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Religious doubt as devotional argument in John Donne's Holy Sonnets

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Abstract
John Donne's Holy Sonnets present religious belief as an unsettled inner experience rather than as a simple statement of doctrinal certainty. The poems repeatedly move between faith, fear, repentance, self-accusation, hope, and the possibility of spiritual failure. This paper examines religious doubt in selected Holy Sonnets and argues that doubt in Donne should not be understood only as a rejection or absence of faith. It functions as a devotional form of questioning through which the speaker tests his relationship with God. The study uses close textual reading supported by historical and theological criticism of Donne's religious poetry. Particular attention is given to the poems "As due by many titles," "Oh my black soul," "This is my play's last scene," "What if this present were the world's last night?" and "Batter my heart, three-person'd God." The analysis considers the language of fear, legal obligation, bodily weakness, death, judgement, reason, and divine intervention. Earlier scholars have interpreted the sonnets through Calvinist despair, conversion theology, Protestant poetics, repentance, and the bodily experience of belief. The present study brings these approaches together but argues that the poems resist a single theological resolution. Donne's speaker doubts his own spiritual condition more often than he doubts the existence of God. His uncertainty therefore becomes a mode of dependence. The sonnets transform religious anxiety into prayer, and prayer into a continuing search for assurance. The paper concludes that Donne's religious doubt is productive because it keeps the speaker engaged with God even when certainty remains beyond his reach.

Keywords: Spiritual state, religious doubt, religious faith, repentance, salvation, devotional poetry, reformation theology

Introduction

John Donne occupies an important position in the history of English religious poetry because his devotional poems rarely present faith as a calm or settled condition. His religious speakers argue, question, accuse, confess, fear, and pray. They are often aware of Christian doctrine, yet intellectual knowledge does not remove emotional uncertainty. This tension is especially visible in the Holy Sonnets. The poems repeatedly return to sin, judgement, death, repentance, grace, and salvation. Their speakers want certainty, but the language of the poems often shows that certainty is difficult to possess.

The present study examines this difficulty through the idea of religious doubt. The central argument is that doubt in Donne's Holy Sonnets is not simply the opposite of belief. It is a form of devotional argument. The speaker uses questions and contradictions to test the meaning of his faith and to express his dependence upon divine grace. He does not normally question whether God exists. Instead, he questions whether he himself is capable of repentance, whether his faith is genuine, whether his sins can be forgiven, and whether salvation is assured. This distinction is important. Donne's doubt is frequently directed towards the self rather than towards God.

The poems were written in a religious culture marked by doctrinal disagreement and continuing debate about salvation, repentance, predestination, grace, and the authority of the Church. Donne's own religious position was complicated by his movement from a Roman Catholic background towards conformity with the Church of England. It would therefore be misleading to treat the Holy Sonnets as simple statements of a single theological system. The poems contain elements associated with Reformation theology, but they also display uncertainty about the practical experience of those doctrines.

The textual history of the Holy Sonnets also requires care. Different editions arrange the poems differently, and manuscript and print traditions do not provide one completely uncontested sequence. Grierson's edition, for example, places the sonnets on pages 322--331 and numbers them within the larger poetic collection (Donne, 1912) [5]. The present study therefore identifies individual poems primarily by their opening lines. This avoids treating any modern numbering as completely authoritative.

Research Problem

Much of the criticism of Donne's religious poetry has focused on the relationship between theology and psychological anxiety. John Stachniewski's influential discussion connects the Holy Sonnets with Calvinist ideas of human depravity, election, and religious despair. His reading gives considerable importance to the speaker's fear of condemnation (Stachniewski, 1981) (Stachniewski, 1991) [7, 8]. Paul Cefalu later examined the relationship between godly fear, sanctification, and Calvinist theology, while also showing that Donne's poetry cannot be reduced to a simple theological position (Cefalu, 2003) [2].

Other scholars have questioned readings that place the poems too firmly within Calvinist despair. Richard Strier argues that the Holy Sonnets frequently contain unstable or conflicting theological positions. For Strier, the poems are important partly because their arguments do not always produce a neat resolution (Strier, 1989) [9]. Stephenie Yearwood, by contrast, studies the sonnets through the theology of conversion and sees a movement from sin and despair towards dependence upon divine grace (Yearwood, 1982) [12].

