

Traces of the Leibnizian Theodicy in John Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*

Mahdi Ghiasian Shahrabaki¹
Fazel Asadi Amjad²

Abstract

In *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, based on his analysis of the relationship between the body and the soul during his sickness, John Donne reaches the conclusion that humans are incapable of fully resisting the temptations of sin. This study proposes that, as a result of this belief, Donne confronts a theological dilemma, which he seeks to resolve by demonstrating that, despite human imperfection, God has provided all necessary means for salvation. It is argued that in the *Devotions* Donne creates a Leibnizian theodicy, asserting that, despite flaws in creation, it is possible to show that God has created the best possible world. The purpose of this study is to provide a novel interpretation of the *Devotions*, challenging the prevalent view that Donne is merely encouraging readers to avoid sin and live virtuously. Instead, it is shown that Donne addresses a profound theological issue by formulating a Leibnizian theodicy in his work.

Keywords: John Donne, Leibniz, *Devotions*, Theology, Theodicy

1. PhD Student of English Language and Literature, Department of Foreign Languages, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran
Mahdighiasian@khu.ac.ir
2. Professor of English Language and Literature, Department of Foreign Languages, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran (corresponding author)
asadi@khu.ac.ir

How to cite this article:

Mahdi Ghiasian Shahrabaki; Fazel Asadi Amjad. "Traces of the Leibnizian Theodicy in John Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*". *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature, Arts and Humanities*, 1, 5, 2025, 239-252. doi: 10.22077/islah.2024.8208.1524



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee Journal of *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature, Arts & Humanities*. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

John Donne (1573-1621) is a renowned English poet who lived several generations before the famous German philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716). Nevertheless, Leibniz and Donne's theological concerns appear to be similar, as both thinkers attempt to tackle theological problems by creating theodicies—i.e. the justification and defense of God in spite of the existence of problems in creation. One of the questions of the present study is: “does Donne deal with a theological problem, in his *Devotions*?” The answer proposed in this study to be “yes.” The other question is: “how does Donne try to resolve his theological problem?” To respond, it is argued that Donne creates a Leibnizian theodicy in order to handle a theological problem he encounters during the time in which he was morbidly sick.

In many influential studies, Donne's *Devotions* has been compared to a variety of theological discourses. The conclusion in almost all of these studies, as will be discussed, has been that Donne represents the individual's capability to liberate herself from the bondage of sin. By reading Donne's *Devotions* based on Leibniz's theory of theodicy, however, the present study reaches a different conclusion. It is argued that Donne is actually trying to resolve a theological problem in the work. After analyzing the relationship between his body and soul during the time of his sickness, Donne becomes convinced that it is impossible for humans to resist all the temptations of sin. It is proposed in this study that he tries to resolve this conflict by showing that in spite of this flaw with human nature, God has provided humans with everything they need in order to achieve salvation. Thus, it is demonstrated that in the *Devotions* Donne creates a Leibnizian theodicy, in which the individual defends God in spite of the existence of problems in creation by showing that God has created the best possible world.

2. Review of Literature

The *Devotions* has been associated with one or another form of religious mediation by critics. Thomas F. Van Laan claims that “Donne's familiarity with the Ignatian system or with a system fundamentally resembling it accounts for the peculiarity of the *Devotions* and explains why it is one of his most introspective writings” (Van Laan 1963: 194). One of the features of the Ignatian meditations, Van Laan states, is its “threefold division of each topic” through which “the entire exercise is divided according to the three powers of the soul,” namely memory, understanding and will (195). He says that the aim of Ignatian and all systematized meditations by Jesuits is that the exercitant remove all his attachments to worldly affairs and find a spiritual union with God (193). He believes that similarly in each of its tripartite sections, which includes a mediation, an expostulation, and a prayer, the *Devotions* expands upon a theme based on an aspect of Donne's sickness “to higher and higher levels, finally achieving a spiritual union with God” (196). Thomas J. Morissey explains the suitability of exercising a programmed meditation in the times of sickness as it

helps the individual “to view the illness and subsequent recovery as metaphors for sin and spiritual purgation respectively” (Morissey 1980: 29). He observes that the objective in a “programmed” or “formal meditation” is to “recognize and resist sin and generally to behave in a Christ-like manner” (30).

