

Hunger for Belief  
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Amy Hungerford argues in “The Literary Practice of Belief” that “(a)rticulating the knowledge is part of the practice” of religion. This leads to her thesis: “in an open rather than a normative way, that belief remains at the heart of American popular discourse about religion.” For Hungerford, however, this is belief with a difference – “it matters in ways that do not track traditional understandings of how belief – understood as mental concept – informs the literary, or, indeed, those traditional understandings of how belief informs everyday life.” By way of illustration, Hungerford offers incisive and rich readings of Marilynne Robinson’s tandem novels, *Gilead* and *Home*, which demonstrate in narrative form that “belief is something that one experiences,” with the important consequence – not readily amenable to belief as mental construct – that the experience of belief is one of the ineluctable juxtaposition of vigorous, decidedly double predestination with the undeniable grace of salvation. Introducing her ensuing discussion of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins’ *Left Behind* series, Hungerford restates her thesis: “I have tried ... to show in some detail how discourses of belief become religious practices, and how literature ... comes to catalyze this communion between approaches to religion currently held apart in scholarly work on religion.” Belief, she concludes, is a form of religious practice.

Crisply formulated and eloquent, Hungerford’s chapter addresses two major sites in the contemporary study of religion: the methodological debate that has centered on the work of Clifford Geertz and its critique by Talal Asad, and recent work in American religious history. At the same time, it is also the most recent recension of a central tradition in the study of religion and literature, the exploration of what William Carlos Williams called “the American grain” as a preeminent site of complex but unmistakable and ongoing interaction of religious thought and practice and literature. Hungerford seeks to address a conundrum at the heart of our studies of religion today. I am not sure that she resolves it, but I am persuaded that she is pointing us in the right direction to think it through.

With regard to religion and literature, the tradition Hungerford invokes has its controlling formulation in Giles Gunn’s *The Interpretation of Otherness: Literature, Religion, and the American Imagination* (1979). In chapters such as “Forms of Religious Meaning in Literature” and “The Place of the Literary Critic in Religious Studies,” Gunn deploys Clifford Geertz’s theory of culture and the American pragmatist tradition (especially William James) to describe more adequately than predecessors such as F.O. Matthiessen the intersection of protean forms of belief with the incipient common religiosity of American life. Like Hungerford, Gunn is keenly concerned to rethink the belief/practice matrix. Unlike Hungerford, Gunn is not concerned with the concept of “belief” *per se* but with the displacement of a stable divine presence in American life. American religiosity is continually, Gunn suggests, a matter of the human existential encounter with the world.

Hungerford does not, to the best of my knowledge, engage Gunn’s book, but the connections are unmistakable. In important respects – that Gunn himself acknowledges

in later work – “The Literary Practice of Belief” can make Gunn’s book seem dated. Hungerford’s engagement of Talal Asad implicitly critiques Gunn’s reliance on Geertz. Gunn’s canon is also “classical” to a degree that such later texts as Jenny Franchot’s *Roads to Rome* (1984) and Tracy Fessenden’s *Culture and Redemption* (2007) – as well as Hungerford’s attention to the *Left Behind* books – render at least partially problematic. Given those qualifications, Hungerford and Gunn nonetheless share important purposes. Hungerford clearly does not regard the Asad critique as decisive, at least to the degree that she does not regard political and social power as sovereign over the work of the imagination and resultant cultural forms. Hungerford posits that the imagination, if it does not transcend material circumstance, is at least its equally potent counterpart in the articulation of meaning. Both Gunn and Hungerford see the American grain as woven of complementary strands of religion and literature – and both despair of our capacity to see the pattern unless we attend to each, and to their intersections.

Hungerford would, I think, parts ways with Gunn on one crucial point. To borrow J. Hillis Miller’s formulation in his trenchant review of Gunn in *The Journal of Religion*, Hungerford is persuaded that the God does matter. Just as Miller worried that Gunn’s pragmatism so focused attention on the human that the formulation of the divine was shortchanged, so Hungerford worries that the advocates of “lived religion” and practice have given short shrift to belief. While she appreciates the utility of Asad’s critique, there is for Hungerford a decisive, and critically demonstrable, capacity of humans to formulate the divine, and in doing so to be religious in ways that make the cardinal object of belief itself a form of practice. In some sense, then, Hungerford shares the instincts of Gunn’s work yet seeks to correct the degree to which he opened the door to precisely the false dichotomy that Asad, and later religionists such as Robert Orsi, have valorized.

