PREFACE

As the discourse of contemporary cultural studies has brought questions of race, nationality, and gender to the center of the critical enterprise, there is in some circles a strong sense that religion, or perhaps religious experience, should likewise command the attention of the academic and of the larger critical community. Certainly one important aspect of the cultural situation of men and women—from primitive to modern and postmodern societies—has been the response to or questioning of some higher force or power beyond the quotidian. It need not be the special language of Christian or Jew or Moslem or Buddhist, although such traditions have produced their own special stories. It may even be the wildly exuberant quest of André Gregory of the remarkable screenplay *My Dinner With André* for a purpose in his life, for a new kind of experience that required his learning “how you can go through a looking-glass into another kind of perception, in which you have that sense of being united to all things, and suddenly you understand everything.”

Or it may be the more measured response of the physicist Sir Arthur Eddington in *The Nature of the Physical World*:

We all know that there are regions of the human spirit untrammelled by the world of physics. In the mystic sense of the creation around us, in the expression of art, in a yearning towards God, the soul grows upward and finds the fulfillment of something implanted in its nature. The sanction for this development is within us, a striving born with consciousness of an Inner Light proceeding from a greater power than ours. Science can scarcely question this sanction, for the pursuit of science springs from a striving which the mind is impelled to follow, a questioning that will not be suppressed.

Whether this force or presence becomes the occasion for some sort of institutional configuration or for some less formal, more

personal expression of celebration, adoration, petition, or even doubt or loss, it has certainly found articulation, however fleeting at times, in the metaphor or symbol of story, drama, or poem. Whether one sees the passage from ritual to art as progress or decline, says J. Robert Barth, s.j., in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, “it remains true that religion has continued to be seen as part of the poetic experience. While no one would claim an identity of religion and poetry, a relationship between them has often been affirmed, even as new theories of poetry have emerged.”

It may be that the subject requires no elaborate discussion. Weren't the origins of the great Greek tragedies—with their rare blending of music, dance, and poetry—ultimately religious, part of celebrations honoring the god Dionysus? Haven't the earliest prayers and stories of the Bible taken a poetic form, finding in language and imagery a way to translate the untranslatable, to articulate the heart's deepest desires? The larger question perhaps relates to the compatibility or companionability of literature and religious experience. To what extent do they intersect? When does one so dominate the other as to rob it of its integrity? What is it that accounts for an abundance of simply bad religious literature? Should artist and priest, art and theology simply go their separate ways?

There are, of course, impressive voices that have recognized problems and raised objections. Samuel Johnson, a Church of England man and a major Enlightenment literary figure, contended in a famous passage in his *Life of Edmund Waller* that “the ideas of Christian theology are too simple for eloquence, too sacred for fiction and too majestic for ornaments.” And William Wordsworth, lover of nature and one of the great Romantic poets, while finding an “affinity between religion and poetry,” nevertheless contended that “no poetry has been more subject to distortion than that species the argument and scope of which is religious; and no lovers of art have gone further astray than the pious and the devout.” Even T. S. Eliot, whose *Four Quartets* strike many readers as major works of religious art, in his early-career essay “Religion and Literature,” described the religious poet as one “who is dealing with a confined part of the subject matter: who is leaving out what men consider their major passions and thereby confessing their ignorance of them.” And Jonathan Culler, distinguished contemporary theorist and critic, has taken

a remarkable tack in his sharply negative observation, "Recently, there has been a striking revival of interest in the sacred. Instead of leading the critique of superstition, comparative literature is contributing to the legitimation of religious discourse" (*Profession* 1984: Modern Language Association).

At the same time there are many eloquent tributes to poetry's religious power. There is Sir Philip Sidney's memorable 1595 Renaissance *Apology for Poetry*, with its combining of classical and Christian strains. Citing Aristotle as his authority, he describes poetry as "an art of imitation . . . that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; with this end, to teach and delight." His major examples, "both in antiquity and excellence, were they that did imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God—the Psalms of David, Solomon's Song of Songs, others." Percy Bysshe Shelley, in the Romantic rhetoric of his 1821 *Defense of Poetry*, broadens the vocation of poet to include all those "who bring into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and true, that partial apprehension of the invisible world which is called religion." With proper respect for the great canonical statements, some of the axioms articulated by the modern American poet Richard Eberhart at the 1968 meeting of the Modern Language Association of America catch quite nicely the points of intersection of literature and religious experience. "Poetry," he says in one, "orders our imaginings!" And in another, "Poetry makes the spiritual real. It erects value and substantive meaning." Engaging axioms—and especially engaging given the current culture wars with deeply divided camps arguing, on the one hand, for the unique beauty and transcendence of works of art and, on the other, for the same works of art as material objects.

