

Lauren Payne

Dr. Jennifer W. Hall

English 201 B

2 May 2005

Toulmin System:
The Evolving Relationship between Science and Faith

Enthymeme: In *Religio Medici*, Sir Thomas Browne explores a powerful, yet controversial conviction because he believes that a man of science can still have a deep and abiding faith in God.

Claim: In *Religio Medici*, Sir Thomas Browne explores a powerful, yet controversial conviction

Stated Reason: because he believes that a man of science can still have a deep and abiding faith in God.

Warrant: anyone who believes that a man of science can still have a deep and abiding faith in God reflects a powerful, yet controversial conviction

Backing: Discuss why we agree that questions regarding faith and science are controversial and why we agree that those who do not see the two conflicting can have deep faith. Give modern examples of questions regarding cloning, genetic counseling, and faith healing.

Grounds:

- Browne's extensive studies in language, medicine, and the sciences greatly influenced both his personal beliefs and career choices.
- His marriage and birth of his children had some effect on his writing.
- The conflict between the church and science of the seventeenth century influenced the doctor's writing.
- In *Religio Medici*, Browne discusses the correlation he sees between science and faith due to the sickness and death that he faces daily.
- Still, Browne clearly believes that faith trumps human knowledge.
- Browne argues that human attempts to gain knowledge glorify God.
- Browne also explores the specific relationship between the study of nature and the glorification of a higher being.
- Finally, Brown expresses his clear confidence in his own personal relationship with God and the relevance of his salvation to his medical practices.

Lauren Payne

Dr. Jennifer W. Hall

English 201B

2 May 2005

The Evolving Relationship Between Science and Faith

Can science and religion co-exist? Since the seventeenth century, society has been asking this question and attempting to find an answer. Though both fields have changed drastically since this time, the battle between the two seems to be escalating without an end in sight. Is it moral to clone humans or to allow a couple to decide whether it wants a little boy or a little girl? Should medicine be completely trusted or should humans trust only in a higher being for healing? When these questions regarding the relationship between science and faith were first contemplated, they were just as complex as they seem to be today. In fact, in the 1600s men and women were often ridiculed if they chose to support the advancement of science and medicine. **In *Religio Medici*, Sir Thomas Browne explores a powerful, yet controversial conviction because he believes that a man of science can still have a deep and abiding faith in God.**

Browne's extensive studies in language, medicine, and the sciences greatly influenced both his personal beliefs and career choices. Due to his mother's remarriage in 1614 to Sir Thomas Dutton, the higher social status of his stepfather made it possible for Browne to enroll at Winchester in 1616 where he learned Latin and Greek (Wilson par. 1). Browne continued in his academic success and moved on to Broadgates Hall, Oxford, in 1623; he was chosen in his first year to give the undergraduate Latin address when the name of the college was changed to Pembroke College (Seelig par. 3). After receiving a B.A. in 1626 and a M.A. in 1629, Browne

began his medical education on the Continent and traveled to some of the most distinguished schools of medicine in Europe (Seelig par. 4). Browne first studied botany and surgery at Montpellier, then anatomy at Padua, and finally anatomy and therapeutic chemistry at Leiden (par. 4). He received his M.D. from the University of Leiden in 1633 before returning to Oxfordshire for his “medical apprenticeship” (par. 4). These universities were on top of the changing times and concepts of medicine and the sciences and probably greatly influenced many of Browne’s ideas. At the top of the education platform, Browne attained his second doctorate, an M.D. from Oxford on July 10, 1637 (Wilson par. 1). Clearly, Browne was well-educated and well-traveled, and the ideas he encountered as a student must have shaped his views of both medicine and religion.

Sir Thomas Browne’s marriage to Dorothy Mileham and the birth of their twelve children also seem to have had some effect on Browne’s writing. Six years before his marriage Browne wrote:

I was never yet once, and commend their resolutions who never marry twice. . . .
 The whole woman was made for man, but the twelfth part of man for woman:
 man is the whole world, and the breath of God; woman the rib and crooked piece
 of man. I could be content that we might procreate like trees, without
 conjunction, or that there were any way to perpetuate the world without this
 triviall [sic] and vulgar way of coition. (Browne 99-100)

There must have been a quality about Dorothy, perhaps only her beauty and potential for procreation, that caused Browne to change his mind and marry. John Whitefoot describes Dorothy as “a Lady of such a Symmetrical Proportion to her worthy Husband, both in the Graces of her Body and Mind that they seemed to come together by a kind of Natural Magnetism” (qtd.

in Seelig par. 5). Their first child Edward was born in 1644, and Dorothy gave birth to an additional child every year for the next six years and six more after 1650 (Seelig par. 5). Five of the twelve children died before the age of six and two more before the age of 24 (5). As with any parent, the deaths of seven children must have been painful and difficult occurrences. One would estimate that these losses also took a toll on Browne's spiritual life and forced him to re-evaluate his view of God and his priorities as a physician.

