heart / That thou shouldst it so eye, and woove”). But rather than inspect his own heart, which he does in so many poems, here Herbert turns back out to the new morning:

Indeed mans whole estate
Amounts (and richly) to serve thee:
He did not heav’n and earth create,
Yet studies them, not him by whom they be.

Teach me thy love to know;
That this new light, which now I see,
May both the work and workman show:

⁹⁷ *The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey*, ed. Charles Hefling and Cynthia Shattuck (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 64.

Then by a sunne-beam I will climbe to thee. (13-20)

In these two short stanzas, Herbert condenses some of the themes he laid out at such length in “Providence” into a few short lines. God is an artisan who may be known through His works. Within these works “mans whole estate” (estate in Herbert’s day would have meant not only dwelling place but also state or condition) is to serve God by recognizing and extolling God’s love. And finally, the poem relies on a well-balanced, chain-like universe that also includes circular movement. God makes the light shine down on the poet, and the poet, in offering a morning sacrifice to God, hopes to ascend to the ultimate source of that light—which from Plotinus to Ficino, was God.

Whether he will or not is harder to say. Note that this poem is a supplicatory prayer. It addresses God, and the poet begs to know God’s love and “climbe to thee,” but the poem does not actually record such a “climbe.” In Herbert’s cosmos it is possible for nature to mediate the poet’s ascent to God, but first God must “teach” him, and only then “may” the new day show God. If God supplies those two conditions, only then “will” he climb. Edward Herbert ascended to the divine as effortlessly as flame flies upward. He couched his reunion with the divine in the future tense (he said he “*shall*” ascend). But George Herbert uses the conditional tense instead: *if* God teaches he *might* ascend. Where Edward states, George requests. “Mattens” seems to end on the very verge of flight. And because “Mattens” is a daily service, the poem as a whole suggests that ascending to God would require God to act on the poet daily, give daily lessons in ascent. The pun on

“sunne,” referring at once to the sunlight itself and Christ, only underscores the point. It is only by Christ—with divine assistance—that the poet can climb to God.⁹⁸

“The Starre,” too, speculates about a possible flight into the heavens, though it takes as its subject a falling star instead of the workaday world, and reveals Herbert’s knowledge of contemporary astronomy. In it the poet addresses a shooting star, which seems to have fallen out of the empyrean: “Bright spark, shot from a brighter place, / where beams surround my Saviour’s face, / Canst thou be any where / So well as there?” (lines 1-4). “Artillerie” also concerns a shooting star (“As I one ev’ning sat before my cell, / Me thoughts a starre did shoot into my lap,” 1-2). The situation is fanciful, of course, nothing more than a conceit. And yet one must remember that before comets appeared in the sky during the 1570’s and 80’s, astronomers had generally thought the heaven immutable.⁹⁹ A star falling from its sphere to earth? One might as well doubt the laws of (Aristotelian) physics! It would have been unthinkable a hundred years before. My point is that Herbert could not have written these poems without knowing the latest astronomical theories. (Perhaps “Divinity” advises the astronomer to “break all [his] spheres” not because astronomical speculation is impious, but because the Ptolemaic, sphere-bound picture of the universe was wrong.)

In contrast to Edward, whose divinity was simply the One, George Herbert again names the divinity to which he aspires. As in “The Sonne” and “Love (I),” the poet of “The Starre” seeks Christ. He wonders why this star would fall away from such a place (“Canst thou be any where / So well as there?” 3-4). But since it has, the poet asks it to “take a bad lodging in my heart” and purify him, “burn to dust / Folly, and worse than

⁹⁸ Rickey also points out that the “beam” in the last line may refer to Jacob’s ladder (Gen. 28:12).

⁹⁹ Granada, 270.

folly, lust” (lines 6 and 9-10). And as in “Mattens” this poem is a request, addressed to the star: the poet must receive something from the star before he can ascend. And as in “Love (II),” what the poet must receive is a moral transformation. “Folly” and “lust” are both sins, the former misdeeds and the latter misdirected desires. Both must be burned away before he can ascend to Christ. “The Starre” says no more about the connection between moral transformation and an ascent into the divine (which I will return to at much greater length in chapter 3). Instead, the poet turns back to cosmology:

Then with our trinitie of light,
Motion, and heat, let’s take our flight
Unto the place where thou
Before didst bow. (17-20)

“Then” and “let’s” in this stanza play the role of “may” and “will” from “Mattens.” They allow Herbert to speculate about the possibility of a divine ascent without leaving the conditional tense. How would such an ascent happen? As is consistent with the Platonic picture of “Man,” the poet shares the star’s basic principles of “light, motion, and heat.” Because the poet is of the same stuff as the stars, he could follow this one’s “flight” back to his “Saviours face.” Note that “The Starre” fits the cyclical pattern we saw so frequently in “Providence.” The star falls, but such a fall is only prelude to its return. Even reaching Christ would not end the star’s flight (and by implication Herbert’s). Instead, they would become part of a new circle, which we already saw in “The Sonne”: they would orbit Christ.

That so among the rest I may
Glitter, and curle, and winde as they:
That winding is their fashion
Of adoration. (25-28).

The discovery of shooting stars appears to have opened an exciting possibility for Herbert. If the stars could rise and fall in the heavens, then he could, too. In “Love (II)” Herbert wrote about returning to God in terms of heat and motion (two of the three terms in his “trinitie”). “The Starre” (and “Mattens”) while not neglecting heat and motion, emphasize “light.” This is once again consistent with contemporary Platonic cosmology. In 1591 *New Philosophy of the Universe* Francesco Patrizi, a disciple of Ficino, argued that one ascends to God through light, not motion. Consistent with traditional Platonic metaphysics, God is the great source of light, which then emanates down through the rest of the cosmos. But while traditional cosmologies had pictured a finite universe, Patrizi argued that an infinite God required an infinite universe: “This world is located in the interior of the infinite Empyreum, and everything is characterized by a pronounced heterogeneity and organized into a hierarchy reaching from the inferior Earth up to the infinite Empyreum, full of light, which is the level closest to God.”¹⁰⁰ “The Starre” has fallen from the Empyreum, and it is Herbert’s implicit knowledge of Platonic light metaphysics and cosmology that opens the possibility of the poet joining it on its return voyage.

In “Mattens” Herbert contemplated the earth and in “The Starre” he contemplated the heavens. He brings both together in his great sonnet “Prayer (I).” The sonnet takes the rhetorical form of a “systrophe”—accumulated definitions of an object, presented without conjunctions. The form has a long history in Christian mysticism, for example in Dante and St. John of the Cross—two other poets concerned with reuniting with God. Whereas “Mattens” and “The Starre” were mostly concerned with space, “Prayer (I)” investigates

¹⁰⁰ Granada, 275-7. Quote on page 277.

time, aiming to suggest the paradoxical presence of eternity in time. Structurally it is an English sonnet, and it proceeds by parataxis, piling up clause after clause:

Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,
Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth; (1-4)

In contrast to Edward Herbert's poetry, nearly every clause here contains some Christian practice or concept: prayer, angels, pilgrimage being only the most obvious. At first, these clauses seem absolutely unrelated. What on earth does the age of an Angel have to do with some Church supper? The rigid rhyme scheme and metrical requirements of the sonnet appear to be all that holds these ideas together. Several of these phrases, though, present the reader with a paradox, in which a particular and temporal coexist with the universal and eternal. Consider "the Churches banquet." Banquets occur on feast days. These days happen on particular days of the year, and yet as part of the Church calendar, they occur every year. They are thus part of ordinary, linear time (one Christmas feast in 2014, another in 2015) and *atemporal*, liturgical time (not bound to this year or last year or the next year). The words paraphrase and pilgrimage reiterate this sense of being at once in and out of the present moment. To paraphrase is to repeat an old idea in a new form; it is at once a singular event and a repetition. Pilgrimages, too, are at once ever the same and ever different. Such a journey is a singular event in a person's life, occupying specific days or even months. At the same time, it is a well-worn track (often quite literally), meaning that even though each pilgrim must walk the trail alone, all of the pilgrims share the same path. It connects the pilgrim to all those who have come before

and will connect her to all who follow. The pilgrimage itself is the same now as was a thousand years ago, and thus, like the banquet, the pilgrimage is at once instantiated and timeless. A later line in the poem reads “The six-daies world transposing in an houre” (7). The entire work of creation took six days, but prayer can compress (“transpose” having the sense here of converting or changing) it all into a single hour. In “Prayer (I)” one finds eternity in what seem to be discrete moments of time. (Herbert’s poem “Easter” presents this idea most succinctly: “Can there by any day but this, / Though many sunnes to shine endeavour? / We count three hundred, but we misse: / There is but one, and that one ever” (27-30)). Though days appear to pass one after another, they are in fact each a copy of one particular day: Easter. It should not surprise us that Herbert picks Easter as the eternal day of days. It is the day of resurrection: the day when Christ overcomes death, eternity overcomes finitude.

This play of definite time and eternity is nowhere clearer than in the second line of the poem. It is a direct reference to Gen. 2:7, in which the Lord God forms a man out of the earth and gives him the breath of life. The man, *adam*, is an individual being, created in the here and now of the Genesis narrative, but he also possesses a divine, and thus eternal, spark. Furthermore, according to Pauline theology, which Herbert was surely familiar with, this man serves as a model for all who follow him.¹⁰¹ Every human life is like Adam’s and therefore, like the pilgrimage or a banquet, each is a specific instance of a general, timeless pattern.

To be sure, “Prayer (I)” also plays with space. A paraphrase could mean either a succinct summary or an expansion at greater length. A “plummet” is a piece of metal

¹⁰¹ Romans 5:12 would be the most obvious instance.

attached to a line, used for sounding depths. Prayer, though, sounds “heav’n and earth,” meaning it moves both up and down the cosmic chain. In the early 17th century “plummet” also had the now obsolete sense of plumbing a Christian’s heart, seeing what was really down there. So prayer at once explores the most distant and hidden recesses of the cosmos and human soul.

The last five lines of the poem both play out its earlier themes and give a hint, just a hint, of a completed divine ascent that Herbert usually presents only as a possibility.

Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the souls bloud,
The land of spices; something understood. (11-14)

These lines return to the earlier theme of coexistent times. The ancient Greeks named the “milkie way,” but Galileo only proved that it was made up of stars during Herbert’s lifetime. “Paradise” connotes both heaven and Eden, but the “bird of Paradise” itself is a New World bird, native to the South Pacific, and thus a recent discovery. So the poem places us in a particular time (the seventeenth century), but a whiff of the eternal remains. And while the first stanza told us that “Gods breath in man” could return to its source, here we learn *where* that could happen: anywhere. We could find heaven, the beatific vision, “in ordinarie,” which I take to mean ordinary times and places. (A later, less orthodox English poet will say that you can see, “heaven in a wildflower \ Hold infinity in the palm of your hand.”) Herbert gives the whole world the character of a banquet or

pilgrimage. It is at once in time and, somehow, carries eternity “in itself.” The return to God can happen here and now, no matter when or where “here and now” happen to be.

The final couplet of a sonnet often summarizes the preceding stanzas. This couplet, though, comments on the efficacy of everything that preceded it. “Beyond the starres” would be above even the Empyrean, meaning above even the nearly inconceivable realm of pure light. In the Renaissance Platonist cosmology, God exists beyond the Empyrean, and therefore what carries “beyond the starres” would reach God. The passive construction of the final clause (“something understood”) immediately raises a question: Who hears? Who understands? One likely answer is God. God hears and understands the poet's prayers. “Prayer (II)” suggests that accessing God through prayer is not only possible, but easy: “Of what an easie quick access, / My blessed Lord, art thou! how suddenly / May our requests thine eare invade” (1-3). This would be a very comforting ending, suggesting as it does that the gap between the pilgrim and God has closed; the words on the poet's breath have reached their source. It could also be that the poet has understood something. *Something* has changed, but he cannot say exactly what. It is as if in the tiny blank gap between semicolon and letter (“the land of spices; something understood”), the poet has made a sudden “access” to God. He was comparing prayer to all of these different ideas (“the churches banquet, angel's age”), most of which found infinity in ordinary times and places. Then, suddenly, he disappears from the temporal progression of the poem, joining God in eternity for the briefest of moments. And then he returns, knowing something has happened, but having no word for it more specific than “something.” But it is enough, the poem, the prayer, can come to an end.

In this chapter I have argued that George and Edward Herbert share a surprisingly close view of the cosmos, nature, and the human place within it. They both subscribe to a kind of Renaissance Platonism. However, significant differences appeared, too. While Edward Herbert ascended to an impersonal divine outside of the doctrines and practices of Christianity, George Herbert called on God for aid, ascended toward Christ, and began his flights in liturgical settings like “Mattens.” Edward’s confidence in the powers of his intellect, and George’s questions about his will become even more pronounced in my second chapter. In the face of epistemological skepticism and empiricism, Edward Herbert’s *De Veritate* argues that the human mind can apprehend the truth immediately. George Herbert, on the other hand, falls away from the well-ordered cosmos and into terrible confusion, epistemological as well as poetic. He only regains his trust in God, and mends his poetry, when he meets Christ on the cross and shares his grief.

Chapter Two: Epistemology and Soteriology

In the early 17th century, belief in the Neoplatonic-Christian cosmos, behind many of the Herberts' poems, was disintegrating. Developments in late-medieval Christian theology had come to fruition and disjointed the old, ordered universe, thereby throwing Christian Europe into a deep epistemological crisis: old ways of knowing had broken down, and the way forward seemed blocked. The process of passing beyond this crisis took European thought through the Renaissance and into the so-called Early Modern era. The story of this crisis and its consequences has been told many times, by scholars like Richard Popkin, Charles Taylor, Thomas Pfau, Louis Dupré, and Hans Blumenberg. For my purposes the crisis had two key and related aspects: epistemological and soteriological. Epistemological because, in John Donne's pithy lines, "And new philosophy calls all in doubt / the element of fire is quite put out" ¹ Because the "new philosophy" broke up the old order of the cosmos, human knowledge about it had to be rebuilt. This breakdown had soteriological implications, too, because with the breakdown of human knowledge generally came uncertainty about the truths of faith, especially as they related to a person's final fate. Soteriology, or the doctrine of salvation, became a pressing issue: "For English men and women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, gaining eternal salvation was an overarching preoccupation that influenced nearly every aspect of their lives." ²

¹ John Donne, "An Anatomy of the World," lines 205-6. *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, ed. A.J. Smith (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1996).

² Gregory D. Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus: The Erasmian Legacy and Religious Change in Early Modern England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 46.

George and Edward Herbert were no exceptions. Their cosmological poems showed a degree of epistemological and soteriological certainty. They presented an ordered cosmos, a comprehensible ladder between the natural world and celestial spheres, on which the poet might ascend to the divine (with or without divine aid). George and Edward Herbert, however, were far from insensible to the great philosophical problems of their day. In this chapter I will show that both brothers worried about epistemological and soteriological uncertainty, and both tried to overcome it, although in different ways.

With a few notable exceptions, George Herbert's poetry does not show an ascent to God through nature. On the contrary, although "Man" may be a part of God's great ordered cosmos, in most of Herbert's poems the problem is that he cannot find God immanent in creation. In Herbert's many poems of grief and lamentation, God has receded from the earth below and from the heavens above him. God's disappearance is at once an intellectual and devotional crisis in Herbert's poetry. The sudden realization that God is nowhere to be found prompts Herbert to feel abandoned, and in losing God he also loses faith in his own salvation. (At the same time, he loses his own poetic voice.) In his efforts to overcome soteriological uncertainty, Herbert must somehow recover God's immanence. He does this by realizing that, paradoxically, his despair over his alienation from God brings him into contact with Christ's cry of desolation on the cross.

Edward Herbert does not respond to the Early Modern epistemological crisis in his poetry. Instead, he writes a metaphysical treatise, *De Veritate*, in which he promises to establish indubitable knowledge without any help from traditional sources, and the key piece of knowledge, revealed at the end of the book, is the knowledge necessary for salvation. What is needed, he concludes, are five "common notions" of religion. These

require no scriptural revelation or institutional recommendation, as they are available to all people everywhere and at all times.

Thus, both Edward and George Herbert respond to the basic epistemological and soteriological problem of their day: the lost connection between humanity and God. They both try to find God by focusing not on the cosmos but in their own inner workings. For George, this means exploring his grief over losing God and an eventual reunion with Christ through their shared grief. For Edward, this means finding and defending his so-called “common notions,” supposedly universal ideas about humanity, God, and how to achieve salvation.

Like my first chapter, this chapter will include three sections. In the first, I look at the roots and consequences of the skeptical crisis. In the second and third, I look at first George and then Edward’s responses.

i. “Man Extremely Uneasy about the World”: the epistemological crisis of late medieval and Early Modern Europe

In some corners it remains popular to see the beginning of modern philosophy in a sudden rejection of everything that had come before.³ Historians of medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern philosophy, however, have all called this narrative into serious doubt. Scholars from Hans Blumenberg in the 1960’s to Charles Taylor in the 2000’s, have argued that modern philosophy did not emerge suddenly in the 17th century but evolved slowly, beginning with the unintended consequences of late scholastic

³ For a recent example of this argument, see Stephen Greenblatt’s *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012). This narrative still enjoys wide acceptance in popular culture; *The Swerve* received a National Book Award in 2011 and the Pulitzer Prize in 2012.

nominalism and only culminating later in a search for new, unconditioned grounds for knowledge. In this section I offer a brief history of the intellectual developments that set the stage for George and Edward Herbert's search for certainty.

In Aristotelian and Platonic natural philosophy, the cosmos runs according to regular rules of eternal order, forms that organize and govern all particulars. In the words of Thomas Pfau, "one divine form of reason was taken to have created and continued to pervade the cosmos—which, after all, signifies not a mere inventory of objects but the permanent and rational order of things" ⁴ But according to Louis Dupré, 13th- and 14th-century nominalists like William of Ockham and Duns Scotus denied that earthly particulars participated in larger, universal forms: "universals existed neither *beyond* (Plato) nor *inside* reality (Aristotle). They are mere constructions of the mind." ⁵ To the nominalists, the created world no longer reflected an eternal and necessary order. Instead, God had willed the cosmos to be a certain way and follow certain laws, but the cosmos and its laws were not grounded on *necessary* laws. Instead, the cosmic order had no grounding other than divine will, which could theoretically have been different. Thus, the nominalists emphasized, according to Hans Blumenberg, "the radicalness of the groundless will that is the ground of everything." ⁶

⁴ Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 18.

⁵ Louis Dupré, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008). For Dupré's succinct discussion of nominalism and its consequences, see pages 6-8. Thomas Pfau concurs with Dupré and further argues that the nominalists' rejection of a divine reason that united humanity and the cosmos kicked off "modern philosophy," with its reductionist, naturalist, and quasi-legalistic accounts of mind and reason" (19; see pages 18-32 for how everyone from Locke to Heidegger followed the nominalists).

⁶ On nominalism, God's will, and the arbitrary construction of creation, see Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), Part II Chapter 3, especially pages 151-55 and 161-163. Quotation on page 152.

The nominalist's elevation of God's sovereign will and criticism of the old form-based cosmology created the conditions for a joint epistemological and soteriological dilemma. If God could no longer be known through the necessary order of the cosmos, how could God be known at all? And if God could not be known, then the path from creation to Creator—so evident in Edward Herbert's poetry—was no longer clear. "Because the nominalist God owes his creation nothing," writes Pfau, "he also cannot be swayed by any efforts that finite human beings may undertake on behalf of their salvation."⁷ Neither Edward Herbert's sphere-climbing poetic flights nor church ritual, could assure a reunion of a finite human being with the infinite God. Blumenberg claims that the nominalists meant to block the traditional pathways to God, instead developing an intellectual "system meant to make man extremely uneasy about the world—with the intention, of course, of making him seek salvation outside the world, driving him ... to the unconditional capitulation of the act of faith."⁸

But what was the content of this faith? What were its articles? How would you know they were true? This may have been less of a problem for Ockham, but with the advent of the Reformation, it became a pressing problem indeed. The combatants on all sides of the Reformation had competing ideas about how human beings were saved. In the Catholic view, the church played a necessary mediating role between the believer and God, especially through possession and distribution of the sacraments. Salvation, in the Roman Church, therefore required participation in a corporate body. While the Reformers certainly would never have denied the importance of church institutions, they followed the nominalists, wittingly or not, in weakening the institutional links between God and

⁷ Pfau, 136.

⁸ Blumenberg, 151.

humanity. According to Charles Taylor, “the most fundamental principle of the Reformers, perhaps even more basic than salvation by faith alone, ... was that salvation was exclusively the work of God.”⁹ Lutherans and Calvinists emphasized the sovereignty and contingency of God’s will. Just like the laws governing the cosmos, salvation depended on the free, and therefore unpredictable, action of God. Because faith or election, the vehicles of salvation in Lutheranism and Calvinism respectively, were unmerited gifts, it became harder to know (impossible in the Calvinist case) the ultimate fate of one’s soul.

The doctrinal disagreements of the Reformation touched on fundamental questions of epistemology. “A central quarrel of the Reformation,” claims Richard Popkin, was “the dispute over the proper standard of religious knowledge, or what was called ‘the rule of faith.’”¹⁰ The “rule” in question was the criterion or criteria by which a statement could be recognized as true. On the Roman Catholic side of the debate, the church’s teachings, once arrived at, were authoritative (though of course open to further interpretation and elaboration); on the Protestant side, Luther claimed to test every theological point against the plain meaning of scripture and, later, when scripture turned out to be too ambiguous, Calvin relied on the inner teachings of the Holy Spirit.¹¹ The disagreements between the Catholic and Reformed churches persisted, in no small part because each side of the Reformation debate proved better at undermining their opponents’ criteria than they were at proving their own. The continued disagreement over

⁹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 215. For the contrast between how the Roman and Reformation churches understood salvation and mediation, see pages 215-8.

¹⁰ Richard Popkin, *The History of Skepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, revised and expanded edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

¹¹ Popkin, 3. He summarizes the debates between Luther and Erasmus and Calvin and his opponents on pages 7-16.

a rule of faith, a criterion for truth that would lead to epistemological and soteriological certainty, pushed Europe into what Popkin has dubbed “the sceptical [*sic*] crisis.” This crisis was felt in England as well as on the continent. The rise of skepticism and proliferation of responses “produced a general sense of insecurity and uneasiness among thoughtful men.”¹²

Popkin identifies three main ways in which theologians, philosophers, and scientists responded to uncertainty, especially in the post-Reformation period in which the Herberts lived. One option was to adopt a skeptical attitude, inspired by Ancient Greek skeptics like Sextus Empiricus, who thought that no firm and final criterion for true knowledge could be found. In different ways, Thomas More and Montaigne both adopted this position, which often accompanied accepting the overall authority of the Catholic Church.¹³

Neither George nor Edward Herbert adopted this position. As I shall show, their positions were closer to the other alternatives: namely fideism and dogmatism. In the 16th century, these terms were not synonymous. Like the skeptic, the fideist admitted that a perfect criterion of knowledge could not be found, so one had to rely, at some point, on faith. To be sure, reasons could be given leading up to faith, and after accepting an article of faith, reasons could be given to support it; but some article of faith would have to be held with the knowledge that it was, technically, open to doubt. By contrast the dogmatist believed it possible to ground at least one, non-empirical proposition with unaided human

¹² Meyrick H. Carré, *Phases of Thought in England*, 217-223 (quote on 217). Carré reads Edward Herbert's *De Veritate* as the perfect expression of “the feeling of disintegration and confusion that weighed upon the minds of men at this turning-point in the history of our thought . . .” (221).

¹³ For Popkin's discussion of More, see 8-10. His third chapter (44-63) discusses Montaigne.

reason.¹⁴ Human reason could know things, including things about God, with certainty and achieve this certainty by its own power. Those who tried to ground knowledge in human cognition alone (like Descartes and later Locke, in their different ways), broke simultaneously with traditional theological authorities and with schools of natural philosophy. They broke with the theological authorities because, in the words of Charles Taylor, they inaugurated a tradition in which we had “to think it out ourselves,” and they broke with the schools of natural philosophy because “what we are called on to do is not to become contemplators of order, but rather to construct a picture of things following the canons of rational thinking.”¹⁵

Although the dogmatic and fideistic approaches certainly differ, they are alike in an important respect. Both move the search for knowledge of spiritual matters inward, from the spinning of the spheres or the doctrines and activities of the church to the beliefs and condition of the individual soul. René Descartes exemplified the dogmatic approach. According to Taylor, Descartes cast aside the old Platonic order: “Being rational has now to mean something other than being attuned to this order. The Cartesian option is to see rationality, or the power of thought, as a capacity we have to *construct* orders which meet the standards demanded by knowledge, or understanding or certainty.”¹⁶ The work of thinking and building order happened first and foremost inside the human mind.

Calvin could be taken as a representative of fideism. The fideists did not share Descartes’ estimation of the powers of human reason, of course. And yet Calvin’s description of certainty also moves spiritual knowledge inside the believer: “Such, then, is a conviction that requires no reasons; such a knowledge with which the best reason

¹⁴ For a succinct summary of these views, see Popkin’s introduction, pages xxi-xxiii.

¹⁵ Popkin, 167 and 168.

¹⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 146-7.

agrees . . . such, finally, a feeling that can be born only of heavenly revelation. I speak of nothing other than what each believer experiences within himself—though my words fall far beneath a just explanation of the matter.”¹⁷ Note well, Calvin never denies the importance of reason for matters of faith (“the best of reason” can support an inner “conviction”), but it will not establish those article indubitably.

One can see, in the writings of George and Edward Herbert, efforts to overcome the skeptical crisis. Edward Herbert pursued the dogmatic route—though he owed more to scholastic and ancient philosophy than he admitted. He tried to establish a criterion for truth and rules for thinking, grounded only on his own investigation. Ultimately, his aim was to discover, independently of church or school, what he needed to know and believe in order to achieve what he called “eternal blessedness.” George Herbert’s epistemology more closely follows the fideistic pattern, because he can only answer doubts about his own salvation through trust. More specifically, he despairs over his efforts to find God in nature or in himself. But then, paradoxically, in his feelings of abandonment he finds that he identifies with Christ’s despair on the cross. He then must trust (rather than know for certain) that he no less than Christ has not truly been abandoned but will be resurrected instead.

ii. George Herbert’s Grief

The Temple is full of poems of grief and lamentation, most often over the sudden disappearance of God. Many critics have rightly noted that in poems like “Home,” “Longing,” and “The Search,” Herbert first loses and then yearns to reconnect with

¹⁷ Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster Knox Press, 1960). Book 1, Chapter 7, Section 5.

God.¹⁸ They have usually been read as personal crises, but they also reflect the larger epistemological and soteriological uncertainty of George Herbert's day. The poems I will discuss in this section are nominalist nightmares, in which the poet loses his place in the ordered cosmos—or the whole order of the cosmos begins to dissolve. God seems to have abandoned the poet and creation, throwing the poet into uncertainty about the ultimate fate of his soul. In his poems, George Herbert never presents dogmatic—that is to say indubitable—certainty about his salvation. His epistemology is fideist, but not in the sense of belief without reason. Rather, faith in his salvation is a matter of trust.¹⁹ In particular, he places his trust in a paradox: though God seems to have abandoned him, his very abandonment reunites him with Christ, who felt equally abandoned during the crucifixion.

A. *"Is it thy will?" God's Disappearance*

As I have argued already, despite the occasional anti-intellectual statement in a poem like "Divinitie" ("Break all thy spheres, and save thy head"), George Herbert's poetry betrays a real familiarity with the intellectual currents of his day. In both his poems and *The Country Parson*, he expresses a potentially nominalist account of the relationship between God and creation: "Preservation is a Creation; and more it is a

¹⁸ See for instance Anthony Low on "The Search" in *Love's Architecture* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1978), page 106; Gene Edward Veith on "Longing" in his *Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1985), 159; and Helen Vendler on "Home" in *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 265.

¹⁹ See Peter Harrison's *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), pages 103-6 for an account of how the meaning of "belief" changed during the 16th and early 17th centuries. My contention will be that "faith" for Herbert is more a matter of "trust in" Christ rather than "belief that" he is among the elect.

continued Creation, and a creation every moment.”²⁰ In *The Country Parson* the whole of creation is contingent on God’s preserving will, requiring God to will its preservation moment by moment. “Providence” also finds God involved in the minutest details: “For either thy *command*, or thy *permission* / Lay hands on all: they are thy *right* and *left*” (33-4). In his chapter on “The Parson’s Consideration of Providence,” George Herbert notes that God’s will must preserve and sustain creation, but God’s will might change at any moment: “By Gods governing power he preserves and orders the references of things one to the other, so that though the corn do grow, and be preserved in that act by his sustaining power, yet if he suite not other things to the growth, as seasons, and weather, and other accidents by his governing power, the fairest harvests come to nothing. And it is observable, that God delights to have men feel, and acknowledg, and reverence his power, and therefore he often overturnes things, when they are thought past danger.”²¹ God’s will undergirds everything from the weather to the crops, and consequently if God’s will changes, the fate of the harvest changes accordingly. This is not an absolute break from the Renaissance Christian Neoplatonic framework, but there is a shift in emphasis. This emphasis on the freedom of God’s will and its potentially ruinous consequences follows from the Reformation’s insistence on the absolute sovereignty of God, which in turn was a response, as Blumenberg suggested, to late-medieval nominalist criticisms of the Thomistic synthesis of intellect and will.

Yet unlike Blumenberg, George Herbert insists in *The Country Parson* that God’s moment-to-moment preservation of the cosmos ought to be comforting. The preservation of the world shows God’s care for it. In some of his poems, however, Herbert considers

²⁰ *The Country Parson*, Chapter xxxiv.

²¹ *The Country Parson*, Chapter xxx.

the unsettling implications of such a free divine will. If God preserves the poet and all of creation at every moment, what does it mean when the poet cannot find God or his own place in this creation? He considers the possibility that God has made no place for him in “Employment (I).”²² Everything in the cosmos fits together as it should, except for the poet:

All things are busie; onely I
Neither bring hony with the bees,
Nor flowres to make that, nor the husbandrie
To water these.

I am no link of thy great chain,
But all my companie is a weed. (“Employment (I),” 17-22)

Much of the imagery of “Providence” reoccurs in “Employment.” There are bees and flowers and rain, all working together in perfect harmony. God employs each of these in the great, orderly cosmos, where each thing occupies its proper place. Except for one. Only the poet (“onely I”) has no place in the “great chain.” He places himself among the weeds, which are not only lowly but also, and more importantly, by definition undesirable and out of place in a well-tended garden. The homely imagery, however, should not mislead us. The stakes are terribly high: if God preserves the created order, and if this order is seen in the “references of things one to another,” then the poet’s lack of employment suggests the grim possibility that he has fallen outside of God’s providential care.

²² William Halewood argues that this poem draws on Reformation theology in which humanity has no place in the universe, absent God’s help. See *The Poetry of Grace: Reformation Themes and Structures in English Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 107-8. Harold Toliver sees the poet’s place in the natural order being “cancelled,” meaning he *did* have one before (*George Herbert’s Christian Narrative* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 115. The interpretive conflict is over whether the poet has *lost* his place, or never had one.

Sometimes it is not only George Herbert who seems to have lost God. Several of his poems begin with his sudden fear that God has abandoned the whole of Creation. The cosmos, which in “Providence” showed God’s craftsmanship everywhere, is empty. Many have dubbed these poems (which include at least “The Search,” “Longing,” and “Deniall”) Herbert’s poetry of “sighs and groanes.” They often begin with God’s sudden and unexpected absence.²³ In “The Search,” for instance, God seems to have withdrawn from the earth below and from the sky above:

Whither, O, whither art thou fled,
My Lord, my Love?
My searches are my daily bread;
Yet never prove.

My knees pierce th’ earth, mine eies the skie;
And yet the sphere
And centre both to me denie
That thou art there. (“The Search,” 1-8)

In poems like “Providence” and “The Starre,” evidence of God’s handiwork was everywhere, in the highest heavens and in the lowliest matter. But now it appears that God is nowhere to be found in either, having “fled” from both the “skie” and the “earth.” The poet cannot find God by raising his mind into the heavens, nor can he find God by falling to his knees. Intellectual speculation and humble supplication are equally unable to assure the poet that God governs and preserves creation. The poem “Longing” begins in an almost identical fashion:

With sick and famisht eyes,

²³ As Richard Strier (171) and Gene Veith (*Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1985), 159-161) have noted, these poems have often unspoken but terrifying soteriological implications: absent God’s providential care, the poet will be lost forever. In my view, doubts about the orderliness of creation—which shows its maker—creates the intellectual background for these poems. Of course, they have Biblical antecedents, too, especially in the Psalms (see Bloch, 266).

With doubling knees and weary bones,
To thee my cries,
To thee my groans,
To thee my sighs, my tears ascend:
No end? ("Longing," 1-5)

Once again God is nowhere to be found in creation. The poet's eyes may turn up to heaven, and his knees may buckle beneath him, laying him on the ground again, but God remains absent. Another poem that begins with God's sudden absence is "Home": "Come Lord, my head doth burn, my heart is sick, / While thou dost ever, ever stay . . . O show thy self to me, / Or take me up to thee!" (1-2, 5-6). Lines five and six offer the same two ways the poet might reconnect with God: either God "shows" Himself through a physical medium or God draws the poet up to Him directly. The poet receives neither favor, as God remains hidden once again.

In addition to God disappearing from nature, God can also disappear from inside the poet. In his poetry George Herbert often describes the sudden absence of God within him as a loss of joy.²⁴ In the opening lines of "The Temper (II)," he sounds bewildered: "It cannot be. Where is that mightie joy, / Which just now took up all my heart?" (1-2). "The Glimpse" also begins with the loss of joy: "Whither away delight? / Thou cam'st but now; wilt thou so soon depart, / And give me up to night?" (1-3). God can disappear from creation, the poet can fall out of the created order, or God can disappear from inside the poet. The moral of the story seems to be that there seems no place in creation from

²⁴ See Terry G. Sherwood's *Herbert's Prayerful Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 111.

which God cannot suddenly seem absent. Abandonment, then, is a real and constant possibility.²⁵

To make matters worse, in a nominalist cosmos God's disappearance seems like an act of divine will. "The Search" raises the terrible possibility that God has deliberately chosen to hide from the poet: "Where is my God? what hidden place / Conceals thee still? / What cover dare eclipse thy face? / Is it thy will? // O let not that of any thing" (lines 29-33). If God preserves creation by an act of will at every moment, then God's sudden disappearance may well be deliberate, and, as Strier notes, this is "much more terrifying than the idea of any physical barrier."²⁶ A physical distance, as in the orderly Platonic cosmos, might be overcome, but if the barrier is God's will, would not be. "The Search" further suggests that God may have made another earth, and even other life forms, on which to bestow his favor: "Lord, dost thou some new fabrick mould, / Which favour winnes, / And keeps thee present, leaving th'old / Unto their sinnes?" (15-18). The poet wonders whether God has created a "new fabrick," meaning another creature who wins God's favor, which has been lost by "Man." This might be more than idle speculation on George Herbert's part. The Copernican cosmography (which gained popularity in the 16th century and was widely accepted by the end of the 17th), included suns like ours with planets of their own. Some even speculated that those planets must have conscious inhabitants.²⁷ It was not inconceivable, in the early 17th century, to think that God had

²⁵ Veith argues that this poem is a "complaint not against God, but against the unruliness of human emotions" (144), but I hear no hint of self-blame, only bewilderment and fear of a change the poet cannot understand.

²⁶ See Strier's whole discussion of this poem, 234-8.

²⁷ Drummond of Hawthornden, cataloguing many of the new and disturbing ideas of the early 17th century, said that "some affirm there is another world of men and sensitive creatures" (William Drummond, 'A Cypress Grove,' *Poetical Works*, ed. L.E. Kastner (London: Printed for the Society by W. Blackwood and Sons, 1913), ii, 78).

turned from humanity and bestowed favor instead on alien life. And if creation requires God's constant preservation to exist, then if God turns away from humanity and this world, then none of it will enjoy providential preservation, and like the poor harvest in *The Country Parson*, it will all "come to nothing."

The problem in all of these poems is at once epistemological and soteriological: all at once, the poet doubts God's providential care and cannot reassure himself by looking out at the natural world or within himself. How can he be sure that God has not abandoned him? In a poem like "Providence," the poet knew God through the natural world. In these poems, the natural world no longer evinces God's providential care, and therefore the poet falls into doubt and confusion. Both Gene Veith and Richard Strier argue that Herbert's uneasiness over God's absence stems from his "reformation spirituality."²⁸ Yet I do not think the problem is, on its deepest level, exclusive to Protestantism. The problem has its roots in medieval nominalism. Strier acknowledges this briefly, but he concludes that God's immanence in or absence from nature is beside the point in Herbert's poetry: "The idea that the place of everything has been assigned by an all-powerful God does not relate to the speaker's emotional and devotional needs any more than the vision of a godless nature does."²⁹ In my view Strier is not quite correct because Herbert's "emotional and devotional" needs are *prompted by* his sudden vision of a godless nature. In these poems he feels the epistemological crisis of his day keenly as an emotional and devotional problem.

²⁸ See for example both on "Longing" (Strier, 171 and Veith, 161), and especially Strier on "The Search" (234-8). The term "reformation spirituality" is Veith's.

²⁹ Strier, 171.

B. *“Nothing Performs the Task of Life”: Sin, Disorder, and Death*

For Herbert the epistemological problem is more than an intellectual problem to be puzzled over while sitting in an armchair by the fireplace. It has unmistakable soteriological implications. If, as in “Providence” and the *Country Parson*, God preserves and continually recreates the world, then God’s absence could mean dissolution, a loss of order. In George Herbert’s poetry, God’s absent care leads to the disintegration of order and matter, both in the cosmos at large and in the human body. The end of material disintegration, especially for the poet, would be death.

In *The Temple*, Herbert frequently describes himself as made of clay, earth, or even dust, the lowest, most disintegrated stuff in the cosmos (and furthest from its unified, divine source). In “Complaining” the poet calls himself “Thy clay that weeps, thy dust that calls” (“Complaining,” 5). In “Prayer (I)” the poet’s breath returned to God, but in these poems of “sighs and grones” the poet’s words cannot reach God, and dust is all that remains of him. In a similar vein the poem “Dulnesse” begins with the question: “Why do I languish thus, drooping and dull, / As if I were all earth?” In “Sighs and Grones” the poet calls himself a “sillie worm” and cries “But I am frailtie and already dust” (5, 17). Calling himself dust or a worm, Herbert places himself at the very foot of the cosmic hierarchy as far from God as it is possible to be.

But at least as a worm, he would be alive. Many of these poems of lament describe the elements of his body breaking apart, leaving the poet near death. “Affliction (IV)” begins with the poet crying that he is “broken in pieces all asunder.” The elements that make up his body are falling apart: “Nothing performs the task of life: / The elements are let loose to fight, / And while I live, trie out their right” (16-18). Herbert may have

once celebrated “Man’s” variability, but here variability has descended into chaos. In these lines Herbert combines Biblical allusions (the “broken vessel” of Ps. 31:14 and Job’s statement that he is “broken . . . asunder” in verse 16:32) with Early Modern physiology, the “elements” of the body, likely the traditional blood, phlegm, choler, and bile. These elements should work together harmoniously to preserve the poet’s life, just as flowers and rain complemented each other in “Providence,” but now all the elements of the poet’s body are at odds, each asserting its own “right” against the others. The result is an organism at war with itself: here the poet is decaying, dying, and dissolving down to earth rather than ascending in his soul. In “Complaining,” the elements outside the poet threaten his life, too. He likens himself to “a silly flie, / That live or die / According as the weather falls” (8-10). The poet may be alive for now, but in both poems nature has turned turbulent and threatens his life. George Ryley suggested that the weather is a metaphor for God’s favor, which, at least to the poet, seems to shift unpredictably.³⁰ Once again, this suggests a universe that seems to be running not according to comprehensible laws but according to an inscrutable and seemingly capricious will.

Mindful of God’s sovereignty over nature, the poet begs for aid: “Oh help, my God! let not their plot / Kill them and me” (“Affliction (IV),” 19-20), and “Let not thy wrathfull power / Afflict my houre” (“Complaining,” 16-17). His petitionary prayers are quite to the point: if the elements of his body are flying apart, not obeying their natural order, then perhaps God is not preserving that order, and so endangering the poet’s life. Likewise in “The Temper (II),” a poem that echoes the nominalist understanding of the relationship between God and creation Herbert outlined in *The Country Parson*, he writes

³⁰ George Ryley, *Mr. Herbert’s Temple and Church Militant Explained and Improved*, ed. Maureen Boyd and Cedric C. Brown (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987), 200. The original may be found at Bodleian MS Rawl. D. 199.

that God is “ev’ry day a new Creator” and “when thou dost depart from hence [from the poet’s mental faculties], / They grow unruly...” (lines 8 and 9-11). Absent God’s preservation, the poet falls apart in mind and body.

In other poems, however, the poet’s dissolution is not so incomprehensible; it is rather the predictable consequence of sin. The poem “Repentance” ties bodily disintegration to sin and the fall. In the post-lapsarian world human life tends inexorably towards dust and death. The poet describes himself as a “momentary bloom”:

Thus we are to delights: but we are all
To sorrows old,
If life be told
From what it feeleth, Adams fall. (9-12)

Here, as elsewhere, George Herbert does not understand sin in terms of individual misdeeds.³¹ Rather, sin is a condition—beginning with Adam’s fall—that now afflicts everyone. In emphasizing the influence of the old sorrow of the fall, Herbert is here far more pessimistic than a Renaissance humanist like Mirandola: “Man” can move up and down the cosmic scale, but “Adams fall” is a heavy weight, pulling him down and, it seems, pulling him apart. In “Repentance” sin is a sickness that eats away at the body:

When thou for sinne rebukest man,
Forthwith he waxeth wo and wan:
Bitterness fills our bowels; all our hearts
Pine, and decay,
And drop away,
And carrie with them th’other parts. (25-30)

³¹ Strier, 26. See also Stephanie Yearwood’s “The Rhetoric of Form in *The Temple*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1700*, vol. 12, no. 2, Winter 1983, pp. 131-144. She gives an account of how Herbert’s seemingly “individual confession” also invites imaginative participation on the part of his readers (see especially 138).

Recall that in *The Country Parson* God preserved and in fact recreated all of creation at each moment, so the poet's disintegrating body raises the terrible possibility that God has withdrawn this care. Barbara Lewalski emphasizes the spiritual aspect of the poet's sickness, but these lines pay a remarkable amount of attention to the sheer physical consequences of sin, too.³² The sinful "man" grows sickly and pale ("wan") on the outside, and inside his digestive tract pains him. The reference to "our hearts" here should be taken in a similar way, not only as a metaphor but also as a physiological fact. In a state of sin, separated from God, the human body dissolves. This line of thought is taken to its conclusion in "Sinne (II)": "Sinne is flat opposite to th' Almighty, seeing / It wants the good of *vertue*, and of *being*" (lines 4-5). As a result of sin, humanity tends to dissolve into non-being, the annihilation of death.

