William James once observed: "Nothing is more striking than the secular alteration that goes on in the moral and religious tone of men, as their insight into nature and their social arrangements progressively develop." To the life of George Herbert, this remark applies well.

No close observer of George Herbert's life will fail to discover in it a rare fusion of his conformity to the beliefs and practices of his Church, and the yearnings of his higher self. Although he was born and brought up in an atmosphere of acute religious dissensions, Herbert did not allow his mind to be stifled by the ecclesiastical polemics of his day. As a priest, he followed the rules and forms of his Church as required, but they did not inhibit his outlook on life and things. He was never a hidebound conformist. Jesus was his concern, not churchianity. His fundamental aspiration was towards love - a love that is selfless and outgoing, embracing even the unlovely and the unlovable. This love was of such a nature that it spontaneously flowed from his heart. God was the source of this love. It recognised Him as the sovereign ruler of all the creation. To live life well was all that mattered to him most. His personal spiritual outlook was distinguished, above all, by its catholicity of tastes and sympathies. For a devout churchman of the early seventeenth century, this attitude of Herbert must be
considered rare indeed. This also shows that the priest and the poet lived in him side by side.

Herbert was not a man of puritanical taste, though he was a priest of the school of Andrewes and Laud, who were against marriage for priests, and also forbade drinking. Herbert was not a celibate, having married a little over a year before taking holy orders. He did not forbid wine up to the third glass, and advocated mirth duly shorn of its superfluities. His message was frankly evangelical, affectionate, and stimulating. 'The Temple' is a sermon, or a series of sermons, in rhyme, addressed to young persons, particularly to those whom Milton would have called the "choicest and hopefulest wits", of his own and later generations.

It is also worth noting that he called the collection of his devotional poems 'The Temple', and not 'The Church'. Helen C. White maintains that when Herbert chose 'The Temple' as a vehicle of his poetic and religious expression, he chose a symbol capable of more than one interpretation. It might be used for the actual church building, for its order, its furnishings; it might also be used for that mystical 'Body of the Lord', the Church. It might even be used for the recognised temple of the Holy Ghost, the spirit of the individual Christian in all its struggles, its repentances, and its illuminations.²

It is, however, contended that the term 'temple' is more general from a spiritual viewpoint because a temple may belong to any religion whereas a church indicates a place used exclusively for Christian worship. He may have, however, got the idea from a sermon of Lancelot Andrewes in which the latter referred
to the human body as the temple of the soul, and to the church as the temple of God.

The purpose of the book, as specified by him, was to make a bait of poetic pleasure, and present his sermon as a delightful verse to catch the fancy of the reader who, perhaps, would have kept himself aloof from a monotonous prosaic sermon:

Thou, whose sweet youth and early hopes enhance
Thy rate and price and mark thee for a treasure;
Hearken unto a Verser, who may chance
Ryme thee to good, and make a bait of pleasure.
A verse may finde him, who a sermon flies,
And turn delight into a sacrifice.

('The Church-porch', 1-6)

One of the main sources of inspiration for Herbert's poetry was the Bible to which he often alludes. He maintained that it was the source of all knowledge, and that it provided him proper guidance:

Not a word or look
I affect to own,
But by book,
And thy book alone.

('Discipline', 9-12)

But, in his treatment of biblical material, he is scarcely a conformist, for he used it in a manner that was daring and innovative as well as deeply spiritual. For example, the greatly glorious service of Christ's apostles for the benefit of all Christians, is thought of by the poet as sustenance brought by pipes of gold. The idea is new:

But since those pipes of gold, which brought
That cordial water to our ground,
Were cut and martyr'd by the fault
Of those, who did themselves through their side wound.

('Whitsunday', 17-20)
At other places, he calls the Bible "a book of starres", "God's ledger on earth", or compares it to a soul-reflecting mirror.

The frequent tension between love and sin, as seen in Herbert's poetry, is the outcome of his deep Christian realisation that there is a good attainable to man, but his inherent corruption makes it difficult for him to get the Lord's favour. Margaret Bottrall has pointed out that, thanks to his sensitive intelligence, it was possible for Herbert to grasp the lessons of his faith as perfectly as he assimilated the varied experiences of the world. As a result, there is that happy combination of piety and knowledge of human nature including that of his own inner self which equipped the poet singularly well for writing the kind of religious poetry for which he is famous.  

