

## Coda: Secular Subjects

### Lori Branch

The academic experiences Everett Hamner describes in the introduction to this issue are, unfortunately, not limited to his education alone. Over the last decade, colleagues and friends have recounted to me such unpleasant tales, similar to my own. During my doctoral work, however much seminar readings in Derrida and Lyotard seemed naturally to cross-pollinate with my interests in religion, well-meaning professors repeatedly warned me not to write about religion in my dissertation, “or people will think this is just a religious project.” (Try replacing the adjective: would anyone have said, “just a political project,” “just a feminist project,” “just a race project”?) Once I landed that coveted, tenure-track research position in spite of it all (thank God), I arrived to be told during my first week on the job that, during my hiring meeting, someone had openly expressed concern that I might “be a religious fundamentalist.” Why? Because I gave a job talk about Christopher Smart? (I did.) Because afterwards I asked the audience to accept Jesus as their personal Savior? (I didn’t.) Besides being illegal, that comment mainly displayed which faculty member wouldn’t know a fundamentalist from Adam. I still shake my head at that one.

By my reckoning, these experiences and dozens like them reveal much less about the relevance of religion in contemporary culture (high) and the intellectual mettle of the students and scholars who work on it (varied), and more about the general discomfort with religion in literary and cultural studies that such censures express (indisputable). Of this shall be the theme of this brief coda. But first, a word of hope: happily, I think, change is in the air, as this issue attests. The Centre for Literature, Theology and the Arts at the University of Glasgow has become the catalyst of a new generation of scholarship on religion and the arts, and here at The University of Iowa, an increasing number of Ph.D students in English (this fall, between a quarter and a third of the entering class) comes to the program drawn by our “Religion, Secularism, and Ethics” area (which they regularly report is “the only

American PhD program in English whose website even mentions the study of religion and literature”), where they can take seminars like “Religion, Secularism, and Modernity” and freely incorporate these concerns into their exams and theses. This program is already bearing fruit in exciting new dissertation projects that promise to seed the studies of literature – from the Enlightenment to the Victorian period to cyber fiction – with new avenues of inquiry. At least in this department a graduate student can no longer be told, “you’ll never get a job if you work on religion” (thank God again).

Nevertheless, the students here who do chose to work on religion in literature and culture will no doubt have occasion to defend, to a degree that almost no other sort of inquiry elicits, the reason for their interest – a fact that, given global political and social upheaval today, is truly unbelievable. As I was asked so many times on the job market, “why should we care about religion at all?” As much as that question begs for the multitude of its seemingly obvious answers, I have become increasingly convinced that the much more fascinating, provocative question, and the one I take up briefly here, is why we as academics are so determined to ignore religion, to flatten the religious transformations of modernity into an equation-like secularization thesis (which, with its calculable trajectory for religion’s disappearance, seems at this point mere wish-fulfillment), and to refuse to entertain the complex sorts of narratives about religion and secularism that, for the last 40 years, we have readily generated about race, gender and class. American a/theologian and deconstructionist Mark C. Taylor puts it eloquently: “To God we have become unaccustomed; of God we have become unaccustomed to speak, even to think, especially to write. If we slip and find ourselves thinking, speaking, even writing of God, it seems embarrassing, horribly embarrassing—even when our inquiry is critical. All of this God stuff was supposed to have been over a long time ago” (30). And the consequences of this embarrassment are grave. As political scientist Alan Wolfe narrates it, operating on the assumption that the world was becoming increasingly secular, “social scientists from the 1960s until the 1980s treated religion as marginal to their concerns. Combined with the conviction on the part of many natural scientists that religion was hostile to their enterprise, . . . that left American academics outside of divinity schools unready for the religious revival that seemed to take on new life in the 1990s,” particularly the decline of mainline religions and the rise of evangelical and fundamentalist ones. This raises the serious question for Wolfe of whether our current social science scholarship on religion “is up to the task of offering Americans insights on the controversies that surround them” (B6).

It might be argued that no field of studies remains as grounded in what Taylor calls the “tenets of modernism” as my own, the field addressed to the origin and emergence of modernity – eighteenth-century studies – and, as Wolfe laments about political science, clearly to the detriment of its understanding of religion and secularism in the very period of their most crucial mutual formation. In Robert Sullivan’s words, it has long been a well-established convention among historians of the European eighteenth-century to condescend toward Christianity in their period, a tendency to which he himself confesses. “Even when deemed inoffensive,” he writes, Christianity “was often represented as a history of mere vestiges,

of a slippery slope, or of generalized change and decay,” and when it was judged to be somehow offensive, he claims (citing E. P. Thomson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*), “condescension sometimes became massive, even abusive” (305). Despite the last twenty years in which this story has been slowly disaggregating and in which, Sullivan points out, the most recently published books suggest that “the cultural role of eighteenth-century Christianity was as various as it was central” (305), difficulties remain. In her fascinating work on the “spectacular failure” of the Philadelphian Society, lead by Protestant mystic Jane Lead (1623-1704), Paula McDowell has come to argue that the late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century reaction against certain kinds of speech, writing, and intellectual inquiry associated with religious ‘enthusiasm’ continues today to affect what counts as the object of English literary study:

