

John Dryden's Conversion and Its Political Basis in *The Hind and the Panther*

Paweł Kaptur
University of Information Technology and Management, Rzeszów

Abstract

Dryden's conversion to Roman Catholicism was a surprise for many Englishmen and a reason for scorn on the part of his enemies. The poet's conversion was not solely based upon theological foundations but was strongly conditioned by Dryden's desire to promote authority. Catholicism and its representative James II personified for him a greater authoritative power so much needed to find a balance between the state and the church. Since the poet regarded religion as a function of the state, he chose the Catholic faith as the most suitable religion to make the state operate effectively. Dryden's greatest concern was the enforcement of peace, order, freedom, and justice within the English nation, and the Catholic King was supposed to be the assurance of such a vision. This expectation is strongly underlined in *The Hind and the Panther*, which is not only the poet's personal confession concerning his conversion but a poetic debate about the origins and functions of authority.

Keywords: John Dryden, *The Hind and the Panther*, religion, politics, James II Stuart

Abstrakt

Przejście Drydena na religię rzymskokatolicką było wielkim zaskoczeniem dla wielu Anglików i powodem do drwin dla wrogów poety. Decyzja Drydena nie ma jednak wyłącznie

podstaw teologicznych, lecz jest silnie uwarunkowana chęcią wspierania silnej władzy politycznej. Katolicyzm i katolicki król Jakub II to dla Drydena uosobienie silniejszej władzy, tak bardzo potrzebnej w budowaniu równowagi pomiędzy państwem a kościołem. Ponieważ Dryden uważał religię jako element państwowości, wybrał wiarę katolicką jako tę, która zapewniała efektywne działanie państwa poprzez zapewnienie pokoju, porządku, wolności i sprawiedliwości. Apologetyczny wiersz Drydena *The Hind and the Panther* to nie tylko osobista spowiedź poety, ale również poetycka debata o roli i pochodzeniu władzy.

Słowa kluczowe: John Dryden, *The Hind and the Panther*, religia, polityka, Jakub II Stuart

The coronation of the Catholic King James II Stuart in 1685 marked the beginning of the gradual path to supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church over Protestantism. The nation's expectations were highly diversified. Walter Scott writes that "the accession of James II to the British throne excited new hopes in all orders of men. [...] the loyal looked to rewards, the rebellious to amnesty" (1834, 265). Dryden, as a poet fighting in verse to promote James on the English throne, rightly expected to have his position as a Poet Laureate and Historiographer Royal secured. As a critic points out, he already assured his readers in *Threnodia Augustalis* that he believed in the providential character of James's succession:

Dryden saw a light in the sky in 1685, and he read it to mean that James II's victory over the Duke of Monmouth was a special Providence, a divine intervention to show that the Catholic King's rule was part of a larger plan for England (Gardiner 1998, 53).

Dryden's deep faith in the divine intervention in James's succession did not only allow the poet to express his full support for the King's political plan but also to convert to Catholicism and in this way align with both the monarch's policies and religion. Neither Dryden's political shift from republicanism to monarchy nor any other biographical facts caused so much controversy around the Laureate's figure. Critics and his biographers, from Dr Johnson to the 20th century, devote a lot of space to discussing the motives of Dryden's conversion. Some of them are convinced that it was a move determined by the poet's desire to gain personal benefits, another sign of opportunism, while others perceive the poet's conversion in terms of political prudence, consistent Toryism, or a firm belief in authority. Saintsbury remarks that apart from an obvious economic profit

emerging from the prolonged position of the Laureate, which Dryden had already held before his conversion, there's no hint of any particular benefit that the poet gained from his shift. The same opinion is expressed by Spurr:

Dryden's conversion was a gift to his literary enemies and his Protestant critics. It looked to all the world as though the Poet Laureate had simply adopted the religion of the new monarch to feather his own nest. But there is no evidence that Dryden profited from his change of religion (2004, 244).

