

“THE LITERARY PRACTICE OF BELIEF”

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**Fiction and Religious Studies**

Clifford Geertz begins his influential essay, “Religion as a Cultural System,” with the following epigraph from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and novelist George Santayana:

“Any attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular. . . . Thus every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in; and another world to live in—whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or no—is what we mean by having a religion.” (from Santayana, *Reason in Religion*)<sup>1</sup>

Geertz invokes Santayana’s praise of particularity—the “marked idiosyncrasy” of “every living and healthy religion”—as the prelude to his own argument about the specific meanings to be found when one attends to the symbolic systems he claims are inherent in the religious practices of any society. But I have been arguing in the foregoing chapters that in a surprising number of literary cases roughly contemporaneous with Geertz’s career, what it means to “have a religion” in literary works entails something very much

like the “attempt to speak without speaking any particular language.” In this sense we might see these developments in literature since 1960 as being at odds with the ways the study of religion has evolved since the early twentieth century—indeed, not only in this sense.

For I have also been arguing that these literary manifestations of religious thought constitute an effort to retain the idea of belief in the absence of specific beliefs—to retain the idea that there can be a religious “message” or “revelation” that biases “life,” even when we don’t know, or can’t know, what that message is, and even when we are left with the formal elements of language as a substitute for the content of belief. I have argued, in other words, that there is an implicit relationship (as Santayana’s comparison suggests) between the idea that the non-semantic aspects of language are the vehicle of its transcendent power and the idea that belief continues to matter even when the specific content of belief falls away. Santayana’s claim that the one effort is “not more hopeless” than the other thus intrigues me. Though he means to suggest that the one is as obviously hopeless as the other, in the latter part of the twentieth century the phrase takes on a different cast. The writers I have been discussing imagine a logic by which religious hope resides precisely in speaking without speaking any particular language, and in believing without having, of necessity, any particular belief.

In this chapter I make a final turn in this analysis, demonstrating how it can inform our understanding of writers who *are* invested in particular belief, in keeping with Santayana’s description of religion. The writers I take up here—Marilynne Robinson and the authors of the popular millennial fiction series *Left Behind*—espouse, and write about, belief that is anything but contentless. Yet I argue that to examine the functions of belief

in their work is once again to discover form as such at the center their religious imaginations—as it has been for the writers I have discussed up to this point. I thus suggest how religious writers in the late twentieth and into the twenty-first century imagine belief—abstract, articulated often in the language of theology or piety—as itself a practice, something as much like a set of rituals as it is like a set of doctrines. In doing so, I not only articulate a necessary nuance to my own larger argument, but also suggest a needed revision of arguments now dominant in religious studies.

One question for this chapter, then, is what kind of practice believing itself might be? The answer to that question opens up the related claim that writing, as both articulation of thought in an abstract sense and as the concrete practice of literary art or literary convention, is a site where approaches to religion that scholars have held to be at odds—specifically, the interest in discourses of belief and the interest in “lived religion”—are simultaneously inhabited. Writing, I will argue, becomes both the articulation of belief and a form of religious practice. It is not the only religious practice these writers imagine, but it is a central one; I will suggest, in the epilogue that follows this chapter, that it is one that carries important stakes for my larger argument in this book, about the relationship between religion and literature more generally since 1960. There I embrace the intuitive connection one might make between religion as Santayana describes it in the passage above— as “another world to live in—whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or no”—and the imaginative worlds that literature gives us.

It is by now well-known, even among literary scholars, that the most innovative branches of religious studies have, since Geertz’s groundbreaking work in the 1970s,

focused less on religious institutions and their doctrines—and, eventually, less on the discourses of “belief”—and more on what Geertz called “the meaning-making subject”—the subject who constructed a religious world through action and word in everyday life, and through the rituals woven into that life. Building on Geertz’s approach, scholars since the 1980s have emphasized “lived religion”—religion as practiced by individuals and communities—as a corrective to the field’s prior focus on organized religion and its institutional discourses or, more locally, on what believers might say about that internalized disposition we call belief, a disposition whose very existence as an object of knowledge has been debated. As one of the most prominent scholars of lived religion, Robert Orsi, puts it, belief is, at the very least, “the wrong question,” the question asked by the naïve, the old-fashioned, the child, the student, the Fundamentalist (and also, one might add, the atheist). Orsi argues that the scholarly question of belief is an unwitting masquerade for the evangelical Protestant question—“do you believe in Jesus? Have you been saved?”—while the better question (which can be cast as the Catholic, Jewish, or agnostic question, validated by the outstanding work of, among others, Thomas Ferraro and Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, and of Orsi himself) is about what you do: Have you been to mass? Have you ever prayed to St. Jude? Are you observant? Do you talk “Jewish”?

The question of belief, such scholars suggest, simplifies the messiness of religious practice, cannot tolerate internal contradiction, and lacks the capaciousness to speak to the diversity of religious life in America, not to mention the world at large. A focus on belief smuggles into the discussion of religion implicitly Christian assumptions about what religion is, and how central to it belief must be.<sup>2</sup> Orsi argues that to say that one

“believe[s] in’ a religion means that one has deliberated over and then assented to its propositional truths, has chosen this religion over other available options, a personal choice unfettered by authority, tradition, or society,” remarking that “this account of religion carries real normative force.” To resist that language of belief has been cast as the move one must make against a normative mode of study that obscures what is significant about religion as lived by historically situated persons. Talal Asad takes this critique right back to Geertz, arguing that Geertz’s stress on mental concept and neglect of social power in religious formations skips over the question of *how* religious discourses come to exert pressure on religious practice—the question of “how. . . power create[s] religion.”<sup>3</sup>

But can we do without the idea of belief? In *Beyond Belief* (1970) Robert Bellah, a pioneer in the study of the American religions of his own time and a colleague of Geertz’s at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, N.J. in the ‘70s, gives us an early example of the effort to do without it when he casts the interest in belief as a disabling legacy of Platonism. Yet in the introduction to *Beyond Belief*, recounting his own religious life, Bellah invokes Paul Tillich’s notion of “meaninglessness” as articulated in *The Courage to Be* (1952) as the site of a kind of belief that, for him, can continue after one becomes disillusioned with traditional systems of transcendent meaning—for Bellah, the theology of Protestantism and the social theory of Marxism that originally replaced Protestantism in his life. Tillich had argued that “the courage to take up the anxiety of meaninglessness” brings us to a state in which “all forms of courage are re-established in the power of the God above the God of theism. The courage

to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt” (qtd. in Bellah, xv).

For Bellah, Tillich’s Christian existentialism was inspiring but inadequate, and not because it remained Christian, that is, committed to the idea of a transcendent God rooted in a particular tradition. Rather, it was inadequate, Bellah writes, because Tillich’s “somberest moods” were not “wholly convincing.” Bellah found instead that “the deepest truth” he could discover was that “if one accepts the loss” of traditional faith, “then the nothing which is left is not barren but enormously fruitful.” His mode of faith finds “patterns of meaning in a world where all the great overarching systems of belief, conservative and radical, have lost their viability.” His analyses of belief’s end and the nothing that is left are themselves, he writes, “expressions of ‘belief,’ . . . ‘without belief, beyond belief” (Bellah, xx, xxi). (He is quoting Wallace Stevens, of course, and I will return to the significance of that allusion.) Bellah ultimately calls for scholars of religion to study religion in their capacity as “religious subjects” (256), and, he goes on to say, “if this seems to confuse the role of theologian and scientist, of teaching religion and teaching about religion, then so be it” (257).

Orsi and Bellah share the notion that the place of the scholar in relation to his or her subject must be other than objective, that to claim an impossible objectivity is implicitly always to devalue the subject one studies, as well as to deny one’s own embedded relation to history. Thus if the beliefs of informants have been set aside in favor of analyzing the practices they engage in, the beliefs of scholars have become the focus of intense scholarly self-reflection of the kind we see in Bellah’s introduction, in Orsi’s analysis three decades later of what has happened in religious studies since then,

and in an array of scholars, such as Stanley Hauerwas, who argue that the virtues of pluralism and tolerance must open the door to teaching religion from traditionally religious points of view even in the secular academy.<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Kripal, in a different vein, has shown how such calls are already after the fact. In *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom* he argues that the ecstatic, and personal, religious experiences of scholars—and their understandings of those experiences—lie at the heart of some of the most prominent academic work on religion since the start of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

This contemporary interest in the religious orientations of scholars of religion, and in the relationship between these orientations and intellectual discourses about religion, is one sign that religious studies does not itself want to dispense entirely with the notion of belief, or, more generally, with religious thought, even as the focus shifts to practice. Asad claims that “discourse involved in practice is not the same as that involved in speaking about practice”; literature, understood as a mode of religious practice, is an occasion for which this claim does not always hold, but this is no less true for the discourse of religious studies.<sup>6</sup> The self-analysis of contemporary scholars of religion in recent years has essentially argued that their scholarly discourse is—or has been—both a discussion of religion and a form of practice, whether that practice is conventionally religious or secular in a way that remains faith-based.

I expound upon this element in the discourse of a neighboring discipline in order to ask, and to begin to answer, a related question in the discipline of literary studies: What are we to do with writers for whom the discourse of belief—and more broadly, religious discourses in general—are not only in play, but carry with them stakes other than the power relations that preoccupy Asad’s work, or the descriptive commitments to

be found in Geertz's and in Orsi's writing? That is, how should we read writers for whom the effort to define life as "religious"—which includes a sense of what religious practice is, who can participate and under what conditions, what a religious life means, what its implications are for human experience, what "belief" is and what is the content of such belief—is precisely the point? The decisive shift of interest from belief to practice, and, in general, the shift away from interest in religious meanings in favor of thick description or efforts to track the workings of power, assumes already a secular point of view that must be different from a religious point of view, because the latter remains invested in knowing itself as such. As Orsi notes, ordinary people—ordinary Americans in particular—remain interested in thinking and talking *about* religion, and in using the language of belief to do so.

The genealogies of the concepts of religion and religious belief that Asad and others give us are helpful insofar as they show us how the very idea of the internal disposition known as belief, and the centrality of that disposition to religion, is a Christian idea that comes to bear upon persons through the exercise of power within social structures. The desire to get outside of that thought tradition, and reveal religious formations as the product of secular power, is itself the desire for secularity. As recent work on the secular has shown, secularity is not only (as Charles Taylor has defined it) the condition in which we all live; it is also, as a social and intellectual formation, something that needs actively to be built. The secular is both a fact and a project. These developments can help us to understand writers who understand themselves to be working within a religious paradigm—a religious paradigm they do not aspire to escape and whose terms they do not wish to cast aside—but only insofar as we do not jettison

the aspect of religious life we call belief, and discourse about belief, as an object of study. For belief has not dropped out of lived religion in America even if it has dropped out of “lived religion.”

That quality of literature we are always teaching our students—that its form and content are both relevant—when cast in religious terms gives us the opportunity to take some of the best insights of the new religious studies (the focus on practice, on what you do) and reunite them with the discursive, reflective elements associated with such practice. In the next section of this chapter, I examine the work of Marilynne Robinson, an avowed and outspoken proponent of mainline liberal Protestantism (in addition to writing three highly acclaimed novels, for example, she makes the construction of John Calvin’s reputation as a liberal her special mission); in the third section, I take up the bestselling evangelical fiction series, *Left Behind*, written collaboratively by the megachurch pastor and co-founder of the Moral Majority Tim LaHaye and a professional Christian writer, Jerry B. Jenkins. Asad notes that “it is a modern idea that a practitioner cannot know how to live religiously without being able to articulate that knowledge.”<sup>7</sup> As I examine how belief functions for these writers, I demonstrate how it may yet be a modern fact that the Christian practitioner in America—perhaps in any Western culture rooted sufficiently in Protestant Christianity—cannot live religiously without on occasion trying to articulate that knowledge, never mind ability.<sup>8</sup> Articulating the knowledge is part of the practice.

To take seriously the question of belief is to take seriously what practitioners do as well as what they say about what they do. To take up questions of belief does not necessarily entail the assumptions Orsi lays out—that to talk about what people “believe

in” must always demand as its object something that aspires to logical, or doctrinal, coherence, something freely and rationally chosen. This is to acknowledge, in an open rather than a normative way, that belief remains at the heart of American popular discourse about religion; it is also to acknowledge that the content of belief does matter to many traditional believers, and that it matters in prominent examples of what we might call religious fiction. The following sections suggest, however, that 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. Amy Frykholm makes a plea for this kind of thinking at the end of her excellent field study of the readers of the *Left Behind* series. For all the scholarly skepticism about belief as a category—which she reviews in a quick tour through the work of Orsi, Catherine Bell, Donald Lopez, and Rodney Needham on the subject of belief—she declares, “As a researcher, I cannot shy away from the category to which readers would give the most emphasis.” She calls for an understanding of religious belief “as dynamic, fluid, and flexible as it functions in people’s everyday lives.”<sup>9</sup> My aim here is to advance such an understanding in the context of literary discourse and literary visions of everyday life.

### **Marilynne Robinson and the Theology of Difference**

Marilynne Robinson would seem to embody the peaceful co-existence of contemporary scholarly thought about religion and commitment to religious life. In a review of Harold Bloom and Jesse Zuba’s anthology of religious poetry, Robinson takes

the opportunity to reflect on the definition of religion as well as the relationships between religion and poetry in ways that are immediately recognizable in the context of the debates in religious studies I have been discussing above. One anecdote she uses and interprets suggests, in compact fashion, how she negotiates these ideas in her many essays and, as I will demonstrate, in her fiction as well. She writes that

when the fifteenth-century Zen monk Shumpo Soki writes at his death, “My sword leans against the sky./With its polished blade I’ll behead/ The Buddha and all of his saints,” his meaning is not that he has rejected his belief but that he will move beyond the forms in which it has been known to him in life. In something of the same spirit, the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as devout a man as the modern world has seen, longed for a “religionless Christianity.” Any writer who has wearied of words knows the feeling of being limited by the very things that enable. To associate religion with unwavering faith in any creed or practice does no justice at all to its complexity as lived experience. Creeds themselves exist to stabilize the intense speculations that religion, which is always about the ultimate nature of things, will inspire.<sup>10</sup>

The position Robinson stakes out here analogizes the word-ward a writer draws upon (sometimes wearily) with the creedal resources of the world’s religions. Both the reality of the divine and the human meanings a writer seeks to articulate exceed these “stabilizing” resources, these formal discursive structures through which human beings attempt to channel lived experience (of the divine, of the world). The limitations of these

resources are not a reason, for Robinson, to abandon the effort to shape experience through creedal reflection or to throw out the idea of creeds—or, indeed, to stop writing. For Robinson is a formalist in both religion and in fiction for all her low-church Protestantism; what I mean is that form stands at the very heart of what she imagines religious life and literature (both the reading and the writing of literature) to be.

Robinson's narrative strategies in her three novels to date reveal how literary form—an analog to creedal form for Robinson—is related to religious understanding. The basic assumption behind those narrative strategies, different as they are from novel to novel, is 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. That assumption, standing behind her fictional articulation of such voices, runs against the contemporary scholarly demotion of discourse in favor of practice. It enacts a Protestant understanding of inner life, the kind of understanding that, all too recently, defined what scholars thought religion had to look like. What Robinson's novels imagine, though, is both discourse and practice: thematically and narratively, they give us the mental discourse of religious persons while also spinning stories that situate those persons within religious life.

Religious discourse and religious life converge through a formal and thematic feature prominent in Robinson's second and third novels: what I will call the discourse of relationship. Both *Gilead* and *Home* are essentially domestic novels. *Gilead* is the long letter of John Ames, a Congregational minister in the small Iowa town of Gilead, to his young son; *Home* is the story of what happens in *Gilead* told from a different perspective. The overlapping story is set in 1956. Ames, a long-time widower, has remarried late in

life and has a seven-year-old son. In his seventies, with an ailing heart and a bleak prognosis, he writes down all that he would want to have said to his son if he had lived to see the boy grow up. He reflects upon his life—and the lives of his father and grandfather, also ministers—through the lens of his theology and his faith, which are tested by the unfolding difficulty on which his meditations converge: the arrival in Gilead of his namesake, John Ames (Jack) Boughton, at once the most beloved son of his friend Robert Boughton and the black sheep of the Boughton family. Robinson's third novel, *Home* (2008), tells this same story from within the Boughton household, from the perspective of Boughton's grown daughter Glory (narrated in third person, free indirect discourse). While it thus lacks the second-person direct address of *Gilead*, *Home* is overwhelmingly characterized, at the level of the sentence, by verbal address, spoken dialog—a prose form largely missing from both *Gilead* and Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping*.<sup>11</sup> The discourse of relationship that defines both the formal structures of *Home* and *Gilead* and the content of their shared domestic stories, like the commitment to internal voice, is imbued with religious significance; it revolves around what Robinson represents as the problem and the opportunity of religious belief within the life of the family.

We might say that John Ames is a character fully imagined to be living within Charles Taylor's secular age: he emerges in *Gilead* as a believer profoundly aware of the possibility—even the plausibility—of unbelief. His beloved older brother Edward went to study for the ministry and came back reading Feuerbach and Marx and renouncing his

faith. The ensuing arguments between brother and father distressed young Ames, but his love for this baseball-throwing older brother is such that he seeks, ever after, to say nothing about belief that would sound insincere to the beloved but skeptical listener. He read everything his brother talked of, and the evidence of that reading persists in his old age. Reflecting, then, on belief in something of the same way Robinson does in the passage I quoted above, he notes “The oddness of the phrase ‘believe in God’” which, he says, “bring[s] to my mind that first chapter of Feuerbach, which is really about the awkwardness of language, and not about religion at all.” Feuerbach, he notes, “doesn’t imagine the possibility of an existence beyond this one, by which I mean a reality embracing this one but exceeding it” but this does not, for Ames, suggest that his thought is less useful than that of the theologian who does imagine such an ultimate reality. Ames compares such human efforts at cosmic comprehension to the hypothetical efforts of their cat: “The inadequacy of her concepts [about the world] would have nothing to do with the reality of the situation.”

While such an analogy renders Feuerbach’s concepts as far from the truth as the cat’s, this is not a smug dismissal of the philosopher; indeed, Ames’s example of the unlikeness between our thought and “the reality of the situation” is simply an important instance of a radical unlikeness that can be found at every level of human experience. Remarking “how a thing we call a stone differs from a thing we call a dream” (143) Ames moves analogically from “the degrees of unlikeness within the reality we know” to “a much more absolute unlikeness, with which we exist”—that is, the distance between human perspective and God’s perspective. As if to demonstrate how the effort to order the world through language is subject to radical unlikeness, he tells his son, as he

concludes these thoughts, “Your mother wanted to name the cat Feuerbach, but you insisted on Soapy.” (143) The mother’s and son’s attempts to assimilate the cat into a world of experience and concepts is revered here in this small anecdote, one of many details of their family life that are among the most radiant passages of the novel.

Robinson writes elsewhere that “to attempt obedience to God in any circumstance is to find experience opening on meaning, and meaning is holy.”<sup>12</sup> The naming of Soapy is in this sense a religious act: in it, mother and son find “experience opening on meaning,” though both the experience of the cat and the animal’s meaning differ so markedly between mother and son. And Ames’s reflection itself is that kind of holy act, finding a theological meaning that comes as the sum of a whole life of attending to the different thought of other persons--his brother and father, his wife and son, Feuerbach and Calvin.

Despite Ames’s exemplary tolerance of those who differ from himself, a tolerance vigorously argued for in Robinson’s essays, strongly-held belief still matters for Robinson and for the characters she creates in these novels. This is clear despite how complex and utterly provisional thought *about* belief always is in Ames’s narrative. In one of his broadest reflections on his ministry in the novel, Ames explains to his son that he has felt there are certain things he must tell his congregation “even if no one listened or understood”: “One of them is that many of the attacks on belief that have had such prestige for the last century or two are in fact meaningless. I must tell *you* this, because everything else I have told you, and them [his congregation], loses almost all its meaning and its right attention if this is not established” (144). The choice of the word “meaningless” is crucial: he does not say that the arguments are wrong, or mistaken, but that they do not participate in the religious practice of making experience open upon

meaning. To take them as meaningful is to rob of its meaning, and thus its holiness, “everything else” Ames has told his son and his congregation.

Belief here is imagined as a religiously understood reality that is simply other to arguments against it. That understanding of belief underwrites everything he says, not just as a pastor, but also as a father writing to his son. A shared commitment to that religiously understood reality underwrites the possibility of speaking about what matters and this is above all a book about what matters in a life by virtue of its original premise—the idea that it is a letter reaching proleptically from dead father to living son. That premise is invoked as the closing thought that follows this particular discourse on belief: “If I were to go through my old sermons, I might find some in which I deal with this subject. Since I am presumably somewhere near the end of my time and my strength, that might be the best way to make the case for you. I should have thought of this long ago” (144). The very fact that Ames wants to “make the case” for belief suggests its ultimate value for Ames, and for the novel itself. But what, we might ask, is belief valuable *for*?

One reason belief remains important to Ames, and to Robinson, is because of its relationship to religious experience. Ames remarks that “it is religious experience above all that authenticates religion, for the purposes of the individual believer” (145)—so attacks on religion that claim that such experience is an illusion for the individual are, for Ames, insidious. Similarly, he argues that “if the awkwardness and falseness and failure of religion are interpreted to mean there is no core of truth in it—and the witness of Scripture from end to end discourages this view—then people are disabled from trusting their thoughts, their expressions of belief, and their understanding, and even from believing in the essential dignity of their and their neighbors’ endlessly flawed experience

of belief” (146). While scholars of lived religion have sidelined belief as a way of understanding religion Robinson insists that belief is in fact something one experiences, just as thought is something that one experiences, and that the content of belief includes claims about the dignity of persons just as surely as it contains claims about God and God’s relation to humanity. She thus works parallel to a minority strain of scholarly discourse working within religious studies to reassert, albeit in a newly nuanced way, the importance of mental concept; this work is exemplified by Wayne Proudfoot’s reengagement of William James in *Religious Experience*.<sup>13</sup> We can also see that Robinson’s fiction—and especially *Gilead*—extends an American revival of the philosophical novel initiated by Saul Bellow in the 1950s. Influenced by Thomas Mann and Dostoyevsky, this tradition imagines fiction as a way of taking thought beyond philosophy proper, beyond proposition and argument (while including those things) and into a sense of what it is like to live with and through philosophical—or, in Ames’s case, theological—reflection.

If belief makes religious life possible because it allows one to trust one’s own and one’s neighbors’ religious experiences as such, talking about belief in the abstract is imagined in Robinson’s work as one kind of religious experience, a kind that is not separate from that social context in which the religious life is most compellingly led in her novels: in the family, and through long-term friendship. And so it is crucial to note that Ames’s reflections on belief and his effort to “make the case” for it in the extended letter to his son arise from a supremely practical attempt to heal a friendship. To do so is to register (as with the appearance of Soapy the cat in a meditation on Feuerbach) how the form of the novel comes to matter to its expression of abstract thought. More

specifically, to recognize how this particular novel's form matters to its expression of abstract thought is to see abstract discourse on belief as part of the larger religious practice of relationship.

The meditations on belief in *Gilead* that I have been discussing, then, are prompted by an article Boughton sends Ames on contemporary American religion—at the suggestion of Jack and Jack's sister Glory—to provide the pretext (literally) for reconciliation between the two ministers. Boughton is angry with his old friend because he learns that Ames preached on unkindness to children (a sermon on the banishment of Ishmael and Hagar) when Jack showed up at Ames's church. Seeming to refer to Jack's notorious youthful abandonment of an illegitimate child, who later died as a result of the poverty in which it was raised by its teenage mother, the sermon causes Jack to flee the church as soon as the service ends. Still worse, the sermon threatens the rapprochement Jack is awkwardly, but persistently, trying to bring about between himself and Ames. The sermon becomes itself an instance of unkindness, a use of a religious discourse to judge and impugn—though John Ames's motives are truly mixed, and the sermon was not originally intended to be given in Jack's hearing. In *Gilead* Ames thinks it is his idea to return the magazine so he can look in on the Boughtons and make sure they are not angry with him; in *Home*, Jack and Glory plant the magazine at Ames's house, knowing Ames will return it having read the article, and knowing that this act and the ensuing conversation will help Boughton set aside his anger at Ames.

