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**Rhetorics of Religion in American Fiction: Faith, Fundamentalism, and Fanaticism in the Age of Terror.**

Liliana M. Naydan

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If the 2016 Trump-Clinton election showed us anything, it is the profundity of the ideological divisions splitting America. A decade ago, Sharon Crowley argued that liberalism and religious fundamentalism struggle to agree precisely because each side inhabits vastly different galaxies of a priori values. For secular liberalism, these include rational discourse, democracy, freedom, tolerance, privacy, persuasive evidence articulated within the realm of contingency; for religious fundamentalism, these include a transcendent notion of history, word-for-word scriptural literalism, theocracy, and the propulsion of secular time toward a final apocalyptic rendering. What results, in Crowley's analysis, is a dialogic impasse. Liliana M. Naydan begins her incisive study, *Rhetorics of Religion in American Fiction: Faith, Fundamentalism, and Fanaticism in the Age of Terror*, echoing Crowley: "American liberals and American fundamentalists speak at cross-purposes because they find different types of evidence to be convincing" (5).

Naydan's study amplifies Crowley's discussion by exploring how this dialogic impasse takes shape across a constellation of American fiction since the September 11 attacks, not only between liberalism and religious fundamentalism but also among fundamentalisms of various stripes, including equally virulent New Atheist and market/economic fanaticisms. In her analysis, literature that addresses the 9/11 attacks ultimately transcends the rhetorical stalemates these produce by forging "an aesthetic and rhetorical space beyond or between religious and counterreligious extremes" (15). In arguing this, Naydan continues a trajectory of analysis begun by her acknowledged predecessors John McClure and Amy Hungerford, who illuminated postsecular American literature's resistance to extreme religiosity as well as to extreme secularity through what McClure's *Partial Faiths* (2007) called a "rearticulation of a dramatically 'weakened' religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects." However, where he saw a "weakening" of totalizing belief, and where Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief* (2010) saw "belief in meaninglessness," Naydan discerns an important "counterfundamentalist" work (15). For Naydan, post-9/11 literature opens up spaces for interrogation, mystery, and reflexivity as if in response to Kenneth Burke's 1931 call, in *Counter-Statement*, for "a disintegrating art which converts each simplicity into a complexity, which ruins the possibilities of ready hierarchies...and thus by implication works corrosively upon those expansionist

certainties preparing the way for our social cataclysms.” For each of the fictions in question, the cataclysm looming in the nearest or most distant background is 9/11.

Don DeLillo, for one, brings counterfundamentalist rhetorical strategies to bear on a form of terrorist violence depicted in the stories “Baader-Meinhof” and *Point Omega*. Both narratives have male protagonists who enact interpersonal forms of terrorism toward female characters. However, the stories defuse the psycho-dynamics of this terror by opening up spaces of narrative indeterminacy—spaces of present absence and absent presence—that produce a salutary flexibility: “By underscoring mystery,” Naydan notes, “DeLillo works to revive the ever-flexible, ever-curious literary imagination” (104). According to Naydan, DeLillo’s representation in *Point Omega* of flexible “possibilities for truth” labors to “thwart” both “mind-numbing inflexibility” as well as the “staunch and narrow conceptions of truth that characterize fanatical fundamentalist terrorist thought” (104).

All of Naydan’s chapters move in similar fashion from the stubbornness of fundamentalism—and the dialogic impasses it creates—to the counterfundamentalist work her writers undertake as a corrective, “bring[ing] readers to the edge of a void in their understanding and literacy of religion and religious difference” (193). Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land* challenge market-fundamentalist American national identity by fostering awareness toward those it stereotypes and oppresses, particularly those of Islamic heritage. For Philip Roth, the primary space for counterfundamentalist work in *Everyman* and *Exit Ghost* is art that “provides a potential means by which to cultivate meaning in life” (58). Such “sophisticated” art “allows for interpretations that transcend literalism and didacticism” and “offers counterreligious and counteratheistic opportunities for reckoning, justification, and even transcendence for readers and artists alike in the post-9/11 Age of Terror” (58). In John Updike’s “Varieties of Religious Experience” and *Terrorist*, characters discover that their own identities are not monolithic in a way that can be readily mapped onto monolithic worldviews. Instead, characters discover an inner hybridity that empowers them to “un-Other religious Others who exist across rhetorically constructed ideological divides,” thus inviting them “to see features of religious Others within themselves” (127). Barbara Kingsolver’s *Small Wonder* and *Flight Behavior* mobilize “images of nature and a rhetoric of ecology to promote modes of understanding that counter binaristic post-9/11 thinking that homegrown Christian fundamentalists, evangelicals, and fanatical Muslim terrorists all work to create,” striving instead “to develop a new and more socially just American patriotism” (17).

These chapters will prove valuable to scholars of contemporary American literature and religion in general, and to those of post-9/11 and post-secular literature in particular. The book's conclusion may draw in readers from across the disciplines, including rhetoric, art, sociology, history, and even urban planning. Here, Naydan takes us through the 9/11 Memorial and Museum in lower Manhattan, attuning us to ways in which this site perpetuates a master narrative of American exceptionalism—yet another fundamentalism—through a religiously inflected rhetoric of patriotism. Is *this* the only way of memorializing 9/11 in the American imagination? Refreshingly, Naydan closes her study by ushering her authors into the wider cultural dialogue about what 9/11 means, how it should be memorialized, and what should be done in response.

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