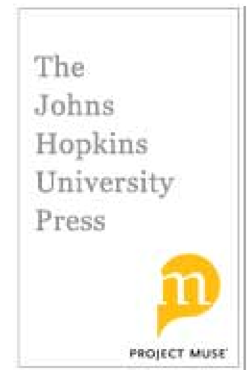
Fictional Religion: Keeping the New Testament New by Jamie Spencer (review)



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Fictional Religion: Keeping the New Testament New. By Jamie Spencer. Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2011. ISBN 9781598150322. Pp. viii + 154. $18.00.

Jamie Spencer has written a slim volume of reflections on the intersections between Christian teachings in the New Testament and literature and among the eclectic mix of poems, stories, and novels that are the focus of his eleven chapters (Introduction plus nine chapters and an "Interlude"). Spencer sometimes leaves the reader wanting a fuller reading of the texts chosen, and his textual pairings are bewildering at first (e.g., *Macbeth* and Faulkner's short story "Barn Burning"? *Paradise Lost* and Golding's novel *The Inheritors*?). But Spencer's argument that literature continually reinterprets and expands the New Testