


Exploring Antiquity and Modernity in *Religio Medici* by Sir Thomas Browne

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ABSTRACT

Sir Thomas Browne was a physician, a man of science as well as a mystic and antiquarian exploring the mystery of Creation, God and the nature of human life. *Religio Medici* or the *Religion of a Doctor* (1635), reveals a symbiotic relationship between his rational and scientific mind and his religious beliefs. His mystic speculations and meditative reveries are triggered by his scientific study of anatomy and investigation of Nature, irradiated by a philosophic imagination and penned with a poetic eloquence and verbal felicity of a unique literary artist. *Religio Medici* is Browne's spiritual autobiography, a defence of the dignity of individual beliefs, a diary of his soul, noting his spiritual predilections despite his secular calling as a physician. Written solely for his private understanding and satisfaction, the treatise has no didactic intention and ends with a robust affirmation of faith in God's almighty power. Browne's quest for knowledge is multidisciplinary: anatomy, physiology, botany, archaeology, geography, natural history, Holy Scripture, music, languages, the classical and the antiquarian. It is the quest for Truth, Janus-faced, where, as a man of medicine, he studies life and death, but then 'physick' leads to knowledge of self and the First Cause or God. For Browne, all the scientific study data are visible symbols of an invisible reality: Nature is, after the Bible, the second book of God, and scientific analysis of this universal and public manuscript, the laws of Nature reveal the infallible wisdom of God. Browne's apologia for science is that the philosophical imagination can, by inductive reasoning from this empirical data, understand the Maker whom he describes as a pencil that never works in vain. Browne's empirical studies establish his rational bent of mind and also fortify his mystical predilections. Explaining how man is an amphibian who can live in divided worlds simultaneously, he uses the minutiae of scientific analysis and connects the corporeal and spiritual essences, the body and soul being the colony of God. In the quest for truth man can use his diverse faculties of sense, reason and imagination, can embark, as Browne does, on an adventure in both science and religion. The scientist in him studies and deciphers 'hieroglyphs' of Nature, and the mystic in him celebrates this miracle and leads him to unshakable faith in God. Nature is the handiwork of God, the perfect geometrician, and its beauty reveals Him as the supreme artist.

The kaleidoscopic perspective of Browne, its metaphysical quality, its inclusive sensibility and a secular approach to diversity resonates with the contemporary mélange of globalization and multiculturalism, desirous of a rational middle ground with which to celebrate the joy and beauty of living.

Keywords: *Empirical data, scientific analysis, reason, religion, imagination, metaphysical, hieroglyphs, antiquarian, multidisciplinary.*

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Introduction

Religio Medici, or *The Religion of a Doctor* is a remarkable book, not meant for the public but for private circulation. Browne writes in the Preface: “To the Reader”, that it was for his “private exercise and satisfaction” and was “a memorial unto me”. Later it was surreptitiously published, and Browne felt compelled to rectify the imperfections and to present a true account of his thought and beliefs. This learned and ingenious discourse conferring literary immortality to the author was penned in 1635 before he settled down at Norwich as a medical practitioner; was printed without his knowledge or consent or name in 1642; was printed in 1643 as Browne’s corrected version or “a full and intended copy” (Preface, p.2). *Religio Medici* caught the attention of many a learned and curious reader and was translated into Latin and many European languages during Browne’s lifetime, such that his attitude to life, religion and philosophy were subjects of serious discussion, and he became a celebrated writer. Yet Browne’s candid and exploratory tone, his liberal and speculative temper together with an absence of theological dogma got him labelled as an atheist. The book was condemned by the Roman Catholic Church and was placed on the Index of Prohibited Books in March 1645. Though neglected in the 18th Century, Browne’s account of his ‘religion’ and his delightful prose style earned him critical praise from Charles Lamb, S.T. Coleridge and William Hazlitt among others. *Religio Medici* is in two parts with Part I divided into 60 Sections, while Part II consists of 15 Sections.

