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Souls in Community: John Donne, His Preaching, and the New World

Jeanne Shami, discussing John Donne's 1622 "Sermon Preached to the Honourable Company of the Virginian Plantation," presents Donne as "profoundly...humane, and personal" toward the native peoples of the New World ("Love" 90). Such a humane attitude was unusual in Donne's day; earlier in the year 1622 these natives massacred several hundred English settlers, prompting calls for retribution from many of Donne's contemporaries ("Love" 99). Shami notes that Donne, far from endorsing the all-too-common attitude of revenge, refers to native peoples as "'men,' 'persons,' 'soules,' and 'names'"—individuals who need the gospel, not retribution ("Love" 90). In contrast to Shami's emphasis on Donne's love for individuals, Thomas Festa sees Donne's sermon as furthering a common imperial cause, turning individuals into "commodities" (93). Festa reminds readers that Donne compares the souls of natives to trade goods and objectifies both the natives and London's criminals in a discussion of labor. Thus, Donne promotes, in Festa's words, "the Crown's ambition to increase its dominion" over individual well-being (90). In Festa's view, Donne subsumes personal good in the communal goals of colonization. Shami, in contrast, presents Donne as intensely focused on the individual.

Despite Shami and Festa's urging to take sides on the issue, other critics present Donne as profoundly aware of both individual and communal demands on his audience, and as aware of the balance needed between these demands. In particular, Gary Kuchar's discussion of "conscience" in Donne's preaching and Marla Hoffman Lunderberg's examination of Donne's

“discretion” (a topic influenced by Jeanne Shami herself) provide a context in which Donne’s views of individual and community balance. In this context, I propose that Shami’s and Festa’s arguments may be seen as mutually beneficial rather than mutually exclusive. Each emphasizes valid aspects of the Virginia Company Sermon, but their fellow critics demand that we acknowledge Donne’s multifaceted view of both his English audience and the New World.

While we cannot ignore Donne’s propensity, of which Festa so eloquently reminds us, to turn the New World into a commodity, neither can we ignore Donne’s love for the native peoples, as Shami points out. Recognizing that Donne consistently strove to balance the demands of individual and community makes the central question of the Virginia Company Sermon a question not of opposition but of balance. Readers do not have to choose Festa’s community-minded Donne over Shami’s individual-focused one, but can see the author of the Virginia Company Sermon as profoundly concerned with both sides of this complex issue.

I will begin by examining the scholarly discussion treating Donne’s focus on individuals in community. Critics including Gary Kuchar, Marla Hoffman Lunderberg, and Jeanne Shami examine Donne’s discourses on individuals in community; in light of their comments Shami and Festa’s debate may be seen as the next step in the discussion, applying this focus to a particular, and difficult, sermon. Then I will delve into Shami’s and Festa’s views on the Virginia Company Sermon; their discussions are not as one-sided as I have implied, and both deserve fuller treatment in light of the balance of individual and community. With these critics as guides, Donne’s view of the individual (English or Virginian) in community emerges as a central part of the Virginia Company Sermon, and integrates the ideas of individual and community more thoroughly than Shami and Festa initially imply.

Discussions of Donne's sermons strive to take into account Donne's attitude toward both the individual and communal aspects of his preaching. Gary Kuchar, in his article "Ecstatic Donne: Conscience, Sin, and Surprise in the *Sermons* and the Mitcham Letters," uses the idea of conscience to examine Donne's preaching methods. In Kuchar's view, Donne measures the effectiveness of his sermons by how directly he speaks to the consciences of his listeners (631). In fact, Kuchar sees Donne the preacher as taking on the actual role of the conscience, seeking to "surprise" his listeners and "pierce" their hearts by making them aware of their sin in the way that the conscience does. The effective preacher achieves this surprising awareness of sin by cultivating what Donne calls (and Kuchar quotes) "nearnesse" to his listeners (631). This nearness is the effect of the preacher's acting like the conscience—knowing the details of sin and presenting them as from an external agency. Obviously Donne did not know the particulars of all his listeners' sins, but he sought to appear, almost theatrically, as if he did know the gory details (Kuchar 632).

However, Donne was only human, like any preacher, and thus knew several details about individual sin—his own. Kuchar sees Donne bringing his listeners to an "uncanny" awareness of their own sin by acknowledging that the preacher too needs to face his conscience, effectively making himself a listener to his own sermon (643). Kuchar brings together his analyses with a quote from a 1620 sermon in which Donne talks about preaching and the individual soul, making the discussion at once communal and personal. He says, "It is not the depth, nor the wit, nor the eloquence of the Preacher that pierces us, but his nearenesse; that hee speaks to my conscience, as though he had been behinde the hangings when I sinned, and as though he had read the book of the day of Judgement already" (qtd. Kuchar 643). Here Donne balances preaching in general with its effect on the individual—including Donne himself. Throughout his analysis, Kuchar

illustrates a Donne who preached to a community as individuals, striving to reach each person's heart with a realization of personal sin and responsibility.

