“He took his religion by trust”: The Matter of Ben Jonson’s Conversion

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Summary: *During his imprisonment for the murder of Gabriel Spencer in 1598, Ben Jonson converted to the outlawed Roman Catholic Church, and for the next 12 years made no attempt to conceal his recusant status. Jonson’s biography and the historical documents treating conversion and recusancy offer evidence of the importance Jonson placed on codified religion, and provide a distinctly religious context for much of what has long been assumed to be an exclusively classically-based secular ethics operating in his writing.*

Mention of Jonson’s conversion to Roman Catholicism in biographical and critical writings is usually brief. Drummond records it in one sentence or so, and even modern scholars like Herford and the Simpsons and David Riggs make the event appear rashly spontaneous, particularly given the fact that Jonson’s imprisonment (during which the conversion took place) lasted only a few weeks. Often at issue is the question of Jonson’s motivation for the conversion, and answers are bound by conjecture. Matters of choice in faith and religion are necessarily shaped by intellect, intuition, and emotion, and we walk on shaky ground when we attempt to enter a person’s mind and soul with the purpose of finding objective reasons for highly subjective actions. Nonetheless, factors surrounding the conversion, namely, Jonson’s acquaintance with the English legal system and the strictures binding priests in the act of converting, bear heavily on the event and call into serious question the common notion that Jonson acted irrationally or entirely out of fear of punishment in the afterlife. Further, the penalties for

violating the Elizabethan state religion were such that Jonson's choice to convert stands as an important reminder that not all choices made by artists of the day were prompted by political or social ambition.

By early 1596, Jonson had severed ties with the bricklaying profession and had entered the world of the theatre itself, embarking on a new life following the 1592 closing by order of the Privy Council because of riots and a serious outbreak of the plague from 1592 to 1594 in and around London. Jonson first connected with the theatre as an actor (likely as Hieronimo in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*), then as a playwright bound to Henslowe, and managed to bring the bravado and aggression of the Flanders battlefield to London by killing one of Henslowe's promising actors, Gabriel Spencer, in a sword fight on September 22, 1598.

Earlier in the year, Jonson had become acquainted with prison life courtesy of his involvement in the writing of *The Isle of Dogs*. The Privy Council had proclaimed the play politically threatening, "containing very seditious and slanderous matter," and ordered imprisonment for any persons involved with it who could be found. The likely co-author, Thomas Nashe, managed to flee, but Jonson, along with actors Robert Shaw and Gabriel Spencer, landed in Marshalsea Prison. On their release in October 1597, Jonson saw production of *The Case is Altered* and, in 1598, of *Every Man in His Humour*. Spencer's murder, however, took Jonson from the stage to the jail once again. He pleaded guilty to the charge and soon after put his classical education to use by pleading benefit of clergy. To Camden's training, then, Jonson owed literally far more than "All that [he was] in arts, [and] all that [he knew]" (*Epigrams* XIV: 1–2).¹ The ancient plea held that a convict could be released if he were able to sight read and translate a passage from Scripture in Latin, a practice that had once provided exclusive protection from prosecution for the clergy, who were the only people who could have received the education necessary for the task.

Before his release, however, Jonson made the baffling decision to convert formally to Roman Catholicism, a religion that had been outlawed in England. As Drummond records the event, Jonson was "almost at the gallows" for Spencer's murder,

Then he took his religion by trust, of a priest who visited him in prison. Thereafter he was twelve years a papist (*Conv.* 244–46).

As an actor and playwright, Jonson had already aligned himself with a social set that lacked respectability; as a convicted seditious writer and a murderer,

moreover, he had established himself as a political threat in the eyes of the court. To add to this status the label "papist" was, to say the least, imprudent, or so it would appear. By this time, the English government had become so efficient in prosecuting recusants that the office of the Exchequer had established a special bureau for tabulating and collecting fines. Government spies had also established contacts with informers who could claim as a prize up to one-third of a fine in the event of a recusant's conviction, whose penalty could include increased taxes and rents that accrued during a jail sentence.² Jonson could hardly afford a costly demonstration of conscience at the time: he was branded and destitute on his release from Newgate and, further, had the welfare of his wife to consider, even if he had been voluntarily away from her in his pursuit of theatrical success. These difficult circumstances underscore the importance of this highly personal choice.

