

Book Reviews

Roger Lundin, ed. *There Before Us: Religion, Literature, and Culture from Emerson to Wendell Berry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007. 250 pp. \$18.00

The purpose of this collection is to redress, in the words of its editor, “the invisibility of religion in American literary studies” (xi). More particularly, it is to counter the fact, observed by Lawrence Buell in his essay here, that “contemporary secularized academics, which comprise a fraction of literary scholars, chronically underestimate the life-changing potential of the religious in individual lives” (234). The nine essays that compose this collection examine the realization of that potential in the lives of American writers ranging from Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Dickinson to Barry Lopez, Wendell Berry, and Leslie Marmon Silko. But they do that in a context that is larger than the literary. One of the contributions of this collection is to locate the literary in America—the project of literary expression in this national culture—in the context of practical philosophy and polity that structures the lived experience of the Americans who write and read it. In that context, American culture as experienced by these literary intellectuals since the nationally transformative years of the mid-nineteenth century is peculiarly religious. That peculiarity is

what this collection examines.

Harold Bloom eloquently describes this peculiarity in the opening lines of *The American Religion* (1992):

Freedom, in the context of the American Religion, means being along with God, or with Jesus, the American God or the American Christ. In social reality, this translates as solitude, at least in the inmost sense. The soul stands apart, and something deeper than the soul, the Real Me or self or spark, thus is made free to be utterly alone with a God who is also quite separate and solitary, that is, a free God or God of freedom. What makes it possible for the self and God to commune so freely is that the self already is of God; unlike body and even soul, the American Self is no part of the Creation, or of evolution through the ages. The American self is not the Adam of Genesis but is a more primordial Adam, a Man before there were men and women. Higher and earlier than the angels, this true Adam is as old as God, older than the Bible, and is free of time, unstained by mortality. Whatever the social and political consequences of this vision, its imaginative strength is extraordinary. (15)

That imaginative strength is not only extraordinary but also peculiar as it expresses the religious in American experience as an essential isolation, and loneliness, in the presence of God.

That may have to do with the American insistence on the autonomy of the free and equal individual. That foundational element of American religion was what de Tocqueville noticed early in the nineteenth century. "Religion in America takes no direct part in the government of society," he observes, yet "it must be regarded as the first of their political institutions; for if it does not impart a taste for freedom it facilitates the use of it," because "while the law permits Americans to do what they please, religion prevents them from conceiving, and forbids them to commit, what is rash or unjust" (305). Then come his questions, "How is it possible that society should escape destruction if the moral tie is not strengthened in proportion as the political tie is relaxed? And what can be done with a people who are their own masters if they are not submissive to Diety?" (307). This collection

might be read as answers to these questions. Americans, its essays suggest, are indeed submissive to deity, but individually and on their own terms, submissive to a deity of their own personal encounter. Indeed, that is what William James identifies in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) where he defines religion for his American readers as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine”; while from such things as “theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow,” what is essential to American religion is “the immediate personal experience” (29).

In the essays of this collection, religion is—consequently and necessarily, given its place in the national culture—defined broadly. For example, in his essay on Thoreau and *Walden* (1854), John Gatta uses Mircea Eliade’s conception of sacred space as “a spot regarded as auspicious for experiencing some opening toward the transcendent” (28), and in his essay on Twain, Harold K. Bush, Jr., relies on Clifford Geertz’s “description of religion . . . as a ‘system of symbols which acts to . . . establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods’” to discuss his subject in religious terms (142–43). Religion as it emerges in this book’s discussions of American literature is indeed primarily about sources and assertions of what de Tocqueville calls a “moral tie” that might bind together otherwise disconnected and in religious terms separately transcendent individuals who are Americans, an idea not far from what James also observes: “If religion is to mean anything definite for us, it seems to me that we ought to take it as meaning this added dimension of emotion, this enthusiastic temper of espousal, in regions where morality strictly so called can at best but bow its head and acquiesce” (43). For Americans, then, religion is not only an individual experience, but it is also so powerful in its non-rationality that the private principles that it prompts must eclipse the demands of any collective morality. Some of the ways that American religion have shaped American literature are described in the essays in this collection. Put another way, they describe American literature doing the rhetorical work of exemplifying and even asserting what Bloom calls the “imaginative strength” that follows from a conviction that Americans each and individually are engaged in a private dialectic, if not argument, with the divine.

