

Religion Around John Donne

Eckhardt, Joshua. *Religion Around John Donne*. Religion Around. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. 208 pp. \$49.95. ISBN: 9780271083377.

The Religion Around series from Penn State University Press explores the religious contexts surrounding writers, artists, and other “cultural icons.” The work of some of the figures treated in this series, such as Virginia Woolf and Billie Holiday, contains little that is overtly religious. Not so for this recent entry on John Donne. Through his devotional poetry and his sermons, Donne’s reputation is built on religion. In fact, Joshua Eckhardt, Associate Professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University, points out that the religious themes and contexts of Donne’s work have been exhaustively charted by literary and religious historians. Why then, is another volume on religion and John Donne called for, and how should it be approached?

Eckhardt’s unique approach makes his book particularly relevant to librarians, archivists, and manuscript historians. Eckhardt aims to read Donne’s work by surveying “the religion around Donne in the manuscript collections, composite volumes, private libraries, and bookshops of some of the people responsible for reproducing and preserving his works” (2). Rather than looking broadly at the religious culture of early modern England or giving a close reading of Donne’s writing in light of other important religious texts of the day, Eckhardt “zooms in on the religion right around Donne in his library, and in his hands” (3). This gives the project a very concrete shape as Eckhardt seeks out the “religion that has been actually, physically ‘around’ Donne and his writing” (4). In this way, Eckhardt’s approach is quite literal, and it makes his book of particular interest to those of us who spend our lives developing and preserving collections of religious literature.

By honing in on personal collections and examining how readers treated Donne’s work in relation to those collections, *Religion Around John Donne* functions as a focused history of certain early modern religious libraries. By looking closely at the way Donne’s books were handled in various personal libraries and bookshops, Eckhardt engages in “proximate” or “material intertextuality” (3). Instead of a standard intertextuality that would examine Donne’s treatment of religious texts in his own writing, we see how Donne himself collected and arranged physical copies of the writings of other English religious figures. We also see how collectors distributed Donne’s books and manuscripts in their own libraries. While Donne’s poems are filled with the language of heaven, hell, and individual souls, Eckhardt’s book “makes no claims about heaven or souls, but it has a lot to say about actual library books” (12).

The Bridgewater collection, currently held at the Huntington Library in California, is the first collection that Eckhardt explores. This family library includes items collected by Thomas Egerton, a contemporary of Donne, and developed by his son and daughter-in-law, John and Frances Bridgewater. This collection includes manuscript copies of several of Donne’s poems and some of his printed sermons. Surveying the shelves of this family library places Donne amidst the religious controversies of his day in a way that a 17th century reader would have experienced them. The other books and manuscripts in the library provide context that enlivens and complicates Donne’s work, also showing certain blind spots in Donne’s own perspective on English religion. For example, Donne sends Egerton poems that show concern for persecution of Catholic recusants, and Egerton’s papers show his own involvement with the prosecution of recusants. However, those same papers detail prosecution of nonconformists, a group that Donne did not have in view.

While Eckhardt looks to collections curated by others to interpret Donne's religious writing, he examines these collections through a grid provided by Donne himself. In an interlude between chapters one and two, Eckhardt highlights the three types of religious characters that Donne describes in his poem "Satyre III." There is "Mirreus," the Roman Catholic, "Crawle," the Calvinist, and "Graiuis," the conforming Church of England parishioner. Eckhardt uses these types to explain how the Bridgewater library and the subsequent collections discussed give a picture of the range of early modern English religion. As he puts it, "The characters that Donne devised to see the religion around him... help us see the same in the rest of this book" (54). While Donne himself critiques each of the three types described in the poem, he can look more or less like Mirreus, Crawle, or Graiuis—depending on the viewpoints represented in the books that surround his own.

Other collections explored include Donne's own personal collection, the books sold alongside Donne's in several London bookshops of the day, and the personal holdings of Donne's biographer, Izaak Walton. Eckhardt's approach also brings Donne into conversation with some less-than-obvious partners. He crosses the Atlantic in the library of the Mather family, indicating some of the ways that readings of Donne influenced the developing religious culture of colonial America through a figure like Cotton Mather. One important feature of *Religion Around John Donne* is its demonstration of the essential nature of archival work and the preservation of personal libraries as collections, not just as individual volumes. This is particularly evident in the manuscript copies of Donne's poems from which Eckhardt works. Trying to follow along with some of the poems in my Everyman's Library edition of *The Complete English Poems* is tricky but informative. There is significant disparity between the texts. Some of Donne's poems in the Bridgewater library were transcribed from original manuscripts and, as Eckhardt points out, errors in transcription can indicate something about the theological assumptions of the day—or at least of the individual doing the transcribing. These nuances only fully come to light when these unique collections are considered as a whole.

Eckhardt's discussion of some of the mistakes made in early editions of Donne's published poetry illustrates another way that his literal approach to the religion surrounding Donne offers insight into the history of Donne scholarship. Specifically, the second edition of Donne's work features an important mistake: "the inclusion... of a defiantly Catholic poem that Donne could not possibly have written" (93). The poem, written by Elizabethan Catholic Henry Constable, was often included in manuscript collections alongside Donne's. It quickly became so associated with Donne that it was mistakenly included in early editions of his poems. Through examining this error of attribution, Eckhardt shows how varied and unsystematic methods of manuscript composition created a context where misattribution became possible. In this case, the religion around Donne gave a warped and inaccurate view of Donne's poetry and thought. The poem in question served to highlight passages in other poems that could be interpreted as sympathetic to Catholicism. It made Donne appear more Catholic than he was. Eckhardt demonstrates how collection practices and the physical history of manuscripts can either warp or clarify our collective memory of religious figures.

Though his focus is on the material culture surrounding Donne's work, Eckhardt's approach actually makes a significant, if backdoor, contribution to the task of interpreting early modern literature. Through examining specific practices of collecting, annotating, and organizing books and manuscripts in this period, he draws out nuances of the religious views of those who valued and preserved these materials. By offering a focused history of particular early modern personal libraries, Eckhardt demonstrates how the curation and evolution of collections function to interpret the

work of the authors and the views of the collectors. Book and manuscript collections do not only preserve the religious culture of previous periods; they also serve as texts to be interpreted.

As library collections develop and librarians make important and difficult decisions about building our collections, providing diverse materials in varied formats, and strive to make those collections accessible and functional, it is essential to remember that these collections are not simply deposits of information. The act of providing literary materials, and the means through which we provide them, have an interpretive function. As theological librarians, we influence the way that our patrons access, understand, and think about religion. The ways that we choose to collect and preserve religious literature influence the development of our various traditions. These are not new issues for libraries and archives, but Eckhardt's illustrations from early modern collections add historical depth and specificity to these considerations.

Other features of the book that deserve mention are Eckhardt's discussions of Donne's marginalia and Donne's collection of *Sammelbände*, which were "composite volumes made of multiple slender books bound together" (59). Eckhardt describes one *Sammelband* as a "mega-book," or "physical database" (16). He discusses various *Sammelbände* found through the various collections dealt with in the book, and they serve as the perfect example of Eckhardt's larger project. By showing which books Donne and various collectors chose to bind together into larger volumes, we get concrete examples of the religion that surrounded Donne.

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