By the time of Jonson's conversion, the Elizabethan religious community had, for almost 40 years, lived with the important Supremacy Act (April 1559) that restored the monarch as the head of the church. This document was followed shortly by the strict Act of Uniformity, which called for fines and imprisonment of nonconformists. Together, these civil acts set forth without doubt the Crown's desire to control — if not rid itself of — political threats thought to characterize affiliates of extra-Anglican sects, both Protestant and Roman Catholic.³ By the 1570 Papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis* of Pope Pius V, Elizabeth was formally marked for deposition and excommunicated from Rome and, by implication, from friendly relations with Roman Catholic countries. While it was clearly the Pope's intent either to force Elizabeth back into conformity with Rome or to incite English Catholics to civil disobedience or rebellion, the Bull, in the words of the Catholic King Philip II of Spain, served to "exacerbate things there and drive the Queen and her friends the more to oppress and persecute the few good Catholics remaining in England."⁴

It became an act of treason to suggest that the Queen was a heretic and became outrightly illegal to associate with a Catholic priest. Recusancy was punishable in civil court and carried a stiff fine that had grown by 1581 to a staggering £20 per lunar month.⁵ In addresses from English pulpits came edicts banning the use of rosary beads, prayers to the Virgin Mary, auricular confession and penance in Lent, even making the Sign of the Cross on entering a church building.⁶ In 1585, five years after the arrival of the Jesuits in England, the official "Act against Jesuits and seminarists" (27 Eliz., cap. 2) gave all Catholic clerics 40 days from the end of the current Parliament

to leave England.⁷ While Elizabeth's formal injunctions did not kill Catholicism, they did force it underground. Mass could not be said in a public or ecclesiastical building without fear of arrest, and Catholics were even forced to bury their dead at night if they wished to avoid being refused burial altogether by the conformist Protestant clergymen who superintended the cemeteries.⁸

It was a criminal offense to engage the company of a priest, and that Jonson's encounter occurred in prison makes the already complicated process of conversion even more complex. Legal strictures had forced most Catholic conversions underground, and most priests of the time were told to change their clothing — even their names — frequently to avoid discovery. On arrival at the house of a Catholic who had gathered prospective converts, the priest was expected to make arrangements for an exchange with another priest, so that no one man could be identified in the line of his work. To make even these requirements seem less legal dodges than necessities for the spiritual success of the conversion process, converts were to be told that their spiritual progress would be enhanced by regular contact with different confessors.⁹ Jonson's conversion, by virtue of its setting, was actually more daring than what other priests and converts understood as a courageous act.¹⁰ This was the group with which Jonson chose to align himself. And while (save for a few explicitly "Catholic" poems) Jonson did not make public issue of his Roman Catholicism, neither did he ever attempt to conceal it. In fact, he maintained membership in the Roman church for twelve years — including a period of Jacobean court employment (1606) during which he (and for a time, his wife) were under formal recusancy charges.¹¹

The question of salvation is, of course, a component in religious decisions, and Jonson's circumstances at the time would certainly have brought the issues of death and judgment into focus. But to explain — perhaps dismiss — the conversion to Catholicism as the result only of psychological distress (or even fear) is to overlook not only these conditions for professing Catholicism, but some serious theological and ethical issues both on Jonson's part and that of the priest. The detailed nature of the Catholic conversion process was designed to curb spontaneity and made a thoughtless or insincere move to Catholicism very difficult. Further, as we will see, it was possible (in serious cases involving pending death) for a person to receive absolution from a Catholic priest without formal affiliation with the Roman Catholic church. Jonson was not trying to "have it both ways," so to speak, by choosing affiliation freely just in case salvation was granted only to

Roman Catholics. A Catholic priest would have seen the murder charge (and its accompanying penalty) as sufficient grounds to judge Jonson's situation very serious, indeed life-threatening. Knowledge of the benefit of clergy plea carried with it no assurance that it would be effected; and Jonson did not need formal conversion to gain absolution. His choice to convert to the Roman Church cannot be explained as the result of fear alone.

Jonson's assignment to Newgate and subsequent trial at the Old Bailey in 1598 was, without minimizing its seriousness, not a new experience. Prison conditions at the time were generally deplorable, and the English courts were not known for their generosity and graciousness towards murderers, especially those admittedly guilty. But Jonson could find some comfort and hope for freedom in the old benefit of clergy plea that remained on the legal books. There was no guarantee that invoking the plea would translate into freedom, but Jonson was as qualified as any to try it. The usual text of the "neck verse," the *Miserere* (Psalm 51), moreover, was well-known, thanks, at least in part, to his friend Nashe's citation in *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594).¹² He was not, in other words, without any hope that he might leave the Old Bailey chastened and censured, but nonetheless alive.

Provided he were successful in invoking the benefit of clergy plea, the chances were quite good that he would survive the trial, and so his decision to convert to Catholicism was made with a view to his life, not his death. In his study of the intellectual struggles of English Catholics, Kenneth Campbell rightly notes that "while fear might represent a first step towards religious conversion it did not necessarily have to lead one to Catholicism," and that "personal fear, while an important part of many conversions, is simply too simplistic in most cases" to suffice as a complete explanation.¹³ In fact, "complete explanations" do not really exist, because the highly personal nature of the decision itself lies beyond reason. The questions that can be answered are those of the "type" of Catholicism to which Jonson subscribed and the manner in which he formally professed the faith.

