

Forum II:  
Milton's *Christian Doctrine*

The Provenance of John Milton's  
*Christian Doctrine*:  
A Reply to William B. Hunter

MAURICE KELLEY

As scholars have determined it during the past century and a half, the provenance of the *Christian Doctrine* should invite no suspicion of Milton's authorship. Instead it confirms it.

The treatise originated in Milton's youthful collection of proof texts and his perusal of certain shorter systems of theology.<sup>1</sup> By the 1640s, Edward Phillips reports, his uncle was dictating to him and his fellow students portions of a "Tractate which he thought fit to collect from the ablest of Divines, who had written of that subject: *Amesius, Wollebius. &c. viz.* A perfect System of Divinity, of which more hereafter."<sup>2</sup> Phillips, however, failed to keep his promise of more information about "A perfect System," but the Anonymous Biographer (Cyriack Skinner) reports that about 1655 Milton began "the framing a *Body of Divinity* out of the Bible . . . which . . . hee finished after the Restoration."<sup>3</sup> Our manuscript of the *Christian Doctrine* confirms Cyriack's rough dating, for the primary hand in it is that of Jeremie Picard, who served as witness or scribe in Milton documents dating from January 1658 to May 1660;<sup>4</sup> and Cyriack's mention of Milton's heterodoxies<sup>5</sup> indicates

---

Maurice Kelley is Emeritus Professor of English, Princeton University.

that he is writing of the *Christian Doctrine* that we have today. Parallels between the treatise and *Paradise Lost* as well as between it and Milton's *Art of Logic*, not published until 1672,<sup>6</sup> confirm Milton's authorship of the systematic theology. Milton's frequent borrowings from Wollebius, especially in Book 2 of the *Christian Doctrine*, connect it with Phillips's "A perfect System," and the plethora of proof texts in Book 2 recall Milton's youthful collection. Finally, from what we find in Milton's works and life, this revision of his "A perfect System" was to be expected, for during the decade of 1645-1655 his religious beliefs had radically changed: he no longer accepted the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity, and to John Calvin's doctrine of predestination he had bidden goodbye. Consequently, if Milton's accounting to the Lord was to be accurate and up-to-date, he must revise the early chapters of Book 1, where those heads of doctrine appear.

With its careful calligraphy and ornate chapter headings, the Picard manuscript was intended to be a fair copy; but during the 1660s Milton, with the help of an unknown number of amanuenses, transformed it into a working copy by adding corrections and revisions throughout its 745 pages, most heavily in the first fourteen chapters (pp. 1-196). In this state at Milton's death, the Picard draft came into the possession of Daniel Skinner. At the most, Skinner had the manuscript in his possession for about a year, during which time he prepared it for the printer Daniel Elzevir.<sup>7</sup> He recopied the heavily revised first fourteen chapters, made the manuscript more readable by recopying insertions, deletions, and pasted slips; and furnished the author's name for the otherwise anonymous treatise. Elzevir also had the manuscript for about a year. During this period he submitted it to the eminent Dutch divine Philippus van Limborch, who advised Elzevir not to print it because of the Arianism of the document. By then an extreme winter had set in and not until spring allowed navigation did Skinner's father receive the manuscript from Elzevir and promptly turn it over to Joseph Williamson. With the rest of his papers, Sir Joseph left it in the government archives where Robert Lemon, Sr., happened on it in 1823.

This, then, is the provenance of Milton's *Christian Doctrine*. The manuscript was prepared at a known time, in a known place, by a known person to whom Milton assigned among other tasks the recording of family deaths in his family bible and the transcribing of his twenty-third sonnet, on his deceased wife, on paper that was to become the last leaf of the Trinity College Manuscript. On this leaf, Samuel Leigh Sotheby writes: "The leaf on which these two Sonnets [22, 23] are written, has been taken from another volume.

