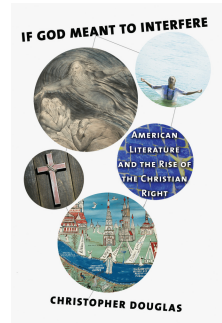


*If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right*, by Christopher Douglas

New York: Cornell University Press, 2016 | viii + 367 pages | ISBN: 978-1-501-70211-2 (hardcover) \$39.95



Christopher Douglas's book *If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right* examines American fiction "that takes the conservative Christian resurgence's public presence and political issues as its occasion—especially when that public presence is addressed indirectly or evasively" (4). Reader of the book will be richly rewarded with the author's provocative reading of a dizzying array of fictional texts and critical engagement with a wide range of scholarship on religion and secularism. Building on earlier research on religion and literature in America as represented by John McClure's *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007) and Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960* (2010), Douglas's book argues that since the 1970s, the reemergence of conservative Christianity has become complexly entangled with the literary paradigms of multiculturalism and postmodernism. It is these two entanglements that mark the Americanness of the postsecular scenario in contemporary America. Accordingly, the book, bracketed by an introduction and a concluding chapter, is divided into two parts, "Multicultural Entanglements" (chapters 1–4) and "Postmodern Entanglements" (chapters 5–8).

Chapter 1, through reading multicultural writers active in the 1965–75 period such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Ishmael Reed, N. Scott Momaday, Frank Chin, and Oscar Zeta Acosta, demonstrates how they culturalized religion as one's ancestral heritage, ethnic belonging, and communal identity. This multiculturalist trend and the conservative Christian resurgence were intertwined, both rejecting the consensus of the previous decade regarding the predominance of a generalized (or, secularized) civil religion. Although they did agree that America was characterized by the historical presence of Christianity, the multiculturalists endeavored to retrieve their non-Christian spiritual resources, while Christian resurgence appropriated the same cultural

model of religion to reclaim America that they perceived to be insufficiently Christian.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 study Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* respectively. These writers all responded to resurgent conservative Christianity in their novels and, heir to the multiculturalists surveyed in chapter 1, all advocated religion as familial or group traditions while avoiding ontological, ethical, and political claims based on doctrinal teachings and personal belief. Douglas argues that these liberal culturalists, not able to confront the aggressive Christian conservatives in the late twentieth century, were left baffled at their empowerment.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver critiqued the Imperialism of Baptist missionaries in Africa and blamed it on a universalist version of Christianity, unmasking it as culturally particular, that is, American. An unexpected implication of this reculturalization, which the conservatives would strongly resonate with, is that Christianity, although alien in Africa, is properly rooted in America. To make things worse, unlike Kingsolver who, out of her respect for cultural differences and pluralist identities, was reluctant to adopt the discourse of universal rights, the conservatives were always more than willing "to legislate for those who do not agree with [their] claims" (79). Robinson's *Gilead* is another novel that enacts religion as a form of cultural identity and advocates suspending truth claims and doctrinal debates. Although the central struggle of the novel is between different (violent or peaceful) forms of Christian opposition to slavery, Douglas points out that "the divide was actually between Christian abolitionism and what Frederick Douglass called "Christian Slavery" (85). Why did the novel fail to face the full complexity of American history? Douglas compares Robinson with "lived religion" scholars and argues that they, shifting attention away from belief to practice, created a purified and idealized version of Christianity as an alternative to the resurgence. However, this alternative did no justice to the messy reality that bred the resurgence.

What has been reculturalized and sanitized is not just Christianity but also Jewish identity. Jewish difference, the question at the heart of Roth's *The Plot Against America*, is presented as cultural rather than racial or religious. Roth saw the Jewish community as "a vibrant, indigenous, but non-transcendent and non-metaphysical culture" while overlooking its faith dimension altogether. In sharp contrast to this liberal writer, today's Christian Right is enthusiastic about converting the Jews, with the old anti-Semitism

transformed into the philosemitism, “with a particular emphasis on support for Israel” (131). I find Douglas’s critique of the cultural turn of liberal writers truly incisive, however, I wonder whether we could identify faith or some transcendent/metaphysical claims as the essential religion-ness lurking at the heart of any religious tradition. In other words, I suspect that Douglas’s book runs the danger of re-reifying a faith-centered model of religion as well as the divide between religion and culture.