Surrounding the occasion is the matter of a formidable number of English Catholics — lay and clerical — who were not in accord with the aggressive and divisive policies of Cardinal Allen and the prominent Jesuit Father Robert Persons.¹⁴ There was, in fact, no demonstrable unity in the English Catholic community, and this factionalism, as it were, permitted multiple "ways" in which one could be (and become) a Catholic. From the time of Allen's *Admonition*, a central point of contention was of whether or not a Catholic could remain in good standing with the Church and yet remain

a loyal subject of the Queen. One answer to the question appeared in a 1594 pamphlet by a priest named Thomas Wright. The tract, whose title asks, "Whether catholics in England might take up arms to defend their country against the Spaniards,"¹⁵ asserted that one indeed could hold loyalty to both church and state.

By demonstrating that Spain had failed to preserve (much less strengthen) the Catholic Church in England, and that it had actually used its "religious" pursuits in the New World to strengthen its temporal position, Wright openly defied ecclesiastical edicts to oppose Queen Elizabeth. This priest, whose aim it was to find a middle way between London and Rome in the battle for tolerance, was the most likely agent of Jonson's conversion.¹⁶ It is highly improbable that Jonson would have been so impudent (if not foolhardy) to call for any priest of an outlawed church as he neared the time when the gallows could have been activated. Before any formal discussion of a conversion to Roman Catholicism, Wright and Jonson had first to become friends. The priest's own experiences and writings made him a very suitable advisor to a man open to approaches to religion that did not preclude treason.

Wright was born in 1561 into a recusant family and left England at age 16 to study for the Catholic priesthood at Douai, a continental haven for English seminarians. After a year there, followed by a year at the English College (Rome), Wright was admitted to the Society of Jesus in February 1580. After completing the Jesuit course of studies, Wright was ordained a priest, and took his first assignments as a teacher (primarily of rhetoric and "controversies") in Jesuit schools in continental Europe. After less than a year as an ordained Jesuit, however, Wright grew increasingly annoyed at not being granted an English missionary appointment, and came near dismissal in 1594 until Father Robert Persons, S.J., assigned him to teach "controversies" at Valladolid, a task that he completed with high success. At Valladolid, he composed the tract in support of English Catholics taking arms against Catholic Spain.

The text of the tract itself, though relatively brief, is good evidence of Wright's considerable skill as a rhetorician — a trait that would have been well noted by Jonson. In arguing that Catholics are virtually bound to take arms against Spain, Wright stated:

If you shall not take armes, you expose your selves to the danger of death, as well on the part of the English, who will reckon you a betrayer of your country, as on the part of the Spanyards, who will kill you as a protestant. You will see your father, your brother,

your son, your cousin, your friend, wallowing in his own blood, breathing out his last in his wounds, taken off by death. You will behold your wife, your mother, your daughter, to be violated, polluted, defiled before your eyes . . . wherefore death it self would be more pleasant to you than your life.¹⁷

Very much to the point of Jonson's conversion, however, is Wright's carefully crafted argument about England's future monarchs, which concludes:

Since the queen doth not dye in England, who therefore succeedeth her shall be certainly a catholic, or will permit us to live catholicly: of which thing many reasons may be produced; as well because it is very uncertain who succeeds, there is none but seeth every one of the pretenders will try all ways to bring the catholics to their sides.¹⁸

Wright's loyalist work in the cause of English Catholics put him in open opposition to mainstream Jesuit political views, however, and he voluntarily removed himself from the Society in 1595, choosing to work as a secular priest. Following publication of the tract, Wright surrendered himself publicly to Essex's secretary, Anthony Bacon, in what was a first attempt at gaining tolerance — if not support — of loyalist Catholics in the English legal system. The situation did not work out smoothly, though. First sentenced to almost nominal confinement at the Dean of Westminster's home, where he continued to write "controversies," Wright was sent first to Gatehead, then to Bridewell in 1597. This is a particularly important period, for it was during this incarceration that he completed the manuscript of his lengthy *The Passions of the Minde in Generall*, for which Jonson composed a commendatory poem.

Wright could bring to Jonson an intelligent perspective in which Catholicity and English citizenship were not mutually exclusive. Essentially, he could present the possibilities of Catholic conversion without the treasonous politics that often characterized the work of many of his fellow Catholic priests. By relegating seditious political overtones of Catholic affiliation to the realm of those activists who saw the church and the crown as incompatible institutions, Wright could dismiss any questions of national loyalty and focus on matters of spirituality. Wright had already established himself in Catholic orthodoxy, and by his choice to relinquish his identity as Jesuit in order to work for the Church in England, showed himself as aligned with the mission of the Church even when he could not accept the divisive temporal politics of the Society and the Pope. The Catholicism that Jonson learned from Wright was orthodox, but not unpatriotic.

