

“The Literary Practice of Belief”
Response by Amy Frykholm

As Amy Hungerford points out in this chapter of her new monograph, religious studies has been stuck in a belief/practice divide for the better part of a decade. On the one side are proponents of the study of “lived religion.” On the other are those who advocate a kind of intellectual history of religion focused on institutions, thinkers and beliefs. Hungerford intervenes in this conversation by pointing out that belief might be, not practice’s opposite, but itself a form of practice. If we understand belief as meaningfully connected to practice, we might begin to find our way out of the impasse and toward a more fully integrated form of religious studies. Coming out of literary studies, Hungerford observes that writing is both a practice and an articulation of thought. Thus it acts as one site where belief and practice can be held together.

To demonstrate different forms of belief as practice in American fiction, Hungerford draws on two starkly opposed fictions: Marilyn Robinson’s three novels and the *Left Behind* series. For Robinson, belief is a nuanced form of practice that incorporates doubt and uncertainty while working to reconcile the unknowable with the familiar. In *Left Behind*, on the other hand, belief is unbending and specific. It functions to being its adherents rewards within a fixed economy of salvation.

Hungerford skillfully demonstrates how Robinson, from a Protestant mainline perspective, integrates form and content. Robinson sees religious belief as providing the foundation for a subtle worldview that works toward the reconciliation of difference. Especially helpful for me was seeing how Robinson deploys the simile in this regard—allowing differences to move into relation instead of collapsing them.

Robinson is also interesting because of her focus on the inner lives of her characters. If we as scholars of religion pay attention only to the outward practices of religion, we will miss the fact, as Hungerford points out, that “ordinary people have rich and complicated interior lives, that they embody a silent discourse of thought that, if we knew its voice, would astonish us.” Fiction is a place to look for some language to put to this silent “voice.” As an extension of Hungerford’s work, perhaps we can ask how that interior life—and whatever kind of access we might have to it as scholars—both reflects and rejects the exterior life of practice.

Hungerford’s reading of *Left Behind* is more awkward, as if she stumbles a little over the unyielding heft of the text’s ideology. Hungerford rightly points out that the authors of *Left Behind* deploy religious belief largely in the service of gender ideology, but she misses some important nuances. For example, she imagines the character of Chloe as being almost entirely passive, a recipient of male belief about her. But Chloe is a mass of contradictions, and when she is martyred, it isn’t because she is at home performing her wifely duties. She has, instead, embraced the work of being the hero of her own life.

Even though belief is urgent and necessary in the *Left Behind* series, Hungerford brilliantly demonstrates its simultaneous incoherence. Perhaps most interesting to me was the section of Hungerford’s chapter where she points out that the authors of *Left Behind* centralize an act called the “sinner’s prayer.” A person is “saved” when they utter this very formulaic prayer. This displaces the traditional evangelical assumption that a person merely need to “believe in Jesus Christ.” Frequently in the series, the authors imagine a

character embracing belief in God, but still needing to seal the deal with the “sinner’s prayer” in order to secure their salvation. This ritualized transaction supercedes belief as such. But in order to understand belief as practice, might it be more productive to see these two things—belief and prayer—in relation? Why, I wonder, is belief imagined as inadequate to Left Behind’s authors? Does this represent a cultural shift in relation to belief?

Given Hungerford’s premise that Robert Orsi is wrong to dismiss belief as “Protestant”—a premise that is absolutely accurate—it might have been useful to pair Robinson’s work with a Catholic fiction writer or to incorporate a third example from another religious tradition. How does belief function in contemporary Catholic fiction? How are inner and outer realms imagined?

Thanks to Hungerford’s excellent work, I know that I need a better understanding of dynamic between what is thought and what is done, how beliefs are embodied and the implication of disembodied beliefs. Hungerford’s work opens up a considerable number of options for exploring the relationship between belief and practice. For example, beyond writing, what other forms of belief as practice might there be and how might we identify them? How do these differ from one religious expression to another? How might we identify belief as practice in non-verbal contexts, and what is gained or lost in these instances?