

'God . . . is best known by our not knowing': Ben Jonson's Theological Diffidence

MICHÈLE DU PLESSIS-HAY
North-West University (Potchefstroom)

Ben Jonson is not traditionally considered diffident: this paper argues that, in his theology, he was diffident, unwilling to move beyond the traditions and authorities common to the Catholic and Anglican churches. Jonson's comments on theological matters in *Discoveries* bear this out, and show that he did not consider that the church should disrupt the political commonwealth. Jonson's views on Puritans, expressed in *Discoveries* and satirically presented in *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*, emphasise his distrust of those who claim to know God's will and place revelation above tradition in theology. Jonson's few religious poems can be shown to be heavily dependent on scriptural and traditional liturgical sources; the paper concludes by analysing the sources of 'To Heaven' and 'The Sinners Sacrifice: To the Holie Trinitie', illustrating Jonson's diffident dependence on tradition and unwillingness to engage in theological speculation or innovation.

ONE DOES NOT, perhaps, expect to find allusions to Ben Jonson's diffidence. And indeed, the traditional picture of Jonson – as poet, playwright, contriver of court spectacles, adviser of princes, conversationalist, bedder of other men's wives, the English Horace, or the emulous rival of his classical models – does not include diffidence: Herford and Simpson see him as a man of 'masterful self-confidence'.¹

¹ C.H. Herford and Percy Simpson, 'Life of Ben Jonson', in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C.H. Herford, Percy Simpson and Evelyn Mary Spearing Simpson, 11 vols (Oxford, 1925–52), I, 120. See also William Drummond, 'Conversations with William Drummond

But it seems to me that Jonson was theologically diffident: unwilling to express any opinions of his own that he may have had, possibly even preferring not to have opinions of his own. I shall argue that he was suspicious of the claims of the Puritans to know the will of God, and his few comments on theology in *Discoveries* suggest that he felt that the only possible attitude for the theologian was a graceful humility that did not dare assert too much knowledge. In his handful of religious poems, Jonson does not engage in the audacious dialectic of John Donne, nor the illuminating parabolic imagery of George Herbert: nearly every line of Jonson's religious poems expresses something backed by traditional Christian authority. He expresses orthodox, safe doctrine, acceptable to either Anglicans or Catholics, and shows us very little of himself.² His religious poems differ from many of his other poems, in that he seems to make no attempt to reinterpret, transcend or subvert his authorities, as he does in the second 'Song. To Celia' (*Forest* VI), 'Inviting a friend to supper' (*Epigrams* CI) or 'To the ghost of Martial' (*Epigrams* XXXVI).

I do not wish to speculate about Jonson's apparently conscientious conversions to Catholicism and then back to Anglicanism, or the psychological reasons for his thoughts and writings: many of his critics, editors and biographers have already done so.³ I hope merely to suggest that, as far as theology is concerned, Jonson is – unexpectedly and even uncharacteristically – diffident.

I shall do so by considering Jonson's comments about theology and Puritanism in *Discoveries*, and his satirical presentations of Puritans in *The Alchemist* (first performed in 1610; probably written when Jonson was Catholic) and *Bartholomew Fair* (first performed in 1614;

of Hawthornden', in *Ben Jonson*, ed. Herford and Simpson, I, 87–89 and 680–89, Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 18–21; Michael McCaules, *Jonsonian Discriminations: The Humanist Poet and the Praise of True Nobility* (Toronto, 1992), pp. vii–viii, 206–7; David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), pp. 2–3, 19, 44–5, 222–24, 238.

² Martin Butler, 'Ben Jonson's Catholicism', *Ben Jonson Journal* 19 (2012): 190–216 (pp. 196–97).

³ See Riggs, *Ben Jonson* 50–53, 175–77; Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* 71–2, 136–44, 255–70, 272–74; Butler, 'Ben Jonson's Catholicism' 194; Robert S. Miola, 'Ben Jonson, Catholic Poet', *Renaissance and Reformation* 25.4 (Autumn 2001): 101–15.