While the work has also been compared to other models of meditation than the one proposed by Ignatius, nevertheless, Donne’s purpose has been similarly characterized as a meditation on the malicious effects of sin and worldliness and the possibility of removing this effect through a union with God. For example, N. J. C. Andreasen, who demonstrates the Protestant influence on Donne’s work, remarks that the *Devotions* “describe the progress of the soul ... from the bondage of sin by charity” (Andreasen 1965: 209). This conclusion has also been reached by critics who compare the *Devotions* to other forms of religious discourse. Kate G. Frost categorizes the *Devotions* as a spiritual autobiography in which “the death to carnal affection is followed by a putting-on of Christ” (Forst 1990: 36). Brent Nelson proposes that Donne uses a specific oratory technique used by Protestant preachers to make his readers feel “disgust” at humanity’s sinfulness and “inattentiveness” to God (Nelson 2003: 258). The ultimate aim of engendering this dissatisfaction is, of course, to produce “a resistant desire to ascend by the way of contemplation” (263).

However, instead of aiming to cut his ties with mundane pleasures and to mend his negligence of God, Donne in fact emphasizes the hopelessness of all his attempts to force himself “to behave in a Christ-like manner,” or of becoming liberated from “the bondage of sin” in any manner so long as he lives in this world. Ramie Targoff observes that if we assumed that the “holy delight” that Donne believes his work can provide for the reader lies in witnessing his restoration to health—both in body and in spirit—we would be “ignor[ing] the mood of the final Devotion, in which Donne moves from his triumphant recovery in Devotions 21 and 22 to his overwhelming fear of a relapse” (Targoff 2009: 153). Similarly, Alexis Butzner observes that “Though [Donne] claims to believe that God ‘hast fully pardoned’ his sins in the course of his sickness and recovery, he presents himself as worried to the last that he will take advantage of that pardon and fall back into danger” (Butzner 2017: 361). As will be shown, the fact that humans cannot resist all the temptations of sin in this life is something that Donne emphasizes throughout the *Devotions*. What he, in turn, tries to achieve is to avoid getting disappointed in God’s providence, given the inevitability of falling for the temptations of sin, which he portrays as the human condition.

Thus, while Targoff and Butzner are correct that in the *Devotions* Donne is worried and doubtful about his capacity to avoid sin, his hypotheses about God’s grace and mercy—which are based on his conviction that God is good and just—reassures him that even by relapsing to sin he will still have the opportunity to avoid damnation. Hence, it is not fear that in the end dominates the *Devotions*, but a trust in God’s mercy which is the fruit of ratiocination. This also sets Donne’s *Devotions* apart from a pattern that Murray Roston believes Donne inherited from the tradition of

Catholic manuals, which “employ scenes of eternal damnation to alarm the meditator into repentance, offering no comfort or assurance of redemption” (Roston 2005: 58). Although Donne is afraid of eternal damnation, by the end of the *Devotions*, he is certain that God has already forgiven him and will pardon his future sins if he asks for mercy.

3. Theoretical Framework: Leibniz's Concept of Theodicy

Based on Leibniz's concept of theodicy, it is possible to prove that all our assumptions that the world could be a better place than it is, are false. It is explained in this study that Donne shows in the *Devotions* that he agrees on this notion with Leibniz, and therefore, he creates his own Leibnizian theodicy in the work.

Leibniz proposes that God chooses to create the best possible world among an infinite number of possible worlds. He argues that among all the worlds that could have been created, God has chosen to create the world with the greatest overall perfection. According to Jesse R. Steinberg, “Leibniz maintains that God is obliged by His nature to create the best possible world” (Steinberg 2007: 124). Leibniz identifies the reason behind the existence of the greatest good in God's wisdom, goodness and power: “this is the cause of the existence of the best: that his wisdom makes it known to God, his goodness makes him chose it, and his power makes him produce it” (Leibniz 1985: 24). Hence, Leibniz proposes that while “there is an infinity of possible universes in the ideas of God” (23), because of His nature, or qualities, God does not arbitrarily choose to create a world, but that He certainly chooses to create the best possible one. Leibniz says that “If only we could sufficiently understand the order of the universe, we should find that it surpasses all the desires of the wisest, and that it is impossible to make it better than it is” (Leibniz 1991: 29). Thus, according to Leibniz, it is impossible to wish for a better world.

