Religion and Postmodernism

Christopher K. Coffman
Boston University

2019

Review of:

Christopher Douglas. *If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), viii + 367pp

Christopher Leise. *The Story upon a Hill: The Puritan Myth in Contemporary American Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2017), x + 210pp

Mark C. Taylor. *Rewiring the Real: In Conversation with William Gaddis, Richard Powers, Mark Danielewski, and Don DeLillo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), xiv + 322pp

The relations between religion and American politics have never been as simple as excluding matters of church from those of state, but the general trend of the first half of the twentieth century was toward an at-least-nominally secularized political arena, one in which the various manifestations of political discourse—including voting, statecraft, and policy—were regarded by all but the most vocal fundamentalist believers as best practiced independently of faith. The past two decades have seen a remarkable shift away from that secularizing trend, and toward a revival of nationalist rhetoric appealing to constituencies defined by marked religiosity. In the United States, as in many instances elsewhere, nationalist arguments are of late largely successful in these appeals, finding no small measure of support from those who have accepted the idea that American political exceptionalism is possibly grounded in some divine dispensation. While it is certainly the case that the more strident of these claims amount only to populist sophistry, it would be a mistake to adopt unthinkingly the position that faith's influence on politics is best understood as a restriction of conscience detrimental to egalitarian, democratic politics. Indeed, such a position is, in its very dismissiveness, far too unsubtle to accommodate the complex historical and present relations of American politics and American religion. While the books under review proceed with very different intentions, each offers valuable insights into how contemporary fictions illuminate the complexities, shortcomings, and contributions that derive from the entanglement of religious thought and practice with American history and politics. Perhaps more importantly, they consider fictions that at once honor faith's value for believers while turning a critical eye on the ways that it can be abused for gain by the unscrupulous. In selecting such texts for discussion, and in reading them as sensitively as they do, these three monographs model the sort of balanced viewpoint so desperately needed at the moment.

One strong connection between each of the books discussed is an interest in the dance between preserving the truth and delineating the ways it can be debased. Given that the problems they explore derive in part from efforts to reconcile individual conscience with collective inheritance, that Christopher Leise's *The Story upon a Hill: The Puritan Myth in Contemporary American Fiction* begins with a personal narrative-cum-scholarly pilgrimage to Salem is entirely appropriate. Residents of New England will know that this city turns with the approach of every October 31 into a touristic extravaganza bespeaking a mania more severe and wide-spread than anything seen in the seventeenth century. The argument of Leise's introduction, however, reveals

that local practices confuse audiences during more than one season per year. He offers consideration of several monuments, plaques, and other ostensibly accurate historical markers that echo widespread misunderstandings of the Salem witch episode of 1692—much of which, Leise explains, actually unfolded in nearby communities such as Topsfield, Andover, Beverly, and Danvers (which was, at the time, known as "Salem Village and Salem Farms," but not really part of the town of Salem itself). The Salem material demonstrates the more general point: a tendency to historical reductiveness, to misinformation both casual and serious, serves political myth-making well, but offers the American present a view of a past incompatible with concern for complexity and accuracy. Such a past is, in the case of the Salem episode in particular, one that betrays inclusiveness and diversity in service of privilege based on a falsified portrait of originary consensus.

Leise's text thence turns to its proper subject: the degree to which woefully misinformed conceptions of the colonial New English past have been explored and tested by a number of our most powerful contemporary writers. His particular focus is the term "Puritan," bandied about in any number of quarters to signify the founding population and, more importantly, originary attitudes of the United States. As Leise makes clear, this usage is abusive; "Puritan" was originally employed in a derogatory sense, and thus is unfit to describe the earliest Anglo-American colonists on their own terms; its applicability to any New World population prior to the very late seventeenth century is misrepresentative, given the variety of faiths and political opinions those populations actually present; and, it fails to capture the diversity of colonial America's immigrant population, which included peoples from Spanish, Dutch, West African, and French origins, among others. At the same time, while Leise asserts that "Puritan" is not only problematic but almost entirely inaccurate as a descriptor for any early-American population, the historical simplification carried out under its aegis indicates its value for the promotion of influential and politically efficacious visions of American exceptionalism and normative citizenship.