Recent scholarship has widened the discussion. Kimberly Anne Coles examines belief through the relationship between body and religious identity, showing how Donne

represents faith as something experienced through a changeable and vulnerable body (Coles, 2015) [3]. Ramie Targoff similarly emphasises the relationship between body, soul, judgement, and salvation in the Holy Sonnets (Targoff, 2008) [10]. Gary Kuchar connects repentance with the language and conventions of Petrarchan poetry and argues that Donne's religious speakers remain caught between desire for divine grace and resistance to complete surrender (Kuchar, 2008) [6].

These approaches have established the importance of fear, conversion, theology, body, repentance, and rhetorical conflict in Donne's religious poems. However, religious doubt can still be examined more directly as a poetic process. The issue is not simply whether Donne's speaker is doubtful. The more useful question is what the poems do with doubt. Doubt changes the form of the speaker's relationship with God. It creates questions, commands, paradoxes, appeals, and acts of prayer.

This paper therefore proposes that religious doubt in the Holy Sonnets is productive rather than merely destructive. The speaker's uncertainty does not lead consistently to silence or rejection. Instead, it produces speech directed towards God. The poem becomes the place where uncertainty is articulated and where the speaker continues to seek divine intervention.

Research Gap

Existing criticism provides several important models for reading Donne's religious uncertainty. Stachniewski stresses despair; Yearwood emphasises conversion; Strier highlights theological instability; Kuchar examines repentance and Petrarchan desire; Coles considers the bodily dimensions of belief; and Targoff studies the relationship between body and soul in relation to divine judgement. These studies demonstrate that Donne's religious poems cannot be separated from the theological pressures of early modern England.

The research gap addressed here lies in bringing these concerns together through the specific category of doubt. The present paper does not attempt to prove that Donne was either a Calvinist or an anti-Calvinist poet. Such a binary approach would make the poems less complex than they actually are. Instead, the paper asks how doubt functions within the poetic act itself.

The argument developed here is that Donne's speaker uses doubt as a form of self-examination. The speaker repeatedly asks questions because he cannot establish his spiritual condition through his own reasoning. His reasoning reaches a limit. At that point, the poem turns towards prayer, command, confession, or an appeal to divine grace. Doubt therefore becomes a bridge between intellectual questioning and devotional dependence.

Research Objectives

The study has four main objectives:

- To examine the representation of religious doubt in selected Holy Sonnets.
- To distinguish doubt about God from doubt about the speaker's own spiritual condition.
- To analyse how rhetorical questions, paradoxes, commands, bodily imagery, and references to death contribute to the representation of doubt.
- To show how religious doubt finally becomes a form of devotional dependence rather than a complete rejection of faith.

Research Questions

The paper addresses the following questions:

- How is religious doubt represented in Donne's Holy Sonnets?
- Is Donne's doubt directed primarily towards God, doctrine, or the self?
- How do the poems convert spiritual uncertainty into prayer and argument?
- What does the persistence of doubt reveal about Donne's understanding of faith and salvation?

Methodology

The study follows a qualitative method based on close textual reading. Selected Holy Sonnets are examined for their imagery, rhetorical structures, theological vocabulary, syntax, and movement between assertion and questioning. The analysis is supported by established scholarship on Donne's religious poetry and by the historical context of early modern religious thought.

The paper does not claim to reconstruct Donne's private psychological condition. The first-person speaker of a lyric poem should not automatically be identified with the historical author. The analysis therefore uses the terms “speaker” and “persona” when discussing the internal voice of the poems. Biographical information is used only when it is relevant to the literary and historical context.

Doubt and the Problem of Spiritual Ownership

The poem “As due by many titles” begins with an apparently firm statement of religious belonging:

“As due by many titles I resigne / My selfe to thee, O God.”

The opening sounds confident. The speaker lists several relationships between himself and God. He has been made by God, belongs to God, and has been redeemed by Christ. He describes himself as God's son, servant, sheep, image, and temple. The language establishes ownership through a series of theological identities.

Yet the sonnet does not remain in certainty. The speaker suddenly asks

“Why doth the devill then usurpe on mee?”