Herbert expressed his deep religious feelings and convictions in a workaday language, and not in an affected way. Contrary to the general practice of his day, religion was not regarded by him as something awfully sacrosanct. Nor did he adopt a portentously solemn attitude towards God, or towards his own sins or shortcomings. Also, he did not find it necessary to pitch his voice in a sanctimonious key when he spoke of divine love. His communion with his Creator was an experience of daily occurrence, and rightly did he adopt, therefore, an easy and informal manner for its expression in poetry.

Commenting on 'The Collar', Aldous Huxley remarked:

"Herbert was a good Anglican. But in this poem — one of the finest he ever wrote and among the most moving, to my mind, in all our literature — he makes no parade of Christian theology. The voice that calls the poet
back from the bars, back from his longing contemplation of the earthly paradise, is a voice from the depths of his own nature, not the voice of an institution or an abstract principle. There is no brandishing of posthumous threats, no ugly appeal to self-interest, no Pascalian betting on the improbable Outsider, with his one-in-a-million chance of being (how alarmingly!) the Winner. No; if Herbert replied, 'My Lord', and obediently turned his eyes away from the flowers and cordial fruits, it was not so much through fear of hell as from an intimate conviction that Cockayne was no place for him and that the Being which had summoned him was a projection of his most real, his essential self. That is why the poem has so much power to move us.\(^4\)

(Emphasis added)

This is a fair assessment of Herbert's spirituality. Just when he is about to lose his way in the quagmire of Cockayne (an imaginary country of luxury and delight), away from the ambit of spirituality, the Inner Resident of his heart calls him "Child!" and he at once responds obediently with the two words, "My Lord". Herbert has expressed in the two words much more than what he could have done by resorting to a traditional, conformist, long-winded dialogue between the Lord and the individual soul.

According to the Christian tradition, Doomsday is the day when the whole creation of God will end. Convention also has laid it down that on that final day of reckoning, God will deliver his judgment on each person depending upon the quality of life lived by him. It is recorded in the Creed thus: "He shall come to judge the living and the dead". The day is viewed also from another angle when, as St. Paul says, "We shall be changed, be
raised incorruptible." It is in this context that, right from their childhood, Christians are taught to keep the Doomsday constantly in their mind, and refrain from sin, and to do good deeds only. But, contrary to traditional belief, Herbert thinks of Doomsday in terms of the emotions that would be felt by the bodies that are dead but not yet raised, apprehensive in their posthumous sensibility, imprisonment, fragmentation, and decay.

Commenting on Herbert's poem, 'Dooms-day', Helen Vendler has pointed out that the 'fancy' behind the poem is that it is not so much God who awaits the Last Day, or those on earth who wish to put on immortality, or the disembodied souls in heaven, as those poor soulless bodies rotting in their graves who eagerly yearn for it. This critic is of the opinion that Herbert's poem does not try and answer the conformist question, "What are the traditions about Doomsday?" The poet seems to be asking himself as to who would be longing for this day most of all, and what would it be like for the waiting bodies.  

Herbert has changed Doomsday into a joyful experience for the 'suspended' souls in a most unconventional manner:

Come away,  
Make no delay.  
Summon all the dust to rise,  
Till it stirre, and rubbe the eyes;  
While this member jogs the other,  
Each one whispering, 'Live you brother'?  

('Dooms-day', 1-6)

Similarly, Herbert's approach to sin also is unconventional. It is not the usual Christian fear or abhorrence of sin, but its degrading effects which clip the wings of the aspiring soul, that he has emphasized. Consider, for instance, these lines:
Blessings beforehand, tyes of gratefulnesse,
The sound of glorie ringing in our eares,
Without, our shame; within, our consciences;
Angels and grace, eternall hopes and fears.
Yet all these fences and their whole aray
One cunning bosome - sinne blows quite away.

('Sinne I', 9-14)

Herbert also believes that but for God's kindly care to check sin, we would all have been utterly lost:

Thou shutt'st the doore, and keep' st within;
Scarce a good joy creeps through the chink:
And if the braves of conqu'ring sinne
Did not excite thee, we should wholly sink.

