



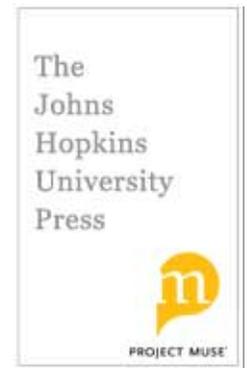
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*Religious Liberties: Anti-Catholicism and Liberal Democracy
in Nineteenth-U.S. Century Literature and Culture* by
Elizabeth Fenton (review)

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It is Crawford's record of Tom's struggles—a Tom who, for all his intelligence, poetic gifts, and august ancestry, is far from aloof—and their bearing on his poetry and criticism that is the great strength of this work. The alien, haunted, otherworldly Eliot might be veiled in the process, but this is a calculated loss more than compensated by gains elsewhere. Crawford's work, taking in the richness of Eliot's early life, is the perfect appetizer for readers looking forward to the feast that is the new expanded and annotated two-volume edition of Eliot's poetry.

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Religious Liberties: Anti-Catholicism and Liberal Democracy in Nineteenth-U.S. Century Literature and Culture. By Elizabeth Fenton. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. ISBN: 9780195384093. Pp. xii + 178. \$65.00

You might think a book that links the Continental Congress's responses to the 1774 Quebec Act with Mark Twain's 1889 novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* would be comparing apples and oranges. However, Elizabeth Fenton's *Religious Liberties: Anti-Catholicism and Liberal Democracy in Nineteenth-U.S. Century Literature and Culture* detects a continuity of anti-Catholicism between them. Indeed, in her book, Fenton attempts a breathtaking juggling act using apples and oranges. Up into the air goes Protestant anti-Catholic screeds and more temperate-yet-bigoted discourses, varied expressions of the grand American liberal tradition of group and individual equality and freedom of religion, late 18th- and 19th-century literary writings beneath the cope of a voguishly capacious concept of literature, a rich sampling of modern liberal political theory, and a broad swath of general American cultural history. It is quite a performance to be able to keep readers' eyes on so many elements so seemingly different from one another.

Fenton's main point is that anti-Catholicism in early America was a generative site for discursive invention bearing upon issues of how political rights, especially freedom of religion, became a constituent of American national identity. Put another, perhaps overly simple way that underscores the audacity of Fenton's insight, the anti-Catholicism many Americans today abjure about the period defined the nation's modern liberalism so many Americans continue to revere. This is what sets Fenton's book apart from earlier examinations of American anti-Catholicism, beginning with Ray Allen Billington's *Protestant Crusade, 1800–1860: The Origins of American Nativism* (1938) down through Susan Griffin's *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (2004) and Tracy Fessenden's *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (2007). Throughout Fenton's book, Jenny Franchot's magisterial *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (1994), which weighs American antebellum Protestants' positive and negative reaction to Catholicism framing an imaginative field of rhetorical and literary invention, acts

as something of a foil. Fenton eschews such culturalist vagaries and ambiguities to argue for anti-Catholicism's direct discursive impact upon liberal discourse. Conspicuous by its absence, however, is Jody M. Roy's *Rhetorical Campaigns of the 19th Century: Anti-Catholics and Catholics in America* (1999), which sees liberal rights emerging dialogically through the rhetorical exchanges of both sides, in contrast to Fenton's view that a modern notion of religious liberties emerged from within the Protestant reaction.

As an analysis of anti-Catholic writing producing liberal discourse, Fenton's book relies upon close readings of selected representative texts from the 18th to the end of the 19th centuries considered in six lean chapters each focusing on case studies. Chapter 1 homes in on the responses to the Quebec Act that essentially equated, in American Revolutionists' appeals to the Catholic Québécois to join them, religious liberty and Protestantism. This sets the stage for her coda-like discussion of disestablishmentarianism in the early republic as similarly Protestant inflected. In chapter 2 she discerns threads of "Federalism, Expansionism, and Nativism," in two early novels, Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland, or the Transformation: An American Tale* (1787) and Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827), both of which for her "show that Catholicism represented both the need for territorial expansion to secure the promise of liberal democracy and the danger that expansion posed to national cohesion" (39). Reference to the angst over the frontier areas going Catholic naturally leads Fenton to conclude the chapter with a gloss upon Lyman Beecher's *A Plea for the West* (1835), that is, to win it back for Protestants. Chapter 3 jumps off from the recently formulated concept of "deliberative democracy" as crucial to the health of the liberal body politic, into the dark waters of sensationalistic "escaped nun's" tales (58) and lighter stories about American Protestant women sojourning in Italy beset by Catholics trying to convert them (as in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1860 novel, *The Marble Faun*), to posit "female deliberation" (60) resisting Catholic rhetorical persuasion as a counterpoise to vaunted "Catholic . . . absolutism" (59). The texts she considers created spaces for imagining a widened civic existence for women, but Fenton rues, "Despite their interest in female deliberation, these novels ultimately pull back from the possibility of public subjectivity for women within the U.S. nation-state" (79). Chapter 4 is about Catholicism and the limits of political representation. Fenton focuses mostly on Margaret Fuller's writings from Rome at the time of Pope Pius IX's "efforts to represent both the Church and the evolving state" (83), a story with an unhappy ending for Fuller. In one of her apple-and-oranges juggling moments, Fenton concludes the chapter with the way 1855 Republican presidential candidate John C. Frémont deflected away charges that he was a Catholic based on offhand remarks in which he purportedly ascribed to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation of the communion host into the actual physical body of Christ. For Fenton, the Fuller-Frémont link is that both cases exhibit derangements in what Michael Warner in his *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-century America* (1990) identified as the problem of "embody[ing] representative legitimacy" (73). These complications

