

Talking about Religion in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Studies

Mark Knight and Charles LaPorte

Practically speaking, this special issue of *MLQ* derives from the material conditions of the COVID-19 lockdown era. It is a happy by-product of the fact that literary scholars (like other folks) were forced to rethink our professional lives during that difficult time. During lockdown the “Religion and Spiritualities Caucus” of the North American Victorian Studies Association (NAVSA) convened a series of online meetings to discuss work and scholarship and to forge new expressions of community in the face of the cancellation of its annual scholarly conference. That these conversations took place remotely, over Zoom, meant that we could expand our conversation to scholars who might not attend NAVSA conferences. At one online gathering, the caucus planning committee (Amy Coté, Denae Dyck, Joshua King, and Mark Knight) asked scholars with related interests but specialties in other historical literature to join a discussion of how we talk about religion in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century studies. Struck by the way in which the experiences of scholars in different subfields resembled one another, we were keen to extend that conversation, and we set about inviting those initial participants and others to contribute to this special issue.

More generally, this issue grows out of the long-standing difficulties that literary scholars have had in discussing religion. The relationship between religion and historical literature is famously vexed. Many of us are daunted by the scale of the issue, frustrated by the limits of our own understanding, and puzzled when we find fellow scholars indifferent to its importance. Since the two of us began our careers, it is true, views about religion have evolved a great deal. During the 1990s nobody

would bat an eye at hearing a scholar dismiss religion as uninteresting or irrelevant to modern literature. But the “religious turn” in the humanities in the late 1990s and early 2000s led to a serious correction. For the most part, literary studies now recognizes religion to be a far more capacious and pervasive category than it once did. It likewise recognizes the secular to be a more ideological category, as opposed to some neutral, objective position from which one might assess faith traditions. The religious turn involved new attention to religion from prominent figures right through the “theory” Rolodex, from Giorgio Agamben to Slavoj Žižek, and it was heavily informed by thinkers who had not previously appeared on “theory” syllabi, including the philosopher Charles Taylor, the anthropologist Talal Asad, and an array of other historians, sociologists, and religious studies scholars. This work has deeply enriched and diversified the scholarship of those who write about literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; its presence can be felt in the essays that follow.

We should acknowledge from the start that our solicited essays all turned out to be rather pointed and even polemical, though their terms and targets range widely. However, there remains a constructive and dynamic cohesion to the conversation. All our contributors agree with Colin Jager that “one cannot simply talk about religion as if it were a single thing in the world” and that “one cannot talk about empire, or race, or the market without also talking about religion, and vice versa, even—perhaps especially—when religion *is not specifically on the table*.” Jager’s insistence on foregrounding the particularities of our talk of religion holds for accounts of denominations and movements as well as for individual expressions of belief and practice. The Roman Catholicism of Alexander Pope and the Roman Catholicism of Michael Field are not, to the cultural historian, the same thing. Religion is pervasive and endlessly differentiated, but it is also closely tied to historical questions of empire, nation, race, economics, and so forth. In addition, because our conception of religion per se derives from the secular, we must work hard not only to understand individual traditions on their own terms but also to read them with reference to the larger religious and secular histories in which they have emerged and been understood. Although it can be tempting to resort to ready-made categories, to do so is usually to give up on understanding the plurality and imbrication of the religious and secular.

The pointedness of our issue also derives in part from our having asked everyone to articulate ongoing promises and challenges. We thus start this special issue with an essay from Lori Peterson Branch that narrates her questions about how the intellectual gains of the religious turn have not yet transformed “business as usual” in literary studies. Branch asks why some colleagues still think it acceptable to be uninterested in religion when they would never dismiss issues like “sex, gender, race, class, or even narrative or poetic form.” She proposes that we rethink our role as pedagogues to be “[taking] up religion in our literature classrooms in ways that dovetail with our operative methodologies.” Whereas Branch exhorts us to unpack the theoretical and disciplinary implications of the secular/religious binary, our second contributor, Timothy Larsen, addresses certain immediate challenges that we face when trying to do so. Larsen points to the complexity of historical traditions and to our collective theological and biblical illiteracy as impediments to understanding literature written from a Christian milieu. His point, Larsen emphasizes, is “*not* that a particular scholar here or there has egregiously allowed biblical and theological illiteracy to mar their work” but that we all need to be better informed and also more cautious when approaching this difficult topic. We agree with Larsen that “religion is a particularly deceptive subject that [we] think [we] have somehow picked up along the way” and that this presents an endemic problem for our field. Jan-Melissa Schramm’s essay, which comes next, offers a helpful instance of how we might address this problem. Schramm, who works at the intersection of law, literature, and theology, reveals their extensive entanglements in “evidence-based knowledge and how we ground our ethical deliberations on these evidential foundations.” Schramm goes so far as to insist that “law, literature, and theology cannot be understood in isolation from one another,” because they all contribute to what reality looks and feels like in the modern era. If religion is still too frequently left out of critical stories of the period, Schramm shows us both how we might start to reintegrate it in our scholarship and why we must do so.

