



INVISIBLE CONVERSATIONS

RELIGION IN THE LITERATURE OF AMERICA

ROGER LUNDIN, Editor



Studies in Christianity and Literature 3

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CONTENTS

Introduction by Roger Lundin	1
Part 1 Religion and American Fiction	
1 Finding a Prose for God: Religion and American Fiction <i>Denis Donoghue</i>	19
2 American Literature and/as Spiritual Inquiry <i>Lawrence Buell</i>	39
Part 2 Religion and American Poetry	
3 Variety as Religious Experience: The Poetics of the Plain Style <i>Elisa New</i>	49
4 Keeping the Metaphors Alive: American Poetry and Transformation <i>Barbara Packer</i>	63
Part 3 Literature, Religion, and the African American Experience	
5 Genres of Redemption: African Americans, the Bible, and Slavery from Lemuel Haynes to Frederick Douglass <i>Mark A. Noll</i>	69
6 Balm in Gilead: Memory, Mourning, and Healing in African American Autobiography <i>Albert J. Raboteau</i>	83

7	The Race for Faith: Justice, Mercy, and the Sign of the Cross in African American Literature <i>Katherine Clay Bassard</i>	101
8	Forms of Redemption <i>John Stauffer</i>	121
Part 4 Literature, Religion, and American Public Life		
9	<i>Hamlet</i> without the Prince: The Role of Religion in Postwar Nonfiction <i>Alan Wolfe</i>	133
10	“The Only Permanent State”: Belief and the Culture of Incredulity <i>Andrew Delbanco</i>	149
Part 5 Theology and American Literature		
11	How the Church Became Invisible: A Christian Reading of American Literary Tradition <i>Stanley Hauerwas and Ralph C. Wood</i>	159
12	“The Play of the Lord”: On the Limits of Critique <i>Roger Lundin</i>	187
	Notes	195
	Index	219



CONTRIBUTORS

Katherine Clay Bassard, Associate Professor of English, Virginia
Commonwealth University

Lawrence Buell, Powell M. Cabot Professor of American Literature, Harvard
University

Andrew Delbanco, Julian Clarence Levi Professor in the Humanities,
Columbia University

Denis Donoghue, Henry James Professor of English and American Letters,
New York University

Stanley Hauerwas, Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics, Duke
University

Roger Lundin, Blanchard Professor of English, Wheaton College

Elisa New, Professor of English and American Literature and Language,
Harvard University

Mark A. Noll, Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History, University of
Notre Dame

Barbara Packer, Professor of English, UCLA

Albert J. Raboteau, Henry W. Putnam Professor of Religion, Princeton
University

John Stauffer, Professor of English and African American Studies, Harvard
University

Alan Wolfe, Professor of Political Science, Boston College

Ralph C. Wood, University Professor of Theology and Literature, Baylor
University

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INTRODUCTION

Roger Lundin

Invisible Conversations adapts its title from works by two American writers, one of them being the greatest theologian this culture has produced and the other an excellent scholar whose untimely death cut short a promising career.

The first of these two is Jonathan Edwards, and the passage in question is to be found in his “Apostrophe to Sarah Pierpont,” the young woman who eventually became his wife. After a lengthy tribute to the “strange sweetness” of Sarah’s love of “almighty Being,” Edwards concludes with a winsome tribute to her love of nature and nature’s hidden God: “She loves to be alone, and to wander in the fields and on the mountains, and seems to have someone invisible always conversing with her.”¹

From the first exploration of this continent to the present day, countless men and women of all types and inclinations have carried on their “conversations with the invisible.” This has been true for Jews and Protestants, Catholics and Hindus, Muslims and Eastern Orthodox believers alike, just as it has also proved to be the case for many who doubt whether Sarah Pierpont’s “almighty Being” even exists. In Chapter 10 of this book, Andrew Delbanco reminds us of the pogrom survivor in Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*: “After the things he had seen, this character admonishes his friends and family not to dare to ‘talk to me about God.’ And yet, as Bellow remarks, ‘it was he who talked about God, all the time.’”