This volume has grown out of an awareness of interesting recent developments in the broad but, I think, relatively undeveloped field of Religion and Literature—small programs in English, Theology, and Religious Studies Departments, interdisciplinary ventures, conferences, and a small but growing number of impressive journals in the field. Such a volume could introduce broad and more focused areas of discussion, and could enrich college and university courses, adult education and discussion groups, and the reading experience of those readers who find the field a source of interest and reflection. Many of us have, of course, already benefited greatly from the pioneering efforts of

scholars like Amos Wilder, Nathan Scott, Northrop Frye, T. R. Wright, and others, and we hope to build on such strong foundations.

This is, at least it is the hope of the contributors, a different kind of book. Given the large body of critical discourse that has developed around New Historicism and Feminism—to take just two prominent contemporary theoretical strategies—there seems to be a genuine need for fresh and original voices who can contribute to the fuller development of a similar body of discourse about the intersections of religion and literature. Part One of this volume will attend to some of the large theoretical issues.

Dennis Taylor, editor of the newly launched scholarly journal *Religion and the Arts*, introduces and addresses in Part One that central and compelling question of how the critic finds the kind of discourse adequate to religious experience, how that critic can avoid the vagueness and sentimentality that weakens much contemporary writing. After a wide-ranging yet penetrating survey of the contemporary critical scene, he offers specific examples of a religious view of poems by Yeats and Stevens, stories by Flannery O'Connor and Sandra Cisneros, a film of Ingmar Bergman, a novel of Dostoyevsky, and a journal of Ettie Hillesum. This introductory probe reveals Taylor's attempt to define a difficult field and to, at one and the same time, underline his sense of the religious and to bring to the process an appropriate critical rigor.

J. A. Appleyard, a specialist in reading theory, traces the levels of developing maturity in readers, and, with Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* as his exemplary text, focuses on parallels between reading and spiritual development, specifically on the psychological dimensions of reading religious texts. Philip Rule, drawing on the work of a feminist theorist like Anne Mellor, warns of the "stereotyping of male and female cognitive operations." Using two biographies of John Keats—one by W. J. Bate, the other by Aileen Ward—and two major texts—the Mount Snowdon passage in Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*—he underlines the gender issue and its vitality for any inclusive critical discussion of religious writing.

John Boyd brings a more specifically theological dimension to bear on the question of the volume, focusing sharply on the Paschal action—death and resurrection—in religious writing, in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and the *Four Quartets* and in Graham

Greene's *The Power and the Glory*. And Charles and Jane Ranney Rzepka offer a fascinating perspective on the current cultural climate, a climate of cross-dressing, of role reversal with the literary theorist and critic becoming the preacher and the preacher, especially in mainline Protestant denominations, generally neglecting the "amoral secularism traditionally associated with literary studies."

Part Two brings together a number of critics/teachers offering somewhat more practical approaches to questions of literature and religious experience in particular texts. Robert Kiely, a Victorian scholar with special interests in the genre of saints' lives, offers what he calls a post-Modern reflection on the *Rule* and *Life* of Saint Benedict. Sounding very much like the New Historicist returning to a classic text, he cites the celebrated Abbess Hildegard of Bingen and her interesting reply to the question of a monastic community of men on how best to follow the *Rule* and a section of Pope Gregory the Great's "Life and Miracles of Saint Benedict," and calls attention to how flexible the *Rule* is for both. Hildegard emphasizes the reality of a monastery of men, focusing on an "insignificant detail" like sleeping arrangements and especially underclothing as a "protection against the temptations of the flesh." Gregory, responding to an ingenuous questioner, regards the *Rule* of Benedict as a great way of spreading the faith. Yet at the same time he has doubts about its becoming too harsh and legalistic, and reminds the questioner about God's continuing presence and the importance of a good monk's knowing and being true to himself.

Stephen Fix, currently editing the "Life of Milton" for the Yale Works of Samuel Johnson, stresses how inadequate sharply defined critical categories can be in one's attempt to come to terms with a religious work. For Fix, Johnson's response to *Paradise Lost*—both its subject matter and its rhetoric—shaped his seemingly quirky critique. Long though the great religious epic is, removed as it seems from human interest, Johnson saw the reading of it as a duty. Critical rules cannot adequately explain how we are "held captive by Milton's sublime greatness," how we are provoked to "confront the story of our lost innocence; and finally, we break down." For Johnson, Fix argues, we need not just "recreation" but "re-creation," "something more than literature can give."

A number of essays in Part Two deal with particular writers and texts as they reveal the intersection of literature and religion. Kevin Van Anglen underlines the religious dimension in Emerson's and Thoreau's Transcendentalism. Using what he regards as "a less pre-programmed approach to the question of secularization and the persistence of religious traditionalism" will enable us to read Transcendentalist texts like Emerson's *Divinity School Address* and Thoreau's *Walden* with greater sensitivity to their complexity for embodying contradictions in matters of belief and unbelief. John Mahoney, intrigued by the often bleak portrait of religious questions in the poems of Stevie Smith, uses that very skepticism as a way of approaching works like "Not Waving But Drowning," "God Speaks," and "No Categories."