In addition to personal conflict, the conflict between the church and science of the seventeenth century heavily influenced the doctor's writings and thoughts on the subjects. Anything religious written during this time welcomed controversy. Thus as the author began to settle down and contemplate the exchanges between religion and the sciences, he claims to have written *Religio Medici* for his own personal collection in the 1630s (Wilson par. 2). After an unauthorized edition was found in 1642, Browne released an officially authorized edition that was printed the following year (Wilson par. 2). Despite the risky topic of the work, following its first appearance, *Religio Medici* was published more than once every five years for the next 360 years (Huebert par. 1). Throughout the time of publication, the documents were considered important enough that eight copies of original manuscripts for private circulation have survived (Bennett 54). Browne drew an audience because he was "a young physician deeply concerned with his own faith at a time of religious strife and of new interest in science" (Finch 3). The idea of science was new, controversial, and exciting to the people of the time. Browne's insistence regarding the co-existence of religion and science caused people to either admire him or to deeply oppose his works.

In *Religio Medici*, Browne discusses the correlation he views between science and faith due to the sickness and death that he faces daily in his practice. Jeremiah Finch states that the

work's "full impact comes only with the realization it was written by a doctor, to whom the relation of science to faith could be no abstract matter, since his daily concern was life and death" (20-1). Browne had no choice but to deal with the ideas that were being considered in his faith and his profession. As a physician, he watched people die daily and was forced to decide whether the use of medical intervention would harm or cheapen their spiritual lives. His personal decision on the correlation of medicine and faith greatly impacted his daily routine as an educated professional. Joan Bennett, agreeing with Finch, writes "it [*Religio Medici*] is not a work of controversy; the heresies Browne describes are recorded as part of his endeavour to explore the relations between his faith, his temperament, and his profession" (54). These dual concepts saturate everything that Browne supports; for him, science and faith must not be in conflict with one another. Religion and medicine must co-exist because without either of the two, Browne's existence is diminished.

Despite his commitment to his profession, Browne clearly believes that faith trumps human knowledge. The author is recognized today for his outstanding literary works, but also because "his book is a plea for the individual's right to follow his own conscience in religion. It affirms the power of intuitive faith over a cold rationalism. It cries out for tolerance in religion and in human conduct" (Finch 4). Browne begs his peers to follow him in the pursuit not only of knowledge, but of a deep saving faith that answers questions when textbooks and scientific reasoning cannot. Browne explores this idea in Section X of *Religio Medici*:

Since I was of understanding to know that we know nothing, my reason hath been more pliable to the will of faith: I am now content to understand a mystery, without a rigid definition . . . for, by acquainting our reason how unable it is to display the visible and obvious effects of nature, it becomes more humble and

submissive unto the subtleties of faith: and thus I teach my haggard and unclaimed reason to stoop unto the lure of faith. (Browne 21-2)

The author believes that, on every level, faith outlives earthly knowledge. He answers uncertainties by explaining that certain ideas are meant to be mysteries, thus deepening one's abiding faith in a higher power. Seelig explains Browne's outlook by saying, "for him faith is not the abandonment of reason but the use of it to the point that it proves inadequate; its inadequacy then becomes evidence of the superiority of divine wisdom and providence" (par. 9). By studying science, one can "prove" the need of a higher explanation. The physician in Browne believes that any attempt to understand science and medicine will only lead to a greater need for faith in God.

Browne also argues that an increased attempt by human beings to gain knowledge glorifies God. In section XIII of *Religio Medici*, Browne explains his convictions on this topic: "The world was made to be inhabited by beasts, but studied and contemplated by man: 'tis the debt of our reason we owe unto God, and the homage we pay for not being beasts" (25). The author believes one of the chief ways humans can glorify God is by making learning a lifelong endeavor. In discussing the wisdom of God, Browne writes "but his greatest knowledge is in comprehending that he made not, that is, himself. And this is also the greatest knowledge in man" (24). Browne further states, "For this do I honour my own profession" (24-5). He clearly believes that by gaining knowledge in his profession, he is glorifying God in one of the highest forms. In studying this aspect of Browne's beliefs, the reader realizes Browne's point: "if God's greatest knowledge is self-knowledge then, by persuasive analogy, self-knowledge is also what man ought chiefly to seek; none do this more obviously than physicians" (Bennett 61). Upon

reading *Religio Medici*, one understands the strength of Browne's convictions. Knowledge is an integral part of his faith and a powerful form of worship for the author.

