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The Life and Thought of John Milton

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Few authors in Christendom have risen to the height of John Milton. A poet, theologian, reformer and political writer, Milton played a large part in rise of the Puritan government in England and the expressions of its beliefs, and also wrote a good amount concerning his own thought. His great epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, is one of the most influential works of poetry in the Anglo-American church, especially amongst traditions stemming from Puritanism. Without his influential life and controversial thought, the English-speaking Western world would not be the same as it is today.



*John Milton. From Little Journeys to the Homes of the Great, Vol. 5, by Elbert Hubbard.*

John Milton was born in Cheapside, London, in the year 1608.<sup>1</sup> His father was a scrivener and equipped with wealth, which was advantageous for Milton throughout his life.<sup>2</sup> It was his father's money that gave a young Milton access to some of the best education possible at the time. He was tutored privately by professionals from prestigious institutions, which he took full advantage of. Milton excelled in his schooling. He learned early in life how to read and write in both Greek and Latin, and also became fluent in a number of other languages besides English. Latin, which was the language of academia at the time, was something in which he became quite familiar.<sup>3</sup> A love of learning was a hallmark of Milton's young life. This is partially why the transition from the secondary school of St. Paul's to Christ's College at Cambridge was a hard

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<sup>1</sup> George Kurian, "Milton, John (1608-1674)" in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, ed. George Kurian (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), 1517.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 8.

shift. Whereas St. Paul's took a more "progressive" approach to education, Cambridge was far more "rigid" and "traditional" in nature.<sup>4</sup> Despite not fitting in well at Cambridge, he persevered and received his Master of Arts degree from the university in 1632.<sup>5</sup>

Also essential to Milton's person was the idea of service to God and of using his gifts for the service of the church.<sup>6</sup> Milton grew up in the Calvinist tradition that stressed vocation, that any career or endeavor can be done for the glory of God. He was determined to ensure that his giftings, particular in the area of writing and language, would not merely serve himself but rather some larger purpose. To this end, while young Milton was at Christ College he was intending to become a clergyman and serve in the church.<sup>7</sup> However, his disappointment concerning the conduct and behavior of others training to become priests and his general disagreements with how the Church of England chose to conduct itself caused him to ultimately decide against entering into the priesthood. It also led him to more closely align himself with the Puritan cause.<sup>8</sup> He disliked the manner in which the Church of England was handling dissent and censoring authorship but did not feel called to join an underground movement such as the Puritans. Therefore, he decided upon graduating from Cambridge to pursue writing instead of clerical duty, hoping to amass skills that would one day allow him to write a truly great Christian work.

Milton spent a large amount of time writing poetry until 1639, when civil war in England began to brew.<sup>9</sup> The poet threw himself into the fray, supporting the Parliamentarians and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.8.

<sup>5</sup> George Kurian, "Milton, John (1608-1674)" in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, ed. George Kurian (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), 1518.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 10.

<sup>8</sup> George Kurian, "Milton, John (1608-1674)" in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, ed. George Kurian (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), 1518.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 14.

Puritans in their push for greater freedom and various reforms.<sup>10</sup> When full-scale conflict erupted in 1642 and King Charles I fled, Parliament removed censorship of the presses. Though his true passion was poetry, Milton took the opportunity to publish a variety of pamphlets and treatises regarding church and societal reforms he felt were needed in England.<sup>11</sup> When Parliament considered once again censoring publications to combat “possibly dangerous”<sup>12</sup> ideas that were being presented to the public, Milton countered with a pamphlet called *Areopagitica* in which he argued that Truth could only be truly known when it was chosen from amongst falsehoods. Such works propelled him to prominence in the days of Puritan England.

When in 1649 King Charles I was tried and executed by Parliament for treason, Milton thought it just. He was amongst a group of likeminded people known as the “Commonwealthmen,” who believed that the removal of the king from the political scene would allow for the practice of greater democracy.<sup>13</sup> He wrote in defense of Parliament’s actions and because of his support was given a job in Oliver Cromwell’s government, where he remained until the Lord Protectorate’s death in 1658.<sup>14</sup> Though during this time Milton grew increasingly dissatisfied with the Parliamentary government, he respected Cromwell and his leadership in promoting Puritan values. His position of privilege changed quickly upon Cromwell’s death; when the monarchy was reintroduced to England in 1660 Milton was forced into hiding. Later pardoned by Royalist leaders, his home, property, and savings were all gone, having collapsed along with the Commonwealth. Following this, Milton kept a low public profile for several years

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<sup>10</sup> George Kurian, “Milton, John (1608-1674)” in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, ed. George Kurian (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), 1518

<sup>11</sup> Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 14-15.

