Restrained with the Civil Sword: Spenser's "Maye" Eclogue and Donne's "Third Satyre" in the Context of the English Reformation

John David Allen
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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Peter D. Wiggins, Chair

Monica Potkay

John Conlee
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ABSTRACT

Written against the backdrop of the English Reformation, the poems of Donne and Spenser—two men whose careers led them into the service of the new English faith—allow a unique glimpse at the reactions of two educated Englishmen to the new state-governed church. In an atmosphere of great religious mistrust and confusion (the Elizabethan government was attempting to consolidate its control over the church at home and fight a sort of cold war with the papacy and Catholic Europe abroad) these poets, with their satiric impulses somewhat disguised, reveal the crisis of conscience that the new religious order presented. Although neither Spenser’s "Maye" eclogue of the Shephearde's Calender nor Donne’s third Satyre presents an overt, clearly articulated list of the Anglican Church’s shortcomings, each sheds some light on the misgivings the poets had with the new ecclesiastical order. Spenser, while ostensibly showing the threat of Catholic intrusion, exposes instead the danger of a civil clergy more intent on pleasing its secular masters than its God. Donne, in a probing attack on established religion, reveals the crisis in conscience that each of the people of his time faced in seeking "true religion" when religion was an arm of the state.
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I

Elizabeth our Queen . . . should rule all estates and degrees committed to [her] charge by God, whether they be Ecclesiastical or Temporal, and restrain with the civil sword the stubborn and evil-doers.

--The Thirty-Seventh Article of Religion of the Anglican Church, 1571

Upon the ascension of Elizabeth to the throne in 1559, England changed religion for the third time in thirty years. Then, as in the past, theology took a back seat to political issues in the formation and protection of the new church. Under Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Mary I, the monarchy no longer simply reacted to dissent but actively led it. Elizabeth would continue this trend and take the Church to a legally recognized standard of Protestantism (Jones 10). Instead of working as a force to contain change, the English monarchs imposed Reformation from the top down, forcing their subjects to obey or accept the consequences. It is my contention that this royal intervention into religious affairs was reflected in the poetry of the period. In particular I will look at the poetry of Edmund Spenser and John Donne. I believe that the Maye eclogue of Spenser’s Shepheardes Calender and Donne’s third Satyre ("Kinde pitty chokes my spleene") represent two responses to the establishment of a faith by statute in England.
Before we examine the two poems, it is necessary to have some understanding of the laws on which the English Reformation rested. When Elizabeth convened her first Parliament in 1559, England had been wrestling with the question of Reformation for thirty years. Only six years earlier had Mary started "the great movement . . . that was to restore" England to Catholicism (Hughes 51), but Elizabeth was determined to reverse that reversal. She based her strategy on two principles, the "revival of [her father's] royal supremacy over the Church, and the establishment of religious uniformity based on a prayer book" (Jones 9).

To achieve her goals, the queen's surrogates in Parliament opened her first session with two acts embodying these changes, the Act of Supremacy and the Act of Uniformity. "Both acts," writes Philip Hughes, a historian whose stand on the English Reformation is sympathetic to Catholicism, "bristled with sanctions for the disobedient" (Hughes 33). The Act of Supremacy restated the break with the pope that her father had made in 1539, with an injunction that no foreign prelate could exercise any spiritual or ecclesiastical jurisdiction within the queen's dominions, and it also forced all ecclesiastical officials to take an oath to support Elizabeth as the supreme governor of the church (Statutes, 353-55). The punishment for refusal was a loss of all offices and prevention from
holding any offices in the future.

The Act of Uniformity once again made Edward's Protestant Book of Common Prayer the liturgical law of the land:

> Be it therefore enacted . . . that the sayd Booke withe Thorder of Service and of the Administracion of Sacramentes Rytes and Ceremonies with Thalteracion and Addicions therein added by this Estatute, shall stande and bee . . . in full force and effecte according to the tenoure and effecte of this Estatute.

*(Statutes 355)*

Any clergyman who performed a service which was not based upon this prayer book was subject to the forfeiture of a year's income and six months in prison for a first offense, a year's imprisonment for a second offense, and life imprisonment for a third offense *(Statutes 356)*. Anyone who would "in anye Entreludes Playes Songes Rymes or by other open Woordes, declare or speake anye thing in the derogation depraving or despising of the same Booke," or for even interrupting a minister, would be subject to a one hundred Mark fine for a first offense, two hundred for the second offense, and life imprisonment and a forfeiture of "all his Gooddes and Cattelles" for a third offense *(Statutes 356)*. Passive resisters were also the targets of legal action. All of the queen's subjects were to "diligentlye and
faithefully, having no lawfull or reasonable Excuse to be absent, endeavour themselves to theyr Parishe Churche or Chappell accustomed . . . upon every Sondaye and other dayes ordained to be kept as Holy days" (Statutes 357). The punishment for each absence was a fine of one shilling for the parish poor.

The Act of Uniformity made one further change which, when combined with the "Supreme Governorship" of the church as provided by the Act of Supremacy, made Elizabeth's liturgical authority nearly absolute. She was granted the right to regulate all of the "Ornaments of the Church and Rites and Ceremonies"; if she ever found them to be lacking in any way, she could, with the advice of her own appointed commissioners, "publishe suche further Ceremonies or Rites as maye bee most for the advancement of Goddes glorye" (Statutes 358). Elizabeth was granted the right to be not only the "Defender of the Faith," as was stated in her title, but also its legislator. The church was now fully in the power of England's civil government.

