Acad. Quest. (2014) 27:400–410
DOI 10.1007/s12129-014-9453-0

Un-Donne: When Secular Students Confront Reverent Classics

Joan Faust

Published online: 1 November 2014
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2014

Anyone who specializes in seventeenth-century nondramatic literature, or really anyone who teaches any medieval or early modern texts, must face the challenge of the woeful lack of student knowledge of religious dogma, be it Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish beliefs. Such knowledge is essential for the study of early modern texts, whether to understand the intricate plan of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven in Dante's *Inferno*; the subtle (and not-so-subtle) irony of Chaucer's portrayals of the Summoner, the Pardoner, and the Prioress; or the differences between the anguished repentance of John Donne's Roman Catholic tendencies in his *Holy Sonnets* and George Herbert's humble acceptance of forgiveness in *The Temple*. To comprehend the significance of these texts, today's students must go beyond the words on the page to locate the literature within its contexts and within the lives of its authors, and those contexts and authors dwell in the tenets of orthodox religion.

The gap in knowledge of religious dogma in the modern age has not gone unnoticed. Peter Cobb, executive director of the Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education in Atlanta, Georgia, notes that this lacuna is a sign of our times:

> We live in a culture, at least in the United States, characterized by growing and vital religious pluralism, religious skepticism, religious resurgence, and

Joan Faust is professor of English and undergraduate coordinator at Southeastern Louisiana University, Hammond, LA 70402; jfaust@selu.edu. She is executive secretary-treasurer of the South-Central Renaissance Conference, past executive secretary of the Andrew Marvell Society, and an executive board member of the John Donne Society. She is the author of *Andrew Marvell's Liminal Lyrics: The Space Between* (University of Delaware Press, 2012).

> religious ambivalence, peopled by those who are not deeply committed to a particular faith tradition and regard it as exclusive, folks who are religious gypsies, people who are champions of ecumenical and inter-faith efforts, folks who describe themselves "spiritual but not religious," and folks who are avowedly secular.[1]

Critics offer various opinions on the origins of this movement away from knowledge of religious dogma. University Professor and Ungerleider Distinguished Scholar of Judaic Studies at Brown University, Jacob Neusner believes the change began with the Protestant Reformation:

> In the four hundred years since the Lutheran Reformation, but especially in the last two hundred years since the Enlightenment, Protestant theology and militant secularism have jointly formed a phalanx to drive religion from its paramount position in culture and politics back into the corners of private life.[2]

Making religion a matter of personal conviction independent of priests, ministers, rabbis, sacraments, or other practices not only destroyed the community founded on the necessity of ritual but also rendered superfluous any expertise in the history, ritual, and dogmas of faith.

The internalization of faith and lack of knowledge of doctrine certainly does not confine itself to Protestantism. Professor John C. Cavadini, chair of the theology department at the University of Notre Dame, laments that entering students, even in elite Catholic universities, do not know what is meant by the "Immaculate Conception" or "the proper numbers and persons in Christ, Mary, and the Trinity—what's an extra nature or two here or there? Besides, who's counting?" More than a third of the students in his classes at Notre Dame "have to guess how many Gospels are in the Bible" and "think that the phrase 'original sin' refers to sex."[3] And these are the literature students—Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, atheist—who must follow Dante though the circles of a Catholic Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, somehow understanding the symbolic

[1]Peter Cobb, "Teaching in an Age of Religious Pluralism, Skepticism, Resurgency, and Ambivalence," *Independent School* 61, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 18–26, available at http://www.nais.org/Magazines-Newsletters/ISMagazine/Pages/Teaching-in-an-Age-of-Religious-Pluralism-2c-Skepticism-Resurgence-and-Ambivalence.aspx.

[2]Jacob Neusner, "The Campus Conspiracy against the Religious Order," *National Review* 38, no. 4 (March 14, 1986): 41.

[3]John C. Cavadini, "Ignorant Catholics: The Alarming Void in Religious Education," *Commonweal* 131, no. 7 (April 9, 2004): 12.

and dogmatic significance of each step of the way, necessitating explanatory footnotes that dwarf the text on each page.

