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978-0-521-10076-2 - Sir Thomas Browne: Religio Medici

Jean-Jacques Denonain

Excerpt

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TO THE READER

Certainly that man were greedy of life, who should desire to live when all the world were at an end; and he must needs be very impatient, who would repine at death in the societie of all things that suffer under it. Had not almost every man suffered by the presse; or were not the tyranny thereof become universall; I had not wanted reason for complaint: but in times wherein I have lived to behold the highest perversion of that excellent invention; the name of his Majesty defamed, the honour of Parliament depraved, the writings of both depravedly, anticipatively, counterfeitley imprinted; complaints may seeme ridiculous in private persons, and men of my condition may be as incapable of affronts, as hopelesse of their reparations. And truly had not the duty I owe unto the importunitie of friends, and the allegiance I must ever acknowledge unto truth prevayled with me; the inactivitie of my disposition might have made these sufferings continuall, and time that brings other things to light, should have satisfied me in the remedy of its oblivion. But because things evidently false are not onely printed, but many things of truth most falsly set forth; in this latter I could not but thinke my selfe engaged: for though we have no power to redresse the former, yet in the other the reparation being within our selves, I have at present represented unto the world a full and intended copy of that Peece which was most imperfectly and surreptitiously published before.

This I confesse about seven yeares past, with some others of affinitie thereto, for my private exercise and satisfaction, I had at leisurable houres composed; which being communicated unto one, it became common unto many, and was by transcription successively corrupted untill it arrived in a most depraved copy at the presse. He that shall peruse that worke, and shall take notice of sundry particularities and personall expressions therein,

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[More information](#)

RELIGIO MEDICI

will easily discern the intention was not publik: and being a private exercise directed to my selfe, what is delivered therein was rather a memoriall unto me then an example or rule unto any other: and therefore if there bee any singularitie therein correspondent unto the private conceptions of any man, it doth not advantage them; or if dissentaneous thereunto, it no way overthrowes them. It was penned in such a place and with such disadvantage, that (I protest) from the first setting of pen unto paper, I had not the assistance of any good booke, whereby to promote my invention or relieve my memory; and therefore there might be many reall lapses therein, which others might take notice of, and more than I suspected my selfe. It was set downe many yeares past, and was the sense of my conceptions at that time, not an immutable law unto my advancing judgement at all times, and therefore there might be many things therein plausible unto my passed apprehension, which are not agreeable unto my present selfe. There are many things delivered Rhetorically, many expressions therein meereley Tropicall, and as they best illustrate my intention; and therefore also there are many things to be taken in a soft and flexible sence, and not to be called unto the rigid test of reason. Lastly all that is contained therein is in submission unto maturer discernments, and as I have declared shall no further father them then the best and learned judgements shall authorize them; under favour of which considerations I have made its secrecie publike and committed the truth thereof to every ingenuous Reader.

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SECT. 1. For my Religion, though there be severall circumstances that might perswade the world I have none at all, as the generall scandall of my profession, the naturall course of my studies, the indifferency of my behaviour, and discourse in matters of Religion, neither violently defending one, nor with that common ardour and contention opposing another; yet in despight hereof I dare, without usurpation, assume the honorable stile of a Christian: not that I meerely owe this title to the Font, my education, or Clime wherein I was borne, as being bred up either to confirme those principles my Parents instilled into my unwary understanding; or by a generall consent proceed in the Religion of my Countrey: But that having, in my riper yeares, and confirmed judgement, seene and examined all, I finde my selfe obliged by the principles of Grace, and the law of mine owne reason, to embrace no other name but this; neither doth herein my zeale so farre make me forget the generall charitie I owe unto humanity, as rather to hate then pity Turkes, Infidels, and (what is worse) the Jewes, rather contenting my selfe to enjoy that happy stile, then maligning those who refuse so glorious a title.

SECT. 2. But because the name of a Christian is become too generall to expresse our faith, there being a Geography of Religions as well as Lands, and every Clime distinguished not onely by their lawes and limits, but circumscribed by their doctrines and rules of Faith; To be particular, I am of that reformed new-cast Religion, wherein I mislike nothing but the name, of the same believe our Saviour taught, the Apostles

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[More information](#)

RELIGIO MEDICI

disseminated, the Fathers authorised, and the Martyrs confirmed; but by the sinister ends of Princes, the ambition and avarice of Prelates, and the fatall corruption of times, so decaied, impaired, and fallen from its native beauty, that it required the carefull and charitable hands of these times to restore it to its primitive integrity: Now the accidentall occasion whereon, the slender meanes whereby, the low and abject condition of the person by whom so good a worke was set on foot, which in our adversaries beget contempt and scorn, fills me with wonder, and is the very same objection the insolent Pagans first cast at Christ and his Disciples.

