Universis Christi Ecclesiis: Milton's Epistle for De doctrina Christiana

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Universis Christi Ecclesiis: Milton’s Epistle for De doctrina Christiana

John K. Hale and J. Donald Cullington

Our edition of John Milton’s unorthodox, still controversial systematic theology appears as volume 8 of the new Oxford University Press Complete Works of John Milton. It seeks a greater fidelity to Milton’s manuscript, by dint of a complete new transcription, fuller edition and notes that keep close to the dictated words, and a translation more literal (and again fuller) than preceding ones. Not that these are the only useful ways to present the work, but they do give new information and emphases, building on the strengths of predecessors, or assuming them in order to offer readers a new scope and methods.

Those predecessors have been three. After the manuscript had lurked unpublished in a cupboard in Whitehall for 140 years, the editio princeps was brought out in 1825, with translation and notes, by Charles R. Sumner. The next edition was that of the Columbia Works of the 1930s, heavily dependent on Sumner’s work. Although no further edition of De doctrina has followed until now, the Yale prose works volume took huge strides forward, in the translation of John Carey and the annotations of Maurice
Kelley. It is not a full edition, however, since it has no Latin text. It lacks Milton’s own words. Consequently, our work seeks to take readers back to the original, to the manuscript, back past even Sumner’s modernizing and harmonizing of the Latin.

We do this, not on a principle, as the only right way to edit, but as what this text needs now. Four emphases in particular inform our approach to Milton’s text. They are needed at once, for its opening epistle, and are illustrated in the following discussion: linguistic, with particular attention to his Latin idiolect; epistolary, since his choice and stance of address are unique; allusive, chiefly scriptural; and etymological, since as elsewhere Milton himself wielded etymology to prove his point.

**Linguistic or Philological**

Here are the opening words, as transcribed from the manuscript (fig. 1) and translated:

\[
\text{[Io]annes Miltonus Anglus Universis Christi Ecclesiis, nec non omnibus Fidem Christianam ubicunque Gentium profiten= tibus pacem & Veritatis agnitionem, salutemque in Deo Patre, ac Domino nostro Iesu Christo sempiternam.}
\]

\[John Milton Englishman To all the churches of Christ, and also to all who profess the Christian faith anywhere among the peoples, [declares] peace, and recognition of the Truth, and everlasting salvation in God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.\]

The address is to two groups of readers, who are joined by *nec non*. Translators render *nec non* by the English “and.” They do the same for the three further connectives in the address, *et, -que,* and *ac.* A fourfold “And” homogenizes the four links, though Milton had differentiated them, and makes the syntax tamely additive. But the double negative of *nec non* (“and-not-not”) becomes a strong positive in Latin. It means “and indeed,” or “and furthermore,” to go by the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *neque.* *Nec non* does not meekly add, or set things in simple parallel: it extends, corroborates, or pushes the speaker’s emphasis forward from the first onto
the second part of the connection. In the present case, therefore, Milton is not merely addressing *Universis Christi Ecclesiis* (as if that were not bold enough). More than that, he is addressing believing individuals, wherever they may be among the *Gentes*, nations. A Latinist should insist that the second group outweigh the first in the speaker’s intention; and might infer that such believers, to be found anywhere, might not be found inside the churches; or that readers of a book are individuals, placed willy-nilly in a Protestant or solo reader posture, where Milton as he writes is greeting them but has already begun working on them, to engineer a devout and open-minded suspension of set belief. The inferences are speculative, but based on a firm and new observation.

In that case, what about the next three connectives, all rendered by a further colorless “and” in translations? Do the three different connectives repeat one another, though *Nec non* had a different and greater force? Why do these three come in this sequence, *et* (written &), suffix -que, then *ac*?