However valuable its unseating of this misapplied term, the real strength of Leise's book may be its readings of particular texts in relation to the myth of Puritan origins. Across its several chapters, the volume devotes significant attention to William Gaddis (by way of Nathaniel Hawthorne) as an author concerned with interrogating the ways that "historical and theological scrutiny" unveil flaws in inherited conceptions of American identity (39); Kurt Vonnegut as a means to unsettle the spurious idea, derived to no small degree from Puritan mythography, of an American ethical exceptionalism; Thomas Pynchon as one who rewrites Puritan myth as confusing and inclusive, and therefore affirmative of "positive uncertainty" (rather than of certain pessimism) (88); Marilynne Robinson's works as respectful rewritings of the Puritan legacy that find in it space for appreciative apprehensions of the complexities (both aesthetic and political, celebratory and problematic) of this world; and, Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* as a rewriting of the early American past as one of diverse voices and heritages, rather than of the monovocal vision of the Puritan myth. Leise also discusses Paul Auster and Col-

son Whitehead more briefly, and a handful of other authors in passing. While some of these figures—Pynchon and Robinson, especially—are unsurprising selections, almost every instance offers new insights. The chapter on Vonnegut is especially bold and convincing in its suggestion that we think of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a contemporary revision of the captivity narrative. Like such foundational examples as Mary Rowlandson's, Vonnegut's text provides an alternate sense of time that reconfigures suffering as explanatory justification for salvation rather than as only unnecessary tribulation and misery. Unlike some other readings of the genre, however, Leise pursues the ways Vonnegut resists aspects of the genre's logic, trading salvation and narrative resolution for pointers at ongoing, non-narrative, confusion. In so doing, he reads Vonnegut as suggesting that the past may be incomprehensible on any available terms—including those of secular humanism—that honestly assess the disorder of historical moments such as the bombing of Dresden. Even as he casts some suspicion on the likelihood that a vision of the American history resistant to reductive binaries will be devised in an antifoundationalist era, Vonnegut employs the optimism of the genre to suggest the hope, and need, that exactly that possibility could be realized if only we took a collective look back at the actual, rather than the mythologized, American past.

While the large majority of Leise's book succeeds admirably, one point of organization is somewhat unsatisfying. The penultimate chapter is wonderful in itself—linking as it does readings of texts by Whitehead and Auster with political maneuvering by Presidents Kennedy and Reagan—but seems misplaced. The critique advanced in these pages is to be applauded: as observations in recent years of trick-or-treating at Kennedy's birthplace have reminded this reviewer, myth-making in service of political power is not an activity found on only one side of partisan lines. The difficulty is that Leise's intelligent and careful consideration of presidential politics in relation to the "Puritan" should serve as part of the introduction, indicating the degree to which such political strategizing fosters the sort of problems addressed by the readings offered across the book as a whole, rather than only in relation to the comments on Whitehead and Auster.

Leise's book unveils some portion of the etiology of America's tendency to employ woefully misapprehended and / or misrepresented histories of prenational religious identity as a means to bolster political agendas. As he asserts at one point, the uncontrollable indigenous population surrounding, and unstable internal dynamics within, early Euro-American colonies produced an unease that emerged in periodic violence, whether directed outwardly (King Philip's War) or inwardly (the Salem Witch Panic). At the same time, a somewhat amorphous racial and religious identity crystallized during and after the period, one that has been taken up again during the past five decades by that subspecies of the American political animal for whom processes of exclusion are the most certain way to determine national identity. Christopher Douglas's *If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right* takes as its subject this more recent phenomenon, as it considers several of the ways that post-WWII American culture has cultivated close ties between Christian fundamentalism

and conservative politics. While it is a cultural commentary, Douglas's text is more particularly a work of literary criticism. In this sense, one recognizes that he draws on and extends recent "postsecular" critical work by Amy Hungerford and John McClure. What Douglas adds to their arguments about how postmodernism has contributed to conservative religiosity is a set of insights regarding multiculturalism's role in that process.

