The *Jouissance* of Belief: Devotional Reading and the (Re)Turn to Religion

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In part, the contemporary critical interest in religion derives from epistemological and not ontological concerns, meaning that ideas about God aren’t what contemporary scholars find compelling so much as the knowledge of what religious people experience when they read or write as religious adherents. A materialist focus on religious practices as both a type of knowledge and a way of knowing is thus becoming more common, and practicing members of Christian communities can have greater insight and familiarity with their community’s ways of knowing than those who approach matters of religion from without. Etymology itself suggests that religious scholars are in fundamental ways interdisciplinary inasmuch as disciplines—adherence to a given set of distinguishing practices—exist in both the spiritual and secular worlds as profound markers and components of group identity. The great diversity of methodological practices in contemporary literary criticism means that explications of Christian ways of knowing and reading are both less unusual and more potentially transformative than ever, at least when they are, as Sharon Kim proposes in her article in this issue, inculturated in both secular and religious ways of knowing.

I argue in this article that the traditional Christian practice of devotional reading cultivates a worldly and self-critical faculty which accords with the humanistic reading practice that Edward Said terms “worldliness.” In accord with our group’s interrogation of the academy’s “turn to religion,” I write to clarify the basis of my confidence that the study of literature in the humanities has been and remains an act of religious significance, though not in many cases a specifically Christian one. To critically appraise any human production is to take seriously both our creative ability and our provisional nature, to acknowledge both production and limitation, agency and errancy, history and communion. I take as a given that the impulse toward theory in modern academic study was metaphysical in nature. Fundamental questions about the relationship of humans to each other, to the universe, and to the
acts of cognition and existence itself remain plangent even when traditional approaches to them have been discarded. What was seen by many within Christian circles as a sophisticated assault on their fundamental beliefs was, in fact, a muscular appropriation of their methodology.

Literary criticism, as it is practiced in most universities today, is frequently more adept in the religious function of self-analysis and cultural critique than much of what is produced in the name of specifically Christian scholarship. As is apparent in the slippage of terms from literary study to cultural critique, I am as concerned with the question of why we study literature as I am with the issue of how. I believe that it is impossible to seriously consider what Christians can contribute to the recent turn toward religion in literary studies without acknowledging that much of what has been attacked as anti-Christian or anti-metaphysical modes of literary criticism has, in elements of its praxis, been prophetically acute in its engagement with and critique of our world and in revealing the spiritually fundamental truth of humanity's embeddedness in both created and received textuality. In methodological terms, the movement from "people of the Book" to discursively produced and apprehended cultural identities is a stunning appropriation of the disciplinary logic inherent in text-based world religions. To sum up, the discursive reality that Foucault, Althusser, and others argued that all texts conspire to create has long been a valued outcome of devotional meditation upon holy writ.

By focusing on Edward Said's critical methodology, I am taking what is arguably one of the easiest paths towards illustrating my claims regarding the consonance between Christian devotional reading and humanist applications of post-structuralist and postmodern theories of textuality. After all, Said was raised in a Palestinian Christian home, confirmed in the Anglican church as a young man, and educated at an American high school founded by evangelist D.L. Moody. He had a lengthy and intellectually profound connection with Charles Malik, the renowned Lebanese philosopher, theologian, and U.N. General Secretary, whose slim book, A Christian Critique of the University, has been extremely influential in Christian educational circles. Yet Said is often incorrectly identified as an apologist for Islam and a defender of terrorism. His profoundly unsettling autobiography, Out of Place, makes clear that his life was one of perpetual exile, a state of being in the world but not of it that for all of its debilitating psychological and emotional distresses thoroughly equipped him for the vocation of a dissident intellectual. Said was congenitally at odds with his
environment, both ethically committed and independent, capable of the most searing critiques and empathetically inventive insights. He embodied in his connection to his profession and political causes the same sort of reflexive critique that he claimed was the core of humanistic studies.