Moreover, Bredvold argues that the conversion did not necessarily have to be an allurements to Dryden and that it was, in fact, dangerous: "The Catholics were not so happy in the reign of James II. The conversions were remarkably few, and this fact James and his advisers laid to the fear of legal oppression" (1934, 183).

Bredvold here suggests that in the times of James's reign those who converted to Catholicism were prevented from holding legal offices until they swore allegiance to the Church of England. This kind of oppression was later attempted to be legally confirmed by the Test Acts which the King tried to repeal. Hence, conversion to Catholicism could not have been as beneficial for Dryden as it might have been expected. It is also quite unlikely that he saw a long-term benefit in his conversion as in 1686 (the year when he converted) it was already apparent that Princess Mary, married to the staunch Protestant William of Orange, would take over the crown after her father. Hence, Dryden's change of religion could not have been determined by a simple desire to gain a short-lasting benefit but it must have had a firm, theological, or more surely, ideological basis enhanced by a desire to support supreme authority.

Spurr is of the opinion that Dryden's conversion cannot be considered in terms of a single decision caused by a changing political reality and points at its complexity and profundity:

[...] This was a process which in many cases might combine an experience of grace, a desire to protect one's person, family, and property, a compulsion to demonstrate political loyalty, and other motives, rather than a simple once-and-for-all change of institutional membership (2004, 250).

Bredvold shares this view paying attention to the study of Dryden's thought in order to finally solve the biographical problem of the poet's conversion. The critic explains that

Dryden's change of direction cannot be hastily judged as an accommodation to the changing reality but has to be comprehensively studied both in terms of religion and politics (1934, 12). Benson and Atkins emphasize the relation between the motives of the poet's conversion and its political background. They both argue that for Dryden "the Church of England no longer represented a hopeful means for settling the nation's inseparable religious and political problems" (Benson 1964, 406) and that "the Church of England was moving in a political direction opposite from his own" (403).

Both Benson and Atkins add another element to the political character of the poet's conversion. Following Dryden's ideal to promote peace and social order one might notice that the "public religious dispute was becoming a vital threat to public order [and it] does give reason to suppose that since 1682 [Dryden] had come to feel an absolute need for a final authority in public religious strife" (Benson 1964, 403). In this sense Dryden understood that only the Catholic King could restore "Common Quiet" and that "the Roman Catholic Church claimed the spiritual authority necessary [...] to guarantee the integrity of the Christian Church in England and of English society" (412). Moreover, Dryden realized that the separation of the church and state is indispensable for a better functioning of society in England. For the poet, the Catholic King on the English throne did not have to mean that the nation would become Catholic too. Atkins says that Dryden had always supported the Divine Right of Kings but he "also recognized and subscribed to the religious basis of that position" (1980, 99) and since he believed that only the Roman Church wields the greatest authority, it provides the best possible basis for political authority. In this sense, Dryden as a supporter of social order and legal succession is a consistent writer. His change of religion can be perceived in the categories of the poet's continuity in promoting the legal, God-given authority which secures peace. This continuity is indeed apparent when we analyze Dryden's *The Hind and the Panther* remembering his religious pronouncements in *Religio Laici* written in 1682. Zwicker suggests that "there is an implicit continuity between Dryden's efforts in *Religio Laici* to distinguish his own religious confession from that of the Anglican establishment, to argue a theologically tolerant line against the Church of England's support for the Test Act" (1984, 134). Bredvold actually believes that *Religio Laici* might be treated as a kind of introduction to *The Hind and the Panther* as "both [poems] are basically skeptical and fideistic" (1934, 121).

