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Introduction

In the first half of the twentieth century, French philosopher Simone Weil wrote: "Workers need poetry more than bread. They need that their life should be a poem. They need some light from eternity. Religion alone is able to be the source of such poetry."[1]

Weil was not naïve, and she penned these words with open eyes. She had seen poverty, injustice, and impending war. She was not given to conventional religious or aesthetic sentiments. Yet against her own inclinations, she had found herself drawn to God and to spiritual practices – indeed to a reorientation of her life – although she never formally became a member of a religious community. Her essays, notebooks, and letters remain a testament to her desire for light and her efforts to become attentive to God in the lives of other people, in liturgical and everyday rituals, and in the beauty of an often-marred world.

The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion begins by acknowledging, with Weil, that human beings need poetry and they need religion, and these two needs are intimately conjoined. It offers a *companion* for those who want to read literature and religion within the same intellectual and affective frame. It is not a handbook or guide or survey; it makes no pretense of offering a comprehensive map to either of those capacious fields "literature" and "religion," nor of delimiting their boundaries. Rather, as a companion, it invites us to consider how acts of reading that take both literature and religion seriously may illuminate our encounter with texts, authors, other readers, and the world itself.

The tasks assigned to the writers of each chapter were straightforward, although they were not easy: reflect on your assigned topic, treat with equal rigor literary and religious concerns, and explicate one or more literary works. In other words, each author was asked to undertake an act of reading that incorporated at least one literary text and one religious tradition, however broadly or narrowly "literary" and "religious" might be construed.

1.

The decision to offer a companion that illustrates some of the varied interrelationships of literature and religion, rather than a volume that provides a comprehensive map of their terrain, was not mere modesty. It was realism. Individually considered, "literature" and "religion" are each enormous academic fields; together they constitute a vast landscape of inquiry, enlarged by the generative and problematic conjunction that links them.

In the past hundred years, "and" has proven an hospitable word, inviting scholars to consider every period of literary history, every genre, every national literature and subset thereof in relationship to a variety of religious traditions. It is not difficult to find conference papers, articles, and books on Shakespeare and religion, the influence of Buddhism on modernist texts, the turn to religion in contemporary fiction, postsecularity, Islam and emerging African writers, and the like. There appear to be few boundaries in the landscape inscribed by literature and religion; so long as a critic can demarcate a text, an author, or a methodology as having literary and religious concerns or, converting absence into presence, as resisting literary and religious interests, she is welcome to join the conversation.

Yet this generative, hospitable "and" also obscures the problematic genealogies of the terms that it links. The categories of "literature" and "religion," as we understand them today, have troubled histories, the former originating in the eighteenth century to become a field of study in the nineteenth-century research university, the latter emerging as part of the intellectual project to find a universal essence among various faith traditions. "Religion" is particularly worrisome because, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith noted in *The Meaning and End of Religion*,[2] it deformed the earlier sense of the word, which designated practices of piety and worship, into a label for abstract structures of beliefs. A universal essence called "religion" could now be studied via its instantiation in various "religions," each of which more or less conformed to the ideal. The *practice* of religion thus became the *study* of religion or religions, a homogenizing and universalizing move that was often resisted by practitioners of a particular faith tradition, "those who live their culture immediately," to borrow Slavoj Žižek's turn of phrase.[3]

Recent work by scholars of world religions has continued the critique. Talal Asad, for instance, astutely reads the genealogy of religion as a modern historical object that takes Christian conceptual frameworks as its norm and yet dismisses earlier instantiations (for instance, the values of physical pain and self-abasement) as archaic.[4] The universalizing of concepts formed by the values of liberal democracies, theological modernism, and a critical reason that casts religion as a private rather than public discourse

perpetrates an intellectual imperialism that distorts not only non-Western religions but also many historical and contemporary Christian communities of faith. From a philosophical perspective, Paul Griffiths argues in *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion*[5] that to be religious means to give a religious account of the world that is marked by three elements: it is comprehensive; it concerns issues of central importance for human thriving; and it is unsurpassable, by which he means that a practitioner holds a religious account as true in a deep and fundamental way not just for herself but for others as well. Although "account" might be read as abstract belief, Griffiths intends for it to be understood in more richly embodied ways. To offer a religious account, therefore, is not merely to articulate its contours but rather to engage its ritual practices, sensibilities, cultural mores, ethics, and forms of piety, as well as its beliefs.

