

## Approaching Donne's Theology

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Jeffrey Johnson, *The Theology of John Donne*, Studies in Renaissance Literature, Volume 1, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999  
xiv + 162pp.

Questions about the nature of Donne's "religion" have begun to dominate recent critical discourse, particularly relating to the sermons. These questions, of course, are complicated by the biographical facts of his Roman Catholic baptism and his stewardship as Dean of St. Paul's in the Church of England. They are further complicated by the increasing interest among historians and literary scholars alike in the polemical and rhetorical purposes to which statements of theology were put within the emerging discourse of the Church of England. In a scholarly discourse preoccupied with pinpointing Donne's sectarian allegiances, Johnson's book chooses to bypass the allurements of political and rhetorical readings by focusing on five aspects of Donne's theology. These theological principles, Johnson argues (following Paul Stanwood), were well-formulated by 1615 when Donne was ordained and can reasonably be traced as "the distinguishing features" (p. x) of a coherent theological matrix within which to assess particular sermons.

Building on the important work of Terry Sherwood and David Nicholls, Johnson's discussion of Donne is based on the foundational principle that Donne's theology was Trinitarian. For Johnson, this observation, is important in understanding Donne's unique contribution to the Church of England and its *via media* in

the 1620s, and produces a theology that is consistently communal. Focus on the Trinity, for Donne, has many consequences, not least of which is its potential to counter doctrinal and ecclesiological singularity within the Church. "This image of dialogic unity," Johnson writes, "serves for Donne as the model for individuals to conform themselves to the triune God specifically through liturgical participation in the Church." (p. x) Having established the importance of the Trinity as Donne's "theological first principle" (p. x) in the first chapter, Johnson demonstrates in the next how Donne's attitudes to prayer (both liturgical and private) transcend sectarian allegiances by defining a communion of saints. The third chapter, on Donne's attitude to images, focuses primarily on the way in which both tangible and imagined images foster community and the "redemptive relationship with God." (p. 64) Consequently, Johnson focuses on the intended communal implications of the Baptism, primarily as these are revealed in four christening sermons. This same chapter includes a reading of Donne's 1622 Hanworth sermon in which Donne corrects and dilates the vision of his auditors, the stoic Earl of Northumberland (recently released from the Tower) and the prodigal James Hay, whose reputation for immoderation also required correction through the spectacle of Christ crucified. Chapter 4 focuses on Donne's theology of repentance, as repentance restores commerce between Church and State, within the Church, and between God and human communities. Here again, Johnson stresses how, for Donne (unlike Calvin and Hooker), repentance is enacted publicly in the Church, and is a relational rather than a private concept. "From Donne's vantage point of the one administering the liturgy, it is the public penance determined by God's ordinances (specifically in common prayer, in preaching, and in the Sacraments) that he sees as most efficacious for salvation, for public confession as such affirms the Church as a community of sanctified believers even as it reenacts the trinitarian unity of God." (p. 98) The final chapter of this study focuses on Donne's theology of grace, particularly his theology of prevenient and subsequent

grace. While prevenient grace comes first from God (and is portrayed as light), it is not irresistible, and subsequent grace requires human efforts. Yet Donne is careful not to overstate the extent of human efforts. For Donne, both Word and Sacraments are necessary, just as faith and works act in concert. Finally, Donne's theology as explained by Johnson is focused on a goal of loving conformity, and is communal: the nexus for reconciliation achieved by human efforts in prayer, preaching, and the sacraments.

This study brings together a number of important earlier treatments of theology in Donne's sermons (and some poems), and presents a coherent treatment of these theological concerns. The author establishes the ground against which to examine Donne's theology in the writings of Calvin and Hooker. This method, in itself, is sensible, (and can be defended, but isn't), although it does not always allow for the ways in which Calvin and Hooker were interpreted and assimilated by theologians (and polemicists) of the period. The entire book is based on an assumption of purity and integrity in the texts (Donne's as well as Hooker's and Calvin's), which at times is quite at odds with the ways in which these texts were actually used in particular circumstances. One sometimes feels the absence of a material, historical concern for the conditions in which theological utterances (either Donne's or others') were made. This is not to say, however, that the study eschews history or context. Johnson's treatment of Donne's sermon delivered at Hanworth in 1622 is a clear example of historically-informed theological reading. One looks, perhaps, for more developed connections between Donne's theological pronouncements in the sermons and his biography, for a less detached reading of Donne's public contributions to the religious discourse defining the *via media* of the Church of England. In other words, the theological discussions would be enriched and complicated by further historical grounding that might, in the end, challenge the view that the theology of Donne's sermons remained substantially unchanged throughout his preaching career (1615-1631). I agree

with Johnson that Donne does not spend much time in the sermons defending his theological vision, and in that way cannot be said to contribute to the divisive religious polemic of his age, but there is surely more to be said about the timing and the contexts of Donne's theological pronouncements.

Despite these reservations, this book is strong in a number of ways, not least of which is its clarity and focus, as well as its lucid style. It will be of service to undergraduate students, in particular, but to anyone wishing to understand Donne's theology in a coherent, systematic way, particularly students of literature, theology, and history. I emphasize the efficacy of this book as a teaching tool, because I believe that, more than ever, students need to read works that treat Donne seriously as a theologian, rather than as the sycophantic rhetorician glibly depicted in so much recent published material on Donne. The recent book by Paul Oliver (*Donne's Religious Writing: A discourse of Feigned Devotion* [Harlow: Longman, 1997]), to name only one, confirms that there is much unscholarly misinformation available, from reputable publishers. In addition, many authors (Oliver and others) appear to ignore material published in articles. Unlike their rather superficial treatments of Donne's theology, this book, like some of the earlier work published on the sermons, (William Mueller, *John Donne: Preacher* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962], for example), is a careful and intelligent analysis, which succeeds in mapping out some of the vast and complex territory of the sermons. Such a mapping makes possible more nuanced readings of particular sermons, and addresses recent scholarly concerns about Donne's contribution to the *via media* of the Church of England. More important, Johnson's study directs us in our inquiries concerning the nature of Donne's religious belief as well as his religious discourse, and suggests how these might eventually illuminate our understanding of Donne's active religious practice and devotion.

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