Indirection, tact, considerateness, kindness, and loyalty to an old friend are the hallmarks of the transaction for all parties. These qualities set the meditation on belief in a relational context of forgiveness; the scene bears significant rhetorical weight in *Gilead*

alone, but with the publication of *Home* it appears even more freighted. The front-porch conversation between Ames and Boughton—a rare conversation that also includes all the other important characters of the novel: Jack, Glory, and Ames’s wife Lila and Ames’s son Robby—occurs over some notable pages (150-152 in *Gilead*, 216-228 in *Home*) where text intermittently repeats between the two novels. The relational context for Ames’s meditation on belief is thus central to not one but two novels; it is the naval of their connection.

Unlike Ames’s private reflections on belief, the conversation sparked between Boughton, Ames, Jack, Glory and Lila is inconclusive and contentious. It leads Jack to ask “how the mystery of predestination could be reconciled with the mystery of salvation.” In a conversation already fraught with theological and personal difficulty, Jack presses for an answer, fulfilling his role as the thorn in the ministers’ sides but also expressing the urgency of this question for his own position in the world and the family. Is he helplessly damned in the scheme of divine predestination, or ripe for the salvation he is reminded of through the persistent love of his family? “No conclusions?” Jack asks his father. “None that I can remember.’ Then he said, ‘To conclude is not in the nature of the enterprise.’” (*Gilead*, 152; the corresponding moment, with slightly different wording, can be found at *Home*, 227) Theology in *Gilead* is understood to produce arguments, and not just the scholarly kind: Glory’s objection to Jack’s question about predestination is that the conversation always arrives at an argument in the ordinary sense within five minutes.

The scene presents theological questions and theological discourse as something to produce thinking, not conclusion, but also, perhaps more importantly, as something

that can become a productively shared discourse only between, as Ames says, “people who have . . . sympathy for it” (he says he “always dreaded having to talk theology with people who have no sympathy for it” (*Gilead*, 153-54). I take “sympathy” here as a way of describing a shared commitment to the activity of trying to know an unknowable divine reality (in which the partners in conversation together believe) through the special kind of discourse we know as theology; belief matters, then, because it is the foundation of relationship between believers and the raw material of their discursive activity. Jack, a professed unbeliever, wants to be convinced through the conceptual content of religious discourse; his difference from his father and from Ames is only underscored by his lack of what Ames calls “sympathy” with theology—his mistaking it for a discourse of answers rather than a discourse of relationship. He mistakes it, that is, for a discourse that could produce individual belief rather than a discourse that enacts shared belief. This is of course appropriate for Jack, who at every turn seems to challenge the very idea of relationship and its presumptions.<sup>14</sup> (It will be the ritual of blessing—of Ames placing his hand on Jack’s forehead in benediction--that will signal their final reconciliation, not agreement about religious truths.)

If Jack is unable to enter sympathetically into the discourse of theology—to participate in that formal practice of relationship—he is a master of another kind of formal practice of relationship: verbal courtesy. The most striking thing about Jack as a character is the utter perfection of his courtesy, a perfection unmatched even by the father who taught him that skill, or by the even-tempered Glory. That perfection at times renders him mechanical, as when Ames and Lila and their son come over for dinner; his anxiety fatally exaggerates his courtesy so that it translates as parody. This suggests that

these mundane forms of maintaining relationship (which Robinson extols throughout her writing) are only the lesser reflection of that higher sympathy of shared belief as practiced in its verbal and social forms. In the absence of shared belief in the nature of ultimate reality, Robinson seems to suggest, the shared courtesy is essential. It is the form in which pluralism can thrive without people losing, as Ames put it, “the essential dignity of their and their neighbors’ endlessly flawed experience of belief.”

“Home” is another such formal structure. Inside the walls of home, the religious practice of maintaining mutual dignity in the face of difference extends from the challenges of familial disagreement to the horror of race relations in mid-century America. Indeed, racial reconciliation is presented as another version of the familial reconciliations that take up most space in the two novels; one could say that the work of both novels is to translate racial reconciliation into another mode of familial reconciliation. The attempt of Ames’s grandfather—the bloody attempt to help John Brown in his revolt against slavery—is one, somewhat discredited, version of the attempt at racial justice; the other is Jack’s private one, of falling in love with a black woman named Della and having a son with her, and naming that son after his father, Robert.<sup>15</sup> We see that effort thwarted by the violence of American race relations at mid-century, and by the prejudices of both Jack’s father and Della’s own family, the latter led also by a powerful minister. Each family is embedded deeply in a coherent and racially homogeneous religious community to which the mixed-race couple cannot be courteously admitted.

*Home*, in placing Jack at the center of the narrative, allows us to see the complex, religiously understood reality of the eponymous world, then. We can see Jack and Della’s

mode of reconciliation—love, loyalty, and the formation of a family—as the revision and, indeed, the redemption of Jack’s earlier encounter with unlikeness: with the poor girl of fourteen whom he impregnates and abandons. The mode of reconciliation Jack embodies is that of making kinship from unlikeness. This is related to Robinson’s consistent emphasis on kindness—the root of that word invoking the likeness of kin as the basis for affection and gentleness. The inverse of this understanding of kinship and difference is also imaged in *Home*: a home can bridge difference by producing kinship, but home can also physically and spiritually contain difference within a benign sphere. In *Home* we learn, eventually, that Jack, so often in childhood missing from the family gathering, was usually still within the family compound. After the novel’s crisis—his two-day drinking binge—we discover that instead of reeling about town, he pitched a tent in the loft of the family barn and furnished it with a bookshelf and a light (and liquor).

In this context we can see that the narrative strategy even of a novel so formally distinct from *Home* and *Gilead* as *Housekeeping* is also founded upon the religious opportunity of difference. Indeed, analogy—the novel’s relentless figurative mode—may be understood as the privileged discourse of contained difference: as the poet Allen Grossman would often declaim to his students, with upraised hands, “‘like’ means *is not!*” If metaphor is the language of collapse, simile is the language that maintains difference within the embrace of kinship. The truth of this is fully realized in *Housekeeping*, which repeatedly works out from the verbal figure of simile to the extended logic of analogy. The absolute difference that presides over this novel is that between the living narrator, Ruth, and her mother Helen, who commits suicide by driving her car into the local lake when Ruth is a young girl. The difference between the living

daughter and her dead mother in turn figures other differences: that between dreamy Ruth and her conventional sister Lucile, between these girls and their eccentric aunt Sylvie, between the inside and outside of houses, between one mind and another, between the presence of memory and the absence of person. The structure is most lyrically expressed by the novel's final lines, where Ruth, after running away with the incorrigibly transient Sylvie, imagines the effect of her and Sylvie's absence on Lucile: "No one watching . . . could know how her thoughts are thronged by our absence, or know how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie" (219). Millennial images, Biblical allusions and scriptural cadence imbue such longing throughout the novel with specifically religious overtones. The novel's poetic style becomes the literary equivalent of the analogical work found in much traditional religious thought—a mode of thought long examined by scholars of Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

The discourse of reconciliation that is defined formally by second person address and by reported dialog in *Gilead* and *Home* respectively, is not missing, then, in *Housekeeping*, but rendered in a different literary form. By the same token, "home" is a practice rather than a place in the earlier novel—we might say that "housekeeping" is the literary practice of making analogies. Reconciliation is the project of *Housekeeping* as surely as it is the project of the two later novels—the narrative is designed to knit up a broken world into a whole, through simile and analogy, or through the idea that absence produces the present thing through the intensity of longing. The relentless generation of likeness in *Housekeeping* is not so much a remedy for radical unlikeness, then, as the natural response of human longing upon the perception of unlikeness. Just as Sylvie and Ruth finally cross the bridge that a doomed train spectacularly fails to cross in the novel's

opening scenes, the human effort, at great cost, is to bridge the gap, draw difference closer, knit up the world.

Difference, then, is encompassed by the family sphere; radical unlikeness is comprehended by “home.” The difference external to the family is analogous to the difference internal to it. These structures repeat the abstract structure at the heart of Ames’s reflections on belief: the unlikeness within the world (the difference between stone and dream) repeats the difference between what Soapy the cat understands and what Feuerbach understands, between what Feuerbach believes and Ames believes, between the boy’s name for the cat and his mother’s, between human thoughts about reality, and the larger reality the religious person believes in, but also believes she cannot know (“my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor you ways my ways, says the Lord”). As we come full circle from a theology of these differences to the lived experience of difference and reconciliation in the home and in the writer’s housekeeping (knitting up a fictional world), it becomes clear that difference is not for Robinson a problem to be solved but rather the occasion for living a religious life.