in liberal political theory are extended in chapter 5. In it, Fenton ponders American Protestant abolitionists' valorization of Black Haitian revolutionaries in the face of those individuals' indelible Catholicism. Fenton shows how the contradiction played out in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Wendell Phillips's 1853 biography of Toussaint Louverture, before turning to Herman Melville's novella, *Benito Cereno* (1855), as evidence of the failure of the project of Protestant liberal pluralism based upon its conflation of the thralldoms of slavery and Catholicism. Finally, in chapter 6, Fenton summons Henry Adams's 1880 novel *Democracy* and the aforementioned *Connecticut Yankee* by Twain. "Adams treats Catholicism as a useful analogue for democracy's corruptions," Fenton writes, while "Twain suggests that a liberal democrat is always already more 'Catholic' than the church itself" (131). Case in point: Twain's Yankee ascends in the course of the novel to being the papal-like autocratic "boss" of his domain (138). Fenton concludes her book by reflecting upon 2004 Democratic Presidential candidate John Kerry's quoting of John Kennedy's distinction between being "a Catholic president" and "a president who happens to be Catholic" (140), when facing a question about his faith. Fenton describes Kerry's response as "superfluous but also anachronistic" because by that time he and many other Catholics had coopted the "liberal discourse" of secularization (145). "[T]he Catholic can at last lay claim to religious liberties," is her final word.

While Fenton's performance in being able to so deftly juggle diverse topics is admirable, she does drop the ball sometimes. Despite her gestures toward internationalism in the Fuller discussion and in addressing the 1870 bull declaring papal infallibility in doctrinal matters, the ghost of American exceptionalism haunts these pages, for after all as Timothy Verhoeven's *Transatlantic Anti-Catholicism: France and the United States in the Nineteenth Century* (2010) makes clear, there were transnational commonalities at work in this prejudice. If the national scope seems too narrow, Fenton's boundaries of her object of study, anti-Catholicism, seems at times overly broad and too immutable. There were many specific elements of Protestant critique of Catholicism that were expressed by individuals in different mixes or selectively over time. Twain, after all, in *Connecticut Yankee* seems more interested in lampooning his contemporary readers' fascination with medievalism than with lambasting Catholicism. Some of this is due to Fenton's reluctance to engage anti-Catholic writing as a rhetoric, aiming to persuade certain people facing specific exigencies, more than a discourse transparently instantiating larger belief systems. The discourse approach makes for blurry lines of influence, as when Fenton claims that Beecher's "*Plea* brings to light the ways in which nativist writing of the 1830s drew on an already extant body of U.S. fiction" (53) by which she refers to her discussion of *Wieland* and *Hope Leslie* earlier in the chapter. It is unlikely that Beecher read or was directly influenced by either book because virtually no one read Brown's and Harriet Beecher Stowe reported her father saying, "I have always disapproved of novels as trash" (in Charles Beecher, ed., *Autobiography, Correspondence, Etc.* [1866], 526). Another problem with her approach is that the concentration on the "anti" side as the site of the invention

of liberal discourse has the side effect of removing agency from Catholics themselves, few of whose voices are heard here. One question is, Did the rhetoric of Catholic politicians of the mid-19th century conform to or resist the idea of religious liberty? Moreover, the human costs of anti-Catholic discourses are elided at the expense of risking a positive spin on them as the watersheds of religious liberty. Finally, Fenton focuses on rhetorical production (the creation and sustenance of discourses), at the expense of reception: What did readers make of this anti-Catholicism? Was it received and made part of their lives or was it ignored?

Still with these qualifications in mind, I can recommend *Religious Liberties* to this journal's readers seeking a well-written, rich, and ambitious study encompassing literature, Christianity, and political theory. Fenton's scholarly performance alone is worth the ticket of admission, even if the apples and oranges she so fascinatingly tosses ultimately remain distinct.

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C. S. Song. *In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2012. ISBN 978-0-227-68023-0 (paperback). Pp. vii + 172. \$18.90.

Choan-Seng Song is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Theology and Asian Cultures at the Pacific School of Religion in San Francisco. His book *In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts* seeks to challenge "Western biblical scholars and theologians who have monopolized the interpretation of the Bible" (115). He desires to throw "wide open the door of interpretation to men and women from outside the West, to people of different ethnic origins and cultural backgrounds, to women as well men, to the powerless over against those who hold power, whether political, social, religious, or academic" (115). Here is how Song structures the book to accomplish his goal.

The book consists of ten tightly integrated chapters and a bibliography. Chapter headings include, "In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts," "Story Is the Matrix of Theology," "Theology Rewrites Stories," "Stories Rectify Theology," "The Theological Power of Stories," "In Search of Our Roots," "Stories within a Story," "Stories Are Culturally Distinctive," "Stories Can Be Theologically Interactive."

The final chapter, "The Bible, Stories, and Theology," provides the reader "approaches" to pursue theology conceived in stories inside and outside of Scripture. Chapter 10 answers this question, "How is...intense theology to be born out of the matrix of stories?" (152). The first step of story theology is, "Awareness of the theological nature of stories" (155).

For Song, "[s]tory is the matrix of theology" (18). This axiom drives his book, challenging the Western penchant for systematic theology. He raises some intriguing questions to make his case: "Who says theology has to be ideas and concepts? Who has decided that theology has to be doctrines, axioms, propositions?"