Unlike most Catholic priests of the day, Wright enjoyed extraordinary freedom and was permitted travel in and around the city because of his loyalist stance. Out on daily parole, Wright visited Jonson in prison and went about the work of securing Jonson's soul for Rome in a rather programmed fashion. Aside from the shared experience of incarceration, and their shared labels as threats to society (though obviously for very different reasons), Wright's learning and intellectual acumen would have appealed to Jonson. Jonson's life following his departure from Camden's tutelage at Westminster had been anything but intellectual, and his description to Drummond of a return to his "wonted studies" after military service underscores the importance he placed on mental development — even if it had been tarnished under the strain of aggressive combat. Wright could speak, indeed argue, on Jonson's level, and could present Catholic precepts with a moderate, conciliatory political stance.

Only conjecture supports the view that Jonson knew of Wright's political and rhetorical career before the conversion, but Wright's activities during his tenure at the Dean of Westminster's house do offer some reason to believe that Jonson had cause to trust the priest. Shortly before his September incarceration, Wright had succeeded in converting William Alabaster, a Latinist and Anglican clergyman, to Roman Catholicism; Alabaster later became a Jesuit. Jonson doubtlessly knew him: he was a fellow classicist and, moreover, a student at Westminster during Jonson's time there. While it is not certain that Alabaster had actually introduced Jonson to Wright, the priest's acquaintance with a former schoolmate — now a Roman Catholic — was no insignificant calling card. Jonson and Wright entered into the conversion process with common ground and common interests.

Whether or not Jonson knew of Wright prior to their meeting in prison, Wright probably knew of him. Jonson had already seen production of *The Case is Altered*, was known publicly for his part in the *Isle of Dogs* incident and, most importantly, had recently brought *Every Man in His Humour* to the London stage. Even if he were not well-liked, he was well-known. To the point of his relationship with Wright is the type of subject matter Jonson introduced into his drama with *Every Man in His Humour*. With Wright at work on, or having recently finished, *The Passions of the Minde in Generall*, the two men had yet another area of common ground: the forces at work within each person that shape, if not govern, behavior. Jonson had mingled classical references with Galenic psycho-medical theory in his play, and had

succeeded in uniting these disciplines with dramatic practice. Wright's project was not dissimilar in scope.

In the Prologue (provided for the later version of *Every Man in*), Jonson wrote that he had gone out of his way to avoid the excesses and obscurities of his contemporaries' dramas, opting not for the odd or spectacular, "But deeds, and language, such as men do use, / And persons such as comedy would choose, / When she would show an image of the times." In a section of the *Passions* dealing specifically with "Discovery of Passions in Writing," Wright observed:

Who of purpose writeth obscurely, perueteth the naturall communication of men; because we write to declare our minds, and hee that affecteth obscuritie, seemeth, not to be willing that men should construe his meaning. . . . To vse many Metaphors, Poeticall phrases in prose, or ink-pot tearmes, smelleth of Affectation, and argueth a proud childish wit.¹⁹

We could not arguably get much closer to Jonson's thinking. Wright's basic treatment of the passions drew on classical precepts, notably those of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, all authors with whom Jonson had more than a passing acquaintance. In essence, what Jonson treated dramatically in his humour characters (that is, excess of a humour that governs behavior), Wright treated philosophically and theologically by showing the passions to be useful (when channeled properly) in moving people to virtue and the apprehension of God.²⁰

With a common acquaintance in Alabaster, a respect for and training in language, and now a demonstrable common interest in "psychology," Wright could approach Jonson on rather familiar terms, and he probably did so prior to any discussion of religious matters. Wright was no fool; though he had engaged in the daring conversion of Alabaster in an Anglican clerical household, he would hardly risk being reported for seeking prison converts by a man whom he had not "tested," so to speak, for his openness to religious matters. At that time, Jonson had spies assigned to him during the tenure of the incarceration — spies he knew to be active by the report of a sympathetic jailkeeper²¹ — and it is difficult to imagine his keeping the company of a man who could only worsen his situation if he were not genuinely interested. Though documentation of the conversion is remarkably brief, we cannot assume that Wright visited him only once. Given their shared interests, Wright's established integrity as a priest, Jonson's intellect, and both the seriousness of the circumstances and the outcome, it is more than possible that the two men met several times during the imprisonment.