The general explanation is that stylish Latin, such as this clarion call to believers, observes the general principle of *variatio*. Rhetorically speaking, the humanist Latinist either builds a series of equal *ets*, for a cumulative effect like that of Blake in “A Poison Tree”; or resorts to synonyms to avoid inert repetition.
But a particularizing explanation is more convincing, that Milton’s speaking voice and innate sense of verbal rhythm may lie behind (or at least partly account for) the use of varying copulas and the insertion of commas. The comma before *salutemque* both separates *salutem* from *agnitionem* and makes it almost equal in weight to that word. The *-que* rolls on beautifully to *in Deo*; the comma after *Patre* separates the first member of the Trinity from the second, while the use of *ac*, on the other hand, ensures that the two are less separated than if *et* had been used.

Should we furthermore draw in wider contexts, like Milton’s theological axioms, to infer that the presence of the first two persons of the Trinity alerts us to the absence of the third, in whom he is always less interested? This seems like illegitimate inference from extraneous knowledge, or from the hindsight of reading book 1, chapters 5–7. There must be good reason for any argument from silence. One such good reason might be the habits of New Testament writers when opening or closing some address to churches and believers. But their habit is to speak of God and Christ, and leave it at that, although the close of 2 Corinthians is an exception. Accordingly, we must answer no to our question. The reasoning from silence is to be resisted. We raise the issue, nevertheless, to call attention to lines of argument that are regularly opened up by a close, linguistic reading of the original Latin words.

Overinterpretation of another sort is a risk. Literary appreciation that feeds off linguistic observation can glorify the words of the text and assume they are the best possible—as in a Whiggish interpretation of history, where only the actual winners could ever have won, and oh what a good, good thing. In reply, one could reason, meekly, that after so many years of underinterpretation, Milton’s Latin style as prominently displayed in the superscription might benefit from a little excess of zeal. A stronger reply is that to an informed, close reader the signs of authorial polish and flair are plain enough. Can it be an accident that the whole superscription is a virtual tricolon, or that successive limbs expand, with any apparent retreat followed by further advance, like the waves
of an incoming tide? Or that the final limb is poised between the balancing of *salutemque* with *sempiternam*—alliteration, consonance, rhythm, and grammatical agreement, all cooperating sonorously? These should be *heard*, and relished. Milton is in top form, to please and so persuade.

**Epistolary**

Maurice Kelley observes, “Renaissance theologians tended to address their works to noblemen, patrons, friends, or to the reader; and I have not noted another Renaissance systematic theology directed, like Milton’s, to the combined churches of Christ and all Christians” [YP 6:117n2]. Working in Princeton, Kelley had access to many more such theologies than the present writers do, but it is naturally very hard to prove uniqueness.

Certainly, if one looks at the prefatorial matter of Milton’s known structural models, those of William Ames and of Johann Wollebius,7 he is manifestly as unlike them in this regard as he is in his way with biblical citations (see next section). The other English theologies examined do as these two, addressing patrons humbly, and readers “praemonitorially.” They do not come near to Milton’s epistolary trumpet blast. We do not exaggerate: its envoi is no less confident, righteous, or uncompromising. This accords with Milton’s stance and voice within controversy, not to mention his combative personality: the message, *Candido lectori* or not, is that here comes the whole man.

Kelley continues, “Both this universality and his form Milton derives from Paul. Romans, Milton suggests [MS 386], was addressed not merely to that church but to believers in general; and Milton’s awareness of Paul’s epistolary openings is indicated by his comment [MS 7], ‘Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ—in this way he begins nearly all the rest of his epistles.’ And also below [MS 63].”8

Kelley’s first comment (“not merely…believers in general”) resembles what was said in our first section about *nec non*. But it is not the identical point. Milton at MS 386, in his chapter on Scripture, says that Peter says Paul wrote not only to the church at
Rome but also to all believers (“scripsisse tamen non illis solûm, sed omnibus fidelibus hic ait Petrus”). But Milton cites passages from 2 Peter which do not actually show this. It seems that Milton is making an inference that is not made explicit in Scripture itself, but that nonetheless tallies with his superscription.