The paper is of the same quality and size as some of that used in the latter portion of the manuscript *De Doctrina Christiana*, preserved in the State Paper Office.”<sup>8</sup> This is the manuscript (SP 9/61) that Skinner took from the deceased Milton’s effects, prepared for the compositor, and sent to Elzevir. This is the manuscript that Elzevir returned to Skinner’s father, who passed it on to Sir Joseph Williamson. This is the manuscript that Lemon found and Sumner edited. So to establish his thesis that Milton did not write the *Christian Doctrine* Hunter has the task of explaining how a manuscript with such close association with Milton was not composed by Milton.<sup>9</sup> For a moment on page 137 he gives us a peek by suggesting that Skinner perpetrated the fraud: “two manuscripts which he could assign to a famous but now late poet who could not correct him.” Two pages later, however, Mr. Hunter writes, “Skinner, incidentally, may have honestly believed that Milton was [the manuscript’s] source.” So far as I can see, Mr. Hunter has not made his case. He has not named who managed the fraud, when the fraud took place, or described how it was executed. But even if he has, he still must cope with “what is in fact the nub of the matter—the question of consonance between this tract and Milton’s poems”<sup>10</sup>—such likenesses as those offered in *Yale Prose*, 6:109-15; or, as a nineteenth-century English historian fresh from the struggle with Bishop Burgess put it, to account for “the passages produced from Milton’s other writings [which] leave no doubt, that the ‘Treatise on Christian Doctrine’ emanated from the same mind.”<sup>11</sup>

## II

In addition to Mr. Hunter’s failure to divest Milton of *Christian Doctrine*, his article contains several questionable matters which call for correction so that he may not lead future Miltonists into his bog of error. In the following numbered sections, Mr. Hunter’s words appear first; my comments then follow.

### (1)

“Another question is why he [Milton] did not [print the *Christian Doctrine*] then, an easy feat before the Restoration” (p. 130).

The Anonymous Biographer [Cyriack Skinner] gives an understandable reason—the manuscript’s heresies: “and therefore his Judgment in his Body of Divinity concerning some speculative points, differing perhaps from that commonly receivd (and which

is thought to be the reason that never was printed)."<sup>12</sup> Also, if Mr. Hunter will consult the *DNB* on John Biddle, an antitrinitarian contemporary with Milton, he will, I believe, withdraw his adjective "easy" if not his whole statement. Biddle, a man of considerable gifts who had the sympathy of Sir Henry Vane and the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, persisted in publishing his unorthodox views, and each publication was followed by jail, sometimes accompanied by denial of visitors or of pen, ink, and paper, or of both. Once, he was banished to the Scilly Islands. Biddle at the age of 47 died of jail fever. And one must not forget that Milton himself had been in hot water with Parliament at the beginning of the 1650s for his connection with Dugard's edition of the *Racovian Catechism*.

## (2)

"[B]ut to argue an interpretation of *Civil Power* from the *Christian Doctrine* is to beg the question" (p. 131).

Really Mr. Hunter is begging the question, assuming as true what he is endeavoring to prove—that Milton did not write the *Christian Doctrine*. For some twenty parallels between the two works indicating that Milton wrote both, see *Yale Prose*, 6: Index, s.v. Milton, John, *Of Civil Power*.

## (3)

"Despite these arguments that separate Milton from the treatise an insuperable objection appears to lie in the inscription of it as his three times in the manuscript itself (see Figure 1, p. 134). Except for these three instances it contains absolutely no indication of who authored it. . . . The editors of the Columbia edition judged that the words were 'evidently added in [a] later hand, a conclusion that Kelley questions as 'not evident. The handwriting is [Daniel] Skinner's, the ink not unlike that on the rest of the page, and the heading shows no crowding.' I have no idea how Kelley could reach such a conclusion" (p. 133).