Under the circumstances of their meeting, Wright might well have sympathized with Jonson's duress over the uncertainty of his future, and would certainly have offered Jonson counsel and the opportunity to pray. A full and formal conversion to the Catholic church, however, involved much more than counsel, and given the seriousness of the choice, Wright would have needed to see in Jonson a good demonstration of seriousness of purpose. The two men may have enjoyed each other's company and shared interests, but neither of these components constituted the necessary consenting act of faith. A conversion resulting from either coercion or a distorted state of mind would not be valid, and Wright would have known this. Catholic doctrine holds clearly that a valid conversion must be made freely, since belief, according to Thomas Aquinas, depends upon free will: *Credere voluntatis est* (*Summa Theo.* II.ii, ques. 10, art. 8). Conversion itself rests on the notion of assent leading to change, and Jonson's conversion was a far more complicated situation than the brevity of Drummond's record would seem to indicate.

Critical explanations of Jonson's conversion have traditionally overlooked Catholic theological principles, and have been based on a fundamental confusion between conversion and absolution. Some suggest that Jonson could have appealed to an Anglican clergyman, but fearing death and judgment, opted for a Catholic priest because he could offer absolution in the name of apostolic succession on grounds of the fear of damnation alone.²² In fact, though, penance as a sacrament and individual auricular confession as the means for securing the sacrament's grace were not universally offered in the Church of England, particularly by clergymen who sought to reduce the sacramental rituals. Even if we allow for a wide gap to exist between the theoretical processes of conversion and actual pastoral practice, Jonson would not necessarily have been required to convert formally to Catholicism to receive absolution from Wright.

Provided that Jonson were baptized into a Christian Church (as he was), and provided he believed that Wright had the power to absolve him of sin, the absolution would have been valid without full conversion.²³ Wright would have understood his powers as confessor to transcend earthly boundaries of sect by virtue of the grace of his Holy Orders. In the preface to his 1596 treatise, *The disposition or garnishmente of the soyle*, Wright demonstrated that although not sympathetic to Protestants in general, he was not unwilling to deal with them personally:

In the first ingresse of this discourse before I descended to any particular Treatise, I preconceiued, that these my sclender Meditations, should come to the vew and censure

of three sortes of persons; Catholicks, protestantes, & demi-catholicks, or catholick-like protestants, or externall protestants, & internall catholicks: some call them Church-papistes, others Schismatiques, whose mindes I thoughte good to prepare in particular before I went any further.²⁴

Clearly, Wright saw his ministry shaped as much by the need to bring people to what he believed to be the true religion as by serving those already professed in Roman Catholicism. In this view, he joined a large group of influential Catholic writers who, in Robert Persons' words, wished to probe "the causes and reasons that should moue a man to resolute hym selfe to the seruice of God: And all the impedimentes remoued, which may lett the same."²⁵ Like Persons, Wright acted as an agent of understanding, making the basis of conversion, both by doctrine and by tradition, not securing the privileges of sacramental rites, but redirecting the course of life. Wright would have required remorse and a resolution to live a life of grace before granting even conditional absolution. In fact, Wright himself wrote on the necessity of works in the context of free will, in which theology would classify acts of penance:

Many moe errors I fynde in the protestants religion which ouerthrowe good workes, but especially one that toucheth to the quick & stingeth to the verie harte of deuotion & piety, that is want of free will to do wel (Preface).

At the Council of Trent, requisite contrition was defined as "a sorrow of the soul and a detestation of the sin committed, with the resolve not to sin again in the future" (Sess. XIV, cap. iv). And while theology distinguishes contrition as either perfect or imperfect (as in this case), neither is valid without a sincere renunciation of the sin and a hope of divine pardon.²⁶ While fear of damnation may indeed have figured in Jonson's request for absolution, it does not account for any personal sincerity, without which the absolution would not be valid. The choice to convert — and the process of conversion — was far more serious than an emergency spiritual laundering. As a free choice, full and formal conversion in fact existed apart from a request for absolution.

Catholic theology recognizes several basic "types" of conversions (moral, religious, and confessional), of which Jonson's would be termed a confessional conversion, that is, a formal change of affiliation from one Christian community to the Roman Catholic community. Jonson's situation, of course, was complicated by culpability in Spencer's murder. The basic "stages," so to speak, of conversion include a profession of faith (often encompassing an admission of error or heresy), reception into the Catholic

church (often by formal baptism), confession, and at least conditional absolution.²⁷ These steps are particularly important in Jonson's case, since they illuminate the seriousness required of a convert and, to a large degree, remove the notion of fear or psychological disorder as the exclusive (or principal) impetus to convert.

