

SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE: UNITIES AND DUALITIES
HPEN5003/6003
AN INTRODUCTION TO MILTON'S *DE DOCTRINA CHRISTIANA* (ON
CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE) AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO *PARADISE LOST*

Lecture Outline:

1. Introduction to the textual history of *De Doctrina Christiana* (On Christian Doctrine) (*DDC*) and to the controversy over its authorship.
 2. The broad significance of the work for our understanding of Milton
 3. The contribution of *DDC* to the arguments surrounding the lawfulness of divorce and the wider question of marriage (Re: *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*). In *DDC*, these arguments are presented in Book I, Chapter 10.
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1. 1823: a manuscript of a Latin theological treatise was found in the State Paper Office by Robert Lemon, Deputy Keeper of His Majesty's State Papers, and was immediately shown to King George IV. Charles Sumner appointed to translate it into English and prepare it for publication. In 1825 it was published as *De Doctrina Christiana* by John Milton. Immediately after the discovery of the manuscript, however, the debate over its authorship had begun.¹
 - a. Manuscript is mainly in the hands of Milton's amanuensis around the period 1658-60, Jeremy Picard, and his assistant, Daniel Skinner Milton was by this time blind and is known to have dictated his compositions to an amanuensis.
 - b. 1660: Restoration of the Monarch after the English Civil Wars
 - c. Skinner's plan to publish it was thwarted by the Government, who thought anything of Milton's might be subversive.
 - d. Parallels between *DDC* and Milton's acknowledged works.² Among these are the radical sexual politics of Book I, Chapter 10, and particularly the arguments surrounding the lawfulness of divorce and the wider questions of marriage.
 2. What is at issue is our understanding of the historical Milton.
 - a. According to his seventeenth-century biographer John Toland, 'in the latter part of his life, he was not a profest Member of any particular Sect among Christians'.³
 - b. Milton's 'religion was so unorthodox in its blend of beliefs that it set him apart from all existing churches. He remained a church of one in which he was his own minister.'⁴
 - c. Anglican Milton: Thomas Burgess, Bishop of St David's, founded a college for the education of the Welsh clergy, at Lampeter, in 1822, in the 'black spot' in Cardiganshire where Unitarianism was strongest. Unitarianism challenges the orthodox Trinitarian view of the Christian God as consisting of three persons in one God.
 - d. *DDC* support for the Arian heresy, that the Son of God was not consubstantial with the Father.

DDC propounds a number of major heresies, radical divergences from generally accepted Protestant teaching which Milton defended on both Scriptural and rational grounds:⁵

¹ See James Ogden, 'Bishop Burgess and John Milton', *Trivium*, 29 & 30, *The Founders' Library*, University of Wales, Lampeter, *Bibliographical and Contextual Studies* (1997), pp. 79-98 (pp. 79, 81)

² Ogden, 'Bishop Burgess and John Milton', pp. 79-80, 90, 94

³ Originally in *A Complete Collection of the Historical, Political, and Miscellaneous Works of John Milton, both English and Latin. With some Papers never before Publish'd. To which is Prefix'd the Life of the Author* [...] (Amsterdam, 1698), as 'The Life of John Milton', by John Toland; in Helen Darbishire, ed., *The Early Lives of Milton* (London: Constable, 1965), p. 195, cited in Ogden, 'Bishop Burgess and John Milton', p. 79

⁴ Perez Zagorin, *Milton, Aristocrat & Rebel: The Poet and His Politics* (Rochester, NY and Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), p. 101

- ❖ Arianism, or anti-trinitarianism
- ❖ Materialism and creation *ex deo*: God is said to have created the world not out of nothing, but out of matter taken from himself.
- ❖ Arminianism: this is rationalistic and opposes the Calvinist doctrine of predestination with an emphasis upon free will. Milton was a strenuous advocate of liberty, but he does not commend what he refers to in Book I, Chapter 1, of *DDD*, as 'abused liberty'.
 - Libertarian : 'One who holds the doctrine of the freedom of the will, as opposed to that of necessity' or predestination. (*OED*)
 - Milton also advocates freedom of opinion as to religion
 - Libertinism is disregard for moral restraint in relations between the sexes, or licentious or dissolute practices or habits of life.
 - Milton's liberty is the liberty to be tempted, to successfully resist temptation, and to exercise self-restraint and discipline. But this logically implies also the liberty not to resist temptation.
- ❖ Mortalism, or thnetopsychism: asserts the unity and interdependence of body and soul. The soul is therefore mortal and 'sleeps' and is laid asleep from the hour of death, unto the hour of the resurrection and last judgement.
 - *animist monism*, the view that matter is instinct with life and motion.
 - Milton's opposition to the mechanistic philosophies of Hobbes and Descartes, which postulated a clockwork universe, God, the watchmaker, distant and removed.