Still, even in a poem as bleak as "Repentance," there remains a hint that the poet may reunite with God rather than decay into earth. He describes his life as "one undressing, / A steadie aiming at a tombe" (4-5). Note that his life, as marked by original sin, is an "*undressing*": it unmakes the poet. Helen Vendler insists that Herbert's character naturally inclined to happiness rather than melancholy: "These poems show the unhappiness of a person not, I think, naturally melancholy; Herbert was a person meant to be happy, one who never doubted that unhappiness is a deeply unnatural state . . ."³³ At first Vendler's position seems surprising. So many of George Herbert's poems record an anguish that borders on despair. There is far more grief in *The Temple* than joy, if we judge by the number of poems (and even lines) about each. However, I think Vendler is

³² Barbara Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century English Lyric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 306.

³³ Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 259.

right to say that for George Herbert melancholy is an “*unnatural* state” (emphasis mine). God has created “Man” for temporary joy in this world on the way to his ultimate, heavenly joy in the next. Sin de-creates what God has made, turning the life that ought to be full of joy to sorrow.

In Herbert’s poems of sighs and groans, he is addressing a specific epistemological problem. His poems of lament are not poems of doubt about God’s existence. His doubts are rather about his own salvation. His alienation from God wounds him because it opens the possibility that he is outside of God’s providential care. In the poem “The Search” the rest of the world thrives, safely under God’s providential direction, and does God’s will effortlessly:

Yet can I mark how herbs below
 Grow green and gay,
As if to meet thee they did know,
 While I decay.

Yet can I mark how starres above
 Simper and shine,
As having keyes unto thy love,
 While poore I pine. (9-16)

Everything other than the poet knows its place in the great cosmic order and does its duty joyfully. There is an implication here that the grass and stars are what they were made to be, and are effortlessly fulfilling their purpose. Grass grows upwards to God and does so with gaiety. The stars twinkle and shine above as if they had “keyes,” easy access to God’s love.³⁴ Notice that the poet is moving in the wrong direction: decaying, breaking into ever smaller pieces, instead of reuniting with God. The stars already shine in the heavens, and the grass reaches for them, but he is falling. Pining, of course, means to

³⁴ The word “simper” here means glimmering or twinkling. This sense is obsolete, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, which cites Herbert’s use of it.

suffer, but it is a particular kind of suffering. One who is pining is wasting away (someone pining may forget to eat, for instance), which is precisely how Herbert had described the physical effects of humanity's post-lapsarian, sin-sick condition: the poet is in a state of disintegration, of "decay." Because he does not "know" how to find or meet God as the grass does, his body languishes, and threatens to dissolve altogether.

Herbert the poet, no less than the farmers' crops in *The Country Parson*, requires God's constant preservation. He makes this point explicitly at the end of "Giddinesse," a poem which up to the final stanza is all about human variability: "Lord, mend or rather make us: one creation / Will not suffice our turn: / Except thou make us daily, we shall spurn / Our own salvation" (25-28). Salvation lies with God's will, which must daily preserve (or create) the poet in order to counteract the decaying effect of sin. Here the poet connects his epistemological uncertainty with his soteriological fears: if God's will is absent, then his salvation will be lost.

At the end of "The Search" the poet imagines, but does not receive, the one thing that could comfort him: salvation in the form of reunion with God. I use the word "reunion" advisedly, because reunion in Herbert's poem implies an unnatural alienation overcome:

O take these barres, these lengths away;
. . . .

When thou dost turn, and wilt be neare;
 What edge so keen,
What point so piercing can appeare
 To come between?

For as thy absence doth excell
 All distance known:
So doth thy nearenesse bear the bell,
 Making two one. (49, 53-60)

The poem does not end with a reunion but with a petition (“O take these barres...”), and yet this petition gives us a glimpse of what Herbert imagines reunion would mean: a closeness no “piercing” point could separate, a literal “re-union” in which the alienated soul and God, who had been “two,” become “one.” “Affliction (IV)” also ends with an imagined reunion. While the “elements” of the poet’s body had previously been at odds, with God’s care, they will “Labour thy praise, and my relief; / With care and courage building me, / Till I reach heav’n, and much more thee” (28-30). Several other poems in *The Temple* also end with imagined or longed-for reunions, such as “Clasping of Hands” (“O be mine still! still make me thine! / Or rather make no Thine and Mine!” (19-20)), or “The Temper (II)” (“Thy power and love, my love and trust / Make one place ev’ry where” (27-28)). If, in a post-nominalist cosmos, absence from God means decay, then salvation would mean a reunion with God, an overcoming of the fearful separation the poet feels. God has the power to effect this reunion and, the poet fervently hopes, a motivating love. The poet certainly loves God, too, and the other requirement, as we shall see, is a kind of faith best described as “trust.”

“Then was my heart broken, as was my verse”: An Interlude on Vocation

Although God’s absence creates epistemological and soteriological problems in *The Temple*—and these problems are surely important enough in themselves—God’s absence also causes problems for Herbert’s verse. At the end of “Affliction (IV)” the poet seeks “relief” from his despair, of course, but he also promises “praise.” Praise is precisely what Herbert identified as the poet’s vocation in “Providence.” Losing his life

due to God's absence, then, entails not only loss of life but loss of life's purpose: singing God's praises in poetry. The last lines of "Repentance" draw an even stronger connection between a restored relationship with God and the music of poetry: "But thou wilt sinne and grief destroy; / That so the broken bones may joy, / And tune together in a well-set song, / Full of his praises" (31-34). Once again, sin has broken the poet's body apart and has put him out of the natural harmony he (like the rest of creation) should be in. But if God heals the poet's bones, then the poet's well-set body will take its proper place in the whole scheme of creation. And that place, in "Providence," was not only a priest but also a poet, the "Secretarie" writing down hymns to God. George Herbert, as a poet, is supposed to be praising God, but in the poems of lament and despair we sometimes find him *not* occupying his proper place in the providential order as the grass and stars are occupying theirs.

Marion White Singleton has suggested that "Employment (I)" is a poem about poetic vocation.³⁵ As we saw earlier, throughout most of the poem the poet had no place, in marked contrast to the rest of the orderly cosmos ("I am no link of thy great chain," 21). But the very last lines suggest that returning to his place in the cosmos would mean rejoining the great hymn of "Providence": "Lord place me in thy consort; give one strain / To my poore reed" (23-24). A consort is a group of musicians playing different kinds of instruments, and in this case the musicians include the whole providential landscape that revealed and praised God. The poet begs for a part in this choir, a single musical "strain" to add: he wants to find "Employment" in the well-tempered universe. The rhyme of "weed" and "reed" is significant here, because the former can be used as the latter, which

³⁵ Marion White Singleton, *God's Courtier: Configuring a Different Grace in George Herbert's Temple* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 128. Joseph Summers concurs in his *George Herbert: His Religion & Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954) 38.

in turn can make music. So what seemed lowly or out of place (a weed in a garden) could theoretically be transformed into the means of musical praise. In “Providence” the poet fulfilled his role in the world by offering up hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God (lines 145-152). So when the poet priest falls out of place in the cosmos, it means he has fallen out of tune, or even silent.³⁶ Ultimately, this poet will find a way to turn his grief and groans into music, claiming his vocation. But for the most part, his poems of lament show him unable to offer sacrifices and thankful prayers to God.

It is not terribly surprising that George Herbert would write poems about being out of place, or being unable to find a vocation. His own path to a fitting place in the world was famously winding. He spent several years as the university orator at Cambridge and even stood a term in Parliament before taking holy orders.³⁷ His posthumous biographer (or hagiographer) Isaak Walton portrayed him as a man who became a priest after his hopes for a position at court were disappointed. A more recent biographer, Amy Charles, disagrees. After he became a fellow at Trinity college, “There is good evidence to show that, aside from the possible interruptions of sickness, Herbert proceeded rather steadily in his study of divinity”³⁸ Still, Herbert’s most overtly autobiographical poem, “Affliction (I),” presents a poet who does not know where he fits in the world. At first all the beautiful ornaments of the church enticed him to enter God’s service: “I looked on thy furniture so fine, / And it made it fine to me: / Thy glorious

³⁶ Strier takes “Employment” as another occasion to argue that Herbert is “concerned not with the grand scheme of things,” but with individual grace (173). Once again, although I would never downplay the importance of individual grace in *The Temple*, I find this opposition overdrawn. It seems to me that the grand scheme of things is a concern to Herbert, precisely because it is against that background that he develops his thoughts on knowledge and salvation.

³⁷ The authoritative Herbert biography is Amy Charles’ *A Life of George Herbert* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

³⁸ Charles, 88.

household-stuffe did me entwine, / And ‘tice me unto thee” (“Affliction (I),” 7-10). The poet’s attraction to holy service in the first three stanzas of the poem is bound together with his youthful happiness: “My dayes were straw’d with flow’rs and happinesse; / There was no month but May” (21-22). When his happiness disappears over the next few stanzas, first due to illness and later to entanglements in worldly affairs, he loses his ardor for divine service. But having lost his religious vocation, the poet finds himself without any vocation whatsoever. He suffers an identity crisis in which “a blunted knife / Was of more use than I” (33-34). Throughout *The Temple* even roses are useful, so the poet’s loss of vocation is just one more way in which he has fallen out of God’s providential ordering of the cosmos. Amy Charles argues that Herbert wrote about half of the poems in *The Temple* between his time in Cambridge, where he had been university orator for eight years, and his installation at the parish in Bemerton.³⁹ So “Affliction (I),” which was probably written before he became a priest, reflects this uncertain position, between his academic and church appointments:

Now I am here, what thou wilt do with me
None of my books will show:
I reade, and sigh, and wish I were a tree;
For then I should grow
To fruit or shade: at least some bird would trust
Her household to me, and I should be just. (55-60)

Regardless of where the “here” was for the historical Herbert, “here” in “Affliction (I)” is a dead end. The poet has lost his childish enthusiasm for the priesthood and has no stomach for secular affairs. Badly out of place, he once again looks longingly on the natural world. Nature, represented here by a single tree, is “just” in the sense of fulfilling its obligations, fulfilling the role God has appointed for it providing sweet fruit of useful

³⁹ Charles, 138.

shelter. In either case the tree is “just,” meaning that it gives its due by providing fruit and shade and therefore fits perfectly into God's orderly, interlocking creation.

Not only the tree, but also all of nature in *The Temple* poetry seems to follow God's providential ordering without difficulty. In “Employment (II)” he marvels sadly at how easy it is for nature to return God's favors:

Oh that I were an Orenge-tree,
 That busie plant!
Then should I ever laden be,
 And never want
Some fruit for him that dressed me. (21-25)

The orange tree is a “busie plant” because it blossoms and bears fruit at the same time. Consequently, the tree always has a sweet fruit for God. The relationship between God and the tree is circular, a pageant of mutual gift-giving. On one side of the relationship, God has “dressed” the tree in the sense of making it to grow fruit in all seasons. On the other side, according to its place in the providential order, the tree grows its fruit then presents it to God.

No less than oranges, the poems of *The Temple* are supposed to be gifts given by and returned to God. In the very first poem in *The Temple*, its “Dedication,” the poet presents his work as “fruit” for God: “Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee; / Yet not mine neither: for from thee they came, / And must return” (1-3). Whether they appear in a literal way, as in Ex. 23:19, or in a spiritual sense, as in the letters of St. Paul, e.g. 1 Cor. 15:20, the “first fruits” of the Bible are gifts, sacrifices from the harvest for God. And in a sense, they only give to God what God had given them first. God's providential care has caused the crops to grow, and upon harvesting it, the Israelite priests offered the first and best parts of the harvest as signs of thanksgiving. In the Pauline

letters, the fruits are spiritual, but spiritual fruit, no less than physical fruit, should be offered back to God, who grants it. In my fifth chapter, when I discuss Herbert's poetic practice, I will explore the issue of human and divine agency more fully (to what extent is Herbert presenting a gift if it already came from God?).⁴⁰ For my purposes here, what is important is that the poet looks on the fruitfulness of the orange tree and in comparison feels fruitless himself, unable to be "just" because unable to give God what God is due: poetic praise. Another poem, "Grief," flatly declares that poetry cannot properly contain and convey grief: "Verses, ye are too fine a thing, too wise / For my rough sorrows: cease, be dumbe and mute" (13-14). The poet rejects all the parts of poetry, bids adieu to feet, music, rhyme, and measure. It ends with the simple exclamation: "Alas, my God!"⁴¹

George Herbert most famously draws a connection between God's abandonment and his own inability to write poetry in "Deniall": "When my devotions could not pierce / Thy silent eares; / Then was my heart broken, as was my verse" (1-3). Unlike "The Search" or other poems of lament, "Deniall" treats God's disappearance as not first and foremost as a soteriological but a poetic problem. The poet cannot find God anywhere, and without God accepting the poet's devotional offering, his verse is "broken." Herbert

⁴⁰ Several critics have noted that Herbert's ambivalence about the authorship of his poems begins immediately, right after entering *The Temple*. For instance, Stanley Fish, as always, thinks that Herbert is "letting go," realizing that his own efforts are worth nothing (see *Self Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972) 157. On the other hand, Michael Schoenfeldt argues that Herbert's seeming humility hides his assertive requests for God's favor. See his "Submission and Assertion: The 'Double Motion' of Herbert's 'Dedication'", *John Donne Journal* vol. 2, no. 2, 1983, pp. 39-47. My own view is that Herbert and God share authorship of his poems through the Renaissance writing method of *copia* (see my final chapter).

⁴¹ Strier regards this cry as "a rejection of language itself," and while I agree that poetry has failed Herbert here, I also suspect his desire to take his vocation and offer God sacred poetry remains undiminished, meaning he has not rejected language entirely but does not know how to use it properly. See Strier's article on "Herbert and Tears," *English Literary History*, vol. 46, no. 2, Summer 1979, pp. 221-247.

dramatizes the brokenness of his verse with an irregular rhythm, oddly proportioned lines, and a rhyme scheme that fails at the end of each stanza:

My bent thoughts, like a brittle bow,
Did flie asunder:
Each took his way; some would to pleasures go,
Some to the warres and thunder
Of alarms. (6-10)

The rhythm of “Deniall” has departed far from the regal steadiness of the iambs in “Providence.” The stresses in line six fall in bunches and the alliteration on the percussive b’s only makes the halting rhythm more obvious. When line seven falls into iambs, it feels less like the poet has regained control of his rhythm and more like he cannot follow his own lead, as if he were stumbling over his own feet. The last line of this stanza, and of every stanza until the last, does not rhyme with any of the lines before it, and the numbers of syllables in each line follow no recognizable pattern (8, 4, 10, 6, 4). They have neither the symmetry of “Man” nor the regularity of “Providence.” The effect of these formal infelicities is to create a sense of a poet who cannot put the parts of poetry (sound, rhythm, line length and so on) into order. If the rest of creation is one great orderly hymn of praise, then this poet has fallen badly out of tune. God’s absence has coincided with the loss of the speaker’s poetic vocation.

The images of the snapping bow and scattering thoughts also recall the disintegration we saw in other poems of lament. In subsequent stanzas, “Deniall” replays other themes familiar from Herbert’s poems on nature and God’s seeming absence from it: “O that thou shouldst give dust a tongue / To crie to thee, / And then not heare it crying” (16-18). Once again, he is made of breath and dust, and if God refuses to hear his devotions, his heavenly part will have no place to rest, and dust will be all that remains.

The poet also once again compares himself to a musical instrument and to a plant that dies before it can flower:

Therefore my soul lay out of sight,
Untun'd, unstrung:
My feeble spirit, unable to look right,
Like a nipt blossome, hung
Discontented. (21-25)

In “Providence” and *The Country Parson*, the hand of God “tun’d” everything in heaven and on earth. The poet who says he is “untun’d” is confessing that he has nothing to add to the cosmic hymn of praise. The “nipt blossome” contrasts the poet of “Deniall” with the ever-fecund orange blossoms of “Employment (I).” The fruitless, unprepared poet is about to die “like a nipt blossome,” and consequently his verse will never flower. The “nipt blossome” and “feeble spirit” have the frightening implication not only of poetic impotence but also death. In “Deniall,” as in so many of Herbert’s other poems, the poet finds himself totally alienated from God and consequently near death. His inability to “look right” in “Deniall” has a double sense: he cannot see God in creation (as he tried to in “Mattens”), and wonders if his appearance has offended God, who has then looked away. The separation between his spirit and God seems insurmountable: God refuses to hear or look at him, and the poet has no way to gain God’s attention.

“Deniall” does not end in total despair. On the contrary, the final stanza offers a reprieve in poetry, but a rather mysterious one. The rhyme and rhythm of the final stanza are suddenly, startlingly even:

O cheer and tune my heartlesse breast,
Deferre no time;
That so thy favours granting my request,
They and my minde may chime,
And mend my ryme. (26-30)

For the entire poem up to this point, disorder reigned. But now the fourth and fifth lines of the stanza, which in every other stanza struck a dissonant note, rhyme perfectly. While many poets have called the final rhyme an answer to Herbert's prayers, in which God returns his gift of poetry, John Hollander suggests that the ending is an "eschatological parable," an intimation of the future rather than a present accomplishment.⁴² The ending is indeed mysterious. Herbert's verses are "tun'd" at last, but with no sense of *how* or *why* the poet has suddenly received God's favor. God's will seems to have changed, and granted Herbert favor without warning or reason. Why has the poet been heard in this moment of despair?

C. Never was grief like mine?

So far in this chapter I have laid out the joint epistemological and soteriological problem in George Herbert's poetry: the sudden disappearance of God from the cosmos and the poet's subsequent doubts about his salvation. As we shall see, Edward will try to establish knowledge of his salvation with dogmatic certainty, on no basis other than his own intellect. The poems in *The Temple*, however, never establish God's favor beyond a doubt. Instead, salvation in these poems is a matter of faith; or, more accurately, of trust. It depends less on certain knowledge and more on re-establishing a relationship between the poet and God. In the poems I have discussed thus far, George Herbert grieves over the sudden seeming disappearance of God. Yet, paradoxically, his grief will reunite him with God: the poet's deepest grief (God-forsakenness) was endured by Christ in the

⁴² John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1975), 131.

crucifixion. “As is often the case,” writes William Pahlka, “when Herbert feels most alienated from Christ, he is in fact recapitulating or copying some aspect of the Passion.”⁴³ In particular, he repeats Christ’s cry of “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” His abandonment paradoxically reunites him with Christ.

The Temple is full of poems about the crucifixion, but the most complete treatment of the passion narrative is “The Sacrifice.” As Rosamund Tuve pointed out, it belongs to a particular genre of medieval lyric, commonly known as “The Complaints of Christ to his People.”⁴⁴ In these poems, which Tuve says were based more closely on medieval liturgies of Holy Week than on the Gospels, Christ laments the cruelty of his historical tormentors and the indifference of his present-day audience. “The Sacrifice” is one of *The Temple*’s longest poems, consisting of four-line stanzas, each of which ends with the words “Was ever grief like mine?” This line is surely intended to elicit sympathy from those who hear it, those who witness the many insults and injuries Christ suffers, but it is also a statement of profound isolation. No one else has suffered what Christ has suffered, so there is no one who can truly sympathize with his grief. Consequently, some critics have read Christ’s grief as fundamentally different from the grief Herbert expresses elsewhere in *The Temple*.⁴⁵ I will argue, however, that Christ’s isolation is precisely, though admittedly paradoxically, why the poet can identify with him.

The first stanza of the “Sacrifice” sets the tone for the whole poem. Christ addresses people, but they ignore him:

⁴³ Pahlka, 111.

⁴⁴ Rosamund Tuve, *A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 24.

⁴⁵ Ilona Bell argues that the poet cannot bridge the gap between himself and Christ’s suffering, “Setting Foot into Divinity”: George Herbert and the English Reformation,’ *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1977, pp. 219-41. Arnold Stein likewise thinks that “The Sacrifice” is an unusual poem in *The Temple* precisely because it addresses divine, not human grief. See his *George Herbert’s Lyrics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), 95.

*Oh all ye, who passe by, whose eyes and minde
To wordly things are sharp, but to me blinde;
To me, who took eyes that I might you finde:
Was ever grief like mine? (1-4)*

Passersby neither see nor understand his grief, and so Christ seems terribly alone. And indeed within the logic of the poem Christ is in fact one of a kind, because no one has suffered for the reasons Christ must suffer: “Man stole the fruit, but I must climbe the tree; / The tree of life to all, but onely me” (202-3). All of humanity sins by stealing the fruit of the tree, so Christ alone pays for man's theft with his sacrificial death on the cross. As the sole savior of humanity, Christ is set apart from the rest of humanity and suffers a singular fate.

And yet the poet hedges on Christ's total abandonment. In keeping with the Gospels according to Matthew and Mark, Christ in “The Sacrifice” asks why God has forsaken him, a reference to the opening line of Ps. 22 (“my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). Or half asks, because the poem, which had established a regular stanza structure over hundreds of lines, suddenly breaks its form at the crucial moment:

*But, O my God, my God! why leav'st thou me,
The sonne, in whom thou dost delight to be?
My God, My God ——
Never was grief like mine. (213-216)*

The missing words should be “why forsakest thou me,” but in their place we have a dash instead. Perhaps it should not come as a surprise that the form of “The Sacrifice” breaks at the moment it tries to contain Christ's cry from the cross. Christ seems to say the impossible: how can the “sonne,” who is of one being with the Father, be parted from the Father? How, in George Herbert's terms, could a God who is “in small things great, not

small in any” not be in the exact place where God is supposedly incarnate? Instead of trying to express Christ’s desolation, the poet stops short of it. The line following the dash (“Never was grief like mine”) raises further problems. The declaration “Never was grief like mine” implies a flat contradiction, as if to say: this is my grief, there has never been grief like it. It is as if the poet has overridden Christ here, cannot believe what Christ says and refuses to repeat it. And in fact the next poem in *The Temple* (“The Thanksgiving”) says as much: “*My God, my God, why dost thou part from me? / Was such a grief as cannot be*” (9-10). Why can such a grief not be? I suspect that when Herbert refuses to believe that God abandoned Christ on the cross, it is not because such an idea is hard to understand but too horrible to consider. That would account for the formal catastrophe in the stanza: unable to bring himself to say that God abandoned Christ, the poet stops writing, and the line goes unfinished.

Yet as horrible as Christ’s loneliness on the cross may be, it paradoxically creates a relationship between Christ and the poet: a community of the abandoned. And because Christ on the cross remains God (however abandoned he may feel), the poet’s identification with Christ’s grief overcomes the distance between him and God. Herbert represents this stunning reversal graphically in the “Easter-wings” poems:

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
 Though foolishly he lost the same,
 Decaying more and more,
 Till he became
 Most poore:
 With thee
 O let me rise
 As larks, harmoniously,
 And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne:

And still with sicknesses and shame
 Thou didst so punish sinne,
 That I became
 Most thinne.
 With thee
 Let me combine
 And feel this day thy victorie:
 For, if I imp my wing on thine,
 Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

As in the poems of lament and grief I discussed earlier in this chapter, both “Easter-wings” poems begin with separation from God, represented by Adam’s fall, sin, and the bodily dissolution and death that follow. Both poems represent graphically, in their tapering toward the thin point, this process of bodily dissolution. It is as if the poems themselves were wasting away as the poet’s voice trailed off, heading toward an eternal silence. The moment of reversal is the same in each poem: at the exact moment of superlative grief (“*most poor*,” “*most thinne*”) the poet finds his greatest closeness to Christ (“*with thee*”). George Herbert’s paradoxical recovery of God in these near-death moments fulfills what Christ promised him in “The Sacrifice”: “In healing not my self, there doth consist / All that salvation, which ye now resist; / Your safetie in my sicknesse doth subsist” (225-7). In Herbert’s poems of lamentation, his sickness and bodily dissolution had seemed to signify God’s absence, but in fact Christ’s own “sicknesse” and death have acted as a kind of backstop, catching the poet just when all seemed most hopeless, healing his sin-sickness and thereby assuring him of his eventual salvation.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ I concur with critics like Summers, who argues that the thinning of the poem is what then makes the “flight” possible (144). Robert Hastings and Martin Elsky also observe that the poem’s form represents the dramatic shape of redemption, in which sin paradoxically leads to salvation. See Hastings’ “‘Easter Wings’ as a Model of George Herbert’s Method,” *Thoth*, vol. 4, 1963, pp. 15-23; and also Elsky’s ‘George Herbert’s Pattern Poems and the Materiality of Language: A New Approach to Renaissance Hieroglyphics,’ *English Literary History*, vol. 50, no. 2, 1983, pp. 245-60.

It is important to note, however, that even in “Easter Wings,” the poet’s knowledge of his salvation remains less than ironclad. As Robert Halli notes, the verbs in the second half of both stanzas still look to the future (“Let me combine” and “O let me rise”), as if salvation were still a ways off.⁴⁷ It is a matter of trust, not indubitable certainty. This is especially evident at the end of his poems, which tend not to dramatize a reunion with God but hold it out as a possibility. Both stanzas in “Easter Wings,” for instance, end in the future tense: “Affliction *shall* advance the flight in me” (10) and “Then *shall* the fall further the flight in me” (21). The verbs here could suggest logical certainty but are better read as a hope for the future. The poems in *The Temple* often describe this hope in terms of trust. In the final stanza of the poem “Death,” the poet considers “our Saviour’s death” and concludes that “we can go die as sleep, / and trust” (lines 13 and 21). As in “Easter-wings,” he trusts that bodily death will not separate him from God, for it joins him to Christ in the common experience of death. Like “Easter-wings,” “The Temper (I)” also ends with a conjecture about the importance of trust:

Whether I flie with angels, fall with dust,
 Thy hands made both, and I am there:
 Thy power and love, my love and trust
 Make one place ev’ry where. (25-8)

This whole stanza, like the final lines of “Easter-wings” is a thought experiment. The poet cannot say, finally, “whether” he will have a mystical flight to God or, due to God’s abandonment, dissolve into dust. But God has made both and, in the figure of Christ, is “ev’ry where” in creation’s cosmic chain, and has the power to extend his love to any

⁴⁷ Robert W. Halli Jr., “The Double Hieroglyph in George Herbert’s ‘Easter Wings,’” *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 2, 1984, pp. 265-72.

part of it.⁴⁸ Because George Herbert's faith in his salvation is ultimately a matter of trust, his epistemology would count (to return to Popkin's terms) as fideist. This does not mean blind faith, however, but rather a continual remembrance of Christ's sacrifice and subsequent trust in his promises, namely that Christ's "sickness" has ensured the poet's "safetie" ("The Sacrifice," 227). This trust ideally would dispel Herbert's fears about the final resting place of his soul, as in the final lines of "The Discharge" when he declares: "Away distrust: / My God hath promis'd, he is just" (54-55).

What Herbert must trust is God's promise to re-gather or restore his wasting flesh. In keeping his belief that God's absence will cause matter to lose its order and decompose, he imagines the resurrection as a process of physical restoration of his body. In a poem about the general resurrection, "Dooms-day," God reincorporates the fallen dust into human bodies: "Summon all the dust to rise, / Till it stirre, and rubbe the eyes; / While this member jogs the other, / Each one whispring, *Live you brother?*" (3-6). In these lines, resurrection replays Adam's creation in Genesis: each risen "brother" is an integration of flesh ("dust") and breath (the "whispring" voice).⁴⁹ Likewise, in "Faith" we learn that every grain of formerly human dust will be accounted for:

What though my bodie runne to dust?
Faith cleaves unto it, counting evr'y grain
With an exact and most particular trust,
Reserving all for flesh again. (41-44)

As in "Dooms-day," resurrection requires a "bodie" and "flesh." Instead of being forgotten and cut off from God, every grain of dust is counted and reserved. It sometimes

⁴⁸ Oliver Steele reads "The Temper (I)" as yet another crucifixion poem, in which the poet, like Christ, begs "O rack me not to such a vast extent" (9). See Steele's short article "Crucifixion and the Imitation of Christ in Herbert's 'The Temper' (I)," *The George Herbert Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1 & 2, 1981/2, pp. 71-4.

⁴⁹ See Genesis 2:7 for the account of the Lord God forming Adam out of dust and breathing life into him.

seems like Herbert despises his flesh and the world it inhabits (“Presse me not to take more pleasure / In this world of sugred lies”;⁵⁰ or “But I am lost in flesh, whose sugred lyes / Still mock me”).⁵¹ But what he objects to is taking the body and its pleasures as ends in themselves, being “*lost* in flesh” rather than understanding pleasure now as a foretaste of better joys to come. On the contrary, even flesh and dust fall within the purview of God's care, as God is “reserving” every “grain” of the poet's matter, in order to give him a “new” flesh some day. If his nightmare were that God would no longer preserve or sustain him, his hope and “trust” is that, by God's will, “evr'y grain” of his body might be gathered together again.

Coda: “Blood is fittest, Lord, to write”

In other corners of *The Temple*, however, Herbert suggests that one need not wait for the general resurrection to take on a new body. To some extent, God can remake the poet's body now. After illness comes recovery, which might establish a closer relationship between the poet and Christ. Whereas in “The Sacrifice” and “Easter wings” the poet gets right next to Christ (in the words on the page: “most thin / with thee”), the next step is to ingest Christ, take him in as medicine. Several poems in *The Temple* describe ingesting Christ and, though a process of incorporation, having Christ's words written inside the poet. In “The Sinner” and “Good Friday,” identification with Christ's suffering is only a prelude to the next step, in which the poet hopes to gain a new body, and especially a new heart. In both poems he calls on Christ to enter him, and more specifically to do so as writing. In “Sepulchre” he calls Christ “the letter of the word” that

⁵⁰ “The Rose,” 1-2.

⁵¹ “Dulnesse,” 21-22.

was once written on stone tablets, and in “The Sinner” he asks that this word be written in a new place, his heart:

Lord, how I am all ague, when I seek
What I have treasur'd in my memorie!
....
Yet Lord restore thine image, heare my call:
And though my hard heart scarce to thee can grone,
Remember that thou once didst write in stone. (1-2, 12-14)

This sonnet begins, like so many of Herbert's poems of lamentation, with bodily illness, a feverish, malarial “ague.” The sins he has “treasur'd in [his] memorie” are at the root of his illness. Memory, like the conscience, was a physical storehouse of past (mis)deeds—an idea I will explore more fully in a coming chapter. To overcome sin, then, means clearing the record of the sins inscribed there, and although today we associate memory with the brain, in Herbert's day it would have been associated equally, if not mainly, with the heart.⁵² Restoring the poet's health in “The Sinner,” therefore, requires a literal change of heart: an inscription of Christ's image, in the form of written words, to replace the record of his former sins. “Good Friday” makes the same request: “Since bloud is fittest, Lord, to write / Thy sorrows in, and bloudie fight; / My heart hath store, write there, where in / One box doth lie both ink and sinne” (“Good Friday,” 21-4). So instead of rediscovering God in nature, Herbert will invite God inside his body, through an internal transformation in which Christ inscribes himself on his [Herbert's] heart. In my third chapter, I will outline investigate the process by which Herbert incorporates Christ — through reading and ruminating on the Bible.

⁵² Mary Carruthers. *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 206.

iii. Edward Herbert on Truth and Providence

When it comes to questions of epistemology and soteriology, Edward Herbert differs markedly from his brother. Instead of trying to assure his eternal life through a renewed trust in Christ, he develops a soteriology that depends on no particular faith whatsoever. Perhaps Edward Herbert's most famous book—during his life and afterwards—is *De Veritate (Of Truth)*. It was a direct response to the early 17th-century epistemological crisis. Herbert wrote it while he was the English ambassador to France, where he came into contact with many of the leading French skeptics.⁵³ He addresses himself to these skeptics and to the epistemological crisis in general when he declares, "Truth exists. The sole purpose of this proposition is to assert the existence of truth against imbeciles and sceptics."⁵⁴ He also claims to limit his treatise to epistemological questions and denies any interest in sectarian controversy. In the very first sentence of his treatise, he says he will concern himself only with "the truths of understanding, not truths of Faith."⁵⁵

As scholars have pointed out, however, concern with the "truths of Faith" permeates *De Veritate*. Eugene Hill, who always reads Edward Herbert as a forward-thinking rebel, calls it "a philosophical charter for the religious doctrine called natural religion or deism."⁵⁶ R.D. Bedford, who views him as the last gasp of Christian Neoplatonism rather than the forerunner of deism, says that *De Veritate* "revolves around what are essentially theological questions" about God, human freedom, and

⁵³ Richard Popkin. *The History of Scepticism: from Savonarola to Boyle*, revised and expanded edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 128-9.

⁵⁴ Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, *De Veritate*, trans. Meyrick H. Carré (Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith Ltd., 1937), 83.

⁵⁵ *De Veritate*, 71.

⁵⁶ Eugene Hill, *Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 19.

immortality.⁵⁷ And John Butler calls *De Veritate* “an eirenic religious treatise as much, if not more, than it is an epistemological work.”⁵⁸ As all three rightly note, one could not divorce epistemological from theological concerns during the early 17th century. What Herbert says about the former will inevitably have consequences for the latter.

I contend that at the heart of *De Veritate* lies Herbert’s concern with soteriology. He writes an epistemological treatise because epistemological certainty is the first step toward establishing soteriological certainty. His final goal is to find a means of salvation (what he alternately calls “happiness eternal” or “eternal blessedness”) open to all, regardless of their confessional identities. He will do so through what Popkin called “dogmatism,” an attempt to ground certainty on nothing more (or less) than his own mind.

In this section of my chapter, I will first discuss Edward Herbert’s correspondence with the Protestant nobleman Sir Robert Harley. Written during his ambassadorship in France while he was also writing *De Veritate*, these letters suggest the book’s underlying motivations and questions: what must Edward Herbert (or anyone) know in order to achieve what he calls “eternal blessedness”? I will then show how his same questions about epistemology and soteriology play out in *De Veritate* and lead him to his famous “five common notions” of religion. Inscribed by God in every human heart, these ideas about God and holy living can be affirmed by all and are sufficient for salvation.

⁵⁷ R.D. Bedford, *The Defense of Truth: Herbert of Cherbury and the Seventeenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), 82-3.

⁵⁸ John Butler, *Lord Herbert of Chirbury (1582 – 1648): An Intellectual Biography* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 173.

A. “God’s Church is all mankind”: Soteriology in Edward Herbert’s Letters to Harley

Early in his Paris ambassadorship, Edward Herbert traded letters with the Protestant nobleman and politician Robert Harley. R.W. Serjeantson has contended that the letters are “a source not yet tapped by Herbert scholars.”⁵⁹ The letters are important clues to Herbert’s intellectual development because he wrote these letters while he was drafting *De Veritate*, and the themes of the letters, such as trusting one’s own reason over traditional authorities, will appear in the longer treatise. But the letters, more overtly than the book, reveal his overriding soteriological concern: the possibility that anyone, through introspection, could find a way to salvation.

In the letters Herbert confesses what he knows is “a very new and dangerous opinion”: anyone might be saved, regardless of which church they belong to. He advises Harley to “study God, study yourself, take heed of new and particular opinions, nor let the name of Church in any Country or tyme deceive you. Gods Church is all mankind, though some are his more beloved, neyther does hee make any, whom hee denyes the means to come to him.”⁶⁰ He is writing in France at a time when the conflicts of the Reformation, both intellectual and political, are ongoing. He believes, however, that it would be possible to circumvent these conflicts by separating confession, the “Church in any Country,” from salvation, a possibility he extends to “all mankind.” To be clear, he never argues that everyone *will* be saved—

⁵⁹ R.W. Serjeantson, “Herbert of Cherbury before Deism: The Early Reception of the *De Veritate*,” *The Seventeenth Century*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2001, pp. 217-38. Quote on page 229.

⁶⁰ Edward Herbert to Sir. Robert Harley 17 July 1619. Bodleian Library, MS Add. 70,001.

some are still “more beloved” than others—but he insists that a pathway or “means” to salvation is available to all.

This pathway has been established, Herbert claims, by God’s providence, and it can be found, at least partially, in every religion: “Yet I thinke there is in every Relligion and ever was and ever will be enough taught to bringe a man to happiness eternall, yf hee follow it, for I must never believe Gods Providence, which extends to man and every creature besides, only to faile in that point which is both the most necessary and to which the rest are subordinate.”⁶¹ “Providence” is the name Herbert gives to God’s creation and governance of the world. In his poetry, too, Herbert’s God ordered every part of the cosmos, but while his poems described great cosmological vistas, his letters to Harley focus in on the soteriological aspect of Providence: humanity’s hope for “happiness eternall.” What good is Providence, he asks, if it neglects his final fate?

By extending the possibility of eternal happiness to all humanity, he offers a kind of theodicy: a vindication of God’s justice. Because God has created human beings without their permission, God must give each of them an equal chance to achieve salvation: “I am sure you would not have to bee believed on your part yf God had given you the Power to create, for shall man bee made whether he will or not, and suffer damnation whether he will or no.”⁶² Underneath his garbled grammar, he poses a pointed question. If God had given Harley the power to create humanity, wouldn’t he [Harley] give every human being the chance to escape damnation?

⁶¹ Edward Herbert to Sir. Robert Harley 17 July 1619. Bodleian Library, MS Add. 70,001.

⁶² Edward Herbert to Sir. Robert Harley 17 July 1619. Bodleian Library, MS Add. 70,001.

Surely to do otherwise would be unjust. That is why every religion must teach “enough” to bring a believer to eternal life.

But Edward Herbert’s “dangerous opinion” about soteriology raises epistemological questions. What is this “enough”? And how does he know what it is? In these letters to Harley, Edward Herbert has little to say about what, exactly, the “enough” in “every Relligion” might be. (He will reveal it near the end of *De Veritate*.) He does offer, however, a hint of where he will search for it. Instead of searching scriptures, doctrines, the schoolmen’s books, or even the cosmos he explored in his poetry, he tells Harley he will search his own heart: “if you ask more how this is wrought, I may say I cannot tell, but this notion is written in my Hart, that gods Providence is over all his works.”⁶³ There is, as will be spelled out at greater length in *De Veritate*, a secret correspondence between Providence and the human heart. Secret, because the truths of Providence often go unrecognized. Although they are always in the heart, one must become aware of them through a combination of introspection and finding points of agreement with others:

since in all other opinions you must eyther believe the truths written in your own heart, or the relations of others, you will have enough to do to find which others. Neither must you follow him who persuades you first or him who doth threaten you most, but him who teaches you best. Neither can you believe him again, unlesse hee comes to some principle agreed of universally and therefore your owne heart.⁶⁴

Edward Herbert believes that God has providentially implanted certain important truths in every human heart. His epistemological mission is to find these universal principles and truths, but they cannot be found through threats. Instead, everyone

⁶³ Edward Herbert to Sir. Robert Harley 17 July 1619. Bodleian Library, MS Add. 70,001.

⁶⁴ Edward Herbert to Sir. Robert Harley 17 July 1619. Bodleian Library, MS Add. 70,001.

must test what people teach against his or her own reason, determining whether or not to agree.

But if the human heart always carries these truths, then why are they not universally recognized? His answer to this question is that most people have been wrongly taught, especially in matters of faith. As he assures Harley, “I scarce know any Relligion as it is comonly taught which hath not some error, and some Ignorance, nor will I give worse names, least I should bee thought to presume.”⁶⁵ In the letters to Harley he derides Jesuits, Puritans, and “Turks” with equal vehemence.

So the question becomes: how to separate what God has providentially placed in human hearts from the incorrect teachings of particular churches? This is the question Edward Herbert takes up at length in *De Veritate*, in which he tries to develop a method for distinguishing truths from errors and ignorance.

B. Rejection of Received Authority in De Veritate: “I side with no party”

Edward Herbert presents *De Veritate* as an independent inquiry into the nature of truth and the method of finding it. In order to establish his independence, he makes a show of rejecting all received opinion and authority. As he writes in his “Preface: to the Candid Reader,” “I desire the reader to know that my philosophical reflections are free of authority, that I side with no party, but seek the truth without gain.”⁶⁶ In this section, I will show why he thinks he cannot rely on any “party” or “authority” other than his own reflections.

⁶⁵ Edward Herbert to Sir. Robert Harley 17 July 1619. Bodleian Library, MS Add. 70,001.

⁶⁶ *De Veritate*, 73.

He has several reasons for rejecting traditional authorities. First, he believes that reliance on traditional authorities has inhibited the search for truth. He sets up a stark conflict between the authority of traditions on the one hand and the unencumbered mind on the other: “The conclusions arrived at in former ages have now come to weigh so heavily upon our own reflections, that there is scarcely anyone in the world who is content to pursue an independent path in the search for truth; everyone submits himself to some alien Church or School; thereby wholly renouncing his own powers.”⁶⁷ The “former ages” can only “weigh” him down, demanding submission where he should exercise his own intellectual “powers.” Second, these authorities disagree with each other about everything, including salvation and damnation: “Now this party, now that, loudly proclaims the truth of its own doctrines, and calls the rest plagiarists, liars, and impostors. The opposing school contests its case with equal heat,” and the consequence of their disagreement is that he finds himself under threat of “nothing less than the prospect, whichever way I may turn, of everlasting damnation.”⁶⁸ Because these authorities all disagree with each other, he can trust none of them, and therefore must investigate questions of salvation and damnation himself. In these passages Herbert sets out a grand project, in which he must sweep away all that came before him and strike out in his own hitherto unexplored direction.

Before proceeding to Edward Herbert’s “own ideas of truth,” it is important to see whose ideas he rejected. He rejects the traditional thought of both “church” and “school.” By churches he means various confessions (Roman Catholic, Calvinist,

⁶⁷ *De Veritate*, 75.

⁶⁸ *De Veritate*, 77.

etc.) and by schools he means various traditions of scholarly thought that made up most of late Renaissance natural philosophy (the skeptics, Aristotelians, and Platonists). He openly opposes the intellectual schools he encountered in France. Namely, he seems to reject both skepticism and intellectual hubris: "...There has always existed at every period an incongruous and perverse class of professors who expounded with equal zeal and confidence both these doctrines at the same time; that we can know everything, and that we can know nothing."⁶⁹ He accuses the skeptics of setting up "a hundred idle paradoxes" (we know nothing but that we know nothing), all in the hope of appearing wise instead of actually pursuing truth. He is equally dismissive of those who think they can know everything if only they apply the right principles of thought. These schools each spawned more and more sects, each disagreeing with all the others, and so, according to Herbert, the very possibility of truth fell into doubt. There is, however, a difference between his rejection of skepticism and his rejection of those who say "we can know everything." Namely, he himself thinks we "can know everything" (or at least everything important); the difference is that he, Herbert, believes he can establish our knowledge on firm ground, while they have all, in his estimation, failed.

Rejecting skepticism and other avenues to certainty, and especially their academic practitioners (those "perverse professors"), he seems to sidestep "the truths of faith," as he promised he would. Indirectly, however, he pursues his disagreements with the churches of his day frequently, though seldom if ever disputing a doctrine by name. But his rejection of "alien [churches]" is of equal importance to his overall project of establishing truth by his own powers, and once again his primary concern

⁶⁹ *De Veritate*, 76.

is soteriological. He implicitly rejects the doctrine of predestination, for instance: “eternal justice . . . rewards everyone according to his works.”⁷⁰ He also echoes the “dangerous opinion” he confided to Robert Harley: “Accordingly, the Reader must not allow the ignorance of writers nor some authoritative pretensions to lead him to imagine that God has ever refused or can ever refuse at any time to provide for us mortals what is essential for this life and for life eternal. Let us trust Divine Providence above any tradition.”⁷¹ By the end of *De Veritate*, however, he grows bolder and openly criticizes both the Reformed and Roman Catholic churches. He rejects several “theories based on implicit faith,” including “that human reason must be discarded, to make room for Faith; that the Church, which is infallible, has the right to prescribe the method of divine worship, and in consequence must be obeyed in every detail”⁷² Whether or not these are fair estimations of Reformed theology or the power of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, his targets are unmistakable. The problem with the authority of the churches, he thinks, is that anyone submitting to their authority might be adopting false beliefs: “Now these arguments and many other similar ones, according to differences of age and country, may be equally used to establish a false religion as to support a true one.”⁷³ As in his letter to Harley, he insists that all religions, as they are usually taught, will contain errors.