Despite postmodernist critiques of Enlightenment claims and frames, dominant interpretive frameworks in current eighteenth-century literary and cultural studies remain rooted in those epistemes—with significant implications for literary historiography. . . . While revisionist historians increasingly argue for the continuing centrality of religion as a social and cultural force, literary studies and cultural criticism remain strikingly unaffected by these developments. Despite a few promising signs, religious writing remains marginalized in our literary histories and cultural studies models, its place in our field of vision directly inverse to its actual importance in the period we study. (517-18)

McDowell goes on to say that this is not due to anachronistic models of fine literature or to a conspiracy of silence, but it is rather “a matter of how we as a discipline deal with works that do not fit dominant critical models of intelligibility and value” (518). Perhaps another way of phrasing this is that our secular models of intelligibility and value continue to silence and erase the truly innumerable religious references, subtle and overt, in the texts we study, allowing them, to paraphrase Shaun Irlam from another context, “to become unheard by passing over them,” like much in mid-eighteenth century poetry, “without comment” (20).

Like McDowell, I believe that these scholarly rituals of ignoring religious references in texts, these disavowals of faith in so many registers and disciplines, are driven by no grand conspiracies. Rather, and this is the thesis of my coda, I would assert that these disavowals are connected by the academic subjectivities they make possible. Kathy Rudy has pointed out the centrality of a narrative of loss of faith both in academic inquiry and in the thriving genre of memoir. In many of the stories we tell, she writes, “coherence becomes fixed on the narrating/narrated subject itself; the loss of belief (and/or the assessment of the damages incurred as a result of that belief) becomes the glue that holds the subject together” (228). Writing about *Blue Windows*, Barbara Wilson’s memoir of her Christian Science upbringing, Rudy claims that even though loss of faith is a gradual process, “for marketing purposes [Wilson] has to declare herself as a unified person who stands in a different place than self-identified Christian Scientists, much the same that I had to declare myself to you here today as having ‘lost my faith’” (232). In plain terms, familiar narratives of the loss of faith constitute subjects who can say “I”

have lost my faith; they invite us into secular ideologies that hold open a space not for the divided, uncertain person who, in the words of the gospel, says, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24), but for a more coherent subject-without-belief.<sup>2</sup> To write otherwise about faith, after all, would be to implicate oneself in it, and by association, in uncertainty. When scholarship does address religion directly, the stakes ratchet uncomfortably high, and establishing a *science* of religious study becomes, in a very real way, the crucial confession of our collective certainty about rationalism and our position as scholars. “Western science defines itself in terms of its historical rift with religion,” writes the French sociologist of religion Danièle Hervieu-Léger writes, “and this is the abiding context in which the sociology of religion is obliged to define its own aspirations” (17). As a result of having something to prove, as it were – of constantly and deliberately having to separate itself from religious institutions, the sociology of religion for instance has seemed “trapped in an empirical positivism which other branches of sociology . . . have long ago left behind” (28). This bind occurs, Hervieu-Léger asserts, because the need for epistemological vigilance is felt to be doubly present in this field; the close study of religion is seen as continually posing the threat of opening up an avenue to religious belief which, “readily ascribed to the abdication of reason,” presumably would “invalidate sociology itself” (28).

All of this reveals, to my mind, that secularism is a central component both of modernist ideologies of objectivity that undergird our modern academic disciplines, and of the subjectivities they imply for us as academics. In *The Differend*, Jean-François Lyotard is particularly aware – and critical – of the interconnection of such academic and economic genres of discourse and their power to dress up their contingency as necessity, the sum of beliefs and volitional linkings as knowledge. Lyotard claims that his book and its call for attention to differends is nothing short of an effort to redefine real thought and philosophy as something other than the two adversaries that assail it, “the genre of economic discourse (exchange, capital)” and “the genre of academic discourse (mastery)” (xiii). *The Differend* as a whole can be seen as the effort to show how these two discourses, economics and knowledge-mastery, are interrelated, and to what effect. For Lyotard, there are realities in experience that are incommensurable with ways of thinking about the world that emphasize efficiency and control and that disallow the time necessary for reflection. The linked quest for mastery and possession – and their corollary disavowal of uncertainty and belief – “seem fatal” to philosophy, Lyotard writes, because “reflection requires that you watch out for occurrences, that you don’t already know what’s happening. It leaves open the question: *Is this happening?*” (xv).

