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SIR THOMAS BROWNE
RELIGIO MEDICI

A NEW EDITION WITH BIOGRAPHICAL
AND CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

BY

JEAN-JACQUES DENONAIN

*Professor of English Literature at the
University of Algiers*

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INTRODUCTION

The formative years

THE son of a London mercer, Thomas Browne was born on 19 October 1605 in the parish of St Michael-le-Quern. After his father's death in 1613 and his mother's remarriage, he was awarded a scholarship in 'Wykeham's School near Winchester', where he remained for seven years. In this old public school, which ranked with Eton College and Saint Paul's School, and was run on disciplinary and ascetic principles, he was 'bred in the way of study', though he seems at first to have acquired only a superficial knowledge of Latin. Failing to meet the requirements for a scholarship at New College, Oxford, he left Winchester College of his own accord, and matriculated in the first months of 1623 in Broadgates Hall, Oxford, which was soon to become Pembroke College.

During his six years' stay under the direction of the Master, Dr Thomas Clayton—Regius Professor of Physick in 1611 and Praelector in Anatomy in the University in 1624, a first-rate physician and an enterprising personality open to new trends of knowledge—and under the tuition of Thomas Lushington—a subtle divine and an eminent philosopher, an independent mind with fits of unorthodoxy and irreverent speech—Browne seems to have profited by the general course of studies provided in Pembroke College in accordance with the new College Statutes, and by the University lectures. He became a master of Greek and Latin, and was versed in 'no lesse then six Languages'. He had been trained in the traditional disciplines of Logic and Rhetoric, in Divinity and Aristotelian philosophy. His own 'hydroptic thirst of knowledge', his inquisitive mind, and the example of his tutor, in-

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duced him to explore more dangerous realms of thought, and to indulge in the tendencies of his own 'irregular head'. As regards medical studies, the University of Oxford had recently added courses in Anatomy and Botany to the antiquated reading of Hippocrates and Galen, and clinical cases could be studied in Ewelme Hospital, for which Dr Clayton was also responsible. Thomas Browne proceeded B.A. in June 1626, and M.A. in June 1629.

He was now able to undertake more precise medical studies, and, like Descartes about the same time, to peruse 'the Great Book of the World'. After some medical apprenticeship in Oxfordshire, and a visit to Ireland with his stepfather in 1630, with the sole remarkable event of a shipwreck on the return voyage, Browne left England to make a scholar's tour of the Continent.

At Montpellier, a half Catholic, half Protestant town, where he stayed in 1631, he found an active medical school of long standing and European repute, in which observation, experiment and logic were prevailing over traditional medical and religious authority. Here he would have noticed the official separation of science and religion, which were treated as distinct provinces of knowledge and thought, and would have been keenly alive to the intellectual stimulus provided by the gathering of students of all shades of belief from all parts of Europe.

Padua, to which Browne resorted in the following year, secure on the territory of the Venetian Republic, professed hostility to the Pope and Jesuits, and complete tolerance for all customs and opinions. The freedom of thought which it afforded could easily and usually did turn into open Libertinism. The *Universitas Artistarum* included students both in Medicine and Philosophy, and conferred a common doctor's degree. The result was that, mainly under the influence of

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THE COMPOSITION AND PUBLICATION

Cesare Cremonini, the idol of the 'Artists', science had got the better of religion, and the general atmosphere was one either of open scepticism and impiety, or of a cautious dualism erecting water-tight frontiers between the realms of reason and faith. As regards medical studies proper, Padua was celebrated for its teaching of Anatomy and clinical observation, and for its early experiments in vivisection.

Browne's visit to the University of Leyden in December 1633 was too short to improve his medical knowledge. He may nevertheless have been attracted by the Iatro-chemical school, whose prominent figure was Van Helmont, then at Louvain. At any rate, it was at Leyden that Browne passed his doctor's degree. There also, as in England previously, he could witness the raging controversies between Arminians, Socinians, and the supporters of Protestant orthodoxy.

