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Was John Donne a Catholic?: Conversion, Conformity, and Early Modern English Confessional Identities

Mary Morrissey

John Donne is usually treated as a convert from Roman Catholicism, and he is often said to have been brought up as a recusant Catholic. This article challenges these assumptions about Donne's background, showing them to rely too heavily on the surviving records of his mother's family. By considering the surviving evidence on other members of Donne's family (his father and stepfather in particular), and by comparing Donne's choices with those of other young men from similar families, we can understand Donne's religious identity as one shaped by conformity rather than conversion. This does not mean that Donne 'merely' conformed without conscientiously choosing the teaching (and the teaching authority) of the Church of England over that of the Roman Catholic Church. It is to argue that, when an adult Donne described himself as someone who had been a member of the Church of England since his baptism, he cannot therefore be said to have converted to Protestantism. Donne decided on his religious allegiance when he was of an age to make that choice, and his decision is not recorded by anyone other than himself because it was unremarkable and legal.

Almost every account of John Donne's life begins by saying that he was brought up a Catholic or a recusant Catholic. And Donne is an author whose works are very often read with reference to his biography, because the story we know seems to be a compelling example of the dislocations that we associate with the Reformation. Born into a family that boasted of Sir Thomas More as an ancestor, Donne became one of the most successful preachers of the early Stuart Church of England. The hard edges in Donne's verse are read as a response to a life caught between a tightly knit religious minority and the chances for social mobility afforded to the clever and eloquent at the Elizabethan and Jacobean courts. Most notoriously, John Carey claimed that Donne's conversion from Catholicism was a deliberate apostasy, a knowing rejection of truth in favour of worldly ambition. The strain of that choice left a mark on all his writings, manifesting in a morbidity that taints 'Songs and Sonnets' and 'Holy Sonnets' alike.¹ Carey is a brilliant reader of Donne, but most Donne scholars have been unconvinced by his argument that all the poems can be interpreted in the light of this original sin. However, a crisis in religious identity is nearly

¹ John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London, 1981), 11–45.

always posited as a fact of Donne's past that shaped the way he wrote, particularly on religion.² This crisis cannot be dated exactly, because the only sources are Donne's own writings, and the datable evidence (the prefaces to *Pseudo-Martyr* of 1610) suggests only that it was prior to the writing of that text.

I do not want to qualify the degree or impact of Donne's conversion; I want to deny that it happened. I argue that the earliest sources we have for Donne's religion (not his family's or his mother's religion) suggest that he believed himself to have been a member of the Church of England all his life, that he did not identify with his mother's religion and therefore did not convert from it. To do this, I want to consider how we treat the absence of evidence when looking at religious identities in the sixteenth century. Our accounts of Donne's religion too often read his beliefs through archival records mostly created by penal processes, which therefore under-represent conformity as a religious choice. What follows treats the surviving sources on Donne's religious choices through a historiography that understands the Reformation as a process that created something new: the idea that one's religious identity was a matter of choice. Readings of Donne as a man on whom his mother's religion left an indelible mark have occluded from us the radical nature of the changes to ideas of personal identity that the Reformation brought.

I.

Donne's biography invariably begins with his family history, but the narrative constructed from the surviving information is distorted by the available evidence. Much is known of Donne's mother's family. Elizabeth Heywood's father was the playwright John Heywood; her two brothers were Jesuit priests (one of whom, Jasper Heywood, took charge of the Mission to England of 1580–1583 after the death of Edmund Campion). Heywood's wife Joan Rastell had a brother William, who was Justice of King's bench before going into exile; Joan Rastell's father John was also a lawyer and a committed Protestant in the reign of Henry VIII.³ John Rastell's wife was Elizabeth More, sister of Sir Thomas. These family connections appear to fit Donne beautifully: there are lawyers, even a connection with Lincoln's Inn; there are poets and translators, and there are priests.

When we turn to Donne's father's family, the picture is much less satisfying: we know of no poets, no lawyers, and no priests. Indeed, we know nothing of Donne's family other than what we discover in his father's will, and even that is not much. It is possible that Donne is from a London family: Donne's father leaves no charitable bequests that suggest sentimental links to another part of the country (as are commonly found in the wills of London citizens born outside the city). The only bequest for someone we know to have lived outside London is to his sister in Oxford, married to Robert Dawson who keeps the Blue Boar Inn. Donne's father's social circle was shaped by the 'worlds within worlds'—the interlocking networks of parish, company and ward—of early modern London life for members of the City companies.⁴ Master John Donne

² The standard biography of Donne remains R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford, 1970), and he posits that the years of religious crisis for Donne were between 1591 and 1595: 63–72. The theory that Donne had such a crisis rests on Edmund Gosse's work, but Gosse placed the religious crisis later and argued that Donne did not fully convert until after his wife's death: Edmund Gosse, *Life and Letters of John Donne*, vol. 2 (1899), 99–10. On Gosse's reading of Donne, see Dayton Haskin, *John Donne in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2007). A more neutral account of Donne's biography is David Colclough, 'Donne, John (1572–1631), poet and Church of England clergyman', ODNB <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/7819>> accessed 21 Dec 2021. Summaries of the evidence and its interpretation can be found in Alison Shell and Arnold Hunt, 'Donne's Religious World', in Achsah Guibbory (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* (Cambridge, 2006), 65–82 and Achsah Guibbory, 'Donne and Apostasy', in Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn and M. Thomas Hester (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne* (Oxford, 2011), 664–77. Jeffrey Johnson outlines the varied critical assessments of Donne's religion: *The Theology of John Donne* (Cambridge, 1999), 38–9.

³ See Bald, *John Donne: A Life*, 19–34; Peter Happé, 'John Heywood (b.1496/7, d. in or after 1578)', ODNB <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/13183>> accessed 14 May 2022; Dennis Flynn, 'Jasper Heywood (1535–1598)', ODNB <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/13182>> accessed 14 May 2022; Cecil H. Clough, 'John Rastell (c.1475–1536)', ODNB <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/23149>> accessed 14 May 2022.

⁴ Steve Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge, 1989), 176–85.

served as apprentice, freeman and then warden of the London Ironmongers' company.⁵ The strongest social ties that we can find for him are among that company: as Laura Birch has written, 'the livery company was hugely influential in shaping the social life of its members', for while one might change one's parish 'company membership was for life.'⁶ Master Donne's will shows the strength of his loyalties to the company: as well as small bequests to the poor of his parish and to the city's hospitals, he left £10 to the company and a gown 'faced with damask' to the beadle of the company.

