

Joanna Rzepa, 'Religion and Representation'

Abstract:

In recent years, the relationship between religion and representation has been examined with particular intensity in the field of modernist studies, to which all books reviewed in this chapter have contributed. It is telling that three of them are devoted to Virginia Woolf, whose firm rejection of patriarchal Christianity and the established church has for years been considered a prime example of modernism's hostility to religion. New scholarship on Woolf, religion, and spirituality offers a much more nuanced view of her engagement with Christian culture and illustrates the wealth of new methodological developments in the field of modernist studies.

The review opens with a discussion of the recent religious turn in modernist studies, situating it within the expansion of the field connected to the emergence of the new modernist studies. Subsequently, it examines four new books that contribute to scholarship on modernism and religion. The chapter is divided into five sections: 1. The New Modernist Studies and Religion; 2. Jane de Gay, *Virginia Woolf and Christian Culture*; 3. Stephanie Paulsell, *Religion Around Virginia Woolf*; 4. *Religion, Secularism, and the Spiritual Paths of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Kristina K. Groover; 5. Martin Lockerd, *Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism*. The books reviewed illustrate the scope and depth of new research into modernism and religion, offering a fresh critical perspective that challenges the widely accepted view of modernism as a purely secular movement.

1. The New Modernist Studies and Religion

When Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz discussed the emergence of the new modernist studies in 2008, they underlined the importance of the expansion of the field, emphasising the temporal, spatial, and paradigmatic broadening of the scope of research undertaken by scholars of modernism. *The New Modernist Studies* (2021), edited by Douglas Mao, maps out the developments in the field in the last two decades. One of these developments is the renewed interest in exploring the complex interface between modernism and religion. As Susan Stanford Friedman contends in the chapter 'Religion's Configurations: Modernism, Empire, Comparison', until recently '[r]eligion has been largely ignored in modernist studies, even as the "new modernist studies" has greatly expanded the spatiotemporal boundaries and the archive of modes, genres, media, creators, and thinkers of plural and planetary modernisms' (p. 88). Friedman points out that religion has not fared as well as other topics studied by scholars of modernism, and it has been completely omitted from some accounts of the period. However, in the last ten years we have seen a welcome change with a wealth of new publications on modernism, religion, and spirituality. They demonstrate an urgent need to re-examine

modernism's relationship to religion and the reluctance of the previous generation of researchers to address this topic. As Friedman argues, '[t]o be modern – and modernist – is too often thought to mean being secular, or at most vaguely spiritual or hermetic. But reading backward from our standpoints in the twenty-first century, when religion is anything but dead on the world stage, we are primed to ask a range of new questions about the meanings of religion and secularism for modernist studies, questions that take into account old and new forms of imperial and gendered power and resistance' (p. 104). The first substantial studies to draw attention to the topic were Pericles Lewis' *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (2010) and Lara Vetter's *Modernist Writings and Religio-Scientific Discourse: H.D., Loy, and Toomer* (2010). They were followed by Erik Tønning's *Modernism and Christianity* (2014), *Modernism, Christianity and Apocalypse*, ed. Erik Tønning, Matthew Feldman, and David Addyman (2015), W. David Soud's *Divine Cartographies: God, History, and Poiesis in W. B. Yeats, David Jones, and T. S. Eliot* (2016), Steve Pinkerton's *Blasphemous Modernism: The 20th-Century Word Made Flesh* (2017), Matthew Mutter's *Restless Secularism: Modernism and the Religious Inheritance* (2017), and my *Modernism and Theology: Rainer Maria Rilke, T. S. Eliot, Czesław Miłosz* (2021). The importance of this new turn to religion in modernist studies cannot be overestimated as it offers new paradigms for reading and interpreting modernist writings, challenging the long-established consensus that religion did not bear much relevance in the literary and cultural landscape of the early twentieth century (see Chapter one in Rzepa, *Modernism and Theology*). Accordingly, this review focuses on four recent books that offer a fresh perspective on modernism and religion and provide a welcome contribution to the field.

2. Jane de Gay, *Virginia Woolf and Christian Culture* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018)

Jane de Gay's *Virginia Woolf and Christian Culture* challenges the long-held view that Virginia Woolf had little interest in religion and her attitude to Christianity was generally hostile and belligerent. The study aims to provide a more nuanced picture of Woolf's engagement with Christian culture to demonstrate that 'Woolf's debates with Christianity form a more powerful undercurrent in her work than has been acknowledged and that this was because she had detailed knowledge and understanding of the faith' (p. 2). This, of course, does not mean that Woolf ought to be considered a 'religious writer' (which, as de Gay acknowledges, is a notoriously slippery term). However, it does make it possible for us 'to identify threads of Christian ideas and concepts as intertexts within the intricate skein of her work' (p. 17). De Gay's study provides plenty of insightful examples of such religiously inflected readings, many of which are informed by carefully researched biographical contexts. The book is divided into seven chapters that trace Woolf's family background, her engagement with contemporary religious debates, her critique of the institutional church and the clergy, her understanding of sacred spaces, as well as her reading of the figure of the Virgin Mary.