('whitsunday', 21-24)

The treatment here is obviously singular rather than conventional.

Herbert was fully conscious of the emergence of the new spirit of scientific inquiry of his day, but he would consider it truly valuable to him only if it would bring him greater spiritual awareness, and give him the power to know the nature of divine love. Through the 'work', he wanted the 'Workman' to be revealed to him. Like a truly inquisitive soul, Herbert would not be satisfied merely with the appearance of things with which the empirical sciences deal, but would look for the Ultimate Reality behind the veil:

Indeed mans whole estate
Amounts (and richly) to serve thee;
He did not heav'n and earth create,
Yet studies them, not him by whom they be.

Teach me thy love to know,
That this new light, which now I see,
May both the work and workman show:
Then by a sunne - beam I will climb to thee.

('Mattens', 13-20)
The claims of science to have solved the riddle of many a natural phenomenon could not dim Herbert's faith in the Lord:

Both the old discoveries, and the new found seas,  
The stock and surplus, cause and historic:  
All these stand open, or I have the keys:  
Yet I love thee.

('The Pearl', 7-10)

This insistence on the use of new knowledge for the enhancement of man's spiritual concern is not new to our day, but in Herbert's time it was an uncommon approach. This also reveals Herbert's emphasis on maintaining a proper synthesis between intellectual pursuits and spiritual aspirations.

Herbert believes that the soul can never find rest in the ephemeral attractions of the world, but must merge with its very source for attaining joy and peace:

If souls be made of earthly mold,  
Let them love gold;  
If born on high,  
Let them unto their kindred flie:  
For they can never be at rest,  
Till they regain their ancient nest.  
Then silly soul take heed; for earthly joy  
Is but a bubble, and makes thee a boy.

('Vanitie II', 11-18)

Herbert has put forward a singular definition of man as the only creature whose being spreads between the extremes of earth and heaven. His ideal man is he who is as much conversant with the material aspect of life as the spiritual:

To this life things of sense  
Make their pretence:  
In th' other Angels have a right by birth:  
Man ties them both alone,  
And makes them one,  
With th' one hand touching heav'n, with th' other earth.

('Man's Medley', 7-12)
Herbert has expressed his conviction that man has the capacity for adherence to the kindred points of heaven and home. He has also maintained that man is susceptible to suffering in all his pursuits, temporal as well as spiritual. But he holds him alone to be wise who can draw, out of grief, pure joy:

But as his joyes are double;
So is his trouble.
He hath two winters, other things but one:
Both frosts and thoughts do nip,
And bite his lip;
And he of all things fears two deaths alone.
Yet ev'n the greatest griefs
May be reliefs,
Could he but take them right, and in their wayes
Happy is he, whose heart
Hath found the art
To turn his double pains to double praise.

(ibid., 25-36)

The above lines seem to strike an autobiographical note, for in his own life Herbert to an extent was able to achieve what can be called the ideal of pain and prayer. His life-long sickness only confirmed his faith in God, and enhanced his spiritual yearnings.

Herbert upholds the supremacy of faith over knowledge, and considers it to be the store-house of perfect bliss. He also believes that God's grace is showered naturally upon him that possesses faith:

Faith makes me anything, or all
That I believe is in the sacred storie;
And where sinne placeth me in Adam's fall,
Faith sets me higher in his glorie.
If I go lower in the book,
What can be lower than the common manger?
Faith puts me there with him, who sweetly took
Our flesh and frailtie, death and danger.
If blisse had lien in art or strength,
None but the wise or strong had gained it:
Where now by Faith all arms are of a length;
One size doth all conditions fit.
A peasant may believe as much
As a great Clerk, and reach the highest stature.
Thus dost thou make proud knowledge bend and crouch,
While grace fills up uneven nature.

('Faith', 17-32)

These lines remind us of what William James has said about faith:

"When, however, a positive intellectual content is associated with a faith-state, it gets invincibly stamped in upon belief, and this explains the passionate loyalty of religious persons everywhere to the minutest details of their so widely differing creeds."