Because he believes no church or school can lead him to certain truth (and with it certainty of salvation), Herbert rejects them all and instead promises to pursue truth alone according to his own independent, intellectual powers. He describes the

⁷⁰ *De Veritate*, 123.

⁷¹ *De Veritate* 119.

⁷² *De Veritate*, 289.

⁷³ *De Veritate*, 289.

first step of this pursuit as a metaphorical divestiture: “Those who enter the shrine of truth must leave their trinkets, in other words their opinions, at the entrance, or, one might say, in the cloakroom.”⁷⁴ In his references to “trinkets” and “cloakrooms,” he evokes all of his enemies at once: the vestments of the priests and the academic gowns of the schoolmen. That these two figures were often the same person (the scholar priest) only makes them doubly objectionable. Unencumbered by trinket or robe, divested of all intellectual clothing, he declares he will “measure, therefore, the entire race by myself.”⁷⁵ In his attempt to establish truth beyond a possible doubt, and on no authority other than his own reason, he attempts a dogmatic response to the epistemological crisis of his day.⁷⁶

C. What did it mean to pursue truth “by himself?” The common notions

Edward Herbert’s declaration that he can measure “the entire race by myself” may sound like the hubris he had decried in his introductory remarks. Although Edward’s opinion of himself was indeed good, he does not mean to say that he himself possesses any special epistemological insight; on the contrary, he believes that anyone who divests him or herself of school and church authorities will reach the same truths as he does. He calls these universal truths “common notions,” and in *De Veritate* he aims to explain what they are and why everyone will assent to them. As a caveat, it must be said that his claim to leave all “cloaks and trinkets” at the door is dubious. His epistemology, no less than his poetry, rests on his idiosyncratic reading

⁷⁴ *De Veritate*, 72.

⁷⁵ *De Veritate*, 78.

⁷⁶ Popkin, 131-2. For Popkin’s complete discussion of Edward Herbert, see pages 128-136.

of ancient philosophy.⁷⁷ But in his efforts to measure truth by himself, he explores not the order of the spheres (as was common in Renaissance natural philosophy), but the inherent characteristics of the human body and mind.

The goal of Edward Herbert's epistemology is to discover what he calls "common notions." The hallmark of a "common notion" is that everyone believes it: "I accept, then, whatever is universally asserted as the truth, for what is universal cannot occur without the influence of the Universal Providence which disposes the movements of events."⁷⁸ He holds up universal agreement as his criterion of truth: the measure by which he could distinguish the indubitable from the merely possible, probable, or false. He admits that lunatics and other abnormal intellects may deny these truths, but he insists that there are truths known to every "normal person." If he can enumerate and defend these common notions, he will have solved the epistemological crisis of his day. Competing churches and schools will no longer cast all knowledge into doubt, because after divesting themselves of traditional authorities, people will find that they agree with one another on a few basic truths. Edward Herbert begins *De Veritate* by defining truth and the conditions for knowing it, developing a method for finding and cataloguing these "common notions." The deeper purpose of the book, in evidence from the beginning but increasingly clear as it progresses, is to find common notions about religion, and especially salvation.

⁷⁷ Although Herbert breaks with the tradition of citing ancient thinkers as authorities, his epistemology shows traces of their influence everywhere. Eugene Hill thinks his epistemology relies on Neoplatonism and occult hermeticism (Hill, 32). R.D. Bedford also connects Herbert's ideas about "natural instinct" (about which more below) with Platonism but then also notes its resonances with ancient Stoicism (Bedford, 70-81). And for all his broadsides against scholasticism, he relies on Aristotle's categories (Butler, 127). Like his poetry, then, Herbert's epistemology synthesizes (or muddles) many strands of ancient thought.

⁷⁸ *De Veritate*, 77.

So why does Herbert think everyone will assent to certain beliefs? As his reference to “Universal Providence” above suggests, he thinks that God has given the common notions to all humanity. Rather than needing to be taught by school or church, these common notions are implanted in everyone: “I hold, therefore, that this universal consent is the teaching of Natural Instinct and is essentially due to Divine Providence.”⁷⁹ Although he identifies four classes of knowledge (which include the senses and logical or discursive thought), natural instinct is by far the most important to his system. Natural instinct is important to him because by such intuitions we know the common notions—without any need for a school or church to teach us. Natural instinct offers a direct line to universal, Providentially-granted truths.⁸⁰ Humanity has many such instincts, some of which touch on physical processes like cause and effect, a sense for how to preserve oneself and the species (eating and mating, say).⁸¹ But he also thinks we have instinctual knowledge of common notions of more abstract ideals like goodness and beauty.⁸² More importantly, just as people have an instinct for bodily preservation, they also have an instinct for the preservation of their souls: “Accordingly I hold that the faculty which seeks Eternal Blessedness, since it is found in all men, cannot be given in vain, but can be brought into conformity by the means and conditions appropriate to it—that is to say, of course,

⁷⁹ *De Veritate*, 117. See also 77: “I derive then the theory of Natural Instinct from Universal Consent, and I conclude that it ought to be completely trusted even when no reason for following it can be perceived.”

⁸⁰ On the critical importance of instinct in Herbert’s epistemology see Bedford (73) and Hill (28-9).

⁸¹ Butler, 153.

⁸² *De Veritate*, 122.

by true Religion.”⁸³ As always, his epistemology has his universalist soteriology in view (the search for “Eternal Blessedness”).

Although people possess these instincts by Providential design, they are not necessarily conscious of them. People come to know the common notions through what Edward Herbert terms “faculties.” By faculties he means much more than the traditional five senses. In fact, every object of perception or thought (in order to be perceivable or thinkable) must have a faculty correspond to it: “By faculty I mean every inner power which develops the different forms of apprehension in their relation to the different forms of objects.”⁸⁴ These faculties can be sensory or intellectual (he often terms them “outer” and “inner” respectively), but they all work by creating conformity between the intellect and its object. When the object and faculty match, the observer can be said to know the truth about the object. In the words of R.D. Bedford, “a successful relationship with an object, in which the appropriate faculty is directed towards its proper object, according to fitting conditions, is truth.”⁸⁵ Crucially, these sensory and intellectual faculties are the same in everyone, establishing regularity in our sensory perceptions and thoughts. So for example: “Since the Common Notion of a rose coincides in man’s experience, all men will agree with me that objects which affect the whole of the faculties in the same manner produce the same results . . . the same faculties have been imprinted on the soul of every normal person in all ages.”⁸⁶ Just as a rose smells the same to a human nose now as it did in antiquity, so too will the “common notions” strike

⁸³ *De Veritate*, 78.

⁸⁴ *De Veritate*, 108.

⁸⁵ Bedford, 52. See also Hill, 27; and Butler 149.

⁸⁶ *De Veritate*, 78-9.

everyone's intellectual faculties in the same way (with the exception, he hastens to add, of the insane). So everyone endowed with normal faculties will, for example, desire eternal blessedness.

On the whole, Edward Herbert's epistemology has convinced few, either in his day or recently.⁸⁷ He sent it to luminaries such as Pierre Gassendi and René Descartes, both of whom delivered devastating rejoinders. Both pointed out, for instance, that not everyone agreed on what Edward Herbert called "common notions"; there was in fact general disagreement on exactly the issues he claimed to be most certain about, and therefore universal agreement could not be a criterion of truth, because there was no such thing as universal agreement in the first place. Gassendi, the skeptic, pointed out that Edward Herbert assumed that things as they appeared to him, either to his senses or his mind, were things as they really were, and so begged the skeptic's question.⁸⁸ Descartes, the rational dogmatist, objected on the grounds that in order to test a criterion, definition, or method for finding truth one would already have to know what was true, and therefore wouldn't need the definition, method, or criterion (hence Descartes started by finding *a* truth – *cogito ergo sum* – and then used it to test and measure other ideas).⁸⁹ Edward Herbert's

⁸⁷ *De Veritate* did have admirers, including a Dutchman by the name Ludovicus, who sent Herbert fan mail. Along with an enthusiastic letter, he included a pencil drawing of Herbert, his competitors, and a bare-chested Lady Truth. In the picture a bank of clouds on one side of Lady Truth obscures her from a group of men (some in monkish garb) while on the other side Herbert (dressed in a cape and high boots with a sword on his belt and a copy of *De Veritate* in one hand), reaches up to her to receive a ring. "Bene scriptisti de me Herberte," she says ("Well written of me, Herbert"). The picture resides in the National Library of Wales (NLW Archives and Manuscripts, E2/1/2).

⁸⁸ For Gassendi's objections see his letter to Herbert see his *Opera Omnia*, vol. 3 (Lyon: Sumptibus L. Anisson et J.-B. Devenet, 1658), 411. He also wrote a more critical letter to their mutual acquaintance Marin Mersenne. See the *Correspondence du P. Marin Mersenne*, pub Mme. Paul Tannery, ed. Cornelis De Waard, with collaboration of Rene Pintard, vol. 4 (Paris: Presses Universities, 1955), 336.

⁸⁹ Descartes' objections to *De Veritate* can be found in two 1639 letters to Mersenne. They are collected in *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, trans. and ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 65-7 and 68.

epistemology has fared no better in recent years. In Popkin's estimation Edward Herbert "failed to come to grips with the fundamental problem at issue."⁹⁰ And even a sympathetic reader like Bedford avers that "His contribution is by any standards a brave one—even if its bravery, like the author's dueling propensity, may be several parts rashness and its actual achievement in meeting the skeptics, like the much-vaunted duels, more and more doubtful."⁹¹ The best that can be said for the epistemology in *De Veritate* is that it anticipates the Kantian project of investigating the anthropological conditions for the appearance of truth, rather than establishing truth as he sets out to do.⁹²

D. Five Common Notions: "The Common Notions of which the true Catholic or universal church is built"

For my purposes, however, the soundness of Edward Herbert's epistemology is less important than its intention: a soteriology apart from any school or church. The result of his attempt were the five "common notions concerning religion," a common denominator beneath all faiths. The idea of "natural religion" was older than Herbert, of course, but he was unique in claiming to have found a universal, natural religion sufficient for salvation.⁹³ The tenets of his faith were: 1) there is a supreme God, 2) this God should be worshipped, 3) the best worship is virtue, 4) one ought to repent of vice, and 5) rewards and punishments will follow this life. These common notions

⁹⁰ Popkin, 133.

⁹¹ Bedford, 50.

⁹² See for instance Hill, 29.

⁹³ My fourth chapter will be on Herbert's place in the history of "natural religion."

of religion were arguably the impetus for the whole book.⁹⁴ Taken together, these five propositions comprise the articles of faith that all may discover and follow, and thereby achieve “eternal Blessedness.” In keeping with his overarching goal of establishing epistemology and soteriology outside of any church or school, Edward Herbert will endeavor to show that although a wide range of religions include these notions, one need not affirm any particular religion in order to hold and live according to them.

The common notions of religion, like all other common notions, are and always have been acceptable to all people: “The system of Notions ... has been clearly accepted at all times by every normal person ... [They are the] true Catholic Church, which has never erred, nor ever will err and in which alone the glory of Divine Universal Providence is displayed.”⁹⁵ The universality and eternity of these notions are vital for Herbert’s soteriology, because if the common notions of religion have been the same everywhere and “at all times,” then Providence has indeed given everyone the means to achieve eternal blessedness. Different churches may include these beliefs, more or less imperfectly; in fact, he suggests, one ought to judge churches according to how well they express the common notions: “I value these [common notions] so highly that I would say that the book, religion, and prophet which adheres most closely to them is the best.”⁹⁶

As he did earlier in *De Veritate*, Herbert aims to remove the mediating institutions and doctrines of church and school, thereby creating a direct relationship

⁹⁴ See Bedford, 131. Or Butler, who says that *De Veritate* “is an eirenic religious treatise as much, if not more, than it is an epistemological work” (173).

⁹⁵ *De Veritate*, 291.

⁹⁶ *De Veritate*, 291.

between the individual and God: “The supreme Judge requires every individual to render an account of his actions in the light not of another’s belief, but of his own. So we must establish the fundamental principles of religion by means of universal wisdom...”⁹⁷ As with natural instinct, “the individual” and “universal wisdom” about religion fit perfectly together, so he can and should know the “fundamental principles of religion” on his own, render his own account of them independent of any church or school. And as the judicial language suggests, having the right account of these principles is the key to eternal blessedness. The common notions of religion, then, are the means to salvation he hinted at in his letters to Harley.

The first of these common notions of religion is that “There is a Supreme God.” Every religion, Herbert claims, has some god and even if a religion has many gods, each has a supreme God. He cites examples from antiquity and from around the world: the Egyptians, Romans, Greeks, Jews, and “Indians” of the west and east, all worship a God or gods, and “accordingly that which is everywhere accepted as the supreme manifestation of deity, by whatever name it may be called, I term God.”⁹⁸ Although he does not say so explicitly, his implication is that none of the above religions, from the Egyptians to the West Indies, has the one and only proper name for God. It is possible to know the supreme God in any of these languages, or to know God outside their churches. When it comes to naming God, no religion anywhere or at any time is in a better epistemic position than any other. He goes on to enumerate the qualities of the supreme God, agreed upon by all: blessed, the cause and end of all things, eternal, good, just, infinite, omnipotent, and free.

⁹⁷ *De Veritate*, 290.

⁹⁸ *De Veritate*, 290.

Yet even though the Supreme God may be known and worshipped outside the confines of churches and schools, Herbert declares in his second common notion of religion that “This Sovereign Deity ought to be worshipped.” He finds worship, like belief in a God or gods, across all of humanity: “Hence divine religion—and no race, however savage, has existed without some expression of it—is found established among all nations.”⁹⁹ He admits that some men style themselves atheists, but says they do so either because they rightly reject most religions’ ridiculous ideas about the supreme God, or they have abnormal minds. The great majority of humanity, on the other hand, expresses its inborn desire to worship, and receive benefits in return, through supplications, sacrifices, and prayers; and it builds temples and shrines for just this purpose. But although one might worship the supreme God through an existing ritual, Herbert denies that any ritual is necessary for proper worship: “the same religious faculties which anyone can experience in himself exist in every normal human being, though they appear in different forms and may be expressed without any external ceremony or ritual.”¹⁰⁰ The “religious faculties” are universal, because these belong to every human being by birth. The particular rites, rituals, songs, or vestments of churches and schools are, at best, superfluous. As in his discussion of the first common notion, he tries to obviate the need for an intercessory church or learned school by drawing a straight line between God and the natural faculties of every human being.

For his third common notion, Herbert argues that the supreme God requires worship in the form of virtue. His list of godly virtues includes gratitude, piety, love,

⁹⁹ *De Veritate*, 294.

¹⁰⁰ *De Veritate*, 295.

hope, and joy. John Butler finds the influence of Stoicism especially clear in Herbert's moral thought.¹⁰¹ Not the Stoicism of *apatheia* but the sense of being in tune with Nature, defined as an inherent sense for the logic or *logos* of the cosmos. As usual, Herbert is drawing not only on Stoicism but also on Neoplatonism and its emphasis on knowing and following the good. As with the other common notions, he thinks that people possess the means to pursue the good by instinct: "I would say that children recognize and seek God in their own way in the form of happiness, and acknowledge Him in the spontaneous gratitude which they accord their benefactors."¹⁰² Pursuing the good by a virtuous life is what he thinks leads us to eternal blessedness: "Since Nature unceasingly labours to deliver the soul from its physical burden, so Nature itself instills men with its secret conviction that virtue constitutes the most effective means by which our mind may be gradually separated and released from the body, and enter into its lawful realm."¹⁰³

As the fourth common notion, Herbert offers expiation of sin. He notes that all people, ancient and modern, have devised rituals of repentance. He gives examples of such rituals from the Ancient Greeks and Romans, the Egyptians, "Mohammedans" and "Eastern Indians." He gives examples from many times and places in order to prove that the need for repentance is a common notion—held by all people everywhere and at all times. He must insist that it has always and everywhere been possible for people to expiate their sins, because otherwise God would have made people incapable of eternal blessedness: "General agreement among religions, the nature of divine goodness, and above all conscience, tell us that our crimes may

¹⁰¹ Butler, 132.

¹⁰² *De Veritate*, 296.

¹⁰³ *De Veritate*, 297.

be washed away by truth penitence, and that we can be restored to new union with God.”¹⁰⁴ As he told Harley in his letters, he cannot imagine a just God who would make people doomed to eternal damnation. But, once again, none of their rituals is itself necessary for forgiveness; in fact, he calls most of them absurd. Instead, he imagines that people can atone for their sins inwardly, according to the dictates of their own consciences: “For this inner witness condemns wickedness while at the same time it can wipe out the stain of it by genuine repentance, as the inner form of apprehension under proper conditions proves.”¹⁰⁵ Everybody’s “conscience” acts as their inner witness, recording misdeeds and urging their expiation. Instead of requiring a mediating priest, an elaborate ritual, or allegiance to the right philosophical school, people can reunite with God on their own, through an examination of their consciences and expiation of what they find there.

As the final common notion of religion, Herbert declares “There is reward or punishment after life.” All religions, he writes, have their own notions of heaven and hell, whether the Elysian fields of the Greeks or the smoke-filled, infernal regions of Chinese myth. As with the other common notions, he finds the exact beliefs of most people risible, but the underlying commonality of their beliefs convinces him of their truth: “In this sense there is no nation, however barbarous, which has not and will not recognise the existence of punishments and rewards. That reward and punishment exist is, then, a Common notion...”¹⁰⁶ He concludes his discussion of divine reward and punishment by harkening back to things he had already told Harley: “I am convinced that in every religion, and indeed in every individual conscience, either

¹⁰⁴ *De Veritate*, 298.

¹⁰⁵ *De Veritate*, 298.

¹⁰⁶ *De Veritate*, 301.

through Grace or Nature, sufficient means are granted to men to win God's good will."¹⁰⁷ Yes, every religion offers the "means" to "win God's good will," but so does every "individual conscience." Therefore, the "individual conscience," in its search for and recognition of the common notion, can be certain of winning God's favor on its own.

As I have noted several times, Herbert is not as free from the thought of the past as he sometimes declares. Here and there in *De Veritate*, bits of old natural philosophy, whether from Stoicism or Neoplatonism, keep peeping through. It might be best, then, to think of his epistemology less as an effort to find new truths than as an effort to defend old (he thinks the oldest) truths in new ways. Most importantly, however, his "five common notions" of religion are an early version of what came to be known as "natural religion" and even what scholars of religion today call a "substantive" definition of religion, religion defined by its minimal content (rather than its social effects, a functional definition). In my next chapter, I will show how he sought to defend these five common notions by finding them within all historical faiths. By doing so he took a major step in the comparative study of religion—albeit perhaps unintentionally.

¹⁰⁷ *De Veritate*, 302.

Chapter Three: The Sense of Scripture in *The Temple*: Eating, Digesting, and Incorporating the Word

Perhaps surprisingly, George Herbert too, criticizes “religion.” In one of his few surviving prose pieces, a note on a devotional manual by a Spanish priest, he writes that “a man [must] presume not to merit, that is, to oblige God, or justify himself before God, by any acts or exercises of Religion; but that he ought to pray God affectionately and fervently to send him the light of his spirit...”¹ Ritual practice, on its own, does not win God’s favor or make the worshipper holy. The real duties of piety and religion, Herbert goes on to say, are the aforementioned prayer along with fasting and giving alms to the poor. He expresses the same reservations about the “exercise of Religion” in a poem entitled “Sion.” The poem begins with a description of Solomon’s temple, but it turns out that God little values all its beauty: “Yet all this glorie, all this pomp and state / Did not affect thee much, was not thy aim” (lines 7-8). The “pomp” of ceremony in beautiful buildings will not move God to favor the worshipper. Instead, “now thy Architecture meets with sinne; / For all thy frame and fabrick is within” (11-12). In both his note on the Spanish priest and in “Sion,” Herbert moves the exercise of religion from outside to inside, from Solomon’s temple and ritual performance to prayer and fasting “within.”

Why? The key word is “Architecture.” The titular metaphor for *The Temple* comes from 1 Cor. 6:19, in which the apostle asks the Corinthians if they realize that their bodies are supposed to be temples for the Holy Spirit. As Barbara Lewalski has pointed out, Herbert’s poetry “has as its primary subject the whole, lifelong process of

¹ This quote is from Herbert’s “Briefe Notes...” on Juan Valdes. I will discuss it in detail later.

sanctification, presented under the metaphor of building the Temple in the Heart.”²

Sanctification, the growth of holiness, which Herbert calls “perfection,” entails a process of transformation, whereby the human heart becomes a fit dwelling place for God.

In *The Temple*, one way that process of perfection happens is through reading. Reading for Herbert is a “spiritual exercise,” somewhat in the sense of an Ignatian exercise. Louis Martz famously included Herbert in his *Poetry of Meditation*, arguing that Herbert’s poetry includes the intimate speaking between Christ and the soul that is the apex of all meditative spiritual exercise.³ Martz primarily tracks themes from spiritual exercises in Herbert’s poetry, but I will focus on meditation as a form of reading. In particular, Herbert belongs to a long tradition that understands meditative reading (as opposed to contemplative reading) as a kind of mental eating and digestion.

The argument of this chapter is that Herbert’s poetry evinces a physiology of perfection. His habitual reading of scripture creates the temple by expelling sin from the conscience and heart and replacing it with the “word” of God. Herbert conceives of this transformation as a physiological process, by which the ingestion and digestion of scripture remakes him. Many of these poems record this process or, more accurately, dramatize the poet’s attention to his changing heart. As opposed to Edward, who strives to extricate himself from any particular religious doctrine or practice in order to gain a critical perspective on all of them, George Herbert seeks an ever-closer identification with the words of the Bible, incorporating its sentences until they are written on the tablet of his heart.

² Barbara Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Lyric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 25.

³ Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962), 286-7.

This chapter proceeds in four main parts. First, it offers historical background on 17th-century conscience and physiology. Second, it shows that in *The Country Parson* and in other prose writings, Herbert insisted that habitual reading of the Bible was a means to perfection. Third, the poetry of *The Temple* suggests that reading the Bible is a means to a reformed conscience and shows the importance of the senses, especially the senses of taste and smell. The poet smells and consumes the “sweetness” of the Bible and even learns to appreciate its occasional “bitterness.” By incorporating scripture, he remakes his body. Fourth, and finally, the hoped-for result is that the word of God will become written on the poet’s heart, so that the poet (and his poetry) becomes a dwelling place for Christ, the Word of God.

i. Conscience and Physiology in Early Modern England

In order to understand Herbert’s physiology of perfection, one must first understand the relationship between physiology and morality in the 17th century. It is a complicated one. At its center is the heart, which, even more than the brain, was the seat of the affections, will, and, crucially, conscience. Conscience was not, as it is sometimes understood today, only a mental sense of right and wrong. It was also a *physical record* of a person’s past (mis)deeds. (Hence still-common phrases like “I have that *on* my conscience.”) But these deeds were not written in indelible ink. In Early Modern understanding of moral physiology, it was often thought possible to cleanse the conscience and replace the old record with new words—or, in Herbert’s case, the Word. This, too, was a physical process, in which healing substances entered the bloodstream through the senses, especially the senses of taste and smell. Then they purged the records

of misdeeds and could leave new writing (ideally the words of scripture) in place of the old.

According to Norman Fiering, “most of the notions about conscience that were current in the seventeenth century had already been worked out in the Middle Ages.”⁴ To be sure, there were differences in how medieval authorities understood conscience. For instance, Bonaventure and Peter Lombard described conscience as an aspect of the will, whereas Aquinas placed conscience in the intellect.⁵ But from Aquinas to the 17th-century Church of England divine Jeremy Taylor, the conscience was the seat of moral judgment, the process by which a person recognized individual acts as right or wrong according to general principles.⁶ Yet one should not think of conscience as unchangeable. On the contrary, conscience was a *habit* of thought, and so like any other habit, it had to be learned and developed over time. Confronted with a difficult choice, a person had to recollect both general principles and past cases and apply them to the new situation. This new judgment in turn became part of the decision-maker’s conscience and would then inform future decisions. Thus the conscience could be strengthened or weakened, improved or damaged, according to its use over time.⁷

Because conscience had to be learned, it was often associated with memory, especially in the Middle Ages. According to Mary Carruthers, the medieval idea of

⁴ Norman Fiering, *Moral Philosophy at Seventeenth-Century Harvard: A Discipline in Transition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 52.

⁵ Fiering, 53. See also Timothy C. Potts *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 5.

⁶ For Aquinas see the *Summa Theologiae* Ia. Q.79 A.13, and especially his reply to objection 3. For a brief discussion of Jeremy Taylor, see Edmund Leites’ “Casuistry and Character” in *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Edmund Leites (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 124.

⁷ See Abraham Stoll’s *Conscience in Early Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). He writes: “conscience is not a static or complete insight, but specifically knowledge which is in the process of being shared and worked out as an ongoing experience,” 9. See also page 43.

memory was much broader than ours—closer to what we might call “cognition.” It included emotion and imagination, and a medieval monk, far from receiving memories passively, actively collected ideas, thoughts and feelings, building them all into a single cognitive structure. Unsurprisingly, many tried to build holy minds, filling their memories with scripture and prayers: “*You* are God’s temple, the commonplace went, and the inventive work of building its superstructures is entrusted to your memory. This Pauline theme is realized over and over, in literary works, in monastic architecture, and in the decoration of both.”⁸ Armed with the holy precepts of scripture, the monk could then judge the righteousness or wickedness of an action or event according to these memorized maxims. Through a regiment of ritualized reading and memory exercises, the medieval monk could become, in a literal sense, Godly minded, and as their memories became more Godly, they became more holy.⁹ Drawing on Aristotelian psychology, Aquinas and others believed that “the ability of the memory to re-collect and re-present past perceptions is the foundation of all moral training and excellence of judgment.”¹⁰ More exactly, memory was essential for prudence, the virtue of practical wisdom whereby a person matches general principles to individual situations in order to know how to act rightly.¹¹

⁸ Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Quote on page 19. See 2-23 on the active creation of memory and mind.

⁹ Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). For a brief discussion of how memory serves as the foundation of moral judgment, see 9-17.

¹⁰ *The Book of Memory*. This quote is on page 68, but see her whole discussion of memory and moral judgment, pages 60-69.

¹¹ For Aquinas’ discussion of prudence, see *ST* IIa.IIae. Q.47. Especially article 6: in which he says that prudence “applies universal principles to the particular conclusions of practical matters.” Bonaventure, though he thought conscience as more a matter of will than of intellect, also saw it as essential for practical reasoning on moral matters (Potts, 33).

Now, although conscience belonged to the intellect in Aquinas, it was also often thought to be a matter of the heart. The medieval bishop Peter Celle, in his treatise “On Conscience,” referred to conscience as “knowledge of the heart.”¹² But it would be a mistake to distinguish too rigorously between the brain and heart as seats of thought, especially when it comes to understanding the conscience.¹³ In moral physiologies running from Aristotle and Aquinas to the post-Reformation period, the heart and conscience had often been linked, albeit often indirectly. For example, in his discussion of the soul and its passions, the German Reformer Philip Melanchthon drew on Aristotelian and Thomist physiologies to explain how “the passions of the sensitive soul constitute physical movements of the heart that follow upon cognition and initiate other material operations and movements.”¹⁴ A cognitive apprehension of the goodness or badness of an object or act moved the will, which for Melanchthon was “actually synonymous with the heart.”¹⁵ Heart and will were also nearly synonymous in the Puritan writings of William Ames.¹⁶ The point is that before and after the Reformation, one important line of thinking about the conscience made it a matter of the heart, not only of the head.

After the Reformation, however, Protestants were *especially* likely to emphasize the heart as the theater of action in which moral judgments were made.¹⁷ Part of this was

¹² Quoted in the *The Craft of Thought*, 206. Carruthers notes that the word “heart” had an “expanded meaning” in medieval devotional texts, in which it was part of the whole psycho-somatic moral system of memory, mind, and judgment.

¹³ Richard Sugg, *The Smoke of the Soul: Medicine, Physiology and Religion in Early Modern England* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 316-7.

¹⁴ Julie R. Solomon, “You’ve Got to Have Soul: Understanding the Passions in Early Modern Culture,” *Rhetoric and Medicine in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Stephen Pender and Nancy S. Struever (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 208-9.

¹⁵ Daniel M. Gross, “Political Pathology,” *Rhetoric and Medicine in Early Modern Culture*, 134.

¹⁶ Fiering, 61.

¹⁷ Fiering, 52-3.

a Reformation rejection of casuistry, the elaborate art of judging new moral problems in light of old cases.¹⁸ Beneath the rejection of casuistry was a deeper disagreement about humanity's ability to tell the difference between good and evil. Aquinas believed that even after the fall, humanity retained an innate ability to knowing what was good or evil on its own.¹⁹ Luther and Calvin believed that the fall had destroyed humanity's ability to distinguish good and evil without divine aid.²⁰

Consequently, Reformation-era moral thought also placed less emphasis on individual acts and more on the overall orientation of the will. In particular, God would judge the content of each human heart as a whole. Calvin, for instance, declared: "The assent which we give to the divine Word ... is more of the heart than the brain, and more of the affections than the understanding. ... Faith is absolutely inseparable from a devout affection."²¹ Affection and assent, orientations of the will toward God, were ultimately more important than any individual actions. The goal was to bring the human will into complete conformity with the will of God, so that it would judge good and evil according to God's standards. This was the only way to have a perfect conscience, and uniting the human will with God was, for Calvin, vital to the process of moral regeneration.²²

¹⁸ See Edmund Leites' "Casuistry and Character," *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Edmund Leites (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), page 120.

¹⁹ In doing so they reject Aquinas' belief that the fall had not totally corrupted the human intellect. He believed that everyone retained "synderesis," universal principles of natural law. In his view, the conscience held these principles and then applied them, more or less perfectly, to individual cases. For his discussions of synderesis, his *Questions Disputate de Veritate* Q. 16, Articles 1 and 2, especially articles 2, II: "There must be some permanent principle which has unwavering integrity, in reference to which all human works are examined, so that that permanent principle will resist all evil and assent to all good. This is synderesis, whose task is to warn against evil and incline to good."

²⁰ Stoll, 32. For a brief discussion of how Luther and Calvin both reject Aquinas' view of synderesis, see John S. Wilks' *The Idea of Conscience in Renaissance Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 1990), 25-27.

²¹ Quoted in William J. Bouwsma's "The Two Facts of Humanism: Stoicism and Augustinianism in Renaissance Thought," *A Useable Past: Essays in European Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

²² John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.iii. 6-7.

While people could not rely on their own consciences to distinguish good and evil, they were not entirely without help. God's will was available, if not clearly discernible, in the words of scripture. Therefore, those who wanted to reform their consciences should first and foremost consult the Bible (rather than, say, a human confessor). John Wilks sums up the broad Reformation consensus as follows: "Now the primary source of man's knowledge of the Law is the divine will in so far as it is revealed in the Decalogue and the Gospels, and it is by the informing precepts of the Scriptures that man's conscience must struggle to confirm itself, and even then the effort can only be made as an imputative effect of divine grace."²³

This move—the rejection of natural law and the overwhelming emphasis on the Bible—had implications for conscience, how it was understood and what its importance was in late 16th and early 17th-century England. During this time, English Protestantism saw a surge of interest in the conscience, evident in books like John Woolton's *Of the Conscience* (1574), Alexander Hume's *Ane [sic] Treatment of Conscience* (1594) and William Perkins' *A Discourse on Conscience* (1606). In these books, the conscience was still a faculty that both recorded (mis)deeds and judged them right or wrong, meaning that they mostly kept the old scholastic Aristotelian/Thomistic psychology.²⁴ But their underlying theology was decidedly Reformed, especially in their rejection of humanity's natural ability to tell right from wrong and their emphasis on scripture as the only sure guide for conscience. In the words of William Perkins, a leader of the Puritan movement

²³ Wilks, 29. See also page 3: for Calvinists, the conscience was "like reason in being debilitated to the extent that it could only resist the rioting passions and inveterate wickedness that are the consequences of the fall, through the regenerative effects of faith and obedience to God's work in the scriptures."

²⁴ For the residue of scholastic psychology in the English casuists, see Stoll, 22. Stoll also argues that Richard Hooker also an English divine, was closer to Aquinas than Calvin (Stoll, 5). For more on how Hooker's attempt to give both scripture and nature a place in conscience-based moral reasoning, see Wilks, 14.

within the English church, “without direction of God’s word, conscience can give no good direction.”²⁵ In his writing on conscience Perkins described regeneration as the Holy Spirit’s “imprinting” and “inlightening” the conscience. Once the Holy Spirit had “imprinted” itself on the human conscience, this regenerated conscience then served as “the controller to see all thinges kept in order in the heart, which is the temple and habitation of the Holy Ghost.”²⁶ The goal was to create in the heart-based conscience a “temple” for the “Holy Ghost,” meaning that the regenerated conscience was godly rather than merely human.

This view was not limited to the Puritans. The creation of a godly conscience, according to the Cambridge Platonist Benjamin Whichcote was in fact the only way in which a human being could truly resemble God, because the divine attributes of omniscience and infinity were obviously beyond us. The perfection of the conscience was, therefore, a matter of great religious concern: “in his moral perfections we may, and ought; and ’tis religion in us to imitate God in his moral perfections.”²⁷

ia. Medicine in Early Modern England

But how could one imitate God’s moral perfections? How could the words of the Bible make their way into a person’s heart? Recall that conscience, as we have been discussing it, is psychosomatic. That is, conscience is not purely intellectual but located in one’s physical memory and heart. This meant that it was susceptible to physical

²⁵ William Perkins 1558-1602, *English Puritanist: His Pioneer Works on Casuistry*, ed. with an introduction by Thomas F. Merrill (Nieuwkoop: Nieuwkoop B. De Graaf, 1966), 42.

²⁶ Quoted in Fiering, 58. See Fiering’s whole discussion of Puritanism, conscience, and the heart on pages 55-62.

²⁷ Quoted in Leites, 123-4.

influences. One answer to the question of “how can words enter the heart?” might be found, perhaps surprisingly, in 16th-century theories of human physiology.

As is so often the case in 17th-century thought, physiology drew on and synthesized several ancient strands of thought. In the case of physiology, the primary sources were Aristotle and Galen.²⁸ These two authorities, though sometimes in tension, offered ideas about how bodies changed, becoming sick or healthy according to what they ate.

The Greek physician Galen enjoyed a new vogue in 16th-century Europe, after his complete works were published in Italy in 1525.²⁹ In his general theory of the humors, everyone had four: black bile, yellow or red bile, blood, and phlegm. These four humors circulated through the body, and one’s health depended on keeping them in equilibrium. Striking a healthy equilibrium was possible through a correct diet, but this was easier said than done because each body had its own peculiar balance of humors and therefore required its own special diet. According to Kaara L. Peterson, “Peoples’ bodies tended naturally to have one or more humors in excess—a disposition tipped by many variables, especially the intake of food.”³⁰ Once digested through the stomach, food entered the bloodstream, thereby influencing the whole body. In fact, in Galen’s account of digestion, one really was what one ate: food was digested through the stomach, but then affected the rest of the major organs, including the liver, brain, and heart.³¹ So the right or wrong diet

²⁸ Sugg, 12. See also Solomon, 208-9 for how Melanchthon drew on both Galen and Aristotle/Thomistic physiologies and 214 for the early modern “synthesis” of Galen and Aristotle in the field of medicine.

²⁹ David Gentilcore, *Food and Health in Early Modern Europe: Diet, Medicine, and Society, 1450-1800*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 12.

³⁰ Kaara L. Peterson, “Re-Anatomizing Melancholy: Burton and the Logic of Humoralism,” in *Textual Healing* ed. Elizabeth Land Furdell (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 140.

³¹ Andrew Wear, *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine, 1550 - 1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 171.

affected not only the diner's physical state, but his or her mental state as well:

“Throughout the Early Modern period there existed a strong tendency to link afflictions of mind with bodily disturbances such as a perceived humoral imbalance or indigestion. Thus the body moved mind as easily as the mind affected the flesh.”³² Michael Schoenfeldt has argued that in Early Modern England, ethics and eating went hand in hand. Following Galen's physiology, in which food influenced the bodily humors and therefore the diner's disposition, poets and divines treated eating as “very literal acts of self-fashioning.”³³ There was no clear line, then, between a bodily illness and a spiritual affliction.

Many in 17th-century England got their knowledge of Galen not directly through his writings but through a Galen-inspired treatise on health: Luigi Cornaro's *Treatise of Temperance and Sobriety*.³⁴ The translator of this text was a little-known country priest, who had once lectured on the classics at Cambridge and served as the university's official orator: George Herbert.

It is impossible, of course, to know how much of the treatise Herbert agreed with, but it includes discussions of how the right diet could moderate emotions and behavior, proving that Herbert was well aware that one's diet might have moral consequences. In the treatise, Cornaro describes how he chose an appropriate diet for his stomach and, by carefully regulating his meat and wine, he overcame his naturally frail constitution and lived to a great age. Regulating food and drink was a matter of

³² Mary Lindemann, *Medicine and Society in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 44.

³³ Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For Schoenfeldt's general discussion of Galen's physiology, see 2-18. Schoenfeldt understandably focuses his discussion of Herbert's diet on the Eucharist (see especially 96-100 and 129-30).

³⁴ Wear, 175.

temperance, striking a balance between too little and too much of either. “Temperance preserves even old men and sickly men sound: But Intemperance destroyes most healthy and flourishing constitutions,” Cornaro warns his reader. “The faults of Nature are often amended by Art, as barren grounds are made fruitfull by good husbandry.”³⁵ Note that the “Art” of eating properly can amend and preserve a faulty “Nature.” In fact, one’s diet seems able to create a second nature. With time and practice, he writes, “Custome [is] turned into Nature.”³⁶ Over time, a habitual diet not only regulates the body as it is but also transforms it, becoming “Nature” through incorporation. Furthermore, a temperate diet regulates more than the body. It also gives one control over the mind. Divine Providence itself, writes Cornaro, has led him to a temperate diet, so that “I might know what great power a sober and temperate life hath over our bodies and mindes.”³⁷ Melancholy, anger, hatred, or any other passion—none can greatly perturb a man with the right diet. The right diet can even lead to joy. The important point is that diet has a psychosomatic effect, connecting and influencing the mind and body.

Cornaro may occasionally mention providence, but he mostly emphasizes the practical rather than theological implications of a temperate diet. But houses for members of religious orders had long regulated the diets of their members, offering mostly vegetarian fare and little wine. This diet was thought to encourage temperate behavior and discourage sexual appetites. In 17th-century England, too, one’s health had moral and religious implications. For instance, the responsibility for curing sickness fell not only to doctors, but also to priests. According to Andrew Wear, “The Latin *salus* came to mean

³⁵ Herbert’s translation of “A Treatise of Temperance and Sobrietie” may be found in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010). This quote appears on page 292.

³⁶ “A Treatise of Temperance and Sobrietie,” 295.

³⁷ “A Treatise of Temperance and Sobrietie,” 294.

salvation, but salvation also meant health.”³⁸ Likewise, although she cautions that “the idea that individual sin caused illness was not as common as one might suppose,” Mary Lindemann also stresses that “Christian thought and practice affiliated saving souls and healing bodies.”³⁹ Clergy often practiced spiritual and physical medicine, both salving the conscience with words of comfort, providing rudimentary medical care with herbs and other plants, and prescribing prayer and repentance.⁴⁰

Curing the soul was a surprising physical task. Prayers, no less than plants, were to be ingested. Furthermore, as Mary Carruthers has pointed out, for medieval monks, “reading is to be digested, to be ruminated, like a cow chewing her cud, or a like a bee making honey from the nectar of flowers.”⁴¹ This idea—reading as an act of eating—survived the English Reformation, appearing again in Thomas Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer*. In his collect for the Sunday nearest November 16th Cranmer prayed: “Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of ever lasting life...”⁴²

In Herbert’s prose and poetry, as we shall see, the ingestion of scripture has the power to change his sinful nature. Michael Schoenfeldt uses Galen and Cornaro to discuss Herbert’s poems on Holy Communion: what it means theologically and how it operates in the poet’s body.⁴³ Schoenfeldt makes no mention of the ingestion of scripture, but the process of eating and digestion are equally relevant to Herbert’s understanding of

³⁸ Wear, 30.

³⁹ Lindemann, 15 and 253.

⁴⁰ Lindemann, 253-6.

⁴¹ Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 164.

⁴² *The Book of Common Prayer*, Year A Proper 28.

⁴³ Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern Europe*, see especially 96-100 and 129-30.

scripture, because Herbert describes scripture and communion in similar ways: namely in terms of eating, drinking, and tasting. And, as we shall see, the food of scripture changes his body: his conscience and, even more importantly, his heart.

ii. “*A Use of Perfection*”: *Scripture and Holiness in Herbert’s Prose*

One of George Herbert’s few surviving prose pieces is a commentary on a book of devotional meditations by Juan de Valdes, the *One Hundred and Ten Considerations*. A 16th-century Spanish priest and humanist, Valdes’ Catholicism made him immediately suspect in James I’s England, as can be seen in the introduction and notes accompanying the translation and publication of his *Considerations* in 1638. In an introductory note, the translator Nicholas Farrer fretted that although the book “containeth many very worthy discourses of experimentall and praticall Divinity” it also contained errors “at which not only the weak reader may stumble, and the curious quarrell, but also the wise and charitable reader may justly blame.”⁴⁴ Not wanting to tamper with the original text (a practice Farrer blamed for corrupting contemporary knowledge about the ancient world), he instead promises the reader a commentary that will “give particular notice of some suspicious places, and of some manifest errors.”⁴⁵

The task of writing the “notice” fell to Farrer’s friend, George Herbert. In the commentary, Herbert voiced special concern with Valdes’ suspicious and possibly erroneous uses of scripture. When Valdes discusses how to inculcate Christian piety, he

⁴⁴ *The Hundred and Ten Considerations of Signior John Valdesso: Treating of Those things where are most profitable, most necessary, and most perfect in our Christian Profession. Written in Spanish, brought out of Italy by Vergerius, and first set forth in Italian at Basic by Caelius Secundus Curio, Anno 1550. Afterward translated into French, and Printed at Lions 1563 and again at Paris 1565. And now translated out of the Italian Copy into English, with notes. Whereunto is added an Epistle of the Authors, or a Precate to his Divine Commentary upon the Romans. Oxford, Printed by Leonard Lichfield, Printer to the University, Ann. Dom. 1638. Page 2.*

⁴⁵ *The Hundred and Ten Considerations*, 3.

recommends images for the unlearned and the Bible for those who can read. Images and words alike, he writes, are “an Alphabet of Christian Pietie.”⁴⁶ Herbert objects to calling scripture an “alphabet” because the comparison might leave the reader with the impression that scripture is something to learn, master, and eventually outgrow. On the contrary, he replies, “The H. Scriptures (as I wrote before) have not only an Elementary use, but a use of perfection, neither can they ever be exhausted (as Pictures may be by a plenary circumspection) but still even to the most learned and perfect in them, there is somewhat to be learned more.”⁴⁷ Herbert insists that “The H. Scriptures” are inexhaustible. Readers can return to them again and again and each time learn something more.