One dimension of Douglas's overall argument is familiar: the resurgence of conservative Christianity as a social program relies on the paradoxical conviction that political compatibility can exist between a defense of freedom of conscience on one hand (a tradition that needs defense in the age of secularism) and the advocacy of universalist—even totalizing—grounds for public policy. The position, which he labels "Christian postmodernism," suggests that the believer should be free to practice unchallenged, even as she challenges others for practices not in accord with her belief. Perhaps most innovative among Douglas's contentions is the second broad argument he presents: today's conservative Christianity and progressive multiculturalism share as a common heritage the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. For the former group, the power religion had to shape politics in the hands of someone like Dr. Martin Luther King was a lesson of two sorts: one a "grudging admiration" for the achievements of Civil Rights leaders who could articulate the religious grounds of their position in politically efficacious ways, and the other a motivation to resist the sort of liberal civil religion of the 1950s, which denied that that strong religious faith could justify the educational practices and legislative policies that preserved social institutions shaped by exclusionary dynamics pertaining to race and gender. For multiculturalists, that same post-war liberal civic religion was the enshrining of a spiritually vacuous and politically stultifying affirmation of homogeneity, one that whitewashed American difference by denying the religious authenticity of any number of faiths, from Chicano/a Catholicism to veneration of Haitian loas. In the cases of both conservative Christianity and multiculturalism, the interplay between cultural relativism and an impetus to universal political standards created a tension that served one goal well only at the expense of the other.

In presenting these arguments, Douglas looks not only at the fictions of contemporary Christian conservatism, such as the *Left Behind* series, but also at a wide variety of popular and literary fictions that reveal the degree to which the context of recent conservative religious practice in the United States has registered in the works of our authors. These readings begin with a chapter on Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible*, in which Douglas considers how that novel's tale of missionary work and relations among races suggests that religious fundamentalism in America is open to injustice in two related senses: firstly, as it frustrates pluralism (because it disparages other cultural values), and, secondly, as it promotes Western ethnocentrism (because it seeks to impose its own views in preference to those it denies). The chapter on Kingsolver works together with those on Robinson's *Gilead* and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, both of which Douglas also reads as treating religion as a matter of

cultural identity. Robinson, although a Christian writer, shares with Kingsolver an opposition to fundamentalist religion, but her response to it, Douglas argues, falls short of the mark. At the heart of the problem is an insufficiently probing consideration of the historical relations between American religion and slavery. More specifically, in attending so carefully to Christian abolitionism, and to religion as a private experience, the novel neglects both the history of religious arguments against abolitionism, and the degree to which private religion is foreign to the politically active contemporary conservative Christian. In the case of Roth, Christianity becomes a cultural construct, an identity, that can be adopted independently of faith. As a consequence, Douglas argues, the novel "fundamentally misapprehends" contemporary conservative Christianity, which may use multiculturalism as a veil to advance its agenda, but is finally displeased with any true religious pluralism. The second half of Douglas's book discusses some more popular texts (Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Carl Sagan's *Contact*), as well as Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. Douglas sees *Lot 49*, with its networks and indeterminacies, and Oedipa Maas's search for the transcendent, as mapping a "religious desire" for an alternative to a mainstream culture that is at once banal and uncertain. The novel is not, Douglas is careful to clarify, a prophetic anticipation of the conservative Christian resurgence in the decades following its publication, but a striking assessment of the confusions and desires of the historical moment that made the resurgence possible. In the case of the chapter on McCarthy, the violence of *Blood Meridian*, and the meditations of its fascinating and horrifying Judge, are for Douglas a theodical engagement with the debate between creationism and evolution. From this perspective, the novel is a study of a world in which suffering seems not merely a redemptive exercise or a punishment for sin, but an endemic characteristic. In so far as this is the case, the text demands readers reject either the (creationist) idea that the world offers signs revealing the nature of the creator or classical conceptions of God's goodness, as both cannot be compatible with the novel's vision.