For understanding those conversations *to* and *about* that “invisible God,” the literature of the United States offers exceptional resources. From their discussions of Emily Dickinson and Andre Dubus to their analyses of Frederick Douglass and Flannery O’Connor, the chapters in this volume move over a

broad historical and cultural landscape that has become, over the history of this culture, packed with private meditations and public reflections on the existence of God, the nature of religious experience, and the place of faith in public life. Often lively, sometimes divisive, and invariably illuminating, these conversations have been central to American culture for centuries, and they will be at the center of attention throughout this book.

There is, however, another sense of “invisibility” that *Invisible Conversations* seeks to address. It has to do with what the late Jenny Franchot once described as the “invisible domain” of religion in American literary studies. Writing more than a decade ago, Franchot observed that, even though “America has been and continues to be manifestly religious in complex and intriguing ways,” a thorough “lack of interest in religion . . . has produced a singularly biased scholarship” in the academic study of the literature of the United States. In recent decades, this bias has manifested itself most frequently as a stubborn refusal to engage religious questions on anything like their own terms. “Religious questions are always bound up with the invisible,” she wrote, and they “are therefore peculiarly subject to silencing—whether through an outright refusal to inquire” or through the rush to translate “the invisible” into what are for the contemporary intellectual the more visible (and obvious) “vocabularies of sexuality, race, or class.” In using these vocabularies to avoid “America’s engagement with ‘invisibles,’” Franchot concludes, “we have allowed ourselves to become ignorant.”²

Invisible Conversations is an effort to dispel such ignorance. This book grew out of the fruitful collaboration of one group of scholars that was made possible by the visionary determination of another group. The visionaries happened to work together for a decade at the University of Notre Dame, where one of them, Nathan Hatch, led the Evangelical Scholarship Initiative, and another, James Turner, served as the founding director of the Erasmus Institute. (These two are also professors of history, and at the time, Hatch was serving as Notre Dame’s provost.) The initiatives led by Hatch and Turner supported numerous scholarly projects that explored the interplay of religion and the major academic disciplines. As one of those projects, the American Literature and Religion Seminar had a straightforward goal, which was to assemble a team of scholars from various religious backgrounds to study the intersection of religion and literature in the United States from Ralph Waldo Emerson to the present.

At a time when acrimony and suspicion have often marked the academic discussion of religion and American studies, the work of the seminar unfolded in a spirit of civil and vigorous dialogue. Seminar members held

sharply divergent views on the nature of religious experience and the significance of religious truth-claims. Yet despite their differences, the participants all took religion to be a substantial subject in its own right and not merely an epiphenomenon of a primary economic, political, or material reality. Similarly, as the chapters in this book demonstrate, the participants in the seminar assumed significantly different stances vis-à-vis the question of American exceptionalism.³

In the seminar, our work was tacitly guided by principles of interpretive pluralism of the kind promoted by Mikhail Bakhtin, Paul Ricoeur, and Kenneth Burke, among others, in recent decades. In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke reminds us “that every document bequeathed us by history must be treated as a *strategy for encompassing a situation*.” History is a “‘dramatic’ process, involving dialectical oppositions,” and no work from the past can be considered “in isolation, but as the *answer or rejoinder* to assertions current in the situation in which it arose.”⁴

Yet the obvious question here is, where does the drama get its materials? Burke’s answer: “From the ‘unending conversation’ that is going on at the point in history when we are born.” He asks us to imagine ourselves entering a room where a “heated discussion” is already underway and the participants are too passionately engaged to explain to us the nature of the debate or the background to the points being made. “In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there,” so that no one presently talking is able to retrace the countless steps that led to this point.⁵

“You listen for a while,” Burke continues, “until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument,” and then you “put in your oar.” Someone challenges what you say and you respond; someone else comes to your defense and either embarrasses you with his poor reasoning or wows the crowd with an astute observation. But the conversation proves to be “interminable,” and eventually you must take leave of the conversation, even as we all must take leave of life. “And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.”⁶