As I hope the above suggests, Hungerford’s elegant argument is in the service of a complex claim. Much hinges finally on what she takes “belief” to mean and to entail. In this respect I confess that I found the essay less forthright than I might wish – but these are complex and dense matters, and (as Hungerford is acutely aware) much current scholarship on religion founders at this point. Two general points may be worth raising in relation to the essay’s discussion.

I’m not clear that a normative understanding of religion cannot be “open”. On my reading, those who subscribe to a particular theological position are not *de facto* “closed” to argument and persuasion. Indeed the history of religious thought strongly suggests the contrary. Hungerford shows impressively how it is not merely possible but crucial for Marilynne Robinson’s imagination – both formally and in terms of character – in *Gilead* and *Home*. Theologians display the same reflexive and self-critical concerns (albeit with, at least in some cases, less attention to literary form). (To be clear, I do not think this is only true of postmodern theologians, but that is a different conversation.)

To carry the point slightly further: it is also the case that Asad’s theorization is as informed by normative judgments as Geertz’s, so that one chief lesson of their ballyhooed debate is that any understanding of religion will make some normative claim or claims. Scholarship on religion does this – whether its focus is historical, theological,

or cultural. It's a fool's errand to pretend otherwise. Hungerford clearly understands this, but on my reading of the chapter she cedes more ground to their critics than most theologians would be prepared to give: they have their theories of religion, and of power, too, and work equally assiduously to integrate them into their interpretive work.

At the same time, Hungerford is tough on the formulators of the concept of "lived religion." This is the nub of her matter, and while she hardly creates a straw man, I confess that for all my concern for the theologians I also worry that this position is richly represented. While admittedly a dubious formulation, the idea – and it is an idea, with normative valence – of "lived religion" as pursued by Orsi, David Hall, and others seeks not to discredit or even to dismiss "belief" from the conversation about religion. It aims rather to correct what they and colleagues regarded as the *exclusive* emphasis on belief and the cul-de-sacs and dead ends it had fostered for our understanding of religion: its fortification of a proto-Christian paradigm for the study of religion, and its reification of indefensible assumptions, e.g. that to know its doctrine and dogma was to know a religion. In this the advocates of practice were by no means simply wrong. They sought not a dichotomy of belief and practice, but an understanding in which practice was not rendered solely within the choking yoke of ordering creedal formulations. I am not clear that Hungerford finds this critique persuasive: the lesser literary merit of the *Left Behind* books render them less religiously interesting to her, and it is just this impulse that worries Hall, Orsi, et. al. because what ultimately counts as of interest for religion meets canons of meaning that exclude manifest forms of practice. That Hungerford seeks to avoid this is clear. I'm not sure her reading of LaHaye/Jenkins is as successful as is her reading of Robinson in this regard.

As I hope is clear, I'm in deep sympathy with Hungerford's objectives; mine are the reservations come from a would-be fellow traveler. To deploy the earlier parlance of Paul Ricoeur: Hungerford seeks to practice together the hermeneutics of suspicion and of retrieval. This is difficult but also essential work. It insists that the normative and the descriptive cannot be dichotomized. This seems to me exactly right, and widely underappreciated.

In this respect Hungerford's discussion has implications not only for the study of religion and literature in the American context, but for the study of religion. Her effort to claim belief as a form of practice is, if I read her correctly, an attempt to rethink in a new and productive way – as truly complementary – the material and the imaginative dimensions of the human adventure of which religion is a decisive part. Put in terms of the classic study of religion: there can be no history of religions without theology, and no theology without history of religions. Hungerford's essay does the signal service of suggesting that the way forward must negotiate the distinctive and enduring Scylla and Charybdis that would make their differentiation into stigmatization. While I remain uncertain about the utility of "belief" as she formulates it here, I am more than ever convinced – with Miller and now with Hungerford – that the God matters, materially and imaginatively and thus decisively, for our understanding of religion and literature in America and, necessarily, beyond.