Donne, Calvin, and *Massa Damnata*

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In the *Life of Donne*, Donne’s first biographer, Izaak Walton stated that “the English Church had gained a second S. Augustine” (sig. B2). Walton made this claim of Donne, who like Augustine, survived a worldly and reckless youth to become a learned divine and King James’ favorite preacher. Nowhere is the comparison more apparent than in regard to their theological views, for besides John Calvin, the only other writer that Donne makes more reference to in his *Sermons* is Augustine. George Potter and Evelyn Simpson, the modern editors of Donne’s sermons, state that Donne resembled Augustine not only in the pattern of his life but also in his writings. In the Introduction to the Sermons they state that, Donne’s “quotations cover almost the whole field of Augustine’s thought” and “deal with such immense subjects as the nature of God, the Creation

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1) Written in 1640, the book is made up of quires (a gathering of pages) stitched together. A Folio has two leaves in a quire, a Quarto four leaves, and an Octavo eight leaves. Each quire is marked with a symbol indicating its place in the volume. The signatures on the finished book will begin A1, A2, etc. in the first quire, B1, B2 etc. in the second quire and so on; sig. B2 refers to page 2 of the second quire in the book.

of the Universe, the relationship between soul and body, the fall of Adam and its consequences, original sin, the saving work of Christ in all its aspects, death and immortality and authority of Scripture” (10:354–58). William Halewood adds, “Donne is perhaps the greatest Augustinian enthusiast in the history of English preaching” (47). Similarly, Mary Popazian noted that Donne’s frequent use of Augustine and Calvin in his Sermons suggests that Donne, “followed the view of his fellow divines that their present Church of England is in the Augustinian tradition, with Luther and Calvin as intermediary steps” (72). But perhaps Augustine’s greatest influence on Donne’s religious view was in regard to the doctrine of original sin.

In the Sermons, Donne places a great deal of emphasis on sin and its punishment as well as on human guilt and frailty. The Sermons are full of references describing the corrupt nature of humans that resulted from the fall of man3). Donne’s preoccupation or “obsession,” as some scholars point out, with sin and guilt led him to imitate Augustine by labeling mankind as massa damnata, i.e. “the mass of the damned.” Donne’s reference to mankind in the Sermons as massa damnata is taken from Augustine’s Confessions, a work that was composed in response to Pelagius, a British monk, who had in the fifth century been troubled by some of the implications in the Confessions. Pelagius’s criticism centered on Augustine’s view of predestination and free will, a concern that erupted into renewed religious controversy during Donne’s early years as an ordained priest.

As Potter and Simpson noted earlier, Augustine’s theology lay behind Donne’s use of the term massa damnata as a reference to original sin, a term that aligns Donne with Augustine’s, and later to Calvin’s view of humanity’s sinful nature rather than with those of Pelagius. Augustine challenged the views of Pelagius, who saw sin basically as an outward act of transgressing the law and regarded the human person as free to sin or desist from sin. Peter Brown describes the differences between

3) The “Fall of the Human Race” denotes Adam and Eve’s disobedience and commission of sin that brought tragic spiritual, physical, and social deprivation to the entire human race. The fall is recorded in the Bible in Genesis 3.

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