

"The Literary Practice of Belief" Response by Caleb J. D. Maskell

Critiquing Lived Religion

In "The Literary Practice of Belief," a perspicacious and provocative chapter from her forthcoming *Postmodern Belief*, literary critic Amy Hungerford calls for reappraisal of a dominant method in the study of American religion. The method in her critical sights is "Lived Religion," in particular the iteration of it expounded in *Between Heaven and Earth*, Robert Orsi's well-known articulation of its doctrines and dispositions. Hungerford's chief contention is that the sentiment distilled by Orsi's famous soundbite, "belief has always struck me as the wrong question," (*Between Heaven and Earth*, p. 18) has become radicalized and overwrought, perhaps even by scholars of such subtlety as Orsi himself. The effect, for scholars who work in the Lived Religion paradigm, has been that the form and content of belief has been named unimportant, out of bounds, not the issue, and thus ruled out of contemporary analysis of religion, particularly religion in America. On the contrary, argues Hungerford, belief is incredibly important--even central--to the self-understanding of most religious subjects and thus, it must be treated with the utmost seriousness in the study of religion. In her wonderfully trenchant phrase, "belief has not dropped out of lived religion in America even if it has dropped out of 'Lived Religion.'"(9)

Fear not, Aristotelians! Hungerford is not suggesting we rewind the clock a few decades, returning the study of religion to a world in which religious (née theological, Protestant, male) ideas reign supreme, animating the otherwise lifeless bodies of their Platonic automaton subjects via the application of the power of normative text. In fact, Hungerford takes as a given the insistence on practice that forms the core of the Lived Religion thesis: subjects are constituted as religious by the particular things that they *do* rather than their statements of normative doctrine. It is in the context of a framework where practice is primary that Hungerford makes her move, arguing that *belief is in fact a form of practice*, a practice whose presence is an irreducibly significant aspect of the study of religion.

What kind of belief, then, is Hungerford interested in? It is emphatically *not* the kind of belief that aspires to a Cartesian purity of coherent logic, forming lucid, proportional doctrines chosen in freedom by rational subjects. Such is the kind of belief that some Lived Religionists have dismissed as antiseptically removed from historical contingency, and thus "the wrong question." On the other hand, the kind of belief that Hungerford argues is crucial for the study of religion is belief that *does* something, existing as "dynamic, fluid, and flexible" in the lives of religious subjects, providing basic formal structures for the description of language-defying experiences that form the substance of religious life. It can never be enough to examine beliefs as a canon of religio-theological proposition. Neither can it be enough to propose the examination of practices, free from the pesky distraction of belief, because, as Hungerford avers, that would be to write out an element of religion that is of paramount significance to religious subjects. Hungerford's goal is to get at *beliefs in practice*, to explore what the discursive function of belief is "on the ground" for forming the internal and intracommunal practical self-understanding of her religious subjects.

The literary turn in Hungerford's argument comes when she argues that a fascinating confluence of beliefs in practice can be seen in literature written by religious writers who understand themselves to be portraying the form and function of belief in religious lives, more specifically in the religious imaginations of their subjects. In such writing can be found a double-layered articulation both of the author's portrayal of the formal role of belief in imagined literary lives and an enactment by the religious author of some version of belief in practice. Hungerford explores this thesis through two test cases: the novels of Marilynne Robinson and the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

On Marilynne Robinson

I will not rehearse Hungerford's arguments about these test cases in detail, but I will comment briefly on each. Hungerford handles Marilynne Robinson's novels with a striking deftness, getting quickly to the heart of the sympathetic space that religious belief creates in her imagined community of Gilead, Iowa. The function of belief--indeed of *creedal* belief--for Robinson is to "stabilize the intense speculations that religion, which is always about the ultimate nature of things will inspire." (11) Hungerford would have it that the formal role of shared belief enables tolerance of difference, vigorous pluralistic debate about the nature of reality, and a fundamentally trustworthy epistemological toolkit that enables deep trust in the value and validity of one's own personal experience. Experience does not war against belief for Robinson, but rather is validated by it, in all of its complexity, paradox, and multivalence. For Robinson, belief is an "experience" which carries with it "claims about the dignity of persons as surely as it contains claims about God and God's relation to humanity." (17) These claims are the ground of religious sociality, originating in concept but culminating in practice, in shared experience, in discourse that is enabled to have "thinking, not conclusion" (19) as its goal, because exists between people who practice their beliefs, *by the very virtue of the content of those beliefs*, in relationship to one another. This is what belief *is* for Robinson. Shared belief enables humanizing, reconciling, discursive relationship between people, across the ground of difference in the secular age (24).