A close look at the above lines shows that the poet has made an excellent exposition of a scriptural tenet. Thanks to his expansive vision, he has been able to present what is much more than mere reiteration of conventional belief. Herbert's cheerful conduct of his priestly duties is also an important aspect of his personality. Instead of treading the beaten track of rigid shrume practices, he adopted pleasant and winning ways of exhortation to persuade people to join church regularly:

Come ye hither All, whose taste
Is your waste;
Save your cost, and mend your fare,
God is here prepar'd and drest,
and the feast,
God, in whom all dainties are.

Come ye hither All, whom wine
doth define,
Naming you not to your good:
Weep what ye have drunk amisse,
And drink this,
Which before ye drink is blood.

('The Invitation', 1-12)

If this address sounds rather commonplace, it is followed by a kind of explanation that is marked by an informality of manner.
and a true note of serious conviction of a devoted soul:

Lord I have invited all,
And I shall
Still invite, still call to thee:
For it seems but just and right
In my sight,
Where is All, there All should be.

(ibid., 31-36)

In the same spirit, Herbert has made an unusual call for Lent:

The Scriptures bid us fast; the Church sayes, now:
Give to thy Mother, what thou wouldst allow
To ev'ry Corporation.

('Lent', 4-6)

Equating one's obligation to his belly ('corporation') with that to the Church might startle many a die-hard Christian, but Herbert's purpose being to bring about a spiritual awakening, he does not hesitate to adopt unconventional ways of communication.

Herbert has often expressed the belief that a true Christian ought to know the inner significance of the rules and customs of his faith, and never miss an occasion to realise the ideal in his own practice:

True Christians should be glad of an occasion
To use their temperance, seeking no evasion,

(ibid., 13-14)

Herbert admits that it may not be possible for all to attain fully the high ideals of spirituality as set forth in Christianity, but an honest endeavour to live up to them should always be made, for, in matters spiritual, aspiration itself is part of the final realisation:
It's true, we cannot reach Christ's fortieth day;  
Yet to go part of that religious way,  
Is better than to rest:  
We cannot reach our Saviour's purity;  
Yet are we bid, 'Be holy ev'n as he'.  
In both let's do our best.  

( Ibid., 31-36)

Herbert has expressed the opinion that the primary aim of fasting should be to starve sin, and that all our sense-perceptions should help us to check our transgressions:

Yet Lord instruct us to improve our fast  
By starving Sinne and taking such repast  
As may our faults controll:

( Ibid., 43-45)

The passages cited here point to Herbert's insight into some of the rites of his Church, and may be said to constitute a kind of exposition of practical Christianity. The attitude, throughout, is individual, and not conventional.

Notwithstanding his honest intent, Herbert's projection of the Bible as a better thing for ladies to stand before than their mirror, is likely to be frowned upon by an orthodox Christian, but it is an instance of the poet's deviation, at times, from the form and practice of religious convention. The lines in question are:

Ladies, look here; this is the thankfull glasse,  
That mends the lookers eyes: this is the well  
That washes as it shows. Who can indeare  
Thy promise too much? thou art heav'n's Lidger here,  
Working against the states of death and hell.  
Thou art joyes handsell: heav'n lies flat in thee,  
Subject to ev'ry mounters bended knee.

('The H.Scrintures I', 8-14)

In the following stanza, Herbert tries to understand the Bible ("the Book of stars") as an astronomer would the pattern of the heavens as a whole:
Oh that I knew how all thy lights combine,
And all the configurations of their glorie
Seeing not only how each verse doth shine,
But all the constellation of the storie.

('The H.Scriptures II', 1-4)

Though the Holy Book has been respected, read, and probably understood, by many devout Christians all over the world, it is doubtful if anyone else ever viewed it as a "constellation" of starres, and tried to understand it in that light.

Stating his own case, Herbert writes that God's grace descended upon him like a 'silk twist let down from heav'n', teaching him thereby how to 'climbe' to the Lord:

I flie to thee, and fully understand
Both the main scale, and the commodities,
And at what rate and price I have thy love,
With all the circumstances that may move:
Yet through these labyrinths, not my groveling wit,
By thy silk twist let down from heav'n to me,
Did both conduct and teach me, how by it
To climbe to thee.

('The Pearl', 33-40)

These lines indicate a clear spiritual perspective of the poet, highlighting, at the same time, his humility and complete dependence upon God.