If Mr. Hunter had worked for any length of time on the manuscript, he might have had an idea. Prudence dictated anonymity for heretical manuscripts; the Picard draft was heretical; consequently it did not contain the name of the author. A printed book normally showed the name of its author; Skinner was preparing the Picard draft to become a book; so in the three customary places he added the author's name or initials, using

capitals to indicate that he wanted upper case letters. Skinner's printing over his supralinear flourishes on page 1, I did not consider "crowding." Page 7, however, is another matter. Whoever prepared it for the cut used on page 134 carelessly overtrimmed the upper margin and cut off the tops of some of Skinner's letters. A xerox of page 7 shows ample room above Skinner's addition. As for the erosion of the inscriptions (p. 140, n. 22) I suggest that it has been caused by the heavier application of the ink in the capitals. When I last used SP 9/61, in 1967, I noticed erosion in the more heavily inked chapter headings but none in the more lightly penned text below. Skinner's inscription on the frontispiece (p. 140, n. 22) was left off the reproduction because the purpose of the page was to illustrate the chief hands in the text, and Skinner's printing did not qualify as a chief hand.

## (4)

"With regard to Skinner's relationship to the theological manuscript . . . it has been assumed that he did so to clean up the text for the printer . . . but that is a questionable assumption because, as Kelley observes, his 'clean' copy is far more smitten with errors than the manuscript of Picard" (p. 137).

Skinner's work was not "to clean up the text," but to help the compositor find his way through the thicket of additions to and revisions of the text, to make clear what went where. My note (*Yale Prose* 6:38, n. 8) did not take into consideration the limited time that Skinner had for his work, probably less than a year; whereas the multitude of textual corrections (see *GA*, pp. 231-42) suggests that Picard had plenty of time to correct his errors. I should never have made this unfair comparison.

## (5)

"His [Skinner's] reason for getting possession of both manuscripts and his attempt to publish them are clear. In 1676 he was on the edge of an appointment to Trinity College (which he finally got) and he evidently believed (wrongly) that his publication of two manuscripts which he could assign to a famous but now late poet who could not correct him might help him to a political appointment in Holland" (p. 137).

Here Mr. Hunter is confused. Skinner had been a junior Fellow at Trinity since 22 October 1674. His motive for publishing the two manuscripts, as Masson suggests, was financial.<sup>13</sup> Skinner was

spending too much time in London, and his father wanted to get his son back to Cambridge "by stopping supplies." The son was reduced to borrowing ten pounds from Samuel Pepys. At the same time, Isaac Barrow, Master of Trinity, was threatening Skinner with expulsion if he did not without delay "repair hither to the college." Skinner however did not heed Barrow's threat, and went through The Netherlands to France. For this insubordination he eventually paid. Almost three years later, 23 May 1679, Skinner was admitted and sworn major Fellow. The interval between first and second admission usually did not exceed a year and a half.

Also, only one manuscript figured in the political appointment, the Letters of State (SP 9/194), and the "now late poet," even if revived, could not deny Milton's connection with the letters.

## (6)

"The description of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* as works in which 'hee more specially taught all Virtue' is somewhat eccentric. Facts like these suggest that the author of the [Anonymous] Biography was not a close associate at the time when he was supposedly dictating the *Christian Doctrine*. If indeed it was Cyriack Skinner he was busy setting up his own household then" (p. 138).

Milton invested most, if not all, of his salary (about £2000) in excise bonds. On 5 May 1660, in an attempt to salvage them, Milton transferred an excise bond (and very probably all of them) to Cyriack Skinner. The transaction was witnessed by Jeremie Picard.<sup>14</sup> Parker also lists Skinner as "most knowledgeable" about Milton in 1644-1647, 1649-1655, 1660, and 1670.<sup>15</sup>

## (7)

"The Poem [*Paradise Lost*], as I have said and repeat here from my paper, is based in part on a subordinationist view of the Godhead" (p. 165). "Subordination, as I have defined it elsewhere, undergirds much of the theology of the poem" (p. 165). "On the other hand, the poem indeed has, as C.A. Patrides, J.H. Adamson, and I have shown, a subordinationist underpinning" (p. 132).