Kelley’s astute but elliptical comment is matched by his second, Milton’s “awareness of Paul’s epistolary openings,” at MS 7 and 63 (YP 6:117n2). What exactly is he aware of, in his own opening? It is not only Paul, and not only openings, that shape Milton’s epistle. For example, the “recognition of the Truth,” Veritatis agnitionem, echoes John more than Paul, truth being a continuing keyword of 2 John, while agnitionem for epignōsin, “recognition” not general or straightforward “cognition,” is a general New Testament sub-song. Milton’s awareness and applications extend beyond Paul, as one would expect.

Similarly at the ending, or envoi (fig. 2), Milton combines good wishes or even benediction for his “brothers” (fratres) with admonition:

De caetero, fratres, veritatem colite cum charitate; de his, prout Dei spiritus vobis praeiverit, ita iudicate: his mecum utimini, vel ne utimini quidem, nisi fide non dubia scripturarumque claritate persuasi; in Christo denique Servatore ac Domino nostro vivite ac valete.

[For the rest, my brothers, cultivate the truth with charity; judge of this writing according to the spirit of God guiding you; use it with me, or indeed do not use it, unless I have persuaded you with full conviction by the clarity of the Bible; last of all, live and thrive in Christ our Saviour and Lord.] (MS 5, OM 8:10, YP 6:124, CM 14.14)

Peter’s letters close with benediction, as does Jude doxologically (the “general epistle of Jude,” says this copy of the KJV). “Cultivate the truth with love” echoes John again, both the Gospel and Epistles that bear his name. Interspersed with benediction and admonition we read an admonition that is all Milton’s own, both in style and substance. The double litotes has both: “his mecum
utimini, vel ne utimini quidem, nisi fide non dubia scripturarumque claritate persuasi” (“use it [this writing of mine] with me, or indeed do not use it, unless I have persuaded you with indubitable conviction by the clarity of the Bible”). “Join me, but only if you agree with me” is said in Milton’s habitual voice of candor. Then he signs off with a flourish: “in Christo… vivite ac valete” pairs the alliterative imperatives to make a godly hendiadys.10

Do these various other voices diminish the centrality of Paul as exemplar in Milton’s epistle? Quite the contrary, as will emerge in the third and fourth sections. But we do find other New Testament letter writers contributing to the epistolary character of the superscription, and to the ending. They do it less when the epistle itself begins. The lengthy hypotactic contextualizing and apologia are Ciceronian after the manner of humanist theological writing. The chief exception to this statement is where the text becomes allusive.

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Fig. 2. Envoi, p. 5 (detail), De doctrina Christiana. State Papers 9/61. By permission of the National Archives, London.
Allusion to Scripture

Allusion is a complex and disputatious concept, in Milton as elsewhere. For example, his majestic epic simile, comparing the fallen angels to the leaves of Vallombrosa, then to the drowned soldiers of Pharaoh, is allusion as much as it is simile; it is the length that makes it “epic” simile. But because it has such power, so many points of contact, actual and imaginable, between the leaves or soldiery and the angels, readers will disagree forever about how many of the lesser details Milton intended us to notice. The position resembles allegory in Spenser or prophecy in Revelation (or Nostradamus). For our present purposes, which concern Milton alluding to Scripture, only three of the safer possibilities are being examined.

All three exhibit the character summed up by George Caird, who discusses allusion among “cohesive” uses of language. Even phatic communion is not necessarily trivial, for it “may tap deep springs of conduct, reminding us of early influences and lost loves.” Caird goes on, “Consider the allusive use of the word ‘cross’ in the letters of Paul.” We have not, yet, noticed it as part of Milton’s Pauline mindset. But these further words do apply: “Much of the use of the Old Testament in the New is of this allusive kind, establishing rapport between author and reader and giving confidence in a background of shared assumptions. A quotation may be the basis of an appeal to authority, but an allusion is always a reminder of what is held in common.” Milton certainly exploits this use of allusion. He knows that he needs this rapport, confidence, and sharing, even while he assumes that his knowledge of Scripture will bring a derivative or delegated authority.