Said is also an ideal choice because he is self-conscious regarding the perceived disparity between his utilization of poststructuralist methodologies and his clear ethical stance that undercuts the ontological pretenses which can accrue to said methodologies. Said consistently and charitably cited James Gifford's critique, made in The Predicament of Culture, of Said's well-known Orientalism. Said summarizes Gifford's critique as one that identified "a serious inconsistency lodged at my book's heart, the conflict between my avowed and unmistakable humanistic bias and the antihumanism of my subject and my approach toward it" (Humanism 8). Gifford viewed Said's analysis of orientalist discourse as validating the notion that western ways of knowing invariably subordinated their Middle Eastern subjects. The thoroughgoing nature of Said's analysis led many to the conclusion that the misleading essentialism engaged in by orientalists was the result of overpowering discursive and ideological forces that minimized or negated the agency of the individual writers. This critique, Clifford argues, is "ambivalently enmeshed [itself] in the totalizing habits of Western humanism" (qtd. in Humanism 8-9) because of the ways that it both demoted the individual orientalists into mere effects of a totalizing discourse while still advocating, through the ethical content of its critique, a view of human nature as capable of resisting and moving beyond totalizing discourses. Self-critique, which Said sees as the function of humanistic study, provides the key to unlocking the epistemological blinders of totalizing discourses much in the same way that, as I hope to demonstrate, the penitent devotional reader receives the insights of the biblical text as a hermeneutic wedge that cuts to the dividing of soul and spirit, of received cultural formations and the burgeoning life and imagination of the redeemed.²

Devotional reading may seem an unlikely place to look for resources that Christians can bring to bear on heady questions of literary analysis. It is, after all, the one mode of Christian reading that is widely considered to be open to all adherents without regard to literary training. The terms of admission to devotional reading can be stated simply as a confidence that the Bible can be understood and can be fruitfully "applied" in one's life. Although systematized in a variety of ways in different communities and strands of Christianity, the intense, meditational slow-reading of the Bible with an
expectation of divinely inspired and authoritative insights that will speak directly to the reader's present character and daily activities is so commonly advocated that it can be considered a normative element of modern Christian identity.\(^3\) In secular terms, Christian devotional reading can be described as an immersion in the world of the text, a discursive self-abnegation that eagerly embraces the interpellative power of narrative, the polysemous play of language, and the transhistorical promise of ethically responsible encounter. What I find most scholarly in the practice of devotional reading is the way that it opens up channels of communication between textual and readerly worlds and that it involves the reader in the interpretation of those worlds with an eye toward understanding the political, economic, relational, and psychological implications of the scriptures in his or her everyday life. While the relationship of the Western canon to a Saidian humanist is not so authoritative, the channels of interpretation and the modes of critique remain the same. While the direction of critique in devotional reading is only from the text to the reader in contrast to the reciprocating nature of critique in literary study, the process by which readers question the text in order to understand how to "apply" it is sufficiently similar in nature for the comparison to stand.

I do not have the space to explicate the manner in which devotional reading presages in a generative and productive fashion what is considered unwitting (hence potentially unwilling) involvement in an ideologically and discursively defined reality. However, I want to emphasize that devotional reading can participate in relatively sophisticated interpretive maneuvers enabled by a divinely inspired polysemy and narrative density. Popular mischaracterizations of Christian readers as close-minded ignore the transformational presuppositions of devotional reading and its often unstated but crucial reliance upon the plenitude of meaning in a text. The radical surrender to divinely-inspired textuality in pursuit of transcendent union is what I have referred to in my title as the *jouissance* of belief, a gentle appropriation of Roland Barthes's terminology that acknowledges the mystical tradition within Christianity which conceives of the union between believer and Christ in the redolent language of sexuality and romance. The devotional reader invites the Hermeneutic Spirit to "expose the guilt of the world in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment" and to "guide [the reader] into all truth" (John 16:8, 13 NIV). Devotional reading is thus an encounter that unsettles the reader by demanding epistemological humility while promising ecstatic union. In contrast to the equally common Christian
reading practice of theologically informed analysis, devotional reading is adventurous, open-ended, and, somewhat paradoxically, deeply secular in the manner that Edward Said uses the term.