The question changes the entire movement of the poem. If the speaker belongs to God, why does another power appear to possess him? The problem is not the denial of God's existence. The problem is the contradiction between theological knowledge and lived experience.

This contradiction is central to Donne's religious doubt. The speaker knows what should be true according to Christian doctrine, but he cannot always experience himself as the person described by that doctrine. He knows that he is God's possession, yet he feels possessed by sin. The language of ownership therefore becomes the language of spiritual conflict.

The poem's legal and possessive vocabulary is significant. The speaker establishes a case before God. He gives reasons for his claim to divine protection. At the same time, he admits evidence that appears to contradict the claim. This structure makes the poem resemble a spiritual argument. The speaker is both petitioner and witness.

The result is a form of doubt directed towards the self. The speaker does not ask whether God has the power to save. He asks why his own experience does not correspond fully with what he believes about God's claim upon him.

Fear, Sin, and the Inner Division of the Speaker

"Oh my black soul!" presents a more direct confrontation with spiritual uncertainty. The speaker addresses his own soul as if it were another person. This separation between the speaker and his soul is important because it creates an internal dialogue. The speaker observes, questions, warns, and instructs himself.

The poem begins with the recognition of spiritual danger. The soul is "summoned" by death, and the speaker recognises that earthly existence cannot continue indefinitely. The language of summons introduces the legal atmosphere found elsewhere in the sonnets. The soul appears before a higher authority and must answer for itself.

The speaker's fear does not simply lead to passive despair. He attempts to reason with his soul. This is one of Donne's recurring strategies. The speaker knows that he should repent, but knowing the need for repentance does not automatically produce repentance. The gap between knowledge and action becomes one of the major sources of doubt.

Paul Cefalu's discussion of godly fear is useful here because it distinguishes different forms of religious fear in Donne's writing. Fear can arise from awareness of judgement, but it can also become part of a desire for spiritual discipline and sanctification (Cefalu, 2003) [2]. The Holy Sonnets repeatedly occupy this uncertain space. Fear may indicate religious failure, but it may also indicate that the speaker remains seriously engaged with salvation.

This tension prevents a simple interpretation of the poems as expressions of hopelessness. The speaker fears that he may fail, but he continues to speak to God. The act of speaking itself suggests that the relationship has not ended.

Death and the Fear of Spiritual Uncertainty

Death provides another important source of doubt. In "This is my play's last scene," the speaker imagines the final division between body and soul:

"And gluttonous death, will instantly unjoynt / My body, and soule."

The poem recognises the Christian promise of an afterlife, yet it does not present the transition as emotionally easy.

The speaker expects to see God, but the anticipation of divine presence produces fear

"Whose feare already shakes my every joynt."

The phrase is revealing. The speaker expects the vision of God, but the expectation does not immediately produce comfort. Divine presence is both desired and feared.

This is one of the important forms of religious doubt in Donne. The speaker does not doubt that divine judgement exists. He doubts his ability to face that judgement. His fear therefore emerges from the distance between theological promise and personal worthiness.

Targoff observes that the Holy Sonnets are deeply concerned with the consequences of divine judgement and with the condition of the soul (Targoff, 2008) [10]. The body is not separate from this spiritual anxiety. Physical weakness, decay, death, and spiritual judgement remain closely connected.

Coles develops a related argument by showing how Donne represents religious identity through bodily changeability (Coles, 2015) [3]. This helps explain why doubt in the sonnets is often expressed through physical images. The speaker's unstable body becomes a visible sign of an unstable inner condition.

The body therefore becomes evidence in the speaker's spiritual case against himself. He knows that human life is temporary. He knows that the body will decay. Yet he wants assurance that the soul will survive. The tension between these two forms of knowledge creates the emotional pressure of the poem.

The Last Night and the Possibility of Judgement

The sonnet "What if this present were the world's last night?" begins with a hypothetical question. The question immediately places the speaker before the possibility of final judgement.

The speaker turns towards the image of Christ crucified and asks whether Christ's face should frighten him. The answer appears to be negative. Christ's tears, blood, and prayer for forgiveness become evidence of mercy.

The structure of the poem is important. It begins with uncertainty but gradually produces a reason for hope. The speaker imagines the possibility of immediate judgement, but he also remembers the central Christian image of Christ's sacrifice. The poem therefore moves from fear towards reassurance without completely erasing the initial anxiety.

