Review Essay

CRITICAL METHODOLOGY AND WRITING ABOUT RELIGION AND LITERATURE

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There is clearly no shortage of new books on the broad topic of religion and literature. The books briefly noted in the first two issues of this journal alone bear witness to a relatively new and continuing effort in and beyond the Academy to deal in more rigorous fashion with the intersections of what is called—often quite vaguely—religion and the arts. Titles range from Irene Collins' Jane Austen and the Clergy, to Mary Heimann's Catholic Devotion in Victorian England, to Peter Iver Kaufman's Prayer, Despair, and Drama: Elizabethan Introspection, to Francis X. Clooney's Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology Among the Strivailsavas of South India, to Brian Ingraffia's Theory and Biblical Theology: Vanquishing God's Shadow, and on and on.

Contemporary studies include anthologies of religious poetry and prose, descriptive studies of religions, histories of theology, and, most notably, straight literary critical discourse bringing to bear the techniques of New Historicism, feminism, and cultural studies. If they have anything in common, it is a desire to move away from the didactic and appreciative tone that characterized much writing about religious literature in the past and to find ways in which the "religious" and the "aesthetic" can be seen as companionable. Yet despite these efforts there remains a great deal of
skepticism, if not hostility towards such criticism, a hostility most notably expressed in two strongly argued recent essays by Jonathan Culler in Profession, the publication of the Modern Language Association of America.

The conflict may be best understood as part of a larger exchange in the secular arena between advocates of a criticism and theory more in tune with issues of history, politics, gender, and race, and those who fear the demise of the aesthetic as the central concern of literature. Paul Fry, for example, while admiring Gerald Graff's Professing Literature, nevertheless worries that Graff places excessive emphasis on teaching the currently fashionable conflicts over these issues instead of the novel or poem at hand, regarding Graff's motto as "now inspiring the closest thing to a teaching revolution in this country since Brooks and Warren" (2). Similarly, Mark Edmundson in his Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry, using prominent contemporary critics of Romantic poetry like Marjorie Levinson and Marlon Ross as his exhibits of New Historicist and feminist theory, attempts to demonstrate "how in the work of Bloom, de Man, Derrida, and other figures in contemporary theory, there exist drives, analogous to Plato's, to demean literary art, or to subsume it in some higher form of thought." As a result, a "less celebratory, more inquisitive, more inquisitorial" approach has developed within the literary-critical establishment today (15).

In light of this debate, the two books under consideration here might very well serve as touchstones to illustrate two notably different and ultimately successful ways of writing about key linkages between the literary and the religious. For one thing, both avoid (Easterlin more so than Wendling) the pieties and appreciative tone of the past, relying on an impressive faith in the text and unusual skills in rigorous analysis instead. Nancy Easterlin's Wordsworth, and the Question of "Romantic Religion," for instance, faces the need for distance from the critical past early and directly, even before she begins her detailed examination of Wordsworth. Drawing on "research in the psychology and sociology of religion to offer an interpretation of transcendent experiences, metaphysical concerns, and conflicting beliefs" and distinguishing her interdisciplinary method from that of "poststructuralist practices" (9), she sets herself the formidable task of dealing with the word "religion" itself. She would avoid, she says, the Freudian "totalizing atheistic model or an equally totalizing model derived from orthodox commitments" (17). She finds herself—obviously partial to William James—more comfortable instead with the concept "religious experience" as the basis for her argument, something that makes her