**Introduction: Talking about Religion in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Studies**

**Mark Knight and Charles LaPorte**

Practically speaking, the following special issue of *MLQ* derives from the material conditions of the COVID-19 lockdown era. It is a happy byproduct of the fact that literary scholars (like other folks) were forced to rethink their 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 our annual scholarly conference. The fact that these meetings took place remotely, over Zoom, meant that we could expand our conversation to scholars who might not attend NAVSA conferences. At one of our online gatherings, the caucus planning committee (composed of Amy Coté, Denae Dyck, Joshua King and Mark Knight) asked scholars with related interests but who specialized in other historical literatures to join us for a discussion of how we talk about religion in eighteenth and nineteenth century studies. Struck by the way in which the various 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 several others to contribute full-length essays to a special issue on the subject.

More broadly speaking, the special issue grows out of the long-standing difficulties that literary scholars have had in discussing religion. The relationship between religion and literary history is famously vexed. Many of us are daunted at the scale of religious culture, frustrated by the limits of our own understanding, and baffled 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 dramatically. During the nineteen-nineties, nobody would bat an eyelid at hearing a scholar dismiss religion as uninteresting or irrelevant to the course of modern literature. The “religious turn” of the late nineties and early aughts thus changed the game in helpful ways. This involved new attention to religion from prominent figures right down the “theory” rolodex from Giorgio Agamben and Judith Butler to Slavoj Žižek.[[1]](#endnote-1) But it also involved thinkers who had not previously appeared on “theory” syllabuses, such as the philosopher Charles Taylor, the anthropologist Talal Asad, and an array of other historians, sociologists, and religious studies scholars.[[2]](#endnote-2) Their 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. Literary studies now generally grants religion to be a far more capacious and pervasive category than it had done, and it now recognizes the secular to be a more ideological category, as opposed to some neutral, objective position from which one might assess faith traditions.

We should acknowledge from the start that our solicited essays all turned out to be 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 here that “one cannot 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 true 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 both pervasive and endlessly differentiated, and 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 the fact that we asked everyone to articulate ongoing promises and challenges. We thus start this special issue with an essay from Lori Branch that narrates 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 in a way impossible to imagine for similar issues such as “sex, gender, race, class, or even narrative or poetic form.” She proposes that we rethink our role as pedagogues to “take 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 some of the immediate challenges that we encounter when trying to do so. Larsen points to the complexity of religious history and to our collective theological and biblical illiteracy as impediments to understanding literature written within a Christian *milieu*. Larsen’s point, he emphasizes, is “*not* that a particular scholar here or there has egregiously allowed biblical and theological illiteracy to mar their work,” but, rather, 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 which [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 works at the intersection of law, literature, and theology, and she reveals their extensive entanglements in “evidence-based knowledge, and the ways in which we ground our ethical deliberations on these evidential foundations.” Schramm goes so far as to urge “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 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 our 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 interesting 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 beliefs 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 to say what distinctive insights we contribute to the study of culture. Peter Coviello’s archly titled “Did God Write *Moby Dick*?” follows naturally from Jager’s piece, for Coviello too suggests that the literary offers a special vantage on secularism, “the solvent in which ‘religion’ as such would appear.” In the case of *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 had once been.” 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 hearkens back to several of the 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 to think about how religion should be read. Drawing on Robert Orsi’s call for scholars working on religion to examine practitioners’ lived experience of religion, Hernandez considers 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.” Challenging 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 difficulties in 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 inter-generational continuity.”

Questions of method are also at the heart of our next essay, cowritten 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 nevertheless must be essential to our understanding of the era. “[H]ow 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, their alternative is 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, which 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 looking for expressions of religion familiar to those in a more a secular sphere. Mason returns to the topic of Christian experience, a category that is frequently occluded when literary scholars entertain any notion of religion. Turning to the work of Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins, she makes a case for 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. 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 by acknowledging the contributions of religious thinkers to the history of critical thought.

We began this brief introduction by observing that the study of literature and religion has made great strides in our own scholarly lifetimes. We can end it by observing that the remarkable insightfulness, generosity, and intellectual breadth of our contributors show why we continue to feel so hopeful and excited about eighteenth and nineteenth century studies moving forward. Our contributors make amply clear why and how the question of religion will continue to occupy and to enliven literary studies in the foreseeable future. We are grateful to Deidre Lynch, for furnishing us with a thoughtful afterword to this special issue, and to the editors of *MLQ* for their supportive provision of a venue in which we can explore new ways of talking about religion.

**References**

Agamben, Giorgio. (2000) 2005. *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Trans. Patricia Dailey. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Asad, Talal, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood. 2009. *Is Critique Secular? Injury, Blasphemy and Free Speech*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.

Badiou, Alain. (1997) 2003. *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*. Trans. Ray Brassier. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Brown, Callum. 2001. *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*. London: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 2004, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

Butler, Judith, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Cornel West. 2011. *The Power of Religion In The Public Sphere*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Caputo, John. 2001. *On Religion*. London: Routledge.

Casanova, José. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Davie, Grace. 1994. *Religion in Britain Since 1945. Believing Without Belonging*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Derrida, Jacques and Gianni Vattimo, eds. 1998. *Religion*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 2001. *Acts of Religion*. Ed. Gil Anidjar. London: Routledge.

Eagleton, Terry, 2009. *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Felch, Susan, ed. 2016. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fish, Stanley. 2005. “One University, Under God?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 51.18. January 7, 2005.

Habermas, Jürgen. 2008. “Notes on a Post-Secular Society,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25: 17-29.

Knight, Mark, ed. 2016. *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion*. London: Routledge.

Kristeva, Julia. (2006) 2009. *This Incredible Need to Believe*. Trans. Beverley Bie Brahic. New York: Columbia University Press.

Latour, Bruno. (2002) 2013. *Rejoicing, Or The Torments of Religious Speech*. Trans. Julie Rose. Cambridge: Polity.

Milbank, John. 1993. *Theology and Social Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Orsi, Robert A. 2004. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Pecora, Vincent P. 2006. *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Warner, Michael. 2004 “Uncritical Reading.” In Jane Gallop, ed. *Polemic*. New York: Routledge.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2000. *The Fragile Absolute—or, Why Is The Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For*? London: Verso.

1. Milestones in what subsequently became known as the religious turn include the following: Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* ([2000] 2005); Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism* ([1997] 2003); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004); John Caputo, *On Religion* (2001); Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion* (2001); Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, eds., *Religion* (1998); Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (2009); Stanley Fish, “One University, Under God?” (2005); Jürgen Habermas, “Notes on Post-Secular Society” (2008); Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe* (2009); Bruno Latour, *Rejoicing, Or The Torments of Religious Speech* ([2002] 2013; and Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute—or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For? (*2000). This is to say nothing of theorists like Paul Ricoeur and Michel de Certeau, whose work found new relevance at this epoch. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example: Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003); Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Injury, Blasphemy and Free Speech* (2009); Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*; Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Cornel West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (2011); José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994); Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (1994); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theor*y (1993); Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (2004); Vincent Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (2006), Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007); and Michael Warner, “Uncritical Reading” (2004).

   This religious turn of the nineties and aughts has generated an ongoing body of scholarship on literature and religion too extensive to enumerate. Noteworthy books have been published by contributors to this very issue of *MLQ*, for instance. A further sampling of scholarship from the interdisciplinary field of literature and religion can be found in Susan Felch’s *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion* (2016) and Mark Knight’s *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion* (2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)