

DRYDEN, THE CATHOLIC

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In his *Absalom and Achitophel*, published in 1681, John Dryden has this to say of the Blessed Sacrament:

Where gods were recommended by their taste
Such sav'ry deities must needs be good,
As serv'd at once for worship and for food.¹

Seven years later, and in *The Hind and the Panther*, he has aligned himself with the poets of the Eucharist with the almost Aquinian inquiry:

Could He His Godhead veil with flesh and blood,
And not veil these again to be our food?²

In Cruce latebat sola Deitas,
At hic latet simul et humanitas.

which has been translated:

God only on the cross lay hid from view,
But here lies hid at once the manhood too.
(English Dominican Missal)

Now what had happened during the intervening years that this poet laureate and historiographer royal of two Stuart kings, this seventeenth century English gentleman, apparently steeped in the anti-Catholic traditions of Guy Fawkes and "the Popish Plot," should have taken up his pen in defense of so contemporarily defenseless a thing as the Catholic Church? The plain truth is that John Dryden, Puritan under Cromwell, Anglican under Charles II, had become, under the latter's brother and Catholic successor to the throne, a loyal adherent of the Church of Rome.

Such a bald statement of fact is not without a wealth of implications, implications which were eagerly seized upon at the time and have, owing to a prejudice which refuses to be downed, never quite been relinquished. Dryden the poet, satirist and dramatist was likewise an opportunist. As one of the many victims of a system which united politics and literature in bonds of unholy wedlock, he was well

¹ Lines 119-121.

² Part I, lines 134, 135. Cf. the *Adoro Te Devote* of Saint Thomas Aquinas:

aware that he must share not only the political creed of his royal patron but his religious creed as well—and especially since religion and politics were so inextricably bound together. So ran the belief of his contemporaries and so it has been that “writers ranging in scholarship, scope and viewpoint from Macaulay to Professor Christie have represented him as insincere and worldly-wise, as a time-server and an opportunist; and Doctor Johnson and Sir Walter Scott have come but reluctantly and half-heartedly to his defense.”³

Simply because the above is the most obvious (and convenient), is it also the only possible explanation of Dryden’s action? Was he cast in the self-same mold as the chameleon-like Talleyrand of a later century? Or was he not genuinely sincere in his change of religion and in some respects closely akin to that other distinguished English man of letters who would follow him, Henry Edward Cardinal Newman? Brother Leo, among others, favors the latter, more kindly opinion. He says: “Like Newman and like Chesterton, he [Dryden] perceived that the fulness of spiritual authority, the perfection of religious organization, and an unbroken connection with apostolic times existed only in the Catholic Church.”⁴

In order to get at the mind and motives of a man who was at the same time a great and a prolific writer, one naturally examines his writings. There he will render himself liable to judgment and on two separate counts: what he has to say of himself and what, leaving unsaid, he reveals of himself. John Dryden’s testament to Catholicism is, of course, *The Hind and the Panther*. Aside from its value as literature, this most famous of his religious poems bears witness to a depth of sincerity and feeling which cannot be questioned. Reminiscent of *The Pillar of the Cloud* (“Lead Kindly Light”) of Newman are these autobiographical lines:

My thoughtless youth was winged with vain desires;
My manhood, long misled by wand’ring fires,
Follow’d false lights; and when their glimpse was gone,
My pride struck out new sparkles of her own.
Such was I, such by nature still I am;
Be Thine the glory, and be mine the shame.⁵

Of greater weight in any discussion of the motives behind Dryden’s conversion in his *Religio Laici*. It occupies much the same position in his religious and intellectual life as did *Tract Ninety* in that of Newman. *Religio Laici* is interesting alike for what it says and

³ Leo, Brother, *Religion and the Study of Literature* (New York, 1923), p. 151.

⁴ Leo, Brother, *English Literature* (Boston, 1928), p. 289.

⁵ Part I, lines 72-77.

for what it leaves unsaid, namely, the doubts which it set stirring in the mind of its author. In it Dryden "makes a wonderful, if unwitting argument in favor of the Catholic Church. He answers objections against the fact of a revealed religion; he insists upon the inspiration of Scripture; he emphasizes the authenticity of at least a portion of tradition, though he is not certain as to what principle should guide in discriminating between the true and the spurious; he is obviously impressed with the advantage of the doctrine of papal infallibility though he endeavors to disprove its possession by the Church of Rome."⁶ Four years later doubt was swallowed up in certainty and Dryden could write in *The Hind and the Panther*:

What weight of ancient witness can prevail,
If private reason hold the public scale?
But, gracious God, how well dost Thou provide
For erring judgments an unerring guide!
Thy throne is darkness in the abyss of light,
A blaze of glory that forbids the sight.
O teach me to believe Thee thus concealed,
And search no farther than Thyself revealed;
But her alone for my director take,
Whom Thou hast promised never to forsake!