The Hind and the Panther is Dryden's longest poem consisting of three parts which serves as his personal explanation of his conversion and a discussion over the principles and origins of authority. In order to comprehend the political character of *The Hind and the Panther* one must understand the theological argument that Dryden presents in his

poem. The juxtaposition of the two religions is to prove the superiority of Catholicism over the Church of England and this relationship is crucial to appreciating the poet's political intention included in the poem. Dryden starts by comparing the two religions:

A Milk white *Hind*, immortal and unchang'd,
Fed on the lawns, and in the forest rang'd;
Without unspotted, innocent within,
She fear'd no danger, for she knew no sin.
Yet had she oft been chas'd with horns and hounds,
And Scythian shafts; and many winged wounds
Aim'd at her Heart; was often forc'd to fly,
And doom'd to death, though fated not to dy (I: 1–8)

Gardiner notices that the adjective “milk white” used at the beginning of the poem creates the image of the Church of Rome as mother who “offers nourishment to the English in their “famine”, the word “milk” connecting her food to the divine “milk” that flowed from the Creator's breast [...]” (1998, 56). Such an image creates a clear link between the Catholic authority and its divine origin. Besides, Dryden underlines its innocence and immortality which prevailed in spite of long-lasting persecutions and discrimination.

Then Dryden calls the Catholic martyrs “a slaughtered army” and presents the “captive Israel” as “multiply'd in chains.” The images of Roman Catholicism as a victim of Protestantism exposed at the beginning of the fable gradually lead the readers to the poet's personal confession justifying his conversion:

My thoughtless youth was wing'd with vain desires,
My manhood, long misled by wandring fires,
Follow'd false lights; and when their glimps was gone,
My pride struck out new sparkles of her own.
Such was I, such by nature still I am,
Be Thine the glory and be mine the shame.
Good life be now my task: my doubts are done,
(What more could fright my faith, than Three in One?) (I: 72–79)

Dryden says that the changeable times led him to the changes in political and religious siding. But he now assures his readers that his “doubts are done” suggesting that his new faith is eventually the goal he has been looking for. The explanation has an apologetic tone and it reveals the poet's deep faith in God. At this stage of the poem, the poet

does not base his argument upon the political elements of the new reality in England. The political character of *The Hind and the Panther* appears evident when the picture of the panther is drawn:

The *Panther* sure the noblest, next the *Hind*,
 And fairest creature of the spotted kind;
 Oh, could her in-born stains be wash'd away,
 She were too good to be a beast of Prey!
 How can I praise, or blame, and not offend,
 Or how divide the frailty from the friend?
 Her faults and vertues lye so mix'd, that she
 Nor wholly stands condemn'd nor wholly free. (I: 327–334)

Dryden presents Protestantism by choosing contradictory adjectives and images to show the ambivalent nature of his former religion. He calls Protestantism “the noblest” and “the fairest” at the same time emphasizing its “spotted kind” which later transforms into “in-born stains” to be “wash'd away”. The poet sees the ambiguity of Protestantism as a religion which can neither be “condemn'd” nor “wholly free”, hence, by means of contradictions and oppositions he points at the inferiority of Protestantism with regard to Catholicism, the latter being characterized by simplicity and transparency.

What is more, Dryden tries to prove that the Church of England is no longer capable of maintaining a strong authority over the English. In order to illustrate this inability, the poet reaches back to recall the origins of the Church of England:

A *Lyon* old, obscene, and furious made
 By lust, compress'd her mother in a shade.
 Then by a left-hand marr'age weds the Dame,
 Covering adult'ry with a specious name:
 So schism begot; and sacrilege and she,
 A well-match'd pair, got graceless heresie. (I: 351–357)

By drawing the image of “a Lyon old” Dryden evokes the figure of Henry VIII whose love affair with Anne Boleyn led to the Act of Supremacy (1534) on the basis of which the Church of England was established and the King made its head. Gardiner suggests that the “choice of the word “compressed” implies not only that King Henry violated the ancient religion of England, but also that he made her smaller, more insular, more

dependent” (1998, 79). In this way Dryden emphasizes that the Church of England was born out of “graceless heresie” and hence it lacks the strong authority needed to rule over the people. The “adult’ry” which caused the “heresie” was a rebellion against Rome:

Fierce to her foes, yet fears her force to try,
Because she wants innate aucturity;
For how can she constrain them to obey
Who has her self cast off the lawful sway?
Rebellion equals all, and those who toil
In common theft, will share the common spoil. (I: 452–457)