In his essay, "The Return to Philology," Said argues that "the process of reading is an irreducibly personal act of commitment to reading and interpreting, the gesture of reception that includes opening oneself to the text and, just as importantly, being willing to make informed statements about its meaning" (66). This reception then moves towards resistance and self-critique:

we need to keep coming back to the words and structures in the books we read, but, just as these words were themselves taken by the poet from the world and evoked from out of silence in the forceful ways without which no creation is possible, readers must also extend their readings out into the various worlds each one of us resides in. ... The task of the humanist is not just to occupy a position or place, nor simply to belong somewhere, but rather to be both insider and outsider to the circulating ideas and values that are at issue in our society or someone else's society or the society of the other. (Humanism 76)

Here we can recall how Said's personal experience as the son of Palestinian Christians made him always and everywhere both insider and outsider, a radical form of kinship and alienation that those whose "citizenship is in heaven" experience when compromise and ethical inattentiveness do not lull them into temporal comfort. In Out of Place, Said reflects that

it does not seem important or even desirable to be "right" and in place (right at home, for instance). Better to wander out of place, not to own a house, and not ever to feel too much at home anywhere. ... With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place. (294-95)

For devotional readers, it is, in fact, the sustained meditation on an otherworldly text that so unfits (by means of a critical comparison between its moral universe and their own) them for worldly comforts, making them long for an eternal being and communion to take shape on earth as it is in heaven.

By means of its emphasis on "application," devotional reading is unabashedly worldly in its presumption that the persons and God of the Bible inhabit the same world as that of the reader and that the quotidian
concerns of the reader can fruitfully interact with the textual world in a dance of interrogation and accountability. While there is certainly a tradition of prophetically reading the Bible for social critique, the principal mode of devotional reading is self-critique, which ultimately does have implications for the individual in terms of his or her social relations. Oftentimes, this is expressed in the questions a reader asks of the biblical text, questions that presuppose the insufficiency of the reader and the plenitude of the text when read in light of divine inspiration. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said describes secular criticism as “always situated; it is skeptical, secular, reflectively open to its own failings. ... [T]he inevitable trajectory of critical consciousness is to arrive at some acute sense of what political, social, and human values are entailed in the reading, production, and transmission of every text” (26). In concluding his discussion of secular criticism, Said adopts a tone that is urgently ethical in a manner that signals its closeness to Christian practice: “criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are noncoercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom” (29). Indeed, “ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free” (John 8:32 KJV) is a line which it must be remembered Christ delivered to an audience enslaved by a calcified hermeneutic process that elevated descent (“Abraham’s seed”) over transformative consent.

From the critical apposition of secular and spiritual reading practices, I turn now to some concluding thoughts, a gesture toward “application” that is commonplace in both literary and Christian writing. First, by drawing on the methodological heritage of devotional reading, Christian literary scholars can augment their engagement with aesthetic issues in order to lay bare the ethical, social, political, economic, and psychological (hence spiritual) implications of the texts they study. The axiom that “books make the man” is a reminder that literary study is and always has been spiritual in its focus on identity and character formation. Second, the study of literature cannot be divorced from the question of “how then shall we live?” That critic who most carefully examines his or her own behavior and beliefs vis-à-vis the text at hand, and is thus moved “out of place,” will be well situated to interpret the text to others. Finally, the conclusions of literary study engaged in according to this spirit of investigation should be expressed in clear, practical terms that can be applied by readers and critics alike to matters of daily concern. In this manner, we can become more explicitly Christian readers by being more devotional, hence worldly. Christian literary scholarship can thus be conversionary in a manner more
inculturated into secular academic discourse by providing readers with the experience of seeing and thinking as a Christian.

I have, perhaps, made a mountain out of a molehill in this paper. Christian devotional reading is as common as a pebble on a rocky shore. Yet this commonplaceness is desperately needed in the profession of English, and I hope that the turn toward religion in literary studies can concurrently address the need for literary scholars to find an audience in the world beyond our own colleagues. By thinking and writing in such a manner as I've suggested above, Christian scholars can free their insights for acceptance and application by a broad audience, a perpetual dream of activist scholars and evangelists of other stripes.