In addition to viewing the gaining of general knowledge as a form of worship, Browne also explores the specific relationship between the studies of nature and the glorification of a higher being. In his discussion of nature, Browne comments:

In the most imperfect creatures, and such as were not preserved in the ark, but, having their seeds and principles in the womb of nature, are every where, where the power of sun is,--in these is the wisdom of his hand discovered. Out of this rank Solomon chose the object of his admiration; indeed, what reason may not go to school to the wisdom of bees, ants, and spiders? (27-8)

The author takes his cue to explore and study nature from stories of the Bible that focus on creation, including the creation story in Genesis, the story of Noah and the Ark, and the story of Solomon. In relation to this passage from section XV, Bennett comments "nature is merely the instrument and deserves praise no more than do our hammers for building our houses or our pens for writing our books; therefore he is not tempted to adore Nature" (64). Browne believes that specific knowledge about creation only magnifies the vastness of the Creator. Worshipers are also described in the text as people who "highly magnify him, whose judicious enquiry into his acts, and deliberate research into his creatures, return the duty of a devout and learned admiration" (Browne 26). Browne argues that without the attempted study of nature by human beings, their worship will be hindered because they cannot fully comprehend the greatness of their God.

Finally, Browne expresses his clear confidence in his own personal relationship with God and the relevance of his salvation to his medical practices. He begins *Religio Medici* with a clear

testimony of his personal salvation: “But that having, in my riper years and confirmed judgment, seen and examined all, I find my self obliged, by the principles of grace, and the law of mine own reason, to embrace no other name but this” (Browne 11). Obviously, the author wants his readers (or just for his own records if it was written only as a personal document) to be aware of his position on the matter of faith and believes it is important enough to write clearly on the first page of his work. Throughout the text, Browne continues to come back to this idea of salvation and how it is attained. In fact, the last two sections of part I of *Religio Medici* are dedicated to the discussion of grace, works, and salvation. In attempting to reveal the answers to the never-ending questions, Browne comments, “And if our Saviour could object, unto his own disciples and favourites, a faith that, to the quantity of a grain of mustard seed, is able to remove mountains; surely that which we boast of is not anything, or, at the most, but a remove from nothing” (83). He knows that no man can rely on his own faith to save him, for even those closest to Jesus could not save themselves. As a religious person, Browne views good works as the evidence of salvation, and thus he believes his salvation is secure and lived out through his own life (Bennett 97). In section LIX, Browne revisits the beginning claim of his work: “Again, I am confident, and fully persuaded, yet dare not take my oath, of my salvation. I am, as it were, sure, and do believe without all doubt, that there is such a city as Constantinople” (82). Browne knows that his faith is being questioned by those in the religious circle because he has chosen to proceed in the study and practice of medicine in a time of questioning and religious turmoil. He proves his clear conscience and wants to persuade others that medicine and faith can co-exist and indeed, both glorify the Almighty.

Sir Thomas Browne’s writings caused an incredible uproar and backlash in the seventeenth century. He was deemed by many a pagan and an “atheist”; in fact, most all

physicians were given these titles (Finch 12). But Browne has a different concept of medicine and science. He views knowledge as a method of worship and a way to glorify his God with his intellect. Like many college students of the twenty-first century, Browne communicates that the explanations of science only point to the magnification of a higher being. The unknowns are mysteries that can only be explained by something, or someone, bigger and more powerful. As a gifted communicator, Browne uses his ability to write as a tool to share his testimony not only with the people of his time, but with medical students and students of science four hundred years later. *Religio Medici* is clear evidence of Browne's convicting beliefs that science and faith can and still do exist side-by-side in a way that glorifies the Creator.

Works Cited

Bennett, Joan. *Sir Thomas Browne: A Man of Achievement in Literature*. Cambridge:

Cambridge UP, 1962.

“Browne, Thomas.” H.W. Wilson, 2001. *Literature Online*. 21 April 2005.

<<http://www.lion.chadwyck.com>>.

Brown, Thomas. *Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici, Urn Burial, Christian Morals, and Other*

Essays. London: Walter Scott, 1886.

Finch, Jeremiah S. *Sir Thomas Browne: A Doctor's Life of Science and Faith*. New York:

Henry Schuman, 1950.

Huebert, Ronald. “The Private Opinions of Sit Thomas Browne.” *Studies in English Literature*

45:1 (2005): 117-8. *Literature Resource Center*. Gale. C-N Lib., Jeff. City, TN. 11 April

2005 <<http://www.galegroup.com>>.

Seelig, Sharon C. “Sir Thomas Browne.” *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Vol. 151. The Gale

Group, 1995. 55-68. *Literature Resource Center*. Gale. C-N Lib., Jeff. City, TN. 11

April 2005 <<http://www.galegroup.com>>.