Explanations of the conversion suggesting that Jonson converted hastily, under duress, or for the expressed purpose of receiving the Catholic priest's absolution need to be reexamined, particularly as they presume that Jonson sought the absolution first and that conversion and absolution are inextricably tied. While we cannot know whether or not Wright required Jonson to profess the Catholic faith before the confession and absolution, it is questionable at best, even in an historical period marked by the serious division of England and Rome. Clearly, in addressing prefatory remarks on preparing the soul for reception of the Blessed Sacrament by means of confession to virtually every conceivable classification of Christian, Wright indicated that he was not loathe to recognize an unprofessed Catholic's capacity to receive the grace of the sacraments.²⁸ There is much room, of course, for an individual priest's approach to pastoral care, but Wright's published list of those who might come to sacramental grace makes it doubtful that he would have insisted on a prior confessional conversion and further doubtful that he would have directed such a conversion for the expressed purpose of ensuring salvation for someone whose motivation for joining the Roman Church was questionably sincere.

In full force at the time of the conversion (and of Wright's seminary training) were the decrees and canons of the Council of Trent (1545–1563), in which we can find explicit treatment of the theological problems posed by a capricious explanation of Jonson's move to the Catholic church. Wright was bound by these dictates, and his extensive seminary and Jesuit training, along with his professional appointment as a professor of theological controversies, make it inconceivable that he was unaware of his ecclesiastical powers — and responsibilities. The conversion process is shaped, after personal inquiry and examination, primarily by an initiation into the Catholic community, usually by the sacramental rite of baptism. It is not to be confused with the sacrament of penance and its accompanying absolution, though this sacrament may indeed be a final part of the conversion process. On this difference, the Tridentine documents are unambiguous:

Besides, it is clear that this sacrament [penance] is in many respects different from baptism. For apart from the fact that in matter and form, which constitute the essence of

a sacrament, it differs widely, it is beyond question that the minister of baptism need not be a judge, since the Church exercises judgment on no one who has not entered it through the gate of baptism (Sess. XIV, cap. ii).

That Wright could have granted Jonson absolution outside a formal conversion is also clear, because the actual charge placed Jonson in a potentially life-threatening state, regardless of either man's knowledge of, or confidence in, the benefit of clergy plea. In this case, Wright would act "after the manner of a judicial act" (Sess. XIV, cap. vi), and would administer the sacrament of penance under grave and unusual conditions.

Ordinarily, a priest could minister only to those within his jurisdiction, and the Tridentine Council declared that the Church had and maintained the right to reserve the power of absolution in serious cases. In cases of imminent or probable death, however, the councillors judged:

that no one on this account may perish, it has always been very piously observed in the same Church of God that there be no reservation *in articulo mortis*, and that all priests, therefore, may in that case, absolve all penitents from all sins and censures . . . (Sess. XIV, cap. vii).

Under these rulings, Wright would act as "judge" in determining Jonson's disposition towards the seriousness of the sacrament, and provided that Jonson could satisfy this test and agree to repentance in some form, Wright could grant an absolution after obtaining a demonstration of either perfect or imperfect contrition. That Wright took the role of confessor seriously is beyond question. In *The disposition or garnishmente of the sovele*, Wright addressed directly the matter of a prisoner's being unable to confess directly to a priest: "Some will say, let him confesse by writing . . . I can not allowe it, because by letters, I can not know the presente state of the penitent, when I giue the absolution."²⁹

Separate from the sacrament of penance, the regulation on initiation into the Catholic community usually satisfied by the formal rite of baptism could be modified by the status of the individual convert. If already validly baptised into another Christian community, the convert would not necessarily be subject to a Catholic ritual. In fact, the Tridentine ruling states, "If anyone says that baptism, truly and rightly administered, must be repeated in the one converted to repentance after having denied the faith of Christ among the infidels, let him be anathema" (Sess. VII, canon 11). Like Jonson, Wright came from a family fathered by an Anglican minister, and would have recognized Jonson as duly and sincerely baptised, even if in error. More probable than Jonson's having asked for absolution under duress is Wright's

offering Jonson an occasion to enter the Catholic community, initiation into which, as the official canons and decrees outline, differs substantially from administration and reception of the sacrament of penance, though this sacrament would have been a concluding act in the conversion.

Some confusion over the situation lies in the fact that Drummond's wording, that Jonson took his religion "by trust," is ambiguous. We know that Jonson's imprisonment was relatively brief, and that there was little time for an extensive examination of the Catholic Church's doctrines, yet given Jonson's intellectual gifts, as well as Wright's, there had to be some reason for the "trust." Jonson was interested in religious questions, as he would later indicate in verse, and Wright was a suitable agent of intellectual as well as spiritual partnership. If, as seems likely, Jonson had some prior knowledge of the legal plea, and, as seems most probable, that he entered the Catholic community for more sophisticated reasons than proximate fear, then he made the choice knowing full well that he would be aligning himself (on release) with an unwelcome group. The "trust" phrase, like the act of conversion itself, needs to be examined more closely.