Some students question the necessity of religious context in studying early modern texts, thereby illustrating the increasing separation of knowledge of creed from personal religious beliefs and practice, and also the fear that study and practice cannot be separated. Cobb agrees that there is some truth in that fear, "just as there is truth in the assertion that the study and practice of math or science cannot be neatly segregated."[4] It must be acknowledged, however, that knowledge and personal belief can be segregated:

> [A]ll who have been in schools know that exposure to math does not lead inexorably to math "conversion" or exposure to history to history conversion. Likewise there is no evidence to suggest that either religious conversion or seduction is a clear and present danger of exposure to religious traditions or religious observance that is fairly presented.[5]

The job of early modern literature educators is to overcome this fear by presenting religious context as more than personal belief. Students need to be reminded of the essential role religion has had and still plays in world cultures. As literary critic and Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson acknowledges, "In a pre-secular and pre-scientific world…religion is the cultural dominant; it is the master code in which issues are conceived and debated," and historian Kevin Sharpe agrees with the necessity of a broadly based cultural-historical approach to religion in the early modern period: "Religion was not just about doctrine, liturgy, or ecclesiastical government; it was a language, an aesthetic, a structure of meaning, an identity, a politics."[6] After all, as Neusner notes, "Because of religion nations make war or peace. Because of religion people give their lives. We are misleading our coming generations by pretending that the critical force in human life does not matter. Religion matters more than anything else does."[7]

A main complication in compensation for lack of knowledge of religious dogma is time. Jeanne Shami, former president of the John Donne Society whose work on Donne, especially the sermons, has contributed greatly to early

[4]Cobb, "Teaching."

[5]Ibid.

[6]Fredric Jamison, "Religion and Ideology: A Political Reading of *Paradise Lost*," in *Literature, Politics, and Theory*, ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen, and Diana Loxley (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), 37; Kevin Sharpe, *Remapping Early Modern England: The Culture of Seventeenth-Century Politics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 12.

[7]Neusner, "Campus Conspiracy," 41.

modern studies, agrees that today's students are woefully lacking in essential tenets of faith:

> [V]ery few of my students have the background they need, or even the mindset of faith in anything, that would help them work through the religious issues….They know nothing of religious diversity in this period. Sadly, some of them have never heard of Adam and Eve (so much for *Paradise Lost*) or of Good Friday (so much for Donne's poem.) When I first realized this, some 25 years ago, I had to spend so much time building the infrastructure that I wondered if we would ever get to the literature.[8]

Similarly, distinguished Donne scholar, former John Donne Society president, and cofounder of the *John Donne Journal*, R.V. Young jokingly laments about his own students "who are about equally ignorant of the identity of Abraham Lincoln and the patriarch Abraham from the book of Genesis, who think 'St. Paul' refers to Paul McCartney (assuming they have heard of him), a mythical figure from the misty past."[9] Obviously, the class time needed for providing missing background for such students is often daunting and takes precious minutes away from dealing with the works at hand.

Of course, the situation can be better at private universities, particularly those with religious affiliations. Early modern scholar Brother George Klawitter, CSC, a retired professor of English at St. Edwards University, in Austin, Texas, now teaching at Holy Cross College, Notre Dame, Indiana—both Catholic institutions—feels less need for background information in his religious-oriented literature classes like "Catholic Writers": "I always presumed the students would be mostly Catholic so I didn't bone up on the sacraments of the liturgy or sacramentals, unless they came up in the readings….If I could teach this course in a different setting (non-Catholic, non-religious-affiliated college) I know I'd have to give a handout and lectures

[8]Jeanne Shami, email message to author, July 22, 2014. Shami's important contributions to Donne studies include: *John Donne and the Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003); *John Donne's 1622 Gunpowder Plot Sermon: A Parallel-Text Edition* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2006); *Renaissance Tropologies: The Cultural Imagination of Early Modern England* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2008); and as editor with Dennis Flynn and M. Thomas Hester, *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). She also has authored numerous chapters and articles on Donne's poetry and sermons.

[9]R.V. Young, email message to author, July 24, 2014. Young's early modern publications include: *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000) and *Richard Crashaw and the Spanish Golden Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982).

on sacraments, liturgy, papacy, virtues, sins."[10] Yet Klawitter's syllabus, while it includes Dante, focuses more on later Catholic authors Flannery O'Connor, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh, whose works perhaps require less knowledge of specific rituals and beliefs, unlike the poetry and prose of Donne, Herbert, Richard Crashaw, and Henry Vaughan—and most university instructors do not enjoy the privilege of a select group of students with some religious background. Donne scholar Achsah Guibbory, Ann Whitney Olin Professor of English at Barnard, past-president of the John Donne Society, and editor of *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* (2006), has a number of students versed in the Jewish religion. However, she assumes nothing:

> I encourage students to ask any question; I don't assume anything. I start with the basics (I've had students say, So what is this circumcision thing? Or, Who was Jesus? Do Jews believe in Jesus?). I connect with their own lives, ask if anyone is Jewish, or Catholic (when I'm trying to explain differences between Protestantism and Catholicism—I try to get people to understand and respect Catholic ways of thinking, and about ritual). I tell them how important it is to know and understand and respect other religions and ways of thinking. I think my students really like these discussions. It almost always arises from the text, from trying to explain a poem, or a stance."[11]

So we must resign ourselves to the reality that for our students to understand and appreciate much seventeenth-century literature, we must provide basic (and perhaps not-so-basic) information on religious dogma and practice, as well as related issues, and that this information is not "extra"—taking up valuable space in our syllabi—but necessary to the course.