Hungerford's analysis of this phenomenon goes on at some length, and it is first-rate. It seems clear to this reader that Robinson is the patron saint of Hungerford's advocacy for the return of belief as a practice in the study of religion, in no small sense because Robinson uses her characters' reflection upon their shared and divergent beliefs--usually in their inner lives--to afford the reader a window into the dazzling complexity and beauty of their humanity. This is of course precisely what the methodology of Lived Religion proposes to do by bracketing mere belief in favor of the study of practice. Hungerford's deployment of Robinson is a direct, fierce, and effective challenge to the wisdom of that notion. The inner life *really* counts, and must be taken seriously. Not everything that is of importance in religion can be seen. Not only the action of private prayer, but also the *content* of that prayer has value for the interpretation of religion. The use of words and the content of language inexorably shapes the religious subject. Intentions matter; indeed they too are a form of religious practice.

On Left Behind

After her impassioned disquisition on the value of Robinson's novels to help her make her methodological point, the *Left Behind* section of the essay is, alas, something of an anticlimax. This should not be read as a deep criticism, but rather as a further indication that Robinson is a muse for Hungerford on the question of the potential of the formal role of belief in the study of religion, while LaHaye and Jenkins most definitely are not. Hungerford's writing becomes more distant, formal, and ironic, just as her campy, apocalyptic subject matter is more foreign, seeming to evoke little "sympathy," to use Robinson's term (cf. p. 20) for what is requisite to attain a shared understanding of reality. Nonetheless, Hungerford continues to be insightful, offering careful readings of the way that media consumption and gender function in the context of volitional submission to new belief. She also draws attention to the ritual dimensions of conversion in *Left Behind*, a helpful observation given that the main explicit ritualist in the novels is none other than the Antichrist.

The most interesting dynamic at work in this section of the essay lies in the way that Hungerford's analysis of submission and the free choice to believe advances her critique of the stance of Orsi's methodology towards belief. She shows that for a person to be saved in the *Left Behind* novels, he or she must willingly submit to a concatenation of theological propositions that make up "right belief." This assent to right belief could be construed as a

literary portrayal of the kind of Cartesian belief described above that Lived Religion-ists want to decry, and Hungerford implies that one almost never finds in actual religious life. This is a metaphysical transaction *par excellence*. However, Hungerford shows us in great detail that this transaction is anything but disembodied; indeed, it is often high "somatic drama." (28) The willing mind and the body exist in powerful relation, even for LaHaye and Jenkins, pre-millennial Arminian tribulationist fundamentalists who seem most enamored of the great masculinist American doctrine that God helps those who help themselves. Nonetheless, the somatic drama cannot play out apart from the characters wrestling with the questions of belief. Belief is irreducibly connected to practice; if belief is bracketed, Hungerford suggests that the world being enacted by these authors will be lost. Wrestling with right belief is at the core of the world that these authors are trying to construct. Here again, discourse about belief *is* religious practice; medium and message are one.

One small point that bears noting is that Hungerford's usage of the term "Evangelical" in this section of the essay (25, 30, 38) is a bit of a blunt instrument, with a degree of ironic distancing and of "lumping" that does not help her case, especially as an intervention into the *métier* of religious studies in the American context. For example, Hungerford tells us that "in the world of American evangelicalism...belief is fully understood in the normative way Robert Orsi resists." (25) As noted above, there is little doubt that LaHaye and Jenkins *are* arguing for the kind of normative belief that Orsi wants to dismiss. However it is misleading to suggest that this kind of belief characterizes all of American evangelicalism, both historically and at present. It seems all the more important to make this clear, given the critique of Orsi and others whose primary scholarly expertise is in the history of American religion. Her characterization of the process from unbelief to belief to repentance (30) is similarly particular to the LaHaye/Jenkins style of American evangelicalism and it does not serve her argument well to lump all evangelicals into their mold. This lumping is made explicit when LaHaye's Moral Majority is proposed to stand in for "evangelicalism in contemporary America more generally." (38) I think that Jim Wallis or Lauren Winner or Nicholas Wolterstorff or even Marilynne Robinson (whose beloved Jonathan Edwards has been called "America's Evangelical") would be horrified to be counted among this number. More specificity on this issue strikes me as being very important, especially for interdisciplinary conversation.