Discussion

The 17th Century was an age of science with Newton’s laws of motion as the keystone of the scientific thought explains Basil Willey in *The Seventeenth Century Background*. Science and Religion were thought to be opposing forces and there was a rejection of Medieval Scholasticism. Religion was the basis of Scholasticism or “Science of Being” in the Middle Ages. Scholastic thought was metaphysical and dealt with Being, Essence, Cause and End. It considered Faith to be above Reason; that the proper exercise of reason was to lead to and affirm faith and its dogmas, since, the proper object of human intelligence and study was ‘Being’. The 17th Century was concerned not with Being but with Mechanistic Determinism. It was an age “when traditional beliefs, especially theological and poetic beliefs, were exposed to the ‘touch of cold philosophy’”, a philosophy which had become very mechanical, replacing a more sublime Idea of the Universe (BW, vii;1). The contemporary intellectual climate explored the most ‘true’ and ‘real’ explanations, setting in, the transition from a contemplative

attitude towards 'Being' in favour of the observation of 'Becoming'. Browne was a doctor who undertook his medical studies on the Continent at Montpellier and Padua, finally taking an M.D. at Leyden and being incorporated as M.D. at Oxford. A man of science, Browne was pleading for Religion in an age beginning to be dominated by Science and he possessed as Edmund Gosse writes "the attitude of a mind that is scientific and yet reverent" (EG,26). Browne composed *Religio Medici* to justify himself; it is his spiritual autobiography. It is a personal testimony, a liberal humane work and is in his own words, "the cosmography of myself" (I, S-15). It is exploratory, not explanatory and is an essay in self-knowledge. In *Religio Medici* he explores his religious faith and its relation to his profession of a medical doctor. Knighted by King Charles II on a Royal visit to Norwich in 1671, Sir Thomas Browne occupies an important place in English literature and thought and is master of a verbal felicity and cadenced prose stirring deep thoughts. His speculative temper and an inclusive sensibility reveal a metaphysical complexity as it discovers the inter-relation of philosophy, science, religion and art. His multidisciplinary interests in anatomy and medicine, archaeology, botany, astronomy, music, his command over six languages, the classical even the antiquarian, are wrought in a prose style infused with grandeur of imagination and nobility of thought. A mystical apprehension and sane realism sit side by side as he speculates about the enigma of life: "there is surely a piece of divinity in us; something that was before the elements and owes no homage unto the sun" (II, S-11). A unique fusion of disparate interests is to be found as he reflects over Science, Reason, Religion, Faith, Truth, God, Nature, Man, Death, the Devil, Charity and the nature of human life.

Explaining about his religion, Browne states that he took his beliefs, not from Rome or Geneva, "but the dictates of my own reason". He speaks of "theorems of Reason" and affirms that every man's reason is his "best Oedipus" for it can deliver a man as Oedipus delivered Thebes from the riddle of the Sphinx. The Church of England is "so consonant unto reason" and yet Browne goes beyond Reason and believes in the mysterious (I, S-5-6). He believes that there are many things true in divinity which are "neither inducible by reason nor confirmable by sense" (I, S-48). He writes: "I love to lose myself in a mystery, to pursue my Reason to an O altitudo!" or the highest altitude of wisdom. He believes in Miracles and his faith transcends Reason and faith may even be "contrary to Reason" (I, S-9,10). Though he loved to reason he welcomed Revelation as revealed truths are beyond reason; moreover, he enjoys the perplexity and complexity which evolve him. Mysteries do not confuse him; rather they are a means of

attaining truth which can best be achieved intuitively. Far from rejecting religion because it demands concessions from reason, he would have it yet more exacting. His faith was largely Christian: “all salvation is through Christ” (I, S-54). He believes in the Christian belief of the immortality of the soul and rejects the Montpellier theory of Vitalism, where the soul is an organic part of the fabric of man as he could not find anatomical proof for such a belief. He thinks of God as Metaphysical, states Basil Willey, as He is both “an excellent artist” and “a skillful geometrician” (I, S-16). He believes that Heaven is where God is and hence it is not a definite place; Hell exists in the mind of man where there are conflicts between faith and doubt because the devil tries to tempt man; the thought of the Day of Judgement, makes man act virtuously. The classical maxim that virtue is her own reward is a cold principle because for the Christian it is the hope of Salvation and Resurrection that makes him act piously. Death is the “nectar” which brings the “pleasant potion of immortality”. Death is a “universal remedy”, “the cure of all diseases” and is not lamentable (II, S-9). Browne wants his name in “the universal register of God” and death is hence welcome: tending to a critically ill patient “I forget my profession and call unto God for his soul” (I, S-51; II, S-6).