It should be noted, however, that despite the many penalties enforceable under the acts of Supremacy and Uniformity, the Settlement of 1559 did a great deal to promote religious freedom of belief. Heresy laws, extremely strict during the reign of Mary I, were stripped of much of their potency by new regulations narrowing the definition of heresy. Even Hughes grants the Settlement this much:
Nothing, henceforth, is to be charged against a man as heresy unless it is judged to be heresy in Holy Scripture; or by the councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), or Chalcedon (451); or 'by the High Court of Parliament of this realm, with the assent of the clergy in their convocation'; and nothing enacted in religious matters by the present parliament is ever to be adjudged heresy, whatever stands to the contrary.

(Hughes 31)

Both Catholics and radical Protestants, who were all unhappy with the moderate nature of the Settlement, were given the right to hold their own beliefs under the new laws, yet both were equally forced to conform to the new state religion.

Despite the only mildly Protestant nature of the Settlement of 1559, and despite the slackening of heresy laws, conflict between Elizabeth's government and her many Catholic subjects continued, and it became more widespread after February 25, 1570. On that date, Pope Pius V lowered the ecclesiastical boom on Elizabeth. In a bull entitled Regnans in excelsis, Pius declared—citing a number of reasons, including her assumption of "the great authority and jurisdiction of the sovereign head of the Church throughout all England"—that Elizabeth was "a heretic, and an encourager of heretics, [and was to be put] under a
sentence of excommunication, cut off from the Body of Christ" (Pius, 418-19). Pius, however, did more than merely decree Elizabeth to be morally separated from Catholic Christendom in his bull; he made it a direct threat to her political--and perhaps literal--survival. Claiming that she was only "the pretended queen of England" whose claims to power were "unnatural" (Pius 418), he declared

that she has forfeited her pretended title to the aforesaid kingdom, to all and every right, dignity, and privilege; We also declare that the nobles, the subjects, and the people of the kingdom aforesaid, and all others who have taken any oath to her, are for ever released from that oath, and from every obligation of allegiance, fealty, and obedience, as We now by these letters release them, and We deprive the said Elizabeth of her pretended right to the throne, and every other right whatsoever aforesaid: We command all and singular the nobles, the people subject to her, and others aforesaid, never to venture to obey her monitions, mandates, and laws.

If any shall contravene this Our decree, We bind them with the same bond of anathema.

(Pius 420)

Thus, to be a good Catholic meant to work for the removal of Queen Elizabeth.
Understandably, Elizabeth and her ministers were not pleased with this development, but they refused to capitulate to the pope's threat. Instead, they attacked the excommunication on political grounds. William Cecil, Elizabeth's treasury minister, called the bull an "anti-Christian warrant, being contrary to all the laws of God and man and nothing agreeable to a pastoral officer" (Cecil 8). It was intended, he wrote, not to promote the cause of true religion, but to aid the cause of those "with inward practices to murder the GREATEST" (Cecil 6). His suspicions were founded in the number of attempts by Catholics to remove Elizabeth from the throne: the rebellion of the earls of Westmoreland and Northumberland in the north in 1569, the Irish rebellion of 1579, and the intrigues of the French and Scots Catholics to promote the cause of Mary Stuart as an alternative to Elizabeth. The pope's threat, Elizabeth and her government decided, was more political than theological, and their defense was to be of the same kind. The protest against Catholicism was to be displayed in action as well as invective.

The political aspect of Elizabeth's break with Rome was reflected not just in military action, but in judicial action as well. Although the laws against heresy had been somewhat muted by the Settlement, the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity gave the government a strong weapon to use against those supporting the Catholic cause, and following
the bull of excommunication Elizabeth and her ministers took action to strengthen it. In the Parliament of 1571, a bill was pushed through "making it high treason to imagine or practice the death or bodily harm of the Queen, to practice against the crown or to write or signify that Elizabeth was not lawful Queen, or to publish, speak, write, etc. that she was an heretic, schismatic, tyrant, infidel, or usurper" (Neale 1: 226). In effect, the bill made it treason to obey in any way Pius's bull of 1570. In 1581, these measures were extended to attack not only those who supported the political message of the papacy, but those who spread its theological message as well. Under this new act, all those who "withdrew the Queen's subjects from their natural obedience, or converted them for that intent [emphasis Neale's] to the Romish religion, were to be adjourned as traitors" (Neale 1: 388).

In the 1580s and 1590s, the time when Spenser and Donne were writing, the list of traitors included not only papal agents and Catholic soldiers, but Jesuit missionaries as well; all Catholics were perceived as a potential threat to the government, and those who attempted to spread the Catholic faith were considered even more dangerous. In 1581, the members of a Jesuit mission under the direction of Edmund Campion were arrested, tried, and executed for treason, even though they had been captured unarmed and had not openly espoused rebellion. The executions caused an
uproar among Catholics, particularly English Catholics in exile. To them, it seemed, Campion and his followers had been executed solely for their faith in an attempt by the government to enforce its Reformation. Elizabeth's ministers, however, maintained that the action was taken to stop the threat of another Catholic rising, and that their reasons were political, not theological. What followed was a propaganda battle, with the Protestants led by Cecil, the most powerful member of Elizabeth's government, and the Catholics by Cardinal William Allen, effective head of the exiled Catholics.