Ames’s meditations on belief reveal that the very structure of human belief in Taylor’s secular age (that it is both importantly totalizing and inescapably partial) encompasses that most radical of differences—between human and divine. The tautology produced here is what Robinson means when she has Ames say that arguments against belief are meaningless. Religious life is above all the practice of reconciliation; religious belief in the secular age, with its capacity for containing difference, is the beginning and the end of religious life. In an essay in the *American Scholar* Robinson quoted Emily Dickinson’s line, “The abdication of belief / Makes the behavior small.” But she

suggested, too, that “There is a powerful tendency also to make belief itself small, whether narrow and bitter or feckless and bland, with what effects on behavior we may perhaps infer from the present state of the Republic.”<sup>17</sup> Her novels imagine belief made capacious, and behavior within the life of belief that can heal both family and Republic.

### **Media and Message in *Left Behind***

I have tried, in my discussion of Marilynne Robinson’s work, to show in some detail how discourses of belief become religious practices, and how literature—both the novel as a narrative form, and various poetic structures she uses within narrative—comes to catalyze this communion between approaches to religion currently held apart in scholarly work on religion. I now turn to a very different version of religious fiction—the *Left Behind* novels—in order to show how even in the world of American evangelicalism, where belief is fully understood in the normative way Robert Orsi resists, belief may nevertheless be productively understood as an form of religious practice in Orsi’s sense. My purpose in presenting this second case is not to give a comprehensive analysis of the whole series—others have done this in service to other kinds of arguments. It is rather to suggest, in a somewhat condensed way, that there is more than one way of mobilizing the literary to reimagine belief as a practice. I do not claim, in presenting the cases side by side, that what I discover here about the practice of belief covers the spectrum of how believing becomes a practice in contemporary America, or what it looks like as practice in the culture at large.

My implicit claim, and the broadest one I want to make in this regard about American religious culture, is that there are about as many versions of the practice of believing as there are believing people. To get a full picture of belief's status as a lived practice in America and to make the more general cultural claims such fieldwork could support are obviously beyond the scope of this book. My more local and specific claim is that literature of all kinds—not only literary fiction such as Robinson writes, but also the popular genre fiction of LaHaye and Jenkins— plays a special role in the culture by embodying the imaginative work required to maintain the viability of belief in the secular age. This claim, like this book as a whole, suggests both the relevance of literature to a major cultural feature of America (its simultaneous religious pluralism and the continuing prominence of belief understood in traditional Protestant ways), and the relevance of American religion to the contemporary development of literary work.

The inaugural novel of Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins' apocalyptic fiction series highlights belief about as dramatically as any fictional scenario could. Believing in Christ is not only, for these writers, the defining characteristic of true religion, subject only to the free choice of individuals, but it defines the fate of every character in the novel. Those who are true believers are assumed bodily into Heaven at the opening of the novel; unbelievers are "left behind." The central dramas thus set in motion have to do with the moments when the men remaining (and I will explain why men's belief is so central to the novels) must decide whether they believe in Christ or not and what they are going to do about it. My section title nods to Marshall McLuhan because these novels

represent a mass, and mass-media, version of contemporary religious fiction, one that wrestles with the Catholically-inflected formalism—a formalism that downplayed the importance of message—around which McLuhan built his theory of media’s power (as I argued in chapter three). If Robinson’s medium for a meditation on belief is the literary, the medium for *Left Behind* is the television or the action-adventure movie. If the choice of the literary fits Robinson’s theology of difference through its particular formal qualities (simile, analogy, address, genre, allusion, narrative arrangement), I will argue, in a parallel way, that the choice of television and, more specifically, the action-adventure genre, can be understood to fit LaHaye and Jenkins’—and their putative audience’s— theology of conversion.

Conversion, imagined in these novels as centering on the willingness to change from wrong belief to right belief, entails a theology not of difference but of the erasure of difference: the separation between God and the believer is wiped out by belief in, and submission to, the mediating body of Christ. There is perhaps nothing surprising in what I have just said; my claim will be that there should be something surprising in it, given the profound uneasiness about such erasure of difference that invests every crevice of this novel. I will argue that this uneasiness centers around two problems: first, the need for men to submit in the context of their decision to be believers, and second, the power of the media to enable, or compel, submission as such. The first problem is entailed by the traditional Protestant theology to which LaHaye and Jenkins subscribe; the second is the very premise upon which these novels—and the raft of *Left Behind* media products available in films, DVDs, teen versions, and merchandise—stake their success as instruments of conversion in the world of actual readers, whether or not the books

actually produce such conversions.<sup>18</sup> The action-adventure movie becomes a religious form in the hands of LaHaye and Jenkins because it embodies the simultaneous insistence on action and passivity that characterizes their theology of conversion; even more specifically, it models how men can negotiate this contradiction while remaining men.

Belief is no dry, conceptual matter in *Left Behind*. Men's pulses race and they lock eyes with each other as they talk about what to believe. After Rayford Steel, a pilot whose wife and son disappeared in the rapture and who soon becomes a Christian himself, tells the as-yet-agnostic Buck Williams (the journalist/action hero of the novels) his theory of the rapture "Buck was desperate to maintain his composure." "Maybe it was wrong," he thinks, "maybe it was mumbo jumbo. But it was the only theory that tied the incidents so closely to any sort of explanation. What else would give Buck this constant case of the chills?"<sup>19</sup> What else, indeed? I will return to the erotic charge such scenes give off; for now I simply want to note that the somatic drama flags belief as being more complicated than the surface discourse of the novel indicates, where belief is highlighted as free choice.

That drama arises within a condition of belief that all of the characters who eventually "become Christian" in the novel undergo: they hear the millenarian theory of the disappearances, come to believe it, know their only hope is Jesus, but have not yet prayed the so-called sinner's prayer (in which one acknowledges one's sinfulness, the fact that one cannot be saved without Christ's sacrifice, and one's sincerity in asking God's forgiveness through Christ). Rayford, his daughter Chloe, and Buck all undergo this condition of what must be called belief: they believe that the story of the rapture is

true, they believe God has taken his people and that Jesus is the way to salvation in this time of tribulation. In fact, it is the condition in which all the somatic drama is concentrated—you don't get chills after you become a Christian, but right before you decide. The state is protracted in Rayford's case, as we see in his encounters with Bruce, an assistant pastor at his wife's church—a man sufficiently lukewarm in his pre-rapture faith to be spit out at the decisive moment; he is left behind, but is quick to become a hot believer. Here is Rayford before his conversion, then: "Rayford could feel Bruce's eyes burning into him as if the young man knew Rayford was nearly ready to make a commitment. . . He was analytical, and while this suddenly made a world of sense to him and he didn't doubt at all Bruce's theory of the disappearances, he would not act immediately. 'I'd appreciate the tape [a video left by the pastor, to be watched in case of rapture], and I can guarantee you, I will be back tomorrow,'" (202) he tells the pastor. Bruce describes Rayford's condition in terms that make one wonder what the difference is between this state and the state of what he calls "commitment": "just let me encourage you that if God impresses upon you that this is true, don't put it off. What would be worse than finally finding God and then dying without him because you waited too long?" (203) What does it mean to "find God" if it can somehow be different from being saved and if, in turn, the internal disposition we call belief is as central to the religious vision as it seems to be?

One way to answer that question is to say that Rayford's and Buck's state of mind seems a species of the state of "conviction" traditionally avowed before repentance and reconciliation with God in the formal conversion narrative, whose roots go back to the Puritans, even though, as Calvinists, the Puritans emphasize what Marilynne Robinson, a

Calvinist in our own time, calls God's "radical freedom" to save those he will. This state of conviction highlights instead the freedom of the person to choose what they will do in the face of conviction: to be saved, they must first pray, and in doing so both repent and "accept Jesus Christ into their hearts." We have all heard these formulae, but it is worth pausing over the process if we are interested in belief and its relation to ritual. The condition of believing is not enough for the evangelical Protestant; it must lead to the act of repentance. If evangelicals are reluctant to see repentance as a form of ritual, associated as ritual is with mere religious habit and with Roman Catholicism, it is a hard position to maintain. The act has a clear formula, despite the fact that, as Chloe tells Buck, it can be done anywhere, anytime (in fact these prayers in the novel mostly don't happen in churches). The study of lived religion thus attunes us to the ritual aspects even of a version of religion that disavows ritual in favor of belief and the free, and rational choosing of belief.