By contrast, the subject of academic discourse is uncomfortable with leaving open, it seems, the questions of belief that religion faces us with, the question of the relation of our knowledges to faith. Indeed, it seems haunted by the questions of faith that it disavows, and it is precisely this sort of haunted disavowal that resonates with Slavoj Žižek’s understanding of the subject in his fusion of Althusserian, post-Marxist ideology critique with Lacanian psychoanalysis. Like Hegel, Žižek sees man as an “animal sick unto death,” extorted by the “insatiable parasite” of language and logo-centric reason (4-5). The self as subject, as a

function of language, is sick unto death, because it has by definition always already fallen into believing the temptation of language, that a totalizing system of certainty in the symbolic order or an objective, complete account of reality by which all experience can be known, understood and controlled, is possible. Or, in theological language we might provocatively borrow from the Genesis account, this is a self that has eaten the forbidden fruit of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” which promises a God-like total knowledge, but which instead brings death (Genesis 2:9ff). In Žižek’s terms, the subject is therefore also perpetually plagued by a fundamental antagonism, that is, the “real-impossible kernel” of experience that eludes containment in the symbolic order. More simply, this impossible kernel is that which in experience seems to resist the totalizing, neat system, forever shadowing language and unsettling our attempts at final, abstract meaning.

Žižek’s contribution, through this melding, is to explain what eludes Althusser: that is, to show, via Lacan, how the subject is interpolated by, lured into or subjected to an ideology and its ways of desiring, in spite of all manner of thoroughgoing ideology critique. The answer for Žižek is that what we come to desire in entering a particular ideology, its notion of totality and its particular pleasures, be they those of various sexualities or of visions of political or religious utopias, is really the allure of the position that system holds open for the self as subject; the fantasy of the subject is itself the “sublime object of ideology.” In the ideologies we have come to critique as peculiarly rational and modern, that sublime, imaginary, symbolic space is for an image of the self as a whole, self-contained master. Or, again to borrow the language of the biblical account, the serpent of ideology always speaks with the same forked tongue, hissing the diabolical promise that “you shall be like God” and “you shall not surely die” (Genesis 3:5, 4).<sup>3</sup> Calculation and abstract reason (or in Lyotard’s terms, economic and academic discourses) promise mastery, we might say, and deliver subjectivity: subjection to the letter and the law, and to the endless antagonisms of gendered hierarchies—the curse of Genesis: “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you”; (3:16)—death, not life.<sup>4</sup> In this psychoanalytic reading of ideology, the full radicality of Jesus’s pronouncement makes sense, “you cannot serve both God and money” (Matthew 6:24).<sup>5</sup> Rather than the marker of all value, money (and, we should add, the secular discourses that count as academic currency) stands as the supremely tempting fruit: the allure of symbolic systems of good and evil and the God-like place for the subject they entail. It is this calculating reason propelled toward self-deification and the seductive glitter of money and master discourses that replaces the contingent fragility and faith of living relation, of walking with God and the other in the cool of the day: that casts the subject out of the relational paradise that is Eden in the Genesis account.

It is in precisely the sense of the lure “you shall be like God” that the modern subject is both adamantly secular and yet never quite leaves behind the God or the religion it defines itself as supplanting. As Hervieu-Léger puts it, though “modernity has deconstructed the traditional systems of believing,” she adds, it “has not forsaken belief,” however much it dresses up that belief as necessity and knowledge (74). The ideology of all meaning as abstract, rational knowledge seduces by virtue of the space it creates for the subject as knower *without belief*, a certainty

without the vulnerability of faith and interrelation that is the very substance of religion. In analyzing transcultural relations such as the British outlawing of religious self-torture in India, anthropologist Talal Asad demonstrates that what is at stake in secularism is not simply a matter of eliminating particular cruelties, but of “imposing an entire secular discourse of ‘being human,’” central to which are its ideas about individualism and “detachment from passionate belief.” To this way of thinking, objectivity is akin to skepticism, for “only the skeptical individual—always suspicious of his or her own beliefs as well as of others—can be truly free of fanatical convictions” (124). In Graham Ward’s related terms, by the twentieth century “secularity as such came to be associated with ‘impartiality’; as not itself an ideology but the unbiased judge of all ideologies” (126). The place through and into which the ideology of secularism interpolates subjects, then, is a fantasy position of mastery and skeptical certainty, free of belief and therefore capable of discerning the error of all other beliefs. This is why, again, as Asad puts it, “The concept of the secular cannot do without the idea of religion”; secularism must continually reinvolve the religion whose disavowal constitutes it (200).<sup>6</sup> Secularism does not, as many contemporary theorists think, “escape God” as Taylor puts it, but merely “exchanges overt faith for covert belief in the One in and through which all is understood” (76). Secularism and secular rationality, as Asad points out, have the distinction of operating as the academy’s disavowed cult of the one truth.

