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## Conference Report

### Religion and the Academy: Report on the Western Conference on British Studies Roundtable

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“Will religion become the intellectual center of the academy?” This question was the topic of a roundtable I moderated at the October 2006 meeting of the Western Conference on British Studies. I was joined by Stephen Prickett, Director of the Armstrong Browning Library at Baylor University; Jessica Sheetz-Nguyen, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Central Oklahoma; and Bob Tennant, Honorary Research Associate in the Department of English Literature at the University of Glasgow.

The roundtable was inspired by Stanley Fish’s “One University Under God?,” which appeared in the January 7, 2005 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. In the final paragraph, Fish writes, “When Jacques Derrida died I was called by a reporter who wanted know [sic] what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion.” Shortly before the meeting, I became aware of a similar statement made by Callum G. Brown, who began his *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (2006) with the declaration that “Religion is back on the agenda” (xv).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David M. Fahey of Miami University (Ohio) mentioned Brown’s book in a September 29, 2006 post to the H-ALBION Internet discussion list. It elicited a brief exchange about the definition of “secularization” and its usefulness in the study of the twentieth and twenty-first century Anglo-American world. To read the messages, consult the discussion logs at <<http://www.h-net.org/~albion/>>.

These statements need to be put into context. It is no surprise to see that both men regard the attacks on the World Trade Center as pivotal events. For Brown, September 11 reminded scholars of the need to consider the influence of religion upon historical events. He identifies “secularisation,” “religious militancy,” and the New-Age “spiritual revolution” as the leading trends of the last fifty years; his own book, he says, draws upon all three perspectives to create “the first comprehensive narrative of religion in British society and culture throughout the twentieth century” (xvi).

Brown, then, sees September 11 as providing the impetus for the reexamination of Britain’s spiritual past. Fish’s concern, in contrast, is the way in which that day changed America’s present and will continue to define her future. In his view, the attacks are significant because they pushed religion to the forefront of American public life. Both acts of terrorism and political campaigns are being conducted in the name of God, and Americans must grapple, perhaps as they never have before, with such issues as the nature of faith, the concept of “holy war,” and whether actions motivated by religious beliefs can be rewarded or punished any differently from deeds proceeding from any other grounds.

Fish segues into higher education about halfway through the article, arguing that Jefferson’s “wall of separation” has been breached not only in legislative chambers, but also in the lecture hall. Young adults who do not draw rigid boundaries “between belief and knowledge” are now coming to university seeking spiritual as well as intellectual guidance, and the academy “had better be” ready to respond to their requests.

I began the roundtable by discussing the reservations I have about these statements. Brown implies that, at some point, religion had ceased to be a matter of interest to scholars of twentieth-century Britain. A quick database search, however, turns up any number of works on the topic; several studies, such as Gerald Parsons’ *The Growth of Religious Diversity: Britain From 1945* (1993) and Ronald Hutton’s *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (1999) explore the same issues of secularization and spirituality that underlie Brown’s work.

Interest in religion, moreover, is evident throughout the academy. Scholars can disseminate their work via a host of scholarly societies and journals devoted to the intersections between religion and other fields; essays on religious topics also regularly appear in more “mainstream” publications such as the *Journal of British Studies*, the *Journal of Victorian Culture*, *Nineteenth Century Studies*, and the *English Historical Review*. Earlier studies may not have taken precisely the shape that Brown proposes, but a good

deal of important work is being done, and there is little evidence to support his notion that religion had somehow lost its seat at the academic table in recent years.

The end of “One University Under God” overstates the case as well. Theology may have once reigned as the “queen of the sciences,” but the diversity of the American academy makes it both difficult and undesirable to enthrone it—or any other single discipline, theory, or perspective—as the “intellectual center” of our work. A more balanced view can be found in “Theology as Knowledge,” a symposium published in the May 2006 issue of *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*. James R. Stoner, Jr., a political scientist at Louisiana State University, agrees with Fish that professors who had been educated within a secular system will have to “retool” if they are to engage increasing numbers of religiously-reawakened students. He neither predicts nor hopes, however, that theology “will return to its ancient pride of place.” He envisages instead that “In different kinds of institutions it will have a different function, formative perhaps in resurgent denominational colleges, auxiliary in more-secular universities” (22–23). He is not using quite the same terminology as Fish, but his statement would be equally sound if he had been writing about “religion” broadly conceived rather than the specific academic discipline of “theology.”<sup>2</sup>

Brown, Fish, and Stoner differ on the details, but they would all agree, as I think most academics would, that religion will continue to have a strong voice in the academic conversation. Taking that as the premise of the roundtable, I asked the panelists to summarize their scholarly interests and suggest some directions that religious studies in the twenty-first century could take. My specialty is Anglo-Catholic oratory in Victorian England, with a particular interest in matters of form and genre. Questions