Each chapter focuses on a particular theme which is explored within a cultural historical framework that contributes to building a nuanced picture of the religious landscape of the period and the ways in which Woolf was immersed in it.

Chapter one considers the impact of Woolf's family background on her understanding of religion. Beyond the agnosticism of her parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen, it discusses her ancestors' association with the Clapham Sect as well as her aunt Caroline Emelia Stephen's Quakerism. As de Gay demonstrates, '[g]enerations of both sides of the family had written on religion in a variety of genres, including journalism, theology, novels and hymns' (p. 21). Woolf read some of those works when she was growing up, and she inherited many others with her father's library. These included Henry Venn's *The Complete Duty of Man, or a System of Doctrinal and Practical Christianity* (1763) and James Stephen's *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography* (1849), which Woolf first read when she was fifteen. Her teenage engagement with religious texts inspired her early writings, which included the essay 'Religio Laici', in which – as she later reminisced – 'God was described in a process of change' (quoted on p. 21). Her subsequent feminist critique of religious and political institutions in *Three Guineas* and *A Room of One's Own* was informed by her rejection of the paternalistic and patriarchal power structures that informed much of her ancestors' writings on religion. De Gay aptly points out that '[s]uccessive generations of male ancestors had played an integral part in developing the establishment: as public figures, they shaped the patriarchal, imperialistic, nationalist political climate that she consistently attacked; as patriarchs within the private home, they endorsed a domestic hierarchy underpinned by Christian ideologies' (p. 33). In contrast to the male ancestors who Woolf distanced herself from, her aunt Caroline Emelia Stephen offered a more positive vision of spiritual life that was far more inclusive of women than the established church. Caroline Stephen, who contributed to the revival of Quakerism in Britain, authoring *Quaker Strongholds* (1890) and *Light Arising* (1908), provided Woolf with encouragement and a safe place where she could recover from the nervous breakdown after her father's death. She also supported Woolf financially with the bequest of £2,500 that Woolf mentions in *A Room of One's Own*. Caroline Stephen's understanding of faith, as de Gay argues, had an impact on Woolf's concept of a 'new religion' advocated in *Three Guineas*, though a detailed comparative analysis would have made the section that traces the affinities between the two even more compelling.

Chapter two, 'Contemporary Conversations', discusses the wider context in which Woolf lived and worked – 'a culture that owed more to Christianity for its identity than one might expect' (p. 52). The early decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of new competing modes of Christian belief as well as a wave of conversions of writers and public figures (including John Middleton Murry, T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, Evelyn Waugh). As de Gay shows, Woolf's responses to contemporary conversations about religion were varied and shaped by political developments, her broad reading, and personal relationships, in particular with Violet Dickinson, Ethel Smyth, and Vita Sackville-West. Tracing Woolf's responses to current affairs, the chapter

shows that during World War 1 and in the run-up to World War 2, she grew increasingly critical of the churches' support for the war and the ways in which the military and the ecclesiastical worked hand in hand, reinforcing patriarchal power structures. This becomes particularly pronounced in *Three Guineas* (1938) and 'A Sketch of the Past' (1939), in which she reflects on the constructedness of the concept of God and critiques political ideologies that are set to uphold patriarchal domination in all spheres of life. 'This sceptical, politicised view of the concept of God as an ideological construct, based closely on the work of Jane Harrison,' de Gay contends, 'is distinctly contrasted with the more speculative, if hostile, views of God that Woolf expresses in other contexts' (p. 79).

The third chapter, 'Reverend Gentlemen and Prophetesses', turns to close textual analysis, focusing on the representations of clergy in Woolf's writings. It opens with the examination of the portrayal of the young vicar Mr Floyd in *Jacob's Room*, drawing attention to the dubious motives that inform Mr Floyd's actions and the role he plays in 'inducting Jacob into the system that will lead to his death in the trenches' (p. 91). The male clergy's domination over their congregations is further explored through the relationship of Miss Kilman and the preacher Edward Whittaker in *Mrs Dalloway*. Having played an important part in Miss Kilman's conversion, Mr Whittaker imposes on her views that 'feed her low self-esteem' and 'poor body-image' (p. 91), turning her into a deeply unhappy person. Analysing two examples of services portrayed in Woolf's novels (Mr Bax leading Morning Prayer in *The Voyage Out* and Dr Crane giving an oration in *The Waves*), de Gay contends that the male clergymen fail to communicate effectively with their listeners as Woolf paints a critical picture of the clergy as 'domineering, wedded to the establishment, spiritually impoverished, and perhaps even wilfully misleading' (p. 93). This kind of portrayal can be directly contrasted with the ways in which Mrs Ramsay presides at the dinner in *To the Lighthouse*, which brings to mind the Catholic Mass. While Mrs Ramsay overtly rejects Christianity, her dinner party 'clearly evokes a church service which [...] involves communion between the participants and a genuine experience of eternity' (p. 99). De Gay points out that since the dinner scene is the last section in which Mrs Ramsay is alive, it can be compared to the Last Supper, with a significant intertextual link between Mrs Ramsay and Christ. Through this link, de Gay aptly remarks, 'Woolf provocatively invites the reader to contemplate the possibility of a woman priest: something that leaders of the Anglican and Catholic Churches deemed impossible at the time' (pp. 101-2). Woolf subsequently returned to the issue of women's ministry in *Three Guineas*, mounting a scathing critique of the Church Commissioners' report on *The Ministry of Women*, which was published in 1936. Her response highlighted the report's inner contradictions and inconsistencies, and concluded that since the established church remains a space that is deeply hostile to women believers, the best place for women to fulfil their vocation was outside the church.

The following two chapters focus on Woolf's preoccupation with spaces, specifically churches and cathedrals (Chapter four) and domestic spaces (Chapter five). Exploring the themes of containment, exclusion, refuge, and liberation, the chapters discuss ways in which women in

particular engage with and create sacred spaces. For the purpose of her analysis, de Gay defines the term 'sacred' as 'something that is holy, set apart' but also 'something that is especially valued or reserved exclusively for a particular person or purpose' (p. 115). She emphasises that it is the latter, broader meaning of the term that Woolf was more interested in since 'it implies control and privilege, raising questions as to who determines what is of value and how the lines of inclusion and exclusion are drawn' (p. 115). The chapters discuss Woolf's essays and journals, drawing attention to her accounts of visits to places of worship in Britain and abroad, including Seville Cathedral in Spain and Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. St Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey occupy a particularly important role in Woolf's writings, and she attempted to undermine their symbolic power stemming from their status as sites of national mythmaking to make them 'accessible to the uninitiated' in the essay 'Abbeys and Cathedrals' (1932). Reflecting on the spatial structures that inform the visitors' and worshippers' experience, she is particularly critical of how the tombs of 'national heroes' seek to imbue the space with civic pride and national belonging, suggesting that the 'posthumous pride of these national figures undercuts the Christian message' (p. 132). Explicitly condemning the union of church and state in her essays, Woolf offers an alternative way of experiencing sacred spaces in her fiction. For example, in *Jacob's Room*, St Paul's Cathedral is visited by Mrs Lidgett, a cleaner, who navigates the space in her own way, paying little attention to the displays of civic pride and stately power, focusing instead on seemingly insignificant architectural details, such as the faces of two little angels above the Duke of Wellington's tomb. This and other similar scenes in *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Years* show women who, visiting churches, subvert and challenge the discourses of power associated with sacred spaces. These characters invite us to consider the dynamic relation between religion, space, politics, and gender in Woolf's works. De Gay contends that by bringing these issues together, Woolf 'does not dismiss the concept of the sacred-as-holy, but values it as something that is greater than the powers of the establishment and that can be encountered in places of worship even when structures are in place to control and resist the visitor and the outsider' (p. 140). The exploration of space and the sacred is further developed in Chapter five, which examines domesticity and what de Gay refers to as Woolf's 'conception of the home as a sacred space' that can 'free women to reflect, write and have spiritual experiences' (p. 144). While the chapter includes an insightful discussion of Woolf's critique of the Victorian household, and her feminist opposition to the patriarchal organisation of domestic architecture, its key argument that Woolf reconfigures domestic space as a 'sacred' space is not as compelling as the interpretations put forward in other chapters. It is not entirely clear what kind of sacredness is at stake here, and to what extent it stems from a particular strand of contemporary religious debates discussed in previous chapters.

Chapters six and seven are thematically focused on the Virgin Mary and the Bible. Considering the cultural history of Mary's representations, Chapter six discusses the role of Woolf's parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen, who – despite their rejection of the Christian faith – actively promoted a model of womanhood that centred on the veneration of the feminine mystique. Woolf's

engagement with the figure of the Madonna was later shaped by her visit to Italy, and creatively reworked in *To the Lighthouse*, where Mrs Ramsay and James are compared to the Madonna and Child. The chapter closely examines Lily Briscoe's work on her painting, contextualising it within the traditional Renaissance representations of Mary and Jesus. Lily is conflicted about portraying Mrs Ramsay since, as the final section of the novel suggests, the 'imperatives associated with that idealised image are clearly aligned with an age that has passed: Mrs Ramsay, like Julia Stephen, is dead and gone' (p. 179). Nevertheless, as de Gay suggests, the Virgin Mary provides Lily with 'permission to live happily as an unmarried woman' since her virginal status is positively reframed as a symbol of female celibacy that offers independence and freedom from the patriarchal appropriation of woman's body. Chapter seven, 'How Should One Read the Bible?', takes a more material approach to the question it poses and opens with an examination of the contents of the Library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf at Washington State University, Pullman. It discusses the bibles and other religious books that the Woolfs purchased, inherited, were gifted, or presented to each other on various occasions. Subsequently, it examines ways in which Woolf used biblical texts in her own writings, looking at intertextual references, allusions, and the rhetorical use of biblical concepts. De Gay puts forward an insightful reading of *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, referring to them as Woolf's 'Passion Trilogy' (p. 202). As she explains, '[i]n each of these novels, Woolf identifies one or more characters with the figure of Christ, and her frame of reference becomes wider over the course of the trilogy, from allusions to the crucifixion and resurrection in *Mrs Dalloway*, to a narrative arc from the Fall to the resurrection in *To the Lighthouse*, and an arc from the Fall through to the Last Judgment in *The Waves*' (p. 202). As de Gay convincingly demonstrates, this treatment of biblical narratives allowed Woolf to test Christian themes, in particular those related to the discourses of creation, salvation, and damnation, and reconfigure them to emphasise female presence and agency.