First, there are the undeclared but striking allusions just assembled from the pastoral epistles. These are localized, not ubiquitous, and belong with the chosen genre, the letter—Milton’s “epistle general.” Second are the less striking and short words or phrases which arise within the flow of Milton’s narrative, first contextual, then personal. Some may not be felt as allusion, being in the first instance ordinary Latin or unemphatic metaphors. Since these
may go unrecognized or unconsidered, we offer them as possibilities, ones that accord with Milton’s mind and imagination in other places, hoping, too, that other readers will propose further specimens. The mental habit suits that Bible-steeped age. Third, we consider the few explicit citations of Scripture within the epistle. All are of Paul. They exemplify Milton’s proclaimed method, and foreshadow the teeming proof-texts of the treatise proper.

Since in general the epistle is reliant on New Testament letters, it deserves comment that the second sort of allusions comes from the Gospels. At MS 3 [OM 8:6, YP 6:121, CM 14.8], Milton speaks of his labors to compile a theology thus: “I had by God’s good help gained a great strengthening for my faith, or rather, I had stored a treasure.” His words are *subsidiwm* and *thesaurum*. We have translated the former as “a strengthening,” but the word might mean a “help” or “support” for his faith. The uncertainty in translating prevents us from connecting it to scriptural images found in the Psalms and widely: “a very present help in trouble,” or the parable of the houses with secure and insecure “foundations.” Similarly, images of “standing” firm or of the “light of truth” come readily to the devout, but are too common and brief to be reckoned as full allusion. They are better read as Caird’s reassuring diction. But the treasure-house image more directly alludes to Gospel teaching, wherever Jesus speaks of householders who store up treasure, build treasure houses, or store up treasure in heaven. *Reposuisse* with *thesaurum* makes this plainer, corresponding to Beza’s *recondere* at Matthew 6:19. And the following allusion to spiritual wealth corroborates, “haec, quibus melius aut pretiosius nihil habeo” (“this my best and most precious possession”). Ensuing mentions of “truth” and “the light of truth” confirm a felt presence of John’s formulations.

Citations, fortunately, are unmistakable. All three of them come in the later, more argumentative portion of the epistle, and all derive from Paul. One comes from 1 Thessalonians 5:21 at MS 3; one from Romans 16:17–18 at MS 4; and one from Acts 24:14 at MS 5. The first quotes Paul without giving the reference, the second quotes with the reference, and the third is Luke reporting
Paul’s words. As allusions, the three seem to come in ascending order of fullness and importance. Whether that is intentional we cannot know, though the rhetorical surroundings make it likely, and something may emerge from inspecting each allusion. At the least, we should note a gravitational pull back to Paul as the epistle enters on more energetic apologia.

First, “explorare omnia iubeamur” [we are enjoined to “investigate all things”). The pronoun “we” is working cohesively, in obedience to Paul’s words. Whether Paul meant the same things by “all things” as Milton does is less likely, given the indefiniteness of “all.” It may not mean absolutely all, only all of what the speaker is thinking about. Nor does Milton explore all, in practice drawing some axiomatic boundaries. But in context, he uses Paul’s phrasing to win readers over to his side, against people who claim that controversy sets the church in undesirable uproar.

The Romans passage has to pull more weight, because Milton has begun an urgent, climactic defense against charges of heresy. It reads in full:

Quibus Ego, id solum fuisset haeresin, quoties hoc nomen in vitio ponitur, aetate Apostolorum, quicquid eorum doctrinae, viva voce traditae, cum libri Evangelici nondum extarent, repugnabat; eosque solos fuisset haereticos, qui, iuxta illud Rom: 16. 17. 18. dissidium et scandala praeter doctrinam Apostolicam faciebant; non Domino nostro Iesu Christo servientes, sed suo ventri: conscriptis demum libris evangelicis, pari ratione nihil nisi quod iis repugnat, posse iure nominari haeresin respondeo. (MS 4)