On the surface, the term indicates that Jonson placed his trust in the priest's power to absolve him of sin, a major requisite in the conferral and reception of penance, and possibly, that Jonson trusted in the priest not to reveal his identity in a confessor-penitent relationship.³⁰ Beyond this, though, it also indicates that Jonson believed in the validity of the priest's office and, thereby, of the ecclesiastical institution that ordained him. But if, as Kenneth Campbell argues, a search for absolution and a resolution to return to a life of grace does not necessarily lead one to Roman Catholicism, we might see in the phrase a perception on Jonson's part that what Wright had to offer him by way of instruction in Catholicism was in his best interest. For this to occur, a man of Jonson's intelligence would have to require similar, compatible intelligence on the part of the agent.

Wright's vigorous approach to securing English converts, evidenced in his return to England even without his Jesuit affiliation, bespoke honesty and courage. Wright could bring to Jonson not only the sacraments of the Church, but an argument that would have allowed Jonson to see that he would not bring his citizenship into question by joining the Catholic community. For Wright, the issue was not simply one of alignment with Rome: it was of the possibility that the benefits and graces of the Roman Church could be shared by the English without treason. By his daring and rather liberal political stand, Wright had credibility in Jonson's eyes, and so the occasion for

conversion could satisfy intellectual, spiritual, and political concerns, according to Wright's highly developed powers of logic and persuasion. Jonson's "trust" was neither naive nor superstitious: his trust in Wright was based on very solid ground.

In a remark resonant of Erasmus, Jonson records in his commonplace book a high disdain for the "controverters in divinity" who, like "swaggerers in a tavern," argue and "turn everything into a weapon," yet produce only controversies "where most times the truth is lost in their midst" (*Disc.* 1290–1301). Evidently he saw in Wright a man both worldly and other-worldly. Elsewhere in *Discoveries*, Jonson recorded that "In being able to council others, a man must be furnished with an universal store in himself, to the knowledge of all nature" (92–94). Able to reconcile classical precepts with religious objectives, man with church, and imagination with reason, Wright possessed the type of "universal store" that permitted entry into Jonson's mind and soul.

Renaissance Christianity often carried with it political and social agenda, but fundamentally, religion and faith are personal matters. Jonson's biography does not permit the moment when we can question their importance to him. Given the complications of his conversion, we might look again at his writings from a new angle. The near-systematic social criticism and satire — and the extensive borrowing from classical writers — assume a very different context when viewed as the characteristics of a writer who knew firsthand the implications of church affiliation and conversion. Jonson recorded in *Discoveries* that a poet could "feign a commonwealth, govern it with councils, strengthen it with laws, correct it with judgments, inform it with religion and morals" (1277–80). He could indeed "feign" such a state, but in Jonson's eyes, needed the guidance and discipline that only membership in an established church could provide. More than evidently placing matters of patronage and royal favor aside, he made issue, for more than a decade, of membership in a politically unapproved group of believers.

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Notes

1. All citations from Jonson are taken from *Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems*, ed. George Parfitt (Middlesex: Penguin, 1988).
2. See Adrian Morey, *The Catholic Subjects of Elizabeth I* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978).

3. See Edward Norman, *Roman Catholicism in England: From the Elizabethan Settlement to the Second Vatican Council* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 8: "The non conformist Protestants, like the Catholics, had overseas links which tainted their religious professions with the suspicion of political disloyalty or unreliability; yet it was the Catholics, through a number of episodes in Elizabeth's reign, who became particularly associated with treason, and whose connections with foreign military enterprises, especially singled them out for proscription."
4. Philip II of Spain to Geran de Spes, Spanish ambassador to England from 1568–72, concerning the bull *Regnans in Excelsis* (1570), in Philip Caraman, comp. and ed. *The Other Face: Catholic Life under Elizabeth I* (London: Longmans, 1960), p. 35.
5. See David Matthew, *Catholicism in England: The Portrait of a Minority*, 2nd. ed. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1948), p. 43.
6. See Archbishop Grindal's *Injunctions to the Laity* (1571) in Caraman, p. 35.
7. See Henry Gee and William John Hardy, eds. *Documents Illustrative of English Church History* (New York: Kraus, [1910] 1966), p. 485.
8. See Norman, p. 32.
9. *Memorandum of George Gilbert* (1583) in Caraman, pp. 119–21.
10. Interestingly, Jonson writes in *Discoveries*, on the reign of King James, that "It was a great accumulation to his majesty's deserved praise; that men might openly visit, and pity those, whom his greatest prisons had at any time received, or his laws condemned" (1234–37). He has no parallel or similar remark on open-door prison policies under Elizabeth.
11. The recusancy charges are printed in H/S 1: 220–23. This situation provides a particularly interesting display of conscience, since James had issued an Oath of Allegiance requirement the same year. Jonson did not formally rejoin the state church for more than three years after the charges — even when provided with the "counsel" of high-ranking Anglican clergy.
12. See Thomas Nashe, *The Unfortunate Traveller. The Unfortunate Traveller and Other Works*, ed. J. B. Steane (Middlesex: Penguin, 1972), p. 304.
13. Kenneth Campbell, *The Intellectual Struggle of the English Papists in the Seventeenth Century: The Catholic Dilemma* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1986), pp. 106–7.
14. There are numerous studies of the Allen-Persons alliance. Among them, the following are highly useful: John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 11–49; J. C. H. Aveling, *The Handle and the Axe* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1976), pp. 52–110; Francis Edwards, S.J., *The Jesuits in England: From 1580 to the Present Day* (London: Burns and Oates, 1985), pp. 17–31.
15. Title translated: *An licitum sit catholicis in Anglia arma sumere, et aliis modis, reginam et regnum defendere contra Hispanos?*. Text and translation in John Strype, ed. *Annals of the Reformation*, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1821–24).
16. The first to connect Wright to Jonson's conversion was Professor Theodore Stroud in "Ben Jonson and Father Thomas Wright," *ELH*, 14 (1947): 274–82. In the years since that article, no convincing evidence to the contrary has appeared.