To balance the idealism of the conversational model, Burke notes that, although the “unending conversation” supplies the materials for the human drama, “this verbal action” is not “all there is to it.” For our language and our stories are grounded in “contexts of situation,” and among those contexts are “the kind of factors considered by Bentham, Marx, and Veblen, the material interests (of private or class structure) that you symbolically defend or symbolically appropriate” when you are making “assertions.” Such “interests do not ‘cause’ your discussion,” for its real source is “man himself as *homo*

loquax.” Nevertheless, “they greatly affect the *idiom* in which you speak, and so the idiom by which you think.”⁷

In saying that “every document bequeathed us by history must be treated as a *strategy for encompassing a situation*,” Burke provides a counterweight to one of Walter Benjamin’s famous “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” The historical materialist, writes Benjamin, must view “cultural treasures . . . with cautious detachment,” for they “have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror.” Given the oppression and suffering hidden within the unwritten history of cultural production, we can only conclude that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”⁸

In practical terms, what does a Burkean view of the conversational and dramatic nature of historical understanding mean for the study of American literature? To begin, one consequence involves the central place given to Christianity and Judaism in the cultural history of the United States. From the colonial period to the end of the nineteenth century, Protestant and Catholic voices dominated the conversations of American religion, and Judaism played an increasingly powerful role in the twentieth century. And while the influence of these traditions, particularly that of New England Puritanism, may not have been as overwhelming as twentieth-century scholarship often claimed, they undeniably provided enduring “strategies for encompassing the situation” of American religious life.

Near the end of his essay in this book, Andrew Delbanco speaks of the need for every academic institution to have within its ranks “a strong contingent of religion scholars.” In making his case, he quotes Alexis de Tocqueville’s observation that “incredulity is an accident; faith is the only permanent state of mankind.” Given that this judgment “seems today” to have been right, Delbanco argues, “we can only hope that he was also right in believing that the American experiment in toleration will not prove finally incompatible with the very essence of religious passion.”

The American Literature and Religion Seminar was an experiment seeking to prove the compatibility of tolerance and passion, and that *Invisible Conversations*—the book that you hold in your hands—is a product of that experiment. The authors of the following essays were given a wide-ranging charge—that is, to write on a series of topics having to do with the interplay of literature and religion in the American experience. Each main chapter is followed by a response, and in the case of literature and the African American experience, there are three chapters plus a response.

We begin with a series of studies of fiction and poetry, each of which starts out on the landscape of New England only to range widely beyond that ground. But where Elisa New and Barbara Packer are in substantial agreement about the nature and value of New England's influence, Denis Donoghue and Lawrence Buell open the conversation in this book by taking serious issue with that influence. They do so, however, for markedly different reasons.

For Donoghue, the opposition to Emerson and his associates is fundamentally theological, and he highlights his differences with them in a proposition that he admits is "so stark that I must try to mellow it at once." His thesis is "that modern American literature is a substitute for religion, but a substitute in which the original has been absorbed." His is a study of the expunging of explicit religious concerns in the poetry and fiction of the United States. A faintly religious scent may still waft through the pages of the national literature, but of the substance of religious belief and practice there is little or none. According to Donoghue, the process of supplanting religion started in the nineteenth century with Emerson, who "began as a religion but ended as literature"—Donoghue is quoting Alfred Kazin on this point—and the absorption continued with Nathaniel Hawthorne, who "replaced God with nature and community." The novelist also turned sin into an offense against the community, and he celebrated the power of the self to transgress those limits and thereby claim its identity. In the history that Donoghue describes, the process Emerson and Hawthorne initiated was to be sustained and furthered by Herman Melville, Henry Adams, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Harold Bloom, among others.

Bloom holds the key to the views (and practices) to which Donoghue takes strong exception. For several decades, he has argued that American religion is a strange mixture of distorted Christianity and ancient Gnosticism, with the Gnosticism predominant. For Americans, at least as Bloom assesses the situation, religion is a matter of feeling and private experience sans liturgy, sans ritual, sans church. The freedom promised by American religion is not some hard-won liberty but "a solitude in which the inner loneliness is at home in an outer loneliness." Bloom asks why the United States has produced so little literature of substance—"Devotional poetry or narrative or drama, of any aesthetic eminence, or of any profound spirituality, hardly exists among us"—but Donoghue complains that Bloom "does not stay for an answer."