Overall, Douglas's points are surprising yet convincing at first blush, and, more importantly, even more so upon consideration of the several arguments he musters in support of them throughout the volume. The result is a critical text that a reader can encounter with that sense of appreciation experienced when an author articulates a cultural condition one intuitively grasps but had never seen clearly enough to describe so well. His argument that conservative Christianity, rather than dwindling into a largely-silenced sociopolitical undercurrent, profited from assumptions entirely compatible with both multiculturalism and postmodernism in its recovery from the decline of social religiosity evident in America after the 1930s is an illuminating perspective on forces that have increasingly defined our cultural moment. Indeed, if there is any fault to be found in Douglas's text, it is that he did not manage to imagine just how successful the Christian postmodernism he describes would become within months of the publication of his book. As post-fact, post-truth discourse is rampant, and the most disheartening populist impulses regnant, even the most extreme associations in

If God Meant to Interfere seem not to go far enough in their vision of the challenges US religious practice presents to democratic politics.

Mark C. Taylor's *Rewiring the Real*, the seventh book in Columbia's "Religion, Culture, and Public Life" series (of which Taylor is a co-editor), takes rather a different tack from Leise or Douglas, although it shares their interest in the relations between spiritual concerns and contemporary American culture. It is of course difficult to overstate the degree to which Taylor's earlier work has already shaped scholarship devoted to a variety of topics at the intersection of cultural studies and theology, a point evident in the consideration his work, particularly *After God* (2007), is given in both Leise's and Douglas's books. The contexts for Taylor's remarks in *Rewiring the Real* are several, and he acknowledges the primary ones. In one sense, the book is a companion to his earlier *Refiguring the Spiritual: Beuys, Barney, Turrell, Goldsworthy* (2012), which looks at the work of four visual artists who encourage their audiences to see aspects of our culture, particularly those aspects that have some bearing on its religious sensibilities, that are difficult to recognize. Like that earlier book, this one also deals with one dead (Gaddis) and three living (Powers, Danielewski, DeLillo) figures, the latter of whom seem to have inherited the world anticipated by their predecessor. Another framework for the text is Taylor's interest in the degree to which art and philosophy have informed one another since the publication of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (re)turned the attention of philosophy to art in late-nineteenth-century Jena, where gathered such luminaries as Schleiermacher, Schiller, the Schlegels, Hölderlin, and Novalis. Taylor asserts early in his text that "philosophy has lost its way," becoming "more and more about less and less," and *Rewiring the Real* is an attempted correction that proceeds by making "philosophy ... more artful and art more philosophical" as a means "to create a new opening for the religious imagination" (11). In short, the challenge Taylor sees our culture as having issued to the engaged thinker is nothing less than the recovery of spiritual life in the age of technology, via the revivification of connections between art and philosophy (including especially those connections relevant to the philosophy of religion, which might better be understood as the province of theology). His response to this challenge is a book that finally works like nothing so much as an experiment in the form of literary criticism, "experiments that begin on, migrate from, and return to the page as we have known it in the past" (11). As this remark suggests, there is a certain progression by digression in Taylor's book, as he moves among fiction, textual interpretation, autobiographical passages, and images in a fashion that reminds one that the essay as a form was born as a written exploration rather than a telic activity.

Taylor covers an admirable amount of ground. A chapter on Gaddis, focusing on *The Recognitions*, reveals how that book repeatedly collapses binaries into a "nonsynthetic third" term, which joins without uniting its predecessors (13). His argument concerns particularly the tension between the widespread unbelief of the technological present and the cultural recollection of faith. A chapter on Powers primarily discusses *Plowing the Dark*, reading the novel's dual narratives as evidence that some central mystery will remain forever elusive, a concealment of a transcendent spirituality approached in the

novel via the two paths of isolated contemplation and collective technological enterprise. His chapter on Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is also concerned with mystery, especially the novel's house that is bigger on the inside than on the outside. For Taylor, this is a figuration of the divine, which is endlessness itself revealed by means of a false container. While each of these chapters has much to recommend it, the chapter on DeLillo's work, which is largely concerned with portions of *Underworld*, is perhaps the best example of Taylor's approach. It begins with a fiction, a rewriting of the end of *Point Omega*. This fiction is followed by a shorter critical section, one that reasonably positions the novel in relation to the transition from Cold War to post-Cold War America, particularly insofar as that transition occurred simultaneously with the development of new media technologies and is at least somewhat comprehensible in relation to Marxism. Most of the remainder of the chapter is given over to a sequence that alternates between autobiography—beginning with Taylor's childhood interest in baseball, including the player Andy Pafko—and reflection on the novel. The blend of the two genres is so extensive that a description of the chapter as belletristic philosophy is perhaps more accurate than is "literary criticism." An epilogue both extends the reflections on the novel and returns us to Taylor's biography, as his own endeavors creating earthwork art are brought into dialogue with material already introduced in consideration of DeLillo's text.