It is an ancient and well-proved axiom that grace perfects nature. The Holy Ghost, working in the souls of men, is not bound by any hard and fast set of rules. Instead, He adapts Himself to the nature of the particular person upon whom He is exercising His Life-giving influence. In their introduction to the study of *The Hind and the Panther*, Shepard and Wood say of Dryden that "he was by temperament a conservative; he believed in authority. His turn to Rome was not out of character."⁸ Brother Leo points out that the years during which Dryden had been experimenting with various literary forms had taught him, among other things, this necessity for authority.⁹ Is it any wonder, then, that having examined the Roman position and having found there something which appealed to his innermost nature, he should have made a change? The wonder would have been that he, for whom religion was more a matter of the head than of the heart, could have adhered to a creed which was no longer able to command his assent.

Of the most obvious probative force in the history of John Dryden's conversion are his actions rather than his words. It is only too

⁶ Leo, Brother, *Religion and the Study of Literature*, p. 159.

⁷ Part I, lines 62-71.

⁸ Shepard, Odell and Paul Spencer Wood, eds., *English Prose and Poetry, 1660-1800* (Boston, 1934), p. 47.

⁹ *Religion and the Study of Literature*, p. 158.

easy to make protestation of loyalty in a moment of prosperity. To maintain that same protestation by act and in bitter adversity is quite another matter. Hence it is that perseverance under fire will ever prove the most spectacular and convincing of evidence. The mere statement of Dryden's various religious changes would seem to leave him well nigh incapable of such stability and perseverance; therefore an examination of the facts and dates in the case is found necessary. Such an examination will prove that his Catholicism was genuine and of the stuff that endures.

One cannot speak of such a thing as a conversion from Puritanism to Anglicanism—at least not in the case of John Dryden. Between the years 1662-1682, the poet and dramatist gave very little thought to religion. Intellectually, he had, like so many of his age, lapsed into a state of cynicism. Politically, he was, it is true, a Puritan and from Puritan stock. But the religious tenets which stemmed from Geneva had never made a profound impression upon his mind. "The *Heroic Stanzas* on the death of Oliver Cromwell, his first important work (1658), are smooth and vigorous, and while laudatory, are not meanly so. There is no attack on royalty and no mention of Cromwell's religion."¹⁰ The conversion to Anglicanism is, then, from the *terminus a quo* of scepticism and it is of interest because it illustrates the poet's natural bent toward conservatism and authority. (Worthy of note, also, is the fact that it does not seem to have evoked any of the accusations of the "time-serving" variety.)

If the poet laureate's and royal historiographer's religious belief was conditioned solely by that of his royal master, one might reasonably expect an immediate change with the accession of the new king, James II. Charles II died in February, 1685, and it was not until the following year that Dryden became a Catholic. There is no evidence of any effort on the part of the new king to bring the poet to this decision. (The very suggestion of such an effort borders on the absurd.) Nor did any material benefit accrue to the laureate as a result of his change in religion. A. W. Ward, in *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, goes so far as to say: ". . . The supposition that this step was, or might have been expected by him to be, to the advantage of his worldly interests is not worth discussing. . . ." and ". . . There is no single known fact in his life to support the conclusion that he changed his faith for the sake of gain."¹¹

¹⁰ Quinn, Arthur H., "Dryden," in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. v, pp. 167-168.

¹¹ *Op. cit.* (New York, 1912), vol. viii, *The Age of Dryden*, chap. 1, "Dryden," p. 50.

The above-quoted statement finds its most incontestable proof in the refusal of Dryden in 1688 to swear allegiance to William and Mary. Had he been a mere mercenary, fattening upon the support of royalty (which, often enough, was very remiss¹²), he might well have continued in office—at the price of his religion. Or, had he seen in the Church merely a means to the end of a much-coveted conservative power and authority in political life, he might easily enough have kept his post, his calm unruffled by “the Bloodless Revolution,” and merely at the cost of so intangible a thing as religious belief. Christopher Hollis points out that “there is little doubt that, had he [Dryden] been willing, like Sunderland, to turn back again to Protestantism and to take the oath to William, he could have kept the laureateship. For it was not only Dryden but almost the entire poetic talent of England which remained faithful to James.”¹³ Instead, he chose to follow the “milk-white Hind,” “was deprived of all his offices and pensions, and as an old man was again thrown back on literature as his only means of livelihood.”¹⁴ The parallel is not complete but one likes to think that at that particular moment Dryden tasted much the same sorrow as Newman was to taste upon leaving Saint Mary’s for the last time. John Dryden had been laureate for almost two decades and now he was afforded the bitter irony of seeing himself succeeded by Thomas Shadwell whom he had satirized in *Mac Flecknoe*.

Dryden and Newman, English converts to the Church of Rome and alike in so many respects, have this also in common: their names have never been inscribed upon the catalogue of God’s Saints. Of the two, the learned Cardinal would seem to stand the better chance of so ultimate and glorious an honor. He will forever be remembered for his gentleness, patience, high courage. Dryden was a fighter, one in whose hand the pen was even mightier than the sword. But if one would—and one should—in charity think upon the good deeds of the man, one need only recall that he paid dearly and followed the light of Faith to the grave—to a grave in Westminster Abbey whence that same Faith had been cast forth after many centuries.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 49.

¹³ Hollis, Christopher, *Dryden* (London, 1933), p. 161.

¹⁴ Long, W. J., *English Literature* (Boston, 1919), p. 246.