Leibniz defines the world as “the whole succession and the whole agglomeration of all existent things” (128). It goes without saying, then, that every detail of this world contributes to making it the best and that nothing could have been made differently without making the world inferior. As Deleuze says, for Leibniz, “the world must be the best, not only in its totality, but in its details or in all of its instances” (Deleuze 1993: 68). The fact that due to His wisdom and goodness it is impossible that God has hesitated to create the best possible world has an important corollary: “because it could have been otherwise, this world must be the best, because God must have had a reason to choose this and not that” (Lærke 2010: 41). In other words, all the desires for things to be different from their current status based on the presumption that the world could become a better place than it is, are false.

Nevertheless, Leibniz does not deny that we may encounter things in the world which seem inconsistent with the idea that we are living in the best possible world. Not only does he not discourage us from encountering the problematic aspects of the world, but also he represents the experience as a salutary one, since we may

realize that “[t]here is order everywhere, a reason for everything, however obscure it may initially appear to our understanding or evil to our moral sense” (36). In other words, if we try to see things clearly, we are able to realize that the world could not be a better place than it is, although it may initially appear to be otherwise. Hence, according to Leibniz, it is possible to defend God against the presumption that He has not chosen to create the best possible world.

As will be demonstrated, in the *Devotions*, Donne seeks to falsify the assumption that God could have made a better world. He shows that God has in fact provided the necessary means for humans to function properly and to achieve their main goal in life, in spite of their natural flaw. In a manner comparable to Leibniz, Donne believes that the world is governed by principles and that human reason is capable of discovering some—if not all—of them. The desire to grasp God’s principles, as Terry Sherwood observes, is particularly manifested in the sections called “Expostulations” in the *Devotions*:

these ‘Expostulations, and Debatelements with God,’ as Donne’s title page calls them, necessarily bring man and God into communion, on one hand honouring the vast gulf between human and divine comprehension that encourages human complaint, and, on the other hand, inciting precisely such a desire to comprehend God’s motivations. (Sherwood 1984: 179)

According to Deleuze, the desire to “justify what is” is something that Leibniz tries to achieve by means of his concepts, which are “the most exuberant”; “the most disordered”; and “the most complex” (qtd. in McDonnell and van Tuinen 2010: 6). The present study argues that Donne shares Leibniz’s desire to create theodicies, i.e. to defend and justify God in spite of the existence of problems in the world. The theological problem which is reflected and dealt with in Donne’s *Devotions* seems to originate in his introspective ruminations on the relationship between his bodily and spiritual conditions during a time when he was severely sick. In this work, Donne regards the vulnerability of man’s body to sickness as a sign indicating the inevitability of his defeat against the solicitations of sin. Consequently, Donne’s focus in this work is on defending and justifying God in spite of the existence of this particular problem in human nature.

4. The Justification of God in spite of Humanity’s Natural Frailty in the *Devotions*

In “Meditation I,” Donne ruminates on the flimsiness of man’s condition due to his weakness in the face of a disease. He says, “VARIABLE, and therefore miserable condition of man! this minute I was well, and am ill, this minute” (1959: 35). By using a familiar analogy, he compares man to a little world. However, he does so sarcastically, since the variability of man’s health makes him a miserable creature in his eyes. Furthermore, he argues that the apprehension caused by sensing the symptoms of the disease, which takes over the patient’s mind, contributes to his death

(35). In "Expostulation I," Donne turns his focus to his spiritual state. Although the ruin of man's bodily condition is quickened by the symptoms of the sickness—since they raise his apprehension of his state—Donne argues that the lack of any symptoms, or awareness, of man's spiritual condition is a far more serious flaw. Hence, he asks God,

[W]hy is not my soul as sensible as my body? Why hath not my soul these apprehensions, these presages ... these suspicions of a sin, as well as my body of a sickness? Why is there not always a pulse in my soul to beat at the approach of a temptation to sin (36)?

