Heroic Deeds of Conscience: Milton’s Stand against Religious Conformity in Paradise Regained

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ABSTRACT Scholars have long debated how to interpret the closing temptation in Milton’s Paradise Regained. In this essay, David R. Schmitt argues that Milton uses the idiom of conscience in Paradise Regained to make an assault upon the political and persecutory imagination of the Restoration and, in the closing temptation, to transform Nonconformity into a heroic stance of faith. Situating the poem within Milton’s writings on toleration and the historical circumstances of Nonconformity, Schmitt argues that Milton not only defends conscientious liberty in his polemical engagement but also poetically embodies it in the Son of God’s final stand in Paradise Regained. KEYWORDS: Milton on toleration; religion in the public sphere; conscientious deliberation; silence as protest; Of Civil Power; Of True Religion

WITH THE EPIC OPENING of Paradise Regained, Milton leads his readers into a paradox. On the one hand, Milton voices epic ambition, promising to sing of “deeds / Above Heroic” that will transform an “Eremite” into a warrior and the desert into his “Victorious Field / Against the Spiritual Foe.”1 On the other hand, as Barbara Lewalski has shown in her magisterial study, Milton frustrates any traditional epic expectations. In place of a battle and an active hero, Milton offers protracted verbal argument and a puzzlingly passive Son.2 The invocation promises “deeds” but the reader is offered words and, to make matters worse, the Son’s words throughout the poem renounce Satan’s proffered means for action in the world. The Son does nothing and yet this inactivity is supposed to be heroic. Milton’s opening promise of epic “deeds” and the

Son’s ensuing inactivity create a paradoxical problem for readers and critics alike. What does one make of this active inactivity?

Critical discussion has long labored over the radical passivity of the Son. Earlier critical studies tended to emphasize Milton’s disengagement with politics and polemics in the poem. The Son’s radical passivity, indeed, the poem’s inwardness and religious interiority, signaled a Miltonic retreat from political action.3 This retreat was variously configured as a sober reflection on the past, marking the errors of the radical sects during the civil wars; as a temporary strategic withdrawal into quietism; or as a permanent disillusioned retreat from public political action into private spiritual concerns, the solace of “A paradise within” (PL 12.587). In each case, *Paradise Regained* was read as not actively participating in contemporary polemics but as standing oddly at a distance from the Restoration. Recent critical studies have concentrated on historicizing Milton, reading *Paradise Regained* by contrast as Milton’s intentional poetic involvement in Restoration politics. These studies, however, disagree about precisely what issues Milton was engaging. Ironically, the Son’s heroic passivity invites critics to discern a constellation of Miltonic political and religious activities, ranging from voicing republican discourse in the Restoration,4 to redefining Royalist Restoration spectacles of punishment and celebration,5 to sanctioning Quaker religious experiences both persecutory and prophetic.6

These disparate readings of *Paradise Regained*, identifying it as intensely private or controversially public, reveal more than changing approaches in literary and historical study. They actually reflect Milton’s poetic diction, for Milton chose the language of conscience as the central paradoxical idiom of *Paradise Regained*, and he did so with an intimate understanding of its religious and political implications. Far from being a Miltonic retreat from public controversy into private spirituality, *Paradise Regained* demonstrates Milton’s intentional use of private spirituality to engage in public reli-

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gious and political debate. In this regard, a number of critics have helpfully situated *Paradise Regained* within the trajectory of Milton's polemical engagement in controversies over civil power and religious liberty. The plain-style prose arguments of Milton's contemporaneous tracts, the constellation of issues appearing in both those tracts and the poem, and the topicality of this work in relation to heightened public debate over toleration encourage such a reading. In light of such work, this essay analyzes what has become a crux of the poem, the closing temptation on the pinnacle of the Temple. Briefly examining Milton's polemical engagement in arguments over toleration reveals the rhetorical dexterity with which Milton uses the idiom of conscience in *Paradise Regained* to make an assault upon the political and religious persecutory imagination of the Restoration and, in the pinnacle scene, to offer a poetic and polemically resonant justification of dissent.

Milton's Polemical Engagement

Consider the rhetorical terms of Milton's controversial engagement. In the polemical pamphlets surrounding debates about indulgence and toleration in the 1660s and early 1670s, what constituted true freedom in religious interiority and how its private practices related to the public religious community were at the center of debate. For


10. Such debate was excited by providentialist readings of war, plague, and fire in 1666–67, continued through the Bawdy House Riots in 1668, the lapse of the Conventicle Act in 1669, and the intense pamphleteering that surrounded the Second Conventicle Act in 1670, the Declaration of Indulgence in 1672, and its repeal closely followed by the Test Act in 1673.

established churchmen, the private conscience was a free but troubled realm. In their polemical defense of church governance and the practice of conformity, these churchmen often interwove two contradictory strands of thought: a celebration of the freedom granted tender consciences and a distrust of that freedom, necessitating legal restrictions in matters of religion. Conformists argued that civil and ecclesial authorities performed two functions in governing the established church: they proactively protected internal liberty of conscience, particularly by restricting their legislation only to matters of indifference, and they defensively contained internal liberty of conscience, particularly by limiting conscientious deliberation to private judgment without public action.

In their writing, conformist clergy highlighted the wide freedom allowed the individual in the private exercise of conscience. They argued that, because conformity demanded public practice only in indifferent matters, their policies actually safeguarded the private realm. For conformists, the Act of Uniformity in 1662 and its subsequent persecutory legislation did not infringe upon the individual’s internal exercise of conscientious deliberation precisely because the discourse of conscience remained free as long as it was private. As Roger L’Estrange writes in his *Toleration Discuss’d*, “Liberty of Conscience (according to my Books) is a Liberty of Judging, not of Acting.” When faced with the Nonconformist’s question about liberty of conscience—“Do’s not the Act for Uniformity Debar us of it?”—L’Estrange offers the conformist’s response: “Not at all: Your Actions indeed are Limited, but your Thoughts are Free.” According to such theological definition and argumentation, the Act of Uniformity did not restrain individual conscientious deliberation; it merely imposed restrictions upon the public manifestation of private belief. While the legislation restricted an individual from putting conscientious contemplation into public speech or action, the internal exercise of individual conscience remained free.

The conformists, therefore, celebrated religious interiority, provided that conscientious deliberation did not manifest itself in public action. For example, in his argument defending the establishment of church governance and laying the foundation for later conformist polemic, Edward Stillingfleet recognizes that religion, understood concretely as “the intennall acts of worship,” is “a matter of the greatest freedom and internal liberty”: “men may hold what opinions they will in their minds, the Law takes no cognizance of them: but it is the liberty of practice and venting and broaching those opinions which the Magistrates power extends to the restraint of.” For Stillingfleet, merely holding a variety of opinions in religion is no threat to the public peace. He even goes so far as to protect forms of religious interiority that, if publicly expressed, would be destructive of the public peace. Stillingfleet defends the freedom


of individuals to contemplate privately those opinions which constitute heresy and could lead to schism: “so long then as diversity of opinion tends not to the breaking the quiet and tranquility of the Church of God, a man may safely enjoy his own private apprehensions, as to any danger of molestation from Church Governours; That is, so long as a man keeps his opinion to himself, and hath the power of being his own counselor.”13 This division of judgment and practice, of private opinion and public religion, allowed the polemicists to argue that laws enforcing conformity, because they merely touched upon indifferent matters and did not interfere with the private exercise of conscience, provided liberty to tender consciences, securing the realm of religious interiority for radical inquiry and individual edification.

While such religious interiority seemed to afford a safe retreat from public controversy into private spirituality, it also served as a cause of great concern. Conformists imagined how those who formerly engaged in rebellion and had justified their actions in religious terms would practice religious interiority. Practices of scriptural and sermonic meditation, prayer, diaries, journals, life writing, cases of conscience, and other forms of examining the self and discerning spiritual guidance were potentially dangerous. For example, if conscientious deliberation were publicly expressed in religious meetings, Nonconformists could persuade others to join them in rebellion, transforming conventicles into literal armies of the Lord. As Thomas Tomkins imagines in his *The Inconveniences of Toleration*, “Though the pretence be nothing but Conscience, yet every discontent will joyn to make the cry most loud and general. Schismes do of themselves naturally grow into Parties . . . the gathered Churches are most excellent materials to raise new Troops out of.”14 For this reason, conformist legislation provided a policy of containment, granting freedom to the tender conscience but only freedom within bounds. Its internal operations were left to the individual as long as that individual’s external practice conformed in indifferent matters deemed conducive to peace and stability in church and state. As Stillingfleet writes, “The Unity then of the Church, is that of communion, and not that of apprehension; and different opinions are no further liable to censures, then as men by the broaching of them, do endeavour to disturb the peace of the Church of God.”15 Conformity thus provided an irenic compromise: freedom in conscientious deliberation provided internal liberty, while force in indifferent matters ensured external peace.

For Milton, however, such a compromise was ungodly. It frustrated both the private and the public working of God accomplished through the Spirit, scripture, and the individual conscience. Milton addresses these dynamics of spiritual privacy and publicity in *Of Civil Power*, published in 1659, and *Of True Religion*, published in 1673. In these writings on toleration, both before and after the Restoration, Milton remains consistent in his vision of the divine ordering of private and public spirituality: God has granted individuals a liberty of conscience so that a responsible practice of religious interiority will both inform and reform the public realm. Milton’s vision only

intensified as he witnessed the establishment and enforcement of Restoration policies of conformity and as he sought to live and to write within them.