SECT. 3. Yet have I not so shaken hands with those desperate Resolutions, who had rather venture at large their decaied bottome, then bring her in to be new trim'd in the dock; who had rather promiscuously retaine all, then abridge any, and obstinately be what they are, then what they have beene, as to stand in diameter and swords point with them: we have reformed from them, not against them; for omitting those impropriations and termes of scurrility betwixt us, which onely difference our affections, and not our cause, there is between us one common name and appellation, one faith, and necessary body of principles common to us both; and therefore I am not scrupulous to converse and live with them, to enter their Churches in defect of ours, and either pray with them, or for them: I could never perceive any rationally consequence from those many texts which prohibite the children of Israel to pollute themselves with the Temples of the Heathens; we being all Christians, and not divided by such detested impieties as might prophane our prayers, or the place wherein we make them; or that a resolved conscience may not adore her Maker any where, especially in places

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[More information](#)

PART I, SECTION 3

devoted to his service; where if their devotions offend him, mine may please him, if theirs prophane it, mine may hallow it; Holy water and Crucifix (dangerous to the common people) deceive not my judgement, nor abuse my devotion at all: I am, I confesse, naturally inclined to that, which misguided zeale termes superstition; my common conversation I do acknowledge austere, my behaviour full of rigour, sometimes not without morosity; yet at my devotion I love to use the civility of my knee, my hat, and hand, with all those outward and sensible motions, which may expresse, or promote my invisible devotion. I should violate my owne arme rather then a Church, nor willingly deface the memory of Saint or Martyr. At the sight of a Crosse or Crucifix, I can dispence with my hat, but scarce with the thought and memory of my Saviour; I cannot laugh at but rather pity the fruitlesse journeys of Pilgrims, or contemne the miserable condition of Friers; for though misplaced in circumstance, there is somewhat in it of devotion: I could never heare the *Ave Marie* Bell¹ without an elevation, or thinke it a sufficient warrant, because they erred in one circumstance, for me to erre in all, that is in silence and dumbe contempt; whilst therefore they directed their devotions to her, I offered mine to God, and rectified the errorrs of their prayers by rightly ordering mine owne; At a solemne Procession I have wept abundantly, while my consorts, blinde with opposition and prejudice, have fallen into an excesse of scorne and laughter: There are questionlesse both in Greek, Roman, and African Churches, solemnities, and ceremonies, whereof the wiser zeales doe make a Christian use, and stand condemned by us, not as evill in themselves, but as allurements and baits of superstition to those vulgar

¹ A Church Bell that tolls every day at 6 and 12 of the Clocke, at the hearing whereof every one in what place soever either of house or street betakes him to his prayer, which is commonly directed to the *Virgin*.

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RELIGIO MEDICI

heads that looke asquint on the face of truth, and those unstable Judgements that cannot consist in the narrow point and centre of vertue without a reele or stagger to the circumference.

SECT. 4. As there were many Reformers, so likewise many reformations; every Countrey proceeding in a peculiar Method, according as their nationall interest together with their constitution and clime inclined them, some angrily and with extremitie, others calmely, and with mediocrity, not rending, but easily dividing the community, and leaving an honest possibility of a reconciliation, which though peaceable Spirits doe desire, and may conceive that revolution of time, and the mercies of God may effect, yet that judgement that shall consider the present antipathies between the two extreames, their contrarieties in condition, affection and opinion, may with the same hopes expect an union in the poles of Heaven.

SECT. 5. But to difference my self neerer, and draw into a lesser circle: There is no Church wherein every point so squares unto my conscience, whose articles, constitutions, and customes seeme so consonant unto reason, and as it were framed to my particular devotion, as this whereof I hold my believe, the Church of *England*, to whose faith I am a sworne subject, and therefore in a double obligation, subscribe unto her Articles, and endeavour to observe her Constitutions. No man shall reach my faith unto another Article, or command my obedience to a Canon more: whatsoever is beyond, as points indifferent, I observe according to the rules of my private reason, or the humor and fashion of my devotion, neither believing this, because *Luther* affirmed it, or disapproving that, because *Calvin* hath disavouched it. I con-

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[More information](#)