He says that as a result of this lack of awareness, he does not avoid the temptations of sins, but instead, he intentionally falls into the way of sinfulness: "I go, I run, I fly into the ways of temptation which I might shun; nay, I break into houses where the plague is, I press into places of temptation, and tempt the devil himself" (36). All the while that he commits sins, he has "no presage, no pulse, no sense of my sickness" (36). Here, Donne appears to wish for things to be different; for his soul to have a pulse like his body or—to use Leibniz's idea of an infinite number of possible worlds—for a better world than this one. However, he soon changes his mind. He claims that we in fact do have means of knowing about our spiritual condition, but we do not heed them. Therefore, he tells God, "Thou hast imprinted a pulse in our soul, but we do not examine it; a voice in our conscience, but we do not hearken unto it" (36). Thus, the idea that God could have chosen to create a better world is refuted. However, even after Donne admits that man does indeed have natural means of recognizing the dangers of sin, it seems that he still does not believe that these are effective enough to protect man against sin. Therefore, he concludes—by comparing God to a good watchmaker—that God's constant assistance is crucial to our spiritual health:

will God pretend to make a watch, and leave out the spring? to make so many various wheels in the faculties of the soul, and in the organs of the body, and leave out grace, that should move them? or will God make a spring, and not wind it up? Infuse his first grace, and not second it with more, without which we can no more use his first grace when we have it, than we could dispose ourselves by nature to have it (36)?

Although man's conscience has the means of warning him about affliction with sin, he has no way of avoiding the temptations of sin. While conscience may not be useless like the symptoms of the body when it has contracted a disease, it is still incapable of countering all the temptations of various sins. Hence, God "not yearly, not monthly, but hourly, and quarterly; every minute ... renews his mercy" (36). Donne's proposition that God is constantly ready to show mercy to the sinner is based on the idea—which he shares with Leibniz—that God is reasonable and good and that, therefore, He would not leave man, who is naturally inclined to sin, without the possibility of being saved. Donne thus defends God against the accusation that He could have made a better world, as he shows that man is able to achieve salvation

in spite of his natural flaw.

Critics who argue that in the *Devotions* Donne follows the formula of a Catholic or a Protestant meditation, ignore the fact that Donne is arguing that man's spiritual sickness, similar to his physical sickness, is inevitable and that, therefore, their claim that Donne's aim in the work is to encourage the adoption of a Christ-like demeanor indicate a disregard for his painful acknowledgment that he is simply unable to withstand all the temptations of sin. Instead of showing the possibility of becoming enfranchised from the bond of sin in this world, in the *Devotions*, Donne tries to justify God in spite of the inevitability of falling for the temptations of sin.

During his sickness, as he records in the work, Donne comes to the belief that similar to his body, his soul inevitably contracts diseases. An important factor that contributes to the formation of this conviction is his assumption that the body and soul are interconnected, which, as Achsah Guibbory explains, results in "his sense that studying the body tells us about the soul, about spiritual matters" (Guibbory 2015: 9). As a consequence of reaching the conviction that committing sin is inevitable, Donne determines that God—since He is good and just—is always merciful towards sinners, no matter how sinful they be and how many times they repeat their sins. He suggests that being too scared of the temptations of sin leads to a lack of trust in God's providence and, in turn, damnation: "to fear every concupiscence, every offer of sin... this suspicious and jealous diligence will turn to an inordinate dejection of spirit, and a diffidence in [God's] care and providence" (Donne 37). In other words, we must have faith that even if we commit sin—and, of course, due to the frailty natural to all humans, we eventually, or inevitably, do—God will not abandon us. Similarly, Leibniz argues that God wants to save the sinner and that it is only the latter who may freely choose damnation:

[Christ] teaches us that God willeth the salvation of all, that he willeth not the death of the sinner. Let us therefore put our trust in the divine mercy, and let us not by our vanity and our malice disqualify ourselves to receive it. (Leibniz 1985: 369)

By proposing that God wants to save the sinner, both Donne and Leibniz show that we cannot desire things to be any better than they are, or—to use Leibniz's principle of the best—that "it is impossible to make [the world] better than it is" (Leibniz 1991: 29). Indeed if God did not forgive our sins and thus healed our diseased souls, He would not be good and just by Donne's standards. This is because, according to Donne, sinfulness, similar to physical sickness, is an inevitable condition for humans, and that nothing is able to eradicate man's bondage to the temptations of sin.