De Gay's impressive study provides a refreshing perspective on Woolf's understanding of religion, showing that her scepticism of Christianity stemmed from the established churches' failure to challenge the state and try to prevent the war as well as their continued endorsement of the patriarchal subjugation of women. 'In tension with this scepticism,' de Gay concludes, 'Woolf had a sense of the sacred that *could* be accessed through Christian culture, if its artefacts were read differently' (p. 219). While what de Gay refers to as 'the sacred' is not always clearly defined, her book is a pioneering study that skilfully brings together literary criticism and cultural history. It includes much incisive textual analysis that shows how careful attention to the religious idiom present in Woolf's writings can yield original new interpretations of her key works. The volume will be indispensable to both scholars and students of Woolf and religion.

3. Stephanie Paulsell, *Religion Around Virginia Woolf* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019)

Stephanie Paulsell's *Religion Around Virginia Woolf*, published by Pennsylvania State University Press in the 'Religion Around' series, considers Virginia Woolf as a 'religious thinker who both engaged with the religion around her and moved beyond it' (p. 14). Similarly to Jane de Gay's study, Paulsell's book takes a cultural historical and biographical approach and pays close attention to Woolf's encounters with religion in her family, readings, relationships, and travels. Paulsell starts by examining the dearth of scholarship on Woolf and religion, which she attributes to the 'fear that exploring the religious dimensions of Woolf's work would obscure its political concerns and make it less available for political work' (p. 3). The book aims to challenge this view and demonstrate that the religious and political dimensions of Woolf's work are at times intricately interconnected.

The first chapter, 'Family Resemblances', considers the most important family contexts in which Woolf encountered religion, including the continuing significance of the devotional practices of the Clapham Sect, Leslie Stephen's endorsement of agnosticism, and Caroline Emelia Stephen's Quakerism. It shows that the Clapham Sect's emphasis on the need to devote oneself to one's vocation informed Woolf's reflection on her vocation as a writer. While she rejected the religious beliefs of her grandparents, she also had reservations about her father's agnosticism. Leslie Stephen's rejection of the Christian faith was predicated on his engagement with the historico-critical study of the Bible that in his and many of his contemporaries' eyes put its truth value in question. His *Essays in Freethinking and Plainspeaking* and *An Agnostic's Apology* celebrated the sense of freedom that he acquired when he rejected Christianity and dedicated himself to the study of ethics. Furthermore, as Paulsell demonstrates, Leslie Stephen 'cast his distinction between reality and dreams, fact and fiction, reason and sentiment in gendered terms' (p. 31), with femininity standing for the sentimental and ineffable, while manliness associated with the courage to face the material facts of existence. The type of agnosticism that Woolf herself endorsed was very different from her father's. As Paulsell aptly points out, '[a]lthough deeply critical of the institutional, religious forms of her grandfather's faith, she also mistrusted her father's muscular agnosticism as a gendered, limited view of the world' (p. 43). The chapter convincingly demonstrates that when one speaks of Woolf's agnosticism or atheism, it is necessary to pay close attention to the varieties of meaning contained in those labels.

The second chapter continues to examine the childhood and young adulthood of Woolf, focusing on the formative relationships, readings, and travels. It discusses her resistance to her cousin Dorothea Stephen's attempts at converting her and her siblings, as well as her engagement with Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), which emphasised the creative and sensual aspects of religion. Paulsell points out that Woolf's early writings, including her essay 'Religio Laici' and 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn', show that she distanced herself from the understanding of religion endorsed by her father and her cousin Dorothea (who saw religion as a set of dogmatic propositions to be intellectually accepted) and followed in Walter Pater's steps by exploring the creative dimensions of religious practice and ritual. She further explored the meaning of religious rituals through the work

of the anthropologist Jane Ellen Harrison, who argued for the primacy of ritual over theology, emphasising the community-building aspects of religious practice.