Yes, subordinationism does undergird much of *Paradise Lost*; but that subordinationism is not Mr. Hunter's orthodox, ante-Nicene subordinationism joined to the doctrine of the two-stage

Logos. As Michael Bauman has shown, Mr. Hunter is wrong in two ways.<sup>16</sup> The two-stage Logos is not orthodox, and Milton does not teach it. To which I add, the *Christian Doctrine* rejects it: "If he [the Son] was once in the Father but now exists separately, then he must once have undergone a change, and is therefore mutable."<sup>17</sup> In its anathemas, the Nicene Creed curses those who hold that the Son "is created or is subject to change."

Mr. Hunter's ante-Nicene subordinationism cannot become orthodox merely by his placing the adjective in front of it. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* defines subordinationism as "the heresy, originating in the 4th century, that admitted only the Father as truly God and taught the inferiority (subordination) of the Son to the Father and of the Holy Ghost to the Father and the Son."<sup>18</sup> Subordination can become orthodox only by affirming the equality of the Father, Son, and Holy spirit—then it is no longer subordinationism. So those who do not like to believe that the author of *Paradise Lost* denied the doctrine of the Trinity and who uncritically embraced Mr. Hunter's homemade brand of orthodoxy must seek elsewhere for a term to soothe their sensibilities.

After Mr. Bauman's attack, Mr. Hunter's aggressive reassertion of his version of Milton's subordinationism surprises me, for I too have challenged Mr. Hunter's patristic origin of Milton's antitrinitarianism, finding Milton's chapters on the Son of God and the Holy Spirit classic examples of Renaissance antitrinitarianism—a fresh product of Renaissance rationalism rather than a continuous development out of the Middle Ages.<sup>19</sup> When challenged as Mr. Hunter has been, the practices of scholarship dictate that he must either rebut or recant. My challenge was in 1972; Mr. Bauman's in 1987; and Mr. Hunter has neither rebutted nor recanted; so he consequently invites the charge of being proof-proof: "standing out against proof; unaffected by proof."<sup>20</sup>

(8)

"But the parallels are only in the commonplaces of Calvinism. There are simply no analogues between the Ames-Wollebius materials and the discussion in the treatise of subjects like the Trinity, the Incarnation, predestination, baptism, and so on. Nor is any to be expected with those two bastions of Calvinism" (p. 141).

If no parallels are to be expected, then why bring up "subjects like the Trinity, the Incarnation" etc.? But if the reader will consult

*Yale Prose*, 6:226, n. 59, he will find Wollebius determining the order of discussion in the first of Milton's three main propositions in his chapter 5, "Of the Son of God," as well as my directions to pursue the matter further in chapter 6, "Of the Holy Spirit." Using the index to *Yale Prose*, 6, let the reader check the influence of Wollebius on Milton's Book 2 of the treatise. He will then be prepared to evaluate Mr. Hunter's statements and be on guard against his too insistent effort to insure a verdict in favor of his brief.

## (9)

"Skinner, who seems to have talked freely about his two manuscripts" (p. 163); "He [Skinner] advertised the fact widely and at the same time spread some idea of its contents and his plan to publish it" (p. 139); In conclusion I suggest that [the Anonymous Biography] relies for these years upon the same rumors about the treatise that the other biographers had also heard, emanating ultimately from Daniel Skinner and including the rejection of the manuscript by Elzevir on the grounds of its heresies" (pp. 138-39).

As our old Princeton professor Gordon Gerould would have put it, Mr. Hunter, I believe, "is drawing a long bow." Document these statements, and I will apologize.

## (10)

"The late C.A. Patrides, accepting Milton's authorship, considered it [*Christian Doctrine*] as a gross statement of theology, unworthy of him" (p. 140).

I meet this denigratory appraisal so frequently in my reading that I am sick and tired of its repetition. Mr. Patrides never comprehended what Milton meant by *Substantia*<sup>21</sup> and he suggests that we read *Paradise Lost* by a hermeneutic principle that Milton condemns.<sup>22</sup> These failings hardly indicate that Mr. Patrides is to be considered a qualified critic of systematic theologies.