Master Donne had been apprenticed to Thomas Lewen, a former master of the Ironmongers and an alderman who served as sheriff of London in 1537–1538. Donne became a freeman through service in 1556–1557.⁷ Such an apprenticeship would have been expensive to arrange, so we can assume that Master Donne's family had some capital: younger sons of the gentry and the sons of other rich and successful citizens tended to get apprenticed to London aldermen.⁸ Lewen had died in 1555, and so Lewen's widow Agnes is named when Donne takes his freeman's oath. Thomas's will suggests that he was a religious conservative, but this may not have been true of Agnes: when she died in 1562, her funeral sermon was preached by Gabriel Goodman, Dean of Westminster Abbey.⁹ Donne was working for Agnes Lewen when she died, and he was one of the executors of her will. Agnes left a bequest of £30 to Donne, as well as the lease of a house promised to him and one third of the profits on the cargo of a ship then at sea.¹⁰ This extra capital obviously helped, and Donne's advancement through the company accelerated thereafter: in 1567, he was called to the livery; in 1574, he became warden of the company (effectively deputy to the master).¹¹ He appears to have been in a business partnership with at least two men who had been his fellow apprentices with Lewen: William Skidmore and Robert East.¹² In his will he left mourning rings for Skidmore and East and money to buy mourning rings for John Eustace, another Lewen apprentice. These three men, along with John Skidmore, would become sureties for a substantial portion of the money left by Master Donne to his children, and they played a significant role, therefore, in ensuring that John's inheritance was protected through the long years of his minority.¹³

Master Donne died in 1576, leaving his pregnant widow with six young children. His daughter Elizabeth would die in 1577, and the two young girls (Mary and Katherine) would die before 1581, but his remaining children would need dowries and capital to support their careers out of the money he left. Our John Donne expected to inherit about £500 from his father. After his

⁵ The National Archives PROB-11-57-678; a transcript is printed in Bald, *John Donne: A Life*, 560–2.

⁶ Laura Branch, *Faith and Fraternity: London Livery Companies and the Reformation, 1510–1603* (Leiden, 2017), 233.

⁷ Ironmongers' Company, Wardens' Accounts, Guildhall Library MS 16,988, CLC/L/IB/D/001/MS16988/001, f. 84^r.

⁸ R. G. Lang, 'Social Origins and Social Aspirations of Jacobean London Merchants', *The Economic History Review*, 27 (1974), 28–47.

⁹ Susan Brigden notes that Lewen left a bequest in his will dated 1554 for a monastery in Sawtry, Huntingdonshire, should it be refounded: *London and the Reformation* (Oxford, 1989), 580; One of his tenants in Bread Street was a former chaplain of the same house: *Abstracts of Inquisitions Post Mortem for the City of London*, vol. 1 (London: British Record Society, 1896), <<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/inquis-post-mortem/abstract/no1/pp168-191>> accessed 1 Nov 2021. Lewen's will is TNA PROB 11-37-392. Henry Machyn notes that Goodman preached at Agnes Lewen's funeral: *The Diary of Henry Machyn*, ed. J. G. Nichols (London: Camden Society, 1848), 294–5.

¹⁰ TNA PROB 11-45-342.

¹¹ Ironmongers' Company Court Books, Guildhall Library CLC/L/IB/B/001/MS16967/001, ff. 59^v, 101^v.

¹² In the 1564 subsidy returns, Robert East and William Skidmore were listed separately, both valued at £12 and therefore assessed at 12s. Donne was valued at £5 and assessed at 5s: TNA E 179/145/220. In 1572 Donne, East and Skidmore were listed together and valued at £100: High Assessors' Book for Subsidy Payment 1572, London Metropolitan Archive CLC/281/MS02942, f. 19^v. In the 1582 subsidy roll, East and Skidmore were listed together and described as 'partners'; they were valued at £180 and assessed to pay £9: TNA E179/251/16. See Bald, *John Donne: A Life*, 28–30, although Bald confuses assessments with valuations and implies that the lists are compiled by address rather than income.

¹³ Baird D. Whitlock, 'The Orphanage Accounts of John Donne Ironmonger', *Guildhall Miscellany*, 4 (1955), 22–9, 24. On 27 September 1576, Skidmore, East and Eustace acknowledged a bond for £300 to the orphans and on 15 December they entered another bond for £300. Both bonds were paid in full when John and Anne received their inheritance: Court of Aldermen Repertory vol. 19, LMA COL/CA/01/01/021, ff. 123^r, 151^r; Repertory vol. 21, LMA COL/CA/01/01/023, f. 239^r; Repertory vol. 23, LMA COL/CA/01/01/025, ff. 72^{r-v}. William Skidmore, along with Robert Chambers, would attest to Donne's age when Donne received the outstanding monies from his legacy from the Chamber of London on 19 June 1593: Repertory vol. 23, LMA COL/CA/01/01/025, f. 72^r.

brother Henry's death in 1593, that rose to about £750.¹⁴ The amount of money that Donne inherited is important to our understanding of his decisions later: this is a sizeable sum, but it is not enough for a gentleman's income. John Donne knew that he would have to make his own fortune. In a letter of 1617 to his mother (the only surviving correspondence between them) he thanks her for her care about 'that education, which must make my fortune.'¹⁵ To Sir Thomas Egerton in 1602 he describes himself as 'carefully and honestly bred' and of 'an indifferent fortune.'¹⁶ Although we know that Donne was chronically short of money after his marriage, we must also remember that he did not belong to the same social class as his wife or most of his friends. He did not have the security of a private income that they had.¹⁷ He was entitled to call himself a gentleman only by courtesy: he attended Oxford but did not take a degree. Donne's inheritance had to buy him an education and an opening into a career that would provide him with a living. That should colour how we think, not only about Donne's secret marriage to Anne More, but about the evidence for his religious convictions. There were some professions in which it might be possible to hide an allegiance to the Church of Rome: medicine appears to have been one; by the 1580s, the common law was not.¹⁸ Donne was not at Lincoln's Inn to learn some law and practise the pastimes of a gentleman; where others might be able to retreat from public life, he could not.