Donne's belief in the *Devotions* that God is always ready to show mercy to His subjects is incompatible with the belief system of the most influential Protestant sect, namely Calvinism. John Stachniewski explains that Donne lived during a time in which "Calvin's fame was almost univocally celebrated by English Protestants" (Stachniewski 1991: 17). The period referred to is between 1548 and 1650, during

which Calvin was “England’s most published author” (17). According to P. M. Oliver, “Donne was scornful of the Calvinist doctrine of the ‘limited atonement’ or ‘particular redemption’, the principle that Christ died only for the elect” (Oliver 2018: 178). Donne’s refutation of such Calvinist doctrines is in line with his conviction that God is good and just. For Donne, God would not show His mercy to a select few whom He has arbitrarily chosen—as the Calvinist doctrine of predestination holds—when He could show mercy to everyone. Otherwise, the belief—which Donne shares with Leibniz—that the world could not be better than it is would be untenable. In her reading of the *Devotions*, however, Mary A. Papazian argues that the work illustrates Donne’s belief in the Calvinist doctrine of election:

Donne creates a speaker in the *Devotions*—and, as the biographical dimensions of the work suggest, similarly constructs his own public persona—who seems to be a special kind of character, one who ... is elect ‘from the beginning’, and who undergoes an experience peculiar to his kind. (Papazian 1992: 603-604)

However, throughout the *Devotions*, Donne depicts a very different God from the Calvinist one. God is willing to heal “the inhabitants of the earth”—hence all humans—so long as they “pray that thou wouldst heal them” (Donne 1959: 53). Christ is described as a “universal physician” who cured “all manners of sickness” and “all the multitude (no person incurable)” (53-54). In “Expostulation IX,” the speaker admits that there are things written in the Bible, which “some men turn to poison” (84). However, he claims that “even from those sentences from which a too late repenter will suck desperation, he that seeks thee early shall receive thy morning dew, thy seasonable mercy, thy forward consolation” (84). Here, Donne rejects any interpretations of the Bible which may discourage anyone from trusting in God’s providence, which is that “thou [i.e. God] intendst all for physic” (84). Donne believes that so long as any individual does not lose hope in God’s providence, God will show mercy to him and will thus heal his soul. This is a conviction that he reaches based on his belief that in view of the incapacity of man to resist all the temptations of sin, the only possible way that man may achieve salvation is through God’s unwavering mercifulness. Donne’s belief in the boundlessness of the divine mercy justifies God. As a result, he doesn’t become frustrated or lose hope in God’s providence:

as long as I remain in this great hospital, this sick, this diseaseful world, as long as I remain in this leprous house, this flesh of mine, this heart, though thus prepared for thee, prepared by thee, will still be subject to the invasion of malign and pestilent vapours. But I have my cordials in thy promise; when I shall know the plague of my heart, and pray unto thee in thy house, thou wilt preserve that heart from all mortal force of that infection. (96)

Man’s heart, or his soul, is susceptible to “the invasion of malign and pestilent vapours.” Since God knows this about His creature, He would not condemn him for his sins and will preserve his heart “from all mortal force of that infection,” so long as he asks Him for mercy. In the *Devotions*, Donne also substantiates his belief that

God's mercy is boundless based on the direct and indirect evidence that he discovers in the Bible. But eventually, he chooses to ignore certain Biblical evidence which contradicts this belief. By doing so, he shows that the main reason why he believes in the boundlessness of God's mercy is his conviction that because God is good and just, He wants man to have every possible means for achieving salvation. Thus, the main reason why Donne thinks that God's mercy is boundless is that he believes that God creates the best possible world.