Of course, religion is not an isolated influence in the early modern period but an essential part of the matrix of influences on early modern writers, including philosophy, science, politics, and visual arts. Information on these topics should begin in the medieval period, especially because much about seventeenth-century literature is best appreciated when contrasting it with what preceded it. The intricate rituals, hierarchies, beliefs, and abuses of the medieval Catholic Church form an important context not only for the steps

[10]George Klawitter, email message to author, July 22, 2014. Klawitter has published several volumes of original poetry as well as *The Agony of Words* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2004), *Country Matters* (San Jose, CA: Writers Club Press, 2001), and *The Enigmatic Narrator: The Voicing of Same-Sex Love in the Poetry of John Donne* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

[11]Achsah Guibbory, email message to author, August 4, 2014.

of Dante's spiritual journey in *The Divine Comedy* and Chaucer's holy and corrupt clerical pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* but also for essential contrast with the Reformation.

I prepare a handout for my students of Dante, "Major Influences in Medieval Thought," that summarizes the relevant influence of Aristotle, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas on Dante's view of science, politics, virtue, ethics, and other aspects of humankind. The next explanation offers bullet points of "Important Catholic Beliefs in Dante," including the origin of original sin, Christ's role in the salvation of humankind, the institution of the Catholic Church, and the necessity of that church hierarchy—a microcosm of the Great Chain of Being—in attaining Heaven, the belief of transubstantiation, and the concepts of Heaven, Purgatory, Hell, and Limbo. Necessary background also includes the Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church, the text of the Beatitudes, the Seven Deadly Sins, the belief in the Last Judgment, and the symbolism in the Book of Revelation used so heavily in the final cantos of *Purgatorio.* I also give students maps of the Ptolemaic view of the universe to help them visualize the structure of *Paradiso.*

Depending upon the level of student, primary works offer valuable background. My medievalist colleague Joel Fredell suggests also giving students critical biblical passages, including Genesis 1, the "camel through the eye of a needle" passage in Matthew, and the most famous passages from the Pauline letters in First Corinthians and Ephesians.[12]

Much of this information is new to my students, even those who were raised Catholic, but the topics offer rich fodder for composition. For example, because my university's "Modern Epic" honors course concentrates on argumentative essays and the research paper, I assign "From Betrayal to Violence: Dante's *Inferno* and the Social Construction of Crime" by Paul G. Chevigny, Joel S. and Anne B. Ehrenkranz Professor of Law Emeritus at New York University, who acknowledges that Dante presents crimes of betrayal as the most serious of sins, placing Judas, Brutus, and Cassius in the worst part of Hell, whereas in modern society betrayal is not considered as serious as crimes of violence.[13] Students are asked to respond to Chevigny's contrast, arguing whether our modern judicial

[12]Joel Fredell, email message to author, July 21, 2014. Early modern scholars agree that this biblical background is essential. Young acknowledges that knowledge of the Bible in particular is becoming more important in understanding seventeenth-century texts: "Scholars have come to recognize in Sacred Scripture—especially in the Psalter and the other poetical books—a source of generic models and metaphoric textures as well as of traditional typological symbolism." *Doctrine and Devotion*, 167. He is supported by Barbara Lewalski's important *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton University Press, 1979), which explores the Bible as inspiration and model for seventeenth-century literature, both Catholic and Protestant.

[13]Paul G. Chevigny, "From Betrayal to Violence: Dante's *Inferno* and the Social Construction of Crime," *Law and Social Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (Autumn 2001): 787–818.

system is just or misguided, citing specific examples of crimes and punishments from the *Inferno* and in modern society and using examples from Chevigny, journals, newspapers, and other sources. Students seem to gain greater insight into Dante's medieval Catholic judgment as well as our own.