The third chapter, 'Religious Reading', focuses on the religious importance of reading, which Paulsell considers 'the most formative practice of Virginia Woolf's life' (p. 98). It situates reading as practice in Woolf's family within the historical context of the devotional practices of the Clapham Sect, for whom 'both individual spiritual reading and family devotional reading were an integral part of daily life and household worship' (p. 99). When Leslie Stephen rejected religion, he retained the practice of reading and reciting to his family, which Paulsell views as an activity of 'spiritual and ethical formation, the fulfilment of a Claphamite responsibility' (p. 100). Analysing selected novels by Woolf, including *Orlando*, *The Waves*, and *The Years*, Paulsell shows that scenes of reading often highlight its transformative power. While generally compelling, the argument that Woolf's reading scenes should be viewed as illustrating the practice of 'religious reading' would merit further critical discussion as would the question of what the religious dimension of this practice consists in more specifically. The analysis of *Mrs Dalloway*, on the other hand, offers a detailed and insightful examination of ways in which Clarissa's actions follow the pattern of the liturgical hours of the Divine Office: Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline, and Matins. Paying close attention to the religious language used to describe Clarissa and her movements, Paulsell contends that the structure of monastic time, which is reinforced by way of 'attaching monastic language to Clarissa' (p. 116), who is compared to a nun, allows Woolf to bring together disparate narrative threads and illuminate connections between various characters.

Chapter four focuses on different ideas about God that appear in Woolf's writings. It opens with a discussion of Woolf's adolescent works, including the essay 'Religio Laici' and early journals, and moves on to analyse her later novels. While in her early writings God is referred to as the creator, later on he becomes more of 'a heavy-handed dispenser of suffering or an impediment to freedom' (p. 133). While Woolf clearly discards dogmatic pronouncements about God and rejects institutionalised Christianity, she nevertheless shows the creative potential of the idea of God as in her fiction 'even the most committed atheists have a difficult time keeping their minds free of God and struggle against the incursion of God into their thoughts' (p. 134). Paulsell analyses 'A Simple Melody', *To the Lighthouse*, *The Voyage Out*, *Mrs Dalloway*, and *The Waves*, concluding that while many of Woolf's characters ostensibly reject God, the idea of religious offering or sacrifice can be seen to shape their actions as they 'long to give and receive, even though both the offering and the receiver remain obscure' (p. 146). The fifth and final chapter examines ways in which the notion of community and the sacred figure in Woolf's writings. The chapter considers the historical context, discussing the growing social concern about the future of a Christian society among Woolf's contemporaries. The future of Christianity in Britain was addressed at the 1937 Oxford Conference on Church, Community, and State, as well as the regular meetings of the Moot group, convened by J. H. Oldham. Woolf's take on the idea of community was most clearly articulated in *Three Guineas*, which drew

attention to the absence of women in the ongoing debates on the future of religion. To address this, she proposed that women form a Society of Outsiders since the outsider who, 'having been excluded by the rituals and ceremonies and the structures of the church, is free to imagine new ones', moving away from the misogyny perpetuated by the established church (p. 178). As the chapter demonstrates, Woolf explores ways in which women can create communities through the characters of Mrs Dalloway, Mrs Ramsay, and Miss La Trobe, who all engage in rituals that could be considered examples of the new religion advocated by Woolf.

Paulsell's study offers a discerning and richly contextualised analysis of Woolf's encounters with religion that complements Jane de Gay's book. It provides an engaging narrative that situates Woolf's writings within the religious landscape of the period and considers various forms of religiosity that she encountered both in her family and in contemporary society. At times, however, the study would have benefitted from a more critical exposition of its arguments. Paulsell argues that 'Woolf urges us to let the world in as we read, to question, and also to accept. She encourages us to peel away the accretions that stand between us and "the thing itself."' (p. 126). She also contends that '[t]he idea of God [...] hovers as a potential answer to questions that arise again and again throughout Woolf's work' (p. 146). The implications of such statements could have been explored in more detail. It would have been great to see a more in-depth critical discussion of how contemporary philosophical and theological debates on what constitutes 'reality' inform Woolf's understanding of 'the thing itself'. It would be also worth examining other 'potential answers' to the questions that arise in Woolf's works, as well as providing a critical discussion of why so many of her characters are quick to reject God as a 'potential answer'. Some of these answers would likely involve philosophical and ethical arguments and their more thorough explication would have enriched Paulsell's discussion. Despite this minor criticism, Paulsell's study provides a rich resource and a welcome contribution to existing scholarship on religion and modernism. Its attention to historical and textual detail is exemplary, and the narrative it weaves remains compelling throughout.

4. *Religion, Secularism, and the Spiritual Paths of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Kristina K. Groover (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)

The volume of essays *Religion, Secularism, and the Spiritual Paths of Virginia Woolf* edited by Kristina K. Groover brings into focus diverse methodological perspectives to the study of Woolf and religion. Building on the work of Pericles Lewis and Jane de Gay, the collection seeks to 'expose a dimension of Woolf's work that is fundamentally theological' (p. 11) and 'take up a challenge posed by Woolf herself: how to understand her persistent use of religious language, her representation of deeply mysterious human experiences, and her recurrent questions about life's meaning in light of her sharply critical attitude toward religion' (p. 4). The volume includes eleven chapters by Kristina K.