In *Towards a New Christianity?* Hervieu-Légér has provocatively suggested that “the process of secularization is above all a [modern] process of *reconstructing* belief” (*Religion*, 3). I suggest that the reconstruction of belief in modernity has taken place primarily through the disguising of belief, its productive mechanisms and rituals as knowledge, common sense and spontaneous desires, by the appeal it thereby extends to the subject conceived of as knower and master. The appeal of this position for the subject is, we should note, something to which religious thinkers have clearly not been immune; in fact, religious thinkers historically have been the first to succumb to it. “Enlightenment secularism,” as philosopher John Caputo has so aptly put it, is perhaps best defined as “the objectivist reduction of religion to something other than itself” (59). In ever more isolated, anxious, and potentially violent modes of being, both Enlightenment and the modern forms of religion it produces position the subject as understanding its worth in terms of knowledge and of immunity to the potential error and vulnerability of belief. This is precisely the spot where we can understand how, as a new wave of scholarship is arguing, that fundamentalism is not a primitivism but rather a product of modernity, of a modernity that to constitute its self and selves must constantly disavow its uncertainties and faiths. Absent the admission of uncertainty and of responsibility for belief, Caputo prophesies, “God and death-dealing, religion and violence, will never be far apart” (100). But Caputo also enables us to understand how secularism – an ideology of a world of facts, without belief and construction – is itself the ultimate fundamentalism. “At the core of fundamentalism,” Caputo maintains, “there lies a repressed fear that faith is only faith and as such a risk with no guarantee of anything, which is the truth about religion” – and, we should expand, about human existence in language – “to which it testifies in the mode of

repressing it” (124). This location of uncertainty, with “no guarantee of anything,” is a frightening space. This place, which Derrida in “Faith and Knowledge” calls “the desert in the desert,” may, he admits, resemble “desertification” – a destitution of the possibility of goodness, truth, or ethics metaphysically conceived – but it can also “render possible precisely what it appears to threaten” (17). As he put it in “*Mes Chances*,” “it is the principle of indeterminism” that in one way of thinking, “makes the conscious freedom of man fathomable” (8).

In other words, what the linguistic turn of philosophy in the twentieth-century has made possible is a different position from which to conduct scholarship: the chance for academic inquiry like religion rationalized in modernity to own up to the *faith* of faith: to rethink religion not as knowledge but as belief, and to explore the sense in which we might speak of the need for faith not as the shame but as the substance of religion and the ground of thought. Already a newly religious postmodernity has begun to look as much to Kierkegaard as to Nietzsche, and in rereading categories like the singular, the absolute and the religious, has begun to consider exactly how epistemological indeterminacy may be the basis of a genuinely creative, non-violent human freedom and responsibility.<sup>7</sup> If there is any non-mechanistically determined experience or genuine communion of alterities across difference, we will glimpse it, I believe, through beliefs and practices that shape a different sort of self and scholarship, not through the shoring up of the academic subject of mastery. As Hervieu-Léger suggests, the social processes that lead to the formation of self are in this sense fundamentally religious; in anthropologist Thomas Luckmann’s words, “Pushed to an extreme, everything in humanity which lies outside biological survival in its most narrowly material sense has to do with religion” (qtd. in Hervieu-Léger 35). It remains for us to discover and to invent what that means for cultural studies and for our respective disciplines.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This coda draws from sections of the introduction and conclusion, respectively, to my book, *Rituals of Spontaneity: Sentiment and Secularism from Free Prayer to Wordsworth*.

<sup>2</sup> It must be noted, however, that the past two years have been remarkable for major award-winning works that are both narratives of faith in all its unsettlingness, both from my colleagues here at the University of Iowa: Marilynne Robinson’s momentous first novel since *Housekeeping*, titled *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) was published in late 2004 and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and Christopher Merrill’s memoir *Things of the Hidden God: Journey to the Holy Mountain* (New York: Random House, 2005) was released in America in early 2005 after having already won international awards and garnered critical acclaim.

<sup>3</sup> Paraphrase. Cf. the Authorized Version and the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>4</sup> NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> Paraphrase: in the AV, “Ye cannot serve God and mammon,” and in the NRSV, “You cannot serve God and wealth.”

<sup>6</sup> Similarly Hervieu-Léger points out “the affinity that modernity has retained

with a set of religious themes to do with fulfillment and salvation, but from which it continually seeks to distance itself in order to exist as such" (3).

<sup>7</sup> See for instance the wonderful volume *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, eds. Merold Westphal and Martin Matušík.

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