Donne considers sickness as an opportunity for God's visitations. Through His visitations to the patient, Donne explains, God creates a "crisis" by means of which He warns the sinner. Although this belief was commonly accepted during Donne's time, he argues that God is known for being metaphorical not only in His words, but also in His works:

Neither art thou thus a figurative, a metaphorical God in thy word only, but in thy works too. The style of thy works, the phrase of thine actions, is metaphorical. The institution of thy whole worship in the old law was a continual allegory; types and figures overspread all, and figures flowed into figures, and poured themselves out into farther figures; circumcision carried a figure of baptism, and baptism carries a figure of that purity which we shall have in perfection in the new Jerusalem (145).

Based on his belief in the metaphorical and figurative nature of God's works, Donne considers his sickness a sign of his sinfulness and his recovery from sickness a sign of his spiritual recovery. As Gerard H. Cox says, "By employing the method of figural interpretation, Donne could treat his recovery from sickness as a return to a state of grace" (Cox 1973: 335). Through this figurative interpretation of his recovery, Donne is able to feel assured that God has accepted his repentance and will show mercy to him. He tells God "none of thy indications are frivolous, thou makest thy signs seals, and thy seals effects, and thy effects consolation and restitution, wheresoever thou mayst receive glory by that way" (148). Hence, according to Donne, God's mercifulness towards the sinner is something that one may observe based on various signs.

God working through signs is something that, as Donne himself suggests, can be deduced from the figurative nature of God's words in the Bible and the typological relation between the old and the new Testaments. As Guibbory says, Donne is "justifying his method of writing and thinking as sanctioned by God, as indeed sacred—and justifying the method of his Devotions specifically" (2015: 11). This method is essential to his quest to prove that God is prone to mercy rather than wrath. He also uses direct evidence from the Bible to support this claim, such as in "Prayer V" in which he says, "O ETERNAL and most gracious God, who calledst down fire from heaven upon the sinful cities but once ... but for thy works of mercy repeatedst them often" (Donne 60).

In the end, however, Donne acknowledges that even the evidence from the

Bible shows that God's mercy may have a limit. Particularly, he observes how God is shown to be irritated by the sin of relapse: "No tongue but thine own, O my God, can express thine indignation against a nation relapsing to idolatry ... where there is but a suspicion, a rumour, of such a relapse to idolatry, thine anger is awakened" (174). He wonders how little his chance of achieving salvation may be if he relapses into sin, since God did not readmit Adam and the fallen angels into Paradise even though "they never relapsed" (175). However, despite what such evidence may indicate, he believes that his case, even if he relapses to sinfulness once again, is "not so desperate; for as thy majesty, so is thy mercy, both infinite" (175).

Thus, it appears that the best explanation for Donne's belief in the boundlessness of God's mercy is that, similar to Leibniz, he believes that since God is wise and good, He creates the best possible world, which "surpasses all the desires of the wisest, and that it is impossible to make it better than it is" (Leibniz 1991: 29). Some of Donne's most important analogies in the work support this claim. As mentioned, in the *Devotions*, Donne compares the man to a watch and argues that God's assistance to mankind is similar to the "spring" of a watch without which the other parts cannot move and function (36). He also compares God to a landowner that pays rent to his tenants:

We are God's tenants here, and yet here, he, our landlord, pays us rents; not yearly, nor quarterly, but hourly, and quarterly; every minute he renews his mercy, but we will not understand, lest that we should be converted, and he should heal us. (36)

These comparisons justify God, as they show that God has provided us with everything necessary for reaching our ultimate purpose in life—i.e. finding salvation—and that despite our frailty, we are able to achieve this goal so long as we choose to do so. Hence, based on Donne's analogies, it is possible to say that his idea of the relationship between God and man is reminiscent of Leibniz's notion that God has created the best possible world, since he shows that God has provided us with everything necessary for achieving salvation, in spite of our natural flaw.