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<sup>2</sup> Other contributors to the symposium take a different view. Stanley Hauerwas largely endorses Stoner’s position and suggests that secular universities may prove to be better at doing theology in “an unapologetic mode” than their faith-based counterparts. Paul J. Griffiths and David B. Hart contend, however, that theology will probably never reemerge as a major field of study. They argue that this is not necessarily an unfortunate situation. Theologians, in fact, should prefer that it be that way because, as Hart puts it, “as soon as it [theology] consents to become a perspective among the human sciences, rather than the contemplation of the final cause and consummation of all paths of knowledge, it has ceased to be theology and has become precisely what its detractors have long suspected it of being: willful opinion, emotion, and cant” (24–27).

such as “what are the differences between sermons, lectures, and episcopal charges?” and “how did the intended audience for this religious text affect how it was written?” are not often asked, and I believe the answers can do much to illuminate the rhetorical versatility and skill displayed by John Henry Newman, John Keble, E. B. Pusey, and other members of the Oxford Movement.

Bob Tennant and Jessica Sheetz-Nguyen are among the contributors to *A New History of the Sermon: The Nineteenth Century*, which I am editing under contract with Brill Academic Publishers. Tennant will examine British anti-slavery and missionary sermons preached in the first half of the nineteenth century, while Sheetz-Nguyen will survey Roman Catholic homiletics from the passage of the Catholic Emancipation Act to the death of Herbert Alfred Vaughan, the Archbishop of Westminster, in 1903. Sheetz-Nguyen has also published on the work of Roman Catholic women in twentieth-century Britain and is co-editing a collection of essays on religiously-based social welfare activities, headed mostly by women, in the Victorian age. Tennant has written on John Tillotson, John Wesley, and Beilby Porteus, who held a number of bishoprics and chaplaincies from 1776 until his death in 1809; his current project is a literary and ideological history of the Anglican sermon in the long eighteenth century.

Religion stayed mainly in the background during Stephen Prickett’s school and university days in southeast England, but it has become one of the central concerns of his scholarly work. His many publications in this area range from *Words and the Word* (1986), an exploration of the growing rift relationship between biblical criticism and literary studies, to *Narrative, Religion, and Science* (2002), which examines what “storytelling” means and the ways in which it has been used to express philosophical, theological, and scientific ideas and world views.

Prickett is currently working to launch a series entitled “The Making of the Christian Imagination.” The editors see the history of Christianity as a great “dialogue,” a centuries-long process in which artists have drawn from the Bible and the work of religious thinkers to paint their own visual and verbal portraits of the mysteries of the faith. Some of these images “die out,” losing their power because they are used too seldom or too much; others retain their vitality and help to shape later generations of creative work. As this cycle proceeds, Christianity continually “re-invents” itself, recasting “timeless truths” in contemporary language and giving rise to “new truth” that will become part of an “on-going and cumulative theological tradition” (Prickett).

The books in this series will examine some of the more important voices in this long Christian conversation. The list is quite diverse, including not just Augustine, Milton, Dante, and Donne, but also Dickens, Pascal, William Golding, and Martin Luther King. All were both innovative theologians and “writers of distinction”; this important project will show how they used their gifts to redraw the landscape of belief and take their places in the never-ending work of “re-birth and re-vivification of images” (Prickett).<sup>3</sup>

The panelists’ and audience’s “wish list” for future scholarship included work on women’s preaching, Dissenting denominations, agnosticism, atheism, and religions other than Christianity. Stephen Prickett made the excellent point that instead of asking what is going to happen, we should take the initiative in making things happen. Bob Tennant responded with what proved to be the most intriguing idea to emerge from the roundtable: he speculated that more work would be done on preaching if scholars had greater access to the primary texts, and suggested that a team of scholars work together to create and maintain a digital archive of British sermons.

The scope of the archive would be quite vast, featuring sermons preached throughout Britain and the colonies between the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 and the reestablishment of the Roman hierarchy in 1851. Whether Catholic texts would be included has yet to be decided, and we would probably put little emphasis upon the work of famous names such as John Wesley, George Whitefield, John Henry Newman, and C. H. Spurgeon, whose sermons are already widely available in print and electronic form.<sup>4</sup>

One of the first issues to be resolved is the question of genre. Will this project be limited to sermons, or will it include lectures, episcopal charges, and other religious speeches as well? How are these terms to be defined? “Charges” are fairly easy to identify: they are discourses delivered by bishops and archdeacons during regular “visitations” to the clergy under their care.<sup>5</sup> What constitutes a “sermon” is, however, somewhat more problematic.