Taylor caps his book with an extended conclusion, one that situates his literary-critical readings in the context of tensions that shape thinking within several fields: that between ontological and cosmological theologies, analytic and continental philosophies, modern and postmodern critical theory, and so forth. Insofar as the positions delineated by such terms are those that have tacitly shaped the preceding chapters, one wishes somewhat for their presentation in the introduction, where a more explicit declaration of the book's conceptual framework would be welcome. On the other hand, given that Taylor contends that philosophy has blinded itself to important questions, especially in the wake of the logical positivism of figures such as Carnap, the advisability of opening certain philosophical problems via engagements with select literary texts would seem to be justified, insofar as those encounters proceed via hesitations, recursions, and openings, rather than the more conventional methods of linear argument.

As the above comments suggest, readers must approach Taylor's book on its own terms if they are to enjoy its virtues. Those dissatisfied by lines of inquiry that seem to aim for no particular end will encounter much frustration, although such readers will likewise overlook the way that the divine Taylor conceives may only be able to reveal itself when processes of representation and comprehension are breaking down. Even for readers willing to follow the sometimes-idiosyncratic paths that Taylor's thinking takes, a few disappointments will arise. Perhaps in the interest of highlighting the freshness of his approach, he offers less critical context than scholarly books typically do. As a consequence, one senses the palimpsest of one earlier critic here, and another there, synthesized by the force of Taylor's acumen into new arrangements, but left nevertheless unnoted. This is a risky move, in that he seems to expect readers to trace

their own paths through the scholarly thickets, rather than offering the very reasonable courtesy of pointing out some of the routes that led him to the conclusions he presents. Too, there is a need for more careful proofing: "Schlegel" is misspelled early in the text (4), and Simon Rodia appears throughout as Simon "Rodina"—an error that may especially trouble readers who recall that "Simon" was not even the artist's actual given name, as DeLillo reminds readers in one of the several passages in *Underworld* that mention the Watts Towers (e.g., *Underworld*, 277). This latter problem is particularly perplexing in a text that attempts to grapple with post-1945 American literature, given the well-known remarks on the Towers by Thomas Pynchon. Ultimately, Schlegel and Rodia are recognizable in spite of the mistakes, but one wonders about what may be regarded as other oversights, such as why Taylor decided against including a chapter on the eminently-suitable Pynchon, or why he does not mention William T. Vollmann even though the long fiction at the start of his chapter on DeLillo employs settings (Slab City, Salvation Mountain) to which no other American novelist has given so much attention. While this reviewer finally applauds Taylor's attempts to reinvigorate intellectual efforts in a variety of fields simultaneously, in part via experiments with the form of scholarly writing, some qualification of this praise should be kept in mind on the part of those who will likely be less patient in their assessments.

Finally, the three texts under consideration here are recommended for the diversity of informed perspectives they bring to considerations of American religion, and religious thought in America, during an historical moment in which our culture seems increasingly in need of clarification and careful reflection on such matters. The problems they identify are to some extent not entirely unique to American literature—writers from any culture deal with its foundational myths and the role of religious belief and practice in shaping their culture—but the nature and implications of these problems assume forms in America that have been uniquely shaped by our past, from the exceptionalism of our mythic Puritanism, to the Cold-War rhetoric of the "godless Reds," and beyond. Taken together, these studies offer valuable insights into the ways that America abuses its religious history, is shaped by contradictions in its convictions, and sacrifices spiritual awareness to instrumental thinking. While scholarly exercise alone will not serve as a full corrective, these texts enliven the critical enterprise and provide intellectual grounds for the ongoing work of moderating religious extremism without sacrificing the spiritual.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Christopher K. Coffman
Boston University
Religion and Postmodernism
2019

Orbit: A Journal of American Literature 7(1). <doi.org/10.16995/orbit.1349>