This process is less a matter of learning about the scriptures themselves and more a matter of personal growth in holiness, using the scriptures as a means to become more perfect. According to Herbert the real action takes place not in the Bible but in the heart of the reader: “Indeed he that shall so attend to the bark of the letter, as to neglect the Consideration of Gods Worke in his heart through the Word, doth amisse; both are to be done, the Scriptures still used, and Gods worke within us still observed, who workes by his Word, and ever in the reading of it.”⁴⁸ In a single sentence, Herbert sets up a complicated relationship between the reader and the text. The letters on the pages are a kind of bark, which in turn contains the “Word,” the spirit of God dwelling in the text. During reading, “the Word” then enters their hearts of readers and “works” on them. This

⁴⁶ Excerpts of Valdes’ meditations and Herbert’s notes on them are found in “Briefe Notes relating to the dubious and offensive places in the following *Considerations*,” *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941). This quote is found on page 309.

⁴⁷ “Briefe Notes relating to the dubious and offensive places in the following *Considerations*.” Herbert makes the same point (“as I wrote before”) on page 306.

⁴⁸ “Briefe Notes relating to the dubious and offensive places in the following *Considerations*,” 309-10.

process is important because it can lead toward “perfection,” which is Herbert’s preferred word for sanctification.

Herbert’s description of perfection as a slow process, taking place in the heart, matches the overall Reformed orientation of the early 17th-century English church. To be sure, it would be anachronistic to distinguish too rigorously between confessional identities in the 17th century, when these identities were still settling into place.⁴⁹ Still, the theology of the Reformation permeated the English church in the early 17th century.⁵⁰ Herbert’s language overlaps in key ways with classic Reformation-era formulations. Calvin’s discussion of sanctification, for instance, also defines it as the slow erection of a temple: “And indeed, this restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the Flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples renewing all their minds to true purity...”⁵¹ Sanctification restores the divine image, renews the believer and, following the Pauline metaphor (as in Herbert), builds a human temple.

There might seem to be a discontinuity between Calvin, who refers to a renewal of the mind, and Herbert, who places the work of God in his heart, but, as I discussed above, in Renaissance-era devotional texts, the “heart” has an expanded meaning,

⁴⁹ See for example Thomas Betteridge’s note of caution in his article on “Vernacular Theology,” which can be found in *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, ed. Brian Cummings and James Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). See especially page 190. For a classic statement on how fluid confessional identity was in England during this time, see also Heinz Schilling’s *Religion, Political Culture, and the Emergence of Early Modern Society* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992).

⁵⁰ Gene Edward Veith, Jr. *Reformed Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1985), 11-16.

⁵¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.3.9.

whereby it can stand in for the whole self: heart, mind, and soul.⁵² Remaking the heart, then, is remaking a whole spiritual identity: heart and mind, intellect and will.

Although Herbert insists that scripture works in the heart of the reader (meaning that God, not the reader, is the true agent of sanctification), the reader may also “attend” to it as it does so. The complicated relationship between scripture and reader becomes more comprehensible when Herbert compares reading to the quotidian acts of eating and drinking. In response to Valdes’ suggestion that one could separate the illumination of scripture (a “candle”) from the greater illumination of the holy spirit (the “Sunbeames”), Herbert reaches for a different set of images: “The Authour doth still discover too slight a regard of the Scripture, as if it were but childrens meat, whereas there is not onely milke there, *but strong meat also*.” Herbert is referring to another verse in 1 Cor. 3:2, but tweaking it for his own purpose. Whereas the apostle told the Corinthians that he gave them only “milk, not solid food,” Herbert insists that the Bible contains both milk and meat: sustenance for children and for adults. In context of his notes on Valdes, Herbert is saying that the Bible should be the Christian’s life-long diet (not a dish fit only for children). More importantly, the scripture-is-food metaphor makes the relationship between text and reader clearer: The reader ingests scripture, as if scripture, no less than meat and milk, were necessary for health.

Herbert’s equation of eating and reading scripture goes beyond his notes on Valdes. He makes a similar comparison in chapter IV of *The Country Parson*, “The Parsons Knowledge”:

⁵² Debora Kuller Shuger. *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and Dominant Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 98. Shuger writes that the pneumatic self has “a lack of interest in moral action.” This is so but should not be taken to mean the heart is not the site of moral concern. It is, after all, the seat of the conscience, especially in Herbert’s poetry, as we shall see.

But the chief and top of his knowledge consists in the book of books,
the storehouse and magazene of life and comfort, the holy Scriptures.
There he sucks, and lives. In the Scriptures hee findes four things;
Precepts for life, Doctrines for knowledge, Examples for illustration,
and Promises for comfort: These he hath digested severally.⁵³

In his notes on Valdes, Herbert compared the physical Bible to a “bark,” while here he calls it a “storehouse and magazene.” In both cases, the Bible stores nutrients, which the priest can suck out and, thereby, live. Herbert mentions doctrines, but he places far more emphasis on devotional issues: “precepts” for right conduct, “examples” for emulation, and “promises for comfort” for his often troubled mind. And once again, these promises and examples are not to be read and then forgotten. The parson should “digest” them, transferring them from the storehouse of the book into his body.

The parson can then share his meal with the congregation. This can be done in at least two ways: private comfort and public address. In the chapter on “The Parson Comforting,” Herbert follows the tradition of grouping physical and spiritual afflictions together: “when any of his cure is sick, or afflicted with losse of friend, or estate, or any ways distressed, [the parson] fails not to afford his best comforts...”⁵⁴ Herbert is here advising the parson to know something about medicine. (In his chapter on “The Parson’s Completeness” he recommends that the parson know his healing herbs and other “Method of Phisick.”⁵⁵) But he is also drawing on the conventional overlap between *salus* and salvation. The good parson will offer several cures for spiritual illness, recommending that his parishioner give confession, do “pious charitable works,” and take

⁵³ *A Priest to the Temple, Or, The Country Parson*, chapter iv, *The Complete Works of George Herbert*, ed. Hutchinson, 228.

⁵⁴ *The Country Parson*, chapter xv, 249.

⁵⁵ *The Country Parson*, chapter xxiii, 261.

“the holy Sacrament [communion] ... Sovereigne a Medicine it is to all sin-sick souls.”⁵⁶

And yet the parson’s chief means of comfort is reminding the sin-sick parishioner of God’s promises of salvation: “to this end he hath thoroughly digested all the points of consolation, as having continuall use of them, such as are from Gods generall providence extended even to lillyes; from his particular, to his Church”⁵⁷ As consolation for sickness, the parson offers God’s promises of salvation, having “digested” these promises himself, by reading and ruminating on them as they appear in scripture. So he first reads Luke 12:27, “Consider the lilies, how they grow...” and then offers the fruits of his own reading as comfort to an ailing parishioner.

For his public sermons, he should choose “texts of Devotion, not Controversie, moving and ravishing texts, whereof the Scriptures are full.” This means that the end of the parson’s reading is not theological wrangling (“Controversie”) but affecting the congregation, “moving and ravishing” them with the Biblical text. And in order to give the congregation ravishing words, country parsons must first have been deeply affected themselves, by “dipping, and seasoning all our words and sentences in our hearts, before they come into our mouths, truly affecting, and cordially expressing all that we say; so that the auditors may plainly perceive that every word is hart-deep.”⁵⁸ Note the references to the taste of the Parson’s words: they are to be seasoned and “cordial,” spicy or sweet in a way that will please the hearers’ senses even as it does them good, leaving them a desire to hear more of the holy, healthful, delicious Word.

The upshot is that the scriptures are to be read, but read in a certain way: consumed and digested. In his notes on Valdes and in the *Country Parson*, as we have

⁵⁶ *The Country Parson*, chapter xv, 249-50.

⁵⁷ *The Country Parson*, chapter xv, 249.

⁵⁸ *The Country Parson*, chapter vii, 233.

seen, Herbert describes reading (no less than communion) as a process of eating and digestion. They must be consumed, and consumed regularly, because they can start the slow moral growth of sanctification: a psychosomatic transformation of the reader by which he or she can become the proverbial temple of God.

Still, the exact process by which reading inculcates holiness, the process by which the reader internalizes scripture, remains rather vague in Herbert's occasional prose pieces. Herbert's writing on Valdes and in *The Country Parson* both suggest more than they explain. For a fuller sense of how the poet becomes the temple of God, one must turn to *The Temple* itself.

iii. The Physiology of Perfection in the Temple

A. "Peace pratler": Conscience in The Temple

As we have seen, the conscience was part of a person's body, typically located in the memory or heart.⁵⁹ The conscience served two functions: it was at once a record of (mis)deeds and the seat of prudential judgment, the ability to identify things as good or bad. Both functions are apparent in *The Temple*. It includes one poem titled "The Conscience" and many more poems of moral introspection, in which the poet searches for sins in his breast.

Although only a few of Herbert's poems mention the conscience directly—the poem "Conscience," obviously (discussed at length below), and "The Storm" (which refers to "a throbbing conscience" (9))—*The Temple* is full of a kind of ethical

⁵⁹ As we have also seen, this was not an either/or choice. The heart affected the brain in Early Modern physiology, and vice versa.

introspection that can be best understood as an examination of the conscience. Several poems begin with the poet searching within himself—his mind, breast, or heart—for a record of misdeeds. For instance, “The Method” begins with the exhortation “Poore heart, lament,” because the poet feels, however vaguely, that God has “cool[ed]” to him. Consequently, he must learn why, and in order to do that he must search his “breast”: “Go search this thing, / Tumble thy breast, and turn thy book” (9-10). Herbert uses similar language in “The Church-Porch,” advising his reader to “Dare to look in thy chest; for ’tis thine own: / And tumble up and down what thou find’st there” (147-8). The metaphor of the breast as a book perfectly matches the old idea that the conscience recorded a person’s deeds. Other poems, even if they do not mention the conscience or “breast” by name, also describe moral introspection as rummaging around inside the poet. “Confession” begins with the poet searching through his inner architecture: “...within my heart I made / Closets; and in them many a chest ... yet grief knows all, and enters when he will” (2-3, 5). “Confession” is the painful process of rooting through one’s own secret places, ferreting out “faults and sinnes” to acknowledge (25). In a more light-hearted poem, “Artillerie,” a falling star lands in the poet’s lap and sarcastically tells him “*Do as thou usest, disobey, / Expell good motions from thy breast, / Which have the face of fire, but end in rest*” (5-7). The star is not really recommending that the poet do whatever he likes, rather than obeying God. Instead, he is telling him to listen to the “motion” of his conscience. (The word “motion” refers to a subtle and pre-verbal movement of the conscience, usually a warning ignored.⁶⁰) All of these poems in *The Temple* place the

⁶⁰ For instance see the *Book of Common Prayer*’s collect for the First Sunday in Lent, which prompts the congregation to pray that: “we may ever obey thy godly motions.”

center of Christian moral life within the Christian's conscience, which is in turn in his or her body—heart, memory, or breast.

The first task of the conscience is to record sins. In *The Temple*, the poet who searches his breast for records of misdeeds is sure to find many of them. Several of Herbert's poems describe sin as remembered and stored *in* the sinner. Sin infiltrates the seats of the conscience, the heart and memory, and gets stuck there. In "The Method" the poet looks at the writing in his breast and finds a sad chronicle: "*Yesterday / I did behave me carelessly / When I did pray*" and "*Late when I would have something done, / I had a motion to forbear, / Yet I went on*" (14-16, 22-4, italics in the original). Likewise in "Confession," "faults and sinnes" have taken up residence in the breast and heart (19-26). While in "The Method" and "Confession" sin had crept into the poet's heart or breast, in "The Sinner" sinful action survives by burrowing into the poet's mind: "Lord, how I am all ague, when I seek / What I have treasur'd in my memorie! / ... / I finde there quarries of pil'd vanities, / But shreds of holiness" (1-2, 5-6). Like the heart or breast, the "memorie" is not part of a disembodied mind; on the contrary, once sin has built up on the memory, it affects the whole body, like a virus or infection. The "vanities" of sin do not pass away but build up inside the poet and make him "ague," shivering with a malarial fever. The physical interiority of sin makes it especially difficult to combat. In "Sinne (I)" Herbert describes all the external checks one has against sin—parents, teachers, laws, ministers—who are ultimately helpless against "one cunning bosome-sinne" (14). As in "The Sinner," sin gets inside the poet. Although the sin is here lodged here in the "bosome" rather than memory, its effect is the same. If sin takes up residence in the sinner's "memorie" and "bosome," then it must be met and cured there, too.

Curing these sins means clearing them away, cleansing the conscience through examining it and repenting. In “The Storm” the poet laments over the “crimes” he finds in his “throbbing conscience” (6, 9), and describes his wails and tears as roaring winds and a torrential downpour of rain (1-4). But his recognition of his crimes, his willingness to bring them from the hidden place in his chest out into the open, means that these crimes can be washed away: “Poets have wrong’d poore storms: such dayes are best; / They purge the aire without, within the breast” (17-18). Just as storms blow away stagnant air, inspecting the conscience, and lamenting the sins it has recorded, allows a penitent to wash and blow those sins away, leaving the “breast” clear. Like “The Storm,” “Confession” ends with the image of the clear and open breast:

Onely an open breast
Doth shut them out, so that they cannot enter;
Or, if they enter, cannot rest ...
Smooth open hearts no fastning have; but fiction
Doth give a hold and handle to affliction. (19-21, 23-4)

And concludes:

I challenge here the brightest day,
The clearest diamond: let them do their best,
They shall be thick and cloudie to my breast. (28-30)

In order to clean the conscience, one must open it. When exposed to the figurative elements of wind and rain—penitent tears and sighs—sin loses its “fastning” and is washed off of the conscience. As a result, the poet’s “breast” becomes brighter than the brightest day and clearer than the clearest diamond. As we still say: his conscience is clear.

The word “purge” in “The Storm” is important because it connects the act of repentance in “The Storm” to medicine and digestion. In “The Rose,” Herbert notes that a rose, though sweet, also “purgeth” (18), meaning it clears a blocked digestive tract. (In *The Country Parson* Herbert also recommends “white Roses” as an emetic.⁶¹) Like an emetic rose, writes Herbert, “repentance is a purge” (“The Rose,” 28). So when the poet inquires into the state of his conscience, he finds it soiled (as it were) and cleans his conscience through self-examination and repentance.

Aside from storing the memory of sin, the conscience in Herbert’s poetry is also the seat of prudence, the practical wisdom whereby the poet distinguishes good from bad. In the poem “Conscience,” the poet replies to his conscience, which he figures as a nagging voice:

Peace pratler, do not lowre:
Not a fair look, but thou dost call it foul:
Not a sweet dish, but thou dost call it sowre:
Musick to thee doth howl. (1-4)

Scholars have often read this poem as a rejection of an over-zealous conscience.⁶² In my view, the poet is not so much rejecting his conscience as thinking about how to reform it. The poet calls his conscience a “pratler,” with the implication that it constantly reminds him of his faults. This is indeed what a good conscience should do, but the problem is

⁶¹ *The Country Parson*, chapter xxiii, 261.

⁶² See for example Sidney Gottlieb’s “Herbert’s Case of ‘Conscience’: Public or Private Poem?” *Studies in English Literature*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1985, pp. 109-26. Gottlieb argues that Herbert is rejecting a radical, Puritan conscience as “a danger not only to one’s peace of mind but also to one’s church and society” (113-4). Another critic, Camille Slight, has read it as a rejection of casuistry. See her *The Casuistical Tradition in Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert and Milton* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 198.

that his conscience is failing at its basic task of prudential judgment: it is judging what is good as bad. The poet should be able to enjoy these sensory pleasures—the sight of fair views, the taste of sweet meals, and the sound of music. But the conscience gets everything backwards: what is fair it calls foul, sweet it calls “sowre,” and it can only hear music as howling. Interestingly enough, the conscience here is not judging actions but sensory perceptions (sight, taste, and sound). Here, as in a poem like “Mans Medley” (discussed back in chapter 1), Herbert is not rejecting sensory pleasure but insisting that one must distinguish between the right kind of sweetness (which leads to God) and the wrong kind (which leads to sin). In this poem the conscience is in charge of telling the difference.

It would not be enough, then, to clear the conscience of misdeeds through repentance. As the seat of practical wisdom, prudence, the conscience is tasked with judging individual cases against broader standards. If those standards are themselves mistaken, then poet would not even recognize an act as sinful, ensuring that his conscience would remain soiled by sin, even though he did not know it. The question, then, is how to ensure that one has the right standards of moral judgment. Fortunately, in “Conscience” the poet knows just the thing:

If thou persistest, I will tell thee,
That I have physick to expell thee.

And the receit shall be
My Saviours bloud: when ever at his board
I do but taste it, straight it cleanseth me... (11-14)

In these lines, the digestive process reforms the “conscience.” The poet comes to the “board,” the communion altar, drinks the “bloud” of Christ, and then this blood acts as a medicinal “physik,” a kind of emetic, expelling the prattling voice of the conscience. Herbert, of course, was not alone in thinking the blood of Christ a cure for conscience. The 16th-century divine William Perkins, in his *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* recommended that “the best and more sure Generall Remedie” for an uneasy conscience was to remember the promise of salvation “in and by the blood of Christ.”⁶³ In this poem, Herbert treats this remedy as physical, not only mental or spiritual. The “physik” of Christ’s blood “cleanseth” his sin-sickness away. Yet it doesn’t just flush out the poet’s sins, cleansing his conscience of past misdeeds.⁶⁴ Rather, it will “expel thee,” wash away the poet’s old conscience entirely. And what will take its place? In place of the old conscience, Christ himself will stand guard:

Yet if thou talkest still,
 Besides my physick, know there’s some for thee:
 Some wood and nails to make a staffe or bill
 For those that trouble me:
 The bloudie crosse of my deare Lord
 Is both my physick and my sword. (19-24)

It would be possible to read these lines as a Catholic-Protestant dispute. The poet discards the casuist conscience of Rome in favor of an overwhelming emphasis on justification by the atonement of Christ. But more important, I think, is the idea that Herbert’s “deare

⁶³ William Perkins, *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*, Book I, Chapter VII, Question III, Section II (London: John Legatt, 1635).

⁶⁴ Though it does this, too. It “leaves thee not a word; / No, not a tooth or nail to scratch, / And at my actions carp, or catch” (16-18). The blood of Christ flushes out the sins recorded on the conscience, leaving the poor conscience nothing to complain about!

Lord” Christ is now doing the traditional work of the conscience. Christ stands guard, armed with a sword or “staffe” made of the cross, against the incursions of sin. The goal of “Conscience,” then, is not only to clear the old conscience but also to create a new one. In practical moral reasoning (the virtue of prudence), the goal is to have general rules by which one judges individual cases. Christ’s blood, by casting out the old conscience and taking its traditional place as moral guardian, becomes the poet’s standard of judgment. In effect, the godly conscience replaces the merely human one.

How long might reforming the conscience in this way take? And what means might effect its transformation? In *The Country Parson* chapter on cures, Herbert recommends curing the ailment of sin by three methods: communion, good deeds, and confession. In “The H. Communion,” the elements of communion, bread and wine, must move through the poet’s internal architecture with what seems like agonizing slowness:

But by the way of nourishment and strength
Thou creep’st into my breast;
Making thy way my rest,
And thy small quantities my length;
Which spread their forces into every part,
Meeting sinnes force and art. (7-12)

The sacramental meal circulates through the poet’s breast, cleaning “sinne” as it spreads throughout. It controls the “rebel-flesh,” and expels “sinne and shame” by setting them “affright” (17-18). In the rest of the poem, Herbert sets up an extended architectural metaphor, with the grace that “with these elements comes ... leaping the wall” (14) between flesh and spirit and then working its way through each of the “souls most subtile

rooms” (22). As the communion wine circulates through the human body, spreading “into every part,” it meets sin and expels it, replacing the illness of sin with “nourishment and strength.” This nourishment will eventually cure original sin itself, restoring the poet to the pre-lapsarian health of Adam: “Thou hast restor’d us to [Adam’s] ease / By this thy heav’nly bloud” (37-8).⁶⁵

In “The H. Communion,” communion itself is the sure way to a clean and reformed conscience, and with it holy health. Communion, however, is not the sole means of ingesting Christ in *The Temple*.

B. “Infinite Sweetness”: scripture, food, and taste in The Temple

Even more than his prose, Herbert’s poetry suggests that reading the Bible is a means to the end of holiness. He describes scripture as sweet, though occasionally as bitter, too, but whether he finds scripture bitter or sweet, his goal is to “suck and live”: ingest the Word of God so that it can enter and change him. To do so it takes a particular path. It enters through the senses; transforms his tastes, so that he both continues to desire its sweetness and understands that its bitterness is healthful, too; it reforms his conscience by redirecting his will toward God; and finally it is written on the tablet of his heart.

⁶⁵ Two of Herbert’s other poems on communion also focus on the experience of eating the elements. In “The Invitation” the poet calls out “Save your cost, and mend your fare. / God is here prepar’d and drest, / And the feast, God, in whom all dainties are” (3-6). Although the poem never refers to conscience directly, the wine and food of communion “on sinne doth cast the fright” (18), with the implication that the poet takes the sacraments, then sin scurries away. “The Banquet” describes the bread and wine entering the poet and being incorporated: “Welcome sweet and sacred cheer, / Welcome deare; / With me, in me, live and dwell ... O what sweetnesse from the bowl / Fills my soul, / Such as is, and makes divine!” (1-3,7-9). Once again, the divinity of the communion elements, as it is incorporated through the digestive process, can lead to a new, regenerated, “divine” flesh.

Of course, in equating reading with eating and especially in extolling the sweetness (and occasional bitterness) of the Bible, Herbert enters a long tradition. From the patristic period through the Middle Ages, everyone from St. Augustine and St. Gregory to the 11th century spiritual writer John of Fécamp described meditative readings as a process of chewing and digesting words: “This repeated mastication of the divine words is sometimes described by use of the theme of spiritual nutrition. In this case the vocabulary is borrowed from eating, from digestion, and from the particular form of digestion belonging to ruminants. ... It means assimilating the content of a text by means of a kind of mastication that releases its full flavor.”⁶⁶ Of course, verses in scripture itself suggested that the word of God was something to taste. In Ps. 119:103, for example, the psalmist declares: “How sweet are thy words unto my taste! Yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” But in the Revelation of St. John the Divine, the prophet receives a book from an angel, and the book is sweet as honey to his mouth, but bitter in his belly (Rev. 10: 9-10). Meditative styles of reading did not end with the Middle Ages, nor were they confined to the continent. In Alberto Manguel’s *A History of Reading*, he notes that Queen Elizabeth chewed over the scriptures: “I walke manie times into the pleasant fieldes of Holye Scriptures, where I pluck up the goodlie greene herbes of sentences, eate them by reading, chewe them up musing, and laie them up at length in the seate of memorie.”⁶⁷ In practicing meditative, even ruminative reading, Herbert is not breaking new ground. Digesting the word of God is especially important for Herbert, however, because (as we saw in chapter 2), when he cannot find God in nature, he feels his own

⁶⁶ Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1961), 78. For more on meditative reading and digestion in medieval monastic culture, see 78-80 and 24-26.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1996), 171-2.

body dissolving. The materiality of scriptural food is important because it rebuilds his ailing body as a new, holier self.

Several poems in *The Temple* compare scripture to food, for instance “The Bunch of Grapes.” This poem likens the scriptures to the manna that fed the people of Israel in the wilderness: “Then have we too our guardian fires and clouds; / Our Scripture-dew drops fast” (lines 15-16). Just as manna sustained the Israelites in the wilderness, so, too, does scripture sustain the health and life of 17th-century Christians. But Herbert treats the edibility of the Bible most fully in his first sonnet on scripture, “The H. Scriptures. I.” The sonnet sounds themes familiar from Herbert’s notes on Valdes and *The Country Parson*:

Oh Book! infinite sweetnesse! let my heart
Suck ev’ry letter, and a hony gain,
Precious for any grief in any part;
To cleare the breast, to mollifie all pain.

Thou art all health, health thriving, till it make
A full eternitie: ... (1-6)

There are several important points of agreement between this poem and Herbert’s prose writings on scripture. First, as in the Valdes notes and *Country Parson*, Herbert equates reading with ingestion. The letters on the page of his Bible are like honeycombs, and the reader may suck the nutritious honey out of them. Second, the “infinite” sweetness of scripture comports nicely with his insistence in the Valdes notes that scripture cannot be used up, meaning the reader can always find more sweetness in its words. Third, Herbert repeats a now familiar pattern: the letter as bark or magazine, the “Word” as honey or

nutrient. In other words, scripture is medicinal, “all health.”⁶⁸ He uses the same shell-substance form in other poems that mention scripture, too. In “The Jews” he writes: “Poore nation, whose sweet sap and juice / Our cyens have purloin'd” (1-2). This metaphor suggests that the substance of God’s word, originally held in the Old Testament, has been rerouted into the New, just as a “cyen,” or grafted stock, redirects the growth of a tree. As in *The Country Parson*, then, the words of the Bible are a “bark” and their substance is a “sweet sap and juice,” available to the reader, and especially the reader of the New Testament. What is important for my purposes is that in all of these poems, Herbert describes reading the Bible as a kind of eating. And furthermore, just as in Herbert’s prose writings, the meal of “The H. Scriptures,” should be delicious, nutritious, and inexhaustible.

Herbert had been preparing the opening metaphor of “The H. Scriptures I” (the honey of scripture) for some time, in fact since his earliest recorded poetic efforts. In his Latin poem “*In S. Scripturas*,” likely written while he was still a student at Cambridge, he compares reading scripture to “sipping honey” and uses the same architectural and digestive metaphors as he later used in “The H. Scripture. I.” and in “The H. Communion”:

O what spirit, what firey whirlwind
 Takes my bones and stirs
 My deepest thoughts? When I was resting
 Near my door not long ago,
 And it was evening, did I
 Swallow a falling star? And is it

⁶⁸ Picking up on the medical theme, Chana Bloch says that Herbert sounds like “a mountebank hawking a miraculous cure-all.” See *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 9.

Trying to escape, not knowing how
In this disgraceful lodging to be hidden?
Have I in sipping honey
Consumed the bee, in eating up
The house eaten up the mistress of the house?
Not bee, not star has penetrated me.
Most Holy Writ, it's you who've traveled through
All the dark nooks and hidden pleats
Of the heart, the alleys and the curves
Of flying passion. Ah, how wise and skilled you are
To slip through these paths, windings, knots.
The spirit that has reared the building
Knows it best.⁶⁹

As he would in *The Temple* and *The Country Parson*, the young Herbert equates reading the Bible with eating. In this case, reading “Holy Writ” feels like swallowing a “star” whose fire shakes him body and soul, from his mouth and bones to his thoughts, passions and, eventually, his heart. (There’s even a foretaste in this early poem of the “honey” in his mature poem on the same subject.) Herbert’s early poem also foreshadows the architectural metaphor that would become *The Temple*: his body is like a building with many rooms. Holy Writ knows the poet’s body because the “spirit” of holy writ is its architect, “the spirit” that “reared” the building. One could hardly have a clearer demonstration of the basic Pauline metaphor, in which the reader of scripture discovers that he is to be the temple of God.

⁶⁹ “On Sacred Scriptures,” *The Latin Poetry of George Herbert: A bilingual edition*, trans. Mark McCloskey and Paul R. Murphy (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1965).

Like the notes on Valdes and *The Country Parson*, “The H. Scriptures I” and the Latin poem are all concerned with human physiology: with digestion, the heart, and the process of physical transformation. Reading scripture is not first and foremost an intellectual exercise. Instead, reading is a task for the poet’s “heart,” which sucks the letters of scripture for its substance. The substance of the Bible tastes as sweet as “hony,” but honey, in the 17th-century, was also used for medical purposes. It was thought to be a detersive, meaning it had an astringent or cleansing effect on the body, especially the digestive tract.⁷⁰ And sure enough, the poet proclaims that “The H. Scriptures” can clear out his breast and mollify his pain. This means that reading scripture is good for the poet’s overall health. In fact it is more than good for the poet’s health: scripture is “all health,” the quintessence or very definition of health. As in his notes on Valdes, Herbert is suggesting that scripture is not a sometimes food but rather the cornerstone of a healthy diet. In his early Latin poem, too, Herbert describes the taste of “Holy Writ” as sweet (honey) and notes its physical effects: it enters at his mouth and then makes its way into all of the “dark nooks and hidden pleats” of the poet’s heart. As in his notes on Valdes and *The Country Parson*, Herbert’s poems present reading scripture not merely as a matter of learning information but also an activity that can change his body.

And not only physically. In both of these poems on scripture Herbert is not only talking about physical health but also spiritual health. Or, more exactly, physical and spiritual health go together in his understanding of the conscience. As we have seen, the heart or breast is the site of the conscience in Reformation (and pre-Reformation) thought. It must be “cleared” of the painful sins it has recorded. Reminiscent of Herbert’s

⁷⁰ See George Ryley’s *Mr. George Herbert’s Temple and Church Militant Explained and Improved*, ed. Maureen Boyd and Cedric C. Brown (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987), 65. The original may be found at Bodleian MS Rawr. D. 1999.

poems on the conscience, in the “The H. Scriptures I” the words of the Bible will have salutary effects on the reader: these words will “cleare the breast,” “mollifie” the pain of sin-sickness by clearing the disease of sin from his body. In his Latin poem, too, Herbert describes “Holy Writ” searching out his heart for its “flying passion” and, the implication is, taming those passions.

So reading the Bible can clear the conscience, but the holy book can also reform the faculty of conscience itself. As the poet proclaims in “The H. Scriptures I,” “Ladies, look here; this is the thankfull glasse, // That mends the lookers eyes: this the well / That washes what it shows” (8-10). The Bible does more than clean the conscience. It also “mends” the eye, which is to say it changes the standard by which the conscience judges. And, as in the poem “Conscience,” it appears that the “Ladies,” or whoever inwardly digests the scriptures, will have a heart full of its words. They will then be able to make moral judgments according to the Biblical standards they find in their own hearts.

At issue is not any particular judgment of the conscience but, following Luther and Calvin, salvation itself. Scripture is a means to “health thriving, till it make / A full eternitie” (“The H. Scriptures. I.” 5-6). As in the notes on Valdes, scripture has use of perfection, namely: making the reader more God-like through the incorporation of holy verse. Becoming the temple of God, then, requires expelling sinfulness from the poet’s heart or breast and then refilling it with the sweet substance of God, taken in through communion or “The H. Scriptures.” The final goal is nothing less than a replacement of the sinful heart with a new and godly one. Partaking of the honey of scripture regenerates the poet, transforms him, to use another Pauline metaphor, from the old man to the new. Thus does the heart become a temple, housing the Word of God.

And yet, reading “The H. Scriptures I,” we should not think that the poet has reached this goal. The poem is an address (“Oh Book!”) and the longed-for “full eternitie” of health is theoretical rather than achieved. Herbert’s heart, here and elsewhere in *The Temple*, is under construction. I turn now to poems on that process.

C. “Bitter-Sweet”: *Training the Senses*

Far more than in his prose writings, where he simply recommends ingesting scripture, Herbert’s poems focus on the *experience* of tasting scripture. Recall that Herbert exhorts his reader to “attend” to the work of scripture as it enters into his or her heart. Many of Herbert’s poems enact the very process of attention he recommends. He will pay special attention to the senses, smell and hearing, but especially taste: scripture will be sweet, spicy, or in some cases, bitter. In *The Temple* the senses of taste and smell predominate over the sense of sight. Understandably so, because taste and smell bear directly on the process of digestion and incorporation, through which the body is remade. But taste can be deceiving. Herbert needs to distinguish between true and counterfeit tastes, between what is holy and therefore healthful, and what is pleasing but ultimately bad for him.

In carefully considering the merits of different tastes, Herbert is joining a long intellectual tradition. As Mary Carruthers has pointed out, in the Middle Ages taste was understood to be not only affective but also rational. Like any other sensory experience, it was “a way to knowledge of the sort that can be articulated, shared with others, and

determined to be true or not.”⁷¹ One could learn to appreciate tastes that were truly healthful, and shun specious sweetness.

The key thing to know is that in Herbert’s poetry he, too, evaluates tastes and tries to train his palette accordingly. Take the poem “The Glimpse,” which begins with a sudden disappearance of pleasure: “Whither away delight? / Thou cam’st now; wilt thou so soon depart, / And give me up to night?” (1-3). Unusually for Herbert’s poetry, he does not here name God as the source of his all-too brief delight. But as we have seen (and will see at greater length shortly), Herbert’s poetry strongly associates pleasure with the experience of God. As the poet reflects on the sudden disappearance of delight, he considers how such a short moment of delight changes him: “Thy short abode and stay / Feeds not, but addes to the desire of meat” (11-12). A brief taste of pleasure has not satiated the poet’s senses but, on the contrary, made him all the hungrier for more. In the same way, tastes sweet and bitter can influence and redirect the poet’s desires. When he tastes something sweet, he will want more of it. So he should learn to enjoy and desire God’s sweetness, while shunning the bitterness of sin.

The poems of *The Temple* are shot through with descriptions of sensory experience, especially the sense of taste. The adjective “sweet” or some variation on it—“sweetness,” “sweetly”—appears dozens of times in *The Temple*. Herbert frequently attributes sweetness to God.⁷² In “Whitsunday,” a poem about Pentecost and the descent of the Holy Spirit unto the apostles, he addresses the spirit with the words “Listen sweet

⁷¹ Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 98. See also 125, where she argues that the idea of trainable taste survived into the 18th century, appearing in the aesthetic theories of Edmund Burke.

⁷² Michael Schoenfeldt, in his recent article on “Herbert and Pleasure” has argued that in Herbert’s poetry pleasure, rather than pain or suffering “is the primary sensation through which God communicated with his creatures.” *George Herbert Journal*, vol. 38, no. 1 & 2, 2014/2015, pp. 145-57. Quote on 155.

Dove unto my song” (1). Later in the poem he suggests that sweetness is one of God’s defining qualities: “Lord, though we change, thou art the same; / The same sweet God of love and light” (25-26). In “Peace,” a poem indirectly recounting the life of Christ, an old man tells the poet about a man who “sweetly liv’d; yet sweetnesse did not save / His life from foes” (25-6). Since God is sweet, it should come as no surprise that Herbert also attributes sweetness to the experience of God. In a poem like “The Glance,” it happens without warning: “When first thy sweet and gracious eye” looked on the poet, “I felt a sugred strange delight, / Passing all cordials made by any art” (1, 5-6). In all of these poems sweetness is a quality of God, or at least definitive of the poet’s experience of God.

Such sweetness can occur suddenly, seemingly at random (as in “The Glance”), but more often God’s sweetness is available to the poet in a particular devotional context: at the communion table or in the scriptures. In the ritual context of communion, the sweetness of God is tasted in wine. In “The Agonie,” which asks the reader to meditate on the crucifixion, “Love is that liquour sweet and most divine, / Which my God feels as bloud; but I, as wine” (17-18). Yet it would be a mistake to limit divine sweetness to the communion table, even to the sense of taste. “Church-lock and key” is another poem about the blood of Christ, but here the sweetness of Christ’s blood is aural rather than oral: “Yet heare, O God, onely for his blouds sake / Which pleads for me: / For though sinnes plead too, yet like stones they make / His blouds sweet current much more loud to be” (9-12). And as we have seen in Herbert’s poetry on scripture, the sweetness of Christ is also available in the Bible.

But when it comes to sweetness, one must be careful. Sweetness, in Herbert's poetry, can be deceiving, too. In "The Rose" the poet pleads "Presse me not to take more pleasure / In this world of sugred lies" (1-2). A "sugred" lie is one whose sweetness disguises its falsehood. So whereas sweetness and health go together in "The H. Scriptures I." in other cases sweet things may harm the poet's health. What seems surgery sweet may in fact be a "colour'd grief" or "blushing woes" (5-6), specious counterfeits of God's true sweetness. Usually, though, Herbert does not flatly reject sweetness other than God's. Instead, he finds them wanting, because they never last. In "Vertue" he addresses the world around him, finding sweetness seemingly everywhere he turns: a "sweet day," a "sweet rose," and a "sweet spring" (1, 5, 9). He devotes a stanza to each, but he always concludes with the sad admission, "thou must die." The rose, day, and spring hardly deceive the poet—they really are sweet—but the poet knows of another, immortal sweetness: "Onely a sweet and vertuous soul, / Like season'd timber, never gives; / But though the whole world turn to coal, / Then chiefly lives" (13-16). These lines describe two transformations. The first is the world, which regardless of the sweetness of its days, roses, and springs, will one day "turn to coal." Change and impermanence is its only law, so every sweetness fades and turns to something foul. The soul, however, can persevere if it becomes "sweet and vertuous."

A hint at how the soul might persevere be is found in the adjective "season'd," which would have had several uses in Herbert's day. Seasoned food, of course, has salt or spice added for preservation, and seasoned wood is wood that has hardened through a process of deracination. Seasoning by deracination seems out of step with Herbert's poems on communion and scripture, in which he takes liquid in instead of expelling it,

but the most important meaning here is a figurative one. A person, or in this case a “soul,” would be said to be seasoned once he had become used to a certain kind of perhaps difficult life. In other words, the soul must become fortified against death through habit, say by regularly eating at the communion alter or sucking the sweetness out of scripture.

Yet the first way to drive out sin is not sweetness but its opposite: bitterness. Unpleasant tastes, such as bitterness or sourness, occur almost as often as sweetness in *The Temple*, as in the poem “Bitter-sweet,” in which the poet cries that his “deare angrie Lord” does “love, yet strike; / Cast down, yet help afford” (1-3), making his life a succession of “sowre-sweet dayes” (7). What usually strikes the poet or casts him down into gloom is a sudden intimation of his own sinfulness, and with sinfulness, alienation from God. In “Assurance” he exclaims “O spitefull bitter thought! / Bitterly spitefull thought! / ... / Thou said’st but even now, / That all was not so fair, as I conceiv’d / Betwixt my God and me” (1-2, 7-9). The suspicion that “all was not so fair” between “my God and me” suggests a broken relationship, the kind of alienation of an imperfect poet from his perfect God. The very thought tastes bitter, and he further calls this thought a “torture” (3) and a “poyson” (3 and 6). As calling it a “poyson” suggests, bitterness no less than sweetness operates physiologically in Herbert’s poetry, and in fact bitterness has a special place in Herbert’s moral physiology. While sweetness in “Bitter-sweet” acts as “*Cordiall*,” God offers bitterness as a “*corrosive*” (28), and a “corrosive” in Herbert’s day was another word for an emetic. A “corrosive,” then, purges sin, scrapes it out of the conscience. As I discussed earlier, in “The Rose” Herbert points out that a rose, far from the pretty flower most poets take it for, is in fact sharp and, if eaten acts as an emetic: “it

purgeth” (18). The titular rose functions ironically, attracting the poet as a worldly (and the implication is sinful) joy but then, through excess of enjoyment of this deceitful pleasure, the rose “produce[s] repentance, / And repentance is a purge” (27-28).

But the tastes of bitterness and sweetness in *The Temple* are not fixed. Rather, the poet can learn to appreciate bitterness, even welcome its taste. Bitterness may be welcome because although corrosive, it can heal the sickness of sin. In “Repentance” the poet begs God to “Sweeten at length this bitter bowl, / Which thou hast pour’d into my soul; / Thy wormwood turn to health, windes to fair weather” (19-21). The paradox, then, is that Herbert should learn to appreciate certain kinds of bitterness: the bitter taste of sin or God’s chastisement is ultimately healthful, because it clues him in to the need for purging and a better diet.

D. “Mend by reflection”: the Incorporation of the Word in “The Odour 2. Cor. 2. 15.” and “Aaron”

The themes of scriptural food, its taste, and its effects are not only confined to a few poems. In truth, these themes circulate throughout the body of *The Temple*. Yet in several poems Herbert not only brings these themes together but also dramatizes them, showing the whole process of transformation from the ingestion of scripture to the reformed conscience. Because “The Odour. 2. Cor. 2. 15” and “Aaron” bring the threads of my argument in this chapter together, I will explicate each at length. “The H. Scripture (I)” proclaimed the curative properties of scripture, but these poems show moral transformation in progress. Recall that in the notes on Valdes, Herbert said that the reader should “attend” to the work of scripture in his heart. These poems are examples of such

attending: records of what he thinks and feels as scripture moves through him and changes him. I will endeavor to show that for Herbert the moral process of regeneration works from the outside in: from the first taste (or even smell!) of scripture, to its digestion and transformation of his heart.

The poem “The Odour. 2. Cor. 2. 15.” is one such poem. The poet ingests the scripture, tastes its sweetness and spiciness, and, by attending to its taste, speculates about how reading scripture will sanctify him by (as it were) changing his mind. The verse from 2 Cor. reads: “For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish.” The title of the poem provides the scriptural bark or comb, the receptacle holding the Word of God. The poem itself represents the poet's rumination, a consideration of its taste, meaning, and how its meaning becomes incorporated into him:

How sweetly doth *My Master* sound! *My Master!*
As Amber-greese leaves a rich sent
Unto the taster:
So do these words a sweet content,
An orientall fragrancie, *My Master*.

With these all day I do perfume my minde,
My minde ev'n thrust into them both:
That I might finde
What cordials make this curious broth,
This broth of smells, that feeds and fats my minde. (1-10)

“My Master” almost certainly refers to Christ. In a note that appeared in early printed editions of *The Temple* (1633-1695), Nicholas Farrer offered some reminiscences about the character of his old friend. Herbert “used in his ordinarie speech, when he made mention of the blessed name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, to adde, *My*

Master.”⁷³ The poet is reading the scriptural verse, then, as words from Christ to him. But for the poet, reading the words of his master is not a purely cognitive activity. On the contrary, he experiences the verse sensually, through his senses of hearing, smell, and taste. Each line of the opening stanza includes either sensory descriptions (“sweet” in lines 1 and 4, “fragrencie” in line 5) and/or introduces a new sense. In the opening line, the words of Christ sound “sweetly” to the poet's ear. The poet then compares their sweet sound to a “rich sent” (line 2) lingering in his nostrils after being tasted (line 3). As usual, Herbert refuses to divide the sensory experiences of smell, taste, and hearing too neatly. What enters the ear, mouth, or nose will equally affect the other organs, because what enters one will travel through the whole sensory apparatus. At the same time, these lines include a subtle progression, with the sweetness of Christ coming closer and closer to the poet. Christ is first heard, which could happen from a long way off; then smelt, coming considerably closer; and finally tasted, entering the poet. As the sweetness of the scriptural verse moves toward and then into the reader's senses, the process of digestion and incorporation can now begin.

In the second stanza, after entering the poet's senses, the fragrance of scripture reaches the poet's mind:

With these all day I do perfume my minde,
 My mind ev'n thrust into them both:
 That I might finde
 What cordials make this curious broth,
 This broth of smells, that feeds and fats my minde. (6-10)

It makes sense for the second stanza to deal with the mind because it follows the logical progression of incorporation: what begins in the senses must work its way into the seat of

⁷³ “The Printers to the Reader.” This note appears on pages 3-5 of *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson. This quote is on page 4.

consciousness. Once the verse reaches his mind, it can linger there as a memory, which outlasts the poet's sensory experience. Subsequently, during the poet's "all day" meditation on the verse, the sweetness of Christ's words becomes an environment for the poet's thoughts, an unseen but unmistakable presence, like perfume. As the poet thrusts his mind into Christ's words, a dialectical relationship between the verse and the poet's mind emerges. The perfume of scripture, being rich and sweet, draws the poet's attention, and the further the poet follows his desires (follows his nose, as it were), the more he wants to thrust his attention into the scent of Christ's words. He desires to enjoy "this curious broth" sucked out of scripture more and more often. The importance of digestive metaphors here could hardly be overestimated: the stuff of scripture is a broth that "feeds and fats" the poet's mind, enters and by fattening it, becomes a part of it and changes it, orienting the poet's desires toward the enjoyment of Christ.