If we look at Donne from the perspective of his father's family rather than his mother's, we see a wealthy citizen's son who had the wherewithal to make his way in the world but no strong family connections outside the city. What about religion? Looking at the evidence from Donne's father suggests that Donne's upbringing may not have been exclusively Roman Catholic, nor was it necessarily recusant Catholic (i.e., involving a conscientious refusal to attend Church of England services). There is an absence of evidence on crucial points. We do not know what his father's religious opinions were: Donne's father died in 1576, and this is very early to expect bureaucratic evidence of a commitment to Counter-Reformation recusant Catholicism. The 1559 Act of Uniformity established the 12*d.* fines for not attending church, but many religious conservatives did not consider it sinful to attend, and so they were not strictly speaking 'recusant'.¹⁹ The publication of the papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis* (1570) hardened confessional lines, and recusancy became a more common response for those who no longer considered conformity to the Church of England compatible with their religious beliefs and who considered themselves Roman Catholics instead. But it was the 1581 statute, which made attending mass a felony and

¹⁴ On 10 May 1576, Elizabeth Heywood, Donne's widow, was bound over for 2000 marks (£1367) by the Court of Orphans (Court of Aldermen Repertory vol. 19, LMA COL/CA/01/01/021, f. 75^v): this represents the orphans' (one-third) share of the will: Charles Carlton, *The Court of Orphans* (Leicester, 1974), 553. 2000 marks is consistent with the sums delivered to Anne and John. Baird Whitlock, 'The Orphanage Accounts of John Donne Ironmonger', 23. and F. P. Wilson, 'Notes on the Early Life of John Donne', *Review of English Studies*, 3 (1927), 232–9, 276. Donne's inheritance is substantial: In 1572–1573 the average value of the estates of freemen that died that year was £142 net. Louis A. Knafla estimates Master John Donne's wealth at £3500–4500: 'Mr Secretary Donne: The years with Sir Thomas Egerton', in David Colclough (ed.), *John Donne's Professional Lives* (Cambridge, 2003), 37–71, 39.

¹⁵ *A Collection of Letters, made by Sr Tobie Mathews* (London, 1559), 323–7. He would repeat the point in a letter to Sir Henry Goodere written sometime between his marriage but before his ordination, saying that his fortune 'needed an occupation': John Donne, *Letters to Several Persons of Honour* (1651), 51.

¹⁶ Thomas Hester, Robert Parker Sorlien, and Dennis Flynn (eds), *John Donne's Marriage Letters in The Folger Shakespeare Library* (Washington, DC, 2005), 47.

¹⁷ William Harrison's definition of a gentleman as someone who has 'studied the laws of the realm, who so abideth in the university giving his mind to his book, or profeseth physic and the liberal sciences, or, ... can live without manual labor, and therto is able and will bear the port, charge, and countenance of a gentleman' is useful here: William Harrison, *A Description of England: The Classic Contemporary Account of Tudor Social Life*, ed. Georges Edelen, 2nd edn (Washington, DC, 1994), 113–4. Donne and his brother matriculated as 'generosi filii', possibly because of their stepfather's status: Andrew Clark, *Register of the University of Oxford*, vol. 2 pt. 2 (Oxford, 1887), 138.

¹⁸ Wilfred R. Prest, *The Rise of the Barristers: A Social History of the English Bar, 1590–1640* (Oxford, 1986), 211–2; See also Geoffrey de C. Parmiter, *Elizabethan Popish Recusancy in the Inns of Court* (London, 1976), 9.

¹⁹ F. X. Walker, 'The Implementation of the Elizabethan Statutes against Recusants, 1581–1605', PhD thesis, University of London, 1961, 13–32. Walker notes that 'despite earlier rulings on the problem, the Catholics in England did not adopt the view of uncompromising withdrawal from their parish churches until after 1570, the year of the papal bull': 32.

recusancy an indictable offence, that made records of recusancy more widespread.²⁰ Recusant Catholicism did not exist before 1559; it was a rare phenomenon until 1570 and only appears regularly in our records after 1581. The only evidence about Master Donne's religious affiliations suggests that he had not separated himself from his parish church: among the smaller charitable bequests in his will is £3 to the poor of the parish to be distributed by the parson or churchwardens, and 20s. to the parson, John Sayward. Sayward was not a Marian survivor and had been in post since sometime after 1560, and so he was probably a conformable Church of England clergyman.²¹

The only other piece of information that relates to Master Donne's religious loyalties is not conclusive. We know that since about 1564, when his wife's father went into exile, Master John Donne had been involved in some transactions that allowed John Heywood to continue receiving an income from his English lands. But we also know that Master Donne refused to continue this help when it became difficult. The Commission designed to investigate lands forfeited by exiles discovered the scheme, and Master Donne ceased to pass on the rents.²² We know this because Heywood wrote to Lord Burghley for help in 1575 and referred to 'my sonne Doonn, who never sent me one peny yet either of that lease or (of anie) of my lyving since the tyme he bought my lease, for he sayth he durst not.'²³ After Burghley's intervention, Master Donne started sending the money again. This suggests that Master Donne's commitment to Catholicism was not as fervent as his wife's family's; he was unwilling to provide illegal help to members of his extended family who had chosen exile unless he had reason to believe that the authorities would turn a blind eye.

Master Donne's religion affected John from the start, not least when we consider what decisions were made about young John's baptism. Unfortunately, the records for St Nicholas Olave's Bread Street in this period have not survived.²⁴ There are, however, some assumptions that we can make when thinking about what Master Donne would have done. We can be sure that he did not delay baptism until a Catholic priest happened to be around: baptismal regeneration was an important Catholic doctrine and Catholics did not risk a child dying unbaptized. Even conforming Protestants baptized children within a week of birth, even though the doctrinal position was less clear for them.²⁵ It is not impossible that Elizabeth Heywood's great-uncle Thomas was available to perform the rite: he was arrested for saying mass two years later (1574) in London.²⁶ It is also possible that Donne took the unusual step of giving his son an irregular but valid baptism by a lay person. Even if Master Donne shared his wife's religious convictions (which is not clear), he might have done as many Catholics were doing in the 1570s, which was to bring their child to the local parish church and have a valid baptism there.²⁷ The baptism of children

²⁰ The names of persistent recusants taken by churchwardens were passed to the county sheriff and appear in quarter session and assize session records, and records of fines appear in exchequer accounts: Walker, 'The Implementation of the Elizabethan Statutes against Recusants', 7–8.

²¹ The Parker Returns for St Nicholas Olave's parish list the incumbent in 1560 as Robert Ferron; Ferron also seems to have been serving St Ethelberga's since 1554: Parker Library MS 122, 27, 29.

²² Under 13 Eliz. c.3 (legislation that followed the Northern Rebellion and that summoned fugitives home): see Bald, *John Donne: A Life*, 31–4.

²³ A. W. Reed, *Early Tudor Drama: Medwall, Rastells, Heywood and the More Circle* (London, 1926), 35–6.

²⁴ Donne's father's will states that he should be buried in St Nicholas Olave's, so it is safe to assume that the family were living in this parish.

²⁵ Babies in Elizabethan England were normally baptized two or three days after birth: David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997), 101.

²⁶ John Stow, *Annales* (1631), 678; *Acts of the Privy Council*, vol. 8, 218, 270, 287. On Heywood, see Dennis Flynn, 'Sir Thomas Heywood and the Parson', *Recusant History*, 15 (1980), 325–7.

