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Sweetnam, Mark S. John Donne and Religious Authority in the Reformed English Church

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Sweetnam, Mark S.

John Donne and Religious Authority in the Reformed English Church.

Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014. Pp. 208. ISBN 978-1846823947 (hardcover) €65.

Though long hailed as the brainiest poet in English, Donne's position in intellectual history has remained marginal. Donne is not generally seen in the company of Hooker, Bacon, Coke, or Hobbes, despite, or perhaps because of, his range of intellectually idiosyncratic works—*Biathanatos*, *Pseudo Martyr*, the *Devotions*, and his sermons. Mark S. Sweetnam begins to address this situation by attending closely to Donne's theology. In six chapters, Sweetnam works through Donne's thought on the authority of Scripture and scriptural interpretation; on the question of the position of the Church; and on the meaning and point of preaching. Though he assures us that he has carefully studied all of Donne's poetry and prose, his book is best understood as a helpful mining of the sermons for theologically consistent positions. Sweetnam's overarching stress is that Donne belongs more to the "conformist mainstream of the English church" (10) than has sometimes been said, and Sweetnam's own determination is to vindicate "a man so abused by those who see in his life little that cannot be accounted for by the cocktail of apostasy and ambition" (186). Sweetnam's Dr. Donne is a conscientious preacher, devoted to his calling, and a slightly dull middle-of-the-road theologian: "Donne saw in the church an interpretative aid, which could guide and test interpretation, but which ought never tyrannically to control it" (184); "Donne resisted the urge towards increased emphasis on ceremonialism, on one side, and a scrupulous Biblicism, on the other" (185); "Donne is resistant to any definition of ministry that makes secondary the importance of preaching" (185).

While Sweetnam's book usefully clarifies many of Donne's de facto theological positions, it remains unclear in the book why, exactly, one might read such a dutiful pastor other than to admire and celebrate his dedication. Though Sweetnam reasonably excludes a detailed consideration of Donne's poetry from his study, perhaps one answer might be that, whether in metre or prose, what is arresting about Donne is less the theology—I am mostly persuaded he is who Sweetnam says he is on matters of doctrine—than what might be called his habitual poetic intensification of everything. Here is a passage Sweetnam

quotes from a Donne sermon on Canticles 5:8: “I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them?”:

It is a degree of uncleanness, to fixe our thoughts too earnestly upon the uncleanesse of our conception, and of our birth: when wee call that a testimony of a right coming, if we come into the world *with our head* forward, in a head-long precipitation; and when we take no other testimony of our being *alive*, but that we were heard to *cry*; and that for an earnest, and a Prophecy, that we shall be...bloudy, and deceitfull Men, false and treacherous, to the murdering of our owne soules we come into this world, as the Egyptians went out of it, swallowed, and smothered in a red sea...weake, and bloudy infants at our births. (153–54)

About this astonishing imaginative flight Sweetnam remarks “[n]ot one to gloss over the earthier facts of life, Donne is, nonetheless, quick to carry his thoughts ‘from material to spirituall uncleannesses’” (154). But the passage sounds like Donne because it does not just let go of its language: it fixes its thought very earnestly on the uncleanness of its “conception”—both its bloody birth origin and its own thinking. There may be nothing theologically remarkable here—Sweetnam points out that “Donne draws on patristic interpretation and exegesis to apply the cleansing mentioned to the cleansing of the life from sin, specifically an initial washing in baptism” (153)—but perhaps theology is not the best lens by which to measure such fixing and unfixing of thoughts. It is worthwhile and valuable to have an overview of Donne’s theology, and I am glad to have read this careful study. But one implication of Sweetnam’s book paradoxically may be that Donne’s intellectual significance lies in some other “head-long precipitation” than theology; that he may be worth bothering with because his writing, rather than, strictly speaking, his thinking, is the great “testimony” of his having been alive.

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