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Tracy Fessenden: Culture and Redemption

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INTRODUCTION

I DISCOVERED early in my work on this book that the short answer I usually gave to the polite question of what I was writing about—“American literature and secularization”—invariably failed to conjure, in the listener’s imagination, a vivid panorama of persons, events, and literary works that might unfold under that rubric. (I typically drew a puzzled silence, followed quickly by a compassionate redirection of the conversation along different lines.) But neither did the alternate answer I sometimes gave to the same question—“American literature and *religion*”—succeed any more in conveying a world of vibrant and many-layered possibility, beyond eliciting, now and then, a follow-up question about the Puritan divines.

Nor did such responses come quite as a surprise. The assumption that the “secular” consists simply in the unremarkable absence of once-dominant “religion” has shaped both American literary history and American religious history, the two fields this book moves freely between, as well as the smaller subfield that bills itself “religion and literature,” where it had its beginnings in a vague dissatisfaction with the way that relationship was configured within the discipline of religious studies. According to the institutional genealogy given by Giles Gunn, for example, critical interest in the “coalescence of the literary and the religious” took shape in the nineteenth century as the attempt to “reconstitute something admittedly in a state of collapse”—that is, religion—“on a different basis.”¹ Such figures as Matthew Arnold, says Gunn, took it upon themselves to “keep alive a sense of the normative and its bearing upon beliefs and practices no longer felt to derive their legitimacy from traditional religious sources.”² Arnold famously relocated religion’s powers of legitimation to “culture,” intimating the supersession of religion by great works of imaginative literature and other, erstwhile secular forms—a shift given theological endorsement in the last century by Paul Tillich, among others.³ Far from attending to the presence of religion in literary contexts, then, students of religion-and-literature learned instead to seek after its absence, its displacement by or reconstitution as the newly empowered secular, freed from the trappings of ritual, the limitations of historical communities, or the embarrassments of outmoded belief.

Religion-and-literature in this way played its role in upholding what Robert Orsi calls the “embedded moral schema” that has long governed the academic study of religion, a discipline organized, says Orsi, “around

the (usually hidden and unacknowledged) poles of good religion/bad religion.” “Good” religion is good in the measure that it tends toward invisibility, or at least unobtrusiveness: “rational, word-centered, nonritualistic, middle class, unemotional, compatible with democracy and the liberal state . . . [good religion] was what was taught and endorsed in academic environments; for everything else the discipline developed a nomenclature of marginalization (cults, sects, primitives, and so on).”⁴ For its part, the study of American religious history promoted a developmental narrative in which “good” religion emerges hand in hand with the new nation as a uniquely American achievement, the Puritans’ sense of chosenness democratized and domesticated by Enlightenment tolerance, with the blessings of free exercise extended most liberally to matters of privately held belief and not to those allegedly irrational, regressive, or inscrutable forms of religious life—cults, sects, primitives, and so on—deemed foreign to democracy.

The salutary transparency of good religion and the attribution of anti-democratic leanings to any other kind made it inevitable that, beyond the discipline of religious studies (and frequently enough within it), *all* visible forms of religion might easily be regarded as irrational, regressive, and threatening to the democratic project. Particularly in American literary studies, a field historically given shape by its own narrative of democratization, religion receives little attention except when it figures as crucial to a progressive, emancipatory politics (Christian antislavery being the readiest example), and often not even then. Secularism enters into American literary studies as both a historical assumption (religion figures only minimally in the development of American literature, and less so over time) and a critical practice (religion therefore fails to warrant the kinds of attention we give to other social formations in American literary history, including gender, race, sexuality, and class).