The composition and publication of Religio Medici

Having spent in his travels 'the greatest Part of his Patrimony', Browne found it high time to earn a living as a physician. In 1634 he settled at Upper Shibden Hall, a few miles from Halifax, in Yorkshire. There he wrote a first draft of the work now known as *Religio Medici*. After moving to Norwich in 1636, he rearranged his early manuscript, cancelling some twenty passages, altering either the argument or the wording in many more, and adding a number of lines, as well as one whole section. Whereas the first draft was mainly intended for his personal use, this second version was probably prepared for communication to a close friend. But the manuscript was widely circulated and transcribed, sometimes at several removes from the original. One of the copies fell into the hands of a London bookseller, one Andrew Croke, at a time when censorship was inefficient. Croke had it printed verbatim, without the author's permission or his name either,

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in a small octavo of 190 pages. No sooner had the book been issued than the Earl of Dorset recommended it to Sir Kenelm Digby, then imprisoned for his Roman Catholic and royalist opinions. Digby read the book during the night of 21 December 1642, and in the course of the next day and night wrote down *Observations upon Religio Medici*, which he sent to the Earl of Dorset. This was printed by the same printer for another bookseller, and usually sold bound with the remaining copies of *Religio Medici*. This unexpected advertisement induced Crooke to issue a second edition, reset in 160 pages, with a few clerical or typographical emendations of his own.

Meanwhile, Browne had heard of the publication of his work, but he seems to have taken action only when he was informed of Digby's slightly dangerous contribution. He wrote to Digby through the channel of Crooke, urging him not to publish his *Observations* until he had 'the true and intended original' in his hands. Digby answered politely, but eluded the wish, pleading that he had nothing to do with the printing of his own pages. Browne was now doubly compelled to publish his work. His proceedings nevertheless seem astonishing. As could be expected, he added to his original text a preface protesting against the pirating of his work and the defects of the printed version, even though the publisher was Crooke himself. He also added four new sections and a dozen passages. But a close study of the 'authorized' version shows that, far from supplying his own original copy, Browne followed the text of the spurious edition, correcting some 650 errors due to faulty transcription of his manuscript, but failing to notice or to correct 360 defective readings. The result was that the so called 'authorized' version of 1643 was not wholly authoritative, and had to be carefully edited by the present editor in accordance with the readings preserved in the extant

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THE CHARACTER OF 'RELIGIO MEDICI'

manuscript copies. Save for a score of *errata* listed in the later copies of the authorized edition, and more or less taken into consideration in the subsequent issues of *Religio Medici*, Browne no longer cared for his book.

The character of Religio Medici

It is possible that the title '*Religio Medici*' was a transcriber's, not the author's own choice. Browne had it struck out on the engraved frontispiece of the authorized edition. In spite of what this now traditional title may suggest, the book is by no means a vindication of the faith of physicians, nor a plea in favour of religion in an age of encroaching science. It is neither a religious or philosophical treatise, nor an essay written for sheer moral or literary satisfaction. It is not a diary reporting the author's experiences and thoughts as they occurred. Neither is it a spiritual autobiography setting forth in retrospect the progress of a soul, though indeed a few stages are occasionally mentioned. Nor is it a confession of past errors, implying self-indictment and self-apology. And it is not a mere introspective 'anatomy' in which the thinker seeks to analyse himself.

It is a 'memorial' intended to record for the author's further use, rather than his present satisfaction, a sum of personal views resulting from temper and experience, written at the sober age of thirty by a man who settles down to a grave calling in his native country after years of browsing among books and roaming in foreign lands. Possibly a synthesis drawn from personal scrap-books in which the author jotted down his reflexions, *Religio Medici* is to some extent the philosophical and spiritual testament of a thinker who has taken his bearings, grappled with and solved a number of important questions, and who has on the whole reached his own final truth.

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The man's self-portrait

Though not primarily an attempt at self-analysis, *Religio Medici* nevertheless provides the reader with a detailed portrait of the author as a man of flesh and blood. His physical appearance we know from a description made by his old friend, John Whitefoot, and an oil-painting in the National Portrait Gallery, which may be dated about 1641. We are struck by the receding forehead, narrow and flat, widening above the eye-sockets, to be narrowed again by the hair. The unusual shape of the skull, as though the bulky brain had expanded in a backward direction, has puzzled modern anthropologists, but left Dr Browne confident that nature had not 'played the bungler' with him. In the asymmetrical sockets, the eyes are open wide, with a frank, kind, naïve, dreamy expression. They reveal a sort of childish curiosity, and suggest either a receptiveness to the wonders of the world or the aura of an inner vision. Between protruding cheekbones, the nose is long and firm, very slightly aquiline, with a flat broad ridge, and rather heavy nostrils. Above a diminutive and receding chin, the mouth is moderate in size, and the somewhat thick lips are pursed in a gentle smile. The hair, long and flowing, curls at the tips, with one or two stray locks on the left part of the brow; the moustache is thin and the pointed beard is neatly parted in the middle. On the whole, this is an attractive face, which leaves the impression of a contemplative mind and a delicate body. According to Whitefoot, Browne's 'Complexion and Hair was answerable to his name; his Stature was moderate, and Habit of Body neither fat nor lean. . . . His Modesty was visible in a Natural Habitual Blush, which was increased upon the least Occasion, and oft discover'd without any observable Cause.' The simplicity of the dark dress worn by Browne in the portrait, just relieved by the short, white collar tied by small bright tassels, is in

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THE MAN'S SELF-PORTRAIT

accordance with what Whitefoot says about Browne's aversion to finery.