Cecil's position, and that of Elizabeth's government, is a relatively straight-forward one, though it makes a rather fine distinction: the government, he writes, did not persecute Catholics on the grounds of their faith, but because of their political goal as stated in the bull of excommunication; it was not a religious persecution but an attempt to preserve the political order. This position was laid out in a short book Cecil published anonymously in the fall of 1583, two years after Campion and his followers were executed. In order to prove his point, he attempted to establish that notable English Catholics had survived unmolested when they remained loyal. Among these, he cites Nicholas Heath, former Archbishop of York and Lord Chancellor to Queen Mary, David Pole, former Bishop of Peterborough, Cuthbert Tunstall, Bishop of Durham, and a
dozen others by name; in addition, he claims that
many such others [had] borne office and dignities
in the Church and . . . had made profession
against the Pope, which they had only begun in
Queen Mary's time to change; yet were these never
to this day burdened with capital pains, nor yet
deprived of any their goods or proper livelihoods,
but only removed from their ecclesiastical
offices, which they would not exercise according
to the laws.

(Cecil 11)
The only victims of governmental persecution, writes Cecil,
are those such as Nicholas Sanders, Nicholas Morton, and the
earl of Westmoreland, those who used the papal bull as "the
ground of the rebellions both in England and Ireland," and
who maintain "the Pope's foresaid authority and bull,
published to deprive Her Majesty of her crown" (Cecil 14).
It is obvious, writes Cecil, that those who have died have
done so not "for defense of Catholic religion as martyrs for
the Pope but as traitors against their sovereign and queen"
(Cecil 15).

In defense of the executions of Campion and his
followers, men who had not actively fomented rebellion, and
for whom the pope had temporarily suspended his bull, Cecil
says that "neither their titles nor their apparel hath made
them traitors, but their traitorous secret motions and
practices; their persons have not made war, but their directions and counsels have set up rebellions" (Cecil 37). It was the position of the government that, although they had not come to overthrow the queen themselves, they had come to prepare the way for the ones who would: they were to coach the people on "what were to be done if the Pope, or any other assigned by him, would invade the realm of England" (Cecil 38).

As for the measures the English government had taken against the practice of Catholicism itself, Cecil does not present the usual Protestant list of accusations against the popes for leading Europe away from the true faith into a religion of prelates and indulgences; instead he again justifies these measures on political grounds. Roman Catholics make poor subjects, he argues, because they recognize the supremacy of an outside authority, the pope, in their political dealings; thus, Catholics fail to recognize that "all Christian potentates, as emperors, kings, princes, and such like [have] their sovereign estates either in succession hereditary or by consent of their people . . .; it belongeth not to a Bishop of Rome . . . to depose any sovereign princess" (Cecil 21). Papal meddling in political affairs leads to such rebellious situations as when Pope Gregory VII attempted to depose the Emperor Henry IV, or when the popes "by their bulls, curses, and open wars" persecuted emperors Henry V, Frederick I, and
Frederick II (Cecil 24). In fact, despite the popes' attempts to claim otherwise, Cecil finds historical precedent for the papacy to be subject to the will of the emperor (Cecil 24). Cecil claims the anti-Catholic laws have been passed out of a fear of losing the loyal subjects of the English crown to the whims of the pope, a response he sees as the only reasonable one.

Allen's tract, as its title suggests, was intended as a refutation of Cecil's. It appeared less than a year after The Execution of Justice, and is an extremely meticulous attack on the earlier work. Allen launches into a diatribe against the English government working from the assumption that there can be no separation of the political and the theological in matters of state religion. It is obvious to him that Catholics are being persecuted for their faith alone because both Catholics and Protestants can "never deny that most prisons in England be full at this day and have been for divers years of honorable and honest persons not to be touched with any treason or other offense in the world other than their profession and faith in Christian religion" (Allen 61). He lists nearly as many names as Cecil had to show the number of Catholics imprisoned or executed for treason under the anti-Catholic statutes. To Allen, it seems clear that the English government is not using a religious reason to maintain political stability, but that it is using a political excuse to enforce religious change:
See whether a portable altar be a sufficient cause to give the torture to a grave, worshipful person, not so much suspected of treason or any disobedience, except in cases of conscience. . . . Let the world see what one confession of treasonable matter you have wrested out by the so often tormenting of so many, and what great secrecies touching the state (which you pretend so earnestly to seek for) you have found amongst them all. No, no, nothing was there in those religious hearts but true religion. It is that which you punished, tormented, and deadly hated them.

(Allen 73)

The treason trials, in his view, are merely a hypocritical attempt at establishing a morally bankrupt Reformation.

In fact, Allen states, Elizabeth’s government is far worse than any Catholic regime, no matter how many heretics it burns. Queen Mary may have executed far more people for matters of religion than Elizabeth, but she did so according to the law. "You profess to put none to death for religion," he accuses Elizabeth and her ministers. "You have no laws to put a man to death for his faith. . . . But nevertheless you do torment and punish us, both otherwise intolerably and also by death most cruel; and that . . . for Agnus Deis, for ministering the holy sacraments, for our obedience to the See Apostolic, for persuading our friends
to the Catholic faith" (Allen 94). Mary’s persecutions, no matter how horrible, at least adhered to a principle of law; Elizabeth’s were illegal.