However distorting a lens for reading this history, secularism flourishes as an operative rubric in American literary studies because it appears to be the best answer to the limitations ascribed to religion.⁵ Thus when a hero of American literary studies’ own formative narrative of democracy—a Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example—is discovered to align himself with a social-evolutionary paradigm of race (as when Emerson confesses his conviction that African and Indian races are destined not to “progress” but to disappear),⁶ alarms are sounded and the work of exposure or exculpation begins, but when the same figure is seen to align himself with a social-evolutionary paradigm of religion (as when Emerson notes easily that Roman Catholicism, too, is destined to disappear),⁷ no such expiatory labors are called into play. And this is so because the assumption that some religions or aspects of religion have simply played themselves out, or ought to, or eventually will, is crucial to the develop-

mental schema of good and bad religion—the first associated with freedom and enlightenment, the second with coercion and constraint—implicit in the progress narrative of democracy.

Of course one may well share Emerson's discomfort with the kind of religious authority he identified with the Catholic Church, which seems a very different thing from wishing to see some races evolve out of existence. To question the secularization narrative, moreover, is to risk appearing to advocate an expanded role for religion at a moment when a newly emboldened Christian right seems bent on remaking the erstwhile secular domains of science and law in its image. (With blessings from a president who urges that "both sides" of the alleged controversy over evolution be taught in schools, for example, the Kansas Board of Education voted in November 2005 to amend its official definition of science to accommodate supernatural explanations; eleven months earlier the Bush administration had filed a legal brief on behalf of the Kentucky counties prohibited by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit from posting framed copies of the Ten Commandments in courthouses, alongside a proclamation from President Ronald Reagan marking 1983 as the Year of the Bible. "Official acknowledgement and recognition of the Ten Commandments' influence on American legal history," the White House assures any doubters in the brief, "comport with the Establishment Clause [of the First Amendment].")⁸

But consider how a simplified narrative of secularization may in fact work to strengthen the hold of a particular strain of conservative Christianity in American public life. When secularism in the United States is understood merely as the absence of religious faith, or neutrality in relation to religious faith, rather than as a variety of possible relationships to different religious traditions—for example, an avowedly secular United States is broadly accommodating of mainstream and evangelical Protestantism, minimally less so of Catholicism, unevenly so of Judaism, much less so of Islam, perhaps still less so of Native American religious practices that fall outside the bounds of the acceptably decorative or "spiritual"—then religion comes to be defined as "Christian" by default, and an implicit association between "American" and "Christian" is upheld even by those who have, one imagines, very little invested in its maintenance.⁹ So pervasive is the identification of religion in America with this unmarked Christianity, even among ardent secularists, that the debate about whether and how to teach about religions in public schools, for example, routinely reverts to a version of the debate between "evolution" and "creationism," between an Enlightenment faith that subordinates all religions to an allegedly disinterested rationality and a conservative Protestant re-reading of a Jewish text that eclipses at once the Jewishness of Genesis,

different religious perspectives on Genesis, and the multiplicity of religious narratives of origin.¹⁰

How have specific forms of Protestant belief and practice come enduringly to be subsumed under the heading of “Christian”—to the exclusion of non-Protestant and differently Protestant ways of being Christian—and how, in many cases, does the “Christian” come to stand in for the “religious” to the exclusion of non-Christian ways of being religious? Part of the answer surely lies in the ability of a Protestantized conception of religion to control the meanings of both the religious *and* the secular. “What has often been forgotten,” Max Weber reminds us, is “that the Reformation meant not the elimination of the Church’s control over everyday life, but rather the substitution of a new form of control for the previous one. It meant the repudiation of a control that was very lax, at that time scarcely perceptible in practice and hardly more than formal in favor of a regulation of the whole conduct which, penetrating all departments of private and public life, was infinitely burdensome and earnestly enforced.”¹¹ Evacuating religious authority from its institutional locations, the Reformation generated its presence “everywhere,” not least in secular guise—an outcome, it further bears reminding, given as “truth” or “freedom” in the measure that the Reformation frames its program as liberation from the errors and superstitions of Rome. In this sense Protestantism’s emancipation from Catholicism both provides the blueprint for, and sets the limits of, secularism’s emancipation from “religion” itself.