Jonson was again Anglican).⁴ I shall then consider Jonson's few religious poems.⁵ Not everything in *Epigrams* that appears to be a religious poem is necessarily entirely so. 'Of life, and death' (*Epigrams* LXXX) also contains Stoic elements. 'On my first daughter' (*Epigrams* XXII) also includes what might be called Catholic 'popular iconography' rather than theology, assigning the souls of those who died virgin to the Virgin Mary's train;⁶ it concludes with a tender but pagan image from Martial.⁷ Despite its Hebraic opening, 'On my first sonne' (*Epigrams* XLV) expresses Stoic apathy rather than Christian resignation.⁸ The religious poems in *Forest* and *Underwood* are conventionally Christian, and I shall conclude this paper with a detailed examination of the sources of two of the longer of these poems: 'To Heaven' (*Forest* XV, first published in 1616); and 'The Sinners Sacrifice: To the Holy Trinitie' (*Underwood* I 1, first published in 1640–41). My aim is to show that these two poems are woven mostly of traditional, authoritative strands and make no attempt to present any argument beyond the accretion of authority that they present. What is true of these two religious poems seems to be true of all Jonson's religious poems, and they are all demonstrably reliant on scriptural authority.⁹

⁴ *Discoveries* (1641), ed. Lorna Hutson, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler, Ian Donaldson et al., 7 vols (Cambridge, 2012 = *CWBJ*), VII, 481–596; *The Alchemist* (1610), ed. Peter Holland and William Sherman, *CWBJ*, III, 541–710; *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), ed. John Creaser, *CWBJ*, IV, 253–428.

⁵ 'Of Death' (Epigram 34), 'Of Life and Death' (Epigram 80); 'On my first Daughter' (Epigram 22), 'On my first sonne' (Epigram 45), in *Epigrams* (1616), ed. Colin Burrow, *CWBJ*, V, 101–98 (pp. 128–9, 151, 122–23, 134); 'To Heaven' (15), in *The Forest* (1616), ed. Colin Burrow, *CWBJ*, V, 199–248 (pp. 245–46); 'The Sinners Sacrifice. To the Holy Trinitie' 'A Hymne to God the Father', and 'A Hymne. On the Nativitie of my Saviour' (1.1–3), in *The Underwood* (1640–41), ed. Colin Burrow, *CWBJ*, VII, 69–296 (pp. 79–83).

⁶ Miola, 'Ben Jonson, Catholic Poet' 110.

⁷ Martial, *Epigrams* V xxxiv.

⁸ Cf. Gen. 35: 18.

⁹ A list of the obvious Biblical sources of the poems other than the two discussed below should suffice:

'Of Death' (Epigram 34): 1 Cor. 15: 54–55;

'Of Life and Death' (Epigram 80): Matt. 7: 13–14;

'A Hymn to God the Father' (*Underwood* 1.2): Ps. 51: 17, Prov. 13: 24, 1 Cor. 11: 32, Prov. 3: 11–12, Heb. 12: 5–9, Rev. 3: 19, Rom. 8: 15–17, Gal. 4: 4–7, Phil.

In *Discoveries* Jonson writes: 'Man is read in his face, God in his creatures; but not as the philosopher, the creature of glory reads him, but as the divine, the servant of humility: yet even he must take care, not to be too curious'. Although the 'philosopher, the creature of glory' is borrowed from Tertullian, these sentiments seem to be Jonson's own. He then quotes the Protestant Humanist Lipsius, who is following Cyprian and St Augustine: 'For to utter truth of God (but as he thinks only) may be dangerous, who is best known by our not knowing'. This is immediately followed by Jonson's own rider: 'Some things of Him, so much as He hath revealed, or commanded, it is not only lawful, but necessary for us to know: for therein our ignorance was the first cause of our wickedness'.¹⁰

Jonson's limited treatment of theological questions in his poems and plays seems to me consistent with what we see here. He feels that even the professional student of divinity should be humble and not too curious, that the limit of our enquiry into the ways of God should be to know what God has already revealed and commanded. And he quotes solid authority suggesting that knowing God's unknowability is the height and limit of our permitted theological knowledge. Elsewhere in *Discoveries*, he remarks:

Some controverters in divinity are like swaggerers in a tavern, that catch that which stands next them . . . ; turn everything into a weapon . . . Such controversies, or disputations . . . are odious: where most times the truth is lost in the midst; or left untouched. And the fruit of their fight is that they spit one upon another, and are both defiled. These fencers in religion I like not (*Discoveries* 749–57).

This makes clear Jonson's uneasiness with a casual, prideful or frivolous handling of theological questions.

2: 9–11, 1 Cor. 2: 2;

'A Hymne. On the Nativity of My Saviour' (*Underwood* 1.3): Jn 1: 4, Heb. 5: 8, Jn 1: 3, Lk 2: 8–20, Matt. 1: 21, Heb. 5: 8, Heb. 9: 11–14, Heb. 7: 26–8, Heb. 1: 9–10, Phil. 2: 5–11, Jn 1: 14; Rom. 8: 17.

¹⁰ *Discoveries* 377–80; Tertullian, *De anima* 1, Justus Lipsius, *Politicorum sive civilis doctrine libri sex*, I ii, identified by Ian Donaldson (ed.), *Ben Jonson*, Oxford Authors (Oxford, 1985), p. 471, and Lorna Hutson, *CWBJ*, VII, 518.

Given Jonson's diffidence here, it is hard to imagine Jonson putting words in God's mouth, as Herbert does in 'The Pulley', or warning God to take further action lest He lose a soul, as Donne does in 'Batter my heart', 'Hymne to God the Father', and elsewhere. When Jonson writes a poem to or about God, he limits himself to 'so much as he hath revealed, or commanded'. My suggestion is that Jonson's few religious poems are skilful combinations of elements from the Bible and the Creeds, with no daring excursions into speculation or negotiation, and that this is further evidence of Jonson's diffidence in theological contexts.

Before looking at Jonson's religious poetry, we should consider his attitude to the Puritans, and his treatment of them in *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*. Drummond recorded that Jonson was 'for any religion, as being versed jn both': neither Drummond nor Jonson seems to consider any alternative to Anglicanism or Catholicism, and certainly Jonson utterly rejects what he considers to be Puritanism.¹¹ The validity of Jonson's understanding of the Puritans is not in question here: it is his distrust of what he perceived as their tendency to flout authority that is significant, as it supports my argument about his diffidence in religious matters. Jonson resents their antipathy to plays and assumes them to be hypocrites: these are attributes that he presents and mocks for comic effect in plays and poems (as I shall show), but we have no record of any considered refutation of their objections to plays, nor any argument or evidence that they are hypocritical. But Jonson's perception of Puritans as a danger to the commonwealth and his suspicion of Puritan claims to know God's will through revelation rather than by tradition are matters he alludes to in the *Discoveries*, and I shall argue that his attitudes here are part of his theological diffidence.

¹¹ Drummond, 'Conversations' 690. *Catholic*, *Anglican* and *Puritan* are contentious terms. Here and throughout, I follow the guidance of the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F.L. Cross (London, 1958), 'Catholic', 'Roman Catholic', 'Anglican Communion' and 'Puritans': *Catholic* means the Roman Catholic Church in Europe during Jonson's lifetime; *Anglican* means 'the State Church of England, Ireland and Wales' during Jonson's lifetime, and *Puritan* refers to English Protestants who wished to purify the English church to be what they considered more Scriptural and less Popish.

Naturally, Jonson objected to Puritan attitudes to the theatre, but he seems never to have accorded them the dignity of serious argument against these views,¹² although he presents considered objections to other aspects of their belief and practice, as I discuss below. Jonson also assumes Puritans to be hypocrites, and presents them as such with comic effect, but seems to have no argued foundation for the assumption. Accordingly, Jonson satirises Puritan opposition to theatre in 'On Lip the teacher' (Epigram 75), with the *tu quoque* assertion that a preacher inveighing against acting is himself acting. This is logically irrelevant though rhetorically effective, and does not actually engage with or reply to Puritan anxieties about the theatres. In *The Alchemist* 3.2.88–90, Subtle suggests that the brothers of Amsterdam object to plays only to please the magistrates whose hospitality they enjoy. In *Bartholomew Fair* 5.5.82–84, the puppet's notorious refutation of the 'old stale argument against the players', that men dress as women, is theatrically effective but, again, it does not address the questions involved: for Jonson there is no debate, and the Puritans are merely ridiculous. In both *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair* other characters assume that the Puritan characters are hypocrites, and they are amusingly presented as such. Busy's unashamed greed is amusing enough,¹³ but the zealous Ananias's quick *volte-face*, from graceless sincerity to a certainty that his Elders will share his revelation that casting of coinage is lawful, is hilarious.

Ananias's descent to hypocrisy is marked by a move from the zealous, 'I hate traditions. / I do not trust them – . . . They are popish all. . . . Please the profane to grieve the godly, I may not' to the expedient, 'Lawful? / We know no magistrate. Or, if we did, / This's foreign coin.'¹⁴ To Jonson, Puritan hatred or ignorance of tradition and their denial of secular authority are equally causes for satire. In *Bartholomew Fair*, Puppet Dionysius (after refuting Busy) asserts: 'I'll prove . . . that I speak by inspiration as well as he; that I have as little to do with learning

¹² See also Miola's discussion of the Puritans as 'natural targets' for satire in Jonson's day, which adduces some of the same examples that I present here ('Ben Jonson, Catholic Poet' 105–06).

¹³ *Bartholomew Fair* 1.6.74–78, 3.2.62–69.

¹⁴ *The Alchemist* 3.2.106–09, 149–51; cf. 3.1.13–14.

as he; and do scorn her helps as much as he'.¹⁵

Behind the satire, however, lies a more considered concern than Jonson's unargued rejection of Puritans as hypocrites and play-haters. In *Discoveries*, Jonson writes:

A puritan is a heretical hypocrite, whom the opinion of his own perspicacity, by which it seems to him that he, with a few others, has discovered certain errors in the dogmas of the church, has thrown his mental state off-balance, so that, stirred up by a sacred fury, he fights frenziedly against the magistrate, supposing himself to be executing obedience to God.¹⁶

This, I think, apart from the predictable 'hypocrite', represents Jonson's more reasoned objections to Puritanism. He believes that Puritanism, fighting *contra Magistratus*, is against the common good of the state. And he is deeply suspicious of Puritan claims to revelation and Puritan rejections of traditional ecclesiastical authority, labelling them heresy.

That Jonson, a recusant at the time of the Gunpowder Plot, should object to Puritanism on the grounds that it accords no respect to constituted authority, might raise an eyebrow but is not relevant to my discussion here.¹⁷ Jonson's life and work suggests that he remained a loyal subject through three changes of monarch, a change of dynasty, and his own conversions from Anglican to Catholic and back again.¹⁸ He seems to have been supremely pragmatic, seeing it as no part of a church's function to disturb the *status quo* of state or church.¹⁹ Immediately after expressing his dislike of 'Fencers in religion', he cites Erasmus:

The body hath certain diseases that are with less evil tolerated than removed. As if to cure a leprosy a man should bathe himself with the warm blood of a murdered child: so in the church, some errors may

¹⁵ *Bartholomew Fair* 5.5.87–89.

¹⁶ *Discoveries* 43–46, trans. Hutson, referring to *The Alchemist* 3.2.150.

¹⁷ Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* 71–2, 136–44, 255–70, 272–74.

¹⁸ Miola, 'Ben Jonson, Catholic Poet' 103.

¹⁹ Butler, 'Ben Jonson's Catholicism' 196–97.

be dissimuled with less inconvenience, than can be discovered.²⁰

Anything, Jonson feels, is preferable to the *sacrum furorem* of the zealous Puritan, claiming divine revelation and overthrowing established tradition.

It should not surprise us that Jonson should defend tradition passionately. But his opposition to re-interpretation of tradition within the church does, because this is very different from the creative attitudes of the man who wrote, 'I cannot think Nature is so spent, and decayed, that she can bring forth nothing worth her former yeares. . . . Men are decayed, and studies: she is not' (*Discoveries* 89–91). We are surprised by a diffidence that appears only when Jonson considers God and approaches to God. We find Jonson horrified by claims of revelation and stamping anything that appears innovative as heresy. And he treats tradition purely as an authority, not, as is his custom, as teacher or rival.

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Jonson's religious poems show this same dependence on tradition. Examination of the sources of 'To Heaven' (*The Forest* 15) and 'The Sinner's Sacrifice. To the Holy Trinity' (*The Underwood* 1.1) supports this. Jonson's editors agree that the primary sense of the opening sentence of 'To Heaven'—'Good and great God, can I not think of thee, / But it must, straight, my melancholy be?' should be understood as, 'Can I not think of thee, God, without others attributing it to my melancholy?', responding to those who were suspicious of the false piety brought about by melancholy (or any other humour).²¹ Donne's 'Oh, to vex me, contraries meete in one' shows the self-condemnation of one who realises, 'As humorous is my contritione / As my prophane love, and as soone forgott'.²² Jonson's argument is that his piety is not spurious, the result of melancholy, but real, the result of the awareness of his sins.

²⁰ *Discoveries* 758–61; Donaldson (ed.), *Ben Jonson* 746.

²¹ Donaldson, *ibid.* 679–80, citing A. C. Swinburne, *A Study of Ben Jonson* (London, 1889), p. 103; Colin Burrow, *CWBJ*, V, 245.

²² John Donne, *The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1978), pp. 15–16.

Jonson rejects the world's interpretation of his actions and spiritual state, and looks to God for vindication and cleansing. This pattern is seen in the many Psalms that contain a rejection of human interpretations, an appeal to God's judgement, or both.²³ The pattern is also seen in Job's continual rejections of his comforters' suggestions, and his turning to God to assert his innocence and beg vindication.²⁴ Jonson's turn from human misunderstanding of his grief to God's true comprehension follows the Psalmist's: 'I wept and my soule fasted, but that was to my reproofe. I put on a sacke also: and I became a prouerbe vnto them. But Lorde, I make my praier vnto thee . . . O God, heare me . . .' (Ps. 69: 10–11, 13). Again, Jonson turns to God: 'Oh, be thou witness, that the reins dost know / And hearts of all . . . And judge me after'. Jeremiah 17: 10, Psalm 7: 9, and Psalm 26: 2 state that God knows and tries the reins and heart, and rewards according to peoples' deeds, ending the wickedness of the wicked and establishing the just.²⁵ It is God's true judgement that Jonson desires, for Jonson certain that he is not 'sad for show', and that he does not 'pretend / To aught but grace, or aim at other end'.

Lines 9 to 12 are very rich in scriptural allusion. Jonson prays:

As thou art all, so be thou all to me,
First, midst, and last, converted one and three;
My faith, my hope, my love: and in this state
My judge, my witness, and my advocate.

Most of the ascriptions are Biblical descriptions of Christ. Ephesians 1: 23 describes 'him that filleth all in all things'. The expansion of 'all' into the triplet 'First, midst, and last' (line 10) appears to be a paraphrase from 'the Lord, Which is, and Which was, and Which is to come, euen the Almightye' (Rev. 1: 8), and Jonson then explicates the conversion, or equivalence (Donaldson), of one and three – 'the Unitye in Trinitie, and the Trinitie in vnitie' which 'is to be worshypped', according to the Athanasian Creed (*Quicumque vult* in the Book of Common Prayer). Jonson continues with Biblical triplets, reflecting the three Persons of the Trinity: faith, hope and love are from 1 Corinthians 13: 13, and

²³ See for example Ps. 3, 22, 43, 52, 54, 55, 56, 58, 64, 69, 70, 140, & 142.

²⁴ See especially Job 26–31.

²⁵ Donaldson and Burrow; see also Rev. 2: 23.

various passages in the New Testament describe Christ as 'ordained of God a iudge of quicke and dead' (Acts 10: 42), 'that faithful witness' (Rev. 1: 5), and 'an Advocate with the Father' (1 John 2: 1; Burrow).

At this point in the poem, Jonson has established his reliance on and trust in God's judgement, for his judge, witness and advocate are all Christ, and so he sets aside the judgement of men. In lines 13 to 16 he asks a series of rhetorical questions exploring the paradoxes that the sinner can be where omnipresent God is not, and that the omnipresent God needs to be invited to be where the sinner is.

Jonson returns to scriptural allusion in lines 17 to 20, where he rehearses the human condition as he finds it in himself, 'both full of shame and scorn'. He acknowledges that he was '[c]onceived in sin', like the Psalmist who confesses, 'in sinne hath my mother conceived me' (Ps. 51: 5). He knows he is a descendent of Adam, who incurred the curse of labour and death: 'in the sweate of thy face shalt thou eate bread, till thou returne to the earth' (Gen. 3: 19). And although he knows that Christ is his judge, witness and advocate, he is human, and knows fear and horror as well as sin and labour, and cannot ignore the writer to the Hebrews: 'it is appointed vnto men that they shall once die, and after that commeth the iudgement' (9: 27).

Others may doubt his piety and call it melancholy, and he can submit his case to God. But here, Jonson's own awareness of his inadequacy makes him fear, and the poem has its place at that point of uncertainty and humanity. At this point (lines 21–22) Jonson expresses his human misery by turning away from Christian tradition to Ovid, the Pagan poet exiled from all he held dear for secular misdoing: 'I feel my griefs too, and there scarce is ground / Upon my flesh t'inflict another wound'.²⁶

In the last four lines of the poem, Jonson returns to scripture, but with no great confidence in himself: the accusations he denies at the beginning of the poem return, and he distrusts his own motives in wishing for death. Jonson's editors agree in suggesting that Jonson is alluding to Paul's exclamation of Romans 7: 24: 'Oh wretched man that I am, who shall deliuer me from the body of this death?'²⁷ But

²⁶ Ovid, *Ex Ponto* II vii 41, cited by Donaldson and Burrow.

²⁷ Donaldson, Burrow, and G.A.E. Parfitt (ed.), *Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth, 1988), p. 517.

Paul here is lamenting his tendency to sin under the law, not his earthly life: in Romans 7 and 8 the contrast between body and spirit is a metaphor for unregenerate and regenerate states and tendencies. Donaldson also suggests that Paul has Philippians 1: 21–4, in mind, and this seems more likely as the source of Paul's 'wish[ing] for death':

For Christ is to me both in life, & in death aduantage. And whether to liue in the flesh were profitable for me, and what to chuse I knowe not. For I am distressed betweene both, desiring to be loosed and to be with Christ, which best of all. Neuerthelesse, to abide in the flesh, is more needefulle for you.

But 'holy Paul' (line 24) has no doubt about his own motives. The second half of Jonson's poem, especially lines 13 to 16, exhibiting anxiety about exile and doubt about both what must follow and his own motives, can be contrasted with another Pauline passage (2 Cor. 5: 6–10):

Therefore we are always bolde, thou we knowe that whiles we are at home in the bodie, we are absent from the Lord. (For we walke by faith, and not by sight.) Neuerthelesse, we are bolde, and loue rather to remoue out of the body, and to dwell with the Lord. Wherefore also we couet, that both dwelling at home, and remouing from home, we may be acceptable to him. For we must all appeare before the iudgement seate of Christ, that every man may receiue the things which are done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or euill.

Paul's words are those of one rejoicing during his exile on earth, and labouring without fear in preparation for judgement. Jonson's poem is that of a man still condemned by his own heart.²⁸

This poem, then, is built up primarily of scriptural elements: Jonson uses this traditional material, and acknowledges the inadequacy of his response, but does not speculate or extrapolate beyond traditional matter.

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Jonson draws even more heavily and explicitly on authorities – the Bible and the *Quicumque vult*, together with the Nicene Creed and

²⁸ I John 3: 20.

the Catechism – in ‘The Sinner’s Sacrifice. To the Holy Trinity’. The poem’s twelve stanzas are arranged into larger structures. Stanzas 1 to 4 are a prayer that the Trinity will graciously accept ‘the sinner’s sacrifice’ (9). Stanzas 5, 6 and 7 each praise one of the Persons of the Trinity. Stanzas 8 to 11 explore and celebrate the mystery of the Trinity, with increasing personal application to the sinner praying, until stanza 12 concludes with the hope of beatitude. The first lines of the poem are:

O Holy, blessèd, glorious Trinity
Of persons, still one God, in unity,
The faithful man’s believèd mystery . . .

This draws upon the opening of the *Quicumque vult*, which affirms, ‘we worshyp one God in Trinitie, and trinitie in vnitie’. It goes on to explicate the mystery of the Trinity, but Jonson now diverts his attention to his need of God’s grace before he can approach or praise the Godhead, and the remainder of stanzas 1 to 4 is an expansion of the plea: ‘Help, help to lift / Myself up to thee.’²⁹

Jonson confesses his sin, as David did, and his prayer resolves into that of David’s great penitential Psalm: ‘a contrite and a broken heart, O God, thou wilt not despise’ (Ps. 51: 17). Jonson offers his sacrifice thus:

3. All-gracious God, the sinner’s sacrifice,
A broken heart, thou wert not wont despise,
But ’bove the fat of rams or bulls to prize
An offering meet

4. For thy acceptance.

These lines move from the broken heart of Psalm 51 into a reference to Samuel’s rebuke to Saul: ‘Beholde, to obey is better then sacrifice, and to hearken is better then the fatte of rammes’ (1 Sam. 15: 22), then return two lines later to ‘a heart contrite.’³⁰

After establishing his approach to the Trinity through the sacrifice of contrition, Jonson, in stanzas 5 to 7, addresses the Persons of the

²⁹ The Cambridge Edition original-spelling text (online) has ‘list’ here, but this appears to be a transcription error, perhaps with the *f* carelessly read as a long *s* (*f*).

³⁰ The biblical debts of these stanzas are noted by Burrow, *CWBJ*, VII, 79–81.

Trinity severally, and here his predominant debts are to the Nicene Creed and the *Quicumque vult*. The latter was required to be read at Morning Prayer on thirteen feasts and Saints’ days throughout the year, including the compulsory Christmas and Easter feasts, throughout Jonson’s lifetime.³¹ Thus, even during his recusancy, Jonson would have been exposed regularly to this exploration of the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation. There are sufficient verbal echoes of the *Quicumque vult* in this poem ‘To the Holy Trinitie’ to suggest that it was in Jonson’s mind as he made his ‘Sacrifice’. The Nicene Creed, which forms part of the Anglican Communion service, also provides Jonson with words and phrases. ‘The father eternall, the sonne eternall : and the holye Ghoste eternall,’ affirms the *Quicumque vult*, and, ‘So the father is God, the sonne is God : and the holye Ghost is God’; Jonson begins his stanzas: ‘Eternal Father, God . . .’ (line 17), ‘Eternall God the Sonne . . .’ (line 21) and ‘Eternal Spirit, God . . .’ (line 25). After the invocation of the Father, stanza 5 owes a generalised debt to the openings of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds and Genesis 1 in ‘who did’st create,’ ‘gavest it forme,’ ‘breath’st into it, life, and light’.

Stanza 6 is very rich in specific borrowings. The main source for the stanza as a whole is Philippians 2: 6–8:

[Christ Jesus] being in ye forme of God, thought it no roberrie to be equall with God: But he made himself of no reputation, & tooke upon him ye forme of a seruant, & was made like vnto men, and was founde in shape of a man. He humbled himselfe, and became obedient vnto the death, euen the death of the Crosse.

Here the sequence of accepting human nature, becoming human, dying, and dying on a cross is the same as in the poem. Christ’s death on the Cross ‘[t]o pay our debts’ is explicated in Colossians 2: 13–14, which speaks of God: ‘forgiuing you all your trespasses, And putting out the hand writing of ordinances that was against vs . . . and fastened it vpon the crosse’. The concluding words of the stanza, ‘cryd’st, / All’s done in me,’ are a paraphrase of John 19: 30 ‘Jesus . . . saide, It is finished.’³²

³¹ Francis Proctor, *A New History of the Book of Common Prayer: With a Rationale of Its Offices*, rev. Walter Howard Frere (London, 1949), p. 391.

³² The allusion to John 19 (but not the allusions to Philippians and Colossians) is noted by Donaldson and Burrow.

Jonson's sources for his praise of the Holy Spirit as 'God from both proceeding, / Father and Sonne' (lines 25–26) are the Nicene Creed and *Quicumque vult*. The latter has: 'The holye Ghoste is of the Father, and of the Sonne : neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding' and the former: 'I beleue in the holye Ghoste . . . who procedeth from the father and the sonne'. The title of 'Comforter' is from Christ's talk with the disciples after the Passover supper, where He calls the Holy Spirit 'the Comforter' four times.³³ There are no obvious direct analogues for lines 26 to 28. The adjective 'fiery' (27) is naturally applicable to the Spirit of Pentecost,³⁴ and the reference to the work of the Spirit in 'feeding' men 'For acts of grace' (lines 27–28) may have its origin in a verse from Paul's address to the elders at Ephesus: 'Take heede therefore vnto your selues, and to all the flocke, whereof *the holy Ghost* hath made you Ouerseers, *to feede the Church of God*, which hee hath purchased with that his owne blood' (emphases mine).³⁵

Stanzas 8 to 12 are a prayer that Jonson will attain the beatific vision. Continuing in the contrite spirit of Psalm 51, he claims no merit of his own, but ascribes all to 'those acts [of grace]' that he prays will be increased in him until he does 'attain the longed-for mystery / Of seeing your face'. Stanza 8 expresses all of this, and stanzas 9 to 12 expand the prayer. As Donaldson and Burrow note, the scriptural basis of the hope to see God's face can be found in the promise in Revelation 22: 4, 'And they [God's servants] shall see his face', and in Paul's hope, 'For nowe we see through a glasse darkely: but then shall wee face to face' (1 Cor. 13: 12).

The continuing influence of the *Quicumque vult* on this poem shows again in Jonson's exploration of beatitude, where he expects to behold the Trinity, in stanzas 9 and 10. In stanza 9, the Biblical imagery of the Godhead as light is combined with a paraphrase of 'that we worship one God in Trinitie, and trinitie in vnitie', in order to express the poet's longing to stand in the light of God's presence.³⁶ He begs, 'Oh, grant it me!', and then continues his prayer:

³³ John 14: 16, 26; 15: 25; 16: 7.

³⁴ See Acts 2: 3.

³⁵ Acts 20: 28.

³⁶ See for example: Ps. 27: 1; John 1: 4–9; 8: 12; I John 1: 5–8; Rev. 22: 3–5.

10. Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost, you three
All coeternal in your majesty
Distinct in persons, yet in unity
One God to see,

conflate two sentences from the *Quicumque vult*: 'But the Godhed of the Father, of the Sonne, and of the holy Ghost, is al one : the glory equall, *the maiesty coeternall*' (emphasis mine) and 'Neyther confounding the persons: nor deuidinge the substaunce'.³⁷

In stanza 11, as his prayer for grace and beatitude continues, Jonson continues to draw upon the Book of Common Prayer for his invocation of God as, 'My Maker, Saviour, and my Sanctifier' (line 41). These offices of the Persons of the Trinity are described in the Catechism, in reply to the question, 'What doest thou chiefly learne in these artycles of thy beliefe?':

Firste, I learn to beleue in God the father, who hath *made me* and al the worlde.
Secondlye, in God the sonne, who hath *redemed me* and all mankinde.
Thirdly, in God the holy Ghost, who *sanctifieth me* and all the elect people of God.

(emphases mine)

Burrow suggests that Jonson is drawing on the Great Litany in the Book of Common Prayer, citing references to the Persons of the Trinity as 'Creator of heaven and earth', 'Redeemer of the world', and 'sanctifier of the faithful'. The echoes of the Catechism are stronger, with 'me' echoed by Jonson's reiterated 'my' – 'My maker, saviour, and my sanctifier' (line 41), the verb *to make* rather than *to create* used by both Catechism and Jonson. But they are not mutually exclusive options, and the wealth of possibilities serves to emphasise the weight of authority that Jonson could and did draw upon.

In the poem, Jonson continues his prayer in a rush of words, arranged in triplets to maintain his emphasis on the Trinity: 'To hear,

³⁷ Burrow notes that this stanza 'echoes the Athanasian Creed' and cites the statement that 'the whole three Persons are co-eternal together'. As far as I have been able to ascertain, his is the first critical attention paid to this poem's debt to the *Quicumque vult*.

to meditate, sweeten my desire, / With grace, with love, with cherishing entire'. Then he will be able to hope to be 'blest' by seeing God. In the final stanza Jonson, unusually, refers to a scriptural passage but also adds his own emphasis. The writer to the Hebrews, describing the reward of those who accept the 'rest' offered them, writes of:

the celestial Hierusalem, and . . . ye company of innumerable Angels, And . . . the assemblie and congregation of the first borne, which are written in heauen, and . . . God the iudge of all, and . . . the spirits of iust and perfite men, And . . . Jesus the Mediatour of the new Testament . . . (Heb. 12: 22–3).

In Hebrews, the angels, the saints and the sanctified, and God the judge and God the redeemer, are present all together in, apparently, no particular order. Jonson summarises and reorganises the material in an ascent from men through angels to God, in to emphasise the point – implicit throughout the poem – that his mind is fixed on primarily on God:

12. Among thy saints elected to abide,
And with thy angels, placèd side by side,
But in thy presence truly glorified,
Shall I there rest!

He expects to rest with the angels and the saints in God's presence: however, the concessive 'But' introduces the manner in which being in God's presence differs from communion with saints and angels – it is only there his soul will be 'truly glorified'. At the end of this 'Sinner's Sacrifice', at least, Jonson, supported by the authority of Bible and the Christian traditions expressed in the Creeds and elsewhere in the Book of Common Prayer, is able to express a conventional Christian hope.

* * *

I have suggested that it is clear that Jonson considered himself, if not all laymen, if not all people, as unfit to attempt to know God beyond traditional teaching. And I have tried to show that this is evident, not only in his comments on the matter in *Discoveries*, but from his religious poems, which avoid speculation, and ground themselves firmly and safely on the traditional authority of the Bible and community worship. In his poetic practice as in his expressed opinion, Jonson clearly feels that a reverent humility is a more appropriate approach to God than too great and exploratory a curiosity. In this aspect of his life and work, if no other, we must speak of *diffident* Ben Jonson.

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