Browne's temper and personality are best revealed by the pages of *Religio Medici*, whether in self-analysis or through his ways of thinking and writing. He has been attentive to define the roots of his temper: the planet and sign under which he was born, his natural disposition and inclination, and the education he received in his family and at school. We may add to these his own reflexions upon the world and himself.

He was avowedly sullen, morose and melancholy, yet might have fits of cheerfulness. He was bashful and reserved in his manner, but he was ready to welcome friend or stranger, good or bad, with geniality; and he could intervene conclusively in a debate in favour of what he considered to be truth. He could readily adapt himself to various climates or situations, to all manners of people, creatures and things, the outcome either of his good will, the flexibility of his temper, or some mental discipline. He was hard to himself, even to the point of ascetic rigour. And his stoicism was due as much to trained self-control as to his philosophical propensities.

He seems to have been from an early age disillusioned—both sentimentally and intellectually—dissatisfied with his own self torn by inner conflicts, with human nature and human kind, with life in this world and with the world at large, even with his own science. He should not however be mistaken for a cynical malcontent railing at Man and the Time. But all this brought him to the verge of suicide, and did in fact make him yearn for death and the fulfilment of his fate.

Another prominent feature of his temper is his charity. He is charitable not only on account of his 'mercifull disposition', his sensibility and compassionate turn of mind; he is charitable also on principle and in obedience to the injunctions of Christ. And he extends charity to the fields of book-learning and

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knowledge in general, as well as to everyday behaviour and intercourse with other living creatures. His strange contempt for the multitude may result from his shyness and insistence on self-control, as well as from traditional prejudices of ancient and contemporary philosophers.

At rare times he warms up to enthusiastic raptures. But these come from solitary joys, felt when he beholds beautiful things, listens to soft music, or indulges in dreams; or they may have their origin in the mystic contemplation of the attributes of God, or in the no less mystic fusion of soul with one dear friend.

Browne's intellectual features are perhaps more strongly marked, and they are granted freer scope than his feelings. This shy creature is a fearless thinker. His inquisitive mind is ever active, and prone to pry into dangerous corners and even divine mysteries. He has 'run through all philosophical sects'; he has perused all the worst and most wicked books of past and present. He made so bold as to check divine with human records; he put his faith to the most adventurous tests. In short he has played with fire, the fire of Hell and of the stake. A relentless critical mind, he judges everybody, everything, every opinion severely yet impartially. He is a wholly independent thinker, apt to rebel against ready-made or compulsory beliefs, adamant in the innermost recesses of his mind about his own tenets, and accepting others only in so far as they 'square unto' his conscience. He pleads in favour of reason and his own free use of it, and claims for it powers in the widest fields.

Yet this bold, stubborn, high-spirited personality is prone to bow at obstacles and shirk the encounter. Either out of cautious or sceptical reserve, or a tendency to come to terms upon immaterial points, or perhaps even more out of the inactivity of his disposition, he is not ashamed to disavow himself publicly.

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He professes two philosophies, one for his own, one for outward use. Though his tolerance derives mainly from his charity and his broadmindedness it can also be explained as a sense of inefficiency, a dispirited loathing of action. He resorts for shelter to a private world of thought and dream.

This rationalist is fully aware of the shortcomings of reason. To solve doubts and riddles, he sometimes turns to a sort of sentimental or aesthetic para-logic which 'humours his fancy'. And finally in front of the failures of human reason, he willingly surrenders himself to the humblest form of Fideism.