Far from being a neutral matrix, then, the secular sphere as constituted in American politics, culture, and jurisprudence has long been more permeable to some religious interventions than to others. The co-implication of secularism and Reformed Christianity has meant, for example, that Christian religious polemic could remain compatible with America’s vaunted history of religious liberty and toleration by being cast in strictly secular terms. Thus at various points in American history, Muslims, Catholics, or Mormons could be construed as enemies of republican institutions, Jews as a racial or economic threat, and Native American ritual practice as an affront to environmental or drug policy, all without apparent violence to cherished notions of religious freedom.¹² At the same time, an implicitly Christian culture puts pressure on all who make claims on American institutions to constitute themselves as religious on a recognizably Protestant model.¹³ (Recall the all-but-mandatory confessions of faith in the last several presidential elections, or the more recent calls of party leaders for Democrats to “get religion” in the wake of their 2004 defeat by a Republican campaign emphasizing conservative Christian values.)¹⁴ Protests against such public displays of Christianity from secularists, meanwhile, are unlikely to create favorable conditions for the expression of *other* forms of religious knowledge, leaving the forum—

discussions of the meaning of “faith-based,” for example—entirely to those who lay claim to it.

To consider the career of secularization in American culture is therefore also necessarily to consider the consolidation of a Protestant ideology that has grown more entrenched and controlling even as its manifestations have often become less visibly religious. Charting the American religious landscape in terms of “manyness” and “oneness,” religious historian Catherine Albanese unflinchingly identifies “public Protestantism” as the “*one* religion” of the United States, a dominant if tacit “religious system” that gives “cultural cohesion [to] American society” over time by eliciting and shaping “the religious adaptations of even the most ‘other’ of new Americans.” “Although many times they were unaware of it,” says Albanese, “Catholics and Jews, Buddhists and Eastern Orthodox Christians” were induced or compelled to assimilate themselves to Protestant norms in order to be recognized as legitimately American. “So [were] countless others from among the many.”¹⁵

Other American religious historians have clamored over the last decade or two to tell any story *but* this one. To judge from recent textbooks and anthologies, the classic narrative of American religious history as one of ever-expanding “tolerance” and “accommodation” radiating from a Protestant center is rapidly losing ground to what historian David Hackett calls “a multicultural tale of Native Americans, African Americans, Catholics, Jews, and other[s]” told by scholars whose work “cut[s] across boundaries of gender, class, and region.”¹⁶ But if, as Hackett suggests, the “older, Protestant consensus narrative has, at best, come to be seen as a convenient fiction for the sake of narrative movement,”¹⁷ that discovery by itself does little to explain how the “convenient fiction” became so powerful and enduring, nor why it remains so ingeniously difficult to counter. Even as the story of persecution-fleeing Puritans and their more broadly Protestant legacy of religious freedom gives way to a more varied and inclusive story of America’s religious development (as scholars now work “conscientiously, often feverishly,” William Hutchison attests, “to chronicle diversities that our predecessors ignored or slighted”),¹⁸ the metanarrative of ever-increasing “tolerance” remains intact.

To put this in a different idiom: the patriarchal deity of Hebrew and Christian scripture may well be regarded as a narrative fiction, but one that a global move to inclusive-language biblical scholarship would by itself do nothing even to *read*, much less to *unwrite*. I agree therefore with Hutchison that to tell the story of America’s religious development without locating the “enormously dominant and influential Protestant establishment” at its center is in fact to tell a different story, one that could scarcely be called a history of American religion.¹⁹ I do so, however, in order to ask how North Atlantic Protestants came to place themselves

at this center, how the “convenient fiction” of a Protestant consensus at the heart of American culture came to take on the status of truth.²⁰