In terms of the private working of God envisioned by Milton, the conformist compromise sought to give and to order for the individual what was already given and ordered by God: the deliberation of conscience. In Of Civil Power, Milton defines the “main foundation of our protestant religion” as “having no other divine rule or authoritie from without us warrantable to one another as a common ground but the holy scripture, and no other within us but the illumination of the Holy Spirit so interpreting scripture as warrantable only to our selves and to such whose consciences we can so perswade” (OCP 242). Milton divides religion into an external body of writing and an internal appropriation of that writing through the work of the Holy Spirit, leading to public persuasion. This view necessitates conscientious deliberation on the part of each individual believer as a practice of faith. Those who failed to deliberate neglected their God-given responsibility and lived by an implicit faith. For Milton, the bare recitation of the faith in public was not enough; individuals needed to interpret scripture in specific situations in order to practice true religion in the public sphere. As Milton writes, Christ has granted the liberty of conscience to all people and “strictly also hath commanded us to keep it and enjoy it” (OCP 263). To receive this liberty from another and to accept outward limitations upon its practice (as in the conformist compromise) was to forfeit true Christian liberty for voluntary servitude to human laws.16

In Of True Religion, Milton continues to emphasize this individual responsibility before God. He encourages individuals “to read duly and diligently the Holy scriptures,” chastising any who would “excuse himself by his much business from studious reading thereof” (OTR 433–34). Milton trusts that conscientious deliberation, even though performed by men and women who are prone to error, is God’s way of ordering the faith. Milton clearly defines this godly use of conscientious liberty for his readers as he sets forth his argument for toleration: “It is a human frailty to err and no man is infallible here on earth. But so long as all these profess to set the Word of God only before them as the Rule of faith and obedience; and use all diligence and sincerity of heart, by reading, by learning, by study, by prayer for Illumination of the holy Spirit, to understand the Rule and obey it, they have done what man can do: God will assuredly pardon them” (OTR 423–24). Milton even extends God’s favor to heterodox expressions of faith, as long as they are arrived at by responsible religious interiority rather than by the neglect of conscientious duty or by the implicit faith of Rome.17 Milton, therefore, assaults the irenic compromise of conformity by defining private conscientious deliberation as divinely given, divinely ordered, and, ultimately, divinely human in its work. In the internal practice of conscientious deliberation, the divine Spirit and the human person work together to interpret the external word of scripture.

16. Earlier, Milton depicts such forfeiture as characteristic of life in a Roman Catholic state where God’s gift of conscience, “implicitly enthrald to man instead of God, almost becoms no conscience, as the will not free, becoms no will” (OCP 254). For Milton, enforced external peace will contribute to an internal decay (OCP 269).

For Milton, this divinely human work of conscience embraces much more than religious interiority, however. By God’s design, it also manifests belief by public action in the world. Here, Milton addresses the conformists’ distinction between public and private toleration. In contrast to their irenic compromise that contained untutored internal liberty by means of an enforced external peace, Milton argues for the centrality of the individual’s proper exercise of conscience in both the private and the public domains. True liberty of conscience holds divine promise for the transformation of the public sphere precisely because it entails not only the private but also the public work of God. If the irenic compromise of internal freedom and external conformity frustrated God’s private work, separating the individual from the divinely given responsibility for religious interiority, it also frustrated God’s public work, separating faith from practice. It relied upon force to establish peace within the church and to maintain uniformity of religious practice within the public sphere. Such force, Milton claims, stifles the experience of true religion. It severs private conscientious deliberation from public service, redirecting the experience of true religion, turning it inward in solipsistic service to the individual rather than allowing it to flow outward in varied but sacred service to the world.

In Of Civil Power, Milton argues that God has so ordered salvation that divine grace and the regenerate human will manifest themselves in the conscientious practice of charity in the world. As Milton writes, “our whole practical duty in religion is contained in charitie or the love of God and our neighbour, no way to be forc’d” (OCP 256). Milton trusted in and sought to protect this rule of Christ, wherein Christ “deals only with the inward man and his actions,” using the human understanding, the human will, and “the work of divine grace upon them” to produce “faith and charitee” in the world (OCP 255). For a magistrate to use force in the practice of religion was to disrupt Christ’s rule through the individual conscience and “to compell hypocrisie not to advance religion” (OCP 256). Religion was to be advanced by God, working privately through scripture and the Holy Spirit to persuade the individual conscience and then working publicly through the individual’s confession of faith to influence “such whose consciences we can so perswade” (OCP 242). While “no man or body of men in these times can be the infallible judges or determiners in matters of religion to any other mens consciences but thir own,” Milton does not foresee a consequent restriction of public practice in favor of private belief; rather, he envisions a broadened public practice of private belief that, in turn, is received by individuals who exercise a deepened religious interiority, an ever more diligent use of the conscience, as “God himself in many places commands us by the same apostle, to search, to try, to judge of these things our selves” (OCP 242–43; see also 247–49). For Milton, the public sphere was to be the place where conscientious beliefs interacted in a sanctified and sanctifying variety for “nothing can with more conscience, more equitie, nothing more protestantly can be permitted then a free and lawful debate at all times by writing, conference, or disputation of what opinion soever, disputable by scripture” (OCP 249). True religion, therefore, was publicly private: it publicly practiced a confession of faith privately discerned through conscientious deliberation. This public privacy fostered spiritual
growth by engaging others in similar responsible religious interiority although not necessarily in similar beliefs.

In *Of True Religion*, Milton heightens this emphasis upon God’s public work through Christian liberty. He does so by starkly contrasting two public realms: one ordered by divine liberty and receiving divine promise; the other ordered by conformity and provoking divine judgment. As in *Of Civil Power*, Milton supports publishing and disseminating responsible religious interiority: he envisions a public sphere where individuals “give an account of their Faith, either by Arguing, Preaching in their several Assemblies, Publick writing, and the freedom of Printing” (*OTR* 426). This time, however, Milton names specific heterodox teachings and asserts that God will work through their expression in public practice. Since “the Gospel commands us to tolerate one another, though of various opinions, and hath promised a good and happy event thereof,” Milton envisions a Christian liberty wherein individuals use the writings of “Anabaptists, Arians, Arminians, & Socinians” to grow in the faith: “There is no Learned man but will confess he hath much profited by reading Controversies, his Senses awakt, his Judgement sharpnd, and the truth which he holds more firmly establisht” (*OTR* 436–38). In reasoning reminiscent of *Areopagitica*, Milton asserts that “all controversies being permitted, falsehood will appear more false, and truth more true: which must needs conduce much, not only to the confounding of Popery, but to the general conformation of unimplicit truth” (*OTR* 438). True religion, therefore, necessitates critical public debate: various beliefs, formed by responsible religious interiority, are publicly confessed and promote further conscientious deliberation, tempered by “mutual forbearance and charity one towards the other, though dissenting in some opinions” (*OTR* 435). In contrast to conformity, this public sphere is far from unified in religious belief. What unifies individuals is not an external force but an internal liberty, not religious belief but true religious practice: the responsible exercise of Christian conscience, a publicly private and divinely human work.

For Milton, divine promise rests in the saving labor of conscientious liberty, a liberty he not only defends in polemical engagement but also imaginatively embodies in the Son of God in *Paradise Regained*.

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**Poetry, Polemic, and Milton’s Hero on the Pinnacle**

In *Paradise Regained*, Milton rewrites both the epic and the biblical traditions to represent the Son of God’s conscientious deliberations as heroic deeds.18 In doing so, he displaces a relatively unified biblical commentary tradition. In the epic invocation, Milton identifies these “deeds / Above Heroic” as “unrecorded left through many an Age” (*PR* 1.14–16). As the biblically literate reader would have known, the wilderness temptations had been recorded, from the spare account of Mark to the more extended narratives of Matthew and Luke, and sung “through many an Age” in drama and commentary both biblical and sermonic. Yet what had not been recorded were the medita-

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18. For Milton’s relation to the biblical tradition, see Elizabeth Marie Pope, “*Paradise Regained*”: *The Tradition and the Poem* (New York, 1962); for Milton’s relation to the epic tradition, see Lewalski, *Milton’s Brief Epic*. 
tive practices of the Son, the religious interiority that lay behind the Son’s citation of scripture. In fact, the commentary tradition emphasized the verbal sparsity of the biblical accounts. For biblical commentators, the Son’s use of scripture alone in overcoming Satan’s temptations taught the sufficiency of God’s word for human trust and divine testing. The absence from the biblical narrative of extended internal meditation was significant to religious commentators: it supported logocentric theological claims, emphasizing the external word over religious interiority.

In his writings on religious toleration, however, Milton emphasizes the role of religious interiority in the interpretation of scripture. The bare recitation of the external word of God was not enough. Milton, therefore, displays what had been unrecorded by the gospel writers: the religious interiority of the Son of God. Far from a record of external events alone (Satan’s temptations and the Son’s replies, citing God’s external word), Milton’s brief epic explores the Son’s internal conscientious practices (his interpretation of obedience to God in specific situations) and invests those practices with epic stature, as “deeds / Above Heroic.” Through the Son of God’s heroic “deeds” of conscience, Milton publishes the proper work of private conscience to educate readers in the exercise of true religion and the “strenuous liberty” (Samson Agonistes 271) that it entails.

Such a poetic design is polemically charged and fits strategically within Milton’s public arguments for religious toleration. As noted earlier, the debates over indulgence and toleration in the 1660s and early 1670s centered on the nature of religious interiority and how its practices related to public action and inaction. Milton captures this polemical fault line separating private conscientious deliberation and public practice by using the temptation sequence of the gospels as the biblical subject for his brief epic. In biblical interpretation, the temptations occur at a liminal time and are therefore fraught with ambiguity. Set between the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, the temptation sequence joins two events often interpreted in terms of their public revelation: the baptism, revealing Jesus in his mediatory office, and the Galilean ministry, revealing Jesus in his prophetic office. Placed between these
initiatory acts of public revelation, the temptations are remarkably separate in their privacy and yet intimately related to the public ministry. In **Paradise Regained**, Milton capitalizes upon this biblical liminality to explore configurations of spiritual privacy and publicity, both satanic and divine, and ultimately to legitimate the public expression of private conscientious belief.