To move beyond the isolating loneliness of the Emerson-to-Bloom impasse, Donoghue returns to his discussion of Andre Dubus's "The Father's Story," a short story that frames his argument in the essay. Near the end of it a character is in the midst one of his frequent conversations with God. How

does he know, Donoghue asks, "that he is not merely talking to himself?" The critic then answers for the character: "What enables it [the conversation with God] . . . is his membership of the Church, the sacraments, the rituals, the Mass, Confession, and Communion." These give him a means of participating in a story "of sacrifice and meaning that he enters by himself but not entirely by himself: there are the others. He is not looking for 'a God within the self.'"

We might say that in his reading of religion in the American experience, Donoghue seeks to reinstate the distinction between metaphor, per se, and religious belief and practice, while New and Packer will appear willing, with some reservations, to accept the Emersonian conflation of the two. To Lawrence Buell, both the granting of centrality to the New England religious experience and the lamentation of its decline into secularity are questionable. He opens his spirited response by pointing out that Donoghue focuses exclusively on the United States, which is but a "portion of 'America'" as it is now understood in literary studies. As a sign of the divide that separates the old discipline of *American* studies and the new problematics of cultural history in the *United States*, Buell repeatedly uses *U. S.* to speak of the literature of this land. He notes that a reader of Donoghue's essay "could never tell" from it that we are now in the third decade of a "canon war in U.S. literary studies," nor would that reader know that Emerson has been deposed as the *ur*-father of the "U.S. literary emergence."

Buell reads Donoghue's argument as a forceful restatement of a long-standing narrative of Romantic secularization and decline. He takes exception to Donoghue's leveling of the distinctions between Emerson and Hawthorne, for the novelist's "conception of sin is . . . more charged with the sense of radical evil" than the critic acknowledges. But the larger problem, Buell avers, is the failure of Donoghue and the critical tradition on which he draws to recognize that "American literature is and has been imbued with spiritual striving." Literature has often been willful and idiosyncratic in its explorations, but it has also persistently held "up a mirror to the dominant culture's stolid complacencies." And Buell believes it ought to receive credit, even thanks, for having done so and for continuing to do so.

In the end, Buell's differences with Donoghue, and with Stanley Hauerwas and Ralph Wood, are rooted in a fundamental disagreement over the nature of religious belief and practice. Donoghue lists Church, sacraments, and rituals as the essence of religion, while Buell counters with a question that reads like a plea: "Why should not the religious be identified mainly . . . with the arenas of moral or spiritual inquiry and practice?" He objects to the effort

to tie the category of religion to “theologic belief or church affiliation” and suggests the alternative of “leaving religion to each individual’s considered private judgment.” This would guard against both the “imperial zealotry” of the state and the “policing” of religious experience by the church. Buell asks, “If that was good enough for George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, why not for us?” He suggests that when the literature of the United States is viewed in this way, as a series of spiritual quests that may or may not be tied to “sect or creed,” then it seems likely that the work of Emerson, Hawthorne, and James will continue to resonate, regardless of future canonical judgments or new theoretical concerns.

In their discussion of American poetry, Elisa New and Barbara Packer stake out a critical position that situates them somewhere between Donoghue’s religious critique of American literary history and Buell’s call for a vastly expanded understanding of U.S. literary studies. Through a sophisticated updating of the American studies tradition of F. O. Matthiessen and Perry Miller, New and Packer examine the intricate interplay between metaphorical exploration and religious expression in the history of American poetry. New’s chapter centers upon the nineteenth century, and Emily Dickinson in particular, but it also reaches back to the prose of the Puritans (John Cotton and Jonathan Edwards) as well as forward to the poetry of the Modernists (Robert Frost and Hart Crane).

Metaphor, New writes, is the most delicate instrument we possess for catching the “pulse” of meaning and thereby registering “the inmost character of things.” She is interested specifically in metaphor as the key to “a linguistic realm where phenomena discover and catch their truest likenesses by entertaining unlikenesses.” According to New, the subversion of identity that takes place through this discovery of “unlikeness” proves to be “key to that identity’s truer self-transcendent revelation as mixed structure.” Dickinson understood and employed this power of metaphor perhaps more fully than anyone else in the nineteenth century, yet her view of it has “a very long American foreground.”