Despite the difficulty of defining religion, the term can still serve as a useful placeholder to designate what social scientists call "communities of belief and practices oriented around claims about the ultimate grounds of existence."[6] Although this definition sounds austere, its acknowledgment that religion concerns real people, in social groups, who both believe and act in purposeful ways that engage matters of ultimate significance goes some way towards relieving the Western Academy's predilection for conceptual analysis, critical distance, and the privatization of religion.

In addition to problems of scope and genealogy, the "and" of literature and religion has also signaled an ambiguous and unstable hybrid. What precisely constitutes the relationship between the two terms? Should we talk, for instance, about religion and literature, about literature and religion, or about religion in literature, to name just three possibilities? Are we interested in a religious reading of a literary text? A theological reading? A literary reading of a sacred text? An exposition of the ways in which a religious culture has shaped a particular author or text? A theologically inflected literary theory or cultural criticism? All of these approaches and more have been embraced – and rigorously critiqued – under the generous rubric of "the study of literature and religion."

And yet despite these problems, the academic study of literature and religion continues to flourish. A brief survey of its institutional history in the Anglophone world may serve as illustration. In 1950, the Divinity School at the University of Chicago established a graduate program in Theology and Literature, followed in subsequent years by programs at Vanderbilt, the University of Virginia, and other schools in North America. In 1956, the Conference on Christianity and Literature was organized, and twenty years later its members, along with other interested faculty, proposed Religious Approaches to Literature (now the Forum on Religion and Literature) as a

formal entity within the Modern Language Association. In 1977, *NDEJ: A Journal of Religion in Literature* (now *Religion and Literature*) began publication, and ten years later the British journal *Literature and Theology* published its first issue. Although some academic programs in literature and religion have closed their doors, others have opened in recent years, including the Literature and Religion Research Network in the Institute of Advanced Study at the University of Warwick, the Society for Religion and Literature at Durham, which morphed into the International Society for Religion, Literature and Culture in 2000, and the Centre for the Study of Literature, Theology and the Arts at the University of Glasgow. Seminaries, such as the Graduate Theological Union in California, offer advanced degrees in Art and Religion, and the American Academy of Religion hosts an Arts, Literature, and Religion section. Many universities and seminaries offer individual courses and encourage research in literature and religion, outside of formal degree programs. Washington University in St. Louis now lists Literature and Religion as one of its focal "interests and approaches," and as recently as May 2012 the University of California at Irvine held an inaugural conference for the study of literature and religion.

This brief institutional history is exemplary, not exhaustive, but it suggests both the capaciousness of the field "literature and religion" and its current vitality, despite the definitional difficulties. It also points to two default positions in the current configuration of the academic field of "religion and literature": a preponderance of Anglophone scholarship and a decided tilt toward texts and theories that are inflected by Western Christianity and its aftermaths, traditionally Protestantism but more recently Roman Catholicism as well.

2.

This *Companion* reflects, in the selection of texts and religious traditions considered in its chapters, the dominance of both American-British literature and Western Christianity in the contemporary Academy. At the same time, however, it is alert to the dangers of assuming that these default positions are either necessary or self-defining. Nearly every chapter wrestles with questions of definition and plots its own position with some care. Rather than considering "religion" as an abstract or universal entity, authors articulate and speak from within particular dharmic or Abrahamic traditions, which they seek to explain and illustrate. Selected literary texts are understood to be exemplary, not canonical. Even the notion of religion and literature as an academic "field," with its concomitant implications of tidy boundaries, tight furrows, and predictable harvests is questioned. Readers should not assume

a uniform set of assumptions, terms, theories, or texts nor agreement among the authors. Readers can expect a stance that deeply engages both literary and religious concerns within the same frame of reference.

Because one of the crucial interstices within the discourse of literature and religion lies at the point of reading practices, Part I examines three perspectives on the act of reading: theological, confessional, and postsecular, asking what work each term can do to map the relationships among texts, authors, and readers. Part II takes up a set of topics that are particularly suggestive when appropriated by both literary and religious sensibilities: ethics, dwelling, imagination, sacrifice, and repetition. These chapters allow readers to eavesdrop as thoughtful critics engage texts within an intellectual and affective frame that embraces both religion and literature. Parts I and II are largely informed by the Abrahamic religions, particularly Christianity. Part III of the *Companion*, however, invites authors to reflect on particular practices, beliefs, and religious traditions within and beyond the Abrahamic religions and overtly to challenge the categories of "religion" and "literature." These chapters seek to counter the modernist paradigm of reducing religious particularity to instantiations of an abstracted religious essence and to offer fresh perspectives on the enterprise of religion and literature from inside various faith traditions.