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NOTES


2 Despite seeing in his critical posture and heritage identifiable Christian ideals and practices, I will not attempt to claim Edward Said in some tribal fashion as an example of a “Christian scholar.” He was unfailingly critical of ethnocentrically compromised expressions of Christianity, especially when it led to apocalyptic representations of the clash between Islam and Christianity. He scrupulously avoided affirmative statements of his own metaphysical beliefs in his writings and published interviews, preferring instead to make cryptic statements such as, “I must confess I am unable to feel any identification at all with Christianity as threatened by Islam” (Out of Place 169). He carefully delimits the nature of his disidentification but expresses himself in such a way as to create the impression of a more total disavowal. Indeed, he praises Auerbach’s reticence regarding his Jewishness in Mimesis while carefully explicating the many passages in which Auerbach’s Jewish identity is both salient and formative (Humanism 96-97). It is not surprising, then, that he should have as zealously guarded his own metaphysical beliefs, knowing that they could be too easily deployed in the defense or affirmation of schools of thought he would decry.

3 In my treatment of devotional reading, practices as diverse as the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola and the contemporary evangelical emphasis on a daily “quiet time” of prayer and scripture reading can be considered part of the same disciplinary tradition.
I rely here on Hans Frei’s *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. Frei’s critique of the generic reappropriation of the biblical canon as an adjunct to history rather than forming our ideas of history and his emphasis on the appropriate figural uses of biblical typology which stress the original text’s historical rather than mythical aspects has far-reaching implications for any analysis of Christian reading practices. According to Frei’s schema, precritical readers of the Bible approached its text as reality, not as merely a reflection of it or contributing element to it, a hermeneutic orientation that assumed the subservience of a reader’s epistemological frame to the world of the text.

Of great importance to Said’s notion of humanistic critique is his belief, taken from Vico, that history, the stream of culture and human agency that tumbles through the ages, is composed of human acts and is knowable to humans because of its genesis in human activity. Said’s point is both epistemological and ethical. It is epistemological in that it affirms our ability to understand history because of a transhistorical conception of humanity: nothing that is human is foreign to us. It is ethical in its emphasis on the agency of humans in constructing, maintaining, and transforming the political, economic, and social structures in which they exist. Put more simply, we can understand people and literature of other times and places because we too are human, and what people have done and written throughout history matters because it has affected other humans. Consequently, both reader and writer can and should be critiqued by subsequent readers and writers.

As is evident from the works Said chose to focus on throughout his career, aesthetic concerns largely determined the specific texts he chose to consider. He studied the great books of the Western tradition because he saw them as operating in a productive dialectic with the time and place of their origins. Their dense network of aesthetic and ideological connections provides for Said the cultural range of self-critique. In the model of consonance I’ve pursued here, secular aesthetic accomplishment parallels the divine inspiration of sacred writ, a comparison which is so commonplace in discussions of literature that I here dispense with it in a footnote, pausing only to say that (apart from the Ten Commandments) the God of the Bible appears well content to work in and through human writers.

WORKS CITED


The Practices of Faith: Worship and Writing

Karen Dieleman

What has been characterized as the turn to religion in literary studies has arisen, I believe, at least in part from a recognition among new historicist and cultural studies critics that producing historicized and culturally astute analyses of literary works requires acknowledging more spheres of meaning than those related to race, class, gender, or economics. Under new historicist principles, religion now also functions legitimately as a component of individual and social formations, while cultural studies finds “material religion” a significant part of the production and distribution of cultural meaning. Both fields are also interested in religion as it relates to issues of power. The Christian literary scholar can welcome and learn much from the work now being published on religion and literature. At the same time, he or she will find that much of this work does not constitute Christian scholarship per se, nor does it intend to. On the contrary, because it takes religion as just one more category of culture or identity formation and not as a transforming vision or central perspective, it leaves plenty of room for a more specifically Christian literary critique – or, since “Christian scholarship” itself is difficult to define, for the insights of scholars who, because of their own commitments to the Christian faith, are more likely than critics of other persuasions to approach the evidences of religion in texts and writers in integral rather than reductionist ways.

Christian scholars might contribute to the religion-and-literature dialogue in a number of ways, one of which is by focusing on the practices of faith. My own interests lie in the potential intersections between a person's