"Commitment" is understood in *Left Behind* as a species of submission—the decision that one will submit one's whole life to Christ's direction. In light of this theological fact, it is crucial to note that action and passivity, control and lack thereof, are constantly set against one another in the novel; the tension between these is concentrated around the action of the media, and the fact of mediation in general. For Nicolae Carpathia, the Anitchrist, becomes a world leader by the general acclamation of the media. He seems passively to accept the elevation offered to him by others and, we find out later, passively manipulates others' evil acts (he's the ultimate passive-aggressive type). When he comes to power he uses supernatural means, effected through a ritual that bears a marked resemblance to the Eucharist in Anglo-Catholic tradition, to ensure that

people only see and remember what he tells them to see and remember. The Antichrist not only uses the media, he becomes (like the Christ whom he inverts) the ultimate medium himself. By contrast, the righteous men of the novel are full of action that reads like action: Rayford pilots planes, and Buck scuffles in a hotel hallway with the journalistic competition to protect his scoop on Carpathia.

Video, and the media in general, are a threat to this preference for action over passivity in the righteous man. If prayer is the ritual act that transforms conceptual belief into salvific belief through commitment or submission, it is the act of watching the Christian video that is its analog in the narrative architecture of *Left Behind*. Rayford in fact becomes a Christian while watching such a video, and the language describing his interaction with the videotape is marked with masculine action and control: He “hit the pause button”(209) on the tape in order to get his wife Irene’s Bible; we are told then that he “let the tape roll” (210) even though some of what the pastor said “was gibberish to him” and then he “paused” (213) the tape when thinking over the Pastor’s message (which we’ve now been reading in transcript for three pages without interruption—we, like Rayford, become the tape’s passive audience). When Rayford declares to himself that “it was finally time to move beyond being a critic, an analyst never satisfied with the evidence” we are told that “there was only one course of action. He punched the play button” (214). He pauses the tape one more time as he hesitates to pray the sinner’s prayer, but finally we are told he “pushed the play button and tossed the remote control aside” (216). “The pastor said, ‘Pray after me,’ and Rayford did” (213). Conversion, then, is submission to the medium first, and then to the pastor, and to God. In this scene, McLuhan proves right: the medium is, after all, the message.

The gendered stakes for this conception of religious action become evident when Rayford's daughter Chloe converts. The moment is described in diametrically opposed terms. She has arrived at that preliminary condition of belief but has not yet prayed to God in the way the pastor teaches—which is not to say that she has not prayed. She has: she asks God for some sort of sign to show that he loves her and cares about her. The next morning she is surprised by the appearance of Buck the one person she most wanted to see, who has booked a seat next to her on her father's flight to Chicago. He, she says, is the answer to her prayer, and as she explains this to him, the two discuss her position *vis à vis* faith: "God has called your bluff," Buck tells her; "you asked and he delivered. Sounds like you are obligated" (406). And this is reassuring to her: "'I have no choice,' she agreed. 'Not that I want one'" (406). The submission to God entailed in the sinner's prayer is not hedged but highlighted in the case of Chloe's conversion; God's instrument in that submission is a man, her emerging love interest.<sup>20</sup>

It won't come as a surprise that women's submissiveness is not simply evident at the scene of conversion; it is the mode of their lives in the novel. Hattie Durham, who becomes Personal Assistant to the Antichrist, is initially a flight attendant carried from place to place by the male pilots; Chloe Steele is the purer example on the plane, because of her status as a daughter and because she doesn't have a job on the plane or even a chosen destination when she flies with her father. She flies on Rayford's flights for free and, after the catastrophe of the rapture, for no reason other than to mark time and stay near her father. Buck, we are told, has had trouble dating because "he had always been considered too mobile for a woman who wanted stability" (357). Chloe seems the perfect match—she's portable. The gender of passivity and its relation to the media is evident as

Buck worries about suggesting that he and she walk around the terminal as they get to know one another: “Would she rather sit down or people watch or window-shop?” (365) That is, he wonders whether she would she rather passively experience the terminal as if it were a TV—one perhaps tuned to that most girly of window-shopping stations, QVC.

Submission, then, is a theological problem. It is an essential aspect of belief—belief understood in that deliberative sense about which Orsi warns—but one surrounded with anxiety. Written and rewritten in multiple forms and versions, it is the novel’s central problem and for men in particular it is not adequately solved by “punching” the play button, for there are larger questions of submission men in the novel must deal with every day. As Christians, they must continually submit to other Christian men, and here the somatic accompaniments of conversion, which cannot fail to look like the signs of erotic attraction, are helpfully displaced onto other, more acceptable forms of submission. Buck is attracted to Chloe, but finds, upon interviewing her father, that it was simply “Rayford in Chloe” that really drew him to her. When he is overcome by Rayford’s testimony about the rapture at dinner, he fears that he will lose his composure under the gaze of the phallically strong Captain Steele; he sits with “his pulse racing, looking neither right nor left. . . . He was certain the women could hear his crashing heart. Was all this possible? Could it be true?” (385). The formulaic language of sexual anticipation—the “crashing heart”—is deflected towards the women (unless they somehow just have better hearing than Rayford). Buck’s submission to Rayford comes in tandem with his growing bond with Chloe, and so in submitting he becomes son, not the feminized erotic figure that he appears to be while first listening to Rayford’s testimony.

In turn, Rayford's submission to the young pastor with the burning eyes is soon renegotiated: once he becomes a Christian, his greater age puts him safely in the position of father figure in relation to Bruce even if Bruce is still leader of the church. Buck's submission to Bruce towards the end of the novel is dramatized when Bruce denies Buck access to a meeting of the core group of believers (which includes Rayford). Bruce makes a point of saying he has told Buck everything he will cover in that meeting, and so what he is denying Buck is intimate access to Rayford, and the power status he and this core group possess. Buck has to submit to Bruce in this instance, but once he becomes a Christian he becomes Bruce's equal, or even, by virtue of his native talents and intelligence, his superior. The notion of these two as brothers, while it leaves open the question of who would submit to whom, locates the prospect of male submission safely in the dynamics of patriarchy.

Submission to bosses is harder to navigate for the Christian man. In the secular world, and in the age of feminism, the problem can't always be solved by recourse to patriarchy: the problem with a boss, the novel tells us, is that he may not promote you, he may promote a woman in your place; even worse, your boss may turn out to be a woman. Rayford at one point describes God in these terms, before he becomes a Christian: he says to Chloe that he feels as if the people who disappeared—his wife, in particular—“got promoted” while he didn't. Buck Williams, when offered the job of senior editor at *Global Weekly*, which he does not really want, decides that he “was going to have to accept the promotion just to protect himself from other pretenders” (328). He takes the job, that is, just to ensure that his boss isn't someone to whom he doesn't want to submit. Later in the novel, we know the Antichrist has taken power not only because he can now

completely control what world leaders think and see, and not only because he can now commit murder with impunity, but also because Buck has been demoted on account of his resistance to Carpathia. His personal tribulation begins with the publisher's order that he must leave New York and the senior editor's job to work in the Chicago branch office of the newsmagazine under a "woman with sensible shoes." And although, as Buck says, "no one" calls flight attendants "stewardesses" anymore, Hattie Durham is comfortably stereotyped in that role during the first part of the novel, becoming evil when she seizes the chance to become the assistant to Carpathia, who has become the Secretary General of the UN. Hattie's is a big promotion if there ever was one, imagined at the expense of the novel's realism (if you can call it that). There is nothing in the novel to suggest why she should be a candidate for this job, or how she would have warranted such attention from clever Carpathia.