## (11)

Now to John Shawcross, apparently regarding Mr. Hunter's number 5 above:<sup>23</sup> "We should probably note that it has been



suggested that the Trinity MS is owned by Trinity College Library because Skinner may have used it as a kind of bribe to become a member of the College. We should also note that Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach had reported that a bookseller (Moses Pitt? John or Peter Blaeu?) had 'ein Systema Theologie von Milton' which evidenced 'Arianismus.'" (pp. 161-62).

Mr. Shawcross is indeed confused, if not befuddled. Skinner was already a Fellow of Trinity when he helped himself to Milton's papers in 1674, and the Trinity manuscript was just a bunch of loose papers from two collections until they were assembled and bound in a single volume in the eighteenth century. Daniel Elzevir had the *Christian Doctrine* manuscript; Pitt and Blaeus were involved in another work of Milton—the 1676 edition of *Litterae Pseudo-Senatus Anglicani Cromwellii*.

And now may I express my appreciation of how neatly and succinctly Barbara Lewalski has replied to Mr. Hunter with the logical force and learning that we have come to expect of her—and covering all bases so well that I had the freedom to wander about, picking and choosing as I list.

### Post Scriptum:

In his attempt to decanonize Milton's treatise, Mr. Hunter's second paper, a year later, "The Provenance of the *Christian Doctrine*: Addenda from the bishop of Salisbury," helps little, if at all.<sup>24</sup> It consists largely of 1) re-presenting the bishop's arguments and of giving guarded approval to the bishop's perverse reading of an excerpt from *Of True Religion* (both of which failed to be convincing to the bishop's Georgian readers); of 2) pointing out passages in the *Christian Doctrine* where the bishop and/or Mr. Hunter find disagreement with Milton's unquestioned works (where agreement, as Ms. Lewalski reminds us, is the nub of the matter); and of 3) the following scenario explaining how the *Christian Doctrine* came into Milton's possession (pp. 200-201):

"Because the Treatise turned up among Milton's effects . . . one of his [Milton's] Dutch associates who gave or loaned him the manuscript may be considered as its author. Such a possibility is Isaac Vossius (1618-1689)," who settled in London in 1670 "and direct association with Milton became distinctly possible, though no early biographer mentions it. . . . From its origin in this mid-century Arminian Dutch context, Jeremie Picard made a copy of the manuscript."

A direct association of Vossius with Milton may have been possible, but was it probable? Could Vossius, a frequenter of Charles II's court, afford to be seen with Milton—a man who had approved of and publicly defended the execution of the present king's father? At least a decade separates Picard's work in the Milton household from Vossius's arrival in England. No Arminian Dutch manuscript is known to exist or to be vouched for by documentation. It and the Dutch associate supposed to be the author of the *Christian Doctrine* are figments of the bishop's and Mr. Hunter's imaginations, conjured up to meet the needs of their theory. In short, these two gentlemen are endeavoring to persuade us to substitute their *invented* provenance for the David Masson, James Holly Hanford, and William Riley Parker *discovered* provenance, a provenance disclosed over the years by seventeenth-century documents, frequently being perused for purposes other than determining the author of the *Christian Doctrine*. This substitution I am not persuaded to make.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don Wolfe et al., 8 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1953-82), 6:119-20. Henceforth *Yale Prose*.

<sup>2</sup>Maurice Kelley, *This Great Argument: A Study of Milton's "De Doctrina Christiana" as a Gloss upon "Paradise Lost"* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1942), p. 10. Hereafter GA.

<sup>3</sup>GA, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>James Holly Hanford, "The Date of Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana*," *SP* 17, 3 (July 1920): 309-19.

<sup>5</sup>"And therefore his Judgment in his Body of Divinity concerning some speculative points, differing perhaps from that commonly received, (and which is thought to be the reason that never was printed) neither ought rashly to be condemned, and however himselfe not to be uncharitably censured; who by being a constant Champion for the liberty of Opining, expressed much Candor towards others" (GA, p. 9).