3·

In "Theological Reading," the first chapter in Part I, Rowan Williams asks whether we might rehabilitate theological readings in the twenty-first century, not as statements of dogma but as harbingers of language that allow us to seek the face of God and the face of other human beings. He wonders why three British plays produced since 2006 – David Edgar's *Written on the Heart*, Mick Gordon and A.C. Grayling's *On Religion*, and Alexi Kaye Campbell's *The Faith Machine* – have so insistently conjoined the cultural memory of religion with anxieties about the inability of contemporary language to do justice to our full humanity. "What does a thoroughgoing secularity prohibit us from saying?" he asks, "and why is the resultant discourse not nearly enough?" Perhaps it is not nearly enough because the world we inhabit is "deeper and more troubling" than we have acknowledged it to be and, despite our manipulations, has proved to be replete with "obligations and relations we have not chosen." Theological reading, Williams suggests, may educate us to see in texts this deeper, more troubling, and richer world. A world that exceeds us, a world of gift, requires not merely technological but theological and imaginative language, which is most potent when it is most evocative.

James Matthew Wilson, on the other hand, proposes in his chapter on "Confessional Reading" a robust return to the transcendental triad – truth, beauty, and goodness – as the necessary guarantor of art. He argues through a reading of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and a reconsideration of the New Criticism that trying to protect aesthetics by excluding the seemingly extraneous categories of truth and goodness evacuates art of its substance, reducing it to mere subjective feelings. If we want to retain beauty, he concludes, we will need its companions truth and goodness. As Wilson demonstrates throughout the chapter, all readings, including the most avowedly secular, are confessional, in that they proceed necessarily on the basis of prior assumptions. What he argues is that the transcendental triad, which is congruent with although not necessarily predicated on religious belief, provides the basis for a more deeply aesthetic experience of the text, as well as one more attentive to the beauty of its surface. For Wilson, because faith does not stop short of the fact of God, it "jams open the gates," allowing human reason to plumb the depths of aesthetic, metaphysical, and theological forms "without confusing them or leaving any of them behind in the process, in a dynamic and fruitful communication."

Zhange Ni poises her consideration of "Postsecular Reading" between theological and confessional readings. As she notes, "Postsecular reading follows theological reading to challenge the hegemonic universalism of 'secular' reason and joins confessional reading to address the failures of the protectionist exclusionism of 'secular' aesthetics." Ni, like Williams and Wilson, is suspicious of the easy dichotomy between the "religious" and the "secular." But she challenges both traditional religions and canonical literature in her reading of the popular *Hunger Games* trilogy. Wilson's universal categories do not sit easily with the postsecular investment in fluidity, multiplicity, angular particularities, and non-Western habits of thought and life, as well as its critical focus on the intertwining of politics and religion. Through an examination of the two "secular sacreds" in the *Hunger Games* – the modern liberal state and the autonomous individual – and the failed bildungsroman of its heroine, Ni explores the possibility of alternative spiritualities that the novel trilogy never fully achieves.

4·

Part II holds up five resonant terms to religious and literary scrutiny: ethics, dwelling, imagination, sacrifice, and repetition. Though distinct in methodology and scope, the chapters together offer a tapestry of readings in which religious and literary concerns interweave, modify, and enrich one another.

Susan Felch triangulates among religion, literature, and ethics under the rubric of the human desire for purity. She reads Mary Gordon's novel *Pearl* and its predecessors, the medieval Pearl poem and Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark," as quests for purity that are both deeply ingrained in the human soul and that can go horribly awry. Within the Christian tradition that marks these three works, ethics alone, whether understood as the fulfillment of obligation or the cultivation of virtuous habits, is insufficient for a good life. The desire for purity, an "extravagance that exceeds the economy of dutiful actions," reveals a desire to live well within a capacious divine-human relationship in response to God's call. It also reveals the desire for religion's excess, the "something more" that the merely secular, as Rowan Williams notes, cannot adequately say. Purity, Felch notes, "repositions ethical decision-making by changing the question from 'What should I do?' to 'What is asked of me?'" Spelling out what might be asked of me is the task undertaken by these writers, who deal in all the messy particulars of fictional lives that mirror lives in the world. Novels, short stories, and narrative poems, as Mary Gordon puts it, dwell amidst "the sheer difficulty of actual human deliberation."