This book seeks to demonstrate, then, how particular forms of Protestantism emerged as an “unmarked category” in American religious and literary history, in order also to show how a particular strain of post-Protestant secularism, often blind to its own exclusions, became normative for understanding that history. Part 1 of this book, “Protestantism and the Social Space of Reading,” reflects on those literary works and reading practices by which Protestant culture in America became entrenched, serving, in Andrew Ross’s phrase, as “bearers and shapers of a language that makes some forms of discursive experience available while it ignores, excludes, or suppresses others.”²¹ Setting the institutionalization of literacy and the emergence of a distinctive national literature in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America alongside more visible projects of Anglo-Protestant consolidation and expansion, these chapters argue that what religious historian Nathan Hatch calls the “democratization of American Christianity” and literary historian Cathy Davidson the “democratization of the written word” proceeded together,²² less toward the end of generalized equality than toward particular distributions of knowledge, mobility, and cultural authority.

Chapter 1 examines New England Puritan contributions to the making of what Edward Said calls “a privileged, genealogical useful past,” an account of American origins from which “unwanted elements, vestiges, narratives” are erased.²³ It argues that the Puritans’ violent dealings with New England’s native inhabitants were intricately tied to their own literary achievements, including their ardent promotion of literacy as a tool for the conquest of spiritual enemies as well as their development of genres designed to expand the Protestant presence in the New World. By figuring their rights to habitation as bound up in their possession of scripture and literacy, for example, Puritans constituted Indians as bereft of legitimate means of conferring or withholding their authorization to Puritans’ use of their lands. Puritan reflections on the Pequot War and King Philip’s War, moreover, show Puritan violence against Indians to have extended the dynamic by which Puritans constituted Indian lands as void of human occupants, open to and even requiring Puritan habitation, a corollary to the view that Indians were themselves “ruines of Mankind” whose destruction was foreordained in the Reformation impulse toward iconoclastic violence against images.²⁴ The narrative form of Puritan spiritual biography, meanwhile, further rendered Indians invisible by rewriting contact with them as part of an ongoing dialogue between God and the Puritan soul, a rewriting that both veiled and underwrote the violence required of Puritans to empty Indian lands of the resistant spiritual and physical difference of Indians themselves.

“Indians” who do appear in Puritan writings figure principally as the unregenerate Other to the Puritans’ salvific Word, a representational practice that resonates even and perhaps especially in those accounts where Indians do not appear at all. Chapter 2 examines the *New England Primer*, in which Indians do not appear, as a tool for the creation of a literate, Christian self in whom what Cotton Mather called the “Indian vices” that afflicted wayward Puritans had been vanquished. Continuously in print in various editions from at least the early eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, the *New England Primer* facilitated the construction of a redeemed self in part by constructing a “redeemed” political order, an account of the nation’s beginnings from which not only Indians but histories of violence against Indians have disappeared. If the *New England Primer* rewrites Puritan origins as innocently untroubled by Indian conflict, however, it nevertheless makes subtle use of the Puritan connection between Indians and childhood, in order both to figure “Indianness” as the vanishing state the maturing nation is bound to leave behind, and to signal the danger that the recalcitrant child or national subject, willfully unredeemed from symbolic captivity to Indians, poses to the national project. In this way the *New England Primer* banishes Indians to the invisible reaches of New England experience, only to retrieve them in the reconstituted form of incorrigible or unassimilable Americans whose otherness threatens the project of white Protestant expansion signaled by the Indian’s anticipatory “removal” from its own pages.