Hamm claims that the above stanza is the poet’s “charge of instability in the English Church” (1968, 402). Even though Dryden praises the Church of England for its loyalty to the throne, he highlights the fact that, being a rebel himself, Anglicanism is not strong enough to withstand rebellion in others. The poet expresses his key opinion claiming that since the Church of England lacks the “innate aucturity” it cannot restrain dissent, and dissent is dissension. She is not, then, a safe guarantor of national peace” (Root 1907, 306). This argument is essential to understanding the motives of Dryden’s conversion in the context of its political background. Dryden’s doubt in the Church of England and his faith in Catholicism must be perceived in terms of his profound conviction that authority secures social peace and order. Since his previous religion has lost its innate authority, the poet prudently moves to support the faith of the new monarch not out of his will to draw benefits but to promote political stability.

Dryden, as he did in the previous poems written for Charles II, stresses the primacy of order and stability over chaos and anarchy. Zwicker clearly shows how the religious issues discussed in *The Hind and the Panther* overlap with political matters:

When the political themes of dissenting Protestantism are raised – riot, disorder, and instability – they are attached to the Anglican Church; by transferring familiar satiric topics to a new target Dryden can tar the enemies of the king [...] and correctly align the poem with James’s political aims in 1687 (1984, 130).

Benson writes that “political chaos [...] must follow from religious individualism” (1964, 395). Hence, Dryden argues that the Church of Rome, now represented by the King, is the only solution to restore firm authority within the English nation and

save the people from chaos. The poet also believes that Scripture should be treated as a basis for religious authority and he "denounces the political exploitation of Scripture by extremists on both sides and warns of its dire consequences" (1964, 395). Dryden detested any kind of extremism, which, according to him, was the shortest way to rebellion. *The Hind and the Panther* may be therefore read as the poet's attempt to undermine the religious basis of political extremism. What Dryden hopes to achieve is the people's obedience to the new King and the religion he represents. He argues that, contrary to Catholicism, the Church of England does not entail obedience:

How ans'ring to its end a church is made,
Whose pow'r is but to counsel and perswade?
O solid rock, on which secure she stands!
Eternal house, not built with mortal hands!
Oh sure defence against th' infernal gate,
A patent during pleasure of the state. (I: 491–496)

Bredvold comments on the above stanza saying that Dryden "speaks with scorn of a state church without any inner principle of authority on the basis of which it can demand obedience" (1934, 127). Indeed, if Anglicanism generates neither respect for authority nor social obedience it cannot represent power either and hence it is too weak to "counsel" or "perswade".

Dryden was pragmatic in his approach to religion. He saw in Catholicism a chance to put an end to the endless social dispute and a possibility to install order within the country by employing a balance of authority between the state and the church. Moreover, Catholicism was for the poet marked with the same element of tradition as royal succession and the Divine Right of Kings. For Dryden, the Roman Catholic faith symbolized the lineal continuity and respect for traditional values which resembled those principles of hereditary royalty that were lost during the Monmouth Rebellion. The turn to Catholicism was a turn towards the traditional model of a regal state:

Despair at our foundations then to strike,
Till you can prove your faith Apostolick;
A limpid stream drawn from the native source;
Succession lawfull a lineal course. (II: 612–615)

Zwicker also notices that "the sanctity of lineal succession links the apostolic tradition of Roman Catholicism with the successive rights of English monarchy" (1984, 145).

Hence, Dryden as a defender of the Stuarts' succession represents the same approach to monarchy as he did during the Restoration: he supports hereditary, traditional succession, peace, social order, and political stability. The Anglican Church does not offer such clear basis of authority:

But mark how sandy is your own pretence,
Who, setting Councils, Pope, and Church aside,
Are ev'ry Man his own presuming Guide. (II: 105–107)

Again, Dryden suggests that the Church of England does not base its principles on authority but it allows individualism which generates political anarchy: "Once interpretive authority is placed in the individual conscience, then "gospel-liberty" becomes the excuse for political rebellion" (Zwicker 1984, 146). Rebellion and anarchy were what Dryden detested most and fought against in verse. Catholicism and the Catholic King were supposed to defend England against such a potential jeopardy.