Browne writes that “there are two books from whence I collect my divinity – besides that written one of God, another of his servant Nature” (I, S-16). The Bible is “the word of God” and hence the “singularest and superlative peace” extant since Creation and it will endure till the world comes to an end because it is “too hard for the teeth of time” and does not require any alteration (I, S-23). He contemplates the attributes of God as “His wisdom and Eternity” and who is both time and the timeless: “His whole duration being but one permanent point, without succession, parts, flux or Division” (I, S-11). In this he prefigures Eliotian concepts, the ‘still centre’ of the Four Quartets. Browne’s grandeur of eloquence describes the spirit of God as “the fire and scintillation” behind all creation and prays: “give thou my reason that instructive flight” that his endeavours to read His works become fruitful (I, S-32,13). The second part of the book ends with his famous “colloquy with God”, first in the verses beginning “the night is come” and the second in his final prayer of self-surrender with which the book closes: “Dispose of me according to the wisdom of thy pleasure: Thy will be done though in my own undoing” (II, S-12,15).

Displaying a unified sensibility like the Metaphysical poets, Browne combined Science and Religion in a Century where these were two diverse, even antagonistic worlds. As a man of science he studies nature – bees, ants, spiders and finds in their intricate systems more “curious

mathematics” or extraordinary precision; as a doctor he studied the anatomy of man and compared the human brain with that of the animals. Though having the same structure, it strikes wonder how man is so superior and rational a being. Other wonders like the deflection of the needle to the North, the ebb and flow of the sea, the flood of the Nile and the observations of the strange and mystical transmigration in silkworms “turned my philosophy into divinity” (I, S-39). The order, perfection and beauty of nature reflects God’s infallible wisdom and thus the laboratory leads him to the contemplation of the greatness of God. He also delves into the study of astronomy and botany and speaks of Nature as “that universal and public manuscript”. As a man of science, he studies the parts of a flower and as a religious person he would “suck divinity from the flowers of nature because the wisdom of God is revealed through Nature”. Nature and Art are the “servants” of Providence or God, “Art is the perfection of nature” and “Nature is the art of God” (I, S-16). The world is made to be inhabited by beasts but “studied and contemplated by man” who should conduct “deliberate research” into God’s creations, and this is the only way to pay homage for not being a beast. He never abjures the scientific attitude and hence: “I honour my own profession” which enabled him to study in an organized way Nature’s manuscript which in turn fills him with awe for God (I, S-13).

Browne believes that man is “a microcosm” of the created world and is also “the breath and similitude of God”. Man is the link between God and Nature and hence is a “great and true amphibium” who can comprehend this world and is also capable of the spiritual perfection of God. Thus, man is capable of living in “divided and distinguished worlds” (I, S-34). Every man has a double horoscope, one of his “humanity” and “another of his Christianity, his baptism”. He confesses: “in philosophy where truth seems double-faced there is no man more paradoxical than myself; but in Divinity I love to keep the road” (I, S-6). God, Man and Nature are the subject of Browne’s sublime contemplations.

At the close of the First part, Browne articulates his liberal spiritedness as his “singular” nature and his “irregular self” (I, S-60). He was an Anglican but his religion was broad-based: “we being all Christians”. He is moved by Roman Catholic ideas and felt no inhibitions in entering the churches of other sects of Christians, praying with them and for them: “I could never hear the Ave Maria bell without an elevation” referring to Roman Catholicity and the cult of Virgin Mary (I, S-3). He would rather cut off his arm than violate any church. His wide breadth of sympathy can be seen in his beliefs that the Roman Catholic prayer for the dead could be incorporated in Anglicanism; that good precepts can be learnt from Greek, Roman, African and

Asian Churches; that one could pray for his enemy also; nor does he feel repugnance at the sight of a beggar because they are of the “same alloy” and “whose genealogy is God’s” and one could also learn from the Devil and know himself (II, S-13). He believed in the idea of predestination and Pythagoras’ Magic of Numbers; admits Aristotle’s idea of a trinity of souls, vegetative, animal and rational. He also believed in Angels and Spirits as invisible light, Miracles, witches, superstitions but had no faith in Relics of Christ as causing miracles, because God is above time: “his duration is eternity and far more venerable than antiquity” (I, S-28).