Herbert's deep faith in the Lord is unquestioned, but, unlike many other Christians, he will not be overawed by Him. A note of easy familiarity marks his addresses to God, as in these lines:

Whither, 0, whither art thou fled,
My Lord, my Love?
My searches are my daily bread;
Yet never proved.

('The Search', 1-4)

The drift of these lines shows that Herbert does not make of God a stranger, an outsider. He is not referred to in impersonal
terms. Nor is He exalted to unapproachable heights, but is thought of as closer to him 'than his own neck artery', as the saying goes in the Koran. Indeed, Herbert's relationship with God is a kind of personal metaphor.

Herbert recommends that a true Christian should be a man of strong physique, but lean and thin like a suitor:

A Christian's state and case
Is not a corpulent, but a thinne and spare,
Yet active strength whose long and bony face
Content and care
Do seem to equally divide,
Like a pretender, not a bride.

('The Size', 31-36)

No other religious poet could be so unconventional as to comment on a Christian's physique in so candid a manner. It would be recalled that Herbert himself was lean and thin, and had a bony face.

Herbert's spirituality reveals itself also through his deep awareness of God's omnipresence and the perfect regularity of His creation:

Of what supreme almightie power
Is thy great arm, which spans the east and west,
And tacks the centre to the sphere!
By it do all things live with measur'd hour;
We cannot ask the thing, which is not there,
Blaming the shallownesse of our request.

('Prayer II', 7-12)

The following lines show a sense of homely familiarity in the poet's relationship with God Whom he thinks of as a friend, and Whose noble name he is pledged to redeem if it was ever sullied by anyone, however slightly:
If any touch my friend, or his good name,
It is my honour and my love to free
His blasted fame
From the least spot or thought of blame.
I could not use a friend, as I use Thee.

('Unkindness', 6-10)

No conventional Christian can be expected to think of God in terms of such relationship.

Herbert's spiritual sensibility reveals itself not only in his intensely personal relationship with God but also in his rare and unorthodox concept of Divine Grace. The following lines present an instance:

When thou dost favour any action,
It runnes, it flies:
All things concurre to give it perfection.
That which had but two legs before,
When thou dost bless, hath twelve: one wheel doth rise
To twenty then, or more.

('Praise III', 7-12)

Herbert expresses his great respect for the act of prayer in these terse lines:

That were I to leave all but one,
Wealth, fame, endowments, vertues, all should go;
I and deare prayer would together dwell.

('Prayer II', 21-23)

The following passage from his well-known poem, 'Prayer I', also bears the true stamp of Herbert's spirituality:

Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;
Engine against th' Almighty, sinners towre,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-daies world transposing in an houre,
A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear;
Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,
Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,  
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,  
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,  
Church - belief beyond the starres heard, the souls blood,  
The land of spices ; something understood.

('Prayer I')

It can be easily seen that in this passage Herbert has depended as much on the conventional biblical concepts as on his own imaginative insight born out of a deep realization of the essence of prayer. The latter also shows the wide range of his spiritual outlook.

We are reminded here of William James who called prayer "religion in act", or "real religion". Explaining his viewpoint, James wrote:

"Religion is nothing if it be not the vital act by which the entire mind seeks to save itself by clinging to the principle from which it draws its life. This act is prayer, by which term I understand no vain exercise of words, no mere repetition of certain sacred formulae, but the very movement itself of the soul, putting itself in a personal relation of contact with the mysterious power of which it feels the presence, — it may be even before it has a name by which to call it. Wherever this interior prayer is lacking, there is no religion; wherever, on the other hand, this prayer rises and stirs the soul, even in the absence of forms or of doctrines, we have living religion."7

These lines represent the true quality of the religious experience which Herbert was undergoing; to him, prayer was the outcome of his heart-felt love for God.

Having defined the substance of prayer so well, Herbert presents the actual process of prayer in a rare ecstasy of
Apart from its unique sincerity welling out of the depths of a devout heart, the one thing that strikes the reader most in this exceptional prayer is its unconventionality, for no other Christian supplication is known to have the same free and familiar manner that it shows.

We also find in Herbert a fusion of love of God and love of man. His love for the common man, as reflected in his poetry, is really touching. The following lines are one such example:

Man is God's image; but a poor man is Christ's stamp to boot: both images regard.

