

Milton's Consistency: An Answer to Jason Kerr

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Abstract

In his "Shifting Perspectives on Law in *De Doctrina Christiana*: A Response to Filippo Falcone," Jason Kerr makes a convincing case for *De Doctrina Christiana* as in itself dynamic and discontinuous as the expression of Milton's Scripture-related intent and evolving theological thought. In the following answer to Kerr, Falcone argues for that same dynamicity and discontinuity as incompatible with the consistency of Milton's undisputed works.

Jason Kerr's response to "Irreconcilable (Dis)continuity: *De Doctrina Christiana* and Milton" is a compelling piece which aptly builds its case on solid evidence—namely the material document of *De Doctrina Christiana*—rather than on the mere interpretation of texts. As it tackles material evidence, Kerr's article reads the textual variations on the definition of the law in the manuscript as shifting perspectives in Milton's understanding thereof. Scholars who have attempted to reconcile *De Doctrina* with Milton's early and late prose as well as with the major poems have themselves argued for Milton's shifting perspectives on a number of theological issues. This attitude is well represented in Campbell and Corns's *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought* (273):

Theology was a living discipline for Milton, and his opinions on many theological issues changed in the course of his life. *De Doctrina* affords a view of his theological thinking in the 1650s. His thinking is for the most part unexceptionable, but on some issues he adopts minority opinions which he defends vigorously.

This is Kerr's own argument, but with a difference: Kerr argues that the manuscript has a life of its own, which is defined in conversation with Scripture (and, with respect to the role of the law, with Milton's belated reading of Zanchi's commentary on *Ephesians*), irrespective of whatever comes before or after. He finds evidence of significant changes in Milton's theological thinking within the very manuscript of *De Doctrina*, that is in the material tampering with the manuscript resulting in variants for which the Yale edition only marginally accounts ("Irreconcilable (Dis)continuity" is based on the Yale edition). These variants show an evolving view of the law and its relationship with the gospel, which is neither antinomian nor nomistic. To be in the company of Bishop Burgess and seek for evidence of discontinuity between Milton's undisputed work and *De Doctrina* is to partake in a foolish enterprise, Kerr suggests, for discontinuity lies at the very core of the manuscript:

I am trying to make a case that the treatise has a life of its own independent of *Paradise Lost*.

I turn, therefore, to Falcone's claim about how the treatise handles the abrogation of the law, for the pages where this claim unfolds show just such a scripturally-driven change of mind at work. (Kerr 130)

While Kerr's argument is well presented, it does little to refute the main point "Irreconcilable (Dis)continuity" makes regarding the law. Rather, Kerr's argument both misrepresents it and enhances it. It misconstrues it by arguing that my article portrays *De Doctrina* as antinomian (see Kerr 132). Whereas Kerr's misrepresentation may well result from my lack of clarity, "Irreconcilable (Dis)continuity" does not intend to portray *De Doctrina* as antinomian, nor is the idea "that the dividing wall of the law cannot be reduced to ceremonies alone" (Kerr 132) central to my argument. I rather try to underscore how the treatise and Milton's

uncontested works come to largely similar conclusions, but by entirely different paths.

With respect to the law, as with prevenient grace, “Irreconcilable (Dis)continuity” argues from a plain fact: the Latin treatise in none of its variants singles out the subdivision of the moral law (Falcone 80). In addressing Zanchi’s commentary on *Ephesians* (MSS 320-21), the author of *De Doctrina* does refer to Zanchi’s theological category of “the ceremonial code,” but only as part of that which he calls “the whole positive law of Moses” which the new covenant has done away with in its entirety (see OCW 8: 700-03; quoted in Kerr 132). In other words, *De Doctrina* in none of its variants envisions substantial subdivisions in the law. Significantly, both the early prose and *Paradise Lost* resort to the phrase “the moral law” and clearly point to substantial subdivisions in the law (Falcone 81). While minor shifts may be noticed in turning from the antiprelatical tracts to the divorce tracts as well as between two subsequent editions of *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* and then *Tetrachordon*, both the early prose and *Paradise Lost* consistently argue from divisions in the law to show that the gospel does away with the detrimental effects of the law to enable man to fulfill the moral law. By contrast, after arguing for the abolition of the law as a whole as essential for the gospel and Christian liberty (see Kerr 135, and the quote from OCW 8: 712-13), *De Doctrina* is forced to introduce the essence of the law almost as an afterthought (CPW 6: 531; see Kelley’s n15). The problem for Milton is never the law in and of itself, as it is for the author of *De Doctrina*, but the law as a means to righteousness before God. Milton’s undisputed works never argue for the abrogation of the law as an element of Christian liberty, but rather for the gospel as the end of both the ceremonial and the moral law *as a path to righteousness*, with Christ standing as that righteousness and hence as the sole ground of both freedom and love (the sum of the moral law).

The second way Kerr’s response enhances my essay’s argument is closely related to the previous one: for all the “shifting perspectives” underlying *De Doctrina*, no shift but rather continuity informs the early prose and *Paradise Lost* as well as later works when it comes to the respective portrayals of the law. To be sure, the uniformity of Milton’s

undisputed works stands out to an even greater extent against the backdrop of the treatise's mutable heterogeneity. While theology is a living discipline for Milton—hence varying emphases and nuances in different works—the consistency of his theological views in his uncontested works appears to set them apart from the restless wrestling of *De Doctrina* with itself. In fact, if it may indeed be foolish to reason in terms of discontinuity between this sort of *Pietà Rondanini* of divinity and Milton's undisputed works, the continuity informing the latter is never undermined by *De Doctrina* and rather challenges Milton's relationship to the treatise.

We should welcome a shift in our perspectives from regarding *De Doctrina*'s manuscript as a monolithic work to seeing it as an ever-evolving body of competing thoughts or rather a patchwork, in fact as many *De Doctrinas* and respective authors (whether one or many) as the views therein reflected. Even so, far from finding a synthesis, the contrast between Milton's uncontested works and the multi-faceted treatise in divinity remains and rather proves amplified.

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