Allen also defends the pope’s supremacy in all spiritual matters, turning Cecil’s accusation of the pope’s capriciousness in excommunication against him. "Princes," he writes, "being not subject to superiors temporal, nor patient of correction or controlment by their inferiors, may easily fall into grievous disorders, which must tend to the danger and ruin of whole countries" (Allen 146). This is evident, he says, in a number of cases both biblical and medieval, from Saul (Allen 147) to the case of Pope Gregory VII (Allen 167). Thus, there can be no "question of [the right of] excommunication or deposition of princes by the Pope" (Allen 173).

Furthermore, Allen challenges the idea that Catholics are less loyal subjects than Protestants, stating that "The Protestants plainly hold in all their writings and schools, and so practice in sight of all the world, that princes may for tyranny or religion be resisted and deprived" (Allen 178). It is the Protestants who encourage rebellion and who challenge the notion that civil power does not come directly from God, not the Catholics. If anyone should carry a blanket suspicion of treason, it is the Protestants.

It is into this world of religious attack and defense that Spenser and Donne are born and seek their fortunes. As
both write their religious/political poetry, they cannot help but reflect the war of rhetoric and legislation that was a major part of the English Reformation.

II

First published in 1579, *The Shepheardes Calender* was Edmund Spenser’s first major poetic work. Organized in a series of twelve eclogues corresponding to the months, he used pastoral imagery to address a number of different issues. While these issues often dealt with the vocation of the poet, the pastoral images often correspond with Christian pastoral symbols, particularly in regard to the role of the shepherd—or pastor—to his flock. Although *Maye* is not the only eclogue to deal with questions of proper religious, and especially clerical, behavior, it is the first to do so overtly, and it is the only one in which E. K. refers explicitly to the English Reformation. "In this fift Aeglogue," says E. K. in his Argument to the *Maye* eclogue of Spenser’s *Shepheardes Calender*, "under the persons of two shepheardes, Piers and Palinodie, be represented two forms of pastoures or ministers, or the Protestant and Catholique . . . ." In this discussion of "whether the life of the one [pastor] mought be like that of the other," Spenser gives his views on how England’s Protestant clergy should lead the new state church. The
question facing the two shepherds seems to be about how the clergy should act, and the answers they suggest display the various hazards that the clergy will face in lapsing from the faith or knuckling under to the state's power as granted by the Royal Supremacy. While E.K. indicates that the discussion is primarily between Catholic and Protestant ministers, each espousing the merits of his theological life, the discussion itself does not support that conclusion. Instead of a comparison of the Protestant and Catholic clergies, as E.K. suggests, what we find is a display of two of the clergy's faults, a laxity of devotion to one's calling, as exemplified by Palinode, and an overzealous urge to please one's governmental superiors, as is shown in Piers.

The first speaker in the eclogue, Palinode, has never been strongly tied to any single historical figure (McLane 340). His name means retraction, especially a poetic retraction. Contrasting his views with his vocation, one can see why; he is only interested in love and the joys of Spring (Maye 1.1-2), not in his vocation. Paul McLane argues that he is "a type character [who] probably stands for one whose life of ease, luxury, and frivolity is a recantation of his pastoral vows" (340), and, on the surface, this seems likely. He is the character who takes the very unpastorlike stand that, since May is the month when "love lads masken in fresh aray" (1.2), he and Piers
should give up their dull, gray cloaks and go about "ylike as others, girt in gawdy greene" (1.4). Instead of "sytten as drownd in a dreeme" (1.16), they should go "helpen the ladyes their maybush beare" (1.34). In defense of this seeming breach of decorum he says that "such merimake the holy saints doth queme" (1.15), because "God giveth good for no other end" (1.72). Palinode appears to be willing to rationalize away his duties as a spiritual leader to quench his bodily desires, to compromise his flock for his own whims.

If this is indeed all that there is to Palinode, then Piers's labelling him "a worldes child" (Maye 1.73) seems wholly accurate. Piers would be wise to "none accordaunce make / With shepheard that does the right way forsake" (1.164-65); Palinode would be a danger to Piers's flock and his own, as he would be pulling them from "the right way" too.

E. K.'s assertion that Palinode represents the Catholic clergy seems somewhat unwarranted, though. As McLane states, were he Catholic, "he and Piers . . . would not have been on such friendly terms," and they certainly would not have been "in perfect agreement about the meaning of the fable" (121). And worldliness was hardly the monopoly of Catholic priests, as the system of granting religious offices for political reasons that became common after Henry VIII's split with Rome accelerated under Elizabeth
Despite E.K.'s statement, if Palinode is not a representation of Catholicism, he becomes a far less threatening figure. Though his lack of Piers's enthusiasm for asceticism may make him a less effective religious leader and may indicate a failure to live up to his vows, he is hardly likely to be attempting to lead his flock into the enemy's fold.

Palinode's failure to meet those vows also becomes more understandable when one considers the state of the English clergy in the 1570s. Despite a general suspicion of the clergy as being parasites living luxuriously on the profits of their benefices, the reality, for the lower clergy, was not so comfortable. In this period, over half of the benefices in England were valued at less than ten pounds annual income, far less than enough "to support an honest or learned man, or to encourage him to fit himself for the ministry through education" (McLane p.98). At such a rate of pay, most of the lower clergy would have to be highly concerned with their worldly needs, and Spenser, as a former secretary to a bishop (McLane 179), would have been well aware of both the reality and the perception of clerical finances. Whichever side Palinode is supposed to represent, his concern with his physical comfort—even his rationalizing—is understandable. In this light, his position that "sorrow ne neede be hastened on, / For he will come, without calling, anone" (Mave 11.152-53) appears
realistic.