It appears that these stanzas concern only the senses and mind and make no mention of that third and most important part of Herbert's physiological trilemma: the heart or breast. This appearance, however, is misleading. A "cordial" is a medicine, in keeping with Herbert's larger themes of the healthfulness of holiness and the sickness of sin. In the 17th century, however, it also had the sense of being of or related to the heart. So the cordial sucked from the Pauline letter works simultaneously in the poet's senses, mind, and heart.

The work of scriptural cordial in the heart, and indeed its possible transfiguration of the poet's body, is the main theme of the next two stanzas of the poem. The poet's reflection on the words of Christ shift to a reflection on himself and the great difference between the scent of Christ and his own scent:

My Master, shall I speak? O that to thee
 My servant were a little so,
 As flesh may be;
 That these two words might creep & grow
To some degree of spicinesse to thee!

Then should the Pomander, which was before
 A speaking sweet, mend by reflection,
 And tell me more:
 For pardon of my imperfection,
Would warm and work it sweeter than before. (11-20)

In the Pauline letter, the church at Corinth already smells of a “sweet savour” of Christ to God, but in these stanzas the poet doubts his own scent. Flesh may indeed smell sweetly to God, creep up to a degree of spicy aroma (and while spiciness and sweetness might be thought antipodal, they were commonly understood to be equally delectable), but it requires a transformation. A “pomander” is traditionally a hollow ball of precious metal in the shape of an apple or orange, normally stuffed with potpourri or another aeromatic substance. It was worn around the neck as a guard against bad smells or infections, and crucially, when it was broken open, or even just rubbed between one’s hands, its scent increased. In a figurative sense, however, it could also be a book of prayers, devotional poems, or chosen Biblical verses. In this poem, the “pomander” is the verse which he carries around in his mind all day, which, when pondered over, further releases its “perfume.”

What happens as it does? The phrase “mend by reflection” neatly captures the dynamic at work. The scriptural verse could mend the poet’s flesh during digestion, winning pardon for his “imperfection” as he “reflects,” or thinks, about its significance while he ruminates on it. Additionally, because as the poet removes imperfection and becomes more perfect he resembles Christ, the poet as he mends also “reflects,” or

mirrors, his master. Hence scripture is, as “The H. Scriptures (I)” had it, “the thankfull glasse, / That mends the lookers eyes” (8-9).⁷⁴

In the final two stanzas of the poem, the poet moves from a consideration of the present moment to a broader perspective on his life. The growth of sweetness, the process of perfection, requires life-long dedication:

For when *My Master*, which alone is sweet,
And ev’n in my unworthinesse pleasing,
Shall call and meet,
My servant, as thee not displeasing,
That call is but the breathing of the sweet.

This breathing would with gains by sweetening me
(As sweet things traffick when they meet)
Return to thee.
And so this new commerce and sweet
Should all my life employ, and busie me. (21-30)

No matter how unworthy the servant may be, he still has the sensual capacity to recognize sweetness, in this case the sweetness of Christ’s voice in his ears and the sweetness of Christ’s “breathing” in his nostrils. As before, the sweetness of Christ’s sound and breath enter the poet, “sweetening [him],” and this sweetness confirms the positive feedback loop seen earlier in the poem: as the poet takes in the sweetness of Christ it slowly changes him, and he then is inspired to “return” to his master. He would become, as in the scriptural verse, “a sweet savor of Christ” to God, not sweet in his own

⁷⁴ Herbert uses the exact same image of the pomander in one of his poems about communion, “The Banquet”: “But as Pomanders and wood / Still are good, / Yet being bruis’d are better sented: / God, to show how farre his love / Could improve, / Here, as broken, is presented” 25-30. “The Banquet” also includes lines about God imparting sweetness to the poet, “Onely God, who gives perfumes, / Flesh assumes, / And with it perfumes my heart” (22-4). My point is that communion and reading in Herbert’s poetry operate in the same way: they are taken in by the poet, and then they work on the poet’s body, improving its odor until it, too, has the sweetness of Christ.

way but becoming sweeter as Christ is sweet, and therefore restoring the poet's likeness to Christ.

Notice, however, that the second two thirds of the poem (ever since "O that to thee / *My servant* were a little so) have been speculative, a poet's thought experiment rather than an accomplished reality. "The H. Scriptures (I)" had the same conditional mood: "...*let* my heart / Suck ev'ry letter" (emphasis mine). Perfect sweetness and holiness are always possibilities, devoutly longed for. Herbert's longing, however, should not render him passive. On the contrary, Herbert's desire for the sweetness of scripture and the holiness it might afford should push him to action, to a busy, lifelong employment of the scriptures as a devotional tool. Reading should become habitual, and thereby *habitus*. But, again, *The Temple* never shows us the completed, scriptural body. Instead of presenting a perfectly sweet poet, Herbert is always on the way to holiness, in the middle of the digestive process.

In my estimation, the closest Herbert comes to showing the full process of regeneration is in the poem "Aaron." There one finds the entire process, from reading and rumination to bodily transformation. Because its structure is important for the overall meaning of the poem, I will quote the poem entire:

Holinesse on the head,
Light and perfections on the breast,
Harmonious bells below, raising the dead
To lead them unto life and rest:
Thus are true Aarons drest.

Profanenesse in my head,
Defects and darknesse in my breast,
A noise of passions ringing me for dead
Unto a place where is no rest:
Poore priest thus am I drest.

Onely another head
I have, another heart and breast,
Another musick, making live not dead,
Without whom I could have no rest:
In him I am well drest.

Christ is my onely head,
My alone onely heart and breast,
My onely musick, striking me ev'n dead,
That to the old man I may rest,
And be in him new drest.

So holy in my head,
Perfect and light in my deare breast,
My doctrines tun'd by Christ, (who is not dead,
But lives in me while I do rest)
Come people; Aaron's drest. (1-25)

Helen Vendler has rightly called “Aaron” a “conversion” poem.⁷⁵ The whole drama can be summed up in a preposition: from holiness “on” the head (line 1) to holiness “in” the head (line 20). That is to say, “Aaron” records the process by which the poet internalizes Christ, effectively becoming a new man. The action of the poem seems to begin just after the poet reads and begins his rumination on its words. Ex. 39 details the priestly garments of Aaron, brother of Moses and high priest of the Israelites. Aaron dons a bejeweled breastplate, robes with bells attached to the hems, and a turban. All of these items appear in the first three lines of the poem: headware, something covering the breast, and bells. In the first stanza, these items are themselves holy, and their holiness makes the one who wears them a “true” and “perfect” priest. The “harmonious bells” suggest the sensory sweetness Herbert has so often attributed to the experience of scripture. The poem, then, records not the act of reading itself but the poet’s rumination on Ex. 39, during which he enumerates Aaron’s qualities in his memory, and considers their sweetness to his senses.

⁷⁵ Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1975), 119.

This pleasant experience, however, changes sharply in the second stanza, when the poet considers the vessel scripture has entered. He finds inadequacies when he inspects himself. In himself he finds the opposite of everything the “true Aaron” is. Inside his head, he is profane; inside his breast, dark; and inside his ears, clamorous. The total effect is one of chaotic contrast, in which the sweet sounds of scripture meet the unharmonious, disordered, dark, and sin-filled body. He calls himself a “poor priest,” and this suggests that even though he is a priest, there is a limit to what the external trappings of the priesthood can do for him. He might wear the vestments of a true priest and ring the bells, but it would only make him a fraud. He must change.

In the next two stanzas he searches his memory further and finds Christ, who can make the “old man” into the “new.” The movement from Aaron to Christ follows a common typological reading in which Aaron prefigures the great high priest, Christ.⁷⁶ In order for this to happen, Christ’s head, heart, and music must replace his.

The final stanza shows the poet-priest’s full transformation. Aaron prefigures Christ, and the poet becomes the present-day instantiation of them both. This is only the case once Christ is “in” the poet’s head. Likewise, the poet’s formerly dark breast has become “perfect,” its profane darkness dispelled, and Christ’s influence has “tun’d” him to the sweet, harmonious frequency of Aaron’s bells. All in all, the transformation is complete: the poet has become a “true Aaron.” Even, perhaps, a greater one. The original Aaron wore holiness “on” his head and breast, whereas the ruminative process has brought holiness and light into the poet.

The end of the poem also justifies its occasion, ending with a sanctified priest who could deliver this address. The key word is at the end of each stanza: “drest.” In

⁷⁶ Bloch’s discussion of “Aaron” may be found on pages 128-135.

Herbert's time "drest" could mean both wearing clothing and prepared, as today we might dress a turkey. The "drest" poet is the one whose holiness entitles him to call ("Come people") the congregation to hear him. This preparation described in "Aaron" harmonizes with Herbert's *Country Parson*, who also had to season himself and his words in scripture before he spoke to his "people." The poem, then, ends with an "Aaron" ready to speak the words of the poem. That returns the poem to the beginning: the "Aaron" of the last line becomes the "Aaron" of the title, ready to speak to his congregation. If so, then the completed "Aaron" at the end of the poem is prepared ("drest") to speak these very words to the reader. Herbert thereby invites the readers to listen to the poem again, to read and ingest the poem again, which will hopefully start a similar process of transformation in them.

Finally, the formal structure of the poem highlights the process of transformation: from the senses to the heart, from outside to in. Recall that in the poem "Man," discussed in chapter one, the outer form of the poem remained the same while the "man" within it could become anything: ascend or descend the ladder of being, rise to the angels or fall into the dust. In "Aaron," the outer form of the poem (or the man, the priest) remains the same, too. All five stanzas have the same syllabic structure: 6, 8, 10, 8, and 6 again (as in "Man," the stanza structure represents the symmetrical human frame). In addition, the last word of each line remains the same throughout the poem. The opening line of the poem ends on "head," as does the first line of the last stanza of the poem. This is more than a rhyme scheme. It is as if the outer edge of the priest, like the outer edge of the poem, remained the same while the words circulating behind them changed over time, as

the interior body of the poem approached its “perfect” state.⁷⁷ In “Man,” the poet could become *anything*, but in “Aaron,” the poet becomes the *right* thing: a temple for Christ to dwell in.

vi. “Write there”: *The Word of God in the Poet’s Heart*

After the Reformation, God seemed to have departed from the natural world.⁷⁸ At least, in his poems of lament, Herbert often feared that was the case. If so, then Christ and Christians needed other sites of contact. Communion was certainly one, but in this chapter, I have endeavored to show that for Herbert scripture was another, whereby Christ could move from the pages of scripture into the hearts of readers. Of course, as I have pointed out several times, the relationship between reading and eating has a long history, predating the Reformation by over a thousand years. My suggestion is that Herbert practiced the meditative, ruminative mode of reading so insistently precisely because it held out the possibility of getting back into touch with God. If his problem in my second chapter was that God’s seeming abandonment of him left him dissolving and dying, then incorporating the Word, remaking his body with its substance, offers a solution.

As per Herbert’s notes on Valdes and the poems of *The Temple*, the work of God ultimately takes place in the reader’s heart. As we have seen, growing sweetness and holiness requires ingesting and digesting the word of God until that word is incorporated in the poet. Architecturally, the temple of God will one day, hopefully, reside in the poet.

⁷⁷ Summers makes this point with regard to the shape of the stanzas but does not mention the importance of the rhyme scheme. See his *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 137.

⁷⁸ Regina Mara Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics At the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 12-14.

The end goal of incorporating scripture is to realize St. Paul and Jeremiah's metaphor: to have the words of God written on the heart. Unfortunately, Herbert's heart often seems too hard to write on. Several poems in *The Temple* describe the poet's heart as hard, stony, or otherwise intransigent. The poet cannot write the word of God on his own heart; he needs God to do that for him. In "The Altar," the poet laments that "A Heart alone / Is such a stone, / As nothing but / Thy pow'r doth cut" (5-8). In "Sion" God struggles against the poet's "peevish heart" (13). In both "The Sinner" and "Nature" the poet calls his heart hard and then asks God to cut the Word into it: "And though my hard heart scarce to thee can grone, / Remember that thou once didst write in stone" ("The Sinner," 13-14), and "O smooth my rugged heart, and there / Engrave thy rev'rend law and fear" ("Nature," 13-14).

The hardness of the poet's heart denies Christ a dwelling place. In "Sepulchre," Christ must lie in the tomb because no heart will receive him: "No lodging for thee, but a cold hard stone? / So many hearts on earth, and yet not one / Receive thee?" (2-4). No one will receive Christ because "our hard hearts" (13) remain inhospitable, full of "transgressions by the score" (6), which leave no room for Christ. The goal was to have written on the heart what was once on the page:

Since bloud is fittest, Lord, to write
Thy sorrows in, and bloudie fight;
My heart hath store, write there, where in
One box doth lie both ink and sinne:

...

Sinne being gone, oh fill the place,
And keep possession with thy grace;
Lest sine take courage and return,
And all the writings blot or burn.

"Good Friday," 21-4, 29-32

The writing Herbert imagines is not a palimpsest, new writing over an old, but a two-step process. First comes the erasure of the old writing, the removal of the sins on the poet's memory and conscience, and then comes the new writing, the new law that could "fill" the poet's heart, effectively making him the new man of the Pauline metaphor.

Once again, "Good Friday" imagines an endpoint rather than showing it achieved. And yet, in some of Herbert's poems, he suggests that even an imperfect person may find Christ's writing within, at least a few letters of it:

JESU is in my heart, his sacred name
Is deeply carved there: but th'other week
A great affliction broke the little frame,
Ev'n all to pieces: which I went to seek:
And first I found the corner, where was *J*,
After, where *E S*, and next where *U* was graved.
When I had got these parcels, instantly
I sat me down to spell them, and perceived
That to my broken heart he was *I ease you*,
And to my whole is *J E S U*.

This poem shows the poet "attending" to the word in his heart, but a little differently than we have seen before. What he needs to know, consciously, has already been written there, presumably carved through the long, habitual process of reading, ingesting, and digesting the Holy Scriptures. So even if the temple of his heart is broken "all to pieces," he can reassemble its parts, re-membering what he had lost.

On one level, then, this poem summarizes what we have seen earlier: the word of Christ eases the heart's affliction. But in this poem Herbert links the word of God with his own process of writing: "I sat me down to spell." Christ has written in his heart, and then through searching his heart, the poet spells something new: "I ease you." The relationship between *JESU* and "I ease you" is puzzling. The poet has neither re-spelled

the word exactly as it was before, nor has he simply misspelled it, and yet he has spelled it seemingly *out of* the word *JESU*. In fact, it seems as though when the poet sits down to spell it out, “*JESU*” becomes more than it was before, as if “I ease you” were latent in *JESU*, rolled up in it like a rug and just waiting for someone to spell it out.

In my final chapter on George Herbert, I will argue that he does exactly that, putting his own spin on Sir Philip Sidney’s directive (look in your heart and write) as a method for writing holy verse.

Chapter Four: Edward Herbert and the Study of “Religion”

Books on the history of “religion” as a concept and object of study usually sum up Edward Herbert and pass him by in a few respectful sentences or footnotes. I contend, however, that Herbert’s voluminous writings on religion deserve more attention. He is a key transitional figure. He synthesizes several strands of 16th-century thought about religion and moves them into new territory.

The word religion, from the Latin *religio*, has a long and complicated history, with a range of etymologies in play. In the Middle Ages it had several possible meanings, but most importantly for my purposes, it could mean something close to pious devotion, a feeling expressed through the scrupulous performance of required rituals. One can find this definition in Aquinas’ *Summa theologiae* and as far back as Augustine’s *De Vera Religione*.¹ In the 16th century, however, “religion” started to take on new meanings. According to the historian Peter Harrison, “When the term [religion] was used in the premodern West, it did not refer to discrete sets of beliefs and practices but rather to something more like ‘inner piety.’”² In a similar vein, Guy Stroumsa notes, “as a concept religion always had a double edge, referring both inward, as a set of beliefs, and outward, as a pattern of behavior.” In the 16th and 17th centuries, he claims, religion was newly

¹ For Augustine on *religio*, see especially his *De vera religione* 55 (“May religion bind us to the one Almighty God.”) For Aquinas’ discussion of religion in itself, see his *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae, Q. 81. For all the many parts of religion (vows, rites, prayer, and so on) see questions 82-91. Aquinas himself suggests several possible etymologies for “religio,” from Cicero and Augustine. For a contemporary consideration of the Latin etymologies of “religio,” see Benson Saler’s *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories* (New York, NY: Beghahn Books, 2000), 64-66.

² Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2015) 8-9.

“externalized,” meaning it was understood as an observable system of behavior and ritual.³ The externalized view of religion enabled the rise of a new and “scientific” study, with religion as its object.

So the basic questions of this chapter are: how did Edward Herbert contribute to the emerging 17th-century understanding of “religion”? What existing ideas did he draw on, and what was his original contribution?

My chapter will proceed in three sections. The first section concerns his *De Religio Laici*, a short book in which he reiterates his five common notions and recommends them to a “wayfarer,” anyone looking for the correct and saving faith. Many before Edward had looked for the essentials of Christian faith, but he takes their search for a common denominator between Christian denominations and extends it to all faiths. In looking for the essence of true religion, he offers an early substantive definition of religion, independent of any particular faith.

In the second section, I present his *De Religione Gentilium*. In this encyclopedic survey of rites and beliefs around the world, Herbert finds the five common notions in ancient pagan and New World beliefs and practices. To do so, he harkens back to certain classical sources that argue for a *symbolic* relationship between particular beliefs and rites and “true,” philosophical beliefs. In Herbert’s theory of religion, salvation comes from holding and living according to the “common notions,” and any pagan could do so, provided he or she understood her seemingly outlandish beliefs symbolically.

In the third section, I detail his criticism of historical religion, which he thinks is the product of priestly deception. If God has implanted the common notions in every

³ Guy G. Stroumsa. *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 25-27.

human being, why are there so many odd beliefs and rituals? The diversity in religious beliefs and practices, he answers, arose due to “crafty priests.” They invented rituals and myths in order to accrue power over the credulous population. Many before Herbert had criticized priests and prophets.⁴ Protestants denounced “Popery,” and Christians of all stripes accused Mohammed of being an impostor. Herbert goes further. He extends the charge of priestly imposture to all,⁵ and in his anti-clericalism he prefigured the Enlightenment’s obsession with “crafty priests.”⁶ Most importantly, Herbert speculates about the process by which priests invented their rites, convinced the common people to follow them, and thus acquired power. To his substantive theory of religion, then, Herbert’s adds a social history and criticism of *religions*.

I conclude with a short section on the originality of Herbert’s theory of religion, how it broke with precedent, and anticipated later developments.

i. Religio Laici and the essentials of “religion”

In my second chapter, I ended my discussion of *De Veritate* with the suggestion that Herbert had developed an early form of “substantive” definition of religion, which defines religion by its essential part or parts. In Herbert’s view, all religion (or at least all true and saving religion) included the five common notions. The anthropologist Talal Asad has called Herbert’s theory of the five common notions a “significant step” in the

⁴ Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 83-4.

⁵ Stroumsa, 34.

⁶ J.A.I. Champion claims that Herbert may well have been the first to use the phrase “crafty priests.” He investigated this possibility in a conference paper (“‘*De Religione Gentilium*’: The First Enlightenment History of Religion, 1645-1711”) at the University of York in May 2016. Unfortunately, he has not yet published the paper.

search for a “substantive definition” of religion.⁷ (A substantive definition defines religion according to what it includes, as opposed to a functional definition, which defines religion by how it operates in peoples’ lives or society at large.⁸) According to Asad, Herbert’s definition of religion adumbrates “what later came to be formulated as Natural Religion—in terms of belief (about a supreme power), practices (its ordered worship), and ethics (a code of conduct based on rewards and punishments after this life)—said to exist in all societies.”⁹ In a less complimentary assessment of Herbert’s historical importance, Ivan Strenski dismisses his theory because he accepted revelation—in the form of our intuitive grasp of the common notions—as a legitimate source of knowledge about the world.¹⁰

I concur more with Asad, but I would also say that Herbert’s emphasis on the minimum necessary for salvation reflects a wider effort to find an underlying agreement between faiths in a time of conflict between various churches in England and on the continent of Europe. Many had tried to find “the essentials” of religion before. Protestants of every kind had tried to agree on the essentials of Christianity, and the 16th century Italian legal theorist and theologian Jacopo Acontio had tried to reduce Christian doctrines to a minimal number, acceptable to all.¹¹

⁷ Asad, Talal, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 40-1. I side with Asad: Herbert is important less for the substance of his ideas than he is for the spirit of study he inaugurates.

⁸ Arthur L. Greil and Thomas Robbins, “Introduction: Exploring the Boundaries of the Sacred,” *Religion and the Social Order. Also Between Sacred and Secular: Research and Theory on Quasi-Religion*, ed. Arthur L. Greil; and Thomas Robbins (London: JAI Press, Ltd., 1994). See especially pages 3-6.

⁹ Asad, 40-1.

¹⁰ Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 25-26.

¹¹ Butler, John. *Lord Herbert of Chirbury (1582 - 1648): An Intellectual Biography* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 29 and 228-30.

But Herbert distinguishes himself from his predecessors. The Protestant polemicists and Acontio focused exclusively on varieties of Christianity, trying to find the underlying essential similarities between Roman Catholicism and various Protestant churches. By way of contrast, Herbert looked for the ideas shared by all religions: a global common denominator. This point was implicit in *De Veritate*, but in Herbert's short book *De Religione Laici*, he makes it explicit.

In 1645 he published his first book explicitly on religion: *De Religione Laici* ("Layman's Religion"; henceforth cited as *RL*). It spells out the consequences of his "five common notions" for a layman's religious life. As I wrote in my second chapter, Herbert's unorthodox views on religion appear for the first time in a series of letters between him and the politician Robert Harley. Herbert's later books, like his letters to Harley, begin with concerns about the ultimate fate of human souls. In *Religione Laici* Herbert addresses his reader as "the Wayfarer" and asks him where he will seek salvation. All the world's churches argue with each other, most claiming that they alone can set the wayfarer on the one true path to eternal life: "For there is no church that does not breathe threats, none almost that does not deny the possibility of salvation outside its own pale."¹² He points out that the laity can find "many faiths or religions" in Europe, others in Africa, and still others in Asia. He then asks: "what Wayfarer, then, born in an unfortunate land or age, shall save himself?" (*RL*, 87).

¹² *Lord Herbert of Cherbury's De Religione Laici*, trans. Harold R. Hutcheson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944), 87. His magnum opus on religion, *De Religione Gentilium* will also begin with the problem of salvation: "After pondering for a long time over many matters, such as whether in some manner eternal, universal salvation of the entire human race might be intended, and that consequently the certainty of a universal Divine Providence might be necessarily inferred, a great number of doubts began to occur to me."

Following his argument in *De Veritate*, in *Religione Laici* Herbert advises the Wayfarer to seek out doctrines on which he and everybody else agrees: “Then, considering, so far as is permissible, various religions, let him first search out doctrines which are analogous to the internal faculties, and afterwards those about which there is most agreement” (*RL*, 89). As in the letter to Harley, Herbert invites the Wayfarer to study God by studying himself. Search for the truths God has implanted in you, Herbert exhorts the wayfarer, and then, finding them in all others with normal minds, believe them and live accordingly. These truths turn out to be the five common religious notions from *De Veritate*, which Herbert condenses from a ten page discussion (in *De Veritate*) to a handy five-point list: “1. That there is some supreme divinity. 2. That this divinity ought to be worshipped. 3. That virtue joined with piety is the best method of divine worship. 4. That we should return to our right selves from sins. 5. That reward or punishment is bestowed after this life is finished” (*RL*, 129). These common notions are eternal and everywhere the same, so the wayfarer may live according to them and have no fear for his or her soul. The five common notions make up a substantive definition of true, saving religion, the “enough” taught by every faith.

Anticipating my next sections somewhat, I will point out that Herbert’s discussion of religion in *De Religione Laici* put his understanding of religion closer to the Protestants than to a medieval figure like Aquinas.¹³ For Aquinas (as we shall see) religion or *religio* was first a matter of cultivating a pious, worshipful disposition. Even after the Reformation, *religio* still often connoted a pious devotion rather than a single system of doctrines and practices. For instance, as late as 1525 Ulrich Zwingli also

¹³ Wayne Hudson, *The English Deists: Studies in Early Enlightenment* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), 42.

equated “religion” with pious devotion: “Here, I say, is the cradle of religion, or rather loyal devotion (for this is the established relation between parents and children, between God and man).”¹⁴

But the Reformation also brought a subtle change. Starting with Calvin, and especially in the writings of later Calvinists, the reformers emphasized “saving knowledge.”¹⁵ And indeed, although Zwingli’s discussion of religion retained the affective, pious dimension of religion, he also insisted on the importance of holding the right doctrines. True piety, according to Zwingli, consisted in devotion to the slogans of the Reformation, such as *sola scriptura*: “So also the soul is not truly pious that listens to another than God, follows another than its own spouse. It is evident, then, that those only are truly pious who hang upon the utterances of God alone.”¹⁶ His entire chapter on “The Christian” religion is about Christ, an unambiguous affirmation of *solus Christus*.

Protestants were not the only ones drawing up lists of widely shared and essential beliefs. One of Herbert’s most important sources, Marsilio Ficino, also tried to find the common denominator among different nations’ ideas about the divine:

Among all theologians it is agreed: (i) that God is the first true and the first good; (ii) that He is all things; (iii) that He is the author of all, (iv) above all, (v) in all, and (vi) for all time; (vii) that He provides for all; (viii) that He governs with justice; (ix) that in governing He remains steadfastly in His habitual condition; (x) that He proceeds with moderation and sweetness; (xi) that He lives in superlative magnificence and delight; and (xii) that He gazes upon, marvels at, and cultivates His own beatitude.

¹⁴ Ulrich Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson and Clarence Nevin Heller (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1981), 90. For Zwingli’s full discussion of religion, see 87-97.

¹⁵ Peter Harrison, *“Religion” and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 19-23.

¹⁶ Harrison, 92-3.

In every nation all theology attributes these twelve properties to God.¹⁷

Both Ficino and Zwingli, then, were looking for the bare essentials of religion. They were not alone. Herbert follows a growing line of thought when he defines the saving substance of “religion” in terms of core beliefs or ideas.¹⁸ Wayne Hudson says that Herbert drew on “liberal Protestant” ideas, perhaps inspired by his correspondence with the Dutch political theorist Hugo Grotius and the Polish Socinian Johannes Crell.

Herbert goes beyond his liberal Protestant contemporaries when he argues that these beliefs belong to no particular Christian church or confession. Ficino, even though he says that theologians in “every nation” agree on these points, never considers possible soteriological implications. The question of whether or not the pagans might be saved was, again, Herbert’s primary focus. His identification of the five common notions opens the possibility that individual religions are species of a larger genus. Having identified an essence (or substance) of religion he now has a basis on which different religions could be compared or even evaluated.

Herbert is careful to say that these common notions appear in the scriptures and the teachings of the “Church” (without ever specifying which church), but where are they in pagan religion? The pagans hold all kinds of fantastic beliefs, and due to their rites and worship of immoral deities, their behavior seems to be at odds with the common notions. In *Religio Laici*, Herbert brings up the question of how pagan religions relate to the common notions but does not pursue it, saying only that it would be a worthwhile topic: “But let others decide these questions. It will, at all events, be worth inquiring what the wise and pious worshiper [*sic*] of God was formerly able to accomplish even amid the

¹⁷ Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, trans. Michael J.B. Allen, ed. James Hankins with William Bowen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), Vol. 4, Book xiv, chapter 1.

¹⁸ Harrison, 63.

superstitions of the Gentiles” (*RL*, 105). If the gentiles were to be saved, even amid their superstitions, then they would have had to adhere to the common notions. In order to prove that all might be saved, Herbert would have to find the substance of true religion in *all* religions. This inquiry would require a wholesale reconsideration of gentile superstition, what it was, and how it operated.

ii. De Religione Gentilium: The symbolic meaning of pagan religion

This is precisely the task Herbert set himself in *De Religione Gentilium* (“Religion of the Pagans”; henceforth cited as *RG*). This book appeared only after Herbert’s death. Its publication was ensured by the son of his friend and primary source, Johannes Vossius. First printed in Amsterdam in 1663, it is a far more ambitious book than *Religione Laici*.¹⁹ *Religione Laici* recommends that its reader adopt certain beliefs as a means to salvation. *Religione Gentilium* endeavors to change the readers’ understanding of “religion” (and “true religion”) dramatically, showing how not only the reader but also pagans of any faith could achieve the same salvation.

In this section I will lay out the arguments and methodology of Herbert’s *De Religione Gentilium*. What I hope to show is that in his effort to explain how the pagans might be saved, Herbert develops not only a concept of religion that stands outside any particular creed or set of rituals, but also a method of studying it. The crucial issue will be the relationship between pagan beliefs and rites and the common notions: though pagans

¹⁹ *The Autobiography of Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, with Introduction, Notes, Appendices, and a Continuation of the Life by Sidney Lee*, 2nd ed. (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1886), xxvii. A second edition of *De Religione Gentilium* appeared in 1700, and it was translated into English in 1709. Many scholars have mistakenly attributed the publication of *De Religione Gentilium* to Johannes Vossius, who could not have printed the book because he died in 1649. It was Vossius’ more intellectually freethinking son, Isaac Vossius, who published the book. See Hudson, 48.

think and do ridiculous things, their rites and believes are *symbolic* rather than idolatrous. That is to say, some aspects of pagan religion refer beyond themselves to the common notions, and therefore everyone, regardless of birthplace or time, could potentially know and live according to them. In arguing that pagan beliefs and rites are symbolic, Herbert joins an old debate, at least as old as Augustine's *City of God against the Pagans*.

A. "Religio" and Symbolism in Edward Herbert's Classical Sources

A complete history of the word "religion," from its origin in the Latin *religio* to Herbert's milieu in the 17th century, is outside the scope of my dissertation. However, it is essential to offer a more detailed sense of how Herbert's sources used and debated the term if we are to further define what Edward Herbert contributed to the history of the study of religion. In order to provide a sufficient but manageable historical context, I have elected to focus on the classical sources Edward Herbert owned or used.²⁰ Then, as I approach Herbert's day, I will discuss other books that, like *Religione Gentilium*, also take a global and historical view of religion. Of each source I will ask what the term "religion" means, how it is categorized, and how it is criticized (as idolatrous, for instance). Doing so will ultimately make Herbert's place in the history of the study and criticism of religion clearer.

²⁰ Edward was one of the great book collectors of his time, owning well over a thousand volumes on subjects as diverse as history, theology, natural philosophy, medicine, and tales of travels to China and the Indies. He left his books in Greek and Latin to Jesus College, Oxford. A list of those books may be found in *Oxford Bibliographical Society, Proceedings and Papers*, Volume V, Part II (1937), "The Library of Jesus College, Oxford, with an Appendix on the Books Bequeathed thereto by Lord Herbert of Cherbury," C.J. Fordyce and T.M. Knox. A 1637 catalogue of his library is also available in the National Library of Wales (MS 5298E). Unfortunately, much of his collection, including nearly all of his books in modern languages, has been lost. Dunstan Roberts has compiled what we know about the lost books in his article "Abundantly replenish with Books of his own purchasing and choice': Lord Herbert of Cherbury's Library at Montgomery Castle," *Library & Information History*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2015, pp. 117-136.

Herbert drew many of his examples of pagan beliefs and rites from historians of ancient Greece such as Thucydides and Herodotus.²¹ Wayne Hudson has argued that Herbert's theoretical understanding of *religio* ultimately derives from ancient Rome.²² In Hudson's reading, Herbert follows Cicero in thinking right *religion* is mostly a matter of living a virtuous life. In my view, however, Herbert learned something even more important from his reading of his pagan predecessors. The three basic activities in Roman cults were sacrifice, divination, and prayer.²³ These cults each had their own mythological gods and stories. But did the pagan philosophers really believe these stories? Or were these popular rites and beliefs really symbolic expressions of more sophisticated, philosophical ideas?

The possible disconnection between *religio* (duty to worship the gods) and theology (an account of the gods) is a major issue in one of Herbert's main sources, Augustine's *The City of God Against the Pagans*. "Religion" means to Augustine roughly what it meant to other Romans: the pious worship and service that bind one to God.²⁴ But for Augustine this worship should only be directed to the one true God, not to the gods of the city.

In his discussion of pagan *religio*, Augustine argues with the Roman scholar Marcus Varro, whose writing survives primarily in *The City of God*. Varro divides theology into three types: mythical, natural, and civil. "They call that kind of theology

²¹ For example, in chapter VII, "On the Cult of the Five Planets," Herbert notes that "Amongst the Scythians, as Herodotus tells us, Mars was worshipped most frequently, although Vesta was their chief deity . . ." (RG, 120). See the *Oxford Bibliographical Society, Proceedings and Papers*, Volume V, Part II (1937), 77-8, for a list of Herbert's history books in Greek and Latin.

²² Hudson, 51.

²³ James B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 23-28. For his fuller account of religious life in Rome, see 13-54.

²⁴ *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Book X, Chapter 1. See also Augustine's *Of True Religion*, chapter IV in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, trans. John H.S. Burleigh (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1953).

mythical which is especially used by the poets; the physical is that which the philosophers use; and the civil, that which the people use.”²⁵ The mythical kind of theology, as Varro and Augustine (and later Herbert) agree, is full of vile stories and its gods are not really worthy of worship at all. “Natural” or “physical theology” refers to the doctrines of the various philosophical schools, such as the Stoics and the Epicureans. Varro sometimes hints at his own natural theology, namely that God is “the soul of the world, governing it through motion and reason.”²⁶ Civil theology, most closely related to *religio*, “is that which the citizens in their towns, and especially the priests, should know and administer. In this kind is contained the knowledge of which gods are to be worshipped publicly, and what rites and sacrifices are appropriate to each.”²⁷ Although a scholar like Varro might have scoffed at the mythical theology, he admits that he adheres to the local civil theology.²⁸

Varro can accept the local *religio*, because though it requires its citizens to worship images of the gods, pagan civil theology is actually symbolic. Whether the plebs performing the priests’ rites and sacrifices know it or not, they are really honoring the god(s) of the philosophers. Varro thereby gives *religio* a “naturalistic explanation” (Augustine’s phrase), in which civic religion can be *true religio*, in the sense of being a disposition ultimately directed at the “world spirit” or some other philosophical

²⁵ Varro quoted in Augustine’s, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, Book VI, Chapter 5. It should be noted that Christian writers often objected to the term “theology” because they associated it with pagan accounts of the gods. They preferred to think of what we would call theology as “Christian philosophy.”

²⁶ *The City of God*, Book IV, Chapter 31. Varro’s view is not identical to Stoicism but clearly indebted to it. See Keimpe Algra’s “Stoic Philosophical Theology and Graeco-Roman Religion,” *God and Cosmos in Stoicism*, ed. Richardo Salles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 242-3.

²⁷ *The City of God*, Book VI, Chapter 5.

²⁸ *The City of God*, Book IV, Chapter 31.

understanding of the divine. As Augustine reports, Varro thinks these images help the simple folk raise their minds to the true gods:

Varro commends these naturalistic explanations so highly as to say that the men of old invented the images, attributes and adornments of the gods precisely so that, when those who had approached the mysteries of the doctrine had seen these visible things with their eyes, they might also see with their mind the soul of the world and its parts: that is, the true gods.²⁹

Varro's "naturalistic explanation" relies on a kind of symbolic thinking. The images and attributes of the popular gods are not worthy of worship in of themselves, but the people of the city worship the true gods through them.

Augustine does not buy it. For one thing, he insists that the city's gods, and the stories about them, are every bit as absurd and immoral as the poet's gods, as philosophers other than Varro admit when they group mythical and civic theology together.³⁰ Therefore when Varro rightly criticizes the poets' gods ("upon whom you very freely vomit forth what you think," notes Augustine) he inadvertently discredits the city's gods, too ("but you thereby spatter the civil gods also, whether you will to or not").³¹ But more importantly, the devotion of *religio* must be directed toward its proper object: the one true God, creator of all things. Instead of worshipping the Deity, civil

²⁹ *The City of God*, Book VII, Chapter 5. See also Book VII, Chapter 19. C.f. Book VII, Chapter 27: "But when I consider the naturalistic explanations by which learned and acute men endeavor to turn these human affairs into things divine, I see nothing except what can be attributed to temporal and earthly works, and to corporeal beings, invisible, perhaps, but still subject to change; and these are in no way the true God."

³⁰ *The City of God*, Book VI, Chapter 7-9. Augustine criticizes the natural theology of the pagan philosophers elsewhere (for example in Book 7, chapter 17 and 23), but he is happy to appropriate their arguments against popular religion. As witness against mythic and civic Roman gods, for instance, he quotes Seneca: "They dedicate to beings who are holy, immortal and inviolable images made of the most worthless and motionless matter. They give them the appearance of men or beasts or fish, or a mixture of both sexes, or different bodies combined. They are called divine beings; but if they should happen to receive breath and we were suddenly to encounter them, they would be called monsters."

³¹ *The City of God*, Book VI, Chapter 6.

theology offers worship to idols and, through those, demons.³² Augustine does not forbid images in worship, but the final end of any worship must be the true God if it [the worship] is to be true *religio*:

Thus, if some element of the world, or some created spirit—even though not impure or evil—is worshipped with the temple, priesthood and sacrifice due to the true God, the worship is evil, not because the means by which it is performed are evil, but because such means ought to be used only in the worship of Him to whom alone such worship and service is due.³³

Augustine rejects the idea that any worship of a pagan god could count as “sacrifice due to the true God.” Even Varro’s “world spirit” is not a proper object for worship, because it is “created” rather than being the creator.

By refusing Varro’s “naturalistic explanation,” Augustine has drawn a hard line between properly directed Christian *religio*, on the one hand, and misdirected pagan *religio* on the other. Near the end of his life, in his *Retractations*, Augustine clarified and enlarged on (but largely maintained) the distinction between true and false worship. In fact, “Christian *religio*” had existed since time immemorial, because the Creator had always existed and was therefore a possible object of worship.³⁴ So although Augustine refused Varro’s “naturalistic interpretation,” he allows that many different rites and rituals would be acceptable, so long as they were directed to the right end. In a letter to a priest named Deogratias, he writes: “it makes no difference that people worship with different ceremonies in accord with the different requirements of times and places, if

³² *The City of God*, Book IV, Chapter 27: “But the gods do not hear you: they are demons who teach depravity and rejoice in vileness.”

³³ *The City of God*, Book VII, Chapter 27.

³⁴ Augustine, *Retractations*, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 60, trans. Sister Mary Inez Bogan, R.S.M. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1968), Book I, Chapter 12, paragraph 3.

what is worshipped is holy.”³⁵ But any worship of any created thing was offered to false gods: “What the true religion reprehends in the superstitious practices of the pagans is that sacrifice is offered to false gods and wicked demons.”³⁶ The problem was not the “practices” or ceremonies, or even the pagans’ feelings of devotion (their *religio*). The problem was the direction and end of that devotion, “offered to false gods and wicked demons.” Augustine’s refusal of Varro’s symbolic interpretation has dire soteriological implications for those who adhere to the *religio* of the pagan city: “In other words, it is not possible to arrive at the felicity of eternal life by worshipping gods of the kind established by the cities, nor by the kind of worship that was offered to them.”³⁷

In *Religione Gentilium* Herbert quotes Varro on pagan figures, on Pluto, Janus, Nemesis, and so on. Quoting from Augustine, he also lays out Varro’s three-part division of mythical, physical, and civil theology. Anticipating later sections of the chapter, I note for now that Herbert sides with Varro: “From these words of Varro, and from the opinion of Plato and the Platonists whom I have cited earlier, it appears that pagan religion was partly constructed from solid reason, partly from mysterious poetic fictions, and partly from priestly inventions” (*RG*, 347). Endorsing Varro, Herbert has re-entered this ancient debate, and—as we shall see— he takes what had been for a long time the losing side.

B. Sources from the medieval period to the 16th Century

Herbert’s classical sources set the basic terms for his thought about pagan religion and its relationship to the common notions. But medieval thinkers were also essential

³⁵ Augustine, letter 102 in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 18, trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons, S.N.D. (New York, NY: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1953), pp. 148-177.

³⁶ Augustine, letter 102.

³⁷ *The City of God*, Book VII, Chapter 1. This is a point Augustine emphasizes, making it also in Book VI, Chapter 6 and 9.

sources in his eventual theory of pagan religion. In particular, he draws on Thomas Aquinas' account of *religio* and idolatry, and on Platonists like Nicholas of Cusa and Marsilio Ficino's efforts to find a similar feeling of devotion expressed through a diversity of rites.³⁸ Detailing their positions on religion and idolatry will set the stage for my discussion of Herbert's theory, allowing us to see what Herbert inherited and how he transformed it.

Although Augustine remained influential in the Middle Ages, terms from *The City of God* like "mythic" and "civil" theology fell out of use. Due to the persistence of Judaism and the rise of Islam, medieval Christians (like Roger Bacon in his *Opus Majus*) divided the people of the world into rough categories: Jews, Christians, Idolaters (or pagans), and "Muhamadens."³⁹ *Religio*, however, did not only or even primarily refer to the genus of these species. Instead, there was a sense in which *religio* was something common to them all. This surprising idea becomes comprehensible if one considers the place of *religio* in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*.

Aquinas discusses *religio* specifically under the virtue of justice. As one of the cardinal virtues, justice is a disposition or inclination formed by habitual actions. Following Aristotle, Aquinas holds that "the essential character of justice consists in rendering to another his due according to equality."⁴⁰ *Religio* therefore belongs under justice because it consists in trying to give to God what is due to God: "Now the good to

³⁸ Herbert owned Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* and quoted from his questions on religion and idolatry (RG, 348). No record exists of Herbert owning books by Nicholas of Cusa. Herbert was, however, deeply indebted to Cusa's inheritor, Marsilio Ficino.

³⁹ Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd Ed. (London: Gerald Duckworth and Company, Ltd., 1986), 12.

⁴⁰ *Summa Theologica*, IIa-IIae, Q. 80, Art., co. Cf. II-II, Q 58, Art. 1, co.

which religion is directed, is to give due honor to God.”⁴¹ A person excellent in the virtue of *religio* is disposed to give God what is God’s due, and this disposition can be strengthened into a habit through repeated acts of worship. The worshipper can cultivate *religio* either through interior acts like devotion and prayer or through external acts such as adoration, sacrifice, and tithes.⁴²

So like Augustine and Cicero, Aquinas regards *religio* as a worshipful attitude. But his discussion of *religio* differs from theirs in a crucial way. He does not talk at all about any particular pagan beliefs or rituals, about this or that form of *religio*. Aquinas lifts *religio* entirely out of Augustine’s Roman context and treats it first and foremost as part of human nature. It is part of human nature because, as a part of justice, it belongs to the moral virtues, which entail “a natural or quasi-natural inclination to do some particular action.”⁴³ The key word here is “natural.” Because *religio* belongs to the natural virtues, it is “proportionate to human nature, a happiness, to wit, which man can obtain by means of his natural principles.”⁴⁴ In other words, *religio* does not belong to Christians alone. The religious impulse belongs to human nature. On Aquinas’ account, a Jewish person or pagan has the same capacity for *religio* as a Christian, because by the light of natural reason, they all know they owe thanks to their creator: “It belongs to the dictate of natural reason that man should do something through reverence for God. But that he should do this or that determinate thing does not belong to the dictate of natural reason, but is established by Divine or human law.”⁴⁵ So although by the light of natural reason Jews and Christians and pagans all know they “should” revere God, *how* they

⁴¹ *ST*, IIa-IIae, Q. 81, Art. 4, co.