('The Church- porch', 379-280)

Herbert considered himself worthy of priesthood only because of his deep faith in God. This is how he has expressed his sentiment:

Christ is my only head,
My alone only heart and breast,
My only musick, striking me even dead,
That to the old man I may rest:
And be in him new.
So holy in my head,
Perfect and light in my deare breast,
My doctrine tun'd by Christ, (who is not dead,
But lives in me while I do rest)
Come people; Aaron's drest.

('Aaron', 16-25)

Seldom before has God been conceived as burning heat by any English poet. For the first time we find Herbert doing just that in the following lines where he describes the Lord as a great fire capable of burning bad desires accumulating in the heart of man:

Immortal Heat, O let thy greater flame
Attract the lesser to it; let those fires,
Which shall consume the world first make it tame;
And kindle in our hearts such true desires,
As may consume our lusts, and make thee way.

('Love I', 1-5)

Herbert's understanding of the magnitude of the soul is original and universal. Compare, for instance, the following lines:

This soul doth span the world, and hang content
From either pole unto the centre;
Where in each room of the well-furnisht tent
He lies warm, and without adventure.

('Content', 17-20)

Yet another instance of the fusion of Herbert's spirituality with his conformity to the Church is seen in a short poem, called 'Love-Joy', where Herbert has shown that in his concept of life on a higher level, there is no difference between Joy and Charity, as there is none between Jesus and Christ (both sets of expressions having the same initial letters):
As on a window late I cast mine eye,
I saw a vine drop grapes with J and C
Anneal'd on every bunch. One standing by
Ask'd what it meant. I who am never loth
To spend my judgement, said, It seem'd to me
To be the bodie and the letters both
Of Joy and Charitie. Sir, you have not miss'd,
The man reply'd; It figures JESUS CHRIST.

('Love-joy.)

In the above lines, the reference to Jesus Christ in the particularization of the words represented by the letters J and C, amounts to conformity. Herbert's allusion to 'Joy' and 'Charity' depicts his own universal spirituality, and the fusion between the two is ingeniously made by him by using words having identical initial letters.

There was a time when Herbert regarded justice in its traditional Christian sense as a fearful constraint upon sin, but a deeper realisation of divine grace has taught him to view it as a happy means of spiritual elevation. The following lines indicate the new approach:

But now that Christ's pure vail presents the sight,
I see no fears:
Thy hand is white,
Thy scales like buckets, which attend,
Lifting to heaven from this well of tears.

('Justice II', 13-18)

This is truly indicative of an enlargement of perspective beyond the confines of conventional thought and outlook.

'Love III' is another poem to show the fusion of church conformity and spirituality as manifest in Herbert's sensibility:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guiltie of dust and sinne.
But quick - ey'd Love, observing me go slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack'd any thing.
A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

According to Helen Vendler, the poem depends on St. Luke's description of Jesus making his disciples sit while he served them, on the words of the Centurion on the arrival of Christ at his house: "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest enter under my roof," and on Southwell's poem, 'St. Peter's Complaint', in which St. Peter knocks on sorrow's door and announces himself as 'One unworthy to be known'. It is quite evident that the real subject of the poem is the entrance of the redeemed soul into Paradise. Helen Vendler has admitted that the link between St. Peter's knocking at the door, or a soul knocking at St. Peter's door, is clear, but only Herbert could amalgamate St. Peter's abject response with the entrance of the soul as an unworthy guest in heaven, instead of its being the unworthy host at the communion. On our first reading, the poem strikes us as exquisitely natural and humanly plausible; only later does the ingenuity of the poet's concept surprise us. As in the case of his treatment of the subject of the Doomsday, so here, Herbert looks at the event in terms of its possible course of culmination, instead of unquestioningly accepting the common belief that a redeemed soul would enter Paradise joyfully in the spirit of 'The Saints go marching in.' But Herbert asks
himself: "If the redeemed soul could speak posthumously, and
tell us what its entrance into heaven was actually like, what
would it say?" He then answers the question as truthfully as it
appeals to his spiritual sensibility. 8

In his poem, 'Peace', Herbert presents the moving story of
Christ. The poet is searching for Peace in a cave, in the rain­
bow, and then in a garden, but without success. At last he comes
to a 'rev'rend good old man' (who could be Bishop Andrewes in
Herbert's real life), who tells him the moving story of Christ,
and advises him to have and nurture faith like himself, for in
faith alone does peace dwell;