It is also important here to note that Donne's intention in the *Devotions* is not to defend the beliefs of any particular Christian denomination and that his main goal in the work is to justify God in spite of the existence of the problem which he detects in human nature. Hence, his purpose in the work is related to theodicy. As demonstrated earlier, Donne's claim in the *Devotions* that God is merciful to everyone is incompatible with the Calvinist belief system. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Arminianism was the most important rival of Calvinism in England and this competition, according to Jonathan Atkins, led to "the elimination of Calvinist influence in the church and at court" (Atkins 1986: 411). While the Calvinists suppose that Christ died only for the elect, the Arminians blatantly reject this: article 2 of The Remonstrance states that "Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, died for all men and for every man" (qtd. in Placher and Nelson 2017: 53). Therefore, Arminians, contrary

to the Calvinists, believe that everyone—not just a few people who were preordained by God to be the members of the elect—is able to reach salvation.

In his study on the *Devotions*, Richard Strier characterizes Donne as a staunch supporter of Arminianism. He argues that Arminianism “had both a theological dimension ... and a ceremonial and devotional dimension” and that Donne embraced both aspects of “Arminianism” (1996: 99). Nevertheless, Donne does not support the views of any specific Christian sect. Oliver notes the difference between Donne and William Laud—who was a follower of Arminianism—regarding the significance of Church ceremonies: “Laud’s incendiary remarks voice a crude prioritisation of the eucharistic body over the preached word. Donne never prioritises one over the other” (2018: 40). The emphasis on the importance of preaching and its centrality in the church is also present in the *Devotions*, in which, as Elena Levy-Navarro detects, Donne explains that “the church offers its people the ‘means’ of salvation where the ‘meanes is preaching’ (Levy-Navarro 2013: 101).

Thus, we may hesitate to categorize Donne as an Arminian, let alone accepting Strier’s claim that the *Devotions* is “a ‘party’ document” (1996: 109). Although in the *Devotions* Donne celebrates the ceremony of the funeral bells, this does not indicate—contrary to Strier’s belief—that Donne defends Arminianism in the work. Even Guibbory, who contends that Donne fully supported Arminianism from the mid-1620s voices her disagreement with Strier’s belief that the *Devotions* may be considered a party document when she says, “There is something broader than a historically specific Christian polemics at work here ... in Donne’s defense of the ceremonial church and oblique attack on the puritan objections” (Guibbory 2015: 13). According to Levy-Navarro—who also disagrees with Strier—Donne’s emphasis in the *Devotions* on the fact that the ceremony of the bells has “no doctrinal or scriptural justification” indicates his conviction that such indifferent ceremonies “can serve a useful purpose for individuals provided they accept the bells’ status as an indifferent ceremony” (2013: 284). Thus, by lauding the ceremony of the bells, Donne is not taking sides in the polemical debates of his time.

Donne says that the sound of the funeral bell is the means through which God is communicating with him: “in this sound and voice I can hear thy instructions, in another man’s to consider mine own condition” (1959: 134). The reason why he glorifies such ceremonies as the ceremony of the funeral bells in the *Devotions* is that he regards them as signs or means through which God is consistently trying to communicate with man in order to remind him that he needs to repent before death and that, by doing so, his sins are readily absolved. Donne’s praise of this ceremony is in line with his emphasis on God’s goodness and therefore it is consistent with his attempt to justify God in spite of the disturbing truth that he discovers about human nature in the *Devotions*.

5. Conclusion

In this study, it was argued that in the *Devotions* Donne suggests that it is impossible for man to resist the temptations of sin. As a result, contrary to the critics' ideas who compare the work to various religious discourses, he does not show that it is possible for the individual to become liberated from the bondage to sin and to adopt a Christ-like demeanor. Furthermore, it was mentioned that Donne's main purpose in the work is not to support the views of one Christian denomination against those of another and that his theological views in this work, as a whole, are compatible with neither the Arminians nor the Calvinists—who had the most influence in the court and church of England in the early-seventeenth century. What Donne seeks to do in the *Devotions*, and what makes the work a theodicy, is to justify God in spite of the existence of the flaw in human nature. Donne demonstrates that similar to a good watchmaker, God provides everything for His creature so that one would be able to function properly and achieve one's goal. In view of man's frail nature, Donne argues that God never refuses to show mercy to a sinner, no matter how often he relapses into sinfulness. Based on this argument—which justifies God in spite of the existence of a flaw in human nature—it is possible to say that Donne is suggesting that God has created the world in a way that it is impossible to make it any better than it is. Therefore, in the *Devotions*, Donne creates a Leibnizian theodicy, which is, as it was explained, based on the idea that God has created the best possible world.