Although Piers, on the other hand, appears at first to be the dedicated, ascetic Protestant that E. K. describes, he is equally difficult to interpret. Much of the difficulty arises from the many connotations his name brings out. "Piers" brings to mind Piers Ploughman, a character whose piety is beyond question. But, as it is another form of Peter, it also suggests the papacy, as successors to St. Peter. McLane sees a third possibility. He suggests John Piers, Bishop of Salisbury, as the model for this character, describing him not only as being a "godly and unworldly spiritual shepherd" (176), but also says that he possesses "every trait and virtue that Spenser admired" (184). Bishop Piers, according to McLane, was known for his generous and self-denying ways (180). This matches with the shepherd Piers's declaration that "shepheards (as Algrind used to say) / Mought not live ylike as men of the laye" (Maye 11.75-76) because "Pan himselfe was their inheritaunce" (1.111). Bishop Piers is also a likely candidate because he probably knew Spenser (McLane 178) and because of the powerful positions he held: "his steady and remarkable climb up the ladder of ecclesiastical preferment" ended in his becoming court bishop (McLane 178).

In fact, the "steady and remarkable climb" is perhaps the most notable thing about Bishop Piers. He was, according to Hughes,
ordained according to the Catholic rite and beneficed in Queen Mary's reign. After
Elizabeth's accession he climbed steadily the cursus honorum, dean of Chester, dean of
Salisbury, dean of Christ Church. [Archbishops Matthew] Parker and [John] Whitgift joined to recommend him for Norwich in 1575. [The earl of] Leicester was to urge his promotion to Durham in 1587.

(Hughes 188-89)

From this brief recapitulation of his career, it is easy to see that, though Bishop Piers may have been a qualified and dedicated cleric, he was also a man with very powerful friends. Despite his ordination as a Catholic clergyman, he not only survived the transition to the Protestant Anglican Church, but thrived in it. This is, it appears, at least in part due to his promotion of the queen's causes. He supported the cause of Elizabeth and Cecil in times of crisis, as is indicated by his sermon before Parliament in 1586. There he gave a sermon warning of "the dangers to England and their Queen" from Mary, Queen of Scots, encouraging the prosecution of Mary desired by Elizabeth's government without forcing Elizabeth to take part directly.

If Piers is seen as representing Bishop Piers, the eclogue begins to take on a somewhat different meaning than it would if he were just another poor clergyman, especially
when one considers the way in which he deals with Palinode’s discontent. Piers answers Palinode with a fable whose moral does not directly address worldliness, but rather the dangers of disobedience. The kid is carried off because he nould warned be

Of craft coloured with simplicitie:
And such end, perdie, does all hem remayne
That of such falsers freendship be fayne.

(Maye 11.302-05)

The fable criticizes not so much his desire for the goods that the fox was attracting him with as his refusal to obey the decrees of his mother. The moral suggests not taking any chances but keeping cloistered under the guard of mother church, or, perhaps, the symbolic mother of England, Elizabeth.

This moral runs counter to the spirit of the open, evangelizing Protestantism which is proposed by Archbishop Grindal, despite Piers’s evocation of Algrind earlier in his argument. The Archbishop, who favored production of the Geneva Bible so that more people would have access to Scripture, and who gave up his career in order to promote the spread of religious discussion to the lower clergy and laity (MacCaffrey, 1981 p.83), would not, it seems, support withdrawal from the world and dependence on the ecclesiastical hierarchies. But this is exactly what Piers recommends.
Although he cites "Algrind," it appears that Piers is getting his material from Queen Elizabeth, who had the archbishop removed. Telling a tale of a fox who uses his bell (which, E. K. explains, is a "trifle" which signifies "the reliques and ragges of popish superstition" [Note to 1.240 in Glosse to Maye]) to lure and capture the innocent and charitable kid seems calculated to endorse the Supremacy. The mother, or queen, must take any measures necessary to prevent the Catholics from devouring England.

Piers, in light of his relationship to the queen, appears to be little more than an arm of the state. Even though Piers makes an explicit condemnation of those ministers who are willing to misuse their offices to build up wealth and favor ("Sike mens follie I cannot compare / Better then to the apes folish care . . . . [Maye 11.95-96]), he seems willing to sell his services as a religious leader for favor at court. The Piers who does what is best not for religious purposes but for the purposes of queen and court is wholly consistent with the Piers of the October eclogue, where he encourages Cuddie to use his poetic talents to glorify the existing political hierarchy, no matter how unheroic it may seem:

Abandon then the base and viler clowne:
Lyft up thy selfe out of the lowly dust,
And sing of bloody Mars, of wars, of giusts:
Turne thee to those that weld the awful crowne,
To doubted knights, whose woundlesse armour rusts,
And helmes unbruzed wexen dayly browne.

There may thy Muse display her fluttryng wing,
And stretch her selfe at large from east to west:
Whither thou list in fayre Elisa rest,
Or if thee please in bigger notes to sing,
Advaunce the worthy whom shee loveth best,
That first the white beare to the stake did bring.