The aim of the *New England Primer*, which typically begins with a picture alphabet and culminates in the Shorter Westminster Catechism, was to induce Bible literacy in children as a means to spiritual maturity. In this way the *New England Primer*’s centrality to children’s education also made the King James Bible central to children’s education long after the *Primer* itself disappeared from classrooms in the early nineteenth century. Chapter 3 examines Protestant arguments for the creation of a public, tax-supported, Bible-based school system, together with the Catholic-Protestant “Bible wars” that erupted in Philadelphia and Cincinnati between the 1830s and the 1870s. To Catholic objections that the compulsory reading of the King James Bible in schools made them into instruments of a de facto Protestant establishment, Protestants insisted that schools were non-sectarian, and that it was Catholics instead who dangerously sought to impose their religious views on public institutions in violation of the separation of church and state. The anti-Catholic vocabularies invoked on the Protestant side of these battles were long entrenched and had “separation” built into them as a feature of the nation’s independence both from popish religious tyranny and foreign political tyranny—a staple of textbook representations of American’s founding from the late eighteenth century. Implicit in this notion of separation was not only a Protestant understanding

of religion—defined largely in terms of the sanctity of individual belief, which presumably lay beyond the coercive reach of government or other powers—but also a Protestant understanding of America. While the Bible riots have usefully been cast as class and ethnic conflicts, little attention has been paid to the Catholic objections to compulsory Bible reading as a specifically political critique, namely, an indictment of the exclusionary nature of civil protections for religion within an implicitly Protestant state. As a Philadelphia newspaper put it, a man “may be a Turk, a Jew, or a Christian, a Catholic, a Methodist or Presbyterian, and we say nothing against it,” but “when we remember that our Pilgrim fathers landed on Plymouth rock to establish the Protestant religion, free from persecution, we must contend that this was and always will be a Protestant country.”²⁵ Such views left nativist Protestants in the Bible conflicts free to lift “Christianity” away from both denominational affiliation and privately held belief and to identify it all the more closely with national symbols, most prominently the American flag, which were then invoked as the mantle of “freedom of religion” whose fabric Catholic claims to free exercise of religion could only be figured as rending in pieces.

Chapter 4 sets the public school movement alongside the literature of the American Renaissance, including its classic manifestations in the canon of Whitman, Emerson, Melville, and others as well as the larger body of sentimental and domestic fiction more recently championed as belonging also to this period of literary flourishing. As Protestant arguments for a Bible-based public school curriculum came to represent such schools, quite erroneously, as havens of religious, racial, and ethnic diversity, so the sentimental novel of the nineteenth century was marked by its concerted extension of Christian sympathy to what figure in its pages as the distressed slaves, Indians, wage workers, and others marginalized by the expansion of middle-class Protestant culture. But so also have the “classic,” male-authored works of nineteenth-century American literature characteristically been valued for just those capacities—the extension of fellow feeling across races and classes, the incorporation of vernacular and subaltern voices—that, in their association with the literature of evangelical Christianity, are derided (or recuperatively defended) as feminine or sentimental. To distinguish such writings as belonging to separate, gendered spheres, or to competing American Renaissances, I suggest, both polarizes the cultural production of the white Protestant middle class and exaggerates the scope of that production, making it stand in for the whole. But it is precisely the “whole,” of course, that such works aspire to in the breadth of their democratic address. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s evangelical melting pot, in which the discernment of Christ within makes “one blood [of] all the nations of men,” was called by other writers simply “America,” “a teeming Nation of nations,” in Whitman’s words, where,

as Emerson famously predicted, “the energy of the Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles, and Cossacks, and all of the European tribes—and of the Africans, and of the Polynesians,—will construct a new race, a new religion, a new state, a new literature.”²⁶ This literature’s conversion of religious, racial, and ethnic diversity into the materials for a new, inclusively American sensibility whose hallmarks are progress and tolerance uncannily mirrors what Protestant voices in the Bible wars convey as the strategies of an avowedly secular culture for dealing with overlapping forms of racial and religious “excess.”

The second part of the book, “Secular Fictions,” takes up the desires, investments, and anxieties seen to govern the narrative practices discussed thus far as these come to inform the work of four celebrated literary figures who wrote at—and of—crucial periods in American history: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Ranging widely over the fiction and nonfiction of each author, these chapters look to the ways each projects a vision of American democratic space that, in varying measure, underscores or upends the Protestant-secular continuum examined in the earlier part of the book, and to the ways that religious, racial, and other differences are variously accommodated (or not) within that space.