²⁷ Mechanisms for avoiding Protestant baptism (such as travelling in order to give birth away from one's home parish) did emerge later: Alex Walsham, *Catholic Reformation in Protestant Britain* (Aldershot, 2014), 96, 385. Michael Questier discusses the second Viscount Montague's actions in baptizing his second child himself (in 1593) as 'pretty radical' and he notes that many Catholic families, even recusants, had their children baptized in their local parish church: Michael Questier, *Catholicism and Community in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2006), 234.

was usually the father's responsibility, not least because it happened while the mother was still 'lying in'.²⁸

Given the absence of evidence that Master Donne objected to the Church of England's ceremonies, I think that baptism in their parish church is the most likely course of action for Master Donne to have taken. That would certainly explain something Donne said later in a sermon at Lincoln's Inn:

Let none divorce himself from that religion, and that worship of God, which God put into his armes, and which he embraced in his Baptism. Except there be error in *fundamentall* points, such as make that Church no Church, let no man depart from that Church, and that religion, in which he delivered his posterity to the service of God at first. Wo be unto us, if we deliver not over our religion to our posterity, in the same sincerity, and the same totality in which our Fathers have delivered it us.²⁹

Donne's audience at Lincoln's Inn knew him from his youth; if these men knew him to be a convert they would have found this an odd thing for the preacher to say. Converts usually stressed the spiritual imperative of following the Holy Spirit's promptings, even if it meant a change of religion, not the importance of *remaining* with the church into which one had been baptized. This is not the only time that Donne speaks in negative ways about conversion between Christian denominations. In an undated letter to Sir Robert Ker, he says 'My Tenets are always, for the preservation of the Religion I was born in'.³⁰ And in a letter advising his friend Henry Goodere about behaviour that might recklessly invite speculations about his religious allegiances, Donne uses an arresting metaphor: 'You shall seldome see a Coyne, upon which the stamp were removed, though to imprint it better, but it looks awry and squint. And so, for the most part, do mindes which have received divers impressions'.³¹ This evidence makes it possible for us to argue that Master John Donne had his son John baptized in the local parish church because he did not feel that this was a wrong thing to do. This fact became important to the adult John Donne when he made his own choice of religious allegiance.

Master Donne is not the only important figure to consider when looking into Donne's religious upbringing, because he died when Donne was only four years old. Elizabeth Heywood remarried within the year, and it is Donne's stepfather to whom we must turn to get a sense of how 'recusant' or how 'Catholic' (and these are still rather different things) Donne's upbringing was. John Syminges was a successful physician who had practised in Oxford and London. He held various positions in the Royal College of Physicians, including the role of President in 1572.³² In a memo written for the Privy Council in 1572, various 'abuses' in the society are listed, the first being that 'presidents, censors, electes and other theyre officers are not sworne to the quenes majestie at theyre admission, as in other corporations they are wherbie it comythe to passe, that papistes have continually occupied the cheefe roomes'. The guilty parties listed in the margins are 'Caius often, Simings, Caudwell Astlowe'. This is, to the best of my knowledge, the only official document extant that suggests that Syminges was in some sense a Catholic. We have no records of him paying recusancy fines or of him being questioned for his religion.³³ That absence may be significant, because there were proceedings against other senior

²⁸ David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*, 103, 149.

²⁹ G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson (eds), *The Sermons of John Donne*, vol. 3 (Berkeley, CA, 1957), 129.

³⁰ *Letters* (1651), 306–7.

³¹ *Letters* (1651), 101–2.

³² <<https://history.rcplondon.ac.uk/inspiring-physicians/john-syminges>> accessed 14 May 2022; Baird W. Whitlock, 'John Syminges, A Poet's Step-Father', *Notes and Queries*, 199.1 (1954), 421–4.

³³ For example, Syminges does not appear in J. H. Pollen, S. J. (ed.), 'Official Lists of Prisoners for Religion from 1562–1580', *Catholic Record Society, Miscellanea I* (London, 1905), 47–72; and (for 1580–1602), *Miscellanea II* (London, 1906), 219–88 or in Rev. Patrick Ryan S. J. (ed.), 'Diocesan Returns of Recusants for England and Wales, 1577', *Catholic Record Society, Miscellanea II*

members of the college for Catholicism in the decade after the 1572 memo was produced.³⁴ In 1584, Syminges was present when the fellows took the Bond of Association (to obey the queen 'against any earthly powers whatever', protect her and avenge any assassination attempts), an oath distributed by the Privy Council in the immediate aftermath of the Throckmorton Plot.³⁵

We need to remember the context of the years between the bull *Regnans in excelsis* and the Armada. These were very difficult years for Catholics of the professional and mercantile 'middling sort'. While the phenomenon that John Bossy described as 'seigneurial Catholicism' made it possible for later and richer Catholics to live in a kind of Catholic bubble, for this generation the situation was different.³⁶ To remain fully recusant (refusing to go to church or receive sacraments) at this time would be difficult to manage while remaining economically active and staying entirely under the government's radar. Few households in London could claim to bring up children in a thoroughly Catholic environment. Syminges' case is an absence of evidence that may be an evidence of absence: if so, we may have no records of him being questioned for recusancy because he was not fully recusant. He may have gone to church often enough to keep the churchwardens happy, regardless of his personal sympathies and beliefs. Such people were common in these years, and often castigated as 'church papists'.³⁷ One indication that the Syminges household conformed enough to stay out of the records is what happened after he died in 1588. Elizabeth Heywood was again a widow and the head of her household, and in little over a year she was presented at the church court in Southwark (where she then lived) for failing to come to church and take the sacrament.³⁸

It is likely that Donne grew up in a household that was 'church papist', where members of the household (and particularly the head of the household, on whom the legal penalties fell) were at least nominally conformist. Syminges' conformity may partly have drifted into an acceptance of Elizabethan Protestantism: this appears to have been the case with Donne's employer Thomas Egerton.³⁹ This kind of 'church popery' was far from uncommon: a process that began with a disgruntled minimal conformity, grew in time to acceptance, and became an enthusiastic 'prayer book Protestantism' is thought to have been the experience of many Elizabethans.⁴⁰ Indeed, that prospect had prompted the Catholic authorities into an insistence on recusancy, despite

(London, 1921), 1–114, or in Rev. J. H. Pollen S. J. (ed.), 'Recusants and Priests', *Catholic Record Society, Miscellanea II* (London, 1921), 120–29, or Rev. J. H. Pollen S. J. (ed.), 'Prisoners in the Fleet, 1577–1580', *Catholic Record Society, Miscellanea II* (London, 1921), 130–31 or Dom Hugh Bowler and Timothy J. McCann (eds), *Recusants in the Exchequer Pipe Rolls, 1581–1592: Catholic Recusant Society Publications*, vol. 71 (1986).