At length I met a rev'rend good old man,
Whom when for Peace
I did demand, he thus began:
There was a Prince of old
At Salem dwelt, who liv'd with good increase
Of flock and fold.
He sweetly liv'd; yet sweetness did not save
His life from foes.
But after death out of his grave
There sprang twelve stalks of wheat:
Which many wondering at, got some of those
To plant and set.
It prosper'd strangely, and did soon disperse
Through all the earth:
For they that taste it do rehearse,
That virtue lies therein,
A secret virtue bringing peace and mirth
By flight of sins.
Take of that grain, which in my garden grows,
And grows for you;
* Make bread of it: and that repose
And peace, which ev'ry where
With so much earnestness you do pursue,
Is only there.

('Peace', 19-42)

It will be recalled that in 'Whitsunday' Herbert compared the
twelve apostles of Christ to 'pipes of gold' through which grace
and sustenance flowed. Here they have been compared to twelve stalks of wheat which grew at the grave of the Master. The grain from these stalks, which have spread far and wide, obviously refers to the Christian faith. Though there are indications of traditional belief in the poem, its treatment is essentially innovative and spiritual. This is another instance to show how Herbert adopts scriptural matter to present an enlarged view beyond all conventional ideas and beliefs, Michael West's assertion that the poem has "drawn upon thoroughly traditional symbolism to comment upon ecclesiastical controversies" is rather hard to vindicate.  

The average Christian would generally justify his observance of the religious rites merely on the grounds of conformity, but Herbert's spiritual insight has found better warrant for following the path of his faith which he has stated thus:

Perhaps my God, though he be farre before,  
May turn, and take me by the hand, and more  
May strengthen my decayes.  

('Lent', 40-42)

Herbert's pattern-poem, called 'The Altar', has been criticised by many as artificial and ostentatious. Although the poet had possibly copied its design from an anonymous poem named 'An Altare and Sacrifice to Disdaine, for freeing him from Love", it is much more than mere imitation. It is a sincere record of the poet's spiritual sensibility, his thoughts and feelings. The poem is a poignant prayer, and its appeal is wide and unfailing:
A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant reares,  
   Made of a heart, and cemented with tears;  
   Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;  
   No workmans tools hath touched the same.  
   A Heart alone  
   Is such a stone,  
   As nothing but  
   Thy power doth cut.  
   Wherefore each part  
   Of my hard heart  
   Meets in this frame,  
   To praise thy name;  
   That if I chance to hold my peace,  
   These stones to praise thee may not cease.  
   O let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,  
   And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine.  
   ('The Altar')

The poet must have felt that each part of his stony heart was  
   joined together in the frame of the Altar. The deeply spiritual  
   content of the poem seems to have been ignored altogether by the  
   critics in their greater concern for its formal pattern only.  

   It has been pointed out by C.A.Patrides that although the  
   fear of hell is an obsession with the Christian consciousness,  
   and although there is frequent reference to it in the writings  
   of Herbert's contemporaries, there is no mention of it in 'The  
   Temple'. A plausible explanation is that the poet's faith in  
   Love Divine was too deep to allow him to recognise hell as real.  
   He must have thought that whoever sought God's grace sincerely,  
   would be able to overcome all fear of the place of torment, and  
   that, to that extent, it did not exist. In the depth of Herbert's  
   consciousness, therefore, God, in the form of the Eternal Good,  
   alone existed, and not hell, which is but a manifestation of Evil.  
   This critic has quoted a line from 'The Church-porch', depicting  
   the poet's ultimate realisation: "All things are bigge  
   with jest." This seems to refer to the words of Christ when he
said: "Everything in this world, said my Father, is big with jest—and has wit in it." Such an attitude is truly reflective of Herbert's characteristic spirituality.

As already observed, Herbert was painfully aware of the ecclesiastical controversies of the day, but he wisely refrained from taking sides. He, however, wrote a poem on the subject of division in the Church, called 'Church-rents and schisms', in which he lamented that the position that the Church of England (referred to as the 'brave rose') had earlier occupied in the Christian consciousness, was lately usurped by unchristian elements:

Brave rose, (alas!) where art thou? in the Chair
Where thou didst lately so triumph and shine
A worm doth sit, whose many feet and hair
Are the more foul, the more thou wert divine.