It is these arts of dwelling that are explored by Julia Lupton in Chapter 5, as she juxtaposes Heidegger's essay "Building Dwelling Thinking," Shakespeare's late play *Pericles*, and the biblical book of Jonah to consider how human bonds are established "out of and around our requirements for shelter, sustenance, and succor." These bonds draw on lines of affiliation with the *mishkan* and temple of the Hebrew Bible, the *ecclesia* of the New Testament, and the intimate, indwelling exchanges of the Eucharist, but also act to "reclaim institutionalized sacred spaces and sacred times for common use." In particular, Lupton thinks through the contingency, sojourning, and estrangement that thread their way through the biblical stories, *Pericles*, and the openness to the divine created by Heidegger's "four-fold" schematic as pointing toward human dwellings that shelter and sustain but that also make room for political plurality, creativity, and openness. These are dwellings that "edify," that constitute "a form of daily theology," and we come to understand them as we allow the spheres of religion and literature to modify one another. To dwell well, Lupton concludes, "is to inhabit one's world with a sense of purpose, modesty, and gratitude; to live lightly in the structures that lend us a sense of duration; to use the opportunities for deliberation, exchange, and collective problem-solving that our architecture affords us; and to acknowledge and attempt to redress the forms of displacement that fund every act of place-making through works of justice and love."

Displacement, dwelling, justice, and love are certainly critical elements in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, which Matthew Potts reads in Chapter 6.

But Potts focuses attention on our too easy commerce with the word "imagination." Useful as it has come to be in bridging literary and religious reflection, imagination – the making sense of received images and signs – especially in *Beloved* is fraught. The novel, Potts claims, is "about the task of imagining a liveable future while burdened by the weight of a dead past." But such a task is beyond the capacity of the protagonist Sethe, whose "devious brain" is locked into the memory of her young daughter's death. Although it is possible to read the interventions of other characters in the novel as attempts to release Sethe and allow her to move through imaginative recall to healing, truth, and a future, Potts wants us to reckon with "the costly and unavoidable consequences" of imagination. What, he asks, is to prevent an imagined truth from exacting a heavy toll on real bodies? This is the question that lingers at the end of *Beloved*: has a ghost been exorcised or has another young woman been sacrificed? Has imagination found a way to heal or only to repeat the trauma of the past? Is it possible, in fact, that the novel both serves as a warning against imagining into reality our own desires and leaves us to consider "the absolute intractability of sacrifice"?

The sacrifices that thrum though *Beloved*, those thrust upon the characters and those undertaken willingly, are troubling to contemporary readers. In Chapter 7, Michon Matthiesen acknowledges that sacrifice is often seen as "a symptom of the pathological suffering, violence, and abuse that either should be expunged from religion" or as reason enough to abandon religious traditions, especially Christianity with its theology of the cross. Through her reading of *A Prayer Journal* and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," however, Matthiesen argues that Flannery O'Connor demonstrates "the productive and transformative potential" of redemptive suffering and sacrifice, even or rather especially in a Western therapeutic culture. O'Connor herself read the Spanish Carmelites, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, and Thomas Aquinas, and through their mediation learned to discipline her aesthetic and spiritual practices. Matthiesen demonstrates that the painful purification O'Connor sought as a means of coming closer to God was as productive for her art as for her spiritual life. Indeed, her artistic vocation was part, although not the whole, of her spiritual vocation, and her stories sought to depict the potential for healing – recognized or not – that may come through painful suffering, even death. As Matthiesen concludes, using O'Connor's own words, "If suffering is a 'healing' that leads the person to their highest good, earthly life takes on 'the character of a hospital; and death has something of the nature of a discharge from that hospital.'"