Prefatory Epistle to *DDC*: Milton to follow '*the way which is called heresy*'.

3. *DDC*, Book I, Chapter 10

- a. The natural disposition of Man is to do what is right; the significance and precise legal status of the prohibition in the Garden of Eden, the command to Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.
- b. Marriage was instituted at the creation and 'consisted in the mutual love, society, help, and comfort of the husband and wife'
- c. The Bible is seen as the sole authority of religious truth and nothing except what contradicted Holy Scripture could correctly be called heresy.
- d. The method of right interpretation of Scripture requires:
 - i. linguistic ability
 - ii. knowledge of the original sources
 - iii. consideration of the overall intent
 - iv. distinction between literal and figurative language
 - v. examination of the causes and circumstances, and of what comes before and after the passage in question
 - vi. comparison of one text with another – the 'consent of scriptures'
 - vii. it must always be asked how far the interpretation is in agreement with faith, with hope and charity (for which we should read also 'Christian love'), and with Nature
- e. Polygamy: OT examples 'clearly admit the lawfulness of polygamy'
 - i. frequent use of the singular 'wife' in the OT: e.g. Exodus XX.17: 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass'.
 - ii. OT polygamists: Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon
 - iii. Ezekial xxiii.4: Milton uses allegorical interpretation (*allegoresis*): God representing himself as having espoused two wives
 - iv. 1 Corinthians vii.2: the numbers of wives permitted to members in the early church
- f. Divorce: marriage in its essential form is good will, love, help, comfort, fidelity. Divorce is therefore a *natural* dissolution when the bond formed by love is dissolved by hatred.

⁵ All of these heresies are discussed by Zagorin, *Milton, Aristocrat & Rebel*, p. 101; John Rumrich, 'Radical Heterodoxy and Heresy', Ch. 9 of *A Companion to Milton*, ed. by Thomas N. Corns (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 141-56 (pp. 142-43)

- i. In Mosaic Law divorce is permitted in cases of 'uncleanness'
- ii. Christ only permitted divorce in cases of adultery, or fornication, which is usually interpreted as adultery
- iii. An example of Milton's linguistic approach: 'According to the idiom of the eastern languages, however, the word fornication signifies, not adultery only, but either what is called *any unclean thing*, or a defect in some particular which might justly be required in a wife [...] or it signifies whatever is found to be irreconcilably at variance with love, or fidelity, or help, or society, that is, with the object of the original institution' of marriage.
- iv. An example of Milton's examination of the causes and circumstances, and of what comes before and after the passage in question; in other words, contextual understanding: When Christ says to the Pharisees that Moses only permitted a man to put away, or divorce, his wife because of the hardness of the people's hearts, Milton argues that Christ only says so because his comments are directed at what is said in Deuteronomy xxiv.1 because this is what the Pharisees were alluding to.
 1. it is said to be lawful for a man to put away his wife for any cause whatsoever, provided a bill of divorcement were given
 2. According to Milton, Christ is not saying what he might appear to be saying, that divorce for any reason other than adultery is sinful, and that Moses tolerated it in other cases because of the hardness of the people's hearts, but that the abuse of the lawful permission to divorce by hard-hearted Pharisees and the like, is sinful.
 3. Christ is in no way modifying the Mosaic Law, for Christ cannot mean adultery, literally, because this was not merely a premise for divorce, but was punishable by death
 4. Milton conveniently forgets that Christ also revised the punishment of an adulteress – stoning to death – in saying, whoever is without sin, let him cast the first stone.
 5. Milton adds that Moses tolerated the abuses because to do otherwise would prevent the dissolution of unfortunate and unhappy marriages. In other words, Moses is said even to tolerate the abuse of the law of divorce in some cases, rather than to abolish divorce altogether, 'considering that the balance of earthly happiness or misery rested principally on this institution'.

Concluding Remarks:

- a) Milton's conviction in the unassailable right of the individual to exercise liberty to interpret Scripture in the freedom of their own conscience: 'the argument which is declared [...] may not be equally obvious to another of not inferior discernment'.
- b) The double nature of Scripture: external, in the form of the written word, and internal, in the operations of the Holy Spirit in one's conscience. It is the latter that is the pre-eminent and supreme authority.
- c) Reason is valorised by Milton the humanist, but it is not enough. There is accordingly a real need for religious toleration.
- d) Separation of Church and state.