Winn says that "the notion of authority [is] a heavy condition of the crown" (987, 425) and hence James had to be accepted as king because he and his Catholic faith represented both the spiritual and political authority over the English nation and gave warranty to maintain social order. Patterson says that "the poem presents Dryden as a peace-maker, as his protagonist, the harmless Hind, stands for the hitherto persecuted Catholics of England" (2004, 233). Indeed, the poet's appeal to the nation to accept the Catholic King is a voice for reconciliation and agreement in terms of the religious foundations of political objectives.

According to Benson, "the immediate political objective of the poem [is] to gain Anglican support for repeal of the Test Acts" (1964, 408). The Test Act was designed to exclude Catholics from holding public offices including the membership in Parliament. Gardiner notices that James is pictured as a monarch protecting all Englishmen's equal native rights, which serves "the common interest". Again, by using the phrase "common interest" Dryden proves his consistency in defending the rights of his countrymen. The poet believes that the reign of James II and his campaign to repeal the Test Acts will bring relief to all the sects, here presented as fowls of birds, which were discriminated against in previous years:

His Fowl of Nature too unjustly were opprest.
He therefore makes all Birds of ev'ry Sect

Free of his Farm, with promise to respect
 Their sev'ral Kinds alike, and equally protect. (III: 1243–1246)

Gardiner believes that equality and freedom of religion are the Englishmen's native rights secured at birth. Hence, the Test Act is a document sacrificing and violating the "common interest" of the English people. As a long-term defender of the "common interest" and social order, Dryden takes up the subject of the Test Act as a political issue in *The Hind and the Panther*:

All gentle means he try'd, which might withdraw
 Th' Effects of so unnatural a Law:
 But still the Dove-house obstinately stood
 Deaf to their own, and to their Neighbours good:
And which was worse, (if any worse could be)
 Repented of their boasted Loyalty:
 Now made the Champions of a cruel Cause,
 And drunk with Fume of Popular Applause; (III: 1085–1092)

Dryden indicates that "the Anglicans were obstinately deaf to their own and the country's good when they supported the Test" (Benson 1964, 409). The poet assures his readers that James did his best to repeal the Test Act in the name of the "common good" but the Anglicans are apparently too stubborn to acknowledge the King's merit to promote equality and peace. Dryden calls the Test Act an "unnatural a Law" which promotes inequality and discrimination as well as supports anarchy and chaos. Benson argues that the poet decided to discuss the issue of the Test Act in order "to destroy the religious basis of political popularism" (1964, 409).

The main political objective that Dryden submits in his disputes against the Test Act is to imply "that so long as subjects pledge not to overthrow the established government by force or conspiracy, they should be left in peace about their religious ideas" (121). The second, and even more important, message in Dryden's campaign to repeal the Test Act is to assure the people of England that the document had become an obstacle to their freedom. This barrier may only be removed when they accept, believe and support James II. All in all, the poet's argument for the repeal of the Test Act represents his struggle to promote the new King who symbolizes the return to tradition, justice, and freedom.

Conclusion

Dryden's conversion and his campaign to promote James II in *The Hind and the Panther* was not a sign of the poet's opportunism but a prudent political decision to defend a rightful monarch and Catholicism, which, in Dryden's reasoning, embodied authority, peace and social order. Critics such as Scott, Johnson, or Saintsbury accepted Dryden's honesty and sincerity of his religious conversion. It has been proved, however, that the poet's conversion had political rather than religious foundations. Such a view is shared by Root: "Religion he [Dryden] regarded as a function of the state; and with perfectly logical consistency he desired an authoritative religion which should compel the acceptance of all" (1907, 307).

The basic political objective of Dryden's conversion, *The Hind and the Panther* and his defense of the Catholic King is to express the poet's belief in the power of strong authority, which should be shared by all Englishmen, in order to achieve well-being and a long-lasting prosperity.

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