<sup>6</sup>This means that Mr. Hunter's author of the *Christian Doctrine* would have to have had Milton's MS of the *Art of Logic*.

<sup>7</sup>Milton died 8 November 1674 and Daniel Elzevir in a letter dated 20 November 1676 writes, "It is about a year since I agreed with Mr Skinner to print the Letters of Milton and another manuscript on Theology" (H. Scherpbier, *Milton in Holland: A Study in the Literary Relations of England and Holland before 1730* [Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1933], p. 58).

<sup>8</sup>Samuel Leigh Sotheby, *Ramblings in the Elucidation of the Autograph of Milton*, (London: Thomas Richards, 1961), p. 95.

<sup>9</sup>William B. Hunter, "The Provenance of the *Christian Doctrine*," *SEL* 32, 1 (Winter 1992): 129-142. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page in the text.

<sup>10</sup>Barbara K. Lewalski, "Forum: Milton's *Christian Doctrine*," *SEL* 32, 1 (Winter 1992): 143-154, 144.

<sup>11</sup>Robert Wallace, *Antitrinitarian Biography*, 3 vols. (London, 1850), 3:347.

<sup>12</sup>GA, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup>David Masson, *The Life of John Milton*, 7 vols. (rppt. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), 6:72.

<sup>14</sup>William Riley Parker, *Milton: A Biography*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 1:562.

<sup>15</sup>Parker, 1:xiii.

<sup>16</sup>Michael Bauman, *Milton's Arianism*, Sprache und Literatur: Regensburger Arbeiten zur Anglistik und Amerikanistik 26 (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), pp. 120-32. Not well-known to Miltonists, Bauman is professor of Christian Thought at Hillsdale College and has a Fordham degree in Historical Theology. His book has yet to receive the attention that it merits. Its thoroughness and clarity should make it the definitive work on this aspect of Milton's theology.

<sup>17</sup>*Yale Prose*, 6:262.

<sup>18</sup>*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 13:761; s.v. Subordinationism. Continuing, the encyclopedia does not accord subordinationism the dignity of a movement; "Certain expressions, subordinationist in implication, that are found even in orthodox writers of the first 3 centuries . . . were due to unskillful and excessively cautious safeguarding of monotheism, and to preoccupation with combatting Gnostic theories of aeons and divine emanations."

<sup>19</sup>See my review of Hunter, C.A. Patrides, and J.H. Adamsson, eds., *Bright Essence: Studies in Milton's Theology* (Salt Lake City: Univ. of Utah Press, 1971) in *Southern Humanities Review* 6, 4 (Fall 1972): 418-19 and *Yale Prose*, 6:65-66.

<sup>20</sup>*Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd edn., s.v. proof-proof.

<sup>21</sup>*Bright Essence*, p. 5; Bauman, p. 83; Lewalski, p. 151.

<sup>22</sup>*Bright Essence*, pp. 71-77 with *Yale Prose*, 6:223-26.

<sup>23</sup>John T. Shawcross, "Forum: Milton's *Christian Doctrine*," *SEL* 32, 1 (Winter 1992): 155-62.

<sup>24</sup>Hunter, "The Provenance of the *Christian Doctrine*: Addenda from the Bishop of Salisbury," *SEL* 33, 1 (Winter 1993): 191-207. In his opening paragraph Mr. Hunter explains the Bishop's connection with his topic:

When I was investigating the provenance of the *Christian Doctrine*, a frequently heterodox theological treatise that has been assigned to John Milton ever since its discovery in 1823, I came across another writer, Thomas Burgess (1756-1837), Bishop of Salisbury, who had argued objections to Milton's authorship similar to mine. Because his views had been dismissed by everyone concerned with the authenticity of the ascription to Milton, I did not follow up this lead; I now know that I should have, because the Bishop has left a number of astute observations which are certainly worth consideration today.