17. Strype 2.2: 592.
18. Strype 2.2: 593.
19. Strype 4.2.vii. See Sloan, pp. 141–143.
20. See Wright, Book I; and Thomas O. Sloan's introduction to his facsimile edition of Wright's *Passions* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), p. xii.
21. C. H. Herford, and Percy and Evelyn Simpson. *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925–1952), 1:19 suggest that the spies were assigned because of the conversion: "A prisoner awaiting trial for his life, and only recently released from prison on another count, who voluntarily assumed a form of religion always regarded askance by the authorities, was only rendered the more liable to sinister suspicion by the very absence of motives which commends it to modern sympathies." The spies' assignment, though, is more likely due to Jonson's status as a repeat offender than to religious conversion. Wright would not likely have appeared in clerical garb at the prison, even though he did enjoy unusual liberty, since the very people he wanted to convert would have feared association with a man who paraded his religious affiliation in the face of the law.
22. See, for example, David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 46. This approach also overlooks the matter of why a steadfast Anglican would even question the efficacy of one of its church's ordained minister's powers to secure God's grace.
23. See Council of Trent, Sess. XIV, canon 9. All references to the Tridentine documents are from the translation by H. J. Schroeder, O.P., *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Rockford: Tan Books, [1941] 1978).
24. Interestingly, in the prefatory sections, only little more than five pages are directed to Catholics, with 35 directed to all others. Wright obviously intended the work for a wide audience. I am indebted to the staff of the Bodleian Library (Oxford) for their assistance in securing copies of Wright's and Persons' works.
25. From the title page of Persons' 1582 *Christian Directory*. See also A. C. Southern, *English Recusant Prose, 1559–1582* (London: Sands, 1950), pp. 183–88, 467–69.
26. René Aigrain (Abbé), ed. *Ecclesia: Encyclopédie populaire des connaissances religieuses* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1927), p. 174. By conditional absolution is meant "the sacramental absolving of sins when the administering priest is doubtful of the disposition of the penitent" (Robert C. Broderick, ed. *The Catholic Concise Encyclopedia* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956], p. 12). The distinction between perfect and imperfect contrition lies in the source of, and motivation for, the sorrow. In perfect contrition, the penitent is moved to sorrow for the sole reason of having offended a loving and merciful God; in imperfect contrition, the penitent is moved by something other than God. While fear of God's punishment qualifies here, the motivation for contrition and the desire to confess and seek forgiveness must be supernatural, that is, it must be in connection with God and not with a purely temporal problem or situation. See also Council of Trent, Sess. XIV, cap. iv (Schroeder, pp. 91–92).

27. See the brief entries on conversion in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 16 vols. (New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1907–13), and *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 18 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967–89).
28. We should note, however, Wright's forceful enquiries in the preface "To the Catholique-lyke Protestantes" in *The disposition or garnishmente of the soyle*: "What can the protestant Churches afforde you? Oh, infected sermons, corrupted with heresies. What prayers? Alas, howe will God heare them who will not here him? The Communion, o poysoned cupp, better it were for you to eate so much ratsbane, then that polluted breade, & to drinke so much dragons gall, or vypers blood, then that sacreligious wyne . . ." Obviously, the man was not without opinion or the capacity for colorful expression.
29. Wright, *The disposition or garnishmente of the soyle*, p. 21.
30. Wright would, of course, have been bound by the "seal of confession," and would have been able to assure Jonson of absolute confidentiality, even under pain of death.