[To such people I answer, that in the time of the Apostles, when the Evangelical books did not yet exist, whenever the word heresy was used as an accusation, the only heresy was what contradicted the Apostles’ teaching as orally transmitted; and the only heretics were those who, according to Rom. 16: 17–18, were causing disagreements and offences contrary to the Apostolical teaching; not serving our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly. By the same reasoning, then, I answer that after the Evangelical books had finally been put together in writing, nothing can rightly be termed heresy except what conflicts with them.]
Neatly, Milton aligns himself with “the Apostolical teaching.” He sees it as a teaching older and (by implication) more authentic than the Gospels. He lines up with Paul in a stern and dismissive mood. And if we press the fact that he continues his citation into Paul’s final condemnation of those undoubted heretical troublemakers (“undoubted” because we cannot doubt Paul), we may feel an incipient allusion of our previous type, aligning the belly-servers with anyone now who doubts Milton’s orthodoxy; for he has Paul and the “Apostolical” teaching on his side, doesn’t he? Milton does not make this final step, let alone voice it explicitly; but if you read slowly and responsively, it does hang in the air.

The epistle is coming up the home stretch, into head-on rebuttal of any accusations of heresy (which it is clear he is anticipating, and which are made likely by some of the ideas that will appear in the treatise). He launches, finally, into a definition or redefinition of the Greek word for heresy, *haeresis*. The argument is by etymology, but also by adducing Paul yet again, this time the Paul of Acts. So once again, our four methods are not working in isolation, but in forceful conjunction.

**Etymological Proof**

Now Milton nails his colors to the mast, his theses to the church door: the passage is given in its entirety:

De me, libris tantummodo sacris adharesco; haeresin aliam, sectam aliam sequor nullam; haereticorum, quos vocant, libros perlegeram nullos, cum ex eorum numero, qui orthodoxi audiunt, [MS 5] re male gesta scripturisque incautius tractatis, sentire cum adversariis quoties illi sentiebant cum scripturis primo didici. Hoc si haeresis est, fateor equidem cum Paulo, Act: 24.14. *me secundum viam illam quam haeresin dicunt, ita servire patrio Deo, ut qui credam omnibus quae in lege et in prophetis, addo, quae in libris evangelicis etiam scripta sunt: alios fidei Christianae iudices aut summos interpretes fidei que in lege et in prophetis, addo, quae in libris evangelicis etiam scripta sunt: alios fidei Christianae iudices aut summos interpretes fidei omnem, quam vocant, implicitam, cum universa Protestantium ecclesia non agnosco.*
[As for me, I cleave to the holy writings alone; I follow no other heresy, no other party line; I had read no books by the heretics, so-called, when I first learnt from the blunders and incautious scriptural interpretations of those who are known as the orthodox, [MS 5] to agree with their opponents whenever those opponents agreed with scripture. If this is heresy, I for my part confess, with Paul, Acts 24:14, that following the path which they call a heresy, thus I serve the God of my fathers, since I believe all the things which are written in the law and in the prophets; to which I add, the things too which are written in the evangelical books: along with the whole church of Protestants, I refuse to recognize any other judges of Christian faith or paramount interpreters, and all implicit faith, as people call it.]

This argument has several steps, but its climax comes where Milton quotes Paul, to equate “following the way of our fathers” with true and right haeresis, choice. How etymological is Paul (or Luke) being, and how decisive does Milton make etymology? We take these points in order.

Milton says, “I follow no other heresy, or party, than the holy writings alone.” So he cannot be a heretic. “Nor have I been influenced by the writings of the so-called heretics, for I had not read them when I learnt the true principle, of sifting misinterpretations by the so-called orthodox so as to find myself agreeing with their opponents when the latter had got scripture right.” The explanatory force comes from two linguistic points, that the orthodox, whose self-assigned name in Greek means right-thinking, can be wrong, so implying that their name for opponents is pejorative and self-serving. So are their opponents heretics, and what is heresy? Call his belief heresy, but it is that of Paul answering Tertullus before Felix; it is the way of our fathers, which he follows: the law and the prophets, to which add the “things written in the evangelical books”—presumably not only the four Gospels, but the rest of the New Testament, hence of necessity Acts 24:14 itself.