The thinker

Trying seriously to record the 'Tenor of his Belief' in 1635, after four years spent on the Continent, Browne was more likely to base his reflexions upon his experience abroad than on the state of religious affairs in his own country. In fact, the relationship is very remote, in mood and substance, between *Religio Medici* and contemporary English books dealing with religion. Browne hardly alludes to the problems raised by the various trends in English religious thought: Arminianism, Socinianism, Puritanism. He does not care for the heresies then familiar in England, which Thomas Edwards was to catalogue in his *Gangraena* in 1646. He ignores Lord Herbert of Cherbury, the father of English Deism, the second edition of whose *De Veritate* had been published in 1633 (in Paris again). Hobbes, in a third visit to Paris (1634-7), had been entertained by Mersenne and other learned persons, but even though he had been thinking of a personal system as early as 1629, had as yet given out nothing of philosophical moment. As regards Sir Kenelm Digby, he was still unknown to Browne, and his *Two Treatises* about the nature of the body and the immortality of the soul were not yet in print. Henry

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More, the Platonist, was still in his college at Cambridge, and was not to publish anything until 1642. How remote Browne was from the English trend of religious thought is perhaps best revealed by the lack of understanding that he met in his early commentators, Sir Kenelm Digby in 1642 and Alexander Ross in 1645.

Shall we therefore consider that Browne's choice of subjects for his meditations is the mere offspring of his desultory, 'irregular and extravagant fancy'? Is it due to the natural quaintness of his mind, which induced him to ramble among obsolete or out-of-the-way regions of thought, giving bias to the ordinary contents of an honest man's brain? Are the problems he revels in nothing but the weeds and tares of his personal thought? Neither of these surmises seems to be the case. If *Religio Medici* is a faithful portrait of Thomas Browne, it is no less a mirror of the thought of his time, and more particularly of the vital issues which were then eagerly debated in the learned circles of Italy and France.

The early 1630's were the most crucial years of that period from 1620 to 1650 in which historians of philosophy discern an immense effort to reach both universal and human truth. For a long time Scholasticism had been moribund. The discovery of hitherto unknown works by Aristotle revealed the now unbridgeable chasm between ancient philosophy and Christian religion, which Christian Aristotelianism had for centuries attempted to blend. Under the united blows of pure Christian doctrine, of renewed scepticism in matters of philosophy, and of the contradictory facts set forth by the progress of science and knowledge, Aristotelian teaching collapsed. But its overthrow laid the Christian religion and the Church open to the assaults of rational minds.

Sure enough, Aristotelianism still flourished in the University of Padua, but it was steeped in Averroism, and it was

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the convenient bulwark from which sly gibes and severe onslaughts were thrust at all religion. Pomponazzi in the sixteenth century, his expositor Vanini in 1615-16 (three years before he was burnt at the stake as a heretic), Cremonini even long after his death in 1631, were the heroes of Italian and French 'Libertines' who gladly availed themselves of the water-tight separation drawn between faith and philosophy, between outward behaviour and inward belief: '*Intus ut libet, foris ut moris est.*'

Pyrrhonian scepticism, which had been applied to human reason and the infant science of the time, in the sixteenth century, now eagerly turned against revealed faith, exposing its contradictions and impossibilities. The Stoic trend itself was to alter to the disadvantage of religion. Christian Stoicism, a compromise between the original form of Stoicism just then forsaken on account of its excessive rigour and pride, and Christian faith, eventually established absolute Fideism, forbidding reason to decide in divine matters, and even destroying the intellectual element in the act of faith.

The weakening of the religious position enhanced the already deeply felt appeal of the most impious thinkers of Greece and Rome. Even more than Pomponazzi, Cardan, Bodin, Vanini, and Machiavelli, the standard authors of irreligion were Protagoras, Diagoras, Euhemerus, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Lucretius, Cicero (whose *de Natura Deorum*, *de Divinatione*, *pro Cluentio*, etc., were convenient handbooks against God, the immortality of the soul, Hell, etc.), Seneca (whose *Troas* poisoned many minds), Lucian and his 'impieties', Sextus Empiricus, Pliny, Galen, and scores of others.

Finally, the new science, freed from Aristotelian tradition and from magic, raised unimagined problems, whether it were anatomy researching for some organic seat of the spiritual faculties, or astronomy shifting the centre of the universe

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from the earth to the sun, or chemistry slowly emerging from the dross of alchemy, or mechanics seen from an atomistic and materialist point of view. In every field, observation and experiment were being set in contrast with the long established authority of ancient science, more or less hallowed by the Church.