The Christian category of faith does not translate automatically into the context of Judaism, not to mention Chinese or Mexican religions. The troubled encounter and negotiation of these other traditions with the Christian model of religion has been extensively studied. The turn toward culture, that is, ritual practice, lived experience, and shared heritage, is not so much an unsuccessful response to the conservative Christian grip over faith as a still on-going effort to expand the very category of religion. Moreover, the resurgence is not necessarily a triumph of faith but an outcome of contingent social, economic, and political developments. It is true that the liberals have lost sight of the full complexity of reality, but shall we blame it on their rejection of a faith-based model of religion and embrace of culture as if both religion and culture were clearly bounded and separated entities?

Part II of the book shifts its focus from religion and culture to religion and science by exploring the postmodern-resurgent entanglement. The resurgence appropriated not only multiculturalism but also postmodernism. The fundamentalist resistance to modern expertise especially in the areas of evolutionary theories and historical-critical methods takes postmodern forms in addition to an antimodern rejection of scientific knowledge and authority. In chapter 5, Douglas reads Thomas Pynchon’s 1966 novel *The Crying of Lot 49* as foreshadowing the manifestation of the resurgence as a Christian postmodernism, “a kind of epistemological and ontological pluralism.” The novel’s portrayal of the spiritual emptiness, political paranoia, and a strong desire for design in this world “locates a nascent intersection of religious desire and political geography that would, in the next decade, begin to coalesce through specific networks and articulate specific policy demands” (181).

Carl Sagan’s science fiction novel *Contact*, which attempts to reconcile the conflict between reason and faith, is the topic of chapter 6. Protagonists in this text and the others surveyed in part II all engage in some type of decoding that resonates with a religious quest for design. Sagan’s scientist-protagonist is a radio astronomer deciphering signs from the universe. She debates with fundamentalists at a “creation science” museum, which, in Douglas’s hypothesis, is modeled after the Museum of Creation

and Earth History built by the Institute for Creation Design. Douglas identifies Creation Science and its successor, the Intelligent Design movement, as an overlooked subtext of Sagan's fiction, which encapsulates the postmodern phenomenon in which Christians played science as a set of language games.

Chapter 7 continues to study Christian responses to the science of evolution by reading McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian*, which is concerned with signs in the natural world. This novel takes the resurgence's theological claims in the 1970s and 80s seriously and offers its intervention in the form of an anti-theodicy, "an indictment of God's responsibility for suffering in his material world" (229). Like Creation Science and Intelligent Design, McCarthy's character "the judge" discerns in nature traces of God's character, however, this God is incompatible with that of traditional theology. Unlike Sagan who endeavored to reconcile religion and science, McCarthy challenged both conservative theology that preserved classical concepts of God and liberal theology that adapted to new knowledge but still refused to consider the possibility that God might have willed suffering and extinction through evolution.

Chapter 8 proceeds to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, a popular thriller that portrays Western art, music, and literature as a realm of historical signs. Douglas reads Brown's novel, the protagonist of which seeks the descendants of Jesus by decoding signs of culture beyond the boundaries of biblical authorities, as a postmodern attack on "the biblical theology characteristic of the Protestantism at the core of the conservative Christian resurgence" (249). However, the novel shares its postmodernism with Intelligent Design, with the former leveling the playing field of the historical-critical method of Biblical criticism while the latter playing the same game with the expert field of evolutionary science. In sum, Christian resurgence and its antagonists (Brown) have both borrowed logics and vocabularies from postmodernism. Douglas's illustration of the entanglement of religion and science in the postmodern language games is illuminating indeed. Interest piqued, I find myself puzzled over this question while finishing his book: Is the entanglement of religion and science reducible to the language games in which folk "wisdom" and expertise knowledge establish their respective audiences? Does Douglas's postmodern entanglement somehow unwittingly obfuscate the complexity of the "and" between religion and science, which, just like religion and culture, are not discrete entities?

Zhang Ni  
*Virginia Tech*