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978-0-521-85650-8 - Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel

Pericles Lewis

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THE MODERNIST NOVEL

The modernist period witnessed attempts to explain religious experience in non-religious terms. Such novelists as Henry James, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Franz Kafka found methods to describe through fiction the sorts of experiences that had traditionally been the domain of religious mystics and believers. In *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, Pericles Lewis considers the development of modernism in the novel in relation to changing attitudes to religion. Through comparisons of major novelists with sociologists and psychologists from the same period, Lewis identifies the unique ways that literature addressed the changing spiritual situation of the early twentieth century. He challenges accounts that assume secularization as the main narrative for understanding twentieth-century literature. Lewis explores the experiments that modernists undertook in order to invoke the sacred without directly naming it, resulting in a compelling study for readers of twentieth-century modernist literature.

PERICLES LEWIS is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Yale University. His past publications explore the development of modern literary forms in a period of political and social instability and include *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel* (Cambridge, 2000) and *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge, 2007).

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## *Contents*

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i>
1 Churchgoing	I
2 God's afterlife	23
3 Henry James and the varieties of religious experience	52
4 Marcel Proust and the elementary forms of religious life	81
5 Franz Kafka and the hermeneutics of suspicion	111
6 Virginia Woolf and the disenchantment of the world	142
7 The burial of the dead	170
<i>Notes</i>	193
<i>Select bibliography</i>	223
<i>Index</i>	232

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Acknowledgments*

I have often thought that, despite their shortcomings, universities provide something like the sense of belonging to those who inhabit them that the “gathered churches” may have afforded the New England Puritans. They lack perhaps the sense of a sustaining purpose provided by a belief in an almighty power; the trustees do not quite inspire such awe. Nonetheless, especially in departments of literature, universities provide sacred texts and offer plenty of opportunity for sectarian strife. Academics tend to imagine themselves as a saving remnant of what the Puritans called “visible saints” in the midst of a fallen world. And what is tenure but a modern covenant of the elect? Along the way, of course, there is frequent occasion for the self-doubt that plagued the true Calvinist.

Yale University was founded over three hundred years ago to combat the doctrinal backsliding already apparent at Harvard. Although some of its congregants will complain that a Puritan ethos still lingers at Yale, I have found in the departments of English and Comparative Literature, perhaps not a city on a hill, but a particularly hospitable environment for the research and writing that have culminated in this book. Other religions come to mind as well, of course. Many a literary critic has romanticized the life of the Talmudic scholar, and universities provide degrees of hierarchy and rites of passage worthy of the Catholic Church. Over the last decade of initiation, I have accumulated many debts, which can be only partly redeemed, even in a lengthy note of acknowledgement.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgments*

vii

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85650-8 - Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel

Pericles Lewis

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

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Max Weber claimed to be "absolutely unmusical religiously," and I feel the same way. I therefore had to learn a great deal from those with first-hand knowledge of religious experiences and institutions, and I am grateful to many friends for conversations that sometimes may have felt to them like discussing a landscape with a blind man. As always, I am conscious of my deep obligation to my family. My children, parents, sisters, in-laws, nieces, and nephews manifested their love and concern during both difficult and happy times. They also gave me insight into the varieties of religious experience. This book is lovingly dedicated to my wife, Sheila Hayre. On our shared pilgrimage, we have endeavored, in our own heterodox way, to achieve the detachment from worldly concerns characteristic of Siddhartha and to celebrate the illusoriness of this world, Maya.