(October 11.37-48)

It is in this praise of the queen that "our Cuddies name to
drown [will] sownde" (1.54). The best way to advance a
poetic career--or an ecclesiastical career--is in bowing to
the will of the now supreme sovereign.

Spenser's poem represents vividly one of the main
arguments Catholics had with the new, political English
Church, and one which Allen would point out in his tract
five years after the publication of The Shepheardes
Calendar: a state-run clergy cannot honestly advise the
government in spiritual matters. Using biblical citations
as evidence, Allen claims that priests have always "held
their dignities and sovereign authorities of God," not of
kings, and that it was always their role to be the
protectors of the people from an unjust monarch:

the priests and prophets . . . rightly opposed
themselves in all such actions as tended to the
dishonor of God, destruction of religion, and to notorious damage of the souls of them over whom they did reign, and in behalf of God executed justice upon such as, contrary to their obligation and first institution, abused their sovereign power, to the destruction of true religion and advancement of idolatry, heresy, or suchlike abomination.

(Allen 151)

The state-controlled clergy that had come into power in England by the time of his tract was made up of nothing more than "greedy wolves; unordered apostates; amorous and godless companions; the very filth and chanel of the realm" (Allen 100). With the loss of independence from governmental control, the clergy becomes nothing more than a pack of self-serving sycophants, and in the absence of an independent clergy to regulate England's public religion, the government is free to encourage heresy.

Seen in this light, the eclogue is as much an indictment of Piers as it is of Palinode. Palinode may be letting his religious ideals lapse in favor of maintaining bodily comfort, "great sport . . . with little swink" (Maye 1.36), but Piers allows his ideals to be prostituted for his political gain. The clergy, in a state where religion is established, is in danger of corruption from more than one source. There exists not only the temptation to reject the
responsibilities of a clerical office for one's worldly gain, but also there is the danger of the exercise of clerical duties in such a way as to gain official, governmental advancement.

III

About fifteen years after the first publication of the Shepheardes Calender, as John Donne was attempting to insert himself into a career at Elizabeth's court, Donne began to put down his responses to the contradictions he found in this life in a series of five poetic satires. These satires, unlike Spenser's poems, were intended only for private circulation (they were not published until two years after his death), and so should offer a more open view of his private feelings about topics of state. Although each of these satires deals with some part of his early experiences as a courtier, the third is of particular interest because it is here that he discusses the possibility of finding true religion in a nation where religion is dominated by the state.

Unlike Spenser, Donne does not write "Satyre III" as a historical allegory. Instead, he presents a persona that differs from the author only in that it seems much older and more experienced than Donne could have been at this time. This persona, according to Camille Slichts, addresses
himself to a "young worldling" who has become cynical about institutionalized religion, and in the course of correcting the younger man, the satirist "clarifies his own case of conscience about his vocation" (161). In order to do this, the satirist poses a seemingly simple, rhetorical question:

Is not our Mistresse faire Religion,
As worthy of all our Soules devotion,
As vertue was to the first blinded age?

(Sat.3, 11.5-7)

The answer, obviously, should be yes, but simply by asking this question he implies that the listeners may be tempted to answer no. The satire then becomes an attempt to show that, despite the pitfalls of living in a world of state-run religion, religion may indeed be "worthy of all our Soules devotion." But the satirist does not just address his or another's religious doubt. Instead, he also uses this discussion of conscience as a defense for the religion which grew out of the Act of Uniformity.

Critics often see "Satyre III" as an outright rejection of state-controlled religion. Arnold Stein reads the satire as showing that "choosing the true church is beset by the interference of laws and customs," and so, in the end, the satirist "scourges the kind of life that depends upon the favour of kings and their favourites" (82-84). Slights similarly believes that the satirist "exposes the folly of naive acquiescence and governmental coercion" (165). To
these critics, the satire demonstrates that the individual conscience is ultimately responsible for itself, and that governmental interference in religion can only be detrimental. This argument is built around a number of passages which attack the temporal church government. These passages shower contempt upon the soul that is swayed by the arguments of external authorities. "Foole and wretch," writes Donne,

wilt thou let thy Soule be ty'd
To man's lawes, by which she shall not be try'd
At the last day? Will it then boot thee
To say a Philip, or a Gregory,
A Harry, or a Martin taught thee this?
Is not this excuse for mere contraries,
Equally strong? cannot both sides say so?
(Sat.3, 11.93-99)

Obedience to laws is no excuse before God, he says, and basing one’s beliefs on the demands or arguments of temporal rulers makes those beliefs no more true or defensible than any others. These lines are particularly significant because he includes "Harry," apparently Henry VIII. This would seem to equate the English Protestant faith with those of Lutherans (Martin) and Catholics (Philip and Gregory) (Shawcross 257-58), with the implication being that no religion is superior to any other based solely on the force of its leader’s will.
The wrath of Donne's satiric voice grows as he turns from those who hold their faith out of the fear of temporal power to those who adjust their beliefs to the position of greatest advantage. Those preachers and courtiers like Spenser's Piers who are willing to prostitute their religion for personal gain are warned that

As streams are, Power is; those blest flowers
    that dwell
At the rough streams calm head, thrive and prove well,
But having left their roots, and themselves given
To the streams tyrannous rage, alas, are driven
Through mills and rockes and woods, and at last, almost
Consum'd in going, in the sea are lost.
So perish Soules, which more chuse mens unjust Power from God clam'd, then God himself to trust.

