



BOOK REVIEW

Shanyn Altman. **Witnessing to the Faith: Absolutism and the Conscience in John Donne's England. Politics, Culture and Society in Early Modern Britain**

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Shanyn Altman's study focuses on Donne's argument that Catholics should swear to the Oath of Allegiance in *Pseudo-Martyr*, interweaving discussion of two other pre-ordination prose texts, Donne's treatise on suicide, *Biathanatos*, and his anti-Jesuit satire, *Ignatius, his Conclave*. Attention to these texts allows Altman to confront two issues that have frequently troubled Donne studies: the question of his attitude to royal authority, or whether Donne should be considered an absolutist; and the problem of when, or even whether, he converted to the English Church. Arguments both for and against Donne as an absolutist have often become mired in problems of definition and entangled in biographical controversies over Donne's motivations for supporting James I. Instead, Altman concludes that Donne defends the requirement to swear the oath by redefining the terms of the question. Rather than attempting to bridge the gulf between Catholicism and Protestantism, Donne situates Catholics' choice as obedience to the state demonstrated through religious conformity or disobedience manifested in recusancy. Donne argues that obedience promises the most safety for the human conscience, since churches are created by humans, and therefore subject to corruption, whereas the king is God's representative on earth, and so closer to the source of divine authority. Consequently, the monarch should be obeyed unless he attempts to oppose God's laws. Unlike either the English or the Roman Church, the state has no authority over the individual conscience, but requires only subjects' outward or political obedience to the office of the monarch.

This discussion leads to a reassessment of Donne's journey from his family's Catholicism to his own priesthood in the English Church. Altman argues that Donne made his decision to conform to the state religion not as a result of a religious conversion but as an act of political obedience. For Donne, choosing one Church rather than another does not endanger one's soul because the fundamentals or foundations of the Christian religion can be found in either. The soul is still permitted to experience rational doubt while conforming to the state religion, since the individual conscience remains outside the state's control.

These two arguments lay the foundations for Altman's discussion of the key problems in *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Biathanatos*: the relationship between martyrdom and suicide. Once again, Altman resists biographical narratives, in this case the interpretation of Donne's antipathy to the Jesuits as the result of his family's experiences, particularly the death of his brother Henry while imprisoned for harboring a Catholic priest. Arguing that Donne's anti-Jesuitism was consistent throughout his writings, Altman sees it stemming from his concerns about the Jesuits' desire for earthly power, and their consequent intrusion into

secular political matters. Donne opposes martyrdom because it is a form of resistance against the state in which the individual acquires power over themselves, thereby usurping the authority of the ruler. In other words, Donne sees martyrdom as a form of treason because the person chooses to obey a humanly constituted Church rather than the state under the authority of God's representative on earth. Moreover, Altman argues that Donne sees martyrdom as idolatrous, since it replaces God with a Church. In contrast, a suicide that is not motivated by political or religious intentions is not necessarily sinful. While Donne sees the desire to kill oneself as natural, he believes such impulses should be resisted in obedience to the natural law of self-preservation. Rather, the individual should strive for repentance and regeneration.

The book's conclusion takes up more explicitly what has been a thread throughout, situating Altman's arguments in relation to the directions of Donne studies in the past four decades. Altman argues that while historical revisionist accounts of Donne as advocating moderation in the face of a newly fragmenting political consensus in the 1620s created a foundation for studies of Donne's politics, particularly in relation to his sermons, they failed to account for the problem of Catholicism. Postrevisionist scholars problematized the debate about Donne's absolutism by undermining the argument that a consensus existed during the earlier Jacobean period. While revisionist studies have generally seen Donne as an outlier in his theology and politics, Altman argues that Donne's distinctiveness consists not in his theology or politics, but in his attention to the problems of Catholic loyalties, specifically in the context of martyrdom. Donne's moderation was not antithetical to absolutism, but a kind of absolutism that renegotiated religiously charged questions as ones that focused on whether to obey the state or the Church and concluded that obedience to the state was ultimately the best choice for the individual conscience.

Witnessing to the Faith offers a fresh perspective on how Donne studies can move beyond debates about conversion and absolutism by resisting biographical interpretations and paying increased attention to the concerns of Catholics. Altman's case is made in clear prose with abundant use of both primary and secondary source materials, including references to many of Donne's other writings, including poetry, prose letters, and sermons.