A recurring theme of the book’s earlier chapters is the discourse of anti-Catholicism that served from the seventeenth century onward to underpin the social, political, cultural, and economic dominance of North Atlantic Protestants in the United States. Chapter 5 examines the modulation of this vocabulary in the writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe, including *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and other fiction, devotional narratives, and domestic writing. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, I suggest, Stowe drew on traditional anti-Catholic rhetoric, familiar from the sermons and polemics of her father, Lyman Beecher, to associate slavery and Southern culture with Romanism. In this way Stowe joined the long-standing fight against Catholic influence in the United States to antislavery activism, even as race and not religion was on its way to becoming the primary language through which white Protestants in the United States struggled to articulate a cohesive identity against a backdrop of growing immigration, westward expansion, and sectional unrest. As Stowe’s vision of a Christian America becomes less overtly religious—Stowe and Catharine Beecher’s domestic handbook *The American Woman’s Home* would equate “the principles of Christianity” with “the great principles of democracy”²⁷—Stowe carefully nurtured her readership and her reputation in Great Britain, connecting the new, racialized basis of American Protestant legitimacy to a wider Atlantic political culture of Anglo-Saxon supremacy. In this way Stowe subtly hastened the conversion of a Protestant discourse of religious otherness into a secular discourse of racial otherness.

A different set of connections between religion and race and a different relation to the secularized Protestant culture of the United States shaped the career of Mark Twain. Twain's own religious skepticism, I suggest in chapter 6, tends to bolster the civic piety that makes a national icon of Twain's most famous novel: perhaps no moment in American literature is more canonical, or celebrated as "quintessentially" American, than Huckleberry Finn's decision to "go to hell" to free a slave,²⁸ to defy in one turn a religious convention and the social injustice it allegedly supports. In a single, brilliant flash of resolve Huck appears to reject a coercive Christianity for a do-it-yourself apostasy, the law and custom of slavery for the riskiness of outlawed freedoms, the privileges of whiteness for solidarity with blackness. Of the oppositions that undergird these either-or choices, however—belief/unbelief, slavery/freedom, black/white—none is entirely stable and belief/unbelief perhaps least of all, since dissent from Christian belief (itself a diversity, and one that accommodated a robust abolitionism on which *Huckleberry Finn* remained silent) could take the form not only of resolute or wavering unbelief but also of varying degrees of allegiance within a vast range of alternative faiths. Twain's writings in fact show an abiding fascination with religions that resist being plotted along a spectrum extending from Protestant conviction to its absence, including the new American religions of Mormonism, spiritualism, and Christian Science; the Old World faiths of Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam; the Asian religions encountered in *Following the Equator*; and the "heathen" belief systems of Hawai'ian natives, American Indians, and black slaves. Unevenly accommodated within conventional renderings of either religion *or* race in Mark Twain's America, these positions beyond the Protestant-secular continuum put questions to readings of Huck's apostasy as a clear strike in favor of racial equality. Most pressing among them, for Twain, was the question of what happens when secular values—patriotism, for example, or scientific "proof"—reveal themselves to be as hostile to racial justice as any constraint of dogma, religious custom, or sect. Grappling with the shortcomings of secular forms of authority produced some of the most searching, if also the murkiest, moments in Twain's writing, for while institutional religion could easily be made the target of his zeal for exposing frauds and superstitions, neither humor nor outrage could as readily undermine these secular values' increasing presumption to legitimacy, or reveal their complicity in the forms of injustice he sought to redress.