Standing squarely in that foreground is the seventeenth-century Puritan John Cotton, whose “favorite metaphors for the state of grace prefigure Dickinson’s own.” What links Cotton in the seventeenth century to Crane in the twentieth are the rich possibilities that Puritan plain style created for metaphor as a religious vehicle. New says Cotton’s “extravagant understanding” of plainness “gave scope and quite serviceable latitude” to later American writers who believed passionately in “beauty’s revelatory power.” For New, the secret of this power is to be found in the paradoxical yoking together of

plainness and metaphorical extravagance that is the hallmark of both Puritan preaching and poetics in the tradition of Emerson and Dickinson. The capacity of beauty to ring “changes on sameness” and to summon “variety out of monotony” has remained throughout the culture’s history “an article of both aesthetic and Christian faith for practitioners of a distinctive American poetics.”

In New’s formulation, by revealing “change” within “sameness” and by relieving the “monotony” of singularity with the “variety” of difference, metaphor does for a largely secular culture the work that Trinitarian belief has performed throughout Christian history. With its lively play of opposites, metaphor mediates the relationship between sameness and difference that is at the heart of religious experience, cultural identity, and poetic discovery: “Grace and metaphor, committed to mutual recognizance, will, in John Cotton’s words, ‘poise one another.’ In Cotton’s homiletics, as in later American poetics, the test of grace is not unity but the variety that gives life to religious, as to aesthetic, experience.”

In her response to New, Barbara Packer offers a historical context for the experiments in metaphor that became crucial to the lives as well as the works of such writers as Dickinson, Emerson, and Thoreau. She quotes from the preface that New had provided to her essay; in that passage, which is not part of the chapter in this book, New says that Dickinson’s understanding of poetic meaning teaches us “patience before obscurity,” and it “reminds revelation that its origin is mystery.” This insight strikes Packer as being “profoundly true,” and she observes that “in flight from” the “shallowness” of Enlightenment literature and religion, Emerson, Dickinson, and others set out to “recover the richness” of earlier religious expression without sacrificing their own “hospitality to universal religion or to progressive thought.” To judge the authenticity and gauge the authority of religious claims to truth, they proposed the “litmus test” of studying “a writer’s metaphors.” Trite metaphors point to a “mind that is either unoriginal or servile,” while “arresting ones” reveal an imagination attuned to “the analogies inscribed by the First Cause on nature.”

Near the close of her response, Packer correctly notes Emerson’s fear of “metaphor’s petrifying powers.” He took religious traditions to be calcified metaphors, and “he traced the bloody history of Christian theology” to a “fatal literal-mindedness that always seems to dog a prophet’s inspired tropes.” These Emersonian fears are in stark contrast, however, to the state of affairs that Mark Noll describes in the opening paragraph of the next chapter, the first of four that deal specifically with literature, religion, and the

African American experience. Noll refers to a “fixation on the Bible” that remained central to African American literature for more than two centuries. This intense focus upon the scriptures led to the Bible’s power as a source of comfort and inspiration in the African American “struggle for redemption from slavery.” It also contributed to that community’s efforts to “redeem” the Scriptures and release them from their bondage to the slavery-condoning interpretations the majority population gave to them.

Noll explains that, from the early eighteenth century on, there had been a “steady stream” of writings on the Bible and slavery that justified the latter by finding sanctions for it in the former. But this stream “became from the early 1830s onwards a great flood of works” that took slavery for granted as a reality of history and as a practice of the present. What Noll calls “the simple point” of his chapter is to describe how black Americans produced a literature of “an unusual depth” and “an unusual breadth” of forms to challenge “proslavery interpretations of the Bible” between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War.