Among the ways to solve this version of the submission problem in the novel is for men to consort primarily with women either much younger or much older than themselves—to have women preemptively arranged around themselves either as mothers or daughters. At the surface of the text we see lots of worry about exactly how much younger a woman can be and still be a legitimate object of a man's sexual interest. Rayford makes it clear that a fifteen year difference (between Hattie and himself) does not put her in the illegitimate category of the woman who, in the common pejorative cliché, is "young enough to be his daughter." Fifteen years younger does not plausibly impinge upon the incest taboo; likewise, the age difference between Buck, at thirty and a half, and Chloe, at twenty and a half (I don't know why the specificity of the "half" is important), does not constitute a statutory difference. Once this is established, Chloe is

quite freely represented both as a child—Buck at one point wipes chocolate off her mouth, she punches him as they flirt—and as exceptionally mature. Buck assures her that she “plays a lot older” than her twenty and a half years, and she appears at dinner “radiant, looking five years older in a classy evening dress” (381).

Submission to women in the workplace can be alleviated, then, by finding younger ones to be with outside the office, by disqualifying women from scenes of sexual equality, or by translating submission to women into submission to God by reading such submission as the means of God’s tribulation. Yet another form of submission—to the media—is even harder to manage. For the novel is as obsessed with the media as it is with belief. The talismanic medium here is televisual, so much so that even the Bible is almost completely displaced as the medium through which God’s message comes to people. On the videotape Rayford, Chloe and Buck must see in order to be saved, six verses of 1 Corinthians 15 scroll on the screen, and though Rayford runs to get his wife’s Bible, he doesn’t really need it—“though it was slightly different in her translation, the meaning was the same” (209). Even the pastor on the tape says that his audience “won’t need this proof by now, because you will have experienced the most shocking event of history” (209). The pastor shows the text of 1 Corinthians not because it will instruct the viewer, but in order to answer the pressing question he thinks his future audience will ask: “How did he know” what the rapture and its aftermath would be like? (209). The bible establishes the authority of the minister by virtue of prophecy; once it has accomplished that, its job is done. (This suggests the minimalism of the theological content of belief.) The novel later withholds the text of Revelations altogether, its literary density hustled off stage by Bruce when he quickly “translates” Revelations into the

mediated reality they should expect to see soon on CNN (the red horse is bloodshed, the black horse is World War III, and so on) while the novel holds scripture at bay.

The character of Buck seems intended to solve the problem of the media's mediation in a fundamental way: he makes the media look like the arena of active men. His early stardom as a reporter is signaled by the way he "covers" the "newsmaker of the year" stories, putting him in a passive position. As he begins the transformation that will eventually result in his becoming a Christian, he becomes an action-adventure hero: he fakes his own death, is handy enough with wirecutters to take apart phones and hook up his computer to the batteries in times of crisis, and he makes news himself as those newsmakers do that he formerly covered. In this sense, Buck is the double of LaHaye and Jenkins. In the novel, and in the array of media products tied to the *Left Behind* series, they aim to use the forms and conventions of American media to evangelize the world. To put the point another way, the premise of the novel is that we really want to watch TV. How can we allow ourselves to do that? To be seduced by it? How can we allow ourselves to see through the eyes of the media?

LaHaye and Jenkins use the media's forms and conventions to construct something that seems to allow you to be making your independent assessment of the media. "God had tried to warn his people by putting his Word in written form centuries earlier" (312), the novel tells us, suggesting that new forms may supplant that writing.<sup>21</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins are now putting it in written form again, but in a form or rather, in multiple forms—the action adventure genre novel, but also in videos and movies based on the books--that they think will reach the masses. The words "Left Behind" are a registered trademark, and lest we think the TM on the cover is the mark of the beast,

LaHaye and Jenkins, in touting the novel's successes, imply that they are in control of the media, and the novel itself demonstrates that control in the ways it deploys for God the conventions of television and generic action-adventure. As Jonathan Freedman has pointed out, the problem of mind control—and, in particular, an anti-Semitic fear of Jewish mind control popular among the neo-Nazi fringe—hovers behind the representation of the media in *Left Behind* even if that fear is not specifically attached to Jews.<sup>22</sup> I want to suggest that the fear of mediation, while it certainly has a root-system in the history of anti-Semitism, is more broadly a fear of social change. What is perhaps remarkable about the *Left Behind* series is the way fears about mind control have less to do with modern media than they do with modern gender relations, and, indeed, with the gendered aspects of the believer's relationship to the Protestant God. This holds true for evangelicalism in contemporary America more generally, in the sense that the politics of marriage, sexuality, and the family topped the agenda of the Christian right as advanced by LaHaye's own organization, the Moral Majority. (LaHaye has also written extensively on Christian marriage and sexuality.) In the novels, the ultimate compensation for the believer's submission to God is the fact that he *or* she becomes immune from the mind control of the Antichrist. Christians—both men and women—are the only ones who can resist his charisma.

The litany of responses to the problem of submission I have outlined here are mined from the conventions of TV; the fantasy entailed in that use of convention is that the conventions of TV can in fact liberate you from the power of its mediation.<sup>23</sup> This is a version of belief in belief: it is belief in the normative idea of belief—belief in the idea of the freely chosen world-view that can be learned and then adopted by the rational man of

action. Such a version of belief solves, or at least masks, the problem of men's submission to God, with all the baggage of cultural emasculation it seems to carry along with it--in particular, the emasculation of the middling man in the workplace. I should note here that the *Left Behind* books deploy a wide array of narrative devices and conventions to deal with the various implications of gender and submission. Those include the representation of the tender Christian man made popular through the Christian men's movement, and the story about a mother (Chloe) doing important work for God and humanity through a home business—a job so crucial to God's cause that it eventually gets her martyred. Belief, highlighted in the drama of conversion, moves among these conventions, entwines with them; it does not stand apart from them or speak, unidirectionally, to them or through them. Robert Orsi is right that this conception of belief is a Protestant idea; in *Left Behind* we can see an example of the work that conception of belief is doing for those who live that religion.

### **The Lived Religion of Religious Literature**

My discussion of how belief functions in the two very different versions of religious fiction I have taken up in this chapter has dwelt upon details of theme, plot, and narrative. This focus on what might be considered literary detail is precisely what constitutes my argument with respect to the theoretical questions about belief with which I began. When we attend to belief as a thematic and a formal structure in these writers, we begin to see why it cannot be neglected in favor of a focus on practice. The conditions of belief imagined by religious writers are themselves not the engines, or the meanings of practice (as Geertz's notion of the symbolic meanings of ritual would suggest) but are a

form of religious practice that is at once material, ritualistic, discursive, and abstract; it is a form of religious practice both internal to individual consciousness and inextricably linked to the social. My discussions of these novels are meant to demonstrate the psychic, erotic, and familial implications of belief; these implications vary as the writer's way of imagining religious belief varies. It is not that belief informs or directs certain ways of living a religious life, but that belief is itself a way of living a religious life, connected, as all religious practices are, with the whole world of daily practices we call culture. To put the point another way, though the gender dynamics I am describing in *Left Behind* are predictable, it is worth seeing how the structure of belief, the very idea of belief—rather than something like Biblical teachings about sex and gender—informs these dynamics.

In a review of a dozen recent works on religion in American literature and culture, Lawrence Buell describes two reigning approaches to the subject that has occupied me and the dozen scholars whose books he surveys. For one group of scholars, he writes, “religion,” is conceived “at the level of life-and-text informing beliefs that imbue discursive forms”; for another group, religion is “a set of cultural practices.” Each approach, he suggests, “has its possible payoffs and occupational hazards, but both, I think, might be pursued to (even) greater effect if literary criticism entered more self-consciously into conversation with lived religion studies.” But Buell sees a special challenge for the first, text-oriented group: “Indeed,” he goes on to say, “lived religion explicitly disassociates itself from text-based analysis in the sense of taking the records of religious experience as its primary site of inquiry over against canonical scripture.”<sup>24</sup> Buell is correct in his assessment of lived religion's difficulty in accounting for religious discourse, but that difficulty goes well beyond the preference for records of experience

over scripture. When, in *Between Heaven and Earth*, Robert Orsi notes the increasing focus on words rather than figures in Catholic practice as a sign of modern discomfort with religious presence, we should pause to consider. To take one example: the “Agape” or “Peace” on church banners is not presence, exactly, neither is it precisely, or only, abstract discourse. The popularity of the “Agape” should clue us in: the word, by virtue of its foreignness becomes verbal icon in a way that, say, the banner adorning some downtown historic-district lamppost does not. No matter how liturgical words come to us—as sermons, or vows, or banners, or scripture readings, or modernized prayers—the context of liturgy, repeated week after week, almost inexorably transforms the instructional into the material.<sup>25</sup>

In reading the practice of belief in Robinson’s literary novels, and in the mass media phenomenon of *Left Behind* I offer what, in Buell’s schema of the critical landscape, can be understood as a third way. Though my approach is clearly text-based, and is concerned with how individual belief imbues discursive forms, it understands texts as a form of cultural practice that imagines belief in ways that have more in common with ritual than with doctrine; these novels are examples of discourse as practice, medium as message. The fact that human relationship in both examples (familial and racial, in Robinson’s work; relationship between men, and across genders, in *Left Behind*) turns out to be the ultimate manifestation of a belief in belief shows how Orsi’s understanding of religion as relationship can yet illuminate an analysis of religious fiction. He is not wrong about relationship, but he underestimates the life of words.