⁴² For discussions of the particular acts of religion, internal and external, see *ST* IIa-IIae, Q. 82-7.

⁴³ *ST*, IIa-Iae, Q. 58, Art. 1, co.

⁴⁴ *ST*, IIa-Iae, Q. 62, Art. 1, co.

⁴⁵ *ST*, IIa-IIae, Q. 81, Art. 2, ad. 3.

should worship God and *what* they should worship does not belong to “natural reason.” Their rituals and gods might be all-too human inventions, the product of “human” rather than “Divine” law.

The name for *religio* gone awry, the name of the vice opposed to the virtue of religion, is superstition. And although Aquinas thinks that superstition can take many forms (such as divination and the use of magic) the most important for my purposes is idolatry. Aquinas defines idolatry as worshipping part of creation rather than its Creator: “For the end of divine worship is in the first place to give reverence to God, and in this respect the first species of this genus [superstition] is *idolatry*, which unduly gives divine honor to a creature.”⁴⁶ Idolatry is worship that alights on the wrong object, whether that object is a mythic hero, the “world soul” of Greek philosophers, or an object infested by a demon. Fervent piety and scrupulous attention to ceremony provide no defense against idolatry, because *latria* [devotion] “is applied univocally, whether to true religion or to idolatry, just as the payment of a tax is univocally the same, whether it be paid to the true or to a false king.”⁴⁷ The issue, finally, is the direction of *religio*. If it aims at the Creator, it is right religion. If it stops anywhere else, it is idolatrous religion.

Aquinas thus maintains Augustine’s bright line between rightly and wrongly directed *religio* while discussing it as a natural human capacity rather than tying it to any mythic, civic, or philosophical system. Right *religio* was directed to the “most high

⁴⁶ *ST*, IIa-IIae, Q. 92, Art 2, co. See also Aquinas’ further definition of idolatry in Q. 94, co. “It belongs to superstition to exceed the due mode of divine worship, and this is done chiefly when divine worship is given to whom it should not be given. Now it should be given to the most high uncreated God alone, as stated above when we were treating of religion. Therefore it is superstition to give divine worship to any creature whatsoever.”

⁴⁷ *ST*, IIa-IIae, Q. 94, Art 1, ad. 2.

uncreated God,” namely the Christian God, and devotion to anything else, to any created thing, was wrongly directed *religio* and probably idolatry.

As an aside, a Reformation theologian like John Calvin also thought religious feeling natural to humanity, and he also distinguished between right worship and idolatry. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he describes “pure and genuine religion” as “confidence in God coupled with serious fear—fear, which includes in it willing reverence, and brings along with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed by the law.”⁴⁸ Calvin’s definition has two parts here. First, it is an attitude of reverent awe, and second, this feeling of awe leads to worship, through prayer, song, ritual, etc. Calvin thinks that all people, even the most barbarous and idolatrous, have an intuitive religious sense because “a sense of Deity is indelibly engraved on the human heart” and “naturally engendered in all, and thoroughly fixed as it were in our very bones.”⁴⁹ But this indelible sense can easily be led awry by idolatrous images. Citing the Roman satirist Juvenal on the Jews, Calvin exhorts his readers: “In the fact that the people every now and then rushed forth with boiling hast in pursuit of idols, just like water gushing forth with violence from a copious spring, let us learn how prone our nature is to idolatry, that we that we may not, by throwing the whole blame of a common vice upon the Jews, be led away by vain and sinful enticements to sleep the sleep of death.”⁵⁰ Idolatry, wrongly placed worship, is an ever-present danger.

But more Platonically inclined Christians began to blur the line between Christian and pagan devotion. The most important of these Platonists for Herbert were Marsilio

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.2.2.

⁴⁹ Calvin, 1.3.3.

⁵⁰ Calvin, 1.3.11.

Ficino and Nicholas of Cusa. These early modern Platonists did as much as anyone to change the meaning of the word “religion.”⁵¹ Both Cusa and Ficino tried to reconcile the diversity of rites into a single *religio*, a universal disposition to worship God.

Cardinal Cusa writes most explicitly about religion in his *De Pace Fidei* (“On the Peace of Faith”), as a response to the recent sack of Constantinople (1453). In the treatise the “Supreme King” of heaven, distressed by the violence visited by the Turks on the city due to “the difference of rite between the religions,” gathers together “in the presence of the Word the most judicious men of this world.”⁵² The book then proceeds as a dialogue between the wise men and “The Word.” Notably, the wise men do not fit the standard medieval taxonomy of Christian, Jew, Pagan and Muslim. Cusa instead identifies his participants, even the Christians, geographically. So he has a German, an Italian, an Englishman, a Frenchman, and a Chaldean—all of whom fit into medieval Christendom. But he also has an Arab, a Tartar, a Greek, a Sythian (from central Asia), a Persian, a Syrian, and an Indian. Cusa brings all of these people together because they all practice different rites, which could become sources of conflict between them.

As might be expected in a dialogue in which a character named “The Word” has all the answers, Cusa’s *De Pace Fidei* is ultimately a Christian apology. In the ninth section of the book, for example, the Word convinces the Jewish and Arab speakers that the Trinity, correctly understood, “will be embraced by all.”⁵³ And yet despite his apologetic intentions, Cusa’s Platonism ultimately underlies his confidence that even

⁵¹ William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 70.

⁵² *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1990). The framing device takes up the first three sections of the treatise.

⁵³ Cusa, section IX.

those who seem to worship many gods in fact worship one God: “For just as there are no white things if whiteness does not exist, so if the deity does not exist, there are no gods. Therefore, the worshipping of [a plurality of] gods bespeaks the deity; and he who says that there is more than one god says [implicitly] that there is, antecedently, one Beginning of them all.”⁵⁴

More consequential for future understandings of *religio*, however, is how Cusa understands the relationship between *religio* and “rites.” The entire purpose of the treatise is to convince the participants that, as the Word tells the Arab: “all men declare together with you that there is one Absolute Wisdom, which they presuppose and which is the one God. ... Therefore, for all those who are of sound understanding there is one religion and worship, which is presupposed in all the diversity of the rites.”⁵⁵ There is indeed a diversity of rites around the world, and even diversity within Christianity and Judaism. But no matter what the object of their worship appears to be, they ultimately worship the same (Christian) God.

In some parts of the world idolatry still obscures the object of true worship, as the Indian wise man admits. But he also thinks that because the Indians “do not doubt that there is a religious necessity for the worship of one God,” they will break those idols, as the Greeks and Arabs have already done. Once they break their idols, “they will thus reach a peaceful conclusion.”⁵⁶ Once the Indians realize that the idols are unnecessary for the worship of “the one God,” they will abandon them, too, thereby eliminating the grounds of conflict with other faiths. Cusa has effectively reintroduced Varro’s more

⁵⁴ Cusa, section VI.

⁵⁵ Cusa, section VI.

⁵⁶ Cusa, section VII.

symbolic understanding of pagan ritual, and in fact Cusa quotes Varro approvingly at the end of the treatise.⁵⁷

But even in Cusa *religio* remains a worshipful disposition rather than a discrete set of beliefs and rites. He is not saying that the Turks and Christians and Indians think the same things (though they can be brought to Christianity through a Socratic dialogue with “the Word”). Rather, he is saying that they have directed their *religio* to the One God, despite appearances to the contrary. (Cusa thinks this underlying agreement could be the basis of peace, though he has nothing to say about the soteriological fate of the pagans.)

Like Calvin and Aquinas, Ficino thinks that all people have in their natures a religious sensibility. “When I say religion,” he writes, “I mean that instinct which is common and natural to all peoples and which we everywhere and always use to think about providence and to worship it as the queen of the world.” In a charming simile, he asserts: “Worshipping the divine is as natural to men almost as neighing to horses or barking to dogs.”⁵⁸

But unlike Aquinas and Calvin, and more in line with Cusa, Ficino has no account of idolatry or superstition. Drawing forth another colorful simile, he reasons that just as different people across the earth eat and drink different things in different ways, so, too, do people express their natural inclination to worship God through a variety of rites: “God is adored among all peoples in every century, although not with the same rites

⁵⁷ Cusa, section XIX: “After these topics were discussed in the foregoing way with the wise [men] of the nations, there were exhibited very many books authored by those who had written about the observances of the ancients—excellent books, indeed, in every language (as, for example, among the Latins, Marcus Varro; among the Greeks, Eusebius, who gathered examples of the diversity of the religions; and very many others). After these [writings] were examined, it was ascertained that the entire diversity lay in the rites rather than in the worship of one God.”

⁵⁸ Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, vol. 4, book xiv, chapter ix.

and in the same ways, because it is natural. ... In no place or time has there been an interruption of religion, although God has been worshipped in various times and places in various ways.”⁵⁹ The human religious inclination is always and everywhere the same, but it finds “various” expressions, meaning different manners of worship at different times. The possibility and danger of idolatry does not play a significant role in his chapters on religion. In fact, Ficino goes so far as to say that in addition to unwittingly worshipping the one true God, the variety of rites in the world has been ordained by God in order to make it more beautiful.⁶⁰

Which is not to say that he regards all faiths as equal. In Ficino’s later apologetic *De Christiana Religione*, he argues for the superiority of Christianity over pagan philosophy, Islam, and Judaism.⁶¹ But he does so on the grounds that Christ most perfectly exemplified religious devotion to God and the requirements of morality.⁶² He writes, “Those above all others ... worship God sincerely who revere Him through goodness of action, truth of the tongue, clarity of the mind as they may and through charity as they must. Such, as we shall show, are those who worship God in the way that Christ, the master of life, and His disciples have taught.”⁶³ The best, most sincere worship of God consists in elements of morality—good and charitable actions, truth-telling, clear thinking—which Christ teaches but does not seem to own exclusively.

⁵⁹ Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, vol. 4, book xiv, chapter x.

⁶⁰ Cavanaugh, 71.

⁶¹ *De Christiana religione*. For a longer consideration of *De Christiana religione*, see James Hankins, “Marsilio Ficino and the Religion of the Philosophers,” *Rinascimento*, vol. 48, 2008, pp. 101-121.

⁶² See Cavanaugh, 71; Hankins, “Marsilio Ficino,” 22-8; and the late, eminent Renaissance historian Paul Oskar Kristeller’s introductory essay in *Marsilio Ficino and His Work after Five Hundred Years*, ed. Leo S. Oschki (Florence: National Institute for the Study of the Renaissance, 1987), 9.

⁶³ *De Christiana Religione*. Quoted in Paul Oskar Kristeller’s *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1943), 320.

When Ficino argues that religious inclination is a natural part of human beings, but downplays the dangers of idolatry, we are on the cusp of Herbert's *Religione Gentilium*. Like everyone from Aquinas to Ficino, he will assert that religious feeling is a natural part of the human animal (implanted there as the five common notions), but he will also take one step beyond Cusa and Ficino when he favors no historical faith over any other. He will be concerned about idolatry, more so than Cusa and Ficino in fact, but he will suggest that Christianity, as much as any other creed, runs this risk.

C. Renaissance Encyclopedias, Histories, and Apologies: toward "religion" as a scheme of classification

There is one more important background to Herbert's *De Religione Gentilium*: encyclopedias. Starting in the 16th century, writers offered massive, multi-volume works promising to detail all the world's religions. "Religion" was becoming an overarching category, the genus for all the individual species. To be clear, just because medieval authors did not use the word "religion" in this way, it does not follow that they did not see Islam and Judaism, for example, as different instances of a single type. But authors like Roger Bacon tended to use words like *fides* (a system of beliefs) or *lex* (a set of moral laws) to distinguish them.⁶⁴ It was common enough to divide the world between Christians, Muslims, Jews, and pagans.⁶⁵ What we see in these encyclopedias, then, is not the sudden break from medieval to modern notions of "religion" but rather the slow expansion of the term "religion" as it displaced other ways of talking about the same phenomena.

⁶⁴ Peter Biller, "Words and the Medieval Notion of 'Religion,'" *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 36, no. 3 July 1985, pp. 352-368.

⁶⁵ Biller, 361.

As was suggested by Cusa's geographically far-flung characters, Europeans in the 15th and 16th centuries were coming into contact with an increasingly large number of hitherto unheard of peoples and cultures. In addition to his classical histories and philosophies, Herbert drew from these more recent sources, especially the priests, soldiers, and explorers who wrote about the beliefs and rites of the Americans.⁶⁶ These explorers discovered and catalogued the rites, laws, and beliefs of people from China, Africa, and the Americas. It is common to read that the encounter with diversity forced the Europeans to recognize themselves and their beliefs as parochial—their religion as one among many. Guy Stroumsa summarizes the challenges as follows: “The discovery of the New World opened the door to knowledge of previously unknown societies that did not fit in the traditional categories for analyzing religious phenomena: revealed religion, heresy, idolatry, and natural religion.”⁶⁷ The encounters, however, did not force Europeans to change their thinking about religion automatically. On the contrary, as Sabine MacCormack has argued, Spanish missionaries and soldiers understood the Incas and Mexicans with the theoretical tools forged by Aquinas and already in their possession.⁶⁸ The idea of “religion” as a general term, of which both Christianity and Inca sun worship were two instances, appeared nowhere in the explorers' books. Instead, as J.Z. Smith points out in his comments on Acosta's history of the Indies, “‘Religion’

⁶⁶ For example, Edward owned copies of books by Garcilas de la Vega and Jose de Acosta and drew from Vega's *Historia de las Incas* and Acosta's *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias* for his chapters on sun and star worship (chapters 4 and 8 respectively).

⁶⁷ Stroumsa, 16.

⁶⁸ Sabine MacCormack. *Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991). MacCormack argues that Aquinas' account of fallible human perception explained the natives' fall into idolatry (see especially 29-40 and 236-240). To be sure, the encounter with new continents and people unsettled the explorers, but it was rather easy for them to group the people of the Americas together with other “idolaters.” What really disturbed the Spaniards was that these “idolaters,” unlike idolaters closer to home, or Muslims, knew nothing at all about Christianity or the geography of the world as it appeared in the Bible (see MacCormack, 48-52).

per se is never defined. Its meaning must be sought in words associated with it as well as its synonyms.”⁶⁹ “Religion” was one of a constellation of words—including custom, superstition, rites, idolatry, ceremony, and sacrifice—that Acosta and others, like Hernán Cortés, used to describe what the locals were doing.

New world exploration and Renaissance curiosity about antiquity, however, certainly set the stage for new uses of “religion” to emerge.⁷⁰ Herbert’s libraries included dozens of ancient histories and contemporary travelers’ tales, the two main sources of information about pagan beliefs and customs in his day.⁷¹ Herbert, however, would not be the only one to compile an encyclopedia of world religions. Shortly after the turn of the 17th century, scholars started to compile and publish encyclopedias with names like *Purchas his Pilgrimage, or Relations of the World and the Religions Observed in all Ages and Places discovered ... (by Samuel Purchas)*. Such an encyclopedia was, Purchas claimed, a novel project. “The newness also makes it more difficult,” Purchas wrote to his patron George Abbot, then archbishop of Canterbury, “being an enterprise never yet (to my knowledge) by any, in any Language, attempted; conjoining thus Antique and Modern Histories, in the observation of all the rarities of the World, and especially of that Soule of the world, Religion.”⁷² A new kind of book, a book about beliefs and practices around the world, had become possible in 17th-century Europe.⁷³

⁶⁹ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 269-284. Quote on page 270. See especially pages 269-272.

⁷⁰ Stroumsa, 5.

⁷¹ A list of Herbert’s ancient histories may be found in *Proceedings and Papers of the Oxford Bibliographical Society* (cited above). For his travel books, see a longer catalogue held at The National Library of Wales (MS 5298E). His library included accounts of travels to the “Indes,” Tibet, Canada, and Ethiopia.

⁷² Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimage, or Relations of the World and the Religions Observed in all Ages and Places discovered, from the Creation until this Present. In Foure Parts. This First Contayneth a Theologicall and Geographicall Historie of Asia, Africa, and America, with the Ilands adjacent. Declaring*

The new encyclopedias did not totally break with the medieval categories. Most obviously, they kept the medieval classification scheme intact, dividing the world between a few major groups, most often Christians, Jews, Muslims, and pagans (sometimes called heathens, gentiles, or idol worshippers). In Edward Brerewood's *Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages, and Religions, through the Chiefe Parts of the World*, he devotes chapters ten through thirteen to "Christians," "Mahumetans," "Idolaters," and "Jewes" (respectively).⁷⁴ In Alexander Ross' *Pansebeia: or, A View of All Religions in the World*, he relates the history of Africa as follows: "From Gentilism

the ancient Religions before the Floud, the Heathenth, Jewish, and Saracenicall in all Ages since, in those parts professed, with their severall Opinions, Idols, Oracles, Temples, Priests, Fasts, Feasts, Sacrifices, and Rites religious: Their Beginnings, Proceedings, Alterations, Sects, Orders and Successions. With brief descriptions of the Countries, Nations, States, Discoveries; Private and publik Customes, and the most remarkable rarities of Nature, or Humane industry, in the same. The third Edition, much enlarged with Additions through the whole Worke; By Samuel Purchas, Parson of St. Martins by Ludgate London (London: Printed by William Stansby for Henry Fatherstone, and are to be sold at his shop in Pauls Church-yard at the signe of the Rose, 1617).

⁷³ Purchas' kind of book did have predecessors, though he probably did not know it. Medieval Muslim scholars had written books with an historical view of Persian religion, Judaism, Christianity, and Indian religions. The philosopher al-Shahrastani, in his *Religious Parties and Schools of Philosophy*, tried to find a meeting point between all known systems of thought (see Sharpe's *Comparative Religion: A History*, page 11). However, the Islamic scholarship, as far as I can tell, was unknown in Europe in its own time or in the 17th century, and so likely did not have had much, if any, influence the study of "religion" in the west. There is a European exception, but it proves the rule. In 1520 a German humanist and churchman named Joannes Boemus published a book called *Omnium gentium mores, legis et rites* (The Manners, Laws, and Rites of all Nations). Mircea Eliade called it the first history of world religion. Tellingly, though, "religion" does not appear in Boemus' title, nor does Boemus use the word "religion" to refer to any nation's whole system of beliefs and rituals. "Religion" had yet to be fully "externalized" in Stroumsa's sense. For the complete 1611 edition, see *The Manners, Lawes, and Customes of all Nations. Collected out of the best Writers by Joannes Boemus. With many other things of the same Arguments, fathered out of the Histories of Nicholas Damascen. The like also out of the History of America, or Brasill, written by John Lerijs. The faith, religion, and manner of the Aethiopians, and the declaration of the people of Lappia, compiled by Damianus a Coes. With a short discourse of the Aethiopians, taken out of Joseph Scaliger his seventh book de Emendatione temporum. Written in Latin, and now newly translated into English by Ed. Aston* (London, Printed by G. Eld and are to bee sold by Franceis, Burton, 1611).

⁷⁴ Edward Brerewood, *Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages, and Religions, through the Chiefe Parts of the World* (London: Printed by John Norton, for Joyce Norton, and Richard Whitaker, at the Kings Armes in St. Pauls Churchyard, 1635). See also page 79: "There are foure sorts or sects of Religion, observed in the sundry regions of the World. Namely, Idolatry, Mahumetanisme, Judaisme, and Christianity."

they were converted to Judaism, then to Christianity, and at last to Mahumetanism.”⁷⁵

Vossius’ *De Origine ac Progressu Idolatriæ* (The Origin and Progress of Idolatry) used the word “idolatry” as a catchall term for ancient beliefs and rites. “Religion” in these books mostly refers to a “devotional feeling” expressed through a variety of rites.

But the old classificatory scheme sometimes proved inadequate to the ways of life these authors tried to capture. Alexander Ross cannot classify the Muscovites as either Christian or pagan, since they seem to exhibit elements of both.⁷⁶ Brerewood admits that alongside Christianity, Islam, and Idolatry “there are two or three irregular Nations, being for their Religion mingled as it were, of some of the former sects.”⁷⁷ One European group named the “Morduities” has “mingled all three sects: for they are both baptised like Christians, and circumcised like *Mahumetans*, and withal worship Idols.”⁷⁸ Church historians, especially those who studied the Bible, were also finding that rituals and beliefs changed over time and could even be borrowed from neighboring groups of people.⁷⁹

After the Reformation, it was even difficult to speak of a singular Christianity (of course, sects like the Nestorians and Monophysites had split from what became orthodox Christianity long ago). The title of Chapter 15 in Brerewood’s enquiry into the diversity of world religions reflects the difficulty: “Of the diverse sorts or sects of Christians in the

⁷⁵Alexander Ross, *Pansebeia: or, A View of all Religions in the World with the several Church Governments, from the Creation till these times. Also, A Discovery of all known Heresies in all Ages and Places: and choice Observations and reflections throughout the Whole. The Sixth Edition, Enlarged and Perfected*, by ALEXANDER ROSS (London: printed for John Williams, at the sign of the Crown, in St. Paul’s Church-yard, MDCLXXXIII [1683]), 94. The first edition of Ross’ *Pansebeia* was published in 1653, a decade before *De Religione Gentilium* appeared.

⁷⁶ Ross, 514.

⁷⁷ Brerewood, 91.

⁷⁸ Brerewood, 91.

⁷⁹ See Stroumsa for a discussion of comparisons between the ancient Israelites and their neighbors (77-79), and for the Cambridge clergyman John Spencer’s discovery of religious evolution (99).

world, and of their severall [*sic*] religions.”⁸⁰ The breakdown of hard classificatory lines between Christian and pagan allowed for interdenominational Christian polemics. Purchas compiled his mammoth compendium of the world’s religions in no small part to convince his reader that “Popish Rites” were “derived out of Chaldean, Aegyptian, and other Fountaines of Paganisme.”⁸¹ The complexity of pagan ritual and political exigencies were making the medieval classifications obsolete.

These encyclopedias catalogue an astonishing variety of beliefs, customs, laws, and rites. What they do not do, however, is theorize the categories anew. They tend to use the old categories (Christian, Jew, pagan, Muslim), even as those categories prove inadequate. It remained for somebody to marry the details of pagan beliefs and practices with Cusa and Ficino’s efforts to find some defensible commonality between them.

D. Edward Herbert’s Symbolic Theory of “Religion”

This integration and reinterpretation is precisely the inquiry Herbert undertook in writing *De Religione Gentilium*. In *Religione Gentilium* Herbert expands his question about who shall be saved radically. He includes not only the wayfaring reader, but also the whole human race, from antiquity to Herbert’s present day. Theologians from the first centuries of Christian history had ridiculed the pagans’ beliefs and public religion, and divines in Herbert’s day, too, cast anathemas back into antiquity, so that “the greater part of humanity seemed doomed to a sentence of eternal punishment.”⁸² On the one hand, Herbert found such a harsh judgment incompatible with “the dignity” of an all-powerful

⁸⁰ Brerewood, 124.

⁸¹ Purchas, “To the Reader.”

⁸² Edward Herbert, *Pagan Religion: A Translation of De religione gentilium*, ed. John Anthony Butler (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, Inc., 1996), 51.

and just God: “How could I believe that a just God could take pleasure in the eternal punishment of those to whom he had never afforded a method of salvation...?” (*RG*, 53-4). On the other hand, when he read the pagans, he had to agree with the Church fathers. The pagan rituals and gods *were* ridiculous. They worshipped planets and unseen spirits and even wicked kings. They divinized emotions such as fear. How could these pagans be saved?

The ultimate means to salvation, the content of proper religion, was of course to know and live according to the five common notions, and Herbert reiterates them in the second paragraph of *Religione Gentilium*.⁸³ But simply reiterating them will not answer his question about the pagans' fate. On the contrary, according to the fifth common notion, there will be rewards *and punishments* after this life. It is entirely possible that “the greater part of mankind” will receive punishment. Herbert must prove that, despite its seeming impiety, pagan religion of all kinds in fact gave its adherents the chance to believe, worship, and live according to those notions. Consequently, he promises to prove that “the pagans worshipped the same God as we do, had the same abhorrence of sin, and believed in rewards and punishments after this life. I cannot but think, then, that after leading good lives, they partook fully of Divine Grace, especially because they knew about the most rational and intelligible parts of true divine worship” (*RG*, 55). His goal is to show that Christians and pagans alike ultimately worship the same God and have the same standards of behavior.

How can Herbert think this is the case when, as he has admitted, the pagans believe in so many things that seem contrary to the common notions? The answer is that

⁸³ *De religion gentilium*, 52: “These five principles occurred, which are not so much mine, but are held as indubitably true by all, a universal world meeting-point. They are as follows . . .” Herbert goes on to repeat his five common notions once again.

pagan worship is not as ridiculous as it seems to be. Herbert makes the argument by resuscitating the kind of symbolic relationship between popular rites, symbols, and beliefs that Augustine had dismissed so forcefully. Following Johannes Vossius' interpretation of Varro, Herbert distinguishes between symbolic and proper worship (*RG*, 300).⁸⁴ One could worship God directly by deriving the five common notions from "the Mind or from right reason" (*RG*, 304). Herbert, along with Varro, thinks that this is how the pagan philosophers had understood and worshiped God. If the pagan philosophers had derived the true "principles of religion" (*RG*, 304) from right reason, then of course they could attain salvation.

But what of hoi polloi? Vossius' three-volume study of pagan religion was ultimately a Christian apology, detailing the errors of the pagans.⁸⁵ They had sought to worship the true God but fallen into idolatry by worshipping nature instead.⁸⁶ Herbert breaks with Vossius in a crucial way. Although he borrows a great deal of historical information from Vossius, he did not consider the pagans' symbolic worship to be idolatrous: "I would like to emphasize that anything which we call superstition was understood by the pagans only to mean the mystical or hidden adoration of some unknown deity, and that anything which we call idolatry was a symbolic method of worshipping the supreme God" (*RG*, 349). Wayne Hudson has argued that Herbert is more Roman Stoic than Augustinian in his understanding of religion.⁸⁷ More specifically,

⁸⁴ See also J.A.I. Champion. *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660-1730*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 141 for how Edward borrowed this distinction from Vossius.

⁸⁵ Eugene Hill, *Edward, Lord Herbert of Chirbury* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 41.

⁸⁶ John Butler, *Lord Herbert of Chirbury (1582 - 1648): An Intellectual Biography* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 409.

⁸⁷ Hudson, 51. See also Peter Byrne's *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 28.

like Varro (but unlike Augustine or Vossius) Herbert thought popular pagan beliefs and rituals were primarily symbolic.

The idea that there is one “true divine worship” underlying diverse human rites and myths opens the door to salvation for the pagans because, despite their seeming ignorance, they are symbolically worshipping the “supreme God.” Cusa and Ficino had already entertained this possibility, of course, but Herbert, unlike them, does not eventually move on to an apology for any form of Christianity. The pagans’ “mystical or hidden” adoration is not directed to the Christian God but at the “supreme God,” who is properly known through the five common notions and worshipped according to them.

So Herbert revives Varro and claims that pagan “superstition” is in fact “symbolic.” This is a bold claim, and Herbert spends the bulk of *Religione Gentilium* trying to support it. In the central chapters of *Religione Gentilium*, Herbert catalogues and interprets the symbolic meaning of pagan mythology and religious rites. In order to support the intuition he first shared with Harley (that every faith had enough in it to bring a virtuous pagan to God), Herbert collects and analyzes common myths and symbols from around the world, such as the worship of heavenly bodies: the sun, moon, planets, and stars. In each case, he assures his reader that the pagan worship was symbolic: “. . . the pagans venerated the Sun as a god, not himself supreme, but the next noblest and most excellent representative” (*RG*, 82. See also page 98). He also draws his accounts of sun-worship from contemporary accounts of the Americas. He approvingly quotes what the Spanish soldier and poet Garcilaso de la Vega heard about an Inca king. The king reportedly said: “I do not take the Sun as the Supreme God, but only as his minister, who, as he goes around the Earth, performs his will and pleasure” (*RG*, 82). His implication is

that the same symbolic relationship links ancient and modern-day pagan beliefs to the Supreme God.

Herbert repeats the basic pattern of his argument with what becomes numbing regularity. Popular pagan beliefs symbolically represent the philosophers' beliefs, which are themselves directed to the Supreme God. His tenth chapter, "The Cult of the Four Elements," is especially representative of his overall scholarly technique. He proceeds by citing dozens of ancient pagan sources, philosophical and historical, on each element. In his section on the element of fire, we learn that Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Hippocrates thought that fire was (respectively) "the first principle of the universe," "a fiery power" in all things, and "the author of all nature's works" (*RG*, 153).⁸⁸ We learn from Herodotus that the Persians did not burn their dead because they regarded it as impious to feed the god of fire dead bodies; and from Plutarch we learn that the Vestal virgins in Rome kept a perpetual fire in a small vessel, the loss of which (the fire) augured disaster. At the end of his chapter on the elements, he then concludes that all of these popular beliefs and rituals ultimately referred to the "supreme God." Consequently, the vulgar people were not simply idolaters but could, albeit unknowingly, worship rightly:

As they believed they were worshipping the entire World through the Stars, Heaven, and four Elements, its integral parts, and that these parts, of which the world was composed, best represented the deity, so they thought that they worshipped the Supreme God by paying external worship to an external deity ... In the meantime, I have lost nothing by showing that those names which the common people in their ignorance, thought belonged only to humans, now refer mystically, thanks to the words and deeds of the more cultivated pagans, to the stars, the heavens and the elements. (*RG*, 188⁸⁹)

⁸⁸ See *RG* 153-163 for Herbert's full discussion of fire.

⁸⁹ See also Herbert's concluding statement on pagan religion: "I would like to emphasize that anything which we call superstition was understood by the pagans only to mean the mystical or hidden adoration of some unknown deity, and that anything which we call idolatrous was a symbolic method of worshipping the supreme God" (349).

Herbert is setting up two levels of representation here. The poets' and peoples' mythic heroes, like the Egyptian Vulcan or the Greek Hephaistos, were anthropomorphic symbols for the philosophers' element of fire. And the philosophers' fire, as the stuff the world was made of, was taken in turn to refer to its creator, "the Supreme God."

What matters is not how convincing the modern reader finds Herbert's interpretations. (Admittedly, they tend to happen quickly and at the end of chapters.) The essential point is that by setting up a symbolic ladder from the most absurd myths of the poets and the most penetrating doctrines of the philosophers, Herbert creates a path by which "the greater part of humanity" could be worshipping the supreme God and therefore, theoretically, achieve salvation.

E. Edward Herbert on the Bible

The rituals and philosophers mentioned by Herbert in his chapter on the elements fall under the rough heading of "paganism." But Herbert did not confine himself to histories of ancient Greece and Rome and travelers accounts of distant lands. He also explored the relationship between paganism and the beliefs and rituals found in the Bible. His overall approach to this delicate issue was to say that the ancient Israelites were *already* worshipping their God symbolically.

It was actually not unheard of, during Herbert's day, for scholars to study the Old Testament in relation to other histories of the Near East.⁹⁰ The English historian and jurist John Selden (one of Herbert's main historical sources), mined Syrian myths for

⁹⁰ Butler, 408. See also Levitin's "From Sacred History to the History of Religion: Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity in European Historiography from Reformation to 'Enlightenment,'" *The Historical Journal*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2012, pp. 1117-1160. See especially 1132.

information about the pagan gods in the books of Moses, and it was widely accepted in scholarly circles that the Israelites had taken many of their rituals from the Egyptians (RG, 69).⁹¹ In his third chapter, “Why there were so many Names given to God, and what they were,” Herbert draws on ancient sources and contemporary histories to point out that seemingly bitter foes, like the Phoenicians and Israelites, often used the same word for God: EL (RG, 69-70). Nor was this the only name for God that the Israelites shared with their neighbors:

Turning now to the other name, *Jehovah* or *Jah*, I shall cite further evidence from Vossius. *Iacchus* comes from *Jah*, one of the names of God, from which we get *Hallelu-jah*, that is, 'praise the Lord.' While they were dancing, the pagans used to shout the name *Jah* or *Jach* very loudly. It seems also that they employed the Tetragrammaton, a word of four letters, which they might have pronounced *Jave* or *Jehave* like the Samaritans, from which I may deduce that *Iache* in Ephiphanius [a patristic apologist] means the same.

In the popular medieval taxonomy, and in some contemporaneous encyclopedias, the world was divided between Christians, Jews, pagans, and “Mahumetanisme.” But careful philological analysis suggested that the line between the ancient gentiles and ancient Israelites was not so clear, because the gentiles called on God with the same words and with similar rituals. Herbert even slips in a quick reminder (“from which we get *Hallelu-jah*”) that his contemporaries call on God in the same way. Herbert, unlike Selden or Vossius, was not a great philologist, but he used their research to support his larger agenda. Like symbolic images and rituals, different names for different gods could ultimately refer to the same supreme God.

⁹¹ A book by John Spencer, the Master of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, argued this case so cogently that it was still a common citation in the early 20th century. See Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, 155.

To be sure, the Israelites referred directly to an unseen, transcendent God, while the pagan tribes used words like “EL” and “Jah” to refer to the Sun. The Israelites’ direct worship was superior, to Herbert’s mind, to the symbolic worship of the pagans. And yet Herbert does not seem to see a qualitative difference between the Hebrews and pagans when it comes to the correctness of their worship:

Thus, although the Hebrews worshipped a deity superior to the Sun under the same name, the pagans did not mean the Sun or any other deity (unless they esteemed it as the clearest representation of the Supreme God, and, as Plato says, his most sensible image) but only worshipped the Supreme God himself. I am more inclined, therefore, to believe that almost all ancient religion was symbolic, and that they do not worship one thing in another, but one thing out of another. (*RG*, 80)

Once again, according to Herbert, symbolic worship could be right worship, or at least right enough. In worshipping the sun, the pagans as much as the Israelites were adhering to the first and second common notions: there is a Supreme God, and this God deserves worship. To draw connections between the ancient Israelites and their neighbors was one thing, but to aver that the differences between them were ultimately superficial was something new. Here, again, Herbert disagrees with Vossius, who thought the pagans remained mired in nature worship (worshipping God “in” the things of nature). He follows Augustine and Aquinas in criticizing the pagans for worshipping created things rather than the uncreated God. But it seems to Herbert that the pagans’ symbolic rites and prayers exalted and reached the Supreme God (through or “out of” nature)—just like the rites and prayers of the ancient Israelites.

If the pagans and ancient Israelites worshipped the same God, then could the same be said about the pagans and Christians? Comparison between Christians and pagans was not unheard of in the 16th and early 17th century. In Catholic-Protestant debates, one side

frequently compared the other to pagans, or Muslims, or the newfound peoples of the Americas.⁹² These comparisons, however, were uniformly unfavorable (to be like the pagans was to be suspect). Breaking with the traditional polemical use of pagan religion in interdenominational debate, Herbert, briefly but at key moments, argues that Christianity and the pagans agree on the God they worship and the importance of a virtuous life. At the end of his first chapter he declares: “The Holy Scriptures testify, and learned theologians agree, that the pagans worshipped the same God as we do, had the same abhorrence of sin, and believed in rewards and punishments after this life” (*PR*, 55). The “learned theologians” Herbert has in mind are probably Vossius and Hugo Grotius, although Herbert later has to admit that Vossius thought the pagans sinned in worshipping idols, and he only mentions Grotius in passing (*RG*, 302).⁹³ More ambitious by far are his readings of the testimony of “Holy Scriptures”:

I am now going to prove that the Supreme God amongst the pagans was the same one that we acknowledge, which is evident from the words of Paul in Romans 1:19, Acts 10, 17, 28 and 29, as Vossius proves by many arguments. The “unknown God” of the Athenians seems to agree with what Paul says about the God of the Jews, and his will and pleasure about Christ in Acts 17:23, “Whom you ignorantly worship, him I declare I unto you,” and Lucan mentions “the unknown God of the Jews.” Epimenides speaks of altars raised to the Unknown God; in his time there were three of them in Athens, called ‘the nameless altars,’ and in all likelihood St. Paul saw one of them when he was preaching to the Athenians. ... Indeed, it does seem a little far-fetched to make this god the God of the Jews, but the instances quoted from the Scriptures do suggest that the Supreme God of the pagans might be the same as the common God of all. (*RG*, 283⁹⁴)

⁹² David Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative Religion in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester,: Manchester University Press, 1984). See especially pages 13-14.

⁹³ Herbert gives Vossius’ judgment on pagan religion (without citing him) in his penultimate chapter: “In our present age, there are many very learned theologians who will claim that the pagans worshipped the same God as we do. The difference is, [they say], that the worship they gave him was erroneous and idolatrous, and they assert that it is equally sinful to worship the true God in a mistaken way as to worship a false god in an honest manner.” For his mention of Grotius, see *RG* page 72.

⁹⁴ See also *RG* 325: “Does St. Paul not say in Acts 10 that the prayers and supplications of Cornelius, a mere pagan, would reach heaven?” Yes, and then Peter says “You know the message he sent to the

Or perhaps a little more than far-fetched. In Paul's speech to the Athenians (the episode in question runs from Acts 17: 16-34), he tells the crowd that he is going to reveal the real name of their "unknown God," and it turns out to be Christ. Herbert takes Paul's message to be that the Athenians have been worshipping the true God all along, while Paul, in contrast, tells the Athenians to abandon their old modes of worship. God allowed for their ignorance before, but God "now commandeth men every where to repent" (Acts 17:30). While one might doubt the accuracy of Herbert's exegesis, his aim is clearly consistent with his overall mission in the book: what appears to be the provenance of a few (true religion and through it salvation) in fact belongs to all.

Herbert's implication is that Christians, too, win salvation through their belief in and adherence to the five common religious principles. His reading of the Bible suggests a radical break with predecessors like Cusa and Ficino. With a new, substantive definition of true religion and a revival of Varro's symbolic understanding of pagan myths and rites, Herbert has not only opened the doors of salvation to all. He has removed Christianity from its pride of place. It is one more expression, more or less perfect, of the five common notions.

iii. Edward Herbert's Criticism of the Priests

If humanity possesses a natural religiosity consisting of the common notions, written on every heart by God and discoverable though reason, how has it come to pass that there are so many, and Herbert would say so many ridiculous, rites and beliefs in the

people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all." Surely the consistent message of The Acts of the Apostles is that Christ's lordship is offered to all, not that the pagans are already living under it unawares.

world? Whence this fall from the original purity of our worship? Herbert blames the priests. He declares that the pagans' "great defection from pure worship of a Supreme God could be justly blamed upon their Colleges of Priests" (*RG*, 52). He aims to show how the priests twist all of the common religious notions to their own ends, thereby accruing power.

Seventeenth-century anti-clericalism like Herbert's grew out of Reformation polemics and, even further back in time, out of medieval complaints about the church hierarchy.⁹⁵ Machiavelli and Cicero treated rituals as social and historical institutions, not as revealed truths.⁹⁶ It is hard to imagine a time without critics of the priestly classes. Augustine certainly did not attribute all false *religio* to the work of demons. He accused the pagan princes of inventing civic religion for their own ends:

For just as the demons cannot possess any but those whom they have falsely deceived, so also men who are princes—not, indeed, righteous princes, but men like the demons - have persuaded the people in the name of religion to accept as true those things which they knew to be false: they have done this in order to bind men more tightly, as it were, in civil society, so that they might likewise possess them as subjects.⁹⁷

Herbert was certainly not the first to notice that rituals and the worship of God could serve temporal ends. Nor was he the first to accuse priests of making it all up. Still, his anti-clericalism is worth attention, because in criticizing the pagan priests, he offers a social history of religion, an account of how religions begin, grow, and change.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion*, 83-4.

⁹⁶ Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, 134.

⁹⁷ *The City of God against the Pagans*, Book IV, Chapter 32.

⁹⁸ I call Herbert's criticism of the priests a "social history" of religion because in my view it differs from a "natural history" of religion, which traces the growth of religious ideas or rituals to parts of human nature. Take Edward's contemporary Thomas Hobbes. In his *Leviathan* he attributes human

Herbert scatters invective against the priests throughout *De Religione Gentilium*, as if his dislike of them were too visceral to keep bottled up for long.⁹⁹ He saves his sustained criticism, however, for a late chapter: “An Inquiry into the Origins of Pagan Religion.” Herbert does not think that the pagan priests pulled their beliefs and rites out of thin air. He argues instead that they built their own systems on the peoples’ innate religiosity, erecting a social structure on the common notions. Herbert imagines how this might have happened in dramatic monologues, which he delivers in the voice of the priests: “‘Nothing is more certain’ [they said] ‘and beyond a doubt than that there is a Supreme God and that he is the First Cause. But this does not prove that he is solitary and alone; surely from the beginning he either found or created some companions either in Heaven or on Earth?’” (*RG*, 286). This is not an outright falsehood. On the contrary, its initial plausibility, Herbert would say, depends on its basis in the first religious common notion (that there is a Supreme God who created all things). But through the priests’ mendacity, and the peoples’ gullibility, one God became many. Popular pagan beliefs about the Supreme God and lesser deities are not falsehood pure and simple. Rather, priestly inventions (in this case the existence of lesser deities) are built over truths (the existence of the Supreme God).

The priests have also turned Herbert’s second common religious notion, the idea that God deserves worship, to their own advantage. The Supreme God deserves worship, but according to the priests, all the lesser gods deserve worship, too: “If this is true, then, they ought to be worshipped, but with less veneration than is paid to the Supreme God”

belief in the gods to their natural fearfulness and desire to know hidden causes. (See *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), chapter xii, “Of Religion.”)

⁹⁹ See for instance his aside about the Olympian deities and the stories the priests told about them. “Arrogantly they pretended these were all confirmed by the oracle of that god whose priests they were, but more of this in its proper place” (*RG*, 213).

(*RG*, 287). But why stop with a few lesser deities? Over the course of his monologue, Herbert's priest argues that each part of creation, from the stars in the heavens to the elements of the earth, deserves worship, too. For instance: "The air, which we continually draw in and breathe out in reciprocal motion and which supports and renews life, ought to be worshipped; if it ever becomes too thin, or infectious, or too thick, our lungs cannot take it in and we die" (*RG*, 294). Once again, the priests have started with a sound intuition and added to it, affirming the people's legitimate desire to worship their creator but then designating all sorts of objects as worthy of worship when in fact they are not. Having convinced the populace to worship secondary Gods, the priests then set themselves up as intermediaries between the people and their god(s).¹⁰⁰ They invent all kinds of propitiatory rituals or, in one of Herbert's favorite examples, appoint themselves interpreters of oracles. Citing Herodotus, Herbert notes that both the Egyptians and Thracians (an ancient tribe that once inhabited present-day Bulgaria) had oracles of Mars. The oracles' prophecies were "stage-managed by the crafty priests, for anything they predicted from natural causes unknown to the common people . . . they pretended it was not something they knew themselves, but something communicated to them by gods, with whom they were conversant. Thus they acquired prestige and wealth, being the only people who knew the sacred mysteries" (*RG*, 120).¹⁰¹ Instead of following their innate religiosity and worshipping the Supreme God directly, people followed the priests' orders and performed their rituals. Doing so, they acquired wealth and prestige, becoming powerful people in their society. Because he is ultimately trying to argue that the pagans'

¹⁰⁰ He had criticized priests for setting themselves up as intermediaries in *Religione Laici*, but only briefly (see 107-111).