<sup>12</sup> Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003),

<sup>14</sup> Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 24.

before returning to his true calling in 1669 – poetry.<sup>15</sup> In the last five years of his life, he released the works for which he is most well-known: *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, *Samson Agonistes*, and *De Doctrina Christiana*.<sup>16</sup> He died peacefully in 1674, just a month shy of turning sixty-six years old.<sup>17</sup>

A survey of John Milton’s thought, drawn together from his myriad of pamphlets, articles and poems depict a man who was dedicated, perhaps even obsessed, with biblical writings and study. For Milton, the Bible was the means by which man could “know God aright, and out of that knowledge... love him, ... imitate him, ... [and] be like him.”<sup>18</sup> The ongoing study a Scripture was a constant component of his life. Because of this, the Scriptures should be studied by all, not just the educated and elite,<sup>19</sup> and they should be interpreted and applied personally to oneself and their situations, not in a vague or general sense.<sup>20</sup> He also felt that it was the proper application of Scripture that would best remedy the ills of society, providing “a solid structure for all institutions and government”.<sup>21</sup> For Milton, the Bible was the easiest point of access to interacting with and understanding the divine – superseding, but not replacing, most other avenues of revelation.

This ushers in some of the more confusing aspects of Milton’s life, such as questions about his orthodoxy. Because of his involvement with the Parliamentary government, it is often assumed that Milton himself practiced Puritanism. This, however, is only a partial truth, for

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<sup>15</sup> George Kurian, “Milton, John (1608-1674)” in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, ed. George Kurian (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), 1518.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 1518

<sup>17</sup> John Milton, and Matthew Stallard, *Paradise Lost: The Biblically Annotated Edition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2011), xii.

<sup>18</sup> John Milton, and Matthew Stallard, *Paradise Lost: The Biblically Annotated Edition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2011), xiii.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. xiv.

<sup>21</sup> John Milton, and Matthew Stallard, *Paradise Lost: The Biblically Annotated Edition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2011), xv-xvi.

while he agreed with the Puritans theologically on many fronts<sup>22</sup> regarding the simplification of worship and religion, adherence to biblical discipline, and moral lifestyle, he never fully fit into their idea of Christian gathering. He was a man of feeling, passion, and experience, who praised God by admiring beautiful things. The somber approach to Christian life did not suit him, though he respected their intentions. He is grouped with them, however because of what he was not: he certainly was not Roman Catholic, Anglican, or Quaker – in fact, he wrote against all three branches for various faults he observed (though he did associate Quaker movement for some time, he ultimately abandoned it). Seeing that these traditions did not meet biblical ideas or standards is partially what drove Milton to place such high emphasis on Scripture and personal study. It also led him to conclude that tradition, such as those derived from the Roman Catholic church, were unreliable as well, which ultimately led him to some of his own doctrinal conclusions.

In *De Doctrina Christiana*, a work of systematic theology discovered and published well after his death in 1674, Milton admits that he is, “an Arian; that is, he disbelieved in the coeternity and equal deity of the three Persons [of the Trinity].”<sup>23</sup> He did not disbelieve in the divinity of Jesus nor the guiding work of the Holy Spirit, but ultimately rejected the belief that they were “not made, consubstantial with the Father” as stated in the Nicene Creed in favor of a more hierarchical view of relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>24</sup> This discovery has led some scholars to reevaluate the works released in his lifetime, such as *Paradise Lost*, keeping an eye open to discover hints of his Arian theology between the lines. While it has been

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<sup>22</sup> Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 32.

<sup>23</sup> C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Galaxy Book; GB-57. London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 85.

<sup>24</sup> For details on the Nicene Creed and its theology, see: “Nicene Creed,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, March 22 2018, [www.britannica.com/topic/Nicene-Creed](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Nicene-Creed).

argued by some that his portrayal of the Son of one created and subservient to the Father, many Miltonic scholars agree that the theology presented in his poetic works is fairly ambiguous. He does not put his personal convictions at the forefront, but rather “subdue[s] his orthodoxies,” making them “subordinate... to a general system of assent.”<sup>25</sup> Milton wrote his works to be read and used by the population at large. He desired his writing to be “doctrinal and exemplary to a nation,”<sup>26</sup> something that would have been highly unlikely if his works had been judged as heretical. Therefore, he presents an underlying theology in his treatises (excluding *De Doctrina Christiana*) and poetry that was within the accepted boundaries of Christian faith, and so by not pushing his unorthodoxies and personal philosophies to the forefront created a product that was able to be received by a larger audience. Milton’s objective is not to highlight his own dissenting beliefs, but rather to build upon the “common truth”<sup>27</sup> shared by all Christians regardless of denominational or doctrinal differentiations. Regarding the matter of the reliability of Milton’s writing in light of his unorthodoxy, C.S. Lewis concludes “we should not... have discovered the poet’s Arianism without the aid of external evidence.”<sup>28</sup> His own personal views have not undermined the legitimacy of his writings. Perhaps this is why the works of John Milton have had such an enduring legacy – not because he desired to make his opinions known, but rather to “justify the ways of God to men.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Balachandra Rajan, *Paradise Lost and the 17th Century Reader* (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, 1966), 36.

<sup>26</sup> Balachandra Rajan, *Paradise Lost and the 17th Century Reader* (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble 1966), 35.

<sup>27</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Merrit Y. Hughes (Fifth ed. New York, NY: Odyssey Press, 1935), line 26.

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