³⁴ On Caius, see George Clark, *A History of the Royal College of Physicians of London*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1964), 127–8; Astlowe was 'twice upon the rack' for his involvement in a plot to free Mary Queen of Scots: <<https://history.rcplondon.ac.uk/inspiring-physicians/edward-astlowe>> accessed 14 May 2022. Dennis Flynn conjectures that an anecdote told by Parsons in 'Punti per la Missioni d'Inghilterra' about a woman who invited Jesuits to her house and whose husband presented the priests with a copy of the 1582 proclamation against Jesuits is about Elizabeth Heywood, her visiting brother Jasper and her 'schismatic' husband Syminges: Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (Bloomington, IN, 1995), 116, 217, n. 2.

³⁵ Edward Astlowe did not sign the bond, and George Clark concludes that only 'Dr Astlowe and Dr Smith of Oxford were out of sympathy with the Church of England': Royal College of Physicians of London, 'Annals of the Royal College of Physicians', vol. 2, f. 38^r; George Clark, *History*, vol. 1, 129–31.

³⁶ John Bossy posited the development of 'seigneurial Catholicism', built around the estates of Catholic gentry, as a response to these pressures: *The English Catholic Community: 1570–1850* (Oxford, 1976). Although Bossy's account has been very influential, important qualifications are found in Christopher Haigh's 'From Monopoly to Minority: Catholicism in Early Modern England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 31 (1981), 129–47.

³⁷ Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, 1993). Walsham points to urban dwellers and the 'middling sort' as communities for whom 'church popery' might be 'a scrupulous as well as pragmatic answer to the problem of proscription': *Church Papists*, 93–5, 95.

³⁸ Syminges died in July 1588, and Elizabeth Heywood was presented on 28 September 1589: St Saviour's Token Books Clink and Paris Garden 1588/9, LMA P92/SAV/0243/ 21; See also Baird W Whitlock, 'The Family of John Donne, 1588–1591', *Notes and Queries*, ns 7 (1960), 380–86, 383. Elizabeth Heywood's commitment to a fully recusant Catholicism continued all her life, as far as our records show: by February 1591 she was married to Richard Rainsford of Southwark. They left England for Antwerp in 1595 (Knafla, 'Mr Secretary Donne', 43). When they returned to England (sometime around 1606), Richard was imprisoned for refusing to take the oath of allegiance: Bald, *John Donne, A Life*, 214, 267–8.

³⁹ In 1569, Egerton was named among those failing to come to church; by 1577 he was 'reconcyled into our howse': Parmiter, *Elizabethan Popish Recusancy in the Inns of Court*, 10–13, 18–24.

⁴⁰ See Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford, 2013); Judith Maltby, *Prayer Book and People in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, 2000).

the great hardship this caused English Catholics. Although scant, therefore, there is evidence that Donne's father and stepfather were at least willing to conform to the Church of England.

There is strong evidence that Elizabeth Heywood identified as a Roman Catholic, for whom not going to her parish church was a matter of principle, although this only becomes visible in public records when she was a widow. Donne was no doubt aware of his mother's religious views: in *Pseudo-Martyr* he tells of attending a consultation among Jesuits in the Tower during Elizabeth's reign.⁴¹ But is this evidence of his mother's commitment to recusant Roman Catholicism sufficient to say that, as a child, John Donne's religion was Catholic? The households over which his father and stepfather presided were not necessarily so determined to remain apart from the Church of England as the household over which she presided as a widow, or the one she shared with her third husband when her children were grown.

Donne grew up in the years when the lines demarcating Christian denominations hardened around the confessional statements produced on both sides. The English state, like others in Europe, was engaged in a process of confessionalization: religious authorities accepted the help of state forces in enforcing religious orthodoxies in exchange for encouraging loyalty to the regime in moral training, especially of the young.⁴² The English parliament as well as the Council of Trent defined what it meant for English people to say that they were Roman Catholic. To 'be Catholic' meant to accept the definitions of Catholic doctrine that the Catholic clergy had formulated and to accept the religious fellowship only of other Roman Catholics by refusing to take part in the Church of England's services. In that refusal, Roman Catholics made their religious identity and allegiance known to the English Church and state. But many households fell uneasily between conforming Protestant and recusant Catholics. The choice to 'be' or 'become' Catholic was available to children whose parents were Catholic (recusant or 'church papist'), but it existed alongside an equally accessible option to conform for those who accepted the Church of England's teachings and teaching authority.

We have no sources that record what kind of Christian John Donne considered himself to be when he was a child or a youth. But in the datable writings where he discusses his religious background, he does not describe himself as a convert. I suggest that this is because he did not consider his religious past to have included a conversion: the adult Donne does not speak of himself as someone who left the church to which he had previously belonged. If Donne never accepted the authority of the Church of Rome, then however determined his mother's Catholic allegiances, Donne was not a Catholic in the eyes of the English state or the Catholic Church. If he never consciously chose Catholicism as his faith, then Donne could not be said to have turned away from it.

II.

If Donne was baptized in his local parish church and if the Syminges household was at least nominally conformist, then Donne was not brought up a recusant Catholic. That term applies to individuals who signalled their rejection of communion with the Church of England by refusing to attend its services or receive its sacraments. As both sets of religious authorities (the Catholic clergy running the English mission and the royal government) looked for litmus tests for allegiance, both sides used recusancy as a proof of Catholic commitment.⁴³ For English Catholics, for whom the defining norms of Catholic practice (the 'Precepts of the Church') were impossible, recusancy was a way of performing their commitment to a church that could not

⁴¹ John Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal, 1993), 56.

⁴² For a brief historiographical review of this subject, see my 'Confessionalism and Conversion in the Reformation', Oxford Handbooks Online, 2015, <DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9,780,199,935,338.013.73.>.

⁴³ On Catholic propaganda in favour of recusancy, see Walsham, *Church Papists*, 22–44.

provide regular pastoral care.⁴⁴ As we have seen, however, some people who accepted Roman Catholic doctrine and practice partially were not recusant. While Protestant writers spoke of 'church papists', the term used by contemporary Catholics for households at least some of whose members conformed to the Church of England while others (often female family members) stayed away from their parish church, was 'schismatic'. Recent work by Lucy Underwood on the younger members of such households sheds some interesting light here. Underwood has analysed the responses given by those seeking entry into the English College at Rome and notes that a marked number of those who described their upbringing as 'schismatic' do not describe themselves as having been Protestant or Catholic before the conversion experience that brought them to Rome. Rather, they say they did not know what they were. They were, Underwood says, 'pre-confessional': the boundaries between confessions were blurred in their childhood. They describe their choice of one church over another as a moment of self-determination: it was only then that they identified themselves as Catholics. This led them to seek ways of behaving appropriate to adherents of Catholicism, and from this came the decision to train for the priesthood.