The speaker's reasoning remains rhetorical rather than systematic. He does not develop a theological treatise. Instead, he presents a sequence of emotional and intellectual movements. The imagined last night creates fear. The crucified Christ provides a counter-image. The speaker then recalls his own sinful history and asks whether divine mercy can still include him.

This movement illustrates why doubt should not be understood simply as the opposite of faith. The question creates the need for an answer. The fear creates the need for a sign of mercy. Doubt therefore produces the devotional act of remembering Christ.

"Batter My Heart" and the Failure of Self-Control

Perhaps the strongest expression of religious conflict appears in "Batter my heart, three-person'd God." The speaker begins with a direct command:

"Batter my heart, three-person'd God."

The command is startling because the speaker asks God to use violence against him. He wants to be broken, beaten, burned, and remade. The conventional language of gentle spiritual guidance is replaced by force.

The central problem is that the speaker cannot transform himself. He says that reason, which should function as God's representative within him, has become weak or false. Human reason therefore cannot provide the certainty required for spiritual transformation.

The speaker's doubt is visible in this failure of reason. He has knowledge, but knowledge does not guarantee obedience. He understands his religious condition but cannot change it by his own effort.

The sonnet develops this contradiction through a series of paradoxes. The speaker wants to be free but asks God to imprison him. He wants to be made new but asks to be

broken first. He wants to be chaste but claims that only divine force can make this possible.

The famous closing movement makes the paradox explicit

“Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain, but am betroth'd unto your enemie.”

Love and conflict exist together. The speaker loves God, yet he remains attached to the enemy of God. His emotional commitment is therefore not matched by spiritual confidence.

Yearwood reads the Holy Sonnets as poems of conversion in which the speaker's struggle moves towards dependence on divine grace (Yearwood, 1982) [12]. Such a reading helps explain why “Batter my heart” should not be treated simply as an expression of despair. The speaker's demand for divine violence is itself an admission that self-reliance has failed.

Strier, however, warns against treating the sonnets as a perfectly ordered progression towards theological resolution (Strier, 1989) [9]. This qualification is important. The speaker does not suddenly become certain. The poem ends with a paradox rather than a neat explanation. The unresolved quality is part of its meaning.

Doubt as a Crisis of Reason

One of the most distinctive features of Donne's religious poetry is its combination of intellectual argument and emotional intensity. The speaker often reasons like a theologian but speaks like a distressed individual.

This combination produces a particular kind of religious doubt. The problem is not lack of intelligence. The speaker's difficulty comes partly from having too many competing forms of knowledge. He knows Christian doctrine. He knows the seriousness of sin. He knows the promise of grace. He knows the possibility of judgement. Yet these forms of knowledge do not automatically create inner assurance.

The sonnets repeatedly reveal the limits of reason. The speaker makes arguments, but the arguments often turn against him. He asks questions whose answers generate further questions. He constructs theological claims and then immediately introduces an experience that seems to challenge them.

This rhetorical structure makes doubt part of the poem's form. It is not only a theme. It is built into the movement of the sentences.

Adlington's study of Holy Sonnet 19, “Oh, to vex me,” emphasises Donne's combination of dialectical reasoning and associative poetry. His discussion shows how rhetorical and prosodic structures contribute to the representation of religious conflict (Adlington, 2017) [1]. The same principle can be extended to the sonnets discussed in this paper. Donne's theological uncertainty is not simply described; it is enacted through the movement of the verse.

Doubt and the Body

Religious doubt in the Holy Sonnets is also physical. Donne does not present the doubtful self as an abstract mind. The body shakes, burns, decays, sleeps, breaks, and fears.

This physical dimension is particularly important because it prevents the poems from becoming purely intellectual exercises. Theological questions have bodily consequences. The speaker's fear is felt in the body. Death is imagined as the separation of body and soul. Sin is represented through images of contamination and captivity. Divine intervention is imagined as physical force.

Coles's analysis of belief in the Holy Sonnets shows that religious identity in Donne is closely connected with the bodily imagination (Coles, 2015) [3]. This helps explain why the language of doubt becomes so intense. The speaker does not merely think that salvation is uncertain. He experiences that uncertainty through the body.