('Church-rents and schisms', 1-4)

In the above lines, the presentation of the Church of England, in exalted contrast to other faiths, is indicative of the high esteem in which Herbert held her.

Herbert calls his Church his mother, and maintains that her beauty and divinity owe their existence to Christ's blessings:

Why doth my Mother blush? is she the rose,
And shows it so? Indeed Christ's precious blood
Gave you a colour once.

(ibid., 11-13)

But he admits that even the brilliance of the Church of England was dimmed by the religious controversies which had not spared her either:

But when debates and fretting jealousies
Did worm and work within you more and more
Your colour waned, and calamities
Turned your ruddy into pale and bleak:
Your health and beauty both began to break.

(ibid., 16-20)
The sincerity of sentiment as expressed in these lines cannot be questioned. That the poet was not drawn to the controversies, in spite of such powerful feeling for the Church, is a measure of his religious tolerance which, again, is an element of his personality. It must be admitted that very few, in the early years of the seventeenth century, could remain indifferent to the religious polemics. That Herbert was one of the few shows that he would never stoop to bigotry if ever so much as to indicate his conformity.

It is a tribute to Herbert's wisdom and clarity of vision that even at a time of fierce contentions, he was able to see all Christian teachings as emerging from the same Lord Himself:

But all the doctrine, which he taught and gave,  
Was clear as heav'n, from whence it came.  
At least those beams of truth, which onely save,  
Surpasse in brightnesse any flame.  

('Divinitie', 13-16)

Herbert saw the events and happenings around him as emanating from God's Will. He also emphasized that if we could see the essential unity and harmony of all creation, there would be little scope for any conflict among men:

All must appear,  
And be disposed, and dress'd, and tun'd by thee,  
Who sweetly temper'st all. If we could heare  
Thy skill and art, what musick would it be.  

('Providence', 37-40)

Herbert believed that music could take him nearer God and reveal to him the essential unity of things which all arise in God:

My musick shall finde thee, and ev'ry string  
Shall have his attribute to sing;  
That all together may accord in thee,  
And prove one God, one harmonie.  

('The Thanksgiving', 39-42)
These lines seem to have been Herbert's favourite, for as we have it from Walton, on the Sunday before his death, the poet sat up on his bed, and uttered them while tuning his lute. Herbert seems to have felt that God was a harmonious state of being which could be experienced by practising devotional music welling up from his heart.

The faithful discharge of one's mundane employment of the day was considered by Herbert to be as good a means of serving the Lord as sincere prayer. Work done for its own sake, without any desire for its result, was regarded by Herbert as an expression of practical spirituality:

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.

('The Elixir', 17-20)

The consideration of all work as prayer contrasts sharply with the conventional notion of worship as an obligation merely.

Herbert was also keen on sharing his experience of divine love with all the world. It is because of this liberal outlook that his poetry has earned the admiration of all, irrespective of any consideration of belief or opinion. J.H.Summers has rightly pointed out that, like the devotions of St.Bernard, and the 'Confessions' of St.Augustine, the many conflicts that passed between God and Herbert's soul also have a universal spiritual significance.

Herbert considers man to be the temple of God, and prays to Him to bless him with good sense so that his mind is drawn to Him in worship. The concept is not new, but it's transfiguration
in verse has much more than mere conventionality: it has all
the warmth of a sincere appeal:

Since then, my God, thou hast
So brave a Palace built; O dwell in it,
That it may dwell with thee at last!
Till then, afford us so much wit;
That, as the world serves us, we may serve thee,
And both thy servants be.

('Man', 49-54)

Herbert's attitude to things mundane and spiritual, as
dwelt upon in the preceding paragraphs, points to his inner per­
ception which he could not have attained, had not his mind aspired
beyond the bounds of sheer conformity. The great popularity of
his devotional poetry over the ages is to be attributed to an
extent to the high esteem in which the reader has held him. In
the final analysis, it is, to use Herbert's own words, the
image of his 'sweet and virtuous soul' radiating love and light
that has left its enduring imprint upon our mind.