Underwood's work is particularly useful in the way that it presents the choice of religious identity as one that these young people faced after childhood. This generation in particular were caught 'between pre-Tridentine Catholicism and the Counter-Reformation; between traditional piety and the hot, contentious issues of recusancy and religious dissidence'.⁴⁵ The Reformation was a period in which people were forced to make choices about allegiances based on their sense of personal faith, and our modern idea of personal identity, of a self expressed in society, emerged from that fundamental cultural shift. To understand Donne's religious allegiance, we need to understand it as a choice he made as a young adult, not an inheritance from his mother's or father's family. Like the young scholars joining the English College in Rome, he was 'pre-confessional', not knowing what his religious identity was, until he had made a conscious, adult choice.

An instructive comparison is with Donne's younger brother Henry. Both brothers' experience of home would have been much the same, as it seems only a year separated them in age. Both brothers spent their formative years in their stepfather's house; they may have grown up learning Catholic doctrine and practice within the home, but they had a male head of household who seems to have modelled at least minimal religious conformity. Henry matriculated at Hart Hall at the same time as his brother (23 October 1584) and he is described in the Register as being 10 years old (his brother is said to be 11). We are told by Walton that their family persuaded John not to take his BA degree because their Catholicism made them 'averse to some parts of the Oath that is always tendered at those times'.⁴⁶ Subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles had been a requirement for those proceeding to the BA degree since 1576, as it was for those matriculating since 1582.⁴⁷ Although being Catholic at Oxford was becoming more difficult, these requirements applied only to those over 16. In their hall, John and Henry would

⁴⁴ On the Precepts of the Church in the Tridentine catechisms of Bellarmine and Canisius, see John Melody, 'Commandments of the Church', *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1908) <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04154a.htm>> accessed 15 Feb 2022.

⁴⁵ Lucy Underwood, 'Recusancy and the Rising Generation', *British Catholic History*, 31 (2013), 511–33, 520.

⁴⁶ Izaak Walton, *The Lives of Dr John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Mr Richard Hooker, Mr George Herbert* (1670), 13; 'John Dunne' (aged 11) and 'Henry Dunne' (aged 10), gentleman's sons, matriculated at Hart Hall on 23 October 1584: Clark (ed.), *Register of the University of Oxford*, vol. 2, pt 2, 138. Donne may have been in fact a little older (12 if the age on his first portrait is correct). On Donne's date of birth, see Bald, *John Donne: A Life*, 35.

⁴⁷ Subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Royal Supremacy became a requirement for matriculation for those over 16 in 1582, in response to Campion's *Decem Rationes* (1581). There is no sign that these requirements were relaxed in the years immediately following: James McConica, 'The Rise of the Undergraduate College', in James McConica (ed.), *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. 3: *The Collegiate University* (Oxford, 1986), 1–68, 49–51; Penry Williams, 'Elizabethan Oxford: State, Church and University', in *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. 3, 397–440, 413. The requirement for taking the BA was subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles: J. M. Fletcher, 'The Faculty of Arts', in *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. 3, 157–99, 171.

have heard formal prayers (even though sacraments were not administered because the university halls had no chapels);⁴⁸ the boys might evade detection for not taking the eucharist for a time because of their age. It would be an exaggeration, however, to describe the atmosphere in which they lived as 'Roman Catholic'. We lose track of both Henry and John between 1588 and 1591. When they next appear, they are living as students in the Inns of Court; Donne had moved to Lincoln's Inn after a year or so in Thavies Inn (an Inn of Chancery): it was not uncommon for those preparing to move to one of the Common Law Inns of Court to spend a year there, and Donne paid the reduced fee offered to those moving from Thavies to Lincoln's Inn.⁴⁹

Henry is also described as 'a young gentlemen of the Inns of Court', but our sources for this are the documents created by the trial and execution of the Catholic priest William Harrington. Harrington was arrested while hiding in Henry's rooms in May 1593. Harrington would not at first confirm that he was a priest but Henry Donne is said to have admitted that Harrington 'did shrive him'.⁵⁰ That Harrington had heard Henry Donne's confession is critical. Lucy Underwood has explained how the sacrament of confession acted as a rite of reconciliation and was used by English Catholics as a way of marking their initiation into Counter-Reformation Roman Catholicism.⁵¹ As recusancy signalled a rejection of the Church of England, so having one's confession heard by a priest marked a formal commitment to Roman Catholic doctrine and practice. This act made Harrington guilty of treason under the 1581 statute (as 'persuading her majesty's subjects from their allegiance'); Harrington was executed on 18 February 1594. Henry Donne, by being reconciled, was guilty under the same law. He was arrested and initially sent to the Clink, but he was transferred to Newgate where he died. By allowing Harrington to hear his confession, Henry Donne made a decision to commit to Roman Catholicism. He chose a side in the confessional wars, and the records of that choice remain to us in the archives of the penal process to which he became subject by that choice.

I do not argue that John Donne made his choice in the same year as his brother, or that his brother's death prompted John to make a choice; I argue only that Henry Donne's choice was (Counter-Reformation) recusant Catholicism, which was subject to the treason statute of 1581 and therefore that a record of that choice survives for us to examine. John's choice is visible only in the absence of records: either he did what the law required of him (went to church, received communion at least once a year, did not hear mass, did not harbour priests in his house) or his law-breaking was so careful that it has left no trace in contemporary records.

III.

Donne nowhere tells us when his decision to conform to the Church of England was made. As this decision did not break any English laws, it does not leave the kind of administrative records that his brother's decision to be reconciled to the Church of Rome did. And although Donne speaks about confessional divisions in various places, his writings (other than his letters) can rarely be read autobiographically. Indeed, the manuscript evidence suggests that one text often read as evidence of a religious crisis, the sonnet 'Show me, dear Christ', was written after his

⁴⁸ Prayers were said and students in halls were expected to receive communion in local parish churches. There was also supposed to be regular catechetical instruction in the halls: McConica, 'The Rise of the Undergraduate College', 54–5. Penry Williams points out that even in the halls, recusancy had declined between the 1560s and the 1580s: 'Elizabethan Oxford: State, Church and University', 413–5.

⁴⁹ Bald, *John Donne: A Life*, 54–5.

⁵⁰ J. Morris, 'The Martyrdom of William Harrington', *The Month*, 20 (1876), 411–23, 414, 418. See also Godfrey Anstruther, O. P., *The Seminary Priests*, vol. 1 (Durham, 1968), 149–50.