In Milton's writings on toleration, conscientious deliberation was the necessary foundation for the public expression of faith. As Milton reconfigures the biblical account, the same is true for the Son of God. In fact, in comparison to the gospel versions, Milton actually strengthens the connection between the temptations and the public ministry of Jesus. The Son of God's private conscientious deliberations, poetically privileged by Milton, lead to "his victory / Over temptation and the Tempter proud" and to the angelic song that encourages him to "Now enter, and begin to save mankind" (PR 4.594–95, 635). By associating extended internal conscientious deliberation (rather than the bare external citation of the word of God) with the Son of God's victory over Satan, Milton aggressively legitimates this private practice. By closing the temptations with a silent act of public sufferance (rather than an audible act of public profession), Milton destabilizes the conformist's policies of containment, publishing as Satan's work the way such policies create the persecuted public stance of Nonconformity. Finally, by voicing in angelic song the Son of God's future work, Milton bestows divine sanction upon the fuller public ministry of the word. This is the ministry for which he argues in his polemical writings, one in which God's work, begun in private conscientious deliberation, is publicly professed and through that profession informs and reforms the public realm.

In **Paradise Regained**, Milton not only places his polemic for true liberty of conscience within poetry, but he also polemically configures his poetry for subversive argument. By carefully limiting his subject to the Son's private deliberations of conscience, Milton writes subversively within the discursive practices sanctioned by his opponents. The Son's exercise of conscience is not expressed in any public forum and does not take the form of any positive public action: his colloquy with Satan is private, sequestered in the wilderness, and, at the end of the poem when the angelic chorus encourages the Son to enter his "glorious work" and "begin to save mankind," he returns to his mother's house "unobserv'd" (PR 4.634–40). In this way, Milton takes up the language afforded him by the conformists and transforms it into a challenge of conformity. The very language sanctioned by conformity, private conscientious deliberation, becomes the Son's only weapon against it, divinely challenging the laws that limit the exercise of true religion and revealing a more excellent way.

The Son's more excellent way embodies contemporary Nonconformist conscientious practice, a publicly private and divinely human work. Stanley Fish offers the most perceptive reading of the poem in this vein. He demonstrates how the Son's verbal sparring with Satan in the poem is nothing less than the practice of conscience, as the Son discerns his obedience to divine will in matters deemed indifferent.21 Fish care-

fully and accurately analyzes how the external events in the wilderness spur the Son of God to faithful practices of religious interiority in relation to matters deemed indifferent. Fish, however, does not pursue the importance of this practice, its heroic stature in Milton's polemical context. Instead, he highlights the generic tension between such conscientious practice and the reader's expectations of plot in epic narrative. Thus, for Fish, in place of narrative movement toward climactic action, Milton offers the Son of God's consistent, faithful, and obedient action: conscientious deliberation based upon interpreting the word of God in every situation. As Fish writes, “since obedience is not a matter of following directions but having a direction, one has it not at particular times or in response to extraordinary circumstances, but at all times and in response to any and every circumstance.”

Consistent obedience through conscientious deliberation, therefore, forms the heart of the epic narrative, rewriting not only the nature of individual heroic deeds but the larger trajectory of heroic action as well. When read within the context of Milton's polemical writings on religious toleration and his own conscientious practices in the private composition of *On Christian Doctrine*, *Paradise Regained* legitimates conscientious practice as a divine gift to all individuals to be exercised responsibly at all times.

There is a problem, however. If conscientious practice is so important, both polemically (in Milton's political arguments) and poetically (in Milton's rewriting of the epic and the biblical traditions), why does the last confrontation between the Son of God and Satan fail to offer any conscientious deliberation? Why does Milton's account of this event—which concludes the wilderness temptations, causes Satan's fall, and inspires the angels to feed the Son from the tree of life and sing “Heavenly Anthems of his victory / Over temptation and the Tempter proud” (*PR* 4.594–95)—not verbalize the Son of God's religious interiority? Milton leaves his readers, instead, with a bare citation of the word of God that raises a troubling question: how does this episode relate to the religious interiority privileged and practiced throughout the rest of the poem?

Milton's use of both economy of language and grandness of scale as the Son of God stands upon the pinnacle of the Temple has caused this scene to stand out in relation to the rest of the poem, generating what one critic calls “a cottage industry” of scholarship. The radical nature of this scene has caused some to argue that the Son of God moves into action at this point. Even though this scene appears in the scriptural account and even though her critical work reads Milton's poem within that biblical frame of reference, Elizabeth Pope denies this scene the status of a temptation: she argues that “the only thing which is practically certain is that the present unorthodox

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22. Fish, “Things and Actions Indifferent,” 165.


form of the *mitte te deorsum* comes, in the last analysis, from its author's determination to introduce action and avoid overweighing the poem with argument: there is no other wholly satisfactory explanation of either the conception or the style.”

Fish rightly challenges the claim that the poem has suddenly shifted into action, arguing that the pinnacle scene has created a temptation for critics to construct a climax in the poem by neglecting the Son of God's consistent conscientious practice and, thereby, to do “the Devil's work.”

Unfortunately, Fish does not offer another “wholly satisfactory explanation” of the absence of conscientious deliberation at this point in the poem. He leaves it as a satanic test of the reader, “a temptation of plot” that unfortunately leaves the Son of God and Milton's readers strangely positioned. They encounter Satan “in a timeless realm” where conscientious practice is “eternally occurring” rather than in (but not of) the world, where very real crises of conscience and very real deliberations crowd the London bookstalls in various and vying arguments. Milton wrote his polemics and poetry in this world, where arguments constructed through conscientious practice were important. They were debated in the pulpit and the Parliament, encouraged by manuals of devotion, and yet contained by conformity. These are the conscientious deliberations that Milton displays throughout *Paradise Regained*, and then silences, for some reason, at this point in the poem.

When Fish does treat the dilemma of Milton's silencing conscientious deliberation upon the pinnacle of the Temple, he strangely erases the nature of conscientious practice. The closing inaction and silence of the Son of God are read as part of a “progressive narrowing (to nothing) of the area in which the self is allowed to operate” manifested by “a pattern of language in the course of which the individual voice is more and more circumscribed until in the end it falls silent.”

Fish argues that “Milton's heroes characteristically perform actions or make decisions which in context affirm the claims of God at the expense of the self until that self exists only in terms of its reliance upon God.” For Fish, “the voice of the individual is heard no more.” While such self-annihilating reliance upon God makes sense in terms of the unregenerate self, it differs markedly from Milton's polemical and private dedication to responsible religious interiority, the strenuous liberty of the regenerate self's obedience to divine will. In Fish's argument, the Son's silence and inaction constitute a subordination of...
the human will to the divine will in which conscientious deliberation is silenced and only the scriptural words of God are left: on the pinnacle, “the Son performs the impossible feat of saying silence and makes himself disappear.” I would argue that the opposite is true. Milton defines rather than erases the human subject in *Paradise Regained*. For Milton, obedience to divine will produces conscientious deliberation, as the individual appropriately meditates upon the external word of God through the gift of the Spirit. In *Paradise Regained*, Milton confesses rather than erases this divinely human work of the Son of God. He celebrates how the Son of God vanquishes temptation through appropriate religious interiority, and thereby asserts the powerful importance of the Nonconformist conscience. In what way, then, does this utterance represent Milton’s understanding of appropriate religious interiority and how does this one moment relate to the other moments of religious interiority practiced throughout the poem?

Some would argue that Milton is representing religious interiority here, but of a different kind. The words that the Son of God speaks are a manifestation of the direct inspiration of the Spirit, thereby legitimating the enthusiastic prophetic speech of dissent. In a perceptive reading of *Paradise Regained*, Peggy Samuels positions the conscientious practices of the Son of God within the context of the Restoration “discourse of quiet” and the attempt by the established church to silence those who claimed to speak for God. For her, the sparsity of speech on the pinnacle is determined less by what has happened to the Son of God (a crisis of identity) and more by what has happened to what he says (a crisis of the word): the Son’s bare words on the pinnacle of the Temple are both the scriptural words of God, quoted by the Son of God, and the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, voiced by the Son. She argues that Milton thereby legitimates the troubling but prophetic speech of dissent “in a context in which no human (non-governmental, nonecclesiastical) spokespersons for God will any longer be tolerated.” Her lucid reading of the established church’s program of containment and the dissenting, primarily Quaker, responses clarifies the importance of the poem’s setting for interpreting the poem: Restoration contemplative practices are a nexus of spiritual freedom, political agency, and policies of containment that inflect Milton’s writing in this poem. Yet Milton’s position within this contested space is defined more carefully than through an equation of external prophetic utterances with direct revelation of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the poem, Milton is not legitimating enthusiastic prophetic speech but rather the individual practice of responsible religious interiority. In *Paradise Regained*, when the Son of God debates with Satan over deceptive oracles, he declares that “Oracles are ceast” (PR 1.456). Instead,
God hath now sent his living Oracle
Into the World, to teach his final will,
And sends his Spirit of Truth henceforth to dwell
In pious Hearts, an inward Oracle
To all truth requisite for men to know.

(PR 1.460–64)

Throughout the poem, Milton depicts that “inward Oracle” not in ecstatic prophetic utterances but in responsible religious interiority. First, he represents this interiority in the Son of God’s repeated conscientious practices, from his meditation upon the word of God at the beginning of the poem to his combat of Satan’s wiles and misuse of God’s external word until the final temptation. Second, he has the Son describe those practices, in which the “Light from above” (PR 4.289) equips the faithful reader to practice judgment in reading any work (PR 4.285–330). Third, he records the Son’s desire to form a people through such practices, “By winning words to conquer willing hearts, / And make persuasion do the work of fear; / At least to try, and teach the erring Soul / Not wilfully misdoing, but unware / Misled” (PR 1.222–26). Milton further reinforces such an interpretation in his arguments and strategies outside the poem: in his polemical writings on true religion; in his definition of scripture and conscientious practice in Christian Doctrine; in his public practice (infamously known) in the divorce tracts; in his private practice (posthumously known) in composing Christian Doctrine (CD 6:117–21); and in his intent that this practice should be exemplary (rather than his conclusions defining) for all intended readers of his work (CD 6:121–24). For Milton,

34. In contrast to the biblical narratives that emphasize the Spirit’s agency in the temptation accounts (either using passive verbs to record the Son as one acted upon by the Spirit in Matthew and Luke or making the Spirit the subject of the sentence in Mark), Milton joins the Spirit’s agency to the Son’s interiority: “the Spirit” and the Son’s “deep thoughts” both lead him into the wilderness (PR 1.189–93), so that his experience there becomes an embodiment of conscientious practice.