These steps include one about the true—etymological, from etymos logos, “true account” or “truth of words”—versus partisan use of names, the struggle for ownership. What is less evident is that Milton is exploiting the Latin translation of the Greek by Beza
For the words “haeresin aliam, sectam aliam sequor nullam” (“I follow no other heresy, no other party line”), Milton found no word in the Greek which means “follow”; only Beza’s preposition secundum for Luke’s kata. But secundum derives from the same root (sec-) as appears in Milton’s secta (“path” or “way”) and in the verb sequor itself. What in Greek you “choose” is your hairesis, from the verb haireō: in Latin what you “follow” is the same thing, in a distinct, buried metaphor and actually closer to Paul’s hodon, corresponding to Hebrew derek. The “way” matters more than the choosing or choice. This is clearer in Paul than in Milton, perhaps because charges of heresy were not quite such a bugbear as they since became.13

In any event, what Milton does, multilingually, is to harness both metaphors at the outset, before finding them in the Latin of Beza’s Paul: “secundum viam illam quam haeresin dicunt.” The argument pivots on etymology, but not on pedantry. So annotators, for their sins, must supply the pedantry. Otherwise, the echoes and puns of Milton’s key paragraph would be missed, as they certainly are in English translation. For the passage had begun “De me, libris tantummodo sacris adhaeresco; haeresin aliam”: the words adhaeresci and haeresin stand cheek by jowl, and bilingually signal that “I stick to my heresy; stand by my choice.” The glancing pun is part of the turbulent arguing, but lost in translation.

So etymology is not decisive but pervasive. It contributes among Milton’s many verbal arts. They are wielded and welded together in this example. The same things are happening throughout his eloquent, passionate epistolary apologia. Laboriously and belatedly, the new edition of De doctrina Christiana charts some of them, and supplies material and method for readers to “wade further” for themselves.

University of Otago
Note to Preface


Notes to Hale and Cullington, “Universis Christi Ecclesiis”


5. The manuscript is transcribed from Public Record Office (now National Archives), SP (state papers) 9/61. The opening epistle is found on pp. 1–5, referred to here as MS.

7. The two are named by Edward Phillips, Milton’s nephew, pupil, then friend, in his biography; see Early Lives of Milton, ed. Helen Darbishire (London, 1932), 61. The comment is very interesting, in that (1) Ames was a dissident and exiled fellow of Milton’s own college, and (2) you would not guess from Milton’s explicit references that either theologian was important: Ames is mentioned once, and not much cited incognito, while Wollebius is very often absorbed or summarized without being named at all. This adds up to a confirmation that Milton wants De doctrina to be seen and known as all his own work. And so it is, in the same way that Shakespeare appropriates many others’ materials, yet no one in their right wits questions his originality, the personal voice and stamp. It is the appropriation and new advance (the “wading further”) that counts.


9. Both points are made more fully in Hale, “Notes on the Style of the Epistle,” 266–68.

10. The punctuation inclines one to read the four injunctions as a single linked entity, in which case the middle pair, “judge” and “use,” which certainly are linked, might need to be linked in the mind with the surrounding two, “cultivate” and “live and thrive.” It is easier to connect the first with the middle pair as concerning how the reader should now read ahead, than to relate the final one, which relaxes his grip and opens out into a concluding generalized benevolence, like any letter and like most of the scriptural ones.


12. Luke’s Paul, but neither Milton nor his opponents would distinguish. He might have done so, in that Acts is as late as the Gospels are, but now this is not his point.


Notes to Rutherford, “The Experimental Form of Lycidas”

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