The collection begins with Lundin’s introduction that sets out the project

of the book—addressing the under-addressed fact that the religious is indeed central to American literature: “in a period when the conversation about the role of religion in American life is too often marked with suspicion and acrimony . . . the contributors to this book seek to change the tone of that conversation” as they assert in various ways that “religion has more often been a dynamic force than a static power in American life” (xxi). Following Lundin, Barbara Packer’s essay on Emerson and Thoreau negotiates the culture of religious indifference in America, a negotiation in which Emerson in particular eventually found he could sustain his abstract and independent sort of faith no more, finally writing in 1854 that “I hope we have come to an end of our unbelief, have come to a belief that there is a Divine Providence in the world which will not save us but through our own cooperation” (22). Gatta’s essay on Thoreau’s evocation of sacred space at Walden examines “the hermeneutical breakthrough” by which Thoreau demonstrates “how nature could be read and reinterpreted imaginatively as a sacred text” in a context where science and criticism had crippled the authority of the Bible (47). Michael Colacurcio’s thorough essay on Melville’s fiction is a rich examination of what he terms Melville’s “self-constructed fault line . . . where the problem of universal defect comes face to face with the question of human obligation” (52). It ends with a description of Melville’s religious position as something like this: “I trust [God] will not destroy me for pursuing without cynicism the moral evidences that call into question our best metaphysical proofs,” a position Colacurcio describes as leaving “ample room for faith, should it ever be given” (79).

Lundin’s essay on Dickinson describes her practice of “nimble believing” by developing a clear discussion of her objections to the orthodox Protestantism of her time and place, and her efforts to develop in her writing “a way of incorporating the experience of suspicion within that of faith” (104), to the extent that “that she became one of America’s most searing poets of suspicion as well as one of our most serious poets of belief” (109). Katherine Clay Bassard’s essay on the poetry of Frances E. W. Harper is the first in the collection that deals with a writer not considered a major American literary figure. Through an examination of Harper’s work, it develops a helpful explanation of use of the Bible throughout American cultural history and the emergence of what Bassard calls a “privatized” mode of reading, particularly in the context of the debate about slavery (117). Bassard’s is one of two essays in the col-

lection that offer fresh insight into the cultural context of nineteenth-century American literature that enriches one's understanding of the milieu in which writers of the time were working.

The next essay, that by Bush, examines Twain's contributions to the sacralizing of the Civil War that was pervasive in American culture in the years following its end. It includes an extensive discussion of Twain's somewhat inaccurate reconstruction of himself as a rebellious Southerner now committed to union as well as to Abraham Lincoln's blend of faith and skepticism that, had he lived, might have countered the excesses of post-war civic religion that emerged in national public discourse during the remaining decades of the nineteenth century. M. D. Walhout's essay on American liberalism is the other very enlightening contextual study in this collection. It examines, in terms of political philosophy, the cultural assumptions from which American literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries necessarily emerged. Punctuated by discussions of the work of both William and Henry James, it enables readers to understand how the American insistence upon equality and individual freedom can both bless and curse the nation. Gail McDonald's essay on modernist poetry surprises readers with an explanation of how poetry so designated complements the social gospel movement that emerged early in the twentieth century and how Pound, H. D., and Eliot develop in their work arguments that it is "not naïve to imagine that progress toward something better was achievable" here and now (214). Buell's panoramic essay on religion and environmentalism in American literature traces both themes from the beginning of the nation's history to its present and explains their essential interdependence as discourses that share the need to transcend the magnetic forces of the material, the practical, and the present if they are to succeed.

The collection ends with Andrew Delbanco's afterword that reminds readers of what they have come to lack. "Americans," he writes, "have lost intensity, and, perhaps, integrity, in their relation to the sacred" (240). While this book can help with that, he suggests that it also exemplifies a problem: "To read the essays assembled here is . . . to keep company with solitary seekers in search of some metaphysical, or aesthetic, or political, insight that promises a transformative experience comparable to what earlier theologians had called grace" (241). This statement echoes a haunting one from de Tocqueville that ultimately expresses a profound failing of the American democratic project, one that follows from the national insistence upon those

foundational American principles, and upon equality and individual freedom. The consequences of such insistence is that “it throws [the American] back forever on himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart” (99).

This collection is a strong response to the failure of academic studies of American literature to address adequately the role of religion in the culture of the United States. It informs the reading of that literature in ways that teachers of it should incorporate in their classes, but in offering a description of that American religion it does not address the prior problem—one fundamental throughout American literature and American culture. American faith, as described in its literature, is solitary. American religion, as described there, is intensely individualistic. Without ground for community, for congregation, even faith and religion must still leave each American alone, alone with God, perhaps, but—as Bloom’s description of America’s peculiar religion makes clear—nonetheless alone. Thus, while the collection renders religion visible in American literary studies, the sort of religion that one sees there remains at the root of American problems. This religion does, as Buell observes, have the power to change individual lives but seems to have little capacity to change the common and collective life of the nation for the better.

WORKS CITED

- Bloom, Harold. *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*. New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1992.
- James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. 1902. New York: Signet, 2003.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. 1838. 2 vols. New York: Vintage, 1990. Vol. 1.

Gregory Clark
Brigham Young University

Russell Kirk. *The Essential Russell Kirk: Selected Essays*. Ed. George A. Panichas. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007. 640 pp. \$30.00.