

“The Religion of Literature”

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In its heyday, scholars in the field designated as “Religion and Literature” proudly proclaimed that literary works were essentially religious, regardless of their subject matter. That was in the 1950s, when PhD programs in Religion and Literature were first established by scholars inspired by Paul Tillich’s theological analysis of culture and the conviction that fiction expressed beliefs, visions, and the ultimate concerns at the heart of culture. Excitement for this field of inquiry waned in the 80s, however, when existential problems became less interesting than alterity, diversity, and subversive readings. The field never really recovered. I mention this history because key elements of it are replayed in Amy Hungerford’s ambitious bid to revive interest in religion and literature, as she seeks to reconcile the old conviction – that literature is a form of belief – with the newer emphasis on practices and relationality.

Hungerford presents “The Literary Practice of Belief” – chapter 5 of her forthcoming book *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* – as an intervention in Religious Studies. In it, she challenges the field’s “decisive shift of interest from belief to practice.” Belief still matters, she argues, not only to many religious people (particularly, as she emphasizes, Protestants in the U.S.) but also to many scholars, even though we’re wont to deny it. Moreover, she presses us to understand belief not as an alternative to but instead as part of practice. “Belief is itself,” Hungerford observes, “a way of living a religious life” (39).

A scholar of American literature situated in an English department, Hungerford associates the turn to practices primarily with scholars of American religion who repudiated an exclusive focus on institutional structures, discourses, or official theology and instead advocated the study of what they called “lived religion.” She’s not wrong to identify the turn to practices with this influential strand of religious studies. But it’s symptomatic of our yen for dichotomies that “lived religion” now represents the choice to study practices rather than belief, even though many of the scholars who promoted this approach were as impatient as Hungerford with the dichotomy that she critiques.

David Hall, for example, who organized the conference and edited the volume that codified lived religion in the 90s, declared that the most important innovation was not to redress the imbalance between popular and elite, or to study actions rather than ideas, but to study religion as culture, which he aligned with meaning-making activity (shades of Tillich here). Hall’s ideal model was Robert Orsi’s 1985 book, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, which rebuked the

conventional study of popular religion—developed primarily by scholars of early modern Europe—for describing practices without exploring how the people imbued these practices with meaning. As Hungerford points out, Orsi insisted that belief is the wrong question, yet his goal was to shift attention from ‘belief’ understood as doctrine or creed to something else. That something else is precisely where Hungerford seeks to place us, too.

Even more interesting is the way Hungerford uses Orsi’s particular definition of religion as relationship to recast the question of difference. This is the point at which literary studies and religious studies converge, for if the fascination with alterity and fragmentation contributed to the downfall of Religion and Literature programs in the 80s, it also explains why religion suddenly became so alluring to literary scholars—not because it addressed ultimate concerns but because it was an endless source of strange or mysterious rituals and beliefs. (It is telling that the literary scholars initially most interested in religion were new historicists who studied early modern Europe: it was easy for them to understand religion as a premodern oddity that helped illustrate the gap between scholars and their sources.) Hungerford turns this inside out by pursuing religion as a form of kinship, as a way of bridging and containing differences through relational ties. This comes out most clearly in her reading of what she calls Marilynne Robinson’s “theology of difference,” but it is in play also in her analysis of how the *Left Behind* books equated conversion with the erasure of difference. In both instances, Hungerford uses literary narrative to show the connections people seek not despite difference, but within difference. The ultimate concern is the forging of commonality.

Both in form and content—deftly intertwined in Hungerford’s analysis—all of these books express a longing for likeness. As a response to this longing, human relationships turn out to be “the ultimate manifestation of a belief in belief” (41). As this last locution suggests, Hungerford argues that in lieu of doctrinal reassurance or specific beliefs, religious fiction expresses a commitment to the relational navigation of difference in what Hungerford felicitously describes as the “life of words.” In this analysis, however, relationality threatens to overwhelm or even replace culture. As Hungerford points out in a footnote, Marilynne Robinson’s work could be read as endorsing just this move by presenting intimate relationships and homogenous communities as a desirable antidote to cultural conflict and diversity (n15). Just as the grandfather’s passionate condemnation of slavery and racism cuts him off from his family and immediate community in *Gilead*, so, too, interracial marriage creates sorrow and isolation. This is not the only way to see this pattern, of course: one could also interpret Robinson’s work as a critique of our impulse to give up cultural battles in favor of familial intimacy. Furthermore, all three of her novels vividly demonstrate how families and homogenous communities fail despite their varied pursuits of common spaces and common stories. But Hungerford’s analysis

supports the former reading of Robinson, and, by extension, of recent religious literature.

As a point of contrast, it's helpful to compare this to Tracy Fessenden's recent study of religion and literature, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Culture*, which shows how canonical American literature obscured cultural diversity and helped solidify the myth of a Protestant consensus. Hungerford does the opposite. She suggests that it is the form and not the content of belief – it is *that* you believe rather than *what* you believe – which makes the fiction an articulation of relationship. Culturally-determined contexts pull us from that religion of literature. The question she leaves us with then is not how to study belief rather than practices, but how to study relationality without falling prey to the temptation to privatize and protect religion.