Groover, Jane de Gay, Lorraine Sim, Amy C. Smith, Dwight Lindley, Elizabeth Anderson, Emily Griesinger, Rita Dirks, Margaret Sullivan, and Benjamin D. Hagen. Their contributions showcase a diverse range of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of Woolf and religion, engaging with the fields of theology, psychology, queer studies, and cultural history. The book opens with Kristina K. Groover's introduction that draws attention to Woolf's reflections on the limitations of language and her frequent use of religiously inflected idiom that challenges traditional religious discourse and reconfigures some of its key categories. These acts of reconfiguration merit further critical attention and require nuanced interpretative tools, which the essays collected in the volume seek to provide. Their aim is to 'enliven a neglected area of Woolf studies by treating Woolf's engagement with the spiritual as contested critical ground' (p. 11).

Several of the chapters focus on specific spiritual traditions and particular moments in the history of religious thought and sensibility that came to inform Woolf's writings. Jane de Gay's contribution discusses the early-twentieth-century mystical revival, which provides a valuable context for reading Woolf's frequent references to mysticism, while Emily Griesinger explores Quaker mysticism that Woolf encountered through her aunt, Caroline Emelia Stephen. Amy C. Smith's contribution offers an analysis of *To the Lighthouse* as a text that enters a conversation with Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' and includes a critical reflection on the Victorian crisis of faith; Rita Dirks' essay considers the impact of Dostoevsky's work on Woolf's portrayal of the soul in *Mrs Dalloway*; and Dwight Lindley discusses Woolf's reading of Gerard Manley Hopkins' verse and ways in which it can be seen to inspire what Lindley calls 'the revelatory particular' in *Mrs Dalloway*. The remaining contributions engage with critical and theoretical concepts that shed new light on aspects of Woolf's work. Elizabeth Anderson's chapter draws on cultural geography to examine urban pilgrimage in Woolf's essays; Margaret Sullivan brings together gender studies, queer theory, and religious history to consider prophetic discourse and lesbian subjectivity in *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*; Benjamin D. Hagen carries out a comparative critical reading of the ethic of response in Woolf, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Sara Mahmood; and Lorraine Sim focuses on the concept of the everyday and its relation to the sacred in Woolf's fiction. This wide range of approaches to the study of Woolf and religion testifies to the richness and vibrance of the field.

The essays that show particular originality and critical acumen include Amy C. Smith's 'Virginia Woolf Reads "Dover Beach": Romance and the Victorian Crisis of Faith in *To the Lighthouse*' (Chapter five) and Margaret Sullivan's "'She heard the first words": Lesbian Subjectivity and Prophetic Discourse in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*' (Chapter ten). Smith performs an impressive intertextual reading of *To the Lighthouse* that situates the novel in a historical context that is marked by a discourse linking the Victorian crisis of faith to the patriarchal idealisation of womanhood and marriage. She brings together cultural and literary history and feminist theory to argue that while the novel includes much autobiographical material, as has been widely recognised, it goes beyond that to offer a creative reflection on the Victorian crisis of faith through recurring

allusions to 'Dover Beach'. Smith contends that 'throughout *To the Lighthouse* Woolf engages in a conversation with "Dover Beach" about the dangers of viewing marriage as consolation for the existential anxiety associated with a godless universe' (p. 71). The social world portrayed in the novel reflects the spiritual condition described in the final lines of Arnold's poem – a world in which one cannot entertain any religious certitude as the 'Sea of Faith' has retreated. While Arnold's final stanza views romantic love as a remedy for the spiritual angst experienced by the speaker, Woolf's novel offers a critical counter-response, posing a direct challenge to Arnold's poem. As Smith points out, *To the Lighthouse* reconfigures the gender dynamic of 'Dover Beach': Mrs Ramsay takes the position of the male speaker of Arnold's poem, turning its passive female addressee into a feminine figure that assumes agency and 'actively wishes to become God' (p. 71). This reading of Woolf's conversation with Arnold opens up a set of critical questions about the relationship between religion and its loss, marriage politics, and gender norms shaping nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century society and culture. Smith contends that '[w]hile Arnold's turn to human relationships as respite for the merciless barrage of naturalistic truth can be read as a sincere and realistic humanist response to the nihilistic elements of a materialist worldview, Woolf's response to the poem emphasizes the problems inherent in viewing romance as an answer to metaphysical ills' (p. 78). The way in which Mrs Ramsay enforced heteronormative norms on other characters, urging them to get married, highlights the oppressive nature of Arnold's vision of romance. While Mrs Ramsay's desire to assume divinity, most clearly expressed in her reading of the fairy tale 'The Fisherman and His Wife', could be viewed as a gesture of feminist empowerment, Smith convincingly demonstrates that Mrs. Ramsay's 'social location as a deified Victorian woman suggests that this desire to be God develops out of Victorian restrictions on women's independent identity and self-determination combined with the ideology of the angel in the house' (p. 81). Ultimately, the essay concludes that by reversing the gender dynamic of Arnold's poem, Woolf's novel reflects on the consequences of the Victorian fetishization of femininity. It leads to women assuming the role of the lost godhead and taking up (rather than subverting) the patriarchal position of power. In this way, *To the Lighthouse* offers a nuanced critique of Mrs Ramsay as a deified Victorian woman and suggests that 'agency and empowerment also make women responsible, and in Lily's eyes, culpable, for the dynamics of their relationships and lives' (p. 83).