The body therefore functions as a site of religious evidence. It gives the speaker reasons to fear, but it also provides the material through which spiritual transformation can be imagined.

Doubt, Repentance, and the Problem of Sincerity

A further difficulty concerns repentance. The speaker frequently knows that he should repent, but he doubts whether his repentance is genuine enough.

This problem is visible in several sonnets. The speaker wants to confess, but confession does not necessarily produce peace. He wants to love God, but he recognises competing desires within himself. He wants to surrender, but he continues to argue.

Kuchar's reading of the Holy Sonnets is useful in this respect. He connects Donne's religious poetry with Petrarchan forms of desire and argues that the speaker's relationship with God can retain the structure of longing rather than reaching complete satisfaction (Kuchar, 2008) [6]. The speaker wants the object of his desire, but the continuation of desire also keeps the poem alive.

This produces a paradox. Complete religious certainty might end the need for questioning, while doubt keeps the speaker in active relationship with God. The sonnet becomes the space in which that relationship continues.

This does not mean that Donne celebrates doubt for its own sake. The poems are serious about salvation. But the absence of complete assurance does not prevent devotion. It produces a different kind of devotion: one based on continued asking.

Doubt as Prayer

The connection between doubt and prayer becomes clearer when the sonnets are read as dramatic acts rather than as theological statements. The speaker rarely discusses God from a detached position. He addresses God directly.

This direct address is important. A person who has completely rejected belief would have little reason to maintain such an intense dialogue with God. Donne's speaker, however, repeatedly turns towards God at the moment when his reasoning fails.

John N. Wall's discussion of the Holy Sonnets emphasises their dramatic quality as acts of prayer (Wall, 1976) [11]. The poems are therefore not only descriptions of religious experience. They are performances of religious struggle.

The speaker's questions become prayers because they are addressed to God. His accusations become petitions. His fear becomes confession. His uncertainty becomes an appeal for intervention.

This is why religious doubt in Donne should not be reduced to scepticism. Scepticism may stop at uncertainty, whereas Donne's doubt repeatedly moves beyond uncertainty towards address. The speaker does not solve every problem, but he continues the conversation.

Theological Uncertainty and the Absence of a Single Resolution

The major critical disagreement surrounding the Holy Sonnets concerns the extent to which they should be identified with particular theological systems. Stachniewski's interpretation gives considerable weight to Calvinist despair (Stachniewski, 1981) (Stachniewski, 1991) [7, 8]. Cefalu develops the importance of Calvinist theology while stressing the tension between theological doctrine and bodily experience (Cefalu, 2003) [2]. Strier challenges readings that make the sonnets too doctrinally consistent (Strier, 1989) [9].

The present study does not attempt to choose one of these interpretations as the only correct explanation. Instead, the disagreement itself demonstrates an important feature of the poems. Their language allows different theological pressures to remain active at the same time.

The speaker can believe in grace and still fear condemnation. He can recognise Christ's power and still doubt his own worthiness. He can understand repentance and still find himself unable to repent sufficiently. He can love God and still describe himself as bound to God's enemy.

These contradictions are not accidental weaknesses in the poems. They create their distinctive devotional energy.

Brian Cummings's discussion of Donne places his religious writing within the complex religious culture of post-Reformation England, where doctrinal questions and literary expression were closely connected (Cummings, 2002) [4]. The Holy Sonnets reflect this environment without becoming straightforward doctrinal documents.

The poems are better understood as encounters with theological uncertainty. They do not simply teach a doctrine of salvation. They dramatise what it feels like to seek assurance while remaining uncertain about one's own spiritual condition.

Original Argument: Doubt as Devotional Dependence

The central argument of this paper can now be stated more clearly. Religious doubt in the Holy Sonnets is productive because it prevents the speaker from treating faith as possession. The speaker cannot simply declare himself secure. He has to continue asking.

The distinction between possession and dependence is crucial. The speaker often claims that he belongs to God, but he cannot rely upon his own ability to maintain that relationship. In “As due by many titles,” he lists the reasons why he belongs to God, yet immediately asks why the devil appears to possess him. In “Batter my heart,” he recognises that his reason is insufficient. In “This is my play's last scene,” he anticipates divine presence with both hope and fear. In “What if this present were the world's last night?” he imagines judgement but turns towards Christ's mercy.