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the “Making of the Christian Imagination” series, contact Professor Prickett at [Stephen\\_Prickett@baylor.edu](mailto:Stephen_Prickett@baylor.edu).

<sup>4</sup> Further details of the rationale behind the project and its proposed scope are available online at [http://www.etbu.edu/nr/etbu/personal/faculty/users/rellison/The\\_English-Language\\_Pulpit.htm](http://www.etbu.edu/nr/etbu/personal/faculty/users/rellison/The_English-Language_Pulpit.htm).

<sup>5</sup> For discussions of visitations and charges, see Peter C. Hammond, *The Parson and the Victorian Parish* 174–178, and Arthur Burns, *The Diocesan Revival in the Church of England* 23–73.

Scholars' ideas range from David L. Bartlett's simple statement that a sermon is "an oral interpretation of scripture, usually in the context of worship" (433) to an unwieldy ten-point description proposed by Ronald E. Osborn in 1976.<sup>6</sup> Virtually every definition I have read states that preaching is intended to inspire people to faith and action; many also either assume or explicitly declare that a sermon is an address delivered by a recognized clergyman or minister during a sacred service.

These criteria may have the virtue of specificity, but they can lead to the omission of works that ought to be part of the archive. Many essays published as "lay sermons," for example, would have been suited for delivery from any English pulpit and would thus seem to easily fall within the scope of the project.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, women could not have been credentialed ministers, but many, including Ann Cutler, Mary Dannel, Joanna Southcott, and Mary Bosanquet, nonetheless enjoyed considerable reputations as preachers.<sup>8</sup> If manuscripts, transcripts, or printed texts have survived, they should definitely be made available as well.

We may not, however, wish to include *all* lay sermons or women's religious work. Thomas Henry Huxley saw himself as a preacher when he delivered "On the Advisableness of Improving Natural Knowledge" and "On the Physical Basis of Life." As the titles suggest, however, science, not Christian doctrine and practice, is his primary concern, and he was widely

<sup>6</sup> In an article somewhat ironically entitled "A Functional Definition of Preaching," Osborn states that Christian preaching is "(1) urgent public address (2) on a theme of Christian concern, religious or ethical, (3) proclaiming the church's catholic faith in Jesus Christ (4) as set forth in Holy Scripture and living tradition. (5) It occurs within a structure of theological reflection (critical dogmatics in interaction with the various symbol systems of modern thought) . . . (8) giving serious attention for the sake of joy and beauty to the homiletical art, (9) with the intention of converting the hearer in attitude, personal behavior, and social commitments, (10) by serving as a sacramental means of the grace of God" (72).

<sup>7</sup> Works that would have met the homiletic expectations of the day include Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Statesman's Manual* and *Blessed are Ye that Sow Beside All Waters*. In these essays, Coleridge applies the teachings of Scripture to the issues of the day, asserting that the Old Testament is a virtual textbook on "the Elements of Political Science" and setting forth the Christian faith as a corrective to what he regarded as the commercial excesses of the early 1800s (49, 169, 229).

<sup>8</sup> For discussions of these and other leading female preachers, see Deborah M. Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters: Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England* and Christine L. Krueger, *The Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse*.

regarded as doing more to undermine Christianity than to advance it. The parameters that are established for the project will need to explicitly outline the criteria employed in determining whether texts such as these are selected or omitted.

On the other hand, many eighteenth and nineteenth-century women *did* seek to propagate the faith, but they did not refer to their writings as sermons, casting them instead in the form of pamphlets, commentaries, letters, and memoirs. Editors Taylor and Weir of *Let Her Speak for Herself: Nineteenth-Century Women Writing on the Women of Genesis* (2006) note that pulpit rhetoric is present in many of these texts, but the scope of the project is likely to become unworkably broad if we state that all prose containing some degree of sermonic language is to be classified as sermons. In these cases, we may wish to adopt Olive Anderson's definition of "female preaching" as "the deliberate undertaking by women of evangelization, spiritual instruction or exhortation in mixed public assemblies held for that purpose, with no attempt to disguise the nature of their activities or their audience" (468). In short, I would suggest that a working definition be specific enough to recognize the sermon's status as a discrete genre, but broad enough to include at least some lay religious oratory, which can be studied both in its own right and in comparison with its clerical counterparts.

Work can begin once these parameters have been defined. Bob Tennant and I have begun to assemble an interdisciplinary team of scholars to assist us in this effort; anyone interested in joining the project or learning more about it is invited to contact me at [rellison@etbu.edu](mailto:rellison@etbu.edu).

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