In the Christian tradition, prayer is sometimes called "the sacrifice of praise." Susannah Monta, in Chapter 8, examines the uses of repetition in

prayer, liturgy, and poetry, seeing it as a point of convergence that allows both literature and religion to retain their own integrity while bringing them into close relationship "through traits, habits, practices, and qualities central to each." Repetition, she points out, "structures and motivates religious ritual," which recalls and reenacts significant moments in a religious tradition and also renews and sustains tradition by re-presenting practices or holy lives that are meant to be imitated. The repetition of sounds, stress, words, and lines, as well as the use of allusion and other less-exact forms of repetition, are integral to literary texts and work particularly to break patterns of linear time and to make readers aware of their "polytemporal commitments." Monta's reading of three devotional lyrics, the medieval "Suddenly Afraid," Robert Herrick's seventeenth-century "His Litany to the Holy Spirit," and Mary Sidney's translation of Psalm 150, show how "repetition may serve as a fine-grained, embodied, practice-based way to talk about tradition and traditioning, and about the interplay between the universal and the particular." Even in literature that is not overtly religious, she suggests, repetition may serve to "broach religious horizons, insofar as it raises questions about temporality and finitude, ritual performance, permanence and change, origins and originality, the givenness of language, and the nature and possibilities of meaning."

5·

At the conclusion of Part II, Susannah Monta warns against "the academic domestication of religious poetry as simply historical artifact," a warning heeded by the writers in Part III. Each chapter in this section explicates a particular dharmic or Abrahamic religious tradition – or rather one or more of its strands, since no faith tradition is homogenous – as it intersects with literary texts generated from within that tradition. Although the authors are careful to contextualize literary works within their religious and cultural milieus, they do not encapsulate these works in fossilized environments. Given the large archives of literary works inflected by various religious traditions, it behooves us to learn how better to read them; at the same time, however, local reading practices often generate productive encounters with other, more distant literatures as they challenge assumptions, raise new interpretive questions or reinvigorate old ones, and suggest alternative modes of intellectual inquiry.

In Chapter 9, Cleo Kerns interrogates both Western ways of reading Hindu texts and the word "Hinduism" itself. Counterintuitively, she argues that modern attempts to discard the term "Hinduism" as a Western fiction are themselves a form of Orientalism that position Indian religion as a

polytheistic "other" against the West's unitary monotheism, a distortion of both religious traditions. Positively, she urges readings of Hindu texts, including the popular Bhagavad Gita, that recognize aesthetic experience as an invitation to immediate apprehension of the divine. As she notes, some forms of Hindu art "are regarded as sufficient and effective forms of spiritual practice in themselves," in contrast to much of Western art that finds itself – at least at times – in tension with the Abrahamic religions. In fact, to separate the "sacred" from the "secular" in Hindu literature is to miss the point that the interactions of religion and literature are often symbiotic as they engage the principle of *maya*, or illusion, the awakening from illusion, and the realization of the ontological identity of the deep self with the divine. Art itself can precipitate spiritual awareness, and Kearns shows how *kavya* a classical literary genre, and the traditional aesthetic theory of *rasa* provide the vocabulary and conceptual rigor for understanding the interplay of affective, intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual experiences within and beyond Hindu literature.

Richard Payne's analysis of Buddhist literature in Chapter 10 similarly begins by noting that Buddhist texts "require readers to become familiar with cultural traditions and reading practices markedly divergent from their own," and he urges readers to resist the temptation to universalize religious themes. Because many of the often anthologized Buddhist texts have been chosen for their apparent congruence with core Western values and then misread through those same lenses, Payne offers a primer on reading/performing a lesser known genre: the tantras, which give a central place to prescriptive ritual practices and which eschew the large philosophic questions of Western religion and its dominant narrative of Edenic creation, fall into sin, and return to paradise. Rather than a moral narrative structure, Buddhist texts construct an epistemic narrative of ground (ignorance), path (training), and goal (the realization of impermanence). In the Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-tantra, ground and goal are seen as one, such that the path becomes not an awakening to the reality of impermanence but rather the making real to the practitioner that he or she has already been awakened. The appropriate reading practice for the tantra is, therefore, a ritual technology of gesture and speech, the latter understood not semantically as sounds that convey linguistic information but rather as a cosmogenic force. Such rituals, Payne concludes, enable "practitioners to realize their own body, speech, and mind as identical with the body, speech, and mind of a buddha," as they cultivate a religious reading sensibility suitable to the tantra and its cultural context.

Both Kearns and Payne point out that the sacred texts of the dharmic traditions have porous boundaries, unlike the bounded texts of the Hebrew