Margaret Sullivan's essay offers a similarly incisive analysis of lesbian subjectivity in *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*, focusing on the portrayals of Rhoda and Miss La Trobe. Sullivan points to the shift in Woolf's representation of a lesbian subject that took place between 1931 and 1941, and was likely inspired by Vita Sackville-West's portrayal of the radical feminist prophetess in *Saint Joan of Arc* (1936) and works of other contemporary lesbian authors. As Sullivan aptly points out, Woolf's interest, as outlined in *Three Guineas* (1938), lay in the forms of linguistic engagement that the female Outsider should undertake to disrupt the patriarchal tradition. Woolf's 'Outsiders usually recognize the uncertainty inherent to any innovative religio-cultural formation' (p. 171), which also

characterises Woolf's own style that features plenty of repetition and promotes complex sentences with multiple clauses, embodying theologically informed aesthetic of hesitation and incertitude. Offering a comparative analysis of Rhoda and Miss La Trobe as two prophetic lesbian subjects, Sullivan argues that Rhoda's 'reordering of foundational Christian narratives' poses 'a lesbianized challenge to Eden's shaping myth', but her ultimate failure illustrates the overbearing power of the 'foundational heterotext' (pp. 172, 174-5). *Between the Acts*, written ten years later, shows Miss La Trobe as a disruptive prophet who is able to succeed where Rhoda failed. Sullivan contends that '[a]nticipating later liberation theologians, with their push for interpreting religion through the eyes of the marginalized, La Trobe demands that her audience see, from the specific, social perspective of a lesbian "outsider," the oppression created by their long, heterosexist history' (p. 177). The biblical references in La Trobe's address have ironic undertones and result in 'purposeful disintegrations of inherited religious meaning' (p. 182). These disintegrations, however, lead to an ultimate renewal that is explored through the rich symbolism of the image of the fertile mud. Comparing Rhoda's and La Trobe's appropriations of religious language, Sullivan concludes that 'because Rhoda preserves the linguistic and structural integrity of originating utterances [...], she fails to overthrow its power. La Trobe, on the other hand, fractures, and ultimately makes useless, the epistemic and linguistic structures that comprise the operations of religion' (p. 185). Thus, it is La Trobe's activist challenge to religious discourse and the violence it promotes, and not Rhoda's mysticism, that can bring about real change and renewal, creating the possibility for imagining a new, more inclusive religion. Smith's and Sullivan's essays are two examples of excellent analyses of Woolf's writings that traverse literature and religion, queer theory, gender studies, and cultural history. This interdisciplinary approach to the study of religion and literature informs other chapters in the volume as well and is one of its key strengths. The collection succeeds in opening up new perspectives not only on Woolf and religion, but the wider field of modernist literature and culture, and it will undoubtedly inspire further scholarship on the topic.

5. Martin Lockerd, *Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism* (Bloomsbury, 2020)

The relationship between modernism and decadence has been recently interrogated by scholars working in the fields of both Victorian studies and modernist studies. Vincent Sherry's *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2015) and the collections *Late Victorian into Modern*, edited by Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn, and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr (2016), *Reconnecting Aestheticism and Modernism: Continuities, Revisions, Speculations*, edited by Bénédicte Coste, Catherine Delyfer, and Christine Reynier (2016), and *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, edited by Kate Hext and Alex Murray (2019) have brought to light the underresearched continuities and hitherto unexamined affinities that defy the neat divide between nineteenth-century aesthetics and the

modernist era. New scholarship has drawn our attention to the constructedness of the line dividing the Victorian from the modernist, showing that the conventional frameworks for studying the two periods can be enriched by mutual exchanges that illuminate previously overlooked links between the two. Martin Lockerd's *Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism* contributes to this fruitful conversation by examining the legacy of decadent Catholicism in the age of modernism. Lockerd points out that while recent studies focused on a number of connections between decadence and modernism, 'they almost completely elided an essential component of the modernist engagement with decadence: Catholicism' (p. 4). Drawing on Elis Hanson's *Decadence and Catholicism* (1997), Lockerd sets out to interrogate the artistic legacy of British decadent authors who in various ways engaged with Catholicism as well as their impact on the cultural landscape of modernism. This includes a wide range of writers and artists, from Aubrey Beardsley, Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, John Gray, Lord Alfred Douglas, Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper) and Oscar Wilde, to W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Evelyn Waugh. This ambitious scope of the study speaks to its aim of 'delineat[ing] an imaginative space in which the discursive acts of decadence and Catholicism engage, interact, overlap, or simply breathe the same air' (p. 14) and putting forward a genealogy 'in which decadent Catholicism becomes an essential constituent element in the development of British modernism' (p. 10).

Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism is divided into five chronologically organised chapters. Chapter one, 'The Decadents: Profligates, Priests, Pornographers, and Pontiffs' focuses on the 1890s and offers a brief survey of the key decadent authors and their engagement with the religious discourse, theology, and aesthetics of Catholicism. The second chapter examines Ezra Pound's and W. B. Yeats' connections to decadent Catholicism and their subsequent attempts to distance themselves from it to develop a new modernist aesthetic. The following three chapters focus on the formative impact of decadent Catholicism on T. S. Eliot (Chapter three), George Moore, James Joyce (Chapter four), and Evelyn Waugh (Chapter five). The conclusion looks beyond modernism and identifies traces of the decadent Catholic aesthetic in the works of Alan Hollinghurst and DBC Pierre.

The key premise on which Lockerd builds his argument is that '[s]in, with all of its consequences and consolations, is perhaps the obsession that most unites the decadents and their modernist inheritors' (p. 14). It is the central theme of *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, the poetry of Edward Dowson, the art of Aubrey Beardsley, as well as many essays by T. S. Eliot and fictional works by James Joyce and Evelyn Waugh. In the poetry and prose of decadent authors, many of whom later converted to Catholicism, sin is often explored through an extensive focus on sexual desire, sensual experimentation, homoeroticism, opium and alcohol addiction, and experiences portrayed as 'perverse'. Lockerd provides a close textual analysis of a representative selection of decadent poems that explicitly engage with religious themes, pointing to the 'combined act of veneration and violation [that] speaks to a tension at the heart of nearly all decadent texts between ideal purity and cultivated depravity' (p. 31). This would have been a promising starting point for a

theoretically informed discussion of the concept of depravity and its theological dimensions, yet this discussion is never properly developed. Instead, the study focuses heavily on biographical anecdotes, repeatedly circling around stories of poets being ‘plagued by alcoholism, dissipation, and self-torturing sexual desires’ (p. 34), artists who chose ‘to exorcise [their] demons in the beds of prostitutes’ (p. 48), authors ‘turn[ing] to alcohol when [their] fleshly desires outstripped the moral demands of [their] faith’ (p. 164), and celibate writers ‘seemingly refusing to make use of their genitals’ (p. 154). Reducing the topic of sin to such unsubstantiated speculations is a missed opportunity to offer a fresh, theologically informed reading of the *fin de siècle*’s fascination with self-destructive addiction and excess. As Peter Chadwick pointed out in ‘Decadence and Spirituality in Late Nineteenth Century Artists and Writers’ (2010), scholarship on the topic should go deeper than simply pointing to links between sexuality, sado-masochism, and religiosity, which are ‘transparent alliances’ (p. 94). Such alliances could be effectively examined, for example, through a theoretically (and theologically) inflected reinterpretation of the concepts of ‘depravity’ and ‘perversion’ or a critical analysis of self-representation strategies of decadent artists. A recent example of an impressively conducted analysis of this topic can be found in Nellene Benhardus’s *British Literary Decadence and Religion* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Iowa, 2018), which contextualises decadent writers’ attempts at redefining religion by engaging with the works of theologians, sociologists, and psychoanalytic theorists, including Danièle Hervieu-Léger, Julia Kristeva, and John Schad.

What remains compelling in Lockerd’s study is the discussion of Ezra Pound’s and W. B. Yeats’ disavowal of the poetry of the 1890s and the decadent style despite their own works displaying some of its typical qualities. This gesture of rejection of the immediate past was, as Lockerd argues, ‘vital to [Pound’s] assertion of the new present’ (p. 65). The period of Pound’s and Yeats’ collaboration in 1913-4 led to a transformation of Yeats’ verse as well. In the preface to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), he famously distanced himself from the poets of the nineties, though as Lockerd demonstrates, his own poetry collections *The Rose* (1893) and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) share in the imagery of decadent Catholicism. The discussion of Eliot’s affinities with the spiritual aesthetics of Beardsley, Johnson, Dowson, and Wilde, which builds on Ronald Schuchard’s *Eliot’s Dark Angel* (1999), is also insightful, though it would have benefitted from a consideration of Eliot’s indebtedness to T. E. Hulme’s writings on Original Sin. Similarly, the analysis of Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* proposes to consider Waugh as a ‘self-conscious participant in a longer Catholic literary tradition, one especially concerned with the relationship between aesthetics, theology, and non-normative sexuality’ (pp. 154-5), but the discussion of this relationship is limited to the consideration of celibacy as a ‘potentially subversive mode of sexuality’ (p. 177). While the analysis is grounded in detailed engagement with the text, the subversiveness of celibacy is never fully explicated nor theorised, leaving the implications of this line of argumentation unexplored.

Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism is an ambitious attempt at bridging the gap between research into religion and literature in the fields of Victorian studies and modernist studies. At its best, it points to important continuities and affinities between decadent writers and canonical modernist authors, offering valuable textual analyses of their selected works. At the same time, it also illustrates the pitfalls of researching religion and literature, showing that the topic can be easily reduced to unconvincing speculation about authors' personal beliefs and private lives. It also demonstrates that the subject of decadent religiosity and modernism has much potential that ought to be explored further, but that examination needs to be grounded in rigorous and critical interpretative work.

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