The genres that Noll treats include memoirs, treatises, sermons, manifestoes, and dialogues. Yet despite their having employed an astonishingly diverse array of rhetorical strategies, “African American interpretations of Scripture never exerted broad influence in antebellum society.” What they did accomplish, however, was to testify “to the power that the Scriptures were exerting” in the lives of African Americans, even as they “also were testifying to the sanctified power of their own prose in redeeming the Scriptures.” Here, at least, the “petrifying” potential of metaphor in the scriptural tradition became a liberating power.

Albert Raboteau’s chapter begins with a searing personal account that reminds us of the other, divisive side of the religious equation. It has to do with a painful separation and an act of exclusion at the core of Christian experience, in this case at the Communion rail. From his own experience and the accounts of others, Raboteau concludes that we in American culture “suffer a form of partial amnesia” because of our collective failure to remember and mourn the suffering of our past: “Our nation has need of tears, tears for all those lynched, maimed, whipped, shamed, and debased by our history of race hatred.”

It is to African American autobiography that Raboteau turns in his search for a “method of healing the wounds” inflicted by the history of racial hatred in the United States. The first autobiographical account he treats is that of Olaudah Equiano, and in it he discovers rhetorical strategies that were to become commonplace in black autobiographies. Like Noll, Raboteau sees African Americans simultaneously using the Bible to inform their quest for

freedom and employing their unique experience to “redeem” the Scriptures. Equiano, for example, casts the drama of African humanity against the background of the Bible, uses the theme of chosenness to convict Anglo-Europeans of their sin, and discerns in the experience of African slaves “a providential and universal message of reconciliation.”

For Raboteau, what these works offer may be best summarized by a comment one of his students made at the end of a recent course on African American autobiography. She said, “we have been breaking apart the bread of the texts and offering each other communion.” Raboteau believes her language was intentionally “Eucharistic,” because it spoke of “calling to mind” the sacrifice of Christ and pointed to the liturgical offering of his body and blood in the Communion experience. As Raboteau’s student spoke, “a murmur of recognition and approval emerged from the class and, when she had finished, a burst of applause. She enabled all of us to glimpse a more profound vision of the transformative power of memory and mourning.”

In a thought-provoking essay, Katherine Clay Bassard pulls together a number of the strands of argument found in Noll and Raboteau and weaves them into a complex account of “race, faith, theory.” She focuses specifically upon the sign of the cross, the central symbol of the Christian faith, and traces its journey through more than 150 years of the African American experience.

As Raboteau does, Bassard opens with a personal incident. In this case, it has to do with a large crucifix a parishioner had brought back from Mexico to the Baptist church of her youth. Bassard reports that her own feeling was almost one “of offense at the grotesque figure described by someone as ‘bleeding from every pore.’” She recounts the discussions that swirled around that crucifix and all the injunctions her Protestant church had against the bodily representation of Christ’s suffering. To her Baptist friends and family, the empty cross represented the presence of Christ rather than his absence. “The central evidence upon which Christianity rests,” after all, “is an *empty* tomb, an *absent* body as the sign” of God’s redemptive power.

Bassard raises a number of questions about this heritage of disembodiment, and her discussion ranges widely from the period of antebellum slavery to Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997) and the experience of what she terms “black postmodernity.” Bassard uncovers in this history “a shift in the figuration of the cross from a more orthodox African American Protestantism to a displacement of its meanings out onto the African American (women’s) community itself.” This transfer of spiritual authority becomes total in *Paradise*, where a black Christ “has no takers and yields no deliverance or hope for

justice.” In the ironic ending to her chapter, Bassard wonders openly about the price to be paid for the massive shift of moral authority and spiritual responsibility from the cross to the community. She closes by quoting Eugene McCarragher’s recent prediction that theology may fill the space vacated by cultural theory. “Revolution is indissoluble from resurrection,” he claims. To which Bassard replies: “The question is, what Body do we imagine rising from the grave?”