Gaining insight into the Catholic faith must include its abuses, so students can better appreciate Chaucer's subtle (and less subtle), ironic portrayals of his ecclesiastical pilgrims the Pardoner, the Summoner, the Prioress, the Friar, and the Monk. With an understanding of Catholic beliefs, students can also better contrast Milton's Armenian Protestant view with those of Chaucer and Dante as well as with those of more Calvinist Protestants. Because many of my Protestant students are evangelical or Baptist, they know little about Reformation Protestantism, but can appreciate Milton's subtle attacks on Catholicism such as the Paradise of Fools in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's presentation of free will, predestination, and foreknowledge tends to serve as the basis for the most fruitful discussion, as students try to reconcile the concept that God's knowing Adam would sin does not make him sin. And many conclude that Milton's epic does not necessarily "justify the ways of God to men."[14]

The Protestant Reformation is an important influence in seventeenth-century literature, but it is certainly not the only life-altering event that affected every aspect of life in the early modern period in Britain, although all have religious connections: the acceptance of the Copernican view of the universe, which altered the view of mankind from "the paragon of animals" and center of the universe to inhabitants of just another of the planets, a "quintessence of dust";[15] King Henry VIII claiming the title Supreme Head of the Church of England; and the later execution of Charles I that questioned the validity of the Great Chain of Being—is there a divinely-created, inalterable order in the cosmos, whether in our relation to God or king? A look at the effect these events had on visual art proves that the changes affected more than religion and serves as a good introduction to other seventeenth-century literature. I like to contrast Leonardo da Vinci's sculptures *David*, *The Pietà*, and *Moses*, which portray calm order and symmetry and seem to echo Hamlet's words, "What a piece of work is a man!"[16] with those of Gian Lorenzo Bernini—*David*, *Daphne and Apollo*, *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*—which indicate movement, instability, and "becoming."

[14]John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, excerpted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 2000), 1.26.

[15]*Hamlet*, in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 6th ed. (New York: Pearson/Longman Publishers, 2009), 2.2.308 and 309.

[16]Ibid., 2.2.304–305.

These sculptures serve as an effective introduction to metaphysical poetry, which also portrays thought in motion and uncertainty in all aspects of life, especially the religious struggles of the poets themselves ("'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone").[17]

It is in the study of seventeenth-century metaphysical poets and Anglican priests John Donne and George Herbert that students most benefit from a solid understanding of the challenges these writers experienced because of their faith. Guibbory acknowledges that at this period, "In spite of gradual secularization, religion was a powerful and pervasive determinant of social and political relations, as well as of the material experience of individuals, some of whom were corporeally and financially punished for voicing or openly practicing their religious beliefs."[18] A major concept our students must understand, then, is that religion is not a separate topic of a work or component of a writer's beliefs but inextricably part of early modern culture, along with power and politics. The preceding background on Catholicism is essential to the study of Donne, since he embodies the struggles of the Protestant Reformation in his conversion to Anglicanism and subsequent career as Anglican minister and, eventually, dean of St. Paul's. Students can participate in the ever-raging debate about Donne's apostasy from Rome: Was his conversion simply a wise career move or was it heartfelt? Analysis of the angst evident in the *Holy Sonnets* and particularly the questions raised in "Satyre III," contrasted with the earlier coterie poetry like "Song" and "The Flea," provides stimulating discussion as to how we should interpret his poetry and understand this man of God.

Scholars frequently address the question of the sincerity of Donne's conversion and also his misogyny, or perceived misogyny. *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne* lists "Donne and Apostasy" (chapter 37) and "Donne, Women, and the Spectre of Misogyny" (chapter 38), a subject always linked to the interpretation of Eve in Genesis, as important topics in the study of Donne's poetry, while the collected *Essential Articles for the Study of John Donne's Poetry* includes Douglas L. Peterson's "John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and the Anglican Doctrine of Contrition" as important background.[19]

Through their research, my colleagues in the John Donne Society and the George Herbert Society demonstrate the necessity of approaching these poets

[17]"The First Anniversary: An Anatomy of the World," in *The Complete Works of John Donne*, ed. and intro. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 278, line 213.

[18]Achsah Guibbory, *Ceremony and Community from Herbert to Milton: Literature, Religion, and Cultural Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2.