Although it is important to all our contributors to reintegrate religion with studies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, doing so does not mean that we can ignore disciplinary differences; indeed, facing these differences squarely should augment the interest of what we

do. Jager points out that the collapse of older models for secularization raises compelling questions about the very *raison d'être* for literary studies. "If we're not reading for the brave souls who pointed toward our secular modernity," he asks, "then what *are* we reading for?" Jager's essay on "phantom belief and belief in phantoms" invites us to examine "the dispositional habitus of literary studies rather than the propositional contents of its (implicit) beliefs"; he suggests that such an examination should help us say what distinctive insights we contribute to the study of culture. Peter Coviello's archly titled "Did God Write *Moby-Dick*?" follows nicely from Jager, for Coviello too suggests that the literary offers a special vantage on secularism, "the solvent in which 'religion' as such would appear." In *Moby-Dick*, for instance, we have "a novel shouting not into the void of a world abandoned by God—or not only—but into the empty space where the theocratic authority of the pulpit once was." Secularism changes literature, that is, because it creates a crisis of authority: "The ordering force of secularism . . . reshapes not only the meaning of religiosity and belief . . . but, with these, the very domain of the expressive medium called 'literature.'" Coviello makes clear how our understanding of literature, what it is and how it works, must be informed by but is not reducible to our thinking about the secular.

Starting with devotional readings of Jane Austen, Alex Eric Hernandez's essay harks back to several previous discussions by encouraging scholars of literature to consider popular reading practices, here exemplified by "those readers who claim to speak with, through, and alongside Austen in their devotional practices." Devotional reading of "secular" literature, in Hernandez's view, helps us think about how religion should be read. Drawing on Robert Orsi's plea for scholars working on religion to examine practitioners' lived experience of religion, Hernandez sizes up the challenge facing literary scholars of registering, "in words adequate to the task, the presences evoked in experiences like this without hastening to explanatory schemes that presume them to be misguided." This invitation for literary scholars to learn from the methodological insights of those who work in religious studies is seconded by Dawn Coleman's "Fathers, Mothers, Saints, Martyrs: Religion as a Lineage of Belief." Calling on readers to rethink their working definitions of religion, Coleman looks to the sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger's account of religion as a chain of memory. Coleman

acknowledges and outlines the various limitations of firm definitions but rightly urges that “approaching religion as a lineage of belief can jolt us out of the reflexive, ubiquitous habit of treating Protestantism as centered in personal belief.” She then explores Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Oldtown Folks* (1869) as an illustrative instance of how “religion matters because it creates intergenerational continuity.”

Questions of method are also at the heart of our next essay, by Winter Jade Werner and Mimi Winick. Their focal point is global religion, a topic that does not sit easily within the scholarly traditions of nineteenth-century literary studies but that anyone who wants to widen their study of the era must nevertheless encounter. “How is it,” Werner and Winick ask, “that the global reach of religion is acknowledged as so central to the Victorian literary imagination but so rarely emerges as a meaningful object of scholarly interest?” Showing how comparative approaches tend to fall into false universals and an essentializing view of religion, they propose instead a mode of investigation that emphasizes “*assemblage*, *affinity*, and *connectivity*.” This interest in more relational approaches to reading reappears in our closing essay, by Emma Mason, who goes so far as to suggest that scholars of historical literature would do well to grapple with explicitly theological ideas and practices rather than only look for expressions of religion familiar to those in a more secular sphere. Mason returns to the topic of Christian experience, a category frequently occluded when literary scholars entertain any notion of religion. Turning to the work of Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins, she demonstrates how the theological notion of *kenosis*, a concept of self-emptying that is grounded in the relational being of the triune God, offers a language for exploring the mystical and experiential content of religious belief and practice. The language of theology has limitations, as do all secular and religious attempts to understand the world, but attending to terms such as *kenosis* enriches our conversation and makes us better readers.

We began this brief introduction by observing that the study of literature and religion has made great strides in our own scholarly lifetimes. We end it by observing that the remarkable insightfulness, generosity, and intellectual breadth of our contributors show why we feel so hopeful about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century studies moving forward. They make amply clear why and how religion will occupy and

enliven literary studies in the foreseeable future. We are grateful to Deidre Shauna Lynch for furnishing a thoughtful afterword to this special issue and to all the authors for their exciting and generative essays. We are also grateful to the editors of *MLQ* for their supportive provision of a venue in which we can explore new ways of talking about religion.

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