John Stauffer’s response to these three accounts of the African American experience is remarkable for the degree of sympathy he has for their central assertions. There is no questioning here of fundamental assumptions, as there was in Lawrence Buell’s critique of Denis Donoghue, no challenge to any theoretical paradigms or theological claims. Instead, what Stauffer provides is an amplified discussion of the historical and literary context for each chapter, and in each case, he offers nuanced suggestions for further reflection or consideration. While praising Noll’s thematic comprehensiveness, Stauffer observes that “what Noll gives up by organizing his essay around genre is a clear sense of change over time in black resistance to slavery and proslavery theological arguments.” Further, he suggests the need to place greater weight on the importance of black protest and the influence that African American interpretations of scripture had on white abolitionists and the larger culture alike.

Stauffer’s reservations about Raboteau’s chapter also have to do with a missing account of historical change. He praises the use of autobiography and the emphasis upon memory but at the same time asks for a more extensive discussion of how “the transformative power of memory and mourning changed” dramatically over time. And in response to Bassard, Stauffer says historical change has also led to changes in the questions we pose to the African American experience and the works that have issued from it. To Bassard’s question—“What Body do we imagine rising from the grave?”—Stauffer responds with one of his own: “To this I would add another question, with which Noll, Raboteau, and Bassard all implicitly grapple. It concerns the location of God’s kingdom and thus the relation between religious faith and social justice: ‘What kind of Spirit do we imagine inhabiting our bodies?’ What does it look like and what forms does it take?”

With Alan Wolfe’s chapter on the role of religion in modern nonfiction, we move from the wide-ranging and geographically dispersed experience of African Americans to a setting decidedly more time and place specific—that is, New York City in the first three decades after the World War II. Yet at this time and from this place, a relatively small group of writers, most of who were Jewish, managed to exercise an influence completely out of proportion

to their numbers. In the words of Andrew Delbanco, they “made twentieth-century New York the intellectual capital of the United States,” and they did so despite the fact that the “upper-crust Protestants” excluded them from most centers of power and learning.

As Delbanco observes, Wolfe places little explicit emphasis on the question of Jewishness, but it does serve as the backdrop to his account of the treatment religion received in a series of remarkable books dealing with the American character and its postwar prospects. To introduce his subject, Wolfe discusses the curious career of C. Wright Mills, a Catholic, who wrote with great insight about the power elites who ruled mid-twentieth-century America. Mills seemed to cover every subject and perspective imaginable, save that of religion. In his rendering of the national culture, Americans struggle with poor schools, difficult industrial and corporate environments, and inadequate political leaders, but they seem to do so “without ever attending church, confessing their sins, or asking God for meaning.”

Using a template established by his reading of Mills, Wolfe proceeds to examine the sociological analyses of David Riesman and Betty Friedan, as well as the historical treatments offered by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Richard Hofstadter. He calls “inexcusable” the failure of Mills, Riesman, and Friedan—“first-rate writers, all of them”—to treat religion seriously, and although his judgment of the historians (Schlesinger, Hofstadter) is more favorable, they too are called out for having come up short: “Yet while they did treat religion more explicitly than their colleagues in the social sciences, they essentially ‘secularized’ religion, modifying it to be part of a larger story that had no particular religious meaning.” Admittedly mystified by the failure of these writers to understand the role of religion in American life, Wolfe concludes it may be that they exemplify the limits of his own discipline of sociology. Perhaps that discipline cannot account for religion, because religion is a psychological phenomenon rather than a sociological one. “Americans do not believe in order to belong; they believe in order to be,” he observes. “If religion means organization and doctrine, Americans are not all that religious. If it means purity of heart and sincerity of spirit, they are religious beyond recognition.”

In response to Wolfe’s use of the word “inexcusable” to describe the indifference of postwar intellectuals toward religion, Delbanco seeks to offer “some contexts, if not excuses, for that indifference.” One key element here, he says, has to do with the history of anti-Semitism in American culture. Mixing cultural history with personal anecdotes, Delbanco concludes that to this day “tensions [have] persisted between Jews and Christians even in America’s

leading institutions." As a result, he writes, "there was a certain wariness, shall we say, on the part of America's minority intellectuals toward America's majority religion."