(Sat.3, ll.103-08)

Those who give up the search for true religion in favor of seeking advancement only end up losing their souls. The venom of the final couplet may possibly be directed against a religion dominated by the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity, a religion formed on "mens unjust Power."

The broadness of the satirist's attacks on institutionalized religion make it appear as though he rejects all of the churches of Europe. "To'adore, or scorne
an image, or protest, / May all be bad" (Sat.3, 11.76-77), he proposes. The "ragges" (Sat.3, 1.47) of Catholicism and the "plaine, simple, sullen, yong, / Contemptuous, yet unhansome" Calvinism (Sat.3, 11.51-52) are both equally overdependent on appearances; Luther’s doctrine that "faith alone and the efficacious use of the word of God, bring salvation" (Luther 347), that only the true Christian faith and not good works or intentions can bring about salvation, is ignored and perhaps even belittled in the lines in which the satirist claims that "the blinde Philosophers . . . / . . . [whose] strict life may be'imputed faith" (Sat.3, 11.12-13) will get into heaven while Christians will not; and Anglicanism is represented only by "Preachers [who are] vile ambitious bauds" (Sat.3, 1.56). But if all of Europe’s organized churches are rejected, where does true religion lie?

The answer, logically, should be in a sort of individualistic religion. Rejecting uniform religion, one should discover one’s own, made up of the bits and pieces of worthy doctrine found in one’s intellectual travels. "Keepe the truth which thou’ hast found" (Sat.3, 1.89), says the satirist; "Be busie to seeke her, beleeve me this, / Hee’s not of none, nor worst, that seekes the best" (Sat.3, 11.74-75). It is this kind of reasoning that leads John T. Shawcross to assert that

Donne’s message is unmistakable: we must have
faith, we must follow virtue (but not the translated meaning of "power"), and we must bind ourselves, like the philosophers of old, to looking directly at the dazzling sun (God), which is there for all plainly to see, in order to perceive the mysteries of life.

(258)
The only way to see the mysteries of life is through the individual revelation or rational achievement of truth. In this reading, the Act of Uniformity becomes an obstacle to finding truth. Organized religion becomes nearly useless, and the satirist begins to sound faintly like Graccus, who "loves all as one" (Sat.3, 1.65).

This reading is particularly inviting considering Donne's background. Donne was born in 1572, just two years after the bull of excommunication was issued, to a Catholic family. Growing up, he must have known the pains and fears of religious persecution, and when, as a young adult, he decided to go to the Inns of Court and make for himself a career in government, he must have felt the isolation that those of his parents' religion were forced to endure. Arnold Stein sees his satires as a reflection of this kind of isolation: "The satiric spokesmen Donne employs are outsiders, whether angry or disengaged, or both more or less; or both and at the same time earnest seekers, as of true religion" (Stein 75). Donne's situation, as the son of
a Catholic family, left him slightly outside the regular, Protestant administration, even after his conversion to Anglicanism.

But there is more to this satire than the anti-establishment reading admits. Donne does not give up organized religion. In fact he does quite the opposite:

but unmoved thou

Of force must one, and forc'd but one allow;

And the right.

(Sat.3, 11.69-71)

The satirist does not offer the luxury of assuming dependence upon personal discovery of the truth; a uniform religion is a necessity. One must choose among religious alternatives. But for the audience to choose "the right," the satirist must give a clue as to which the right one is.

The first clue that rises from the satire is the use of tradition. "Aske thy father which is shee, / Let him aske his" (Sat.3, 11.71-72), says the satirist, indicating that "human tradition is the guide to truth" (Slights 164). This would seem to be an argument for Catholicism, the most traditional of Christian faiths. Not only was Donne's father a Catholic, but at this time, every Englishman's father or grandfather was. But the satirist has already rejected Catholicism: its Inquisition, like the Babylonians of the Old Testament, puts "Children in th'oven, [the] fires of Spaine" (Sat.3, 1.24). Tradition is, in fact, a rather
difficult guide: even though Mirreus "doth know / That shee [true religion] was [at Rome] a thousand yeares agoe"
(Sat.3, 11.45-46), it is, for Donne, no longer there, and a thousand years of Catholic traditions cannot change that.

It may be easier to find the key to discovering true religion if what Donne left out is examined. In his attack on religious leaders, the satirist named a Philip, a Gregory, a Harry, and a Martin, but not an Elizabeth. Although Henry VIII had initiated England's split with Rome, his minor reforms were, by Donne's time, no longer the basis of the Anglican Church. His system of "'Catholicism without the pope' was now, as a possible solution and system, not only dead, but dead and damned" (Hughes 54). The conservative, Henrician system of reform had died during the reign of Mary, and by the end of the sixteenth century Elizabeth, not Henry, was the major "teacher" of the Anglican Church.

The statements made by Donne's satirist, while they do not overtly make mention of government policy, echo in a number of ways the concerns of Elizabeth's government in regard to conflict between Catholics and Protestants. These are revealed in the moments where he takes the most moderate positions:

To'adore, or scorne an image, or protest,
May all be bad; doubt wisely; in a strange way
To stand inquiring right is not to stray;
To sleepe, or run wrong, is.