He has “a catalogue of doubts” whether Judas hanged himself or not, the story of the pigeon which Noah sent out to know whether the Great Flood had abated, and certain things in the Bible read like fantastic fables yet has implicit and unshakeable faith in God. He conquers doubts “not in a martial posture but on my knees” as a mark of his humility before the Almighty. The discovery of naphtha and scientific experiments with bitumen may explain away the fire of the Altar; how manna is now plentifully gathered in Calabria, yet he does not challenge religion or the Bible which is the word of God (I, S-19-21).

Browne’s prose style is the incarnation of his sensibility. His use of language is such that it kindles the imagination and simultaneously appeals to the emotions and reason. Characteristic features of his cadenced prose are: reduplicated words from different languages such as “jargon and patois”, “tempests and contrariety of winds”, “warm blood and canicular days”; use of Latinate words such as: ‘utinam’, ‘pia mater’; his Latinate coinages: ‘improperations’ for improprieties, ‘supputations’ for computation; sonorous words such as ‘incurvate’, ‘archidoxes’, ‘eleemosynaries’; quotations from Latin and references to Greek mythology abound: Hermes, Arethusa, Atropos, Sorites; his vocabulary is drawn from different branches of learning – ‘helix’, ‘meridian’, ‘compass’, ‘globe’; an ingenious style: “theorems of reason”, “in eternity there is no distinction of tenses”; at other times he adopts an aphoristic terseness: “revenge is a kind of wild justice”, “virtue is like a rich stone, best plain set”. References to pagan legends, urn burials, and scintillating metaphors such as the Antichrist is comparable to the myth of the Philosopher’s Stone, the Resurrection is akin to the biological process wherein ashes of vegetables can be revived to raise the plant, his belief in the ‘music of spheres’—all these lend a quaint charm to this masterpiece. Ideas and emotions fuse into a poetic whole as in the poetry of John Donne. For Browne, a fact was to be thought as well as felt, and the axioms of philosophy are proved upon the pulses.

Sir Francis Bacon wished to keep science pure from religion and held that Truth is of different kinds: the truth of science and the truth of religion and must be kept apart. Yet after three hundred years of science there are writers like Needham in *The Great Amphibium* pleading for religion in an age dominated by science. As the century progressed a mechanistic conception of the universe became dominant. Hobbes was to offer the God of Deism – first mover and designer of the world-machine, replacing Zeus and Jehovah. For Hobbes “the word God is really little but a symbol of the philosopher’s fatigue” (BW, 114). He erased God of all content, reasoning that it is through the senses we conceive of an ‘image’ and since He is remote from the mortal state, we can have no ‘idea’ or ‘conception’ of God. Hobbes hostility is evident in the chapter, ‘Of Religion’ in *Leviathan*, as having a questionable origin in man’s fear of the unknown and ignorance of natural causation, as an instrument of exploitation by tyrants and unscrupulous priests and its tendency to degenerate into superstitious beliefs (BW, 115). Today man has become incredulous, even dismissive of Divine mystery. D. H. Lawrence in *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* laments how the human race is like a great uprooted tree, with its roots in the air and man must plant himself again in the universe. T. E. Hulme, pioneer of the Imagist movement in Modern poetry, championed a return to Scholasticism in face of the erosion of humanist values and predominance of scientific traditions. A.N. Whitehead in *Science and the Modern World* explains how the 17th Century produced scientific thought framed by mathematicians for the use of mathematicians; how Nature of this mechanical philosophy “is a dull affair, soundless, senseless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly” (p. 55). Another historian of scientific thought, E. A. Burtt, writes how the Cartesian metaphysics reduced man to “a puny, irrelevant spectator” how the world of harmony and creativity was scattered into one that was “hard, cold, colourless, silent and dead” (EAB, 236-7).