¹⁰¹ See also other short denunciations of priestly fraudulence and hunger for power in *De religione gentilium* on pages 59, 151, 213, 218, and 284.

religion was less foolish and barbaric than is commonly supposed, Herbert is especially keen to ascribe cruel rituals like human sacrifice to the priests' imaginations (*RG*, 232). Herbert's fundamental problem with priestly rituals, however, is not their occasional cruelty. His real objection is that by setting themselves up as intermediaries between the Supreme God and the populace, the priests have alienated people from their immediate, inner connection to the Supreme God.

The priests also set themselves up as dispensers of censure and forgiveness, thereby usurping the fourth and fifth of Herbert's common notions (we should repent of our sins, and will be rewarded or punished hereafter). Participating in the priests' ceremonies, rather than virtuous deeds, became the route to salvation: "They told the masses that if they would only devote themselves entirely to their priests they might rest secure; [the priests] appointed themselves mediators between God and Man, and [claimed] that God had delegated the power to them of procuring pardon for sinners" (*RG*, 317). The masses' moral lives consisted in petitioning the priests for pardon instead of doing virtuous deeds. Once again, priestly inventions alienated people from their direct connection with the Supreme God and, as an added consequence, distracted them from the exercise of virtue, which Herbert, following Cicero, thought was the height of religious worship.

Herbert approvingly quotes Cicero to the effect that humanity has "no other way to get to heaven other than through the mind, virtue, piety, and faith," which Herbert interprets as a call first and foremost to a virtuous life: "the pagans did not depend at all upon the external worship of their gods or upon the prayers and vows they made to them; they depended upon virtue itself as the admission to Heaven" (*RG*, 302). According to

Herbert, worship was supposed to consist of virtuous deeds, but when the common people followed the directions of the priests, they were performing an empty, outward show. Their rituals were empty because they no longer connected the inner desire to worship with the virtuous deeds that right worship consisted in: “they led people away from the worship of God to the magnificent pomp of mere empty ceremony, to the detriment of true and sound religion. The feasting, sports, and shows that were put on by the High Priest or his colleagues made the people withdraw from the direct worship of God . . .” (*RG*, 348).

Eventually, Herbert concludes, the original and pure worship of the Supreme God was all but forgotten. In its place were man-made systems of doctrines and rituals, developed over time by the priests. True religion, which consists of the five common notions, is timeless, the same now as it was for the ancient pagans. Historical religion, as it emerges and changes over time, is entirely a story of corruption by priestcraft.¹⁰² The priests started with common notions about the existence of God, and then added their theology: “After they had made such empty speeches, which had very little solid truth in them, the priests then started to put together their theological systems” (*RG*, 297). They started with the desire to worship and live virtuously, and then added their own rituals and rites of propitiation:

Nevertheless, the pure worship of God came to consist of only those sacrifices which the priests ate, only the prayers which they invented, the sacred mysteries which they alone performed, the oracles of their own designing, their own interpretations of auguries, their own rites and ceremonies, feasts and games which they thought up, and finally those dreams which occurred in temples and which none but them could interpret. (*RG*, 297)

¹⁰² Harrison. *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment*, 68.

Priestly invention eventually became almost the whole of pagan religion, which consequently makes it ridiculous to modern eyes. In short, Herbert argues that the priests invented human religions, and in doing so he offers a “history of the development of religious ideas and institutions.”¹⁰³ In his attempt to defend the rationality and eternal fate of the pagans, he developed the idea of historical religions as purely human creations, albeit invented with sinister purposes in mind.

Although he does not make this point explicitly, Herbert’s criticism of priestly religion touches on each of his five common notions. The priests have drawn the common people away from each: they invented multiple gods (1), set up unworthy objects of worship (2), distracted people from true virtue (3), demanded contrition (4), and controlled the path to salvation (5). Their religion is not only false but also a perversion of what is true. Herbert’s argument, that priests are responsible for most (and the most ridiculous) parts of pagan religion, is vital to his ultimately apologetic mission: “The Five Articles which I have extracted from pagan religion and laws ought to provide the best means for attaining a better life. The mistakes of the pagans, which sowed dissension and which consisted of myths and fictions invented by the priests, must be rejected” (*RG*, 352). Take away priestly inventions, and what remains of pagan religion is rational and gives its adherents a chance to attain eternal salvation.

iv. The Originality and Achievement of Edward Herbert

Many have held Herbert in low regard because his theories are, admittedly, circular. He claims that his five common notions are obvious to all “normal minds”: anyone who doubts them has an abnormal mind, and so the common notions remain

¹⁰³ Hudson, 48.

universal whether you believe them or not.¹⁰⁴ In *De Religione Gentilium* he insists that if a belief or rite could stand symbolically for one of the common notions, it could lead to salvation; if not, it was the work of crafty priests. Herbert is making what one critic called “heads I win, tails you lose,” arguments.¹⁰⁵ But focusing on the problems of his argument would blind us to the originality of his books. He combines existing ideas and approaches into a new kind of study.

To be sure, thinkers had tried to find “the essentials” of religion before. Protestants of every stripe had tried to agree on the essentials of Christianity, and the 16th century Italian legal theorist and theologian Jacopo Acontio had tried to reduce Christian doctrines to a minimal number, acceptable to all.¹⁰⁶ Platonists like Nicholas of Cusa and Marsilio Ficino had, like Edward Herbert, searched for the essence of religion beneath a diversity of rites. The difference is that all of them ultimately had apologetic intentions: advocating for their particular brand of Christianity and treating it as the apotheosis of religion. By way of contrast, Herbert tried to look for the ideas shared by all religions, a global common denominator. His goal was to study all but favor none.

By refusing to measure other religions according to the yardstick of Christianity, Herbert also distinguished himself from his contemporary historians, even the ones who treated pagan beliefs and rites as symbolic. As I mentioned earlier, Herbert borrowed heavily from Vossius’ scholarship on ancient Greeks and Romans. But Herbert breaks with Vossius on a crucial point. Vossius’ three-volume study of pagan religion was

¹⁰⁴ See for instance Peter Harrison’s *‘Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 71.

¹⁰⁵ David A. Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative Religion in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984), 20.

¹⁰⁶ Butler, *Lord Herbert of Chirbury (1582 – 1648)*, 29 and 228-30.

ultimately a Christian apology, detailing the errors of the pagans.¹⁰⁷ They had sought to worship the true God, but fallen into idolatry by worshipping nature instead.¹⁰⁸ Other historians of religion were equally apologetic, claiming that Christianity was the true, original religion from which all others had fallen.¹⁰⁹ Herbert, in contrast, did not consider the pagans' symbolic worship to be necessarily idolatrous. He placed pagans, Jews, and Christians on equal footing, arguing that everyone everywhere at every time had been able to worship the same God.¹¹⁰

Arguably, Jean Bodin and Giordano Bruno also treated Christianity as one religion among many. According to Bruno, Christianity and every other religion manifest the same divinity.¹¹¹ And Jean Bodin, both in letters and in his posthumous *Heptaplomeres*, suggested that adherence to “the laws of Nature and natural religion” were sufficient for salvation.¹¹² But Herbert's books on religion still mark significant advances. Neither Bruno nor Bodin go as far as Herbert in specifying the minimum necessary for salvation. And neither man attempts anything like Herbert's historical and geographical survey of beliefs and rites. Herbert was one of the first (if not the first since antiquity) to combine the search for a common denominator among the world's religions with an encyclopedic view of beliefs and rites from around the world and over time.

The originality of Herbert's studies will be more apparent if we see how they anticipated later developments. Between 1723 and 1737, Bernard Picart and Jean

¹⁰⁷ Eugene Hill, *Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 41.

¹⁰⁸ John Butler, *Lord Herbert of Chirbury (1582 - 1648): An Intellectual Biography* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 409.

¹⁰⁹ See the wildly popular encyclopedia by Samuel Purchas: *Purchas his Pilgrimage, or Relations of the World and the Religions Observed in all Ages and Places discovered, from the Creation until this Present*. He claims Christianity was the first religion on pages 1-2.

¹¹⁰ *De Religione Gentilium*, 283.

¹¹¹ Paul Richard Blum, *Giordano Bruno: An Introduction*, trans. Peter Hennevelde (New York, NY: Rodopi, 2012), 53-62, especially 56-8.

¹¹² Strenski, 17-21.

Frederic Bernard published a massive encyclopedia of religious ceremonies from around the world. It included not only theoretical essays and descriptions but also thousands of engravings showing the ceremonies. This, according to Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, and Wijnand Mihnhardt, was “the book that changed Europe.” Like Herbert, Picart and Bernard thought that humanity had lost “the True Idea of the divine.”¹¹³ They attributed all religion to an innate feeling of guilt, which was then expressed through a great variety of dances, purification rites, and other forms of ritual. “For them,” write Hunt and her co-authors, “religion ceased to be a given defined by one’s relationship to a divinely inspired text and a church built on its absolute truths. It became instead a set of historically conditioned beliefs and ritual practices that offered insights into human nature in general.”¹¹⁴ Their goal was not to dismiss religion but “to discern within religious diversity itself the truths one could honestly live by and cherish.”¹¹⁵ Hunt and company only mention Herbert in passing, but in my judgment Herbert anticipated Bernard and Picart’s method and theoretical advances by decades. All of which is to reaffirm my basic point about Edward Herbert’s writings on religion: they represent major advances in the history of the study of religion and deserve more attention than they have hitherto received.

¹¹³ Quoted in Lynn Hunt, Margaret C. Jacob, Wijnand Mihnhardt, *The Book that Changed Europe: Picart & Bernard’s Religious Ceremonies of the World* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 4-5.

¹¹⁴ Hunt et al, 20.

¹¹⁵ Hunt et al, 21. See also 126: “They wanted to confront their audience with a radically new religious education that would turn the traditional religious surveys—from Boemus to Defoe—upside down: they wanted to show the public that acquired religious ceremonies and customs had obscured the universality of religion.”

Chapter Five: Copying the Word: George Herbert and Creative *Copia*

So many of Herbert's poems are about poetry itself. What is the right kind of poetry to offer God? And who deserves credit for writing these poems, God or the poet? This chapter investigates these questions. My thesis is that the Renaissance writing technique of *copia* (the art of producing hundreds of variations and elaborations on phrases or ideas) is a principle of composition in George Herbert's *The Temple*. By using the technique of *copia*, Herbert writes a poetry that participates in the divine *logos*, as an imitation of Christ the Word.

When he was a 17-year-old student at Oxford, young George sent two sonnets to his mother. They announced his life-long ambition of writing verse in praise of God instead of Venus:

My God, where is that ancient heat towards thee,
Wherewith whole showls of *Martyrs* once did burn,
Besides their other flames? Doth Poetry
Wear Venus Livery? only to serve her turn?
Why are not *Sonnets* made of thee? and layes
Upon thine Altar burnt? (1-6).¹

These lines suggest that sacred poetry would require nothing more than a redirection of ardor. The hot desire poets feel for Venus should instead be turned to God. All that would change, really, would be the subject matter: poetry "of thee" (God) rather than Venus.

Unfortunately, it turns out that Herbert's youthful enthusiasm underplays the difficulty of writing pious poetry, a subject *The Temple* investigates in much greater length and at

¹ This poem can be found in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed by F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 206.

much greater depth. The meta-poetic poems of *The Temple* come perilously close to saying that truly pious poetry is impossible because poets will always run the risk of exalting themselves, even as they try to praise God. If this is the case, then *The Temple* offers a kind of anti-poetry.

Many critics have argued that Herbert is indeed trying to silence the poet's voice entirely, the better to hear God speak. At the very least, most have found him an anti-rhetorical poet, who rejects ornamentation in favor of a simple, austere verse. But while Herbert certainly finds fault with the poetic conventions of his day, he never abandons his youthful goal. The key is the phrase "made of thee." "Of thee" could mean that God is the subject matter of the poem, but it could also mean that God is, in another and more interesting sense, what Herbert makes his poetry out of. How could one make poetry "out of" God? By making it out of scripture. In order to write a poetry that is more than citation, allusion, or even imitation, Herbert draws on the Renaissance writing technique of *copia*. According to Desiderius Erasmus, *copia* is the foundation of the "abundant" style, by which the poet can either write hundreds of variations on a single phrase or idea, or elaborate the same idea at great length. Herbert's scriptural *copia* likewise either subtly varies Biblical verses or fleshes them out, unpacking some of their latent implications. The technique of *copia* allows Herbert to write poetry that emerges from, rather than supplanting, the Biblical Word of God.²

This chapter proceeds in four main sections. The first section is on defenses and criticisms of poetry in 16th and 17th-century England. The second section raises the

² Although I argue that Herbert makes *copia* out of the Bible, we cannot be absolutely sure which Bible, prayer books, and Psalters he was working with. This is in large part because his personal papers were destroyed in a fire after his death. In the future I plan to do more historical work on what texts he would have likely owned.

possibility that Herbert is a kind of anti-poet, who tries to silence his own voice in order to hear God. In the third section, however, I argue that Herbert uses the technique of *copia* to write poetry that aspires to be both his and God's, equally "mine and thine." Fourth, I argue that in *The Temple* Christian life is itself a kind of *copia*: an elaboration of existent Christian stories and figures. By way of a conclusion, I will consider the ethical implications of my thesis, suggesting that for Herbert, Christian freedom is a poetic activity. I end the chapter with a short reading of "Love (III)."

i. "Fictions onely and false hair": *The Criticism of Poetry*

Before the publication of *The Temple*, English divines generally disapproved of poetry: it was prideful, exalting the poet above God, and might even lead its readers into sin.³ Defenders of poetry like Philip Sidney and George Puttenham responded to both charges. Both Sidney and Puttenham insisted that poets, as the etymology of their title (*poeta*) would suggest, were makers, and therefore their poetic creativity mirrored, in some small way, the creative acts of God. Puttenham makes this point on the first page of *The Art of English Poesy*: "Such as (by way of resemblance and reverently) we may say of God, who without any travail to his divine imagination made all the world of nought ... Even so the very poet makes and contrives out of his own brain both the verse and matter of his poem..."⁴ Likewise, Sidney argued in the process of making verses, one can see the poet's likeness to God:

³ See the first few pages of Elizabeth Clarke's *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: 'Divinitie, and Poesie, Met'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) for a good account of distrust of poetry amongst early 17th-century divines.

⁴ George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 93.

Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of Nature; but rather give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in Poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth far surpassing her doings.⁵

“Second nature” here refers to creation in its fallen state, a loss of its original perfection.

Human beings are somewhere between their earthly nature and divine origin, and the poet’s capacity to imagine things “far surpassing” nature is proof of this. To be clear, however, human beings are also fallen, and therefore even their poetry will always be imperfect. The poet’s creation will never risk competing with God’s. Both Puttenham and Sidney, then, present poetry as a kind of *imitatio Dei*, an imitation, however imperfect, of God’s original creative acts. It was also common to argue that the Bible in fact authorized poetry, in the Psalms, Proverbs and book of Job. In the late 16th century, for instance, the French courtier Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas exhorted poets to imitate Biblical subject matters and styles, especially the Psalms.⁶

Apologists for poetry also pointed out that it was deeply affecting, and therefore could move the reader to virtue.⁷ Sidney was an articulate proponent of this position, and he argued that it could both teach virtue and move its reader to emulate that virtue: “Now therein of all sciences (I speak still of human, and according to the human conceits) is our poet the monarch. For he doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into

⁵ Philip Sidney, “An Apologie for Poetrie,” *An Apology for Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973), 101.

⁶ See Lewalski. *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Lyric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 231. Du Bartas was enormously popular in England and had a clear influence on Sidney’s *Apology*.

⁷ Clarke, 65. “There is also a strong sense in sixteenth-century thinking about language that rhetoric is not only naturally derived, but helps to improve fallen nature.”

the way, as will entice any man to enter into it.”⁸ The philosopher could tell somebody what was good, and the historian could show people being good, but philosophy, thought Sidney, appealed only to reason (which on its own could not inspire goodness), and the historian’s concern for accuracy, more often than not, provided poor models. Only the poet combined philosophical knowledge and moral ideals with moving speech. The poet was therefore the one capable of moving the reader to virtue. Puttenham also thought that poetry should instruct its readers. In his discussion of the origin of Greek and Latin poetry he writes:

But the chief and principal is the laud, honor, and glory of the immortal gods (I speak now in the phrase of the gentiles). Secondly, the worthy gests of noble princes, the memorial and registry of all great fortunes, the praise of virtue and reproof of vice, the instruction of moral doctrines, the revealing of sciences natural and other profitable arts, the redress of boisterous and sturdy courages by persuasion, the consolation and repose of temperate minds, finally the common solace of mankind in all his travails and cares of this transitory life.⁹

The poets level praise and blame: praise for the gods and virtue, blame for vice. In doing so, they do more than simply tell their readers what is good and bad. Puttenham uses words like “persuasion,” “consolation,” and “solace,” all of which suggest that poets aim to move the affections of their readers. Instruction in virtue and science requires not only telling people what is virtuous but also really moving them to virtue and away from vice. It is an ethical endeavor.

It should only be a small step from Sidney and Puttenham’s theories to the practice of pious Christian poets. They would acknowledge that their own creations were

⁸ Sidney, 113.

⁹ Puttenham, 114.

second-best to God's, but they would still try to present Christian virtue and persuade listeners to heed and follow it.

Herbert's poetry frequently finds fault with both of these arguments. At times, *The Temple* seems to side with poetry's detractors rather than its defenders, especially in his poems "Jordan" (I and II). The first of these poems raises doubts about popular poetry techniques. The second, however, offers a more radical critique, raising the question of whether or not the dreamt-of sacred verse is possible at all.

"Jordan (I)" begins by raising questions about poetic methods. Do not the traditional methods of poetry run the risk of falsifying rather than improving on fallen creation?

Who sayes that fictions onely and false hair
Become a verse? Is there in truth no beautie?
Is all good structure in a winding stair?
May no lines passe, except they do their dutie
Not to a true, but painted chair? (1-5)

This stanza might as well be a direct rejoinder to Puttenham, who thought of poetry as a matter of both painting and making: "This ornament we speak of is given to it by figures and figurative speeches, which be the flowers, as it were, and colors that a poet setteth upon his language by art, as the embroiderer doth his stone and pearl or passements of gold upon the stuff of a princely garment, or as the excellent painter bestoweth the rich orient colors upon his table of portrait."¹⁰ He goes on to say that poets, like other manual laborers, must be skillful in the performance of their art. The poet of "Jordan (I)," however, has questions about whether or not these models (builder and painter) are good ones. The poet as craftsman or maker runs the risk of excess, of building "winding" stairs

¹⁰ Puttenham, 221-2.

when simple, direct staircases would do. The danger of verbal excess is that the poet will overlay his object with his own “colors,” and in doing so present a specious picture of it, filling the readers’ heads with falsehoods.

The second stanza raises further questions, moving from human creations (chairs and stairs) directly to nature:

Is it no verse, except enchanted groves
And sudden arbours shadow course-spunne lines?
Must purling streams refresh a lovers loves?
Must all be vail’d, while he that reades, divines,
Catching the sense at two removes? (6-10)

These lines parody popular pastoral nature poetry by poking fun at its mawkish conventions, in which every grove is enchanted, every “arbour” a sudden surprise. The implication is that pastoral language, like paint that covers a chair, falsifies (“vails”) nature. Sidney and Puttenham both argued that the poet, as a maker, could improve on fallen nature. Herbert, in “Jordan (I)” has his doubts. It is equally possible that the poet, in ornamenting and painting over nature, will offer a false picture. Instead of coming closer to the original perfection of creation, the poet’s imitation will fall further away from it. Herbert’s criticism here is actually quite reminiscent of one of Plato’s arguments against allowing the poets into his ideal city. Poets are twice removed from nature: they imitate copies of the original forms. Poets may be makers, as Puttenham and Sidney suggest, but what they make is not any closer to divine perfection than what they started with (in fact, it is probably further away).

“Jordan (I)” objects to the poetic practices of Herbert’s day, but it does not yet object to poetry as such. Perhaps poetry could be done better! The real dangers of poetry, however, occur on the moral level. For one thing, skill in poetry might invite pride in the

poet. Herbert's poem "Submission" poses this problem with regard to worldly advancement, but it was no less a problem for the aspiring poet: "How know I, if thou shouldst me raise, / That I should then raise thee? / Perhaps great places and thy praise / Do not so well agree" (13-16). The greater the poets, the more they might feel inclined to admire their own brilliance, instead of giving credit to the one who "raised" their talents in the first place.

Perhaps such pride could be overcome. A poet could conceivably remain humble, even while receiving loud acclaim. But is poetic pride so easy to overcome? "Jordan (II)" levels a more radical criticism of poetry than we have seen before, calling into question the possibility of poetry that exalts the creator God instead of the creator poet. "Jordan (II)" begins in a familiar way, by criticizing Renaissance poetry techniques. The poet chastises his younger self for embellishing the simple words of Christianity:

When first my lines of heav'nly joyes made mention,
Such was their lustre, they did so excell,
That I sought out quaint words, and trim invention;
My thoughts began to burnish, sprout, and swell,
Curling with metaphors a plain intention,
Decking the sense as if it were to sell.

. . . .

As flames do work and winde, when they ascend,
So did I weave my self into the sense.
But while I bustled, I might heare a friend
Whisper, *How wide is all this long pretence!*
There is in love a sweetness readie penn'd:
Copie out onely that, and save expense. (1-6, 13-18)

"Jordan (II)," no less than "Jordan (I)," rejects all the stylistic techniques of Renaissance poetry (invention, metaphors, and brilliant, creative thoughts). And once again it appears that the problem is excess: the poet decked and curled what should have been simple and

straight. Here, as in “Jordan (I),” there is a clear divide between the poet's “thoughts” and the “heav'nly joys” he hopes to depict.

The final stanza, however, levels a more serious criticism, one that might make sacred poetry all but impossible. Recall that pious poetry needed to convey Biblical truth in a pleasing form: the words of God restated in the words of the poet. It is precisely the distinction between the poet's words and God's that collapses in the final stanza: the words of God and the words of the poet get mixed together. Lines 13 and 14, with their invocation of flames, respond quite directly to Herbert's early sonnet, in which he tried to recover the “ancient heat” of the martyrs and burn offerings to God rather than Venus. But the more mature Herbert sees a bitterly ironic consequence of his earlier offering: his words became part of scripture's sense. If so, then there is something inevitably prideful, even idolatrous, about writing poetry on Biblical subjects. A poet who embellishes the word of God weaves himself into scripture, which means that a poet could earnestly protest that all glory and honor belonged to God for the excellence of her poetry, but the very same lovely metaphors that were supposed to draw a reader to God might instead lead the reader to praise the ingenuity of the poet. Sacred poetry, of the kind Herbert tried to write as a younger man, risks setting up the poet, rather than Christ, as an object of devotion. His goal had been to make sonnets “of thee,” but they ended up being made of “my self.”

ii. “*Losse of rime*”: Herbert the anti-poet?

Does *The Temple* go beyond criticism to advocate another kind of poetry?

Perhaps, but the poetry Herbert champions appears at first to be a kind of *anti*-poetry, in which the poet strives to silence his own voice and merely repeat the Word of God.

The first two stanzas of “Jordan (I)” were full of questions, but the third stanza moves to conclusions, offering the reader two possibilities. In spite of the probable falseness of pastoral verse, it should be allowed: “Shepherds are honest people; let them sing” (11). This poet, however, stakes his claim to a different kind of verse: “I envie no mans nightingale or spring; / Nor let them punish me with losse of rime, / Who plainly say, *My God, My King*” (13-15). Other poets may praise the nightingale or spring, but this poet will dedicate his verse directly to God. In contrast to the excess of the builder or painter, this poet will speak plainly, in speech unadorned by any kind of ornament, unpainted by the poet’s colors. The pious poet’s submission to God’s kingship draws a further contrast between himself and the painter. There is something self-assertive about the builder and painter poets, as if they were not so much interested in their subject than in what they [the poets] could make of them. The pious poet merely echoes what doubting Thomas said in the Gospel according to John, “My Lord and my God.” He ends by offering God’s words, the words of scripture, rather than his own.¹¹

Because “Jordan (I)” only announces the alternative to pastoral poetry in its final line, its alternative remains underdeveloped. Another poem, “A true Hymne,” fills in the picture, advocating a kind of Christian lyric that emphasizes heartfelt emotion at the expense of poetic brilliance: “The finenesse which a hymne or psalme affords, / Is, when

¹¹ Though, anticipating my next section, I will point out that the poet doesn’t quote Thomas word for word.

the soul unto the lines accords” (“A True Hymne,” 9-10). The fineness of hymns and psalms (and by extension *The Temple*’s own holy lyrics) has nothing to do with their language and everything to do with the spirit in which they are written, read, and sung. In fact, a mediocre poem might even be preferable to a brilliantly painted one, because the poem’s very mediocrity will invite God to improve and complete it:

Whereas if th’heart be moved,
Although the verse be somewhat scant,
God doth supplie the want.
As when th’heart sayes (sighing to be approved)
O, could I love! and stops: God writeth, *Loved.* (16-20)

As in the contrast between the “lines” and “soul” earlier in the poem, the poet separates the “verse” from the “heart” that reads or writes it (the excellence of a poem’s fashioning versus its emotional effect). “A true Hymne” also sets up a hierarchy between heart and verse. One must not judge the “verse” solely according to its rhetorical merits, its ornament and trim inventions; on the contrary, the ideal or “true” verse (or hymne) moves its reader (or even its writer, “th’heart” could be either’s) to God. All in all, these lines oppose heart-felt poetry to dazzling ornamental verse. The last line takes the poet’s humility a few steps further. The poet can take no credit for moving hearts. As is so often the case in Herbert’s poetry, the conditional tense belongs to the poet, the past tense to God.¹² The heart sighs “*O, could I love!*” but there it stops. God is the real agent in the poem, bringing it to an end with the declaration “*Loved.*” Anything the poet writes will only present a possibility (to the reader, to himself). It is up to God to actualize that possibility that the poet and readers’ hearts entertain. In other words, God must love the poet *and* move the poet to love God. And finally, in writing “*Loved,*” God assumes some

¹² The first aphorism in Herbert’s collection of nearly 1,200 “outlandish proverbs” is “Man Proposeth, God disposeth.”

authorship over the poem. Not only the heart, but also the very words of the poem belong to God.

Some of Herbert's poems seemingly radicalize this final point, making God the sole author of the poem. The poem "Assurance" is ostensibly about the atonement, but it is also about the source of poetry. It begins with the poet anxious over the state of his soul: "That all was not so fair, as I conceiv'd, / Betwixt my God and me" (8-9). What he eventually realizes is that Christ has already imputed his [Christ's] deserving to him [the poet]: "Thou art not onely to perform thy part, / But also mine; as when the league was made / Thou didst at once thy self indite, / And hold my hand, while I did write" (27-30). In Herbert's understanding of the crucifixion, God both died to save the poet in the past and makes the poet accept his salvation in the present. Christ therefore deserves all the credit for the poet's salvation, and what holds good for the atonement also holds good for the poem's authorship. The word "indite" is mostly obsolete now, but to Herbert it would have meant not only "accuse" (as in, on the cross God the father indicts God the son), but also "to write down." So God also "indites" God by being both the subject of scripture and its ultimate author. The scriptural authorship occurred in the past, but God's authorship continues in this poem: God holds and guides the poet's hand as surely as God held and guided Isaiah's. But if God is both responsible for the effects of poetry (moving its readers to love) and writes the poetry, what role is left for the poet?

One option is: none at all. If so, then *The Temple* really advocates a kind of *anti-poetry*, in which the poet learns to fall silent, so that God alone might speak. The anti-poetry position is a popular one in Herbert criticism, and critics usually cite the closing lines of "Jordan (II)" as their clinching argument: "*There is in love a sweetnesse readie*

penn'd: / Copie out onely that, and save expense" (17-18). A certain reading of the word "copie" is crucial for this anti-poetry school of interpretation: "*copie out onely that*" means "copy that down word for word, letter for letter, and add nothing else!" Stanley Fish argues that Herbert's poetry is all about letting go, giving up on his poetic ambitions: "By copying out what is already there one speaks in the words of another, and therefore, to the extent that speech is an assertion of self, does not speak."¹³ What is "readie penn'd," argues Fish, is the Word of scripture. The only way Herbert could write truly sacred verse would be by repeating, word for word, what was already there. William Pahlka likewise reads "copie only that" as an injunction to a "mimetic approach to poetry."¹⁴ He contrasts mimetic imitation with new creation. Like Fish, he thinks that sacred poets may safely imitate existing sacred poetry, but creative poets risk pridefulness. Heather Asals says that "when [Herbert's] writing gives up its claim as original . . . and accepts its identity as copy (by which it is Christ's handwriting *written over again*), it defines itself as 'A True Hymne.'" Herbert should copy Christ's handwriting (the Word of scripture) not only word for word but also letter by letter, tracing over what is already there.¹⁵ Ryan Netzley goes as far as to say that "Jordan (II)" advocates a kind of plagiarism!¹⁶ Michael Schoenfeldt notes that "imitation" and "copy"

¹³ Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), 199.

¹⁴ William H. Pahlka, *Saint Augustine's Meter and George Herbert's Will* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1987), 5.

¹⁵ Heather Asals, *Equivocal Predication: George Herbert's Way to God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 24.

¹⁶ Ryan Netzley, *Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist in Early Modern Religious Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 53.

were in Herbert's day technical terms for both writing poetry and devotion to Christ.¹⁷ He then contrasts imitation with emulation: imitation merely repeats the original while emulation allows for elaboration. In all of these cases, the general idea is that copying requires an exact imitation. Christ as *logos* has already set down all the words the poet will ever need in scripture; all that remains for the poet to do is copy them. Consequently, poets who copy scripture should have no voice of their own but subordinate it to the original text.

iii. Herbert's Copia

There is, however, one problem with the anti-poetry position. In Renaissance rhetorical theory, copy (or the Latin term for it, *copia*) was the foundation of what Desiderius Erasmus called "the abundant style." It meant amplification, not simplification. The injunction to "copie out onley that" allows the poet far more latitude than is usually thought.

In his manual on rhetoric *De Copia*, Erasmus distinguished between two kinds of copia: copia of words and copia of thoughts.¹⁸ When one copies words, one says the same thing in a different way: expressing "exactly the same thought, so that as far as the meaning goes, it makes no difference whether you choose rather to use one or the other."¹⁹ Erasmus is here relying on the old distinction between *res*, or subject matter, and *verba*, or words. Erasmus demonstrated his own virtuosity by copying "Your letter

¹⁷ Michael Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 42.

¹⁸ Desiderius Erasmus, *On Copia of Words and Ideas*, trans. Donald B. King and H. David Rix (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2012), 15.

¹⁹ *On Copia*, 19.

has delighted me very much” in nearly 200 variations.²⁰ Copying words could be achieved by many rhetorical devices, including: “antonomasia [substituting a title for a name], metaphor, allegory, onomatopoeia, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole and a range of pronunciation (for example, interrogation, irony, admiration, dubitatio, exclamatio and occupatio).”²¹

When one copies thoughts, on the other hand, one elaborates, working out at length and in detail some pregnant idea: “the first way to embellish thought is to relate at length and treat in detail something that could be expressed summarily and in general.”²² As an example Erasmus gives the phrase “He lost everything through excess” and then enumerates the many things one could lose (inheritance, land “together with farms and herds”) and how one could lose them (“passion for harlots, in daily banquets” and so on). Erasmus says the process of copying thoughts is “as if one should display merchandise first through a latticework, or rolled up in carpets, then should unroll the carpets and disclose the merchandise, exposing it completely to sight.”²³ *Copia* of thought, no less than *copia* of words, allows the orator to go on for pages about a single idea without ever leaving the topic at hand. So instead of limiting what the poet can say, the injunction to “copie out onely that” allows for, and even invites, further elaboration, what Erasmus describes as “piling up, expanding and amplifying of arguments, *exempla*, *collationes*, similies, *dissimilia*, *contraria*, and other methods of this sort.”²⁴ It could also include

²⁰ *On Copia*, 39-42.

²¹ Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 84-85.

²² *On Copia*, 43.

²³ *On Copia*, 43.

²⁴ *De Copia*, 16.

“description, amplification, commonplaces, example, and proverbs.”²⁵ It is important to note that the *copia* of ideas need never be exhaustive. After all, there are innumerable ways to lose money other than due to a “passion for harlots” or “in daily banquets” (poor investments, for instance).

Erasmus made *copia* the cornerstone of eloquence in the early 16th century, but it already had a long history in classical authors like Quintilian and Cicero. Quintilian taught that *copia* was a means of elaboration. He also included many rhetorical devices under the larger heading of *copia*, including paraphrase.²⁶ In his famous demonstration of *copia*, he described all the many ways one could talk about sacking a town: “If you develop what is implicit in the one word [sacked], flames will appear pouring through homes and temples; the crash of falling buildings will be heard, and one indefinable sound of diverse outcries...”²⁷ Cicero defined *copia* slightly differently, making it first and foremost a matter of *elocutio*, or eloquence. He especially tied *copia* to the rhetorical power of eloquence, the orator’s ability to move the listener’s mind with a speech, now this way and now that, by varying his words. In Medieval Latin, *copia* lost the sense of rhetorical puissance and simply meant reproducing existing manuscripts letter by letter. In the Renaissance, however, humanists treated *copia* as part of *inventio*, the process of coming up with new topics, or at least gathering existing ones, for a speech or written document, and this understanding of *copia* largely returned it to Quintilian’s method.²⁸ Erasmus draws on the entire history of *copia*. *Copia*, especially of words, begins from a

²⁵ Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric*, 85.

²⁶ Aneta Georgievska-Shine, *Rubens and the Archaeology of Myth, 1610-1620: Visual and Poetic Memory* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009).

²⁷ Quintilian, viii. 3. 67. (Quoted in *De Copia*, 47-8).

²⁸ Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3-8.

base text (although Erasmus, unlike medieval scribes, allowed deliberate changes to the original) and then varies them in as many ways as possible. His *copia* of ideas looks like Quintilian's description of the siege, too: abundant elaborations on a single idea or event, expounding on the many ways some poor fool could lose his fortune.

As for the purpose of *copia*, Erasmus shares Cicero's desire to move the audience, especially to virtue: "Amplification seems at first to function as a general device for enlarging meaning. But its ethical orientation appears as soon as Erasmus concentrates on the amplification of thought which appeals specifically to the human affections."²⁹ In order to explain how different words can move readers, Erasmus compares words to clothing: "What clothing is to our body, diction is to the expression of our thoughts."³⁰ Depending on how one clothed ones thoughts, they could either entice or repel the intended audience: "For just as the fine appearance and dignity of the body are either set off to advantage or disfigured by dress and habit, just so thought is by words."³¹ If words are like clothing, then fine words can make a pleasing impression on an audience, harsh words repel it, and so on.

How closely does Herbert's poetry follow Erasmus' understanding of *copia*? We have no direct evidence that Herbert read Erasmus, not least because most of Herbert's private writings were reportedly burned during the English civil war.³² Still, it is highly likely that Herbert knew *De Copia* or at least the writing technique of *copia* well.

Erasmus' *De Copia* influenced Renaissance rhetorical theory (which touched on

²⁹ Mandred Hoffman, *Rhetoric and Theology: The Hermeneutic of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 188-9.

³⁰ *De Copia*, 18.

³¹ *De Copia*, 18.

³² Izaak Walton, *The Life of Mr. George Herbert* (1670) in *George Herbert: The Complete English Works*, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater (New York, NY: Everyman's Library, 1995), 385.

everything from poetics to preaching) more deeply than any other book.³³ Eighty five editions of the book appeared in his lifetime, and countless more after his death.³⁴ He was well-known on the continent and in England. In fact, John Colet, the English humanist and Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, commissioned Erasmus to write *De Copia* for use at St. Paul's school. Herbert attended the Westminster school rather than St. Paul's, but it, too, would have taught him both classical and contemporary rhetoric. Because Tudor rhetorical pedagogy focused more on Quintilian and Cicero than Aristotle, *copia* was one of the major concerns of early education, so it is highly likely that young George would have learned and practiced the art.³⁵ Furthermore, as the official Orator of the University of Cambridge, Herbert must have been familiar with the concept of *copia*, at least as it appeared in the classical texts he lectured on "for the special benefit of first-year students."³⁶ Given the popularity of Erasmus' work and Herbert's education and position at Cambridge, it would be surprising if Herbert had *not* read *De Copia*. But my argument does not depend on the historical point. Rather, my argument is critical, which is to say it offers a way of understanding Herbert, a lens through which his work suddenly comes into focus, whether he understood himself in these terms or not.

According to Elizabeth Clarke, *The Temple* realizes Erasmus' dream of the copious Christian writer, whose poems are "a plentitude produced by dynamic inward imitation of scripture, a living library."³⁷ Herbert uses both forms of *copia*: of words and

³³ Peter Mack, *A History of Renaissance Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 77.

³⁴ *Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and Educational Writings 2. De Copia/De Ratione Studii*, ed. Craig R. Thompson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978). 283.

³⁵ *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, 4th edition, ed. Edward J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁶ Amy Charles, *A Life of George Herbert* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 97.

³⁷ Elizabeth Clarke, *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: 'Divinitie, and Poesie, Met'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 139.

of ideas. Let us look first at how Herbert copies the words of the Bible. Hardly a poem in *The Temple* goes by without a scriptural quotation or allusion. But in her book-length study of Herbert's use of scripture, Chana Bloch points out that the poems can be quite free with Biblical texts when it suits Herbert's purposes.³⁸ Herbert is willing to quote inexactly, as he does, for example, in "The Posie":

Let wits contest,
And with their words and posies windows fill:
 Lesse then the least
Of all thy mercies, is my posie still.
...
 Invention rest,
Comparisons go play, wit use thy will:
 Lesse then the least
Of all Gods mercies, is my posie still. (1-4, 9-12).

The word "posie" has two main meanings. A "posie" is a short motto or aphorism, the kind of memorable line one could write on a windowsill or engrave in a ring. It is also another word for "poetry," so a poem with the "Posie" promises a meta-poetical reflection. Herbert's "Posie" will deliver both senses at once, offering a "posie" (motto) for "posie" (poetry in general).

As in "Jordan (I and II)," these lines reject all the traditional tools of the Renaissance poet: wit, inventions, and comparisons. In Herbert's day wits truly did contest. Poets tried to best each other with ever-more virtuosic rhetorical stuntsmanship. In place of this one-upmanship, the poet offers a simple motto: "lesse then the least..." This motto comes from Gen. 32:10 and Eph. 3:8. The meta-poetical point seems rather blunt. Instead of being witty or inventive, Herbert merely cites scripture and then repeats

³⁸ Chana Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 14.

it. Could there be a clearer contrast between the self-asserting poet of courtly love and the humble, pious rector of Bemerton, who merely quotes scripture?

Except: he does not quite quote scripture. The “posie” in this poem (“lesse then the least...”) resembles verses from Genesis and Ephesians, but it never appears word for word. In the King James Version of Genesis, Jacob prays to the God of Abraham “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant.”³⁹ And Eph. 3:8 reads “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given...” In these passages Jacob and Paul both proclaim that God has blessed them in spite of their unworthiness, much as Herbert’s “The Posie” declares its own unworthiness (the poem is less than God’s mercy), and by extension the poem declares the poet’s unworthiness, too. And yet, despite his seeming self-abnegation, the poet’s “citation” rewrites these two verses as one new phrase, making something obviously indebted to both, but reducible to neither. The meta-poetical point, which seemed so simple, suddenly appears more complicated. Herbert’s “Posie” is not slavish, letter-by-letter copying. It will elaborate on scripture, draw forth its abundance. In short, holy verse will be *copia* of scripture.

But if Herbert isn’t quoting scripture, another possibility emerges. One could read these poems as highly ironic: at the very moment Herbert calls himself worthy of “less than the least” of all God’s mercies or says that “Thou art still my God” is all he can say, he also seizes the prerogative of rewriting Biblical verses. Helen Vendler has argued that if there is a Bloomian rivalry in *The Temple* it is not between Herbert and another poet

³⁹ The 1599 Geneva Bible is almost identical: “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and all the truth, which thou hast showed unto thy servant.” As is the Bishop’s Bible: “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercyes and trueth whiche thou hast shewed unto thy seruanut.”

but between him and “received religious dogma, religious literature, tradition, practice.”⁴⁰

If in Genesis Jacob is unworthy of “the least” of God’s mercies, Herbert is unworthy of “*lesse* then the least of God’s mercies.” He has won the humility contest, and against a major Biblical patriarch, too. George Herbert: humbler than thou.

Understanding Herbert’s citation as *copia* reveals a neglected alternative, one that avoids a stark either-or choice (*either* God’s word requires the silence of the poet *or* the poet’s word challenges the word of God). Bloch argues that Herbert stands to the Bible as T.S. Eliot’s Individual Talent stands to Tradition: Herbert’s mind is the catalyst which makes something new out of well known elements.⁴¹ Looking at Herbert’s words closely, they are neither God’s word, letter for letter, nor are they entirely the poet’s own. They are the same ideas, phrased differently. That is, they are *copia*.

One can see the same basic dynamic (overt disavowal of classical rhetoric, subtle use of *copia*) in another of Herbert’s most meta-poetical poems, “The Forerunners.” The basic conceit of the poem is a lover’s lament, in which the aging poet wonders where his youthful love, poetry, has gone. Although it can profitably be read as Herbert’s meditation on old age and his declining mental powers, it is also yet another meditation on secular and sacred verse, and more exactly on whether or not the riches of classical rhetoric can serve the ends of Christian piety. While the youthful Herbert, in his Latin sonnets, looked forward to the day when he could turn poetry from Venus to God, the aging poet of “The Forerunners” laments that he failed in the attempt:

Farewell sweet phrases, louely metaphors.
But will ye leave me thus? when ye before
Of stews and brothels onely knew the doores,

⁴⁰ Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 100.

⁴¹ Bloch, 63.

Then did I wash you with my tears, and more,
Brought you to Church well drest and clad:
My God must have my best, even all I had. (13-15)

The appearance of poetry at Church “well drest and clad” suggests a nuptial scene, and the marriage of phrases and metaphors with the poet would have produced, as progeny, the kind of holy verse Herbert had dreamed of writing all his life. But in these lines, the poet admits his failure to marry church and verse together. Instead of marrying the poet, poetry left him waiting at the altar: “Lovely enchanting language, sugar-can, / Hony of roses, whither wilt thou flie? / Hath some fond love tic’d thee to thy bane? / And wilt thou leave the Church, and love a stie?” (“The Forerunners,” 19-22). Poetry has fled the church and returned to other, human lovers (and apparently many of them), to the brothels and “stie” of illicit loves.