⁵¹ Lucy Underwood, 'Persuading the Queen's Majesty's Subjects from their Allegiance: Treason, Reconciliation and Confessional Identity in Elizabethan England', *Historical Research*, 89 (2016), 246–67.

ordination.⁵² This may suggest what Molly Murray has described as ‘an ongoing interest in confessional change’.⁵³ But the question of how the true church can be identified in the world was one of the most fraught and active controversies in contemporary confessional debates, and one that affected the Church of England’s relationship with its Protestant neighbours as well as its Catholic opponents.⁵⁴ Donne’s continued preoccupation with the question does not distinguish him from his contemporaries. Men such as Richard Field or Joseph Hall, whose Protestant loyalties are not questions by modern scholars, wrote extensively on the debate over the nature of the true church.⁵⁵

In neither this sonnet nor in ‘Satyre 3: Of Religion’ (the other poetic work most often read as relevant to Donne’s supposed change of religion) is the narrating voice that of the historical Donne.⁵⁶ Nor is it clear that ‘Satyre 3’ is about the process of conversion: it is more a discussion of the politics of confessionalization. Indeed, ‘Satyre 3’ is a poem that exposes the gap between the adoption of a confessional identity and a true conversion to God. Early in the poem, the reader is given an imperative to ‘Seek true religion’ (l. 43). Instead of conventional advice on how to do this (through prayer, reading the Scriptures, etc.), the reader is told that many choose merely to adopt a confessional identity.⁵⁷ The most famous section of the poem is not about what various Christians believe, but about the shallow grounds on which they have chosen to align themselves with a particular church, and the reasons that Donne ascribes to these bad choices are the dominant themes in contemporary inter-confessional polemics.

The only texts that we can date accurately and where Donne refers to himself as a particular individual known to his readers are the prefaces to *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610) and *Biathanatos* (composed between 1607 and 1609).⁵⁸ Here we see how carefully Donne presents his religious history: not as a convert but as someone who came to a decision about his beliefs despite the claims on his loyalty of the Catholic members of his family. Donne writes in the first preface to *Pseudo-Martyr* that he is someone whose family was Catholic: he is ‘derived from such a stocke and race, as, I beleeve, no family (which is not of farre larger extent, and greater branches) hath endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes, for obeying the Teachers of Romane Doctrine, then it hath done.’⁵⁹ In the preface to *Biathanatos*, Donne describes himself as having ‘my first breeding, and conversation with Men of a suppressd and afflicted Religion.’⁶⁰ We note here that he says his breeding was ‘with Men of a suppressd’ religion, not that he was brought up as one of them. The choice of religious allegiance was not something for his family to make.

The second preface to *Pseudo-Martyr*, addressed to ‘Priestes, Jesuits, and to their disciples in this Kingdome’ gives the fullest account we have of Donne’s religious evolution from any of his extant writings. It is also the basis for all subsequent accounts of Donne’s religion:

⁵² On the dating of this poem, see *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. Robin Robbins (London, 2008), 463 and R. V. Young, ‘The Religious Sonnet’, in Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn and M. Thomas Hester (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne* (Oxford, 2011), 218–32, 227–8. On the problems created by attempts to read the Holy Sonnets through a single doctrinal lens, see Richard Strier, ‘John Donne Awry and Squint: The ‘Holy Sonnets’, 1608–1610’, *Modern Philology*, 86 (1989) 357–84.

⁵³ Molly Murray, *The Poetics of Conversion in Early Modern English Literature: Verse and Change from Donne to Dryden* (Cambridge, 2009), 71–2.

⁵⁴ On this debate, see Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought, 1600–1640* (Cambridge, 1995); Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 2009); Kenneth A. Locke, *The Church in Anglican Theology: A Historical, Theological and Ecumenical Exploration* (Aldershot, 2009).

⁵⁵ Richard Field, *Of the Church* (London 1606); Joseph Hall, *The Old Religion: A Treatise* (London 1628).

⁵⁶ Paul Sellin has argued that ‘Satyre 3’ might have been composed much later than is usually supposed and when Donne was an ordained priest: Paul R. Sellin, ‘The Proper Dating of John Donne’s “Satyre III”’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 43 (1980), 275–312. The Variorum editors note of ‘Satyre 3’ that ‘Donne himself revisited the poem to effect revisions’: Gary A. Stringer, (ed.), *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, vol. 3 (Bloomington, IN, 2016), 97.

⁵⁷ *Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. Robbins, 390. On ‘Satyre 3’, see Brent Nelson, ‘Courtship and the Hill of Truth: Religion, Career, and the Purification of Motives in Donne’s “Satyres” and Sermons’, *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 27 (2003), 5–29; Murray, *The Politics of Conversion*, 82–92; Guibbory, ‘Donne and Apostasy’, 674–7.

⁵⁸ On the dating of *Biathanatos*, see Ernest W. Sullivan II, ‘Modern Scholarly Editions of the Prose of John Donne’, in Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn and M. Thomas Hester (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne*, 65–80, 74–5.

⁵⁹ John Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal, 1993), 8.

⁶⁰ John Donne, *Biathanatos*, ed. Ernest Sullivan II (London, 1984), 29.

They who have descended so lowe, as to take knowledge of me, and to admit me into their consideration, know well that I used no inordinate hast, nor precipitation in binding my conscience to any locall Religion. I had a longer worke to doe then many other men; for I was first to blot out, certaine impressions of the Romane religion, and to wrastle both against the examples and against the reasons, by which some hold was taken; and some anticipations early layde upon my conscience, both by Persons who by nature had a power and superiority over my will, and others who by their learning and good life, seem'd to me justly to claime an interest for the guiding, and rectifying of mine understanding in these matters. And although I apprehended well enough, that this irresolution not onely retarded my fortune, but also bred some scandall, and endangered my spirituall reputation, by laying me open to many mis-interpretations, yet all these respects did not transport me to any violent and sudden determination, till I had, to the measure of my poore wit and judgement, surveyed and digested the whole body of Divinity, controverted betweene ours and the Romane Church.⁶¹

It is important to emphasize what we do not find here: this does not follow the conventions of a conversion narrative (to Protestantism) or a 'motives tract' (like those written by converts to Catholicism).⁶² The conventions of both forms were well established by this time, because stories of conversion were encouraged by religious authorities on both sides: these narratives made very effective polemics in the struggle for proof that the Holy Spirit favoured only one church.⁶³ Converts to Catholicism describe their experience as an enlightening of the mind about the nature of the true church. Converts to Protestantism often expressed their conversion in terms of *sola fide* justification. Motives tracts and conversion narratives of this time are not transparent registers of a spiritual re-orientation: they were written according to a well-known script and were shaped by a political imperative.