35. Lewalski argues that the claim to be God’s living oracle is among the special revelations for the Son of God. But even such revelations are predicated upon the Son of God’s proper exercise of conscience in regard to the prophetic office and firmly embedded within such practices. See Lewalski, Milton’s Brief Epic, 210–14.

36. The parenthetical statement, “(and What he brings, what needs he elsewhere seek),” referring to the inward light that an individual brings to texts that are read is not a subversion of all forms of writing in favor of direct inspiration, as it has recently been interpreted, but rather a denunciation of Satan’s temptation to seek that which will equip the Son of God for his mission within nonscriptural texts and thereby devalue both the inward oracle and the external word that are the equipping gifts of God. See Bennet, Reviving Liberty, 162–66.

37. On reading this statement in the opening meditation as the Son of God’s preliminary discernment of his prophetic office rather than as a renunciation of the temptation of rhetoric, see Lewalski, Milton’s Brief Epic, 190–92. For a Nonconformist understanding of this exemplary role of “our Saviour” who did not use force but recognized only those “whom Preaching and sound Perswasion hath won over to him,” see Edward Bagshaw, The Second Part of the Great Question Concerning Things Indifferent in Religious Worship (London, 1661), 3.

38. See “Of the Holy scripture” and “Of the Gospel, and Christian Liberty,” where Milton notes that having the Holy Spirit within “is as good as having the gift of prophecy and dreams and visions” (CD 6:574–92, 521–41).
the Spirit of truth works with both the individual conscience and the texts of scripture to enable conscientious discernment as the basis for proper external action. The constellation of the Spirit, the word, and the conscience forms the proper basis of agency in the public sphere for Milton, both within and without the poem. Yet, as noted above, the Son of God’s proper conscientious discernment, practiced throughout the poem, is the very activity that Milton hides in the pinnacle event. How can this event both represent and hide proper conscientious discernment at the same time?

The answer lies in Milton’s use of the public display of the crisis of Nonconformity, a crisis wherein private conscientious deliberation is given public witness in acts of silent resistance. In this last temptation, Milton hides the Son of God’s conscientious deliberation in order to vanquish temptation not by a crisis of identity (who is the Son of God?) nor by a crisis of scripture (what is the external word of God?) but by a crisis of conscience (what is the power of the private exercise of conscience?). This is the crisis of Restoration spirituality: the public voice of private conscience. For Milton, the divine will operates not through the individual’s self-annihilation in a bare recitation of the word of God (as in external conformity) nor, through the displacement of an external text, in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (as in enthusiastic prophecy), but through the individual’s conscientious practice. Such practice joins private internal spiritual deliberation with faithful external public action, even when that public action is, paradoxically, the refusal to act, as in the case of Nonconformity. When individuals resist the imposition of external ceremonies because of their deliberations of conscience, inaction becomes action because their private deliberation has a public manifestation: the conscientious stance of Nonconformity. This stance is paradoxically active and inactive, public and private, at the same time. By hiding the Son of God’s agency, Milton writes the public stance of Nonconformity into the poem. He traces the ways of the divine in the public privacy of Nonconformity, revealing the power of that religious interiority both within the context of the poem and of Restoration London. The external text, the internal Spirit, and the Son of God work together to produce a manifestation of the human subject that is silently heroic: standing upon the pinnacle of the Temple in an act of religious interiority that is both outwardly resistant to satanic machinations and inwardly obedient, through the liberty of conscience, to the will and the work of God.


The Son of God's stance upon the pinnacle supports Milton's argument for the Christian's proper exercise of conscience. The Son of God stands, "vanquishing / Temptation" (PR 4.607–8) by a mystery, the mystery of proper religious interiority. By keeping this means hidden in this last temptation, Milton joins the mystery of the gospel hidden from the foundation of the world (the Son's vanquishing of temptation) to the mystery of religious interiority, hidden for the present by the persecutory practices of conformity. At the same time, Milton displays how the public acts of Nonconformity in Restoration London (silent acts of renunciation) are the heroic work, divinely human, actively inactive, and publicly private, of all those who stand with the Son of God in "his uneasy station" (PR 4.584).

Milton accomplishes this rhetorical feat by rewriting the biblical tradition so that this closing scene resonates with meaning both in biblical typology and in the polemics and practices of Nonconformity. Consider Milton's work with biblical interpretation. While the biblical tradition records Satan tempting the Son of God to a single act in this temptation ("cast thyself down"), interpreted as a temptation to presumptuous vainglory, Milton has Satan tempt the Son of God to one of two acts: to stand ("There stand, if thou wilt stand; to stand upright / Will ask thee skill") or to cast himself down ("if not to stand, / Cast thyself down" [PR 4.551–52, 554–55]). This rewriting has confounded critics, not so much by the use of the biblical command ("Cast thyself down"), which is relatively easily answered in accord with biblical tradition, but by the addition of the command to "stand." In what way did Satan intend this command and in what way did the Son of God fulfill it?

41. While this work of the Son of God is obviously not the full gospel message, it does constitute the gracious work of the Son that is fitting for the subject of this poem. In Christian Doctrine, Milton writes that "The COVENANT OF GRACE itself is first made public from God's point of view, Gen. iii. 15" (6:514) with the divine promise that the seed of the woman (the Son of God) will bruise the head of the serpent (Satan). Milton then cites Genesis 3:15 as an example of how the gospel "WAS FIRST ANNOUNCED, OBSCURELY BY MOSES" (6:521, 523). In regard to the temptation of Jesus, Milton lists the temptation sequence as that administration by Christ of his mediatorial office in the state of humiliation wherein he voluntarily submitted himself in life "TO THE DIVINE JUSTICE, IN ORDER TO SUFFER ALL THE THINGS WHICH WERE NECESSARY FOR OUR REDEMPTION" (6:438–39).

42. For example, see the subsequent discussion of the silent acts of renunciation by Nonconforming ministers in response to the Act of Uniformity on August 24, 1662.

43. Appropriately, in Christian Doctrine, Milton argues that there are two ends to Christ's administration of his mediatorial office: "the satisfaction of divine justice on behalf of all men, and the shaping of the faithful in the image of Christ" (6:443).


45. The Son of God avoids misusing scripture in a presumptuous claim upon God by allowing scripture to interpret scripture. This interpretation, however, is only relatively easy, as the multi-valence of the phrase "Tempt not the Lord thy God" (meaning either "tempt not God" or "tempt not me") has fueled various configurations of the last temptation as an identity test. For a survey of the critical literature regarding the identity test, see MacCallum, Milton and the Sons of God, 313–1532; for readings that persuasively indicate problems with this reading, see Regina Schwartz, "Redemption and Paradise Regained," Milton Studies 42 (2002): 26–30; Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, "Standing Alone on the Pinnacle: Milton in 1752," Milton Studies 26 (1990): 193–218; and Fish, "Things and Actions Indifferent," 184–8513; and for a reading that demonstrates its subtle persistence, see John Rumrich, "Milton's Theanthropos: The Body of Christ in Paradise Regained," Milton Studies 42 (2002): 50–67, esp. 65.
In terms of Satan's intentions, some have read his command for the Son of God to “stand” (PR 4.551) as a scornful charge for the Son of God to do the impossible. In support of this interpretation, Milton's later glimpse of Satan's intentions (“he stood to see his Victor fall” [PR 4.571]) is read physically (he wanted to see the Son of God fall from the pinnacle, where it would be impossible for a human to stand) rather than typologically (he wanted to see the Son of God repeat Adam's fall into sin). In this reading, Satan knows that a human cannot stand upon the pinnacle and expects to see the Son of God physically fall when placed there. When the Son of God stands, he reveals his divinity by doing that which is impossible for a human to do. This interpretation, however, is problematic because the Son of God reveals his divinity and thereby, in some measure, falls to Satan's temptation to exercise his divinity, to overcome human weakness by divine strength. Others have read what Satan commands, to stand on the pinnacle, as humanly possible, noting that in his temptation Satan specifies the terms on which it can be done: “to stand upright / Will ask thee skill” (PR 4.551–52). In this case, the Son of God's standing reveals his humanity: he does that which demands human skill and waits, poised upon “his uneasy station” (PR 4.584) until delivered by divine intervention. This interpretation is problematic, however, precisely because the Son of God reveals his humanity in a way that answers Satan's demand. He uses human skill to stand and thereby falls to Satan's temptation to obey Satan rather than God.

That the Son of God stands is clear, although it is an “uneasy station” (PR 4.584). That he does so in a way that fulfills his filial obedience to God is also clear on the basis of the result of the temptation: Milton joins the standing of the Son of God to the fall of Satan (“Tempt not the Lord thy God; he said and stood. / But Satan smitten with amazement fell” [4.561–62]) and, after Satan's fall, the angels tend to the Son of God and sing “Heavenly Anthems of his victory / Over temptation and the Tempter proud” (PR 4.594–95). But how the Son of God stands is unclear. To stand by an exercise of his divinity, overcoming the weakness of human flesh by divine strength, is to fall; and to stand by an exercise of his humanity, using the strength of human flesh in obedience to Satan's command, is to fall. How, then, does the Son of God stand in a way that fulfills his filial obedience to God and yet resists Satan's temptation to exercise his divinity or his humanity in a sinful way?

The answer lies in the hidden power of religious interiority, the Son of God's exercise of human strength not in obedience to Satan but in obedience to God. In this

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46. For a recent example, see Rumrich, “Milton's Theanthropos,” 65; for a review of this position in the critical tradition, see Rushdy, “Standing Alone on the Pinnacle,” 215n7.

