

Belief Beyond Beliefs

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I read with much admiration and more than a little hope Amy Hungerford's chapter essay, "The Literary Practice of Belief." Through a double focus on the various epistemologies of belief operating in intellectuals and novelists, she captures well the present state of the study of religion, which over the last few decades has swung widely, if not also wildly, from an almost exclusive theological focus on text, doctrine, belief, essentialism, universalism, philosophical argument, and tradition to an almost exclusive anthropological focus on practice, ritual, constructivism, context, functionalism, and power. Such a swing, of course, was desperately needed as a corrective to the earlier models, and the scholarship has become far more nuanced and richer as a result.

But one wonders—okay, I wonder—whether we have not, in the process, also replaced one form of shortsightedness for another and, more importantly and more problematically, reduced human being to local culture and political identity. One wonders if we have not become expert in studying and analyzing everything about religion, except, of course, that which makes these other worlds explicitly "religious" for so many of those who live in them (including Hungerford's literary subjects), that is, their universalizing claims on transcendence and truth.

"Truth." It's an old-fashioned word, isn't it? Rather like "belief." And it is here that Hungerford writes her way into a whole set of contemporary discussions and, in the process, provides us with a kind of update on what we might call "the present state of belief in the academy" (if hardly the world). I recognize that this is a later chapter in what is no doubt a very wide-ranging book, and I do not know the specific authors whom she treats here, so let me respond to her chapter essay in the only way that I can: by relating her thought to my own. More specifically, I would like to respond through three brief movements: (1) a few words about what she calls "the attempt to speak without speaking any particular language" or, in this case, believe without believing any particular belief system, here through my own work on "the

religion of no religion” of the human potential movement and the history of American metaphysical religion, the latter often coded in the phrase “spiritual but not religious”; (2) some thoughts about the religious or frankly magical nature of language, writing, and reading as I have explored these issues in works like *Roads of Excess*, *Palaces of Wisdom* and, most recently, *Authors of the Impossible*; and, finally, (3) a closing parable.

To Speak Without Speaking Any Particular Language

In my own mind, Hungerford’s most important insight here is her observation that we have entered, through the practice of literary belief, what amounts to a new “third” epistemology beyond the usual dualisms of fiction and truth, a way of living in another world defined by radical reflexivity and the exiling, but liberating knowledge that *all* our cultures and religions are constructed by elaborate psychological, linguistic, ritual, social, and political processes, but that the act of believing itself appears to possess some very real power and truth. This most basic insight might be captured in the phrase “belief beyond beliefs,” by which I simply mean the realization that the content of every belief system is local and therefore relative, but that the act or power of belief itself, whether framed in religious or cultural terms, is in fact—dare I say it?—universal.

Once the real historical pluralism of the history of religions is understood in its full mind-bending complexity, such a both-and position appears, to me anyway, to be nearly inescapable. I thus agree wholeheartedly with Robert Bellah, as summarized by Hungerford, that the end of belief in the scholar is itself a form of belief and a way of being religious—and, I would add, a quite radical witness in a world torn apart by particularist belief and religiously certain local practices and identities. I also reject the notion that this move is somehow inescapably privileged or Protestant or Western or anything else particular, since its inherent logic is its own argument and forms of this both-and conclusion can easily be located in numerous cultures and time periods.¹

¹ I have explored this point in chapter 3 of *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

In our own place and time, I take it that this form of belief has formed around a literary structure that we might best identify as “Romantic.” In the American context, such a form of belief beyond beliefs probably has its deepest and most obvious roots in what F. O. Matthiessen famously called the American Renaissance, that is, that astonishingly productive and definitive literary movement of the middle of the nineteenth century that sparked and spiked around figures like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman.² I understand that Hungerford’s book treats the second half of the twentieth century, not the nineteenth, and that she recognizes the importance of the Transcendentalist movement as an important precursor to her own authors, so I do not expect any extensive treatment of these figures here. I am simply making an historical observation about precedents and lineages.

As authors like Catherine Albanese, Leigh Eric Schmidt, and Michael Robertson have shown in great detail, the distinction between the “spiritual” and the “religious,” far from being some recent invention or superficial form of “the spiritual marketplace,” stretches back centuries, if not millennia. Such a world to live in possesses deep roots in the history of European esotericism and Hermeticism.³ As a full-blown form of American religious thought, it is probably first found in Emerson’s early essays, after which it blooms in Whitman’s ecstatic poem-prophecy *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and is then explicitly articulated in the same poet’s *Democratic Vistas* (1871), where Whitman writes that “only in the perfect uncontamination and solitariness of individuality may the spirituality of religion come forth at all,” and that “all religions” are “but temporary journeys.”⁴ So too, the very first American occurrences of both “mysticism” and “spirituality” (used now in their modern senses) appear in Emerson (in 1838) and, as we have already seen, in Whitman (in 1871), respectively.⁵ In a different vein, Eric G. Wilson has located and developed a literary form of belief that he calls “transcendental irony” in American culture that stretches from Emerson, through the films of (Transcendental Meditation

² F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).

³ Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁴ Michael Robertson, *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁵ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality, From Emerson to Oprah* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

practitioner) David Lynch, to the self-reflexive “gnosticism” of science fiction and the Platonic cave of contemporary cinema.⁶ We could go on and on here, layering and deepening the narrative for a very long time.

All of this historical background and contemporary efflorescence appears to be lost on any number of elite critics of these modern mysticisms and spiritualities, who mistakenly believe that these moves are recent and always somehow narcissistic or superficial. But not Amy Hungerford. Her efforts here to trace the literary lineaments of this belief beyond beliefs and, in the process, demonstrate that such a position possesses deep intellectual roots and is in fact a viable option for individuals who have taken the historicity and pluralism of religion seriously is much needed. I can only applaud and celebrate such a project.

I also can also only affirm her desire to read belief as a literary form of practice and her insight that writing itself is “both the articulation of belief and a form of religious practice,” but this time with two provisos.

The first proviso is that that we understand, fully, just how radical and subversive a move this is vis-à-vis the historical traditions (and this is the real reason, I suspect, that these literary forms of “being spiritual” are roundly rejected by religiously or politically conservative critics and have traditionally been framed in esoteric modes). Hungerford, it seems to me, understands this well, but it perhaps needs repeating and underlining.

The second proviso boils down to a question or concern. If we rehabilitate “belief” by framing it as a “practice,” have we not already admitted that practice is somehow a privileged frame through which religion can be studied and discussed today? I mean, have we not given too much away to the wide and wild swing of the last two decades?

My own preference would be to perform a kind of Feuerbachian reversal here and, instead of reading the writing of belief as a form of practice, to read religious practice as a form of writing through which the powers of language and belief (as a form of conscious and unconscious encoding) can be seen for what they in fact are: real magic that witnesses to the

⁶ Eric G. Wilson, *The Strange World of David Lynch: Transcendental Irony from Eraserhead to Mulholland Drive* (New York: Continuum, 2007); and *Secret Cinema: Gnostic Vision in Film* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

incredible, impossible powers of what an earlier age called “soul” but which we today might better call “mind” or “consciousness.” In short, I would “reduce” the powers of belief to the powers of human nature, but a human nature now rendered unbelievably expansive and noble. I would also push Hungerford’s literary model of belief very, very far until religions really are seen as lived novels or cultural fictions, but novels or fictions that enable us to access and express some of the deepest potentials of human nature, which are, to use another literary term, literally fantastic.

Let me end with a true story that opens a recent book on neuroscience and “the biology of belief.”⁷ I intend it as a kind of parable. I will leave its complex threads of impossible powers, magical mind-matter influences, reading events, enabling fictions, and deathly disillusionments for the reader to untangle.

Mr. Wright, his lungs struggling to breathe, his body riddled with cancerous tumors, was expected to die within the night. He convinced his doctor to give him an experimental drug called Krebiozen, which he believed might cure him. His doctor ignored protocol and submitted to his patient’s desperate request. He did not expect Mr. Wright to survive the weekend. When he returned on Monday, however, Mr. Wright’s tumors had shrunk to half their size and, with a series of injections over the next ten days, the cancer disappeared completely. Mr. Wright went home a healthy man. The doctor, astonished at what had just happened, wondered whether this was not the miracle drug for which modern medicine had been waiting for so long. Unfortunately, it only seemed to work on Mr. Wright.

Two months later, Mr. Wright heard that Krebiozen had proved ineffective with a broad-based sample of patients. His cancer returned. His doctor now decided to lie to him. He told him that they had created a new, more refined version of Krebiozen, with which he then injected him (it was in chemical fact sterile water). Mr. Wright was cured of cancer a second time. He went home

⁷ Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *Born to Believe: God, Science, and the Origin of Ordinary and Extraordinary Beliefs* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 3-4.

happy again. Until, that is, he read an announcement from the American Medical Association that “Nationwide Tests Show Krebiozen to Be a Worthless Drug in Treatment of Cancer.”

Mr. Wright returned to the hospital and was dead within two days.