Such was the background against which Browne wrote the *Religio Medici*, such were the origins of the problems about which he was taking his bearings, and which he strove to solve. The very list of the questions dealt with by Browne in his 'memorial' is astonishingly similar to that of some typical contemporaries. God's existence and nature; providence and fortune; faith and reason; the creation or the eternity of the world; Nature and its latent possibilities or its monsters; the influence of stars on men, on kingdoms, on religions; miracles and the properties of things; the nature of the soul, its immortality, its inorganicity, its 'traduction' from parents to child; apparitions, angels and devils; demoniac possession, witchcraft and white magic; oracles and premonitions—all those problems were eagerly grappled with by thinkers as different as Vanini in his *Amphitheatrum aeternae providentiae divino-magicum* (1615) or his *De Admirandis Naturae Reginae Deaeque Mortalium Arcanis* (1616), La Mothe le Vayer in his *Dialogues faits à l'imitation des Anciens* (1630-1), Descartes in his *Méditations* (thought out in 1627-9), Gabriel Naudé and Guy Patin, the famous Paris physician, in their numberless letters to friends. Apart from those major issues, hundreds of echoes in *Religio Medici* testify to Browne's response to the vital questions of his time.

But if the choice of his subjects was suggested or dictated by the general trend of thought, his answers were by no means forced upon him. It is unfair and inaccurate to assert that he is no original thinker. Very different influences told

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THE THINKER

upon him, whether of men or books, yet he assimilated them all, and made his own synthesis, never caring to ascribe to such-and-such the germ or the model of his own thought. Regardless of religious or philosophical authorities, he reconsidered everything in his own mind, and stamped his answers with his inimitable seal. Had he had 'good books' at his disposal while he was writing *Religio Medici*, the result would perhaps have been heavier but not essentially different. He was fully able to re-invent old heresies, to offer a wholly new hypothesis about the habitation of Angels, and to build up for his private use a noble definition of death.

It was his own truth that he eventually came to, and his final attitude notably differed from that of his greater contemporaries. Whereas La Mothe le Vayer and Naudé remained ironically and cynically sceptic, whereas Descartes made a point of not meddling in divine or half-divine puzzles and focused his attention on the sharply distinct scientific aspects of things, whereas Guy Patin concealed his inner scepticism under the outward show of fideistic piety, and yearned to find shelter in a 'Tiers parti', that of the philosophical freedom of physicians, Thomas Browne submitted himself in all sincerity and humility (in spite of some jarring notes) to Christian faith in its Anglican form. His faith is humble and reverent, yet not unreserved. He tends to set boundaries to its province, whether it be the commonly accepted creed or his own private belief. He is prone to minimize heresies or atheism and to advocate religious tolerance. But on the other hand he sets boundaries to the province of reason also, at the very moment when he strives to free it from the fetters of religion and proclaims the rights of individual thought. His rationalism is equally hostile to religious irrationalism and to certain forms of philosophical rationalism. But even then he loves to humour his fancy when he cannot satisfy his reason,

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and willingly resorts to the ‘mysticall method’ of Pythagoras and of the ‘Hieroglyphicall Schooles of the Egyptians’ for an adumbration of inaccessible Truth. And at the core of his mind and heart he is essentially, thoroughly, a Christian.

The writer

As a private ‘memorial’, the main purpose of which was to settle the tenets of Browne’s belief, *Religio Medici* hardly aims at being a work of literary art. The thought itself in its subtlety prevails over the language in which it is expressed. Though the syntax and wording are occasionally apt to be plain and slovenly, the book is not lacking in flashes of wit and lyrical strains. The successive additions to the first version show a growing care in expression and style. But it must be confessed that we have here only a faint anticipation of the boldly coined phrases, the sweeping cadences, and the muffled or loud sonorities of *Hydriotaphia* and *Christian Morals*. *Religio Medici* is a work of faith, and the wealth of Browne’s talent is here only used when it can best express the depth of his faith.

Conclusion

The self-portrait of a mind and soul, and a prominent landmark in the history of ideas, *Religio Medici* is a document of inexhaustible interest and persisting value. Browne’s final attitude in the religious debates of his day belongs in fact to no precise time, and in a sense may be considered as strikingly modern. There is something deeply moving in this intimate contact with a winning personality, so close to us in spite of its remoteness in time. Nor is the dramatic element lacking in the confession of a spiritual evolution which took one of us from rash enquiry, through the intermediate stages of despair and inclination to self-murder, to a victory over

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sturdy doubts gained on his knees. This harrowing of the brain makes introspection the richer in *Religio Medici*, and we may be thankful not only for what is explicitly revealed, but also for what has been silenced and can just be surmised.

As a witness of the struggles which opened the way for modern modes of thinking, *Religio Medici* cannot be neglected either. If it is best interpreted in the light of continental trends of thought, it is in return a first-rate token of the problems and the influence of the Italian and French quest for philosophical truth. And it is remarkable that, at a time when the notion of the ‘honnête homme’ was being promoted, it was an Englishman, Thomas Browne, who set the best example of how an ‘honnête homme’ could respond to religion’s unfathomable mysteries.