Across these poems, doubt does not remove God from the speaker's world. It makes God more necessary.

This is also why the sonnets repeatedly employ imperative language. The speaker asks God to act because he cannot trust himself to complete the work of spiritual transformation. The command may sound aggressive, but beneath it lies dependence.

The poetic form strengthens this argument. The sonnet is a compact structure traditionally associated with argument and turn. Donne uses the form to place opposing states next to one another. Certainty is followed by doubt. Fear is followed by hope. Self-condemnation is followed by appeal. Reason leads to paradox. The turn does not always solve the problem, but it changes the speaker's relation to it.

The result is not a final state of perfect certainty. It is a continuing movement between questioning and trust.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this reading lies in its attempt to move beyond the simple opposition between faith and doubt. Such an opposition can make Donne's devotional poetry appear more stable than it is.

A more useful understanding is to see faith and doubt as interacting conditions. The speaker's faith gives him the language with which he expresses doubt. His doubt, in turn, forces him to return to the central claims of faith. The process repeats throughout the sonnets.

This approach also avoids reducing the poems to autobiography. Donne's historical religious experience is important, but the poems create speakers whose uncertainty is organised through rhetoric, imagery, and form. The literary construction of doubt deserves attention in its own right.

The study further suggests that Donne's religious poetry is persuasive precisely because it does not hide spiritual uncertainty. The poems acknowledge that theological knowledge and emotional assurance are not identical. A person may know what faith teaches and still fear that he cannot live according to it.

Such a position remains relevant to the study of devotional literature because it shows how literature can represent belief as an active struggle rather than a finished state.

Conclusion

The study of religious doubt in John Donne's Holy Sonnets shows that doubt is not simply the absence of faith. It is one of the principal forms through which faith is expressed. Donne's speaker repeatedly questions his own spiritual condition, his capacity for repentance, his readiness for judgement, and his ability to achieve salvation through personal effort. These questions create anxiety, but they also produce prayer.

The analysis of “As due by many titles” shows that the speaker's uncertainty arises from the contradiction between divine ownership and personal experience. He knows that he belongs to God, yet he feels that sin has taken possession of him. “Oh my black soul” develops the same conflict through self-address and the fear of judgement. “This is my play's last scene” connects death with the fear of meeting God, while “What if this present were the world's last night?” turns the possibility of judgement towards the mercy represented by Christ. “Batter my heart” provides the strongest example of the speaker's recognition that human reason and will are insufficient for spiritual transformation.

These poems demonstrate that Donne's doubt is usually directed towards the self rather than towards God's existence. The speaker does not abandon belief. Instead, he doubts whether he is capable of receiving or living out the grace that he knows theology promises. This distinction allows the poems to remain devotional even when they are full of fear and contradiction.

The study also shows why a single theological label cannot fully explain the Holy Sonnets. Calvinist ideas of sin, election, grace, and despair are important to the poems, but they do not remove the tensions within them. As Strier and

other scholars have shown, Donne's sonnets often resist a neat doctrinal resolution. The poems preserve contradictions because those contradictions represent the speaker's actual struggle for spiritual assurance.

The central finding of this paper is therefore that religious doubt functions as devotional dependence. When reason reaches its limit, the speaker turns to prayer. When self-confidence fails, he asks God to act. When certainty becomes impossible, he continues to address God. Doubt consequently becomes productive. It keeps the speaker in a relationship with the divine.

Donne's poetic achievement lies partly in this ability to turn uncertainty into form. His questions, paradoxes, commands, and images of bodily suffering do not merely describe religious anxiety. They enact it. The reader encounters a speaker who cannot remain silent because he cannot settle his own spiritual condition.

The study is limited to selected Holy Sonnets and does not attempt a complete theological account of Donne's religious writings. A broader study could compare the sonnets with Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, the sermons, and the religious poems of George Herbert and other early modern writers. Such a comparison could further examine how doubt, assurance, and bodily experience operate across different forms of devotional literature.

Ultimately, Donne's Holy Sonnets suggest that religious faith need not always appear as certainty. In these poems, faith survives through questioning. The speaker's doubt does not end his search for God. It is the very condition that makes the search continue.

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