Donne does not follow this script: he does not elaborate on a process of spiritual enlightenment, nor does he name particular doctrines that crystallized his sense of a need to change religious affiliation. Such sentiments were conventions in motives tracts for converts to Catholicism and in conversion narratives of converts to Protestantism alike.⁶⁴ This denies him the polemical advantage on which the autobiographical revelations in conversion narratives usually rely: the 'testimony' or witness that the convert can give of the Holy Spirit working on his soul. Instead, Donne emphasizes the length of the process and the emotional ties that impeded him. He speaks of a period of 'irresolution' during which he would not 'bind his conscience' to a 'locall religion'. The phrase 'locall Religion' is not a neutral one, as it contradicts the Roman Catholic Church's claim that it alone constituted the church militant. Framing this as a choice of local religion is to express the choice in terms that only make sense within Protestant ecclesiology.

I suggest that Donne does not write like a convert in these passages because the adult Donne did not consider himself to be a convert. The 'impressions' of Catholicism he had were those made on a child. And it is equally noteworthy that Donne does not identify himself as Catholic in this pre-confessional stage: he speaks of himself rather as someone on whom certain impressions were made that had to be removed before his irresolution about 'binding his conscience' could be resolved. The vagueness about his childhood religious affiliation that Donne expresses here is very like the 'pre-confessional stage' that Lucy Underwood has found in her study of the Catholic

⁶¹ *Pseudo-Martyr*, ed. Raspa, 13.

⁶² On the misreading of the prefaces to *Pseudo-Martyr* as a conversion narrative, see Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Cambridge, 2002), 365–77; Murray, *The Politics of Conversion*, 73–82. Kathleen Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World* (Oxford, 2012), 49–58.

⁶³ Michael Questier, 'John Gee, Archbishop Abbot, and the Use of Converts from Rome in Jacobean Anti-Catholicism', *Recusant History*, 24 (1993), 347–60; Michael Questier and Peter Lake, 'Agency, Appropriation, and Rhetoric under the Gallows: Puritans, Romanists, and the State in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, 153 (1996), 64–107.

⁶⁴ On the ways in which conversion narratives and motives tracts map onto the theology of grace, see Michael Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion in England*, 58–75.

Responsa Scholarum: some of the students, particularly those whose family conformed to some degree, express an ‘acute need for a definable identity amid confusion and conflict.’⁶⁵ Donne’s choice of ‘locall religion’ was different from that of the scholars in Rome and Valladolid, but his ‘pre-confessional’ presentation of his youth is very similar.

It is often assumed that Donne speaks in such a personal way in this preface because he wishes to capture the good will of English Catholics worried about taking the Oath of Allegiance, that his purpose was to ‘save lives by preventing Catholics from going to death needlessly in the vain hope of martyrdom.’⁶⁶ But viewing *Pseudo-Martyr* in the context of confessional debates, his style and tactics appears less persuasive and more confutational: this tract addresses English Protestant readers and it reassures them that all the Catholics’ arguments have been answered.⁶⁷ There are few attempts to make common purpose with a Catholic readership: the autobiographical revelations are in a preface addressed to ‘Priestes, Jesuits and to their Disciples in this kingdome’: Donne lumps together clerical and lay Catholics, which makes it harder for him to free the laity of the blame while denouncing a duplicitous Catholic clergy. Catholic clergy and laity are addressed as the source of ‘the subtile whisperings of Rebellious doctrines, the frequent and personall Traiterous practises, the intestine Comotions, and the publike and foraine Hostile attempts’ from which God alone has delivered England (p. 25). Donne does not adopt a neutral tone, despite his stated intention ‘not to exasperate, and aggrieve you, by traducing or drawing into suspection the bodie of your Religion’ (p. 26). On the fundamental question of merit (whether we can in principle do good deeds sufficient to deserve heaven) Donne position is unambiguous: ‘no good worke is naturally large enough to reach heaven; ... we can do no perfit good work’ (p. 88). When he uses the first-person plural (‘we’), it is to connect with an English Protestant readership: the question of excommunication, for example, has ‘beene abundantly, and satisfactorily spoken of, by very many of ours, and of their owne authors’ (p. 74). In dealing with the doctrine of purgatory, he refers to ‘Sir Thomas Moore, of whose firmnesse to the integrity of the Romane faith that Church [emphasis mine] neede not be ashamed’ (p. 94). *Pseudo-Martyr* is an exercise in religious polemic, designed to convince an English Protestant readership that even someone with personal sympathies for Catholics can find strong arguments against their refusal to take the Oath of Allegiance.

IV.

The process by which the population of England managed the changes to their life-rituals and beliefs that the government implemented during the Reformation was a slow and painful one, and in many ‘church papist’ families, the generation growing up in the 1570s and 1580s had choices to make that were as painful as those made in the 1540s and 50s. But the process of confessionalization meant that sides had to be taken, as the political and cultural divisions between denominations hardened around the likes of Donne and his family. When we read the evidence from both sides of his family with an understanding of the variedness of religious identities in late Elizabethan England, we can see how simplistic it is to say that Donne grew up a recusant Catholic and that he therefore was a recusant Catholic as a young man. The choice of religious identity, the choice of a ‘locall religion’ and not a conversion (a ‘turning to God’), is what Donne

⁶⁵ Lucy Underwood, ‘Youth, Religious Identity and Autobiography at the English Colleges in Rome and Valladolid, 1592–1685’, *The Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), 349–74, 360–69. See also Lucy Underwood *Childhood, Youth and Religious Dissent in Post-Reformation England* (London, 2014), 22–7.

⁶⁶ Johann Sommerville ‘John Donne the Controversialist: The Poet as Political Thinker’, in David Colclough (ed.), *John Donne’s Professional Lives* (Cambridge 2003), 73–95. Sommerville points out that Donne uses arguments against the Pope’s deposing power also used by Catholic writers influenced by Gallican ideas and contrary to Bellarmine’s position. Further work on this area is being done by Shanyn Altman in *Witnessing to the Faith: Absolutism and the Conscience in John Donne’s England* (Manchester, forthcoming).

⁶⁷ On the *Pseudo-Martyr* and religious polemic, see Douglas Trevor, ‘John Donne’s *Pseudo-Martyr* and the Oath of Allegiance Controversy’, *Reformation*, 5 (2000), 103–38.

speaks of in the preface to *Pseudo-Martyr*. It is a choice he made as an adult; it was not something his family could do for him. To say that Donne was ever a practising Catholic, let alone a recusant Catholic, is to make a claim for which the evidence is absent.

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