Browne has “general charity” towards humanity and does not hate Jews, Turks or infidels, although they are deprived of “so glorious a title” of a Christian (I, S-1). About himself, he writes: “I am of a constitution so general that it comports and sympathizeth with all things” and has no antipathies (II, S-1). He pursued knowledge with a wide breadth of interest, not only for power but also for pleasure. He believed that “every essence, created or uncreated, hath its final cause, and some positive end, both of its essence and operation; this is the cause I grope after in the works of nature; on this hangs the providence of God”. In this, Providence reveals both reason and art and man carries with him “the wonders we seek without us.... we are that

bold and adventurous piece of nature.... a compendium” (I, S-14,15). Although science might come up with facts that seem contrary to God but all is God’s creation “God being all things, is contrary unto nothing, out of which were made all things, and so nothing became something, and omniety informed nullity into an essence”. Therefore, man ought to offer homage to God “which when we neglect, we forget the very end of our creation” (1, S-35). He marvels at the variety and diversity of peoples of the world and wishes to have a charitable attitude to all and bind all into “a community in learning” as it is greater charity to “apparel the nakedness of his soul” or illuminate another’s life by sharing knowledge and having a tolerant attitude. He believes that nations that condemn each other act uncharitably; nor should we judge others according to our presumptions and that “charity.....is the voice of the world”. Browne’s humble attitude is evident and he avows: “God who truly knows me knows that I am nothing” (II, S-2).

Conclusion

Religio Medici, reflects an open and enquiring mind, a devout attitude to life, the possibilities and grandeur of human enterprise. Howard Gardner in his book, *5 Minds for the Future*, states how science is thought to be the prototype of all knowledge and we overlook the artistic, humanistic and spiritual stances vital to a holistic development of a global community. He enumerates the Five Minds as the Disciplined, the Synthesizing, the Creating, the Respectful and the Ethical Mind. The ethical mind produces good work that is responsible and meaningful in its impact and “scientists who consider themselves secular today often cite early religious training as important in developing their values” (p.132). A harmonious interdisciplinary dialogue between science and religion is being promoted by the John Templeton Foundation in America, by the Roman Catholic Church through the Vatican Observatory, in the academic realm by Richard Dawkins, professional scientists like Ian Barbour, Paul Davies, Arthur Peacocke to name a few. In *The Future of Religion: Postmodern Perspectives* the authors explore how the dialogue of religions now underway can help in ‘overcoming’ the arid view of Enlightenment science and teach the human family “to sing a new song” by providing living practices to cultivate the spirit, since “transcendence is the heart and ground of humanity”. The ‘Beyond’ and the ‘Whole’ or transcendence is experienced in diverse Faiths, “it is”, and is the subtlest of conceptions (p.34-35). Martin Forward in *Religion: A Beginner’s Guide*, explains that Secularism of Western Enlightenment focusses on the sensory, palpable, and ephemeral and denies the intuitive and eternal modes of knowing, whereas Religion points to

Transcendence which connotes “a reality that is greater than the five senses....and evokes a sense of awe and wonder in humans” (p.xiv). Today, Quantum Physics is going beyond physical determinism and is according a special ontological status to the mind of the human observer. Kurt Godel, the mathematician, believed in God and an afterlife and described his philosophical beliefs as rational, optimistic, theological and idealistic. Einstein was a secular humanist and supported the Ethical Culture Movement as “without ‘ethical culture’ there is no salvation for humanity” (Ideas And Opinions, p.62). He believed that both philosophical enquiry and scientific empiricism are required when understanding Nature, and he believed in Spinoza’s God, who reveals Himself in the orderly harmony and beauty of the created world. Of the relationship between science, philosophy and religion Einstein stated: “A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which are accessible to our reason in their most elementary forms – it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious person” (The World as I See It, p.5). William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), stressed on a form of consciousness that realizes the ‘spiritual Me’; he laid as much stress on the inculcation of a healthy mindset from childhood through adulthood to realize the spiritual self. Sir Thomas Browne, a man of science, expresses his spiritual self and avers the mystery of life as “an obscurity too deep” and “since I was of understanding to know we knew nothing, my reason hath been more pliable to the will of faith...I teach my haggard... reason to stoop unto...faith” (I, S-10). Indeed, as Virginia Woolf said: “few people love the writings of Sir Thomas Browne, but those who do are of the salt of the Earth” (TLS,1923).

For man, the great amphibian, both Science and Religion, provide concepts and belief systems, practices and ritualistic modes that can enlighten and inspire us to carve afresh an axiological gnosis and praxis.

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