Yet even more important may have been the fact that "New York Jews were not necessarily committed in any deep sense to their own religious heritage." To them, politics in its neo-Marxist garb was more important as a religion "than the Christian idea of a merciful redeemer," and this proved to be even more the case after Auschwitz, when the very idea of Christianity seemed "an unbearable affront" to the victims of the Holocaust. That left politics as the acceptable religion for the contemporary American intellectual, whether he or she is based in New York or somewhere else well beyond the Hudson. For members of the intellectual elite, many of whom reside in university departments of English, "religion is an embarrassment at best and a menace at worst."

Delbanco regrets this turn of affairs and closes with a query. If in the early twentieth century Freud said that guilt was the greatest problem of modern civilization, might it not be the case that our greatest problem today "is finding a way to satisfy the human craving for belief while containing the proselytizing and purifying passion of true believers. Riesman and Hofstadter and the rest can be excused, I think, for failing to see that problem as clearly as we are compelled to see it today."

In his analysis of Wolfe's themes, Delbanco astutely cites the authors of our final chapter, Ralph Wood and Stanley Hauerwas, as examples of intellectuals in whom "suspicion runs deep toward religion," when it is used to justify "the kind of transcendental nationalism" that has marked American civil religion. It may seem counterintuitive to claim that these two preachers—Baptist and Methodist, respectively—are somehow hostile to religion. But Delbanco's point makes theological sense and is borne out by the interpretation of American literature that Wood and Hauerwas offer, for these two share an antipathy to American exceptionalism that is rooted in the theology of Karl Barth and the ethical thought of the Anabaptist tradition.

To Wood and Hauerwas, the most important question to ask about the literature of the United States does not have to do with its religious background or its Emersonian legacy. Instead, the question for them is why "a nation with the soul of a church" has "produced so few writers who are Christian in any substantive sense of the word." Their answer to this question may seem surprising, for they place the blame not at the feet of the writers but at the heart of the churches. These institutions, they write, have so fully identified themselves "with the American project that our artists have had little cause to

heed any unique and distinctively Christian witness in the churches.” They claim that a “Constantinian shift” took place early in the national experience of the United States, as the church and state became effectively yoked together. This linkage permitted Protestant Christianity to enjoy “a cultural establishment that, for being so subtle, may be far more pernicious than the old-style conflation of realms.” As an alternative, they search for works of American literature that show “the church as the one transformative community” through whose offices “the triune God is fashioning an alternative history for all people.”

Given the scope of what they seek, it is not surprising that the only examples Wood and Hauerwas discover come from our novelists rather than our poets. In Flannery O’Connor’s fiction, they come upon convincing evidence of divine grace freely given and convincingly rendered. Yet even O’Connor remained incapable of depicting the “faithful community” of the church as a place where “divine grace might be socially embodied and ethically sustained.” For the depiction of this ideal, they turn to a single novel: Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Here the church, which is “nearly everywhere else occluded from our imaginative vision, clearly and redemptively emerges.”

My response to Hauerwas and Wood highlights the fruitful tensions that ran through the American Literature and Religion Seminar and that animate most serious studies of the role of religious belief in the history of American culture. Although I share a number of Hauerwas’s and Wood’s deepest theological convictions, I question the tightness of their argument concerning the “Constantinian” captivity of American Christianity. Their clarion call to overcome the triumphalist allure and to resist the coercions of state and culture alike seems to run counter to the fact that, through the mystery of grace, triumphalism and coercion often work together toward redemptive ends, both in the rich fiction these two admire and in the deeply intertwined lives we all lead. “The lion lies in wait for the antelope at the ford,” observes a character in one of Isak Dinesen’s extraordinary *Seven Gothic Tales*, “and the antelope is sanctified by the lion, as is the lion by the antelope, for the play of the Lord is divine.” There is nothing, this character tells his conversational partner, that sanctifies or is sanctified, except by this “play of the Lord, which is alone divine.” It will not do, he says, to declare that only some notes on the musical scale—“say, *do*, *re* and *mi*”—are sacred, while the others are profane, “for no

one of the notes is sacred in itself, and it is the music, which can be made out of them, which is alone divine.” As the essays in this volume brilliantly attest, such polyphonic play has long marked the religious and cultural life of the United States, just as it continues to animate the conversations our literature carries on in the presence of the Invisible or in the shadows cast by its absence.

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