

*John Donne and Religious Authority in a Reformed Church.* Mark S. Sweetnam. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014. 204 pp. €65.

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Mark Sweetnam is not the first to address “issues of theological authority” (9) in the works of John Donne, although his monograph *John Donne and Religious Authority in*

*a Reformed Church* calls attention in a comprehensive, focused way to Donne's treatment of these issues, particularly in the sermons. In the course of this study, Sweetnam has gathered a range of passages from the sermons, the *Essays in Divinity*, and two poems, and has synthesized them into a coherent account (what he calls a "comprehensive and integrated picture" [10]) of Donne's eclectic and ultimately sui generis churchmanship within the reformed Church of England. Sweetnam does so in an admirably nonpolemical and evenhanded fashion, allowing Donne himself, as he puts it, "to set the agenda" (9).

Several features of the study attest to the strength of this close reading of Donne: its analysis of Donne's thoughts on the relations between prayer, preaching, and sacrament; its dilation of what Donne's "conversion" to a "local religion" entailed (94–96); its provocation to consider the influence of Hooker on Donne's theological thought; its discussions of the *Essays in Divinity* as Donne's "personal experiment in theology" (15); and its articulation of Donne's reasons for not abandoning the Church of England.

While Donne's own extensively quoted words allow him to set the agenda, however, Sweetnam's engagement with the scholarly conversation that has developed in relation to these issues is uneven, calling into question his claims for the originality of his approach. To say, as Sweetnam does, that Donne scholars have neglected Donne's theology (in favor of his politics, his biography, or other historical contexts), and that his study supplies this lacuna in Donne studies, overstates his case, as does his suggestion that this study will extend beyond the historical to the theological by looking at sermons as deeply occasional, performative expressions of Donne's personal and communal commitments. Leaving aside the suggestion that theology is somehow beyond history, very little in this approach is entirely new. Moreover, the areas in which the greatest contribution might be made (sermons as performances, for example) do not feature prominently in this study.

My own work over the last thirty-five years, while well represented in this study, has tackled many of these issues of authority — scriptural, interpretative, and institutional — but so has the work of an army of scholars, foremost among them Peter McCullough and Jeff Johnson, both referred to only perfunctorily in the introduction. Others are absent altogether from the list of secondary sources: Katrin Ettenhuber's *Donne's Augustine*; Brent Nelson's *Holy Ambition: Rhetoric, Courtship, and Devotion in the Sermons of John Donne*; Gale Carrithers's *Donne at Sermons*; Carrithers's work with James Hardy in *Age of Iron: English Renaissance Tropologies of Love and Power*; Mary Morrissey's *Politics and the Paul's Cross Sermons, 1558–1642*; Arnold Hunt's *The Art of Hearing*; Bryan Crockett's *The Play of Paradox*; Margaret Fetzer's *John Donne's Performances: Sermons, Poems, Letters and Devotions*; Hugh Adlington's essay on Donne's ambassadorship; Achsah Guibbory's seminal *ELR* essay on Donne's religion; and Alison Knight on Donne's use of the Bible. Still others are cited in footnotes, but their intellectual arguments are not engaged (e.g., Kneidel, Haskin, Whalen). *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne* (2011) is completely absent from Sweetnam's consideration, despite its state-of-the-art biographical, historical, generic, and theoretical analyses and contextualizations of Donne's works. So too is *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern*

*Sermon* (2011), an indispensable resource for anyone working on sermons of this period. All of these studies, and more, were available for consultation and would have confirmed as well as challenged findings claimed as original in this study. An array of typographical errors, while not substantive, are a minor irritant to readers. The index is primarily a list of proper names.

Allowing Donne to set the agenda has produced Sweetnam's synthesis of Donne's views on various kinds of authority — a close reading of Donne, supplemented by occasional references to others who have also read these passages. Engaging with (not simply noting) scholars who have investigated similar ground would undoubtedly have led to a revision of Donne's relations to these authorities, one that could truly lay claim to the originality toward which this study gestures.

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