Funding Acknowledgments:

The present article is an extract from a PhD dissertation in Kharazmi University entitled *Theodicy, Original Sin and Banishment of Death in Donne's Selected Works: A Leibnizian Reading*

References

- Andreasen, N. J. C. (1965). "Donne's 'Devotions' and the Psychology of Assent." *Modern Philology*, 62: 3, pp. 207–16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/436404>. Accessed 26 July 2024.
- Butzner, Alexis (2017). "'I Feare the More': Donne's Devotions and the Impossibility of Dying Well." *Studies in Philology*, 114: 2, pp. 331–67. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90002151>. Accessed 26 July 2024.
- Cox, Gerard H. (1973). "Donne's 'Devotions': A Meditative Sequence on Repentance." *The Harvard Theological Review*, 66: 3, pp. 331–51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1509005>. Accessed 26 July 2024.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1993). *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Translated by Tom Conley, London: The Athlone Press.
- Donne, John (1959). *John Donne's Devotions*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library.
- Frost, Kate G. (1990). *Holy Delight: Typology, Numerology, and Autobiography in Donne's Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Guibbory, Achsah (2015). *Returning to John Donne*. Surrey: Ashgate.
- Lærke, Mogen (2010). "Four Things Deleuze Learned from Leibniz." In *Deleuze and The Fold: A Critical Reader*, Edited by Sjoerd van Tuinen and Niamh McDonnell. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Leibniz, Gottfried W. (1985). *Monadology*. Edited by Nicholas Rescher, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Leibniz, Gottfried W. (1991). *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*. Edited by Austin Farrer. Illinois: Open Court Publishing.
- Levy-Navarro, Elena (2003). "Breaking Down the Walls That Divide: Anti-Polemism in the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*." In *John Donne and the Protestant Reformation: New Perspectives*, Edited by Mary A. Papazian, Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- McDonnell, Niamh, and Sjoerd van Tuinen (2010). "Introduction." In *Deleuze and The Fold: A Critical Reader*, Edited by Sjoerd van Tuinen and Niamh McDonnell. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Morrissey, Thomas J. (1980). "The Self and the Meditative Tradition in Donne's 'Devotions.'" *Notre Dame English Journal*, 13: 1, pp. 29–49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40062421>. Accessed 26 July 2024.
- Nelson, Brent (2003). "*Pathopoeia* and the Protestant Form of Donne's *Devotions*

Upon Emergent Occasions." In *John Donne and the Protestant Reformation: New Perspectives*, Edited by Mary A. Papazian, Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Oliver, P. M. (2018). *Donne's God*. New York: Routledge.

Papazian, Mary A. (1992). "Donne, Election, and the 'Devotions upon Emergent Occasions.'" *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 55: 4, pp. 603–19. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3817635>. Accessed 26 July 2024.

Placher, William C, and Derek R. Nelson (2017). *Readings in the History of Christian Theology: From the Reformation to the Present*. vol. 2, Revised Edition, Louisville: WJK.

Roston, Murray (2005). "Donne and the Meditative Tradition." *Religion & Literature*, 37: 1, pp. 45–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40059976>. Accessed 26 July 2024.

Sherwood, Terry (1984). *Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Stachniewski, John (1991). *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair*. Oxford: Calderon Press.

Steinberg, Jesse R. (2007) "Leibniz, Creation and the Best of All Possible Worlds." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 62: 3, pp. 123–33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27646240>. Accessed 25 July 2024.

Strier, Richard (1996). "Donne and the politics of devotion." In *Religion, Literature, and Politics in Post-Reformation England, 1540-1688*. Edited by Donna B. Hamilton and Richard Strier. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Targoff, Ramie (2009). *John Donne, Body and Soul*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Van Laan, Thomas F (1963). "John Donne's 'Devotions' and the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises." *Studies in Philology*, 60: 2, pp. 191–202. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4173417>. Accessed 26 July 2024.