Hungerford's Third Way and Some Small Concluding Questions

The most exciting thing about this piece is that it proclaims in no uncertain terms the importance of studying culturally situated, historicized beliefs, ideas, and ideologies to understand religion. This is an idea whose time has come (again). Beliefs matter, and Hungerford is one of the vanguard leading the charge against their reckless (or lazy) dismissal. Her construction of beliefs as situated practices is precisely the right way to go about making this claim, as it does not reject the great insight of the Lived Religionists; it simply refuses to be bound by their doctrine. Hungerford frames her contribution as a "third way" (41) between a text-based discursive approach to religion and an approach that sees it as a set of cultural practices. Her move is to insist that ideas and their articulation by individuals and communities have much more shaping significance in religious practice than some Lived Religionists have been willing to admit. Words in discursive practice, even those which seem free-form and spontaneous, have a life of their own which, more often than not, becomes material if one cultivates the eyes to see it. For Hungerford, the first line of observation is in the literature of religious subjects, but it seems clear to this reader that her method of reading such texts is just the beginning of the potential to apply this renewing methodological insight.

Her paper does leave me with some questions and concerns, which I will simply articulate here as I conclude.

1. This study is very effective in engaging the inner lives of evangelically inclined, relatively pious American Protestants as seen through the lens of their literature. As different as Marilynne Robinson and LaHaye/Jenkins are, their work is in fact quite similar in this regard. I wonder about the extent to which it would be possible to explore such dynamics in more diverse contexts. Does belief function with with similar formal (and forming) power in the rather more developed, self-conscious practical context of contemporary American Roman Catholicism? A little farther afield from Hungerford's center in this chapter, how would her arguments about belief apply to the narrative construction of a contemporary American Buddhist novel?

2. Does this kind of analysis of the practice of belief require a narrative format in order for it to work? Could Hungerford ask similar questions of poetry written by particular kinds of religious believers? The meta-question here is whether or not she is making aesthetic observations or narrative ones? Must there be *actual characters* responding religiously (inwardly and outwards) to real-life situations in order for such an analysis to hold water? Or could it work with less narrative information?

3. I wonder if there might not be some tension in proposing the kind of direct alignment that Hungerford seems to between the cumulative ethos and ideological thrust of the novels in questions and the religion of the novelists themselves. While this worry may sound a bit forced, (i.e. why would a novelist bother to write a novel that did not attempt to convey her genuine take on things as they are?) one encounters enough inexplicable paradox in the lives of religious subjects that it seems to me a valid concern. What if a religious novelist was trying to project a world not as it is, but rather as it might be? This is of some significance to me as a historian of transatlantic Christianity who is trying to interpret the religious significance of 19th century Christian utopian fiction. Taking another tack, how much irony can this mode of analysis endure? Neither Marilynne Robinson nor LaHaye/Jenkins seem to me to intend much irony in the overarching canopy of the worlds they are portraying. What would it be like to think this way about the religion of, say, Shusaku Endo or Herman Melville?

4. Returning finally to the question of inner life, it is clear there are unique possibilities afforded by literature written on religious themes by religious people. As readers, we can know what John Ames is thinking in a given moment because Marilynne Robinson tells us. Thus we can gain an intimate relationship with the ambiguities and complexities that comprise his inner life in the world that is being made by the otherly givenness that is his structure of belief. As Hungerford clearly lays out, this gives us a remarkable window into both Robinson's imagination and into the projected world of Gilead, Iowa. However, it is just as clear that, barring the historian's goldmine of a private diary, there is far less that a scholar of religion can do to reconstruct the inner life, the genuine "dynamic, fluid, and flexible" contours of a subject's belief. Is it simply the case that in order to rightly apply Hungerford's proposed method in a historical mode, one must limit oneself to writing about a individual or community that left extensive records of its discourse surrounding belief? Along these lines, does a "return to belief" for scholars of religion require a renewal of interdisciplinary training, such that, for example, historians must expect to have to become theologically keen in order to speak accurately about the religion of their subjects?