J. Robert Barth, who has written extensively about the Coleridgean imagination, views Hopkins's poetry in the tradition of the great Romantics, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge, emphasizing Hopkins's "awareness of the relationship between the created world and the world of transcendent reality," "the sacramental sense." Through poems like "The Wreck of the Deutschland," "God's Grandeur," and "The Windhover," Barth demonstrates, "we draw close not only to creation but to the Creator." Michael Raiger ranges over several Flannery O'Connor stories, commenting that they reveal not so much Hopkins's "enjoyment of the natural as the sign of God's presence" as moments of "extremity" where grace is revealed. Raiger traces in stories like *The Artificial Nigger*, *Revelation*, and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* creatures "blasted by sin beyond the recognition of God's image, but nevertheless held in the superabundance of God's gift of being." In O'Connor the grotesque leaves "space for the sublime vision."

John Anderson, noting how a kind of canonical bias against religious poetry has contributed to the exclusion of certain kinds of poets, especially women poets, sees the challenge of reading and studying such poets and with them important religious poetry. Working closely with the nineteenth-century British poet Charlotte Smith and with sections of her epic *The Emigrants* and the so-called Middleton sonnet from her collection of *Elegiac Sonnets*, he views Smith as addressing religious matters from the "social role of the Church to psychological portraits of a woman's struggle between faith and despair."

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., using as his text “the Fathers have eaten sour grapes” passage from Ezechiel, finds it a stunning cautionary tale on the “notion of the heritability of guilt across generations and across time.” Discussing Jewish–African American relations and highlighting a recent New York conference that looked for common ground on such issues as slavery and social justice, he vigorously uses Ezechiel’s words to protest “score-settling” and to view the past as a “wellspring of moral courage.” Richard Kearney, philosopher and literary theorist, takes Seamus Heaney, a recent Nobel Prize winner for poetry, as his subject. Rejecting a narrow image of Heaney as remaining “faithful to the primacy of the provincial” or as a “good old homespun Catholic,” Kearney sees the poet before the Irishman, and explores in the poetry the “pivotal motif of homecoming.” In a remarkable comprehensive overview of a range of poems, he gives notable attention to Heaney’s *Station Island* (Lough Derg in the North is a familiar place of pilgrimage and of spiritual meditation), calling special attention to the ways in which the poet keeps returning to “an exploration of the homing instincts of religious and political reverence.”

Melinda Ponder, continuing the concern with gender and literary theory raised by Philip Rule, brings to the fore a woman poet more famous for having written the words of “America the Beautiful” in 1893, her prayer for a badly fractured country. But the chief concern of her essay is Bates’s figuring of Katharine Coman, her Wellesley College friend, faculty colleague, and role model, as a female Savior who rescued her from spiritual anguish. Bates’s sonnets, greatly influenced by Christina Rossetti, capture vividly, Ponder argues, “Coman’s ministering presence in her spiritual life.”

Dorothy Judd Hall, currently writing extensively on the poetry of Wallace Stevens, takes a cue from Louis Martz’s emphasis on Stevens’s “meditative temperament,” his links with the “monastic tradition,” and follows what she describes as his spiritual journey in poems like “Sunday Morning,” “Sailing After Lunch,” “The Snow Man,” and “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour.” Hall’s special concern is the coming together of two religious traditions in Stevens, “the tao of Zen meditative detachment and the Christian contemplative path, the *via negativa*.”

In two wide-ranging essays on literature–religion connections,

David Leigh and Judith Wilt pursue long-standing and engaging interests that seem vitally connected to the overarching concerns of this volume. Leigh, who has recently completed a book on spiritual autobiography, offers a new method of reading and thinking about the genre. It is a method that approaches such autobiographers “separated from the mediation of a religious community” using “the methods of prose fiction.” In books as different as Gandhi’s *Autobiography*, *Black Elk Speaks*, Dorothy Day’s *The Long Loneliness*, Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom*, and others, Leigh locates the life-writer as narrator and deals with the plot as a kind of “spiral pilgrimage,” arguing that the “modern Augustine or Teresa must also be a Faulkner or Woolf.”

Judith Wilt’s versatility as a scholar-teacher active in the fields of Religion and Literature and Film Theory is demonstrated in “Acts of God: Film, Religion, and ‘FX.’” Tracing her own rich moviegoing experience from the blockbuster days of *Quo Vadis* to the homey worlds of *Going My Way* and *The Bells of St. Mary’s* and on to the more domestic settings of *Places in the Heart* and *Household Saints*, she has come to see film not as a vehicle for religion, but film, with all its wondrous special effects, as religion. Film is religion, she contends, “in the sense that it does for the mass audience the cultural work that religions have done, supply models for ethical action and provide grounding images for ideals and desires.” Film is most effective when at its most mature, offering “the sacralization of the mundane, the miracle of ordinary dailiness.”

By combining the theoretical and the practical, *Seeing into the Life of Things* should serve an important need as both scholarly contribution to a developing field and valuable guide for those who read, reflect on, and discuss the literature of religious experience.

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