PART I, SECTION 6

demne not all things in the Councill of *Trent* nor approve all in the Synod of *Dort*. In briefe, where the Scripture is silent, the Church is my Text; where that speakes, 'tis but my Comment; where there is a joynt silence of both, I borrow not the rules of my Religion from *Rome* or *Geneva*, but the dictates of my owne reason. It is an unjust scandall of our adversaries, and a grosse error in our selves, to compute the Nativity of our Religion from *Henry* the eighth, who though he rejected the Pope, refus'd not the faith of *Rome*, and effected no more but what his owne Predecessors desired and assayed in ages past, and was conceived the State of *Venice* would have attempted in our dayes. It is as uncharitable a point in us to fall upon those popular scurrilities and opprobrious scoffes of the Bishop of *Rome*, whom as a temporall Prince, we owe the duty of good language: I confesse there is cause of passion betweene us; by his sentence I stand excommunicate and my posterity, Heretick is the best language he affords me; yet can no eare witnesse I ever returned to him the name of Antichrist, Man of Sin, or whore of *Babylon*; It is the method of charity to suffer without reaction; those usuall Satyr, and invectives of the Pulpit may by chance produce a good effect on the vulgar, whose eares are opener to Rhetorick then Logick, yet doe they in no wise confirme the faith of wiser beleivers, who know that a good cause needs not to be patron'd by a passion, but can sustaine it selfe upon a temperate dispute.

SECT. 6. I could never divide my selfe from any man upon the difference of an opinion, or be angry with his judgement for not agreeing with mee in that, from which perhaps within a few dayes I should dissent my selfe. I have no Genius to disputes in Religion, and have often thought it wisdom to decline them, especially upon a disadvantage, or when the

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cause of truth might suffer in the weaknesse of my patronage: where we desire to be informed, 'tis good to contest with men above our selves; but to confirme and establish our opinions, 'tis best to argue with judgements below our own, that the frequent spoyles and victories over their reasons may settle in our selves an esteeme, and confirmed opinion of our owne. Every man is not a proper Champion for Truth, nor fit to take up the Gantlet in the cause of Veritie: Many, from the ignorance of these Maximes, and an inconsiderate zeale unto Truth, have too rashly charged the troopes of error, and remaine as Trophees unto the enemies of Truth: A man may be in as just possession of Truth as of a City, and yet bee forced to surrender; 'tis therefore farre better to enjoy her with peace, then to hazzard her on a battell: If, therefore, there rise any doubts in my way, I doe forget them, or at least defer them till my better settled judgement and more manly reason be able to resolve them; for I perceive every mans owne reason is his best *Oedipus*, and will, upon a reasonable truce, find a way to loose those bonds wherewith the subtilties of error have enchained our more flexible and tender judgements. In Philosophy where truth seemes double-faced, there is no man more paradoxicall then my self: but in Divinity I love to keepe the road, and, though not in an implicite, yet an humble faith, follow the great wheele of the Church, by which I move, not reserving any proper poles or motion from the epicycle of my own braine; by this meanes I leave no gap for Heresies, Schismes, or Errors, of which at present I hope I shall not injure Truth to say, I have no taint or tincture. I must confesse my greener studies have beene polluted with two or three, not any begotten in the latter Centuries, but old and obsolete, such as could never have been revived, but by such extravagant and irregular heads as mine; for indeed Heresies perish not with their Authors, but, like the river

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PART I, SECTION 7

Arethusa, though they lose their currents in one place, they rise up againe in another: one generall Councell is not able to extirpate one singular Heresie, it may be canceled for the present, but revolution of time, and the like aspects from Heaven, will restore it, when it will flourish till it be condemned againe; for as though there were a *Metempsychosis*, and the soule of one man passed into another, opinions doe find, after certain revolutions, men and mindes like those that first begat them. To see our selves againe, we need not looke for *Platoes*¹ yeare; every man is not onely himselfe; there have beene many *Diogenes*, and as many *Timons*, though but few of that name: men are lived over againe, the world is now as it was in ages past; there was none then, but there hath been some one since that parallels him, and is, as it were, his revived selfe.

SECT. 7. Now the first of mine was that of the *Arabians*, That the soules of men perished with their bodies, but should yet bee raised againe at the last day; not that I did absolutely conceive a mortality of the soule; but if that were, which faith, not Philosophy hath yet throughly disproved, and that both entred the grave together, yet I held the same conceit thereof that wee all doe of the body, that it should rise againe. Surely it is but the merits of our unworthy natures, if wee sleepe in darkenesse, untill the last alarum: A serious reflex upon my own unworthinesse did make me backward from challenging this prerogative of my soule; so I might enjoy my Saviour at last, I could with patience be nothing almost unto eternity. The second was that of *Origen*, that God would not persist in his vengeance for ever, but after a definite time of

¹ A revolution of certain thousand yeares when all things should returne unto their former estate, and he be teaching againe in his schoole as when he delivered this opinion.