[19]See Shami, Flynn, and Hester, *Oxford Handbook of John Donne*; and Douglas L. Peterson, "John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and the Anglican Doctrine of Contrition," in *Essential Articles for the Study of John Donne's Poetry*, ed. John R. Roberts (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1974), 313–23.

and their careers through their religious beliefs. Shami's *John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit* explores the controversy created by and resulting in James I's censorship of preachers' comments on heated public issues. Thus a threat to Donne's religious beliefs is directly related to his career. Young's *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan* argues that in their concerns about the tension between the secular and the sacred, these Catholic and Protestant poets have more in common than commentators acknowledge, while in *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship*, Michael Schoenfeldt, University of Michigan John R. Knott Jr. Collegiate Professor of English and department chair, sees in Herbert's poetic offerings to God the same techniques used by ambitious courtiers seeking secular preferment.[20]

Herbert provides an interesting contrast to his fellow Anglican preacher Donne, yet Herbert also turned to holy orders only after his failure to achieve success at court. Students who have traced the importance of dogma in metaphysical poetry are usually interested by this point in comparing Donne's and Herbert's lives, particularly if they read Isaac Walton's hagiographic biography of the two. As Donne was surely not a second St. Augustine in his conversion, Herbert may not have been "that great example of holiness."[21] Yet students cannot fail to notice Herbert's entirely different tone—the calm, accepting humility in such poems as "The Collar" and "Love III" as opposed to the violence and hysteria in Donne's "Batter My Heart" and "At the Round Earth's Imagin'd Corners." Religion plays an even greater part in the study of his poetry, as seen in the list of "essential articles" on Herbert: "George Herbert and the Religious Lyric," by Robert Ellrodt; "George Herbert and the Incarnation," by Richard E. Hughes; "'Setting Foot into Divinity': George Herbert and the English Reformation," by Ilona Bell; "George Herbert and the Emblem Books," by Rosemary Freeman; and "'Solomon *vbique regnet*': Herbert's Use of the Images of the New Covenant," by Florence Sandler.[22]

The approach of these critics, however, differs from our own inexperienced students' approach: scholars well-versed in creed, practices, and tenets of faith seek

[20]Michael Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[21]Isaak Walton describes Donne as "a second St. Austine, for, I think, none was so like him before his Conversion." *The Lives of John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker, George Herbert, and Robert Sanderson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 47–48, 6.

[22]Roberts, *Essential Articles*: Robert Ellrodt, "George Herbert and the Religious Lyric," 3–32; Richard E. Hughes, "George Herbert and the Incarnation," 52–62; Ilona Bell, "'Setting Foot into Divinity': George Herbert and the English Reformation," 63–86; Rosemary Freeman, "George Herbert and the Emblem Books," 215–30; and Florence Sandler, "'Solomon *vbique regnet*': Herbert's Use of the Images of the New Covenant," 249–57.

to find evidence of these in the text, particularly subversive uses, as is typical of much modern scholarship. As Richard Strier, Frank L. Sulzberger Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago's Department of English Divinity School, admits, critics "tend to fit texts into predetermined views of the author's political orientation."[23] For our students, understanding the text first requires knowing the tenets and controversies of religion and the author's own views, and it is our job to impart that knowledge to them.

Here is warranted a deeper study into the various sects of Protestantism that confronted these men of God, including the Calvinists, High Anglicans, Diggers, Quakers, and Fifth-Monarchy Men; the importance of Catholic traditions remade in the Protestant mode into emblem literature, typology, and Meditation; the literary, cultural, entertaining, and edifying role of the Protestant sermon; and the tangle of religion and politics that constituted the reigns of Elizabeth, James I, Charles I, Charles II, and James II and radically affected the careers of our writers. With the aid of supplementary information and the assignment of projects and oral presentations on topics like emblem literature, the meditative process, typology, and the Protestant sermon, dogma and tenets of faith become an integral part of the study of early modern literature in such poems as Herbert's "The Windows" and "The Bunch of Grapes," and Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*.

Wayne State University English professors Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti acknowledge that scholarly emphasis on religious doctrine and contexts had for a while been "pushed somewhat to the side by most New Historicists and cultural materialists, who pursued other topics and, when they dealt with religious issues, quickly translated them into social, economic, and political language." However, a renewal of historical interest in religion "has accompanied the growth of cultural history as a critical practice," so that religion and religious literature have become parts of the interdisciplinary study of culture.[24]

While critical schools may change, the fact remains that students of early modern literature must have a religious context to understand and appreciate fully the authors and the texts, and I believe early modern literature educators must provide that context, no matter how much time it takes out of our syllabi. Not often do students object to the religious content of chosen texts, but once in a while the fear that study and practice cannot be separated arises, usually in a class

[23]Richard Strier, "Donne and the Politics of Devotion," in *Religion, Literature, and Politics in Post-Reformation England, 1540–1688*, ed. Donna B. Hamilton and Richard Strier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 93.

[24]Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti, "The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies," *Criticism* 46, no. 1 (2004): 167, 169.

of non-English majors, when a student whose religion does not acknowledge the existence of devils or ghosts protests studying *Paradise Lost* or *Hamlet*. True, educators of early modern literature must walk a fine line between informing and inculcating, but we should not, we must not, avoid that line.