47. For example, see Rushdy, “Standing Alone on the Pinnacle,” 195–99, 215n10; Fish, How Milton Works, 386–87; and MacCallum, who, while recognizing that to stand is humanly possible, argues that ultimately it is of no importance as Milton writes the account in such a way as to “point to the importance of a spiritual reading” (Milton and the Sons of God, 255–62, esp. 258).

48. For those who read Satan's command to stand as the command to do the impossible, these further words are simply a mark of Satan's scorn rather than a literal description of the case. The whole temptation, however, is marked by scorn and these words could be scornful in asking the Son to do that which cannot be done or in pressing the Son to do that which should not be done (after all, in this way, the command to cast himself down is uttered in scorn as well).
respect, Milton’s rewriting of the biblical tradition is not as radical as is customarily thought. In the traditional interpretation of this temptation, the Son of God is tempted by presumptuous vainglory: to cast himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple is both to presume upon the promises of God that he will be delivered (“for he shall give his angels charge over thee” [Psalms 91:11–12; cf. Matthew 4:6 and Luke 4:10–11]) and to seek to be revealed by means of his own choosing (casting himself down in order to be publicly delivered by God among the crowds at the Temple) rather than those that God intends. When Milton adds Satan’s command to stand to this temptation, he clarifies rather than disrupts this tradition: he continues to express the temptation to presumption through Satan’s command to “Cast thyself down” (PR 4.555) but he amplifies the temptation to vainglory by adding Satan’s command to “stand” (PR 4.551). This reading clarifies why, when Satan commands the Son of God to stand, Milton also has him call for an intentional act of self-revelation in this particular place: “I to thy Father’s house / Have brought thee, and highest plac’t, highest is best, / Now show thy Progeny” (PR 4.552–54). The temptation to stand is a temptation for the Son of God to reveal himself (“Now show thy Progeny”) by means of his own choosing. More specifically, Satan tempts the Son of God to reveal himself (“show thy Progeny”) by claiming the “highest” place in his “Father’s house” (a place to which he has been brought and “plac’t” by Satan but also a place to which Satan believes the Son of God should have claim to stand if he is the Son of God). In being tempted to stand upon the pinnacle, the Son of God is tempted to rely on human skill (“to stand upright / Will ask thee skill” [PR 4.551–52]) in an act of vainglory (“highest is best”) that makes claim to the “highest” place in his “Father’s house,” revealing himself to be the Son of God by means of his own choosing rather than by obedience to the will of God. The Son of God is, therefore, poised between a vainglorious reliance on human skill (to stand) and a presumptuous reliance on divine promises (to cast himself down). Through this reconfiguration, Milton uses the familiar strains of biblical tradition to celebrate the Son of God’s faithful obedience through conscientious dis-

49. For an argument of Milton’s radical revision, see Pope, “Paradise Regained”: The Tradition and the Poem, 92–95.

50. For the strength of this “established line that the temptation was one of vain-glorious presumption,” see Pope, “Paradise Regained”: The Tradition and the Poem, 80–92. Compare Perkins, Satans Sophistrie, 65–68; Calvin, Harmonie upon the Three Evangelistes, 131; Dyke, Two Treatises, 283–90; Thomas Taylor, Christs Combate and Conquest (Cambridge, 1618), 195–96; and Peter Heylyn, Theologia Veterum: or the Summe of Christian Theologie (London, 1654), 166.

51. Critics, unfortunately, overlook the context of this command and read it as referencing the result of the Son of God casting himself down from the pinnacle rather than the result of his standing upon it. For example, see the otherwise careful reading of Rushdy, in “Standing Alone on the Pinnacle,” 199. While the biblical tradition certainly associates both vainglory and presumption in the act of the Son of God casting himself down from the pinnacle, Milton is careful to clarify that tradition. Note how Milton uses parallelism (“if thou wilt stand” and “if not to stand”) to separate the two acts (“There stand” and “Cast thyself down”) and, then, how he positions this statement (“Now show thy progeny”) as the result of the first act, even as he positions the subsequent statement (“safely if Son of God”) as the result of the second act (PR 4.551–59). Milton’s poetic structure would at least argue for reading the command to “show thy Progeny” as inflecting both the Son of God’s act of standing and his act of casting himself down, if not exclusively the former.
cernment, for both of these choices are intimately related to Milton’s dialectical method for clarifying appropriate religious interiority.

In *Christian Doctrine*, Milton examines religious interiority in terms of the human being’s internal worship of God. As he anatomizes this worship, Milton emphasizes the quality of “CONFIDENCE, which is placed entirely in God” (*CD* 6:657). He defines such confidence dialectically, contrasting it to four human acts: “distrust of God,” “presumption,” “trust in the flesh,” and “trust in idols” (*CD* 6:658–59). These four human acts constitute constant sources of temptation for the cultivation of one’s religious affections toward God and it is in opposition to them that true internal worship is known. At the center of this listing lies the dual struggle of the last temptation in *Paradise Regained*: over confidence in the divine (“presumption”) and overconfidence in the human (“trust in the flesh”). For Milton, the proper practice of religious interiority is understood in opposition to these temptations.

Recognizing this dialectic clarifies what Milton reveals, even though it remains hidden, as the Son of God stands in the final temptation. Milton takes the traditional interpretation of this temptation and amplifies it in a way that focuses upon religious interiority, dialectically defining the Son of God’s confidence in God. Milton positions the Son of God in opposition to two specific sins: Satan tempts the Son of God to “presumption” by commanding him to “Cast thyself down” in an act of overconfidence in divine promises (“He will give command / Concerning thee to his Angels” [*PR* 4.555–59]) and Satan tempts the Son of God to a vainglorious “trust in the flesh” by commanding him to “stand, if thou wilt stand” in an act of overconfidence in human strength (since “to stand upright / Will ask thee skill”) that will be his self-revelation (“Show forth thy Progeny” [*PR* 4.551–54]). The Son of God, however, does not presume upon the promises of God in scripture and answers Satan’s temptation to “Cast thyself down” with the scriptural command “Tempt not the Lord thy God” (*PR* 4.555, 561). He also does not trust in human strength. Satan has tempted him to “stand,” if possible, and claim the “highest” place in his “Father’s house” (*PR* 4.551, 552–53) by relying on human skill, and the Son of God responds by standing, not in obedience to Satan, but in conscientious obedience to God. The Son of God stands by an internal act of worship, hidden from Satan but (as we shall see) revealed to the reader, that demonstrates his confidence in God. In rewriting the biblical tradition, Milton dramatizes for the reader the dialectic through which true religious interiority is known: the Son of God stands upon the pinnacle, poised between a sinful trust in divine strength and a sinful trust in human strength, standing only by a hidden but faithful trust exercised in the divinely human strength of conscientious practice.

By hiding the Son of God’s conscientious practice in this closing scene, Milton closes his epic with a heroic manifestation of the Nonconformist response to spiritual crisis. Hidden within this event lies the public power of the private conscience to resist satanic wiles. On the pinnacle of the Temple, the Son of God vanquishes temptation by an act of internal worship that displays his confidence in God even though he remains

52. As Milton offers biblical citations for the sin of presumption, he references the temptation on the pinnacle, indicating an awareness of and at least some agreement with the biblical tradition.
silent in regard to his conscientious deliberations. Rather than stand by means of his own choosing, the Son of God stands by the proper exercise of religious interiority. This internal worship is the means that God has chosen for revealing him to be the Son of God, for avenging “Supplanted Adam,” for “vanquishing / Temptation,” and for regaining “lost Paradise” (PR 4.606–8). The Son of God stands by his continued exercise of the divinely human strength of conscientious deliberation, a hidden obedience to God that overcomes the wiles of Satan.

In a careful deployment of double meaning, Milton has the Son of God's hidden obedience be the means by which God reveals his Son's true “Progeny,” understood both in terms of his parentage, traced in the distant mystery of salvation, and in terms of his descendants, traced in the nearer mystery of Nonconformity. Typologically, the Son of God's proper exercise of conscience on the pinnacle traces the hidden mystery of salvation, answering Adam's fall. In Paradise Lost, after Satan disturbs Eve's sleep, Raphael is sent by God to converse with Adam, providing a divine revelation that will strengthen him in the exercise of his free will against the temptation of Satan (PL 5.224–45). At the close of this discourse, Raphael encourages Adam with a statement clarifying the power that God has given him to resist temptation:

stand fast; to stand or fall
Free in thine own Abitrement it lies.
Perfet within, no outward aid require;
And all temptation to transgress repel.

(PL 8.640–43)

Adam is able to resist temptation (“to stand” and “all temptation to transgress repel”) by relying upon the liberty (“Free”) of his own internal conscientious practice (“thine own Arbitrement . . . / Perfet within.” In fact, for Milton, this liberty defines what it means to be a son of God.