(Sat.3 11.76-79)

While it appears that he is merely recommending a slow course for reform, these lines also bolster the government's position. Elizabeth, while by no means a Catholic, came under fire from stricter Protestants who believed her taste for "ornamentation" and her moderation toward Catholicism "boded ill for pure religion" (Jones 159). She had to fight extremists on both sides to get the religious reform package she wanted.

Donne's message, though not exactly one of tolerance (the listener must "but one" religion allow), is one of moderation. Even though "our Mistresse [is] faire Religion," we must not waste energy in meaningless violence over her:

must every hee
Which cryes not 'Goddesse,' to thy Mistresse, draw,
Or eate thy poissonous words? courage of straw!

(Sat.3, 11.26-28)

As with Elizabeth's reduction of the heresy laws, Donne opposes harsh, violent action when dealing with those who disagree. Instead, he proposes religious differences be looked at with a more scholarly eye, always remembering to "doubt wisely" and "stand inquiring right."

This is not to say that "Satyre III" is by any means a
whole-hearted defense of government actions. In fact, it hardly sounds like the proper sentiment for the secretary to Thomas Egerton (see Shawcross 252-54), Elizabeth's solicitor general and the man who prosecuted Campion and his confederates (Hughes 359), to hold. In this capacity, it would seem he should be churning out tracts that, like Cecil's, unwaveringly advanced the government line. A useful comparison may be made between "Satyre III" and a letter written by Francis Bacon, secretary to Elizabeth's foreign secretary, Francis Walsingham. In this letter, written for Walsingham's signature, Bacon states that England's policy toward Catholics creates no strain on its people's consciences.

Giving a slightly more eloquent voice to Cecil's argument, Bacon writes that Elizabeth is not attempting "to make windows into men's hearts and secret thoughts" (Bacon 98), that she is not interested in what their own faith may be, but only in how faith affects allegiance. It is only when her Catholic subjects start pursuing Catholic political goals, when they are "no more Papists in conscience and of softness, but Papists of faction" (Bacon 99), that she must punish them. As there were also laws that condemned those Puritans who attempted to force religious change through "uproar and violence" (Bacon 101), he claims, it is obvious that Elizabeth was not persecuting Catholics solely on the basis of their faith, but rather "dealing tenderly with
consciences and yet discovering faction from conscience and softness from singularity" (Bacon 101). The letter makes no attempt to address issues of clerical independence and responsibility or of the theological implications of governmental interference in spiritual matters. The laws on religion exist only to sort out and punish the "factious."

Donne's satire criticizes both the "vile ambitious bawds" (Sat.3, 1.56) that often join the new civil clergy and the notion that a subject should blindly tie his or her soul to the laws of the kingdom (Sat.3, 11.93-94). However, just because it does not mirror the typical government defenses does not mean that it is wholly opposed to them. It should be noted that Bacon's letter was a public document, meant not only to be published but to be published in France, one of England's chief critics (Bacon 97).

Donne's poem was private and was never published in his lifetime (Shawcross 252). Donne was not attempting to engage in formal rhetoric with political opponents, but rather, as Slights significantly points out, his satirist-persona "addresses himself to a young man's religious doubts" (Slights 161). The satire's direction toward a conservative ("ask thy father which is [true religion]" [Sat.3, 1.71]), moderate ("doubt wisely; in a strange way / To stand inquiring right is not to stray" [Sat.3, 11.77-78]) course seem to carry the weight of age behind them. It is, quite possibly, the kind of document which would have been
circulated among young, minor government employees, men such as Donne, but not among outsiders. In this capacity, it allows privately what the government cannot allow publicly: there is, embedded in the official, Elizabethan religion, a crisis of conscience; duty to government and duty to God may conflict. But it also maintains the caution against factiousness that the government so strongly desired.

Conclusion

Because these ecclesiastical poems by Donne and Spenser are not official, government documents, they provide an interesting historical perspective on the crisis of conscience that pervaded England—and particularly England's low-level government officials—during its legislated Reformation. Although Spenser, former secretary to a bishop and aspiring poet, published his doubts about a government-sponsored clergy in a thinly veiled allegory, his eclogue remains a sharp attack on the conflict of interest that such clerics would face. The public roles of such prelates as Bishop Piers would become an issue not only to Catholics such as Allen, but also to radical Protestants, as Bacon would admit in his letter: by the time of his letter, the Puritans had "call[ed] into question the superiority of bishops, and pretended to bring democracy into the church" (Bacon 100). Conflict over the authority and importance of
bishops as government and church officials would continue to
grow through the next century.

Donne’s satire, though not as scathing as Spenser’s
attack on the clergy, provides a far more holistic
exploration of the crisis in conscience created by the
Reformation and Elizabeth’s confrontations with Rome.
People of Donne’s age had lived their entire lives under
laws that equated one form of Christian faith with treason
against the state. His questioning of state enforced
religion and his appeals for moderation and even a tolerant
form of unity tell of the issues that faced genuinely
religious members of the government in a land that was under
continuous threat of an outbreak of religious warfare.
Together, the two poems provide deep insight into the
concerns of educated sixteenth-century Englishmen unimpeded
by the rhetoric of the overt political tracts of either
side.


VITA

John David Allen

Graduated from City High School in Iowa City, Iowa, in 1987.
Attended Iowa State University from 1987 to 1991, receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in May 1991. Accepted a graduate assistantship from the Department of English at the College of William and Mary and entered the graduate program there in August 1991.