I want to return, finally, to Santayana’s description of religion, which opens Geertz’s essay and also this chapter—that description of religion as “another world to

live in,” whether or not we think we will ever “wholly pass over into it.” It sounds so much like a description of the imaginative world of novels that one has to ask: why wouldn’t we think of fiction as religion? (Certainly religion has been described as fiction.) And surely it is telling that Robert Bellah, in searching for a way to describe his religious subjectivity in the wake of belief, turns to literature—to the poetry of Wallace Stevens—with a kind of religious hope that Stevens never clearly evinced even as he proposed his luminous “notes towards a supreme fiction,” towards a (refrigerated) plenitude that might stand in for the emptiness of a churchless “Sunday morning.” In this sense Bellah and Geertz, as writers embedded in their own historical context, in late twentieth-century America, reflect a belief in literature born in the Victorian skepticism of Matthew Arnold, made monumental in the Modernism of writers like Stevens and Eliot, disseminated through New Critical reading practices taught to the rising middle classes of America going to college on the GI Bill, and found supremely useful by so many American writers at the close of the twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), ch. 4; epigraph on 87.

<sup>2</sup> Asad gives a brief digest of the thinking on belief along with his criticism of Geertz on the subject. See Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 47-48.

<sup>3</sup> To quote Asad more fully: “The connection between religious theory and practice is fundamentally a matter of intervention—of constructing religion in the world (not in the mind) through definitional discourses, interpreting true meanings, excluding some utterances and practices and including others. Hence my repeated question: how does theoretical discourse actually define religion? What are the historical conditions in which

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it can act effectively as a demand for the imitation, or the prohibition, or the authentication of truthful utterances and practices? How does power create religion?” (*Genealogies*, 45).

<sup>4</sup> See Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, ch. 6; he discusses Hauerwas’s teaching as a Christian “witness” on 196-97.

<sup>5</sup> See also Jeff Kripal’s *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001) which delves, both historically and autobiographically, into the ecstatic religious experiences of the scholar that lie at the heart of the most prominent twentieth-century academic work on religion.

<sup>6</sup> Asad, *Genealogies*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Asad, *Genealogies*,

<sup>8</sup> Asad, *Genealogies*, 36.

<sup>9</sup> Amy Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 186 (“as a researcher”), 185 (“dynamic, fluid”).

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, “That Highest Candle,” *Poetry* 190.2 (May 2007), 130.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in *Housekeeping* dialog is the subject of parody in the scene of Lily and Nona, the spinster aunts who simply repeat each other’s sentences in an extended dialog about the fate of the orphaned Ruth and Lucile. Conversation is certainly the discourse of relation, but the relation is sameness, one in which Robinson is not much interested. See *Housekeeping* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 37-39.

<sup>12</sup> Robinson, “Onward Christian Liberals” [unpaginated electronic version].

<sup>13</sup> Proudfoot argues that experience itself cannot be said to be religious—either by the person having the experience or by anyone else—without structures of belief that exist

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prior to that experience and make it understandable *as* assimilable to a religious understanding of the world. See *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985).

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting here a point to which I will return: that relationship is precisely the term that Robert Orsi uses to understand the workings of lived religion. For him, it is relationship not only with other persons, but also with presences such as saints, or Christ, or God Himself, that is the very substance of religion. See Orsi, “Introduction: Jesus Held Him So Close in His Love For Him That He Left the Marks of His Passion on His Body,” *Between Heaven and Earth*, 1-18.

<sup>15</sup> It is sometimes tempting to see in Robinson an endorsement of segregation—segregation of cultures, in the private realm of the family and community, so that the black church of Della’s family and the white Methodist Midwestern world of Jack are the coherent wholes where meaning and human value can be conserved. This view would be consistent with what Robinson has said about the formation and transmission of morality and a viable sense of one’s humanity—that it requires private time and space, away from the voices of mass culture. In the essay “Family,” she writes that “the setting apart of the weekend once sheltered the traditions and institutions that preserved the variety of cultures. French Catholics and Russian Jews and Dutch Protestants could teach morals and values wholly unembarrassed by the fact that the general public might not agree with every emphasis and particular, and therefore they were able to form coherent moral personalities in a way that a diverse and open civic culture cannot and should not even attempt.” (in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* [New York: Picador, 1998, 2005], 98.) Robinson imagines in Della in this sense as an analog for Jack—the daughter

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of a powerful minister, part of a large, close family dignified by its religious commitments, flawed in the prejudices that naturally arise from its otherwise valued insularity. The force of longing in *Gilead* is for Jack's return to the Boughton family, his reconciliation with those people, and that place, which formed his coherent moral context. What little we learn of Della suggests the power of her own longing to remain in relation with her own family's coherent world.

<sup>16</sup> For example, David Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Marilynne Robinson, "Onward Christian Liberals," *The American Scholar* 75.2 (Spring 2006), 42.

<sup>18</sup> Amy Frykholm's fascinating study of readers' responses to the Left Behind books demonstrates that readers' responses to the series have to do with entertainment as much or more than they have to do with belief, which suggests how discourses of belief both do and don't have traction in the world of lived religion. The discourses of belief that provide the context for the novels' existence—that enable their marketing and encourage their sales—may make possible a literary object, and an experience of reading, that has very little to do with the discourse of belief among ordinary readers. See *Rapture Culture*.

<sup>19</sup> LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1995), 385. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>20</sup> There are, of course, many conversion scenes in the thirteen novels of this series, and they display differing qualities. For instance, Jonathan Freedman notes the significance of stereotypes of the Diaspora Jew versus the Biblical type of the Jew in the conversion narrative of one of the central characters, Chaim Rosenzweig. The drama of his

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conversion entails abandoning the former in favor of the latter, and thus we might argue, as Freedman does, that in this case the drama of belief tangles with evangelical philo- and anti-Semitism rather than with the gender dynamics I attend to in the conversions of Rayford, Buck, and Chloe. This is simply to point out that belief in freely-chosen belief animates more than one set of social dynamics; as a practice, Protestant belief is as flexible as any other religious practice—such as a church’s practice of collective prayer. For the reading of Rosenzweig’s conversion, see Freedman, *Klezmer America:*

*Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2008), 152.

<sup>21</sup> This has become a point of contention within the evangelical community. LaHaye and Jenkins’s way of playing loose with scripture has drawn criticism from pastors worried that their flocks will think the novels represent what they should expect to happen in the end-times. See Amy Frykholm’s account of this opposition in *Rapture Culture*, 176.

<sup>22</sup> See Freedman, *Klezmer America*, 154-55.

<sup>23</sup> Glenn W. Shuck notes this aspect of the novels as well, placing it in the context of what he calls the “electronic church” (113), and next to the work of televangelists, who, he argues “display and naïve confidence that they can somehow broadcast the message of Christ through a media infrastructure they believe the Beast controls. . . . They assume that as soon as the red light activates atop God’s Panaflex camera that their words—inspired by God—will flow directly to the audience without any distortion” (115). See *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2005), esp. chapter 4, “Technologies of Transcendence.”

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence Buell, “Religion on the American Mind, *American Literary History* 19.1

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(Spring, 2007), 52 [32-55].

<sup>25</sup>Orsi's discussion of the ascendancy of words in the 1970s and 80s can be found at Orsi, 157-158. For him, the devotional words prior to Vatican II reforms are "efficacious" and created relationship with "beloved saints." After the Council, he writes, "the new words derived their legitimacy from a strict and precise connection to church authority and not from their association with a beloved saint" (157).