In Paradise Regained, before the pinnacle of the Temple episode, Satan focuses his temptation upon the meaning of the title “Son of God.” In Satan's rhetoric, the title “bears no single sense”: it includes all humanity (“All men are Sons of God”) and even Satan himself (“The Son of God I also am, or was, / And if I was, I am: relation stands”}

53. To do so would be to demonstrate his choice to reveal that he is the Son of God by claiming the highest place in his Father's house and would be to sin by acting out of a vainglorious desire for the highest place, an overconfidence in human strength, obedience to Satan, and a choice of his own means for self-revelation.
54. Earlier in the poem, the Father tells Gabriel, first, that the angels shall behold “how I begin / To verify” the solemn message Gabriel delivered at the Annunciation that the child of Mary should be “call’d the Son of God,” second, that Satan “now shall know I can produce a man / Of female Seed, far abler to resist / All his solicitations,” and, third, that all people “hereafter, may discern, / From what consummate virtue I have chose / This perfect Man, by merit call’d my Son” (1.130–67).
55. For Milton's reading of the fall into sin as disobedience in relation to the “divine plan” that “angels and men should alike be endowed with free will” and therefore be able to exercise the liberty to “stand firm” in temptation, see Christian Doctrine, 6:161–63, esp. 163, 351–53, 381–85.
Satan places the Son of God upon the pinnacle “Therefore to know what more thou art than man, / Worth naming Son of God” (PR 4.538–39). Here, Milton strengthens the echoes of typology in the way he rewrites the biblical tradition. By having the Son of God stand upon the pinnacle as Satan falls, Milton alerts the reader to the saving mystery of the Son of God’s mediatorial office that remains unwritten. Since Adam fell by failing to exercise his internal liberty to stand, condemning all humanity to be slaves of sin rather than sons of God, the Son of God stands by doing that which Adam did not do: he resists Satan’s temptations by a proper exercise of conscience. The Son of God answers Adam’s fall by exercising the mystery of his humanity, faithful obedience. He is obedient not to Satan’s command to stand, for that would demonstrate an overconfidence in human strength, claiming the “highest” place in his “Father’s house” (PR 4.552–53) by means of his own choosing; instead, he is obedient to God’s command to “stand fast” in the presence of temptation by practicing conscientious deliberation, revealing the divinely human strength of faithful obedience through conscientious deliberation, a strength given to (but not used by) Adam in temptation. He practices his internal liberty to stand and demonstrates his “filial Virtue” that the Father ventures “Against whate’er may tempt, whate’er seduce,” so that all the “stratagems of Hell, / And devilish machinations come to nought” (PR 1.177–81). Where Adam fell, the Son of God stands; where Adam disobeyed, the Son of God obeys; and, by standing in filial obedience to God, the Son of God vanquishes temptation and lives in the mystery of what it means to be a Son of God. Thus, paradoxically, the Son of God is most divine when he is most human. He is truly the Son of God when he exercises God’s gift to Adam and to all humanity that overcomes Satan’s temptations: the divinely human strength of conscientious liberty.

Milton hides the mystery of this gift in the mythological allusions that color Satan’s fall, dialectically revealing the nature of the one who stands. Milton compares Satan’s fall to that of Antaeus, conquered by the divinely human strength of Hercules, and to that of the Sphinx, conquered by the wisdom of Oedipus (PR 4.563–76). In epic simile, Milton offers the reader a fleeting glimpse of the Son of God, defined dialectically through the unspoken images of Hercules and Oedipus, the heroes who still stand. The Son of God’s exercise of private conscience embodies a combination of divinely human strength (Hercules) and wisdom (Oedipus) that vanquishes Satan’s temptations and reveals the felling answer to the Sphinx’s question (“man”), an answer that Milton leaves yet again unspoken so that it might be discerned. For the reader to discern how Satan falls is to understand how the Son of God stands: through an exercise of internal liberty. Internal liberty is the mystery of what it means to be a son of God. Milton hides the Son of God’s internal worship only in this last temptation so that he might write the mystery of salvation upon the highest place of public worship and join that distant mystery to one nearer to his readers: the public practices of Nonconformity. As Satan brings the Son of God to the pinnacle of the Temple, Milton reminds the reader that “underneath them fair Jerusalem, / The holy City, lifted high her Towers” (PR 4.544–45). Here, in the public space of worship, the Son of God
embodies the mystery of salvation. He overcomes temptation in a publicly private act: the Son of God publicly stands fast on the pinnacle of the Temple even as he privately exercises the mystery of internal liberty, conscientious deliberation. That distant mystery of salvation, placed high upon the pinnacle of the Temple, resonates with one nearer to Milton’s readers, displayed and debated within the streets of London: the religious liberty of the sons of God, hidden in the private conscience and yet powerfully displayed in the public practices of Nonconformity.

Milton’s Stand: Transforming Nonconformity

In polemical argument, the act of standing, especially against the imposition of ceremonies, had long been associated with religious liberty. Paul’s command to “stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free” (Galatians 5:1) was a biblical commonplace for conscientious resistance. Paul’s paraenesis, originally encouraging the sons of God to stand in liberty from the burden of divine law, became a cry for Christians to defend their liberty a fortiori from the imposition of human ceremonies: since if “all kinde of signes and ceremonies in Gods service under the Old Testament, though ordained by God himselfe” were “utterly abolished by Christ, and forbidden to Christians,” then certainly all ceremonies “such as are of humane invention” were forbidden as well. So, for example, when Samuel Rutherford was confined in Aberdeen for resisting the 1636 imposition of a common liturgy in Scotland, the call to “stand fast” echoes throughout his private correspondence. Rutherford depicts himself as suffering for Christ’s “honour as Law-giver & King of his Church,” voices the biblical commonplace for his recipients to “Stand fast for Christ: Deliver the Gospel off your hand, & your ministry to your Master with a clean and undefiled conscience,” and argues that even his sufferings “encourage others to stand fast for the honour of our suprem Law-giver Christ.” Both in word and in deed, Rutherford translates his suffering under the imposition of ceremonies into Paul’s command to stand fast.

In the controversy occasioned by the Laudian canons of 1640, this exhortation to stand fast became closely associated with clergy conscientiously refusing to obey the divine command to preach when faced with the ecclesiastical command to preach in favor of conformity. Canon 8, “Of Preaching for Conformity,” bound ministers to preach “twice in the year at the least, that the Rites and Ceremonies now established in the Church of England are lawfull and commendable, and that they the said people and others, ought to conform themselves in their practice to all the said Rites and Ceremonies.” For some, this canon made “the Sacred Ordinance of Preaching . . . the Pan-

57. Henry Burton, Christ on His Throne ([London], 1640), 24–25. For Milton’s elaboration of this argument, see Christian Doctrine, 6:525–37.
58. For occurrences in various personal letters, published in 1664 “for the use of all the people of God, but more particularly, for those who now are, or afterwards may be put to suffering for Christ,” see Samuel Rutherford, Joshua Redivivus, or Mr Rutherfoord’s Letters (n.p., 1664), 40, 244, 312, 366, 379. On the imposition of a common liturgy in Scotland and the punitive role of Thomas Sydserff, Rutherford’s bishop and a personal friend of Laud, see Roger Lockyer, The Early Stuarts: A Political History of England 1603–1642, 2nd ed. (New York, 1999), 326–30.
59. Rutherford, Joshua Redivivus, 378, 244, 366.
dor for the Synod’s whorish Rites.”61 It set a human command (to preach conformance to human ceremonies) against a divine command (to preach the gospel) and, therefore, the refusal to preach embodied both conscientious resistance to human commands and conscientious liberty from divine commands. As one writer notes, ministers could stand fast in resistant liberty through conscientious silence: “O miserable men, if you doe these things! How much better were it for you to abandon your places, and so quit your selves and Soules from the yoke of such vile Slavery, unless you have the courage in you as to deny to doe these base Egyptian drudgeries for these your Taskmasters, though you be suspended for it, and loose all you have. Strengthen, O Lord, all thine, to stand fast in thy truth, and not to betray it with themselves, their People, and the whole State of the Lord.”62 Whether by abandoning their ministerial charge or by being suspended for disobeying the ecclesiastical canons, the clergy became living examples of those who stood fast in conscientious liberty. In their silence, inaction became action. Their standing fast constituted a public (because seen) yet private (because unstated) expression of conscientious liberty.

Restrictions upon the ministry in the 1660s awakened these polemical associations of standing fast from the 1640s and excited them until the act of a minister standing silent before the pulpit became a sermon all its own. In Toleration Discuss’d, one of his Restoration polemics against toleration, Roger L’Estrange casts a glance backward to the regicidal liberty of the 1640s in order to probe the religious interiority of Nonconformists in the 1660s. Having condemned the Nonconformists’ outward practices, he turns his attention to analyzing their inward opinions: he strategically seeks to associate the internal liberty of the Nonconformist conscience with sedition and thereby justify his argument against tolerating any public practice of their private conscience. As he examines the “Poyson’d Fountain” of the Nonconformist conscience, he rehearses the regicidal arguments of the 1640s, implying that they are typical of present Nonconformist internal deliberations. Before citing a range of writers from Rutherford to Milton, he summarizes the logic of their argument: “what has any man more to do in Order to the Embroyling of a Nation, but to perswade the People that This or that Political Law has no Foundation in the Word of God; to bid them Stand fast in the Liberty wherewith Christ has Made them Free: and finally to Engage the Name of God, and the Voyce of Religion in the Quarrel?” For L’Estrange, the command to stand fast occupies a pivotal and typical link in a murderous argument. It cloaks sedition with obedience to a biblical command. L’Estrange isolates this biblical exhortation not simply because of its prevalence in previous arguments but also because of its power in contemporary debate. By standing fast, Nonconformists embodied a dangerously powerful mystery. L’Estrange, therefore, sought to subvert their biblical mandate, discovering behind the mystery of their silent witness “Sedition . . . not as an Accident neither, attendant upon Your Separation, but as a form’d and excogitated Design, wrapt up, and Coucht in the very Mystery of your Profession.”63

61. Englands Complaint to Jesus Christ against the Bishops Canons ([Amsterdam], 1640), F1.
62. Ibid., Fiv–F2.
63. L’Estrange, Toleration Discuss’d, 30, 31, 30.
In the early 1660s, Edward Bagshaw performed this mystery of profession, employing its potent silence and personal agency in polemical engagement. From 1660 through 1662, Bagshaw debated the question of worship and matters deemed indifferent in a series of three polemical pamphlets. During that time, as an episcopally ordained clergyman, Bagshaw left the vicarage of Ambrosden, Oxfordshire, was “deprived of my just Right, in a Freehold I had at Ch. Church,” and became the personal chaplain to Arthur Annesley, first earl of Anglesey. As his pamphlets progressed from anonymity to declared authorship, Bagshaw progressed from established churchman to Nonconformist. He carefully negotiated the movement, however, to end in silence as a suffering authorial witness to appropriate religious interiority. In his last pamphlet in the series, Bagshaw suggests that suspicion of his authorship led to his recent clerical deprivation. For this reason, he can no longer speak “since it may be interpreted now, that I write like a Party; and that, not Conscience, but Discontent doth excite me to it.” Bagshaw, therefore, writes himself out of being charged with discontent or interest by writing himself into a stance of conscientious silence. He argues, “I shall for the future forbear, and manifest by my carriage, that though for the present, I cannot submit, yet, I thank God, I can suffer in silence.” Standing in silence formed an act of conscientious obedience, declaring internal liberty by not saying a word. Bagshaw, therefore, stands before the reader, fully known in authorship and yet unknown in ministry except through the powerful agency of conscientious silence.