No such ambiguity clouds the progress narrative of secularization to which Charlotte Perkins Gilman laid claim in the name of feminism. Chapter 7 reads Gilman's utopian novel *Herland* with her other fiction and nonfiction alongside the first stirrings of the American women's movement, the nineteenth-century anthropological discourse of world re-

ligions, and the expansion of America's geopolitical boundaries to include newly enfranchised African American men; new waves of Irish, European, and Asian immigrants; and the inhabitants of the recently annexed territories of the continental United States. Unlike her great-aunts Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, who imagined the white, Christian home as a blueprint for the civilized world, Gilman argued that the home was a primitive survival whose demands keep white women from achieving the cultural and economic potential of their race. Gilman brought her claims for women's equality to bear on hierarchical models of religious development: in her view, Christianity was a central factor in the relative freedoms of white Western women in comparison to women of other races, but real gender equality, again for white women, depended on Christianity's giving way to what Gilman identified as "the final merging of religion and life which shall leave them indistinguishable."²⁹ For Gilman, the bridging of the separate spheres of "religion and life" diminishes the gender difference between white women and men by heightening the difference between Anglo-American men and women, on the one side, and racial and religious minorities, on the other. Gilman's stark mapping of a supersessionary model of racial development (culminating in white/Western dominance) onto a supersessionary model of religious progress (culminating in a wholly secularized Christianity) under the banner of feminism challenges the widely held view that secularism is a necessary precondition for democratic, pluralistic societies. In Gilman's universe, the violence of colonialism and the continued subordination of non-Western women are instead the necessary preconditions for the spread of secular (read American) "freedoms" across the globe.

Gilman understood the disappearance of religion (into "life") as the inevitable and welcome consequence of Protestant Christianity's continuing triumph over its more primitive rivals and antecedents, even as her reliance on colonial models of development undermines her celebratory narrative of secularization as emancipation. F. Scott Fitzgerald tells a different story of secularization than the one that renders religion invisible because wholly transparent to everyday life, or wholly interiorized in the hearts and minds of adherents. Chapter 8 reads Fitzgerald's novels, essays, and stories together with his reflections on his Catholic upbringing and more general debates surrounding the assimilation of non-Protestant immigrants in the early twentieth century. Unlike critics who find a thinly veiled nostalgia for the vividness of childhood faith at the heart of Fitzgerald's melancholy grandeur, I read Fitzgerald as concerned far less about the impossibility of remaining a believing Catholic than about the challenge of remaining a *secular* Catholic, of recovering Catholic difference as something richer, thornier, and more variegated than a difference of belief. Over the course of his career, I suggest, this Catholic secularism

moved Fitzgerald toward engagement with new ways of being American, with varieties of otherness—sexual, racial, national—that call to account a culture of “pluralism” that most readily embraces diversity in the form of a marketplace of private religious faiths.

My reading of Fitzgerald’s Catholic secularism might seem to mark a break from the preceding chapters in its effort no longer to probe the contradictions of a secularized Protestant culture, but to identify a rival fracturing within the register of the secular itself. To pluralize and complicate the meaning of religion in American cultural history, as I seek to do throughout this book, however, is to raise all along the question of differently descended, differently constituted secularisms. Put another way, to unmask the exacting religious, national, racial, and other specifications that have passed themselves off as a blandly accommodating Christianity is also to begin to expose the similarly exacting specifications concealed within an allegedly universal secular. My hope is that others might follow these alternative trajectories forward and backward from the middle decades of the twentieth century, where I leave off, in the service of a newly energized awareness of the role of religion in American culture, including its literary canon. The last thing I would wish, however, is for religion to be seen as a legitimate category of analysis in American literary and cultural history *only* insofar as it can be reconstituted in terms of the pressures it exerts on race, nationality, gender, sexuality, and other varieties of difference, for such a move would replicate the process by which religion disappears from critical inquiry by being dismissed as epiphenomenal. My interest in exploring the interplay of different religions and different secularisms in American literary history, rather, is to return *these* differences to a discussion from which a simplified narrative of secularization-as-progress has erased them, obscuring a great deal else besides.