In the poem’s last stanza, the poet accepts the loss of “lovely enchanting language” and seems to content himself with a simpler, strictly Biblical form of verse: “Yet if you go, I passe not; take your way: / For, *Thou art still my God*, is all that ye / Perhaps with more embellishment can say” (31-33). As in “Jordan (II),” the poet seems to give up on poetic devices and settle instead for repeating what God has already said. “Thou art still my God” appears to be a quotation of Ps. 31:14. It occurs several times throughout the poem as what remains after lovely enchanting language has left him: “Must dulnesse turn me to a clod? / Yet have they left me, *Thou art still my God*” (5-6). Its repetition seems to underscore the point that the poet has no originality of his own; all he has are the words of God, repeated again and again to compensate for his poetic failures. The case, though, is not quite so open and shut. Critical debate on this poem has turned on the word *perhaps* (“*Thou art still my God*, is all that ye / Perhaps with more

embellishment can say”). Is it, as Fish would have it once again, a resigned shrug, a sad admission that even with a bit of embellishment, the poet is finally doing no more than parroting the Bible?⁴² Or does it, as Vendler argues, slyly rebut the idea that all the poet can do is quote scripture, opening the door to endless embellishment? Both of these positions take it for granted that the Biblical verse and its poetic embellishment are two different things. But in fact “Thou art still my God” *is already an embellishment*. Ps. 31:14 reads “Thou art my God.” “Still” is the poet’s contribution, a *copia* of the original verse. The stark choice between rebellion and submission turns out to be a false one: the poet can disavow the ornamental excess of secular love poetry while already exemplifying another kind of verse, which proceeds from the Psalm instead of rising against it or merely repeating it.

“The Quip” is another poem in which a Biblical refrain turns out to be, on closer inspection, *copia*. In each stanza of “The Quip,” some worldly temptation parades before the poet. Beauty, money, glory, and then rhetoric itself all pass by and offer themselves to the poet, but he responds the same way each time: “Then came quick Wit and Conversation, / and he would needs a comfort be, / And, to be short, make an oration. / But thou shalt answer, Lord, for me” (17-20). Yet again the poet rejects “wit,” the kind of clever word-play valued by Herbert’s contemporaries, and he apparently responds with a quote from the Bible, this time from Ps. 38. But once again, appearances are deceiving. In the Book of Common Prayer, which Herbert certainly owned, Ps. 38:15 reads: “For in you, O Lord, have I fixed my hope; you will answer me, O Lord, my God.” As in “The Posie” the poet’s *copia* at once changes the words of the Bible and humbles the poet below his Biblical source. While the Psalmist asked God to hear his petition (and so

⁴² Vendler, 41, and Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, 222-223.

retained his own voice), the poet asks God to speak for him in every situation (and so gives up his voice). At the same time, however, he achieves his humility by copying out the words of the Psalmist, meaning that humility and piety allow for copious elaboration of the Biblical base text.

Along with *copia* of words, Herbert copies ideas. He begins with a topic (such as the word “Affliction” or a scriptural verse) and then, to borrow Erasmus’ metaphor, he unrolls it, disclosing a few of its latent possibilities. A perfect example is the poem “Colossians 3:3, Our Life is hid with Christ in God” (the title is itself *copia*, because Col. 3:3 actually reads “*your* life is hid with Christ in God”). The relationship of the poem’s title to its body, in which the former states the subject and the latter expounds on it, follows Erasmus’ advice: “I should not think it out of place to make this suggestion, that a general statement of the subject be placed at the beginning and that the same be then repeated in another form of speech, and that finally you should return to the general statement as though at last wearied of enumerating details.”⁴³ Following Erasmus, Herbert takes the Bible verse as his starting point, and then each line elaborates on it, while cleverly repeating his title in the poem:

My words & thoughts do both expresse this notion,
That *Life* hath with the sun a double motion.
The first *Is* straight, and our diurnall friend,
The other *Hid* and doth obliquely bend.
One life is wrapt *In* flesh, and tends to earth:
The other winds towards *Him*, whose happie birth
Taught me to live here so, *That* still one eye
Should aim and shoot at that which *Is* on high:
Quitting with daily labour all *My* pleasure,
To gain at harvest an eternall *Treasure*.

⁴³ *De Copia*, 44.

Looking at the italicized verse running down from left to right across the poem, it is as if Herbert has expanded each word of the verse into a full line of his own, as if every word in line one were rolled up in “*My*,” just waiting to be unfurled. And I cannot resist noting that the italicized words make yet another *copia* of Col. 3:3, rewriting “Our” as “My” and “Christ in God” as “Him that is my treasure.” The poem copies out the idea of the Biblical verse as well, expanding on what it might mean to Herbert to have a life hid with Christ in God, just as Erasmus expanded on how one might lose everything through excess. To have a hidden life in God means to lead two lives at once: one visible, in time, ending in the ground, and the other bending up to Christ in eternity. This life will be difficult, a daily labor against the temptations of earthly pleasures, but the reward for forbearance now will be a greater treasure in the future.

The first line also summarizes Erasmian *copia*, its two basic kinds and overall function. Different “words” can state the same “notion” (or *res*) differently, and further “thoughts” can expound the same “notion” (or *res*) at greater length and depth. Whatever his different words and thoughts might be, Herbert constantly expresses one central idea (“this [one] notion”), an idea we see copied again and again throughout *The Temple*: human life is a difficult journey to God, enabled by the mediation of Christ, who through scripture teaches the poet to live.

“The Call” offers another example of Herbert’s *copia* of ideas. It begins with a *copia* of words, and then unspools a possible implication of each of those words’ meaning:

Come my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a Way, as gives us breath:
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
And such a Life, as killeth death. (1-4)

The first line is yet another *copia* of a Biblical verse, John 14:8 in which Christ says “I am the way and the truth and the life.” The poet varies the *verba* in order to suit his position as caller, but repeats the triple *res* of Christ as way, truth, and life. “As” links each pair of words together, so that the one elaborates on the other. It is as if the logical consequence of each of Christ’s words were already packed into it, and its further meaning needed only the space, in the next line, to spread out. That Christ is the Way entails that he gives the poet breath, that Christ is truth means that once he is known, strife and quarrels will end, and so on. As with the copy of words, the copy of ideas could go on at great length, giving the poet considerable latitude while also staying on a single idea, like a Biblical verse.

Herbert uses both kinds of *copia* in “The 23d Psalme,” expanding the iconic psalm into the “common metre” (8-6-8-6 syllable lines and A-B-A-B rhyme scheme) typical of English hymns. In the authorized version of the King James Bible, Ps. 23 has six verses. Herbert’s poem has six stanzas, each of which copies out both the words and ideas of its corresponding verse. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” becomes: “The God of love my shepherd is, / And he that doth me feed: / While he is mine, and I am his, / What can I want or need?” (lines 1-4). The first line copies words. “The Lord” and “The God of love” are two names (the *verba*) for one person, Christ (the *res*). The next three lines (2-4) then copy out the idea of God as a shepherd, unpacking some of the possible implications of the Psalm. Christ is the poet’s shepherd, the one who owns, protects, and feeds the poet. He also unpacks the Psalmist’s “want” into “want or need,” with the implication that Christ provides not only the means of living (the poet’s barest

material needs), but also the ends to which the poet should direct himself (his wants and desires). The theme of eating recurs in the second stanza (“He leads me to the tender grasse, / Where I both feed and rest” (5-6)) and throughout the poem (“Nay, thou dost make me sit and dine, / Ev'n in my enemies sight” (17-18)). The idea of feeding is everywhere implicit in the original Psalm (“he maketh me to lie down in green pastures,” “thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies”) but it becomes explicit in Herbert’s copy. Not only lying down in the grass, but also eating it. Not only sitting at the table, but also enjoying a meal there. Once again, it would be hard to call these lines either strict quotation or a new psalm. They are an elaboration of the psalm, a discovery of its latent abundance. That is, they are *copia*.

My argument is that *copia* is a principle of composition in *The Temple*, which is a lot to claim after briefly explicating a few poems. But *copia* of word and idea are everywhere in *The Temple*. As Bloch has pointed out, Herbert rewrites scripture at least as often as he cites it word for word. And as for *copia* of thought, even a glance at the titles in *The Temple* will show that Herbert constantly wrote variations on his favorite ideas. He has five poems titled “Affliction,” three apiece called “Love” and “Praise,” two on “Sinne,” “Prayer,” “Scripture” and many others. He also names poems after specific Biblical verses or figures and then elaborates on them, as if each were a rug he unrolled to reveal just a few of the possibilities within each. One can also understand Herbert’s formal inventiveness in terms of *copia*. His poems may address relatively few topics, but they appear on the page in an astonishing variety of poetic forms: strangely shaped stanzas, unusual line lengths, tempos, and rhyme schemes. Through formal decisions he can write poems of dizzying variety while preserving the sense of his Biblical themes.

Most significantly, his poems play out the same spiritual conflicts again and again. One of the reasons it's so hard to write about *The Temple* at any length (in a dissertation, say) is that while you are trying to deal with one poem and issue at a time, the poems themselves overflow with ideas and themes that were supposed to be part of your *next* chapter. Thinking of Herbert's poems as *copia* suddenly makes sense of the way his poems seem so different from one another and yet nearly identical at the same time. Herbert's spiritual conflicts may be few in number, but they can be abundantly elaborated. That is the (endlessly variable) essence of *copia*.

iv. "*In another make me understood*": Poetry and Christian Life

While Herbert's earliest attempts at sacred verse "weaved [himself] into the sense" of Biblical verse, poems like "The Posie" and "The 23d Psalme," weave a poetic voice out of the Biblical source material. Perhaps the distinction seems overly subtle, but it is the difference between establishing a competitive and cooperative relationship between the poet's words and the scriptural word of God. Herbert's is an authorship whose ideal, in the words of "Clasping of Hands," is making "no Thine and Mine!" The relationship between the poet and God has implications beyond poetry. Questions of authorship and agency overlap for Herbert: to what extent can he attribute his own efforts and creations to himself, and what extent do they belong to God alone? By trying to answer both of these questions at once, *The Temple* presents a theory of Christian poetry that is also a theory of Christian life.

The idea of authors as the sole creators of their texts, and the therefore sole owners, emerged slowly from the 17th to the early 19th century.⁴⁴ In Thomas Hobbes' writing on property, for instance, he argued that agency was meant staking a claim to ownership. The one who physically created the text deserved credit for it.⁴⁵ Many Renaissance writers, however, understood their relationship to what they had written differently. Calvin, for instance, frequently reworded his sources rather than citing them, not because he wanted to steal credit but because he had absorbed those sources. If his own voice was already an amalgam of sources, then to whom did his writings belong? His use of other writers "would have signaled the truly eloquent blending of two natures, his own and the authorial nature of his sources. Furthermore, marking the text as a distinct product of his own authorial voice did not preclude the possibility that the doctrines he articulates are 'more God's than his own.'"⁴⁶ By drawing on scripture and arguments from antiquity and the Church Fathers, Calvin opened up the possibility that God could speak through "his" words.

Protestants were not the only ones who tried to strike a balance between human and divine authorship. Erasmus wrote full paraphrases of several Gospels and he distinguished paraphrase from both translation and commentary.⁴⁷ In commentary, one hears two voices: the voice of the original text and the voice of the commentator. In

⁴⁴ See Michel Foucault's famous article "What is an Author?" *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Vol II* (New York, NY: New York Press, 1998), 212-3.

⁴⁵ Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 202.

⁴⁶ Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 35. See 19-35 for Jones' complete discussion of Calvin's use of *imitatio* and *copia*.

⁴⁷ Other Renaissance rhetoricians also distinguished *copia* from paraphrase. Philip Melancthon listed paraphrase as one way to produce an amazing amount of *copia*. See Kees Meerhoff, "The Significance of Melancthon's Rhetoric," *Renaissance Rhetoric*, ed. Peter Mack (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994), 48-49.

translation, one ideally hears only the original voice. But a paraphrase is trickier, making “no distinction between the narrator and the commentator, since the author himself seems to be explaining his text. For this reason Erasmus states on several occasions that it is not he but the writer of holy scripture who speaks.”⁴⁸ It does not follow, however, that Erasmus silences himself entirely. In a letter he admitted that his paraphrases were “a new departure in every way.”⁴⁹ As with his *copia*, Erasmus was trying to find new, delightful and instructive words for the Biblical truths. The point is that neither Erasmus nor Calvin saw themselves in an antagonistic relationship with their sources, whether those sources were theological, classical, or Biblical. Imitation and copy were ways of blending their voices and their sources.

As Michael Schoenfeldt has noted, “copy” and “imitation” are at the same time technical words in Renaissance poetics and words for Christian devotional practice, especially for the imitation of Christ.⁵⁰ Herbert explicitly connects the imitation of Christ to *copia* in “The Thanksgiving,” when the poet, trying to respond appropriately to Christ’s passion, asks “But how then shall I imitate thee, and / Copie thy fair, though bloudie hand?” (14-15). According to the general consensus in Herbert criticism, Herbert discounts his own efforts to imitate Christ entirely, the better to attribute all honor and glory to God for his salvation. But what if the imitation of Christ were like *copia*, an elaboration of Christ’s life, specified in all sorts of different contexts? In this way “our lives” (as Herbert has it) really would be hid with Christ, their possibilities rolled up in the gospels, waiting to be articulated and acted out in daily life.

⁴⁸ Jean-Francois Cottier, “Erasmus’ *Paraphrases*: A ‘New Kind of Commentary’?” *The Unfolding of Words: Commentary in the Age of Erasmus*, ed. Judith Rice Henderson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 31.

⁴⁹ Cottier, 27.

⁵⁰ Schoenfeldt, 42.

This is precisely the relationship between scripture and Christian life that Herbert imagines in “The H. Scriptures II.” Christian life, according to this poem, should be understood and lived out as an extension of scripture, but the “H. Scriptures,” in individual Christian destinies, will become abundant and various, elaborated and specified in countless different ways in countless different lives:

This verse marks that, and both do make a motion
 Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie:
 Then as dispersed herbs do watch a potion,
 These three make up some Christians destinie:

Such are thy secrets, which my life makes good,
 And comments on thee: for in ev'ry thing
 Thy words do finde me out, & parallels bring,
 And in another make me understood. (5-12)

These lines present the Bible as a unified and self-glossing text.⁵¹ One verse is best-understood in light of another (“this verse marks that”), and Biblical characters are types of each other, as, for instance, Isaiah’s “suffering servant” prefigures Christ. Present-day Christians, too, are Biblical types and therefore participants in the epic Biblical history of salvation, and yet, like Herbert’s poems, present-day Christians are more than carbon copies.⁵² The comparison of scriptural verses to herbs, and the individual Christian “destinie” as the resulting “potion,” suggests that while scripture is the basic condition for any Christian life, the individual Christian’s destiny, like a potion which has undergone an (al)chemical reaction, will be something more than the sum of its parts. The analogy between Christian life and Christian *copia* should then be clear. Just as “*Less than the*

⁵¹ See Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Lyric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 117-141 for an argument that typology is a staunchly Protestant exegetical method, but also see Deborah Shuger’s *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and Dominant Culture*, 19. She points out that Lancelot Andrewes, too, read typologically.

⁵² John Wall, *Transformations of the Word: Spenser, Herbert, Vaughan* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 240-45.

least of all thy mercies” was indebted but not reducible to Gen. 32:10, so too a Christian life is indebted to Jacob but not reducible to him, or any Biblical model. It is vital, however, to get this relationship the right way around. “Some Christians destinie” is only understood through the Biblical parallels, meaning one must understand the Biblical types *before* one understands one’s own life. Christian “destinie” only becomes apparent through scriptural precedent, as “in another” one learns to understand oneself.

As for Christian life, so it is for Christian poetry: the poetic persona emerges from the Biblical base text. In “The Posie” and “The 23d Psalme,” Herbert’s own voice emerges from scripture. In the second stanza of “The Posie,” the poet writes his posie everywhere around him, as if trying to see everything through the lens of God’s mercy:

This on my ring,
This by my picture, in my book I write:
Whether I sing,
Or say, or dictate, this is my delight. (5-8)

He engraves it on his ring, which he always has on hand (as it were). He etches it on his “window,” his porthole to the world. He puts it by his portrait, as if this posie rather than his name were his proper title. He inscribes it “in [his] book,” which is surely *The Temple*, but also could be an *ex libris* inscription (with God’s word instead of his name establishing ownership) in all the other books he owns. These are all ways of taking the verses out of Genesis and Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians and making them a part of daily life. It would not be too much to say that the poet is attempting to experience his life *through* this posie. As a ring it circles a part of his body and signifies betrothal, promissory ownership: in response to God’s mercy, he has promised himself to God. It frames his view of the outside world (his window) and his view of himself (his picture).

Whenever he opens one of his books, it is the first thing he will read, and he can therefore always keep it in mind as he reads. Furthermore, it is not only outside of him but also inside of him: he says or sings or dictates it, all of which implies that this posie is lodged in his memory. It is always on his mind and in his heart. The overarching idea here is to achieve Calvin's ambition: seeing everything through the spectacles of scripture.⁵³

Herbert's posie accompanies everything the poet does, as if he should see his whole life under the aspect of God's mercy. As he imitates the Bible in his poem, he creates the conditions for imitating the Bible outside of his writing, in his life. If so, then writing *copia*, writing poetry, can become a spiritual exercise, a conversion process by which the poet learns to see himself and the world rightly.

In "The Quidditie," Herbert suggests that writing Biblical *copia*, imitating the Word of God, draws the poet to God. "Quidditie" is a term for the essence or inherent nature of a thing, and so, like "The Posie," this title promises a reflection on verse itself. The poem proceeds at first by negation, considering everything that poetry is not: "My God, a verse is not a crown, / No point of honour, or gay suit, / No hawk, or banquet, or renown, / Nor a good sword, nor yet a lute" (1-4). As always, Herbert rejects the trappings of 17th-century courtly life, and in a subsequent line, "It never was in *France* or *Spain*" (6), it is hard not to hear a contrast between his quiet life in Bemerton and his brothers' continental adventures. But more important than the poet's possible regret is the ambiguity of the meaning of "verse" in these lines: is the poet talking about the verses of the Bible or his own verses? The answer, I think, is both at once: "But it [a verse] is that which while I use / I am with thee, and *Most take all*" (10-11). Herbert's *copia* is a way of using Biblical verses to make his own verse, and therefore, while he is copying

⁵³ Lewalski, 185.

Biblical verses into his own, he is “with thee,” with the word of God. To copy out verses of the Bible is, like the imitation of Christ, a way of being “with thee,” participating in the *logos* of Christ.

“The 23d Psalm” offers an even closer identification of poem, poet, and Biblical text. In the third verse of “The 23d Psalme” Herbert writes “Or if I stray, he doth convert / And bring my minde in frame” (9-10). Herbert can have a mind beyond scripture, but it is a straying, distorted mind. To see himself clearly, he needs to be “in frame,” and the frame here is both the Biblical context of his life and the common meter of the poem itself.

In the final stanza, he asks that he live his whole life within the frame of the Psalm. Living his life in the frame of a Psalm would mean responding to God's love with praise, writing holy verse: “Surely thy sweet and wondrous love / Shall measure all my dayes; / And as it never shall remove, / So neither shall my praise” (21-24). The Psalmist said that surely God's love would “follow [him] all the days of my life,” and while the poet keeps this general subject matter (God's abiding care), the poet also makes some suggestive substitutions, most notably replacing the verb “follow” with “measure.”

“Measure” might be a simple synonym for follow, meaning (as it did more often in Herbert's day than in does in ours) traversing a length of ground. God's love, in that case, will keep pace with the poet wherever he goes. But other senses are in play, too, and they establish God's sovereignty over the poet. “Follow” can make it sound like God is tagging along after the Psalmist, but God “[measuring] all my dayes” suggests that God has apportioned out the days of the poet's life already, from birth to death. One who “measures” is also making a judgment (as in, how does he “measure up” to my

standards?), in which case the poet is looking ahead to God's final verdict on him. But, of course, "measure" also has a meaning in poetry. A poem's "measure" is its meter, the rhythm of the lines that can remain constant even as the words filling them in might change. For the poet to ask God to "measure" his days, then, means for God to order his [the poet's] life ("all my dayes") according to an existing pattern, like the Biblical types of "The H. Scriptures II." Furthermore, he asks that his days become "praise," and given the close association of praise and poetry (in *The Temple* as in the Psalms), Herbert is asking that God grant him the chance to spend his days in the act of praise, which for him meant writing holy verse.

To conclude: instead of weaving himself into the sense of scripture, Herbert is trying to weave the word of God into himself, as poet or moral agent. What is important to see, however, is that Herbert's ethics follows his poetics. He does not have a theory of agency and then write poetry about it. Instead, Herbert demonstrates human action responding to revelation: a picture of Christian freedom emerging from poetic *praxis*, a *poesis* of agency. For Herbert, the possibilities of Christian poetry (what he can make of revelation) reveal the possibilities (what he can make) of the Christian life.

Coda: "My deare, then I will serve."

No sustained treatment of *The Temple* would be complete without a reading of Herbert's most famous poem, "Love (III)." Chana Bloch contends that it "contains *The Temple* in brief."⁵⁴ Sure enough, the first stanza (even the first two lines) touch on all the major themes of my first and second chapters:

⁵⁴ Bloch, 108. Veith likewise notes that all of Herbert's themes are "recapitulated" in this poem (171)

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guiltie of dust and sinne.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack'd any thing. (1-6)

As many critics have pointed out, the figure of “Love” at once represents God, who according to 1 John 4:8 “is love,” Christ, in whom that love becomes a human being and can bid welcome, and the communion wafer (“the host” at the communion table). While denying none of this, others have added that this poem might also represent “a Christian’s coming home to heaven.”⁵⁵ It is no ordinary communion, then, but the final banquet, at which Christ and Christian finally unite. If so, then the poem also fits nicely with Christian Renaissance Platonist ideas about divine love. In Ficino and Herbert’s earlier poems on “Love,” God’s love was a medium of ascent to the divine, a “greater flame” which attracted “the lesser” to it. Further in line with my first chapter, “Love” (III) suggests that God must assist the soul in achieving this reunion. If this were one of Edward’s poems, he would surely walk right in, pull out a chair, and make himself comfortable, but the poet of *The Temple*, as we saw in my second chapter, is less sure of his worthiness. He once again accuses himself of being guilty of both “dust and sinne,” pairing sin and the bodily disintegration of death. This matters (as it were) because in Christian Platonism part of God’s perfection was unity, meaning nothing divided could join God, as it would compromise said divine unity. A disintegrated poet would have no place at Love’s perfect banquet table.

⁵⁵ George Ryley, *Mr. George Herbert's Temple and Church Militant Explained and Improved*, ed. Maureen Boyd and Cedric C. Brown (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987), 265. Summers concurs with Ryley (89).

That was precisely what Herbert feared in his many poems of abandonment. As his body wasted away, he considered the horrible possibility that God's love had deserted him. In those poems God's will was so often inscrutable, but in "Love (III)" God's will is unmistakable. Instead of abandoning the poet, Love seeks him out, persistently welcoming, observing, and drawing near. Eventually, Love reaches the poet and takes his hand:

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
Love said, you shall be he.
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah, my deare,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I? (6-12)

By taking the poet by the hand and saying that he made the poet, Love stakes a gentle claim. Just as in "Love (I)" Love was the "authour of this great frame" (1), Love is here the maker ("authour") of the guest's eyes. So although Herbert feared that he was outside of God's care, he was no less part of God's providential poem than anything else in nature.

In the final stanza of the poem Love, like a good host, will not be gainsaid by the poet's protests that he "couldn't possibly!" sit down and have a bite to eat. He demands that the poet attend the banquet:

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, sayes, Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat. (13-18)

In line with my third chapter, the entire poem is of course about eating, culminating with the last two lines: “You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat: / So I did sit and eat.” Most obviously, these lines support the line of criticism that reads “Love (III)” as a communion poem: the “host” is Himself the banquet. Yet I think it is also possible to detect scriptural food in “Love (III),” too, though it is already well digested. In Ps. 23:5 the Psalmist declares that the Lord “preparest a table before me,” and in Rev. 20:3 an angel declares “I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.” In the Gospel According to Matthew Jesus tells a parable about a king who tells his servants to invite “as many as ye shall find” to a wedding feast, and in Luke 12:37 Jesus tells his disciples that “Blessed are those servants, whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them.” The “meat” here also has echoes of 1 Cor. 3:2, in which meat is the spiritual food appropriate for mature believers. In Luke as in “Love (III),” the master makes the servants sit and serves them meat, an inversion of the normal social order. With a touch of *copia*, however, Herbert alters the scene. Instead of the master coming to the servants’ home, the poet arrives at Love’s house, which adds support to Ryley and Summers’ reading of the poem as a celestial banquet. It is possible to find a scriptural antecedent for almost every line in the poem. For example lines 13-4 (“let my shame / Go where it doth deserve”) varies 2 Sam. 13:13: “Whither shall I cause my shame to go?”⁵⁶ Though in a happy inversion, Herbert turns the scene in 2 Sam. (in

⁵⁶ Bloch holds up “Love (III)” as the “consummate example of the way in which Herbert uses biblical materials—and makes them speak in his own voice” (100).

which Amnon forces himself on his sister) into a scene that, although it certainly has erotic undertones, is sweet and even playful.⁵⁷

Though it would be possible to read the ending otherwise. Stanley Fish unsurprisingly emphasizes Love's "must," calling the ending "imposed," with the implication that the tension between the poet's will and God's remains.⁵⁸ Love, in this reading, would be uncomfortably close to Amnon: he forces himself on the poet. But there can only be a winner and a loser in this "courtesy-contest" (as Strier calls it), if the poet and Love want different things.⁵⁹ Does the poet really want Love to heed his protests? He looks away from Love because he cannot stand to see what he wants the most, feeling unworthy of it. If so, then by losing the contest he paradoxically wins it. This in turn creates a happy scenario in which both he and Love get what they want. This is what happens, I believe, in line 16: "My deare, then I will serve." Until this line, the speaker has always been clear, with Love and the poet bantering back and forth, but this line could belong to either or, better, both: they speak these lines together, with Love and the poet pledging each other their mutual service. Love's task, as Christ, is to bear "the blame," take responsibility for sin and thereby secure the poet's eternal salvation. The poet's preferred mode of service is poetry: to fulfill his early ambition of writing holy verses like this one.

So in line 16, as I have argued is often the case in Herbert's poetry, the authorship is co-operative. This is true of the poem as a whole. Aside from Love speaking about half of the words in the poem, "Love (III)" has a plethora of Biblical and theological sources,

⁵⁷ Schoenfeldt especially insists on the eroticism of the scene. See *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 256.

⁵⁸ Fish, *Catechizing the Reader*, 136.

⁵⁹ Strier, 74.

so many that it might seem to be a wholly unoriginal poem. And yet it is Herbert's most recognizable. The Renaissance method of *copia* allows this kind of joint authorship, but as Funkenstein noted (way back in my introduction): "The 'new' often consists not in the invention of new categories or new figures of thought, but rather in a surprising employment of existing ones." Herbert achieves his most quintessentially Herbertian poem not by rejecting his intellectual inheritance, but by incorporating it so thoroughly that he creates something new.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have argued that Edward and George Herbert faced similar intellectual challenges but came to different conclusions. In my first chapter, I showed that both brothers drew heavily on Renaissance-era Christian Platonism. In my second chapter, I contended that both were grappling with the aftermath of the 16th-century skeptical crisis and its implications for soteriology. Here is where their similarities ended, because while Edward responded by trying to regain certainty about his eternal fate by the independent power of his mind, George tried to regain his trust in God through identification with Christ. Their different estimations of human power led them to different conclusions: Edward did not believe he needed help, while George did. In my third chapter, George took a hermeneutic approach to achieving his salvation, building a holy body and conscience through steady engagement with the Bible. In my fourth chapter, Edward endeavored to set himself up as an independent observer, standing outside any one confession in order to see what they all shared—which he in turn thought would be the essentials of true, saving religion. And, in my fifth and final chapter, George wrote his poetry out of the words of scripture, using the Renaissance writing technique of *copia*. Reading and writing devotional verse was a way of being “with thee”: a foretaste of the final communion, imagined most sweetly in “Love (III).”

In my introduction, I suggested that the Herbert brothers were Janus-faced, looking into the past and future at the same time. As Funkenstein suggested, their novelty came not from inventing unheard of categories but from a surprising arrangement of

existing elements. Edward always insists that he is attempting something unprecedented; his epistemology is of “no party or school.” Yet his metaphysical treatise relies heavily on classical and scholastic models, and his encyclopedia of religion contains little, if any original research. Still, the way he synthesizes existing strands of thought—encyclopedias of religion, the symbolic relationship of beliefs and rituals to God, and a search for a minimal agreement on matters of faith—results in something new. George wants to achieve the ancient goal of making himself a temple for the spirit of God, but in order to do so he draws not only on the Bible but also on both ancient and contemporary understandings of human physiology. He wants to write sacred poetry, which some in his day understood to be a contradiction in terms, and succeeds by reviving the classical art of *copia*. They offer two possible models of modern selfhood (call them the independent and hermeneutic) that survived long after their deaths.

The Afterlife of the Temple: “one may be a nation”

Nicholas Ferrar described George as “a pattern or more for the age he lived in.” And even though he supposedly gave Ferrar the option of destroying his poems, George seemed to hope that his poetry would survive him. In “Obedience” he imagined his future readers identifying with his words:

How happie were my part,
If some kinde man would thrust his heart
Into these lines; till in heav’ns court of rolls
They were by winged souls
Entred for both, farre above their desert! (41-45)

To have another’s heart in his lines, which I take to be concurring with their sentiment, would in some way reflect how he felt when he read “The H. Scriptures II”: “in another

make me understood” (12). Absent the method of *copia*, this would surely look presumptuous. Instead of the Bible moving the reader to holiness, Herbert’s poetry would suffice. But if Herbert’s poems are made “of thee,” then the conflict dissolves. And besides, far from self-regarding, the poet seems to be admitting that he has no final say over the value of his poetry. Either men and women will find room in these poems for their own hearts, or they will not. As usual with Herbert, he prefaces his hopes with a conditional “if”: *if* some kind man...

He certainly got his wish. As I wrote in my introduction and bibliographic essay, *The Temple* was a hit. In an essay on Herbert’s reception in the 17th century, Helen Wilcox has shown that his readers and imitators were numerous, appreciative, and ran the gamut from Royalist to Puritan and even non-conforming.¹ They seemed to have loved two things about *The Temple*: it was ravishingly beautiful, and it moved people to virtue: “While many readers spoke rhapsodically about their own personal ‘delight’ in reading *The Temple*, others expressed the hope that, as the poet predicted, reluctant believers would be brought to holiness under the influence of the poems.”² In fact, she notes, the most commonly cited verses were from “The Church-porch”: “A verse may finde him, who a sermon flies, / And turn delight into a sacrifice” (5-6). In Wilcox’s judgment, *The Temple* was perhaps more often read as a devotional manual than for aesthetic enjoyment. (In some editions special indexes pointed readers to devotional topics, such as God, sin, and grace.) Yet if we remember Herbert’s own thoughts on the relationship between sweetness and the verses of scripture, this should not be surprising. Devotional literature,

¹ Helen Wilcox, “In the *Temple* precincts: George Herbert and Seventeenth-Century Community Making,” *Writing and Religion in England, 1558-1689: Studies in Community-Making and Cultural Memory*, ed. Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 253-71. For a roll call of poets who openly imitated Herbert, see 256.

² Wilcox, 259.

like “The H. Scriptures” themselves, should both taste sweet and instruct the reader’s taste at the same time.

Wilcox realizes that with so many readers, many of whom seriously objected to each other’s doctrinal beliefs (and read *The Temple* as confirmation of their own), it might be inaccurate to speak of Herbert’s readers as one community. And yet she also concludes that devotional poetry may have been uniquely suited to bridge the doctrinal divisions of this period: “In this context, Herbert’s poems were important for their expression of the personal experience of faith (and doubt), in which their readers could identify their own spiritual autobiography and find themselves ‘understood.’”³ Wilcox’s implication is that Herbert’s readers loved his poems despite their theological differences, but perhaps he also spoke to a similarity underlying their different confessions. If I am right in my contention that Herbert did not belong only to one arm of the post-Reformation church but was also responding to the epistemic situation of post-Reformation Europe and the skeptical crisis it engendered, then his poetry might well speak to the “faith (and doubt)” of a wide array of people—because they were all facing these problems, too. As Herbert wrote in “An Offering”: “Yet one, if good, may title to a number; / And single things grow fruitfull by deserts. / In publick judgements one may be a nation, / And fence a plague, while others sleep and slumber” (9-12). He seems to have found a way to speak to the whole nation’s spiritual anxieties.

If so, then *The Temple*, no less than *De Religione Gentilium* (or Descartes’ *Meditations*), is an essential part of the story told by Blumenberg, Gillespie, and so on. Charles Taylor has pointed out that while in 17th-century theology and philosophy, the effort to cultivate the love of God took a backseat to more analytic, impersonal concerns.

³ Wilcox, 270.

At the same time, however, devotional literature like the “devout humanism” in France or Ignatian meditation maintained “a high degree of reflectiveness about one’s orientation ... and proposes ways to nourish a dedication to love of God.”⁴ What he says about devout humanism and Ignatius of Loyola could be said of Herbert, too. But I would caution against seeing the devotional as something other than philosophical. As an anonymous poet wrote into the 10th edition of Herbert’s poetry, “Behold an Orator, Divinely sage, / The *Prophet*, & *Apostle* of that age. / View but his *Porch*, and *Temple*, you shall see / The body of Divine *Philosophy*.”⁵ And yet we should not read poetry like Herbert’s only as reactions to (or symptoms of) philosophical changes in the 17th century. Herbert faces many of the same questions Edward was posing to himself, but poetry like his can offer something more than arguments. He explores and models ways in which reading and writing can become devotional practices, ways for him to try to reconnect with the God he thought he had lost.

Edward Herbert and the Study of Religion: in the 17th century, before, and after

In the conclusion of my fourth chapter, I considered how Edward Herbert’s theories of religion grew out of and differed from his immediate predecessors. But what place did his theories have in the larger history of the study of religion?

It was once common to date the birth of the “science” of religion to the late 19th century.⁶ What made the 19th-century study of religion “scientific”—rather than apology,

⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 227.

⁵ Quoted in Wilcox, 258.

⁶ See for example Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd ed. (London: Gerald Duckworth and Company, Ltd., 1986), xi.

polemic, or mere church history—was the addition of philology and comparative grammar to classical myths and travelers’ tales: “Here for the first time was a demonstrable scientific link between the old and respected discipline of Classics, and the newer areas of Indology and Germanic studies, which was capable of replacing the dilettantism and haphazard qualities of past comparative work.”⁷ The problem with this argument is that 16th- and 17th-century scholars like Vossius and Selden were excellent philologists, applying their knowledge of ancient languages to Egyptology and the study of the Old Testament. Perhaps the “science” of religion changed in the 19th century, but it did not begin there.

Consequently, scholars have more recently pushed the study of “religion” back further into European intellectual history. Guy Stroumsa argued that the period “between the Renaissance and Romanticism is the crucial one in European intellectual history for the first emergence and early formation of the modern study of religion.”⁸ What happened, he claims, is that Europeans went from having an “internalized” view of religion, in which it referred primarily to the disposition of *religio*, to an “externalized” view, in which it referred to a unified system of doctrines and rituals: “Henceforth religion would no longer refer to personal vision but to systems of beliefs and behavior. This radical semantic externalization of ‘religion’ and its transformation from inner piety to social patterns of behavior occurred in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.”⁹ In his telling, the crucial ingredients were the discovery of the Americas,

⁷ Sharpe, 22.

⁸ Guy Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), viii.

⁹ Stroumsa, 27. See 25-7 for his whole discussion about internal and external approaches to religion.

renewed interest in antiquity (which required philology), and the “wars of religion.”¹⁰ New information about the people of the Americas and the ancients (including philological approaches to studying the Bible) forced the Europeans to reconsider themselves and their categories.¹¹ Peter Harrison has emphasized the importance of the Reformation. The political agreement of the peace of Augsburg created “religions”: sharply defined and delineated systems of belief and behavior that could be easily told apart.¹² He concurs with Stroumsa: “With the increasing frequency of the expressions ‘religion’ and ‘the religions’ from the sixteenth century onward we witness the beginning of the objectification of what was once an interior disposition.”¹³

Some have argued that “religion” in this sense was unknown to the medieval and ancient worlds. See for instance John Bossy, who argues that between the 15th and 18th centuries the word religion changed from “an attribute of individuals or communities” (a feeling of devotion) to “objective social and moral entities characterized by system, principles, and hard edges, which could be envisaged by Voltaire as cutting one another’s throats.”¹⁴ Brent Nongbri has argued something similar, adding that the ancient Greeks and Romans, too, lacked the idea of a religion as a distinct and separable part of society.¹⁵

The critical point in all of these arguments is that the “objectification” or “externalized” view of religion made it a possible for people like Edward Herbert to study it as an

¹⁰ Stroumsa, 5.

¹¹ See Stroumsa 19: “Throughout history, it is only by the brutal confrontation with radically new facts that categories open up and new cognitive structures eventually appear.” For his discussion of the role of Biblical philology, see 87.

¹² Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2015) 97-8. See also 7-8.

¹³ Harrison, 11.

¹⁴ John Bossy, *Christianity in the West: 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 170-1.

¹⁵ Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of the Modern Concept* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013). For the birth of religion as an “[object] of academic study” in the 17th and 18th centuries, see page 11. For his argument that men like Lucretius and Cicero meant something different by *religio* than, say, Edward Herbert, see pages 21-28.

independent object, a genus with many species under its tent rather than as a component of an ancient society or part of a doctrinal system.

This argument has perhaps been overstated. According to the medievalist Peter Biller, learned men in the 12th and 13th centuries may not have used the word “religion” in exactly the way Bossy and Stroumsa suggest, but they covered the same ground with different words and phrases, such as *fides* (“articles of belief”) or *lex* (“moral precepts, or a set of ceremonial precepts”).¹⁶ In the works of Roger Bacon, and in apologetic books written against Muslims and pagans, Biller finds “a sense of embattled faiths and a use of *religio* or one of its derivatives in a way which seems to indicate development towards a sense of *religio* as an entity or thing.”¹⁷ Likewise, the historian Dimitri Levitin has been scathingly critical of what he calls “the old narrative of a turgid anti-pagan ‘orthodoxy’ being bulldozed away by the deist invention of comparative religion . . . Recent works which continue to espouse deist-centered interpretations do so only by ignoring the fruits of the recent history of scholarship.”¹⁸ Levitin emphasizes the importance of church historians (like John Selden) whose careful study of the Hebrew Bible, Levitin claims, was the real precursor to the “history of religions.” If so, then the historical study of religious groups originated not with Spinoza and other freethinkers (as Stroumsa insists) but with perfectly orthodox Churchmen.

Because the fourth chapter of my dissertation argued for the unique and pivotal

¹⁶ Peter Biller, “Words and the Medieval Notion of ‘Religion,’” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1985, pp. 351-369. Quote on page 362.

¹⁷ Biller, 368. Biller’s article deserves a wider readership in the religion department.

¹⁸ Levitin, “From Sacred History to the History of Religion: Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity in European Historiography from Reformation to ‘Enlightenment,’” *The Historical Journal*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2012, pp. 1117 -60. Quote on page 1136. For a brutal assessment of Peter Harrison’s contention that the Reformation led to a fundamental change in how Europeans conceptualized religion, see Levitin’s review of *The Territories of ‘Science’ and ‘Religion’* in *The English Historical Review*, vol. 132, no. 556. 1136.

contribution of Edward Herbert (the purported father of deism), I might stand accused of repeating “the old narrataive,” as Levitin puts it. Biller and Levitin certainly have a point: just because a medieval thinker like Bacon didn't use the word “religion” as we do, it does not follow that he was unable to compare Christians and Muslims in similar ways. And, as Sabine MacCormack pointed out, contra Stroumsa, the Europeans who encountered the indigenous Americans could and did make sense of them with the conceptual toolkit they had inherited from Thomas Aquinas.¹⁹

Yet it remains the case that the meaning of the word “religion” and the way it was studied did change between the 15th and 17th centuries. Taking Biller and Levitin into account, however, I submit that this change in the meaning of *religio* was less of a break from the past than it was a slow shift in emphasis or center of gravity. In the Middle Ages *religio* had several possible meanings, “worshipful disposition” being the foremost.²⁰ By the 17th century, *religio* as a disposition moved from the center to the margin, while religion as “a system of doctrines and rites,” which had been marginal, came to the fore.

I am happy to grant Levitin the importance of church historians for the development of historical thinking about religions other than Christianity, and also happy to grant Stroumsa the importance of travelers’ tales and philology. I would, however, aver that church histories and travelers tales and advances in philology, crucial as they doubtless were, also required a new conceptualization for the study of an independent object called “religion.” Herbert’s books provided it. He relied heavily on historical works and accounts of the new world; he never would have hit on his theory of religion

¹⁹ Sabine MacCormack, *Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 237.

²⁰ Biller, 358.

without them. But his theoretical contributions, his substantive definition of religion and social history of religions, were his own.

Herbert's contribution to the study of religion goes beyond his books. His ideas influenced the course of English deism and through it the study of "natural" religion. Herbert died before the publication of *De Religione Gentilium*, but after his death, the English deist Charles Blount popularized Herbert's work.²¹ Due to Blount's wholehearted adoption of Herbert's thought, Herbert came to be known as the "Father of English Deism." Subsequent scholars have questioned Herbert's right to this sobriquet, though not to my mind convincingly. Peter Byrne, for instance, argues that Herbert is not "naturalistic" in the sense of later proponents of "natural religion," like Matthew Tindal.²² Herbert's religion "is not the product of human reason's reflection on nature, though such reflection may stimulate or awaken it. It is essentially a religion that has a divine source (inscription) as well as a divine focus. A different kind of naturalism is involved in the elevation of natural religion."²³ God has placed the five common religious notions in everyone's hearts (inscribed them there), and Byrne takes this to be a continued reliance on revelation.

While Herbert's God is admittedly not the God of later, clockwork Deism, he still anticipates later Deism on several points, though Herbert also insists that the pagans, and by extension his readers, will have to reflect on nature to discover what is already inside them (*RG*, 56-9). In the section of *A Secular Age* on "Providential Deism," Charles Taylor defines it according to a few characteristics. It has a creator rather than incarnate God. There is no need for divine grace, nor any possibility of miracles. And God's main

²¹ Champion, 143.

²² For Byrne's full criticism of Herbert, see *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion*, 32-36.

²³ Byrne, 36.

purpose for us is that we achieve our own good. All other religious ideas and rituals are later inventions, best cast aside.²⁴ Herbert anticipates most of these characteristics, with the exception of the mechanistic view of nature. His original religion has no need for grace, miracles, or Christ. True worship is ethical action, and the purpose of religion is one's own good, defined as eternal bliss. Anything beyond this minimum is suspect. In his rationalism and his effort to refuse inherited wisdom Herbert stands at the riverhead of later natural theology and subsequent studies of natural religion.

Perhaps Herbert's longest-lasting innovation, however, is using a purportedly non-confessional viewpoint to study huge amounts of historical and anthropological data. From Augustine to Ficino, the stuff of "religion" was always understood within a larger conceptual frame (say, Christian theology). In Herbert's *De Religione Gentilium* "religion" becomes the framework, the way to get perspective on conceptual and ceremonial systems around the world. And with that term in hand, the scholar can see deeply into the system while standing outside of it. Herbert's approach in *De Religione Gentilium*, I note in closing, is the default setting of many in religion departments today.

²⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 221-224.

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