64. For a rhetorical self-positioning similar to that of Edward Bagshaw, see Richard Baxter, The Mischiefs of Self-Ignorance, and the Benefits of Self-Acquaintance (London, 1662), C1–C6v. Because of the August 1660 Act of Confirming and Restoring Ministers, Richard Baxter lost his appointment as vicar of Kidderminster (an appointment secured in 1648 against his will by the parishioners) and was forbidden by George Morley, the bishop of Worcester, to preach within his diocese. Baxter continued to preach in London, at Westminster and St. Dunstan-in-the-West, and subsequently published a series of sermons partly for the benefit of his former parishioners in Kidderminster. In his prefatory letter to these parishioners, Baxter exhorts them to “stand fast in the Lord” and represents his response to the ecclesiastical restriction upon his preaching as a conscientious suffering “as if I were a Martyr for the faith” (C5–C6). Baxter’s situation then becomes a site of subsequent polemical engagement in Edward Bagshaw, A Letter unto a Person of Honour and Quality, Containing some Animadversions Upon the Bishop of Worcester’s Letter (London, 1662); Roger L’Estrange, A Whipp A Whipp, For the Schismatical Animadverter Upon on the Bishop of Worcester’s Letter (London, 1662); D. E., A Second Letter unto a Person of Honour and Quality (London, 1660); Roger L’Estrange, A Whipp For the Animadverter In Return to his Second Libell (London, 1662); Edward Bagshaw, A Letter to the Right Honourable, Edward Earl of Clarendon (London, 1662); and Roger L’Estrange, Truth and Loyalty Vindicated, From the Reproaches and Clamours of Mr. Edward Bagshaw (London, 1662).


66. Bagshaw was ordained by Ralph Brownrigg, the bishop of Exeter, on November 3, 1659.


68. Bagshaw attributes his “full convenience and opportunities of studie” during this difficult period to Annesley’s favor, in Edward Bagshaw, A Treatise about the Spiritual Nature of God and of His Worship (London, 1662), A2v.


70. In Bagshaw’s first pamphlet, the issue of appropriate conscientious obedience appears in the publisher’s introduction of the anonymous author. The publisher introduced Bagshaw to the reader as one who was free to speak since he was not suffering for the sake of conscience: “as there is an Active
Not only does Bagshaw perform this stance of public silence in the press, he envisions how it applies in the pulpit as well.

In the second of his series of pamphlets, Bagshaw had addressed the question of whether “Devised and Unnecessary Ceremonies in the Worship of God” are imposed upon clergy, “they may lawfully be observed.” He cites the common argument that one should participate in a lesser evil (conforming in indifferent matters) for the sake of a greater good (continuing to exercise one’s ministry). For Bagshaw, however, “our Lord Jesus Christ hath sufficient power to propagate his Gospel without our sin” and, therefore, “at the last day he will not accept this as a sufficient answer, that we mingled his Worship with the, otherwise unlawful, Commands of men, merely to maintain our Liberty of preaching; since he can make our suffering for his Truth, to be as effectual means for the Conversion of others, as our open and free declaring it.”71 Here Bagshaw invests the suffering witness of silent clergy with the power of preaching: it testifies to the truth and may be used by God as a means of conversion. In the marketplace of print and in the houses of worship, a minister standing fast in suffering silence, paradoxically, preached a sermon. The sermon, however, did more than testify to the truth and convert those who witnessed. It also proclaimed the hope of future deliverance.

As Bagshaw closes his second pamphlet, he opens a prophetic vision of the future and he appeals for parliamentary action defending religious liberty. For Bagshaw, true heroic action begins in the proper exercise of religious interiority: God will “raise up some generous and truly Heroick Prince,” convince him “of the truth of Christian Religion” by the proper exercise of conscience (“not by hear-say from others, but by a through search and enquiry into the Causes of it himself”), and lead him to defend it publicly (“resolve to give it a free and undisturbed Passage”) from the imposition of ceremonies so that “Truth” will be “unfettered and set free” from “Antichristian Tyranny.”72 The Declaration of Breda, with its promise of “liberty to tender consciences,” had awakened Bagshaw’s prophetic hope: “This Great and Glorious work I dare almost prophecy that his Majesty is reserved for, whose pious and unequalled Declaration hath already indulged as much Liberty, as any sober-minded Christian can pretend to: and which will then undoubtedly be made a Law.”73 Parliament was now poised for an action that would fulfill Charles II’s divine office, complete God’s design, and bring to spiritual fruition the silent but expectant suffering of God’s faithful people. Bagshaw declares that all those who have suffered for the faith will know then that “by our constant and chearful Sufferings for this Doctrine of Liberty, we have expiated and washed away those Scandals” of ceremonial impositions.74 The sermon silently

Disobedience, viz. to Resist, which is a Practice he abhorres; so there is a Passive Disobedience, and that is to Repine, which he can by no means approve off. Since whatever He cannot Conscientiously do, he thinks himself obliged to suffer for, with as much Joy, and with as little Reluctance, as if any other Act of Obedience was called for from him” (The Great Question, A4v).

72. Ibid., 20.
preached will not only have testified to the truth and converted those who witnessed, but it will also have atoned for sin and evoked the nation’s faithful action of securing religious liberty.

On May 19, 1662, however, the Act of Uniformity transformed religious interiority, dashing hopes of regal deliverance and exciting a public display of suffering silence. As the suffering silence became more public, the biblical exhortation broadened in its appeal: not only ministers but all the faithful began to stand fast in an expectant religious liberty. By legally imposing indifferent matters upon the conduct of public worship, the act thrust an individual’s private conscientious discernment into public view. For nonconforming ministers and the laity who followed them, conscientious belief expressed itself in a refusal to conform to legislated forms of public worship. When approximately 1,500 ministers refused to lead public worship on August 24, 1662, the crisis of conscience was powerfully and memorably displayed. Pepys fretted for months over anticipated effects of the act. In June, he recorded the enthusiasts’ cry that “the King doth take away their liberty of conscience”; in August, on the Sunday before St. Bartholomew’s Day, Pepys arrived at St. Dunstan-in-the-West before the doors were opened, returned an hour later for the morning service, and came later again that afternoon, to “hear Dr. Bates’s farewell sermon.” Much to Pepys’s dismay, however, William Bates kept his conscientious deliberations private. An early publisher of the nonconforming clergy’s farewell sermons noted that “no root of error, no slip of Schism, no fruit of disobedience, whatever some men may prejudge” was to be found in their sermons. Clerical privacy in this matter publicly demonstrated that these ministers were not a threat to the state just as their ensuing public inaction would demonstrate the state’s threat to conscientious practice. Through nonconformance, the ministers embodied an active inactivity: they wed the private practice of conscientious discernment to a celebrated display of silence and inaction in the public realm.

Pepys demonstrates how sensitive hearers were to the private conscientious deliberations behind the public inaction of nonconformance. He listened to the first sermon, noting that there were “very little reflections in it to anything of the times,” and so returned to listen again. This time he was able to record what he had gone to

75. For the pivotal role of the Act of Uniformity and St. Bartholomew’s Day, in particular, in constructing a Nonconformist identity among Presbyterians, Independents, and sectarian groups, see De Krey, London and the Restoration 1659–1683, 87–92.
76. For estimates of the numbers of clergy who left their livings, see Keeble, The Literary Culture of Nonconformity, 31–33. Gilbert Burnet notes that, at the time, the number was “about two thousand . . . as they gave out,” in Burnet, Bishop Burnet’s History of his Own Time, vol. 1, ed. M. J. Routh (Oxford, 1823), 319. Cf. Richard Baxter, who cites the same number, in Baxter, The English Nonconformity, As under King Charles II. and King James II. Truly Stated and Argued (London, 1689), A2v.
hear. According to Pepys, Bates closed his sermon by briefly stating, “it is not my opinion, faction, or humour that keeps me from complying with what is required of us, but something which after much prayer, discourse and study remains unsatisfied and commands me herein. Wherefore, it is my unhappinesse not to receive such an illuminacion as should direct me to do otherwise, I know no reason why men should not pardon me in this world, and am confident that God will pardon me for it in the next.”

The language of conscientious deliberation pervades this account. Bates defines his public inaction as an expression of conscience by differentiating it from common abusive designations (“opinion, faction, or humour”), by associating it with responsible practices of interiority (“prayer, discourse and study”) and trust in divine guidance (“illuminacion”), by investing it with divine authority (“commands me”), and by asserting the need for its present and eternal respect (“I know no reason why men should not pardon me in this world, and am confident that God will pardon me for it in the next”). This glimpse into the privacy of conscientious deliberation explains why Bates, whom Charles II had appointed a chaplain in ordinary and for whom he had also requested a Doctor of Divinity from Cambridge University, would leave St. Dunstan-in-the-West in a celebrated act of Nonconformity.

Nonconformity needed interpretation and only the voice of private conscience could clarify whether a minister stood fast in faction or in faith. Following St. Bartholomew’s Day, publishers collected the farewell sermons of nonconforming ministers. They printed them to rehearse this event for the public, both helping to interpret the silent stance of the ministers and to further its development into lay Nonconformity. In prefatory material, they argue that their farewell sermons will defend these silent clerics from false interpretations “cast upon them” (“as if out of an humour, faction, or which is worse, disobedience to Authority, they refused to conform”) and transform these ministers into a united martyrological witness. To further that end, they highlight the funeral trope frequently used by the preachers (for example, “The ensuing Notes, being the Preachers last Legacies to their several Congregations” and “dying Pastors preach their own funeral sermons whilest they were yet alive”), and evoke a biblical commonplace of martyrdom for the readers (such as “take up their Cross and follow Christ”). In light of these farewell sermons, homiletical silence is suffering profession, civil disobedience is divine obedience, and the Act

79. See Pepys, Diary, 3:167–78 (August 17, 1662).
80. Edmund Calamy, An Exact Collection of Farewel Sermons Preached By the late London-Ministers (London, 1662); Calamy, The Farewell Sermons Of the Late London Ministers, Preached August 17th, 1662 (London, 1662); Calamy, The London-ministers Legacy to Their Several Congregations being a Collection of Farewel-Sermons (London, 1662); Lazarus Seaman, The Second and Last Collection of the Late London Ministers Farewel Sermons (London, 1663); Calamy, A Compleat Collection of Farewell Sermons (London, 1663); and Edmund Calamy, Farewell Sermons Preached (London, 1663).
81. Edmund Calamy, An Exact Collection of Farewel Sermons, A3, A2–A2v, A3. The funeral trope, itself, arises from a play upon the language of the Act of Uniformity that declares that “every Parson, Vicar, or other Minister whatsoever, who now hath, and enjoyeth any Ecclesiastical Benefice, or Promotion, within this Realm of England, or places aforesaid” who neglects to conform “shall ipso facto be deprived of all his Spiritual Promotions; And that from thenceforth it shall be lawful to, and for all
of Uniformity paradoxically unites clergy and laity into one living epistle, standing fast and proclaiming religious liberty.

In the biblical rhetoric of exemplarity, the ministers, standing fast in silent suffering, set a pattern for the laity. The laity were their living epistles, embodying in their lives what the ministers no longer preached.82 In their prefaces, the publishers of the farewell sermons envision this divine writing of liberty in the public realm, “praying that the Lives of these worthy Ministers Hearers, may be their legible Epistles, seen and read of all men; and . . . that they stand fast in one spirit, striving together for the Faith of the Gospel.”83 In a sermon in one of these collections, John Collins also uses this epistolary trope as he encourages his hearers to “stand fast in one Spirit” and joins pulpit, press, and people in a witness of suffering silence. Collins proclaims that “You never glorify the truths of God so much by practice, or writing, as by suffering for them,” and thereby elevates Nonconformist suffering above the civil and discursive practices of belief. He recalls for his hearers how the “glorious truths” of liberty from ceremonial impositions are “written in the honourable and blessed scars of the witnesses, and burnings of those glorious Martyrs,” and exhorts his auditory to become contemporary witnesses, living epistles in the midst of the polemics of print. Collins encourages them, when “God takes away our faithful guides,” to join together in silent sufferance, “for the Gospel really would get more advantage by the holy, humble sufferings of one gracious Saint, meerly for the word of righteousnesse, then by ten thousand Arguments used against Hereticks, and false worship.”84 Standing fast embodied religious liberty and revealed God’s hand, writing the potency of the private conscience into the polemics of the public realm.

In Restoration religious culture, the Act of Uniformity and subsequent persecutory legislation created a spiritual climate in which the agency of the private conscience was publicly displayed and intimately associated with the biblical mandate to stand fast. Inaction was action; silence was speech; and Nonconformity to civil power was conformity to the will of God. By standing fast in silent suffering, nonconforming clergy and laity became living epistles, sent by God into a controversy of print. They were objects to be read, mysteries to be discerned. The public privacy of their conscientious

Patrons, and Donors of all and singular the said Spiritual Promotions, or of any of them, according to their respective Rights, and Titles, to present, or collate to the same; as though the person, or persons, so offending or neglecting were dead.” See “An Act for the Uniformity of Public Prayers and Administration of Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies and for Establishing the Form of Making, Ordaining and Consecrating Bishops, Priests and Deacons in the Church of England,” in The Book of Common Prayer (London, [1662]), a5–a5v.


83. Calamy, An Exact Collection, A3–A3v.

84. John Collins, “Mr. Collin’s Farewell Sermon,” in Calamy, An Exact Collection, 382–83. Collins, an ordained clergyman, was not leaving a ministerial office and yet his sermon is included by Calamy in the collection of farewell sermons, evidencing the broader understanding of those affected by the Act of Uniformity.
deliberation invited a careful reading and the ability of God to speak through silent suffering awakened hope that readers would discern in these silent acts of Nonconformity conscientious obedience, the divinely human liberty that sets all people free.

Used in the 1640s and aggravated in the 1660s, the biblical commonplace to stand fast was associated with both conscientious resistance to the imposition of ceremonies and divine preaching of religious liberty through suffering silence. It was written into letters of pastoral counsel, preached from the pulpit, debated in the press, and publicly embodied by nonconforming ministers and laity alike. In *Paradise Regained*, Milton uses this polemical commonplace in rewriting the epic and biblical tradition to educate discerning readers in the terms of liberty. In his brief epic, Milton enters the troubled realm of Restoration privacy and, through the conscientious deliberations of the Son, celebrates what legislation has silenced. Milton elevates to heroic stature what public policy has secreted away. Milton writes within the constraints of conformity, recording only the religious interiority of the Son of God. Yet, Milton challenges those constraints, revealing how the Son of God uses his internal conscientious freedom in faithful obedience to God and thereby vanquishes temptation. Writing from the margins of the Restoration, under the exile of its political and persecutory imagination, Milton uses the idiom of conscience, the rhetorical terms granted him by his opponents, to transform the exilic wilderness into a liminal space, the threshold of divine working in the world. The Son of God enters into the wilderness and, through the proper exercise of conscience, vanquishes temptation and regains Paradise, after which he is encouraged by angels to enter his “glorious work” and “begin to save mankind” (*PR* 4.634–35).

What then is to be said of the lack of description of internal conscientious deliberation in the last temptation of the poem? It depicts the highly contested and yet, according to Milton, faithful action of true believers practicing true religion in the Restoration public realm. The proper exercise of religious interiority involves silently suffering, in faithful obedience to God and in divinely human resistance to the public practices of conformity. By standing silently upon the pinnacle, the Son of God becomes a living epistle. In this one temptation, unlike the others, he stands void of any recorded conscientious deliberation. He is a letter to be read, a mystery to be discerned, a victorious embodiment of both the loathsome suffering occasioned by conformity and the faithful obedience of conscientious liberty. To the discerning reader, the Son of God reveals his progeny through the divinely human strength of his publicly private conscientious liberty: in his saving fulfillment of divine promise, he is the Son of God and, in his unrelenting defense of religious liberty, he is the progenitor of all true sons of God.

Early biographers of Milton offered the critical commonplace that “Milton is easily found in Paradise lost, but not in Paradise regained.” Yet Milton seems

strangely at home in the Son of God’s “uneasy station” (PR 4.584). Earlier, when he rehearsed his poetic career in The Reason of Church-government, Milton used this polemical convention of standing silent before the pulpit to communicate his being “Church-ousted by the Prelats.” Seeing that “he who would take Orders must subscribe slave, and take an oath withal,” Milton “thought it better to preferre a blamelesse silence before the sacred office of speaking.” Now, in Paradise Regained, Milton transforms this stance of blameless silence into the sacred office of preaching, as the Son of God becomes a living epistle and traces the hand of God in figures of Restoration Non-conformity. In An Apology for Smectymnuus, Milton once argued that “the best apology against false accusers is silence and sufferance, and honest deeds set against dishonest words.” Now, in Paradise Regained, Milton elevates this rhetorical stance, embodying it in the Son of God and setting it upon the highest place of worship to vanquish temptation. These “deeds / Above Heroic, though in secret done” (PR 1.14–15) are set against all dishonest words.

In addition, the pinnacle of the Temple had long been associated with the spectacle of public confession, resistance, and martyrrological witness. In Eikonoklastes, Milton himself refashioned it to attack both an inappropriate religious interiority on the part of Charles I (a “goodly use made of scripture in his solitudes”) and the external practices of false worship (“a Pinnacle of Nebuchadnessars Palace, from whence hee and Monarchy fell together”). Later, as Joseph Jane’s response to Eikonoklastes was punitively republished in 1660, Milton found himself transported to the pinnacle and publicly ridiculed as a conflation of Nebuchadnezzar (robbing and ruining the Temple) and Satan (glorying in “casting King, and Monarchy head long”). In Paradise Regained, Milton thus revisits a contentious site, associated with the rule of state and the resistance of conscience, the imposition of ceremony and the practice of religious liberty, and rewrites his public ruin into the private victory of the silently suffering Son of God. Here, Milton takes his stand, transforming Nonconformity.

88. In his Ecclesiastical History, Eusebius records Hegesippus’s account of the martyrdom of James the Just, the brother of Jesus. When commanded to renounce that Jesus was the Christ, he was placed upon the pinnacle by his opponents that “you may be clearly visible on high, and that your words may be audible to all the people.” Resisting renunciation, James made public confession of his faith and that testimony became a martyrrological witness when his opponents “went up and threw down the Just.” See Eusebius, The Ecclesiastical History, vol. 1, trans. Kirsoff Lake (Cambridge, Mass., 1926), 171–75 (2.23.4–18). For Milton’s awareness of Hegesippus’s fuller account of James but his dislike of its hagiography, see John Milton, Of Prelatical Episcopacy, ed. Don M. Wolfe, in Complete Prose Works, 1:645–46.
91. For an examination of the heroic quality of suffering silence in Milton’s works, see John R. Knott Jr., “Suffering for Truth’s sake: Milton and Martyrdom,” in Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics,
pinnacle, the highest place of public worship, stands the Son of God, silent in Non-conformity. He stands fast, not in an erasure of self or in a manifestation of divinity, but invested with the potency of conscientious deliberation that, though secret and silenced in the private houses of the Restoration,\(^{92}\) is now published and Miltonically positioned both in poetry and in polemic, on the verge of redeeming the world. Indeed, Milton is not “easily found” in \textit{Paradise Regained}. To find him is to discover what it means to be a Son of God and that requires the reader’s exercise of strenuous liberty.

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