Jeanne Shami's article "Donne on Discretion" and Marla Hoffman Lunderberg's article "John Donne's Strategies for Discreet Preaching" both explore Donne's preaching to the individual in the community via the term "discretion." The term, which Lunderberg borrows from Shami, denotes a balance between zeal and caution—both of which, when carried to extremes, make the preacher less successful, either because the listeners are offended or because they cannot see the point. Shami writes that Donne's ultimate goal is to make his congregants aware of their place in God's plan of salvation, but in order to accomplish this goal Donne must arrive at "nearness," the same term Kuchar quoted for making sermons apply to all hearers (49). As Donne developed this nearness, he was particularly concerned with what Shami calls "the problem of despair"—he worried that in making his congregation aware of their personal sin he might drive some of them to despair rather than to seek reconciliation in the message of the gospel (50). Thus, as he preached, Donne continually struggled with the balance between making his listeners aware of their personal sin and keeping them firmly within God's overarching plan of salvation and grace.

Lunderberg sees Donne as a "discreet preacher"—keeping to the boundaries of discretion—because of the way he balanced encouragement and criticism in his sermons. She lets this idea stand in a general sense but is most interested in tracing what she calls "discreet radicalism or radical discretion" to situations where Donne preached before monarchs (Lunderberg 100). When Donne preached at court he had to strike a balance between complimenting the monarch (in order to stay alive and in favor) and preaching honest, if difficult, gospel truth. Lunderberg presents Donne as a "careful, thoughtful—yet questioning—

supporter of his monarchs” (100). While Donne often sees a direct connection between the king and God (in essence supporting the “divine right theory,” as Lunderberg calls it) he also presents the king as subject to the law, suggesting that only the king’s lawful acts are sanctioned by God (100). In one sermon, Donne speaks of the importance of the preacher’s audience, including the king, and, as Lunderberg says, of its “responsibility to allow forthright preaching to occur” (108). However, to avoid repercussions for any perceived criticism, Donne follows these remarks with effusive compliments toward King James and his court—flattery that Lunderberg points out may trouble today’s readers but that demonstrates Donne’s assert-and-retreat method of critique.

These explorations of discretion have drawn us slightly away from our focus on individuals within community, and from the “Virginia Company Sermon,” but the concept of discretion is an important one in many critical discussions. By means of discretion, as Shami and Lunderberg demonstrate, Donne sought to balance the demands of his preaching with the needs of his audience—an extension of the emphasis Donne placed on the balance needed in preaching to individuals in community, which Kuchar illustrates in his discussion of conscience. And indeed, the critics mentioned here comprise only a sampling of those who address Donne’s awareness of individuals and community. Those who explore Donne’s poetry, especially his Holy Sonnets, note Donne’s deep awareness of the individual’s spiritual struggle—the poems beginning “Oh my black soul!” and “Batter my heart,” for example, suggest extremely personal journeys. Murray Roston grounds these and other such poems in the meditative tradition of the Roman Catholic Church because they reflect the inward, personal focus of Catholic meditation (50). Anthony Parr notes that in Donne’s poems about traveling (like “Good Friday 1613”) the landscape is secondary to “self-discovery” and the affairs of the soul (76). Other critics draw more fully on John Donne as communally minded—Adam Potkay, for instance, who in

exploring the concept of joy in Donne's sermons mentions an emphasis on "corporate rejoicing" (60). John Stubbs, in his introduction to *John Donne: The Reformed Soul*, emphasizes Donne as part of a historical community—as the originator of that famous statement, "no man is an island" (qtd. Stubbs xxiii). Thus, in the critical discussion currently underway, scholars see Donne as both intensely aware of the individual soul's concerns and as focused on those of the broader community.

Kuchar and Lunderberg, along with these other critics, have illustrated that Donne strove to balance the demands of individual and community in his poems and preaching; through Shami's and Festa's examinations of the Virginia Company Sermon we see Donne striving (perhaps with limited success) toward that same balance. While Shami and Festa each focus on one of the two aspects, both admit the blending of individual and community in Donne's sermon. Shami examines Donne's presentation of natives as both individual souls and common humanity; Festa presents Donne's treatment of individual natives and Londoners in light of the communal focus of the British Empire. By allowing these analyses of the Virginia Company Sermon to inform each other in light of the rest of the critical dialogue, we see the sermon as a venue where the individual (native or English) exists in community (that of nation or of common humanity).

As we have briefly seen already, Shami's analysis privileges Donne's care for individuals, particularly native Virginians. Shami's title is "Love and Power," and she insists that the discussion she enters emphasizes power at the expense of Donne's love for others. She prefers to emphasize the "personal" aspect of Donne's message—personal both in terms of his presentation of the natives as individuals and in terms of Donne's awareness of his audience, illustrated in the final paragraph of the sermon. Here Donne acknowledges that not all of his listeners are directly connected with the Virginia Company, and says to the Company's

members, “I have, indeed, but told the Congregation, what hath beene done already” (206). Shami emphasizes Donne’s love for the native peoples in the way he characterizes them as “soules”—that is, individuals—and also in the way Donne presents the “possibility of trade” with the Virginians (97). Donne calls the plantation England’s “little Sister” and promotes a hypothetical exchange of goods for the gospel (Donne 201). This “assumption of trade” presents trade itself as a dialogue of sorts rather than an imperial mandate (Shami 98).

Shami also, as mentioned earlier, notes that Donne’s care for the natives would have been striking in the wake of massacres that had taken place earlier that year in Virginia. She reminds us, “Colonialist characterizations of natives as inviting their own destruction find no parallel in Donne; nor do we see ambivalent fears of natives” (100). Donne’s only remark on the massacres, his oblique phrase “a *Flood of bloud*,” is in the center of an argument for patience on the part of the Company—patience that would spare the native “souls” (197). Furthermore, in an earlier sermon, Donne had emphasized what Shami calls the “contiguity”—we might say community—between England and the New World by proclaiming, “a Virginian is thy neighbor, as well as a Londoner” (qtd. Shami 100). Thus while individuals are her primary focus, Shami also draws attention to Donne’s communal awareness. She ends her article by noting the important task of “bearing witness,” which, to quote Shami, “will be effective only through the agency of particular human beings: John Donne, members of the Virginia Company, and ultimately native Virginians themselves” (106). In this analysis, Donne promotes the common humanity of the natives with his listeners, thus grounding all people in community—but a community made up, as Shami reminds us, of individual “soules.”

In speaking about the New World, Donne displayed an extraordinary love for the native peoples and did indeed designate them as individuals, “soules” in need of people to “bear

witness” to them, as Shami emphasizes. And yet he promoted the corporate goals of the English empire, sometimes at the expense of individuals, as Thomas Festa notes. In his article “The Metaphysics of Labor in John Donne’s Sermon to the Virginia Company,” Festa turns this communal focus toward the way Donne’s sermon ignores some individual concerns. Donne’s blend of individual and community may be disturbing to the modern reader, as Festa highlights in Donne’s tendency to endorse the colonial cause. Festa argues that Donne, in the imperialist mindset of his day, loses sight of the individuality of both the native Virginians and the criminals of London. These people, Festa argues, become “commodities,” souls to be converted and labor for the plantations of the New World (93). While Festa does not deny Donne’s “exceptional” compassion toward the native peoples, he sees the scales tipped toward a far less humane attitude when Donne “implies the connection between the quantification of souls and commodities” (84, 93). For example, Donne proclaims, in one of his more troubling analogies, “O, if you would be as ready to hearken at the returne of a *Ship*, how many *Indians* were converted to *Christ Jesus*, as what *Trees*, or *druggs*, or *Dyes* the *Ship* had brought, then you were in your right way, and not till then” (195). Festa sees this argument as a commodification of souls that dehumanizes in favor of a kingdom, earthly or otherwise. Festa is reluctant to accuse Donne outright of inhumanity or insensitivity, but he is deeply disturbed by this quantification of souls. He is no less distressed at Donne’s subsuming the “horrors of transportation” into something that can, as Donne preaches, “sweep your streets, and wash your dores, from idle persons” (Festa 97, Donne 198).

Festa does not ignore Donne’s focus on the individual, though even here his analysis is not complimentary. Insofar as Donne recognizes those being transported as individuals, Festa argues, Donne presents a connection between “spiritual regeneration and financial productivity”

that asserts good for these criminals only as they are useful to the English empire (99). Thus Festa, while acknowledging Donne's compassion toward the native peoples and making note of an awareness of individuals, does not allow these factors to outweigh the commodification of natives and criminals, the obscuring of individual souls in the grand communal goal of empire-building.

Nor, as most readers of Donne's sermon would agree, should Festa do so; the imperialist mindset and its subsequent treatment of native peoples have a lot to answer for. However, as we have seen from numerous other critics in the discussion, Donne was intensely aware of the importance of individual souls and of bringing each struggling conscience (his own included) in line with God's communal plan of salvation. Rather than choosing one side of the issue over the other, perhaps we as readers can acknowledge both—as the points of overlap between Shami and Festa may be expanded into a greater view of Donne's emphasis on both individual and community. Donne strove constantly to balance the demands of individuals in community, especially in his sermons; Shami and Lunderberg's idea of "discretion," as well as Kuchar's analysis of preaching and conscience, carry out this notion of balance. Neither Shami nor Festa entirely excludes the opposite side of their position; Festa, in his discussion of empire, mentions individual good for both natives and criminals (although he protests Donne's application of this individual good). At the same time, Shami, while emphasizing Donne's love for individuals, presents Donne as aware of the communal aspect of his preaching, since the natives share common humanity with his audience. In this way, both Festa and Shami—as well as the other critics discussing Donne—allow a glimpse of the complexity of this issue in Donne's Virginia Company Sermon; despite their privileging of one side or the other, Shami and Festa allow both aspects to emerge. And we, by allowing Shami's and Festa's views to relate to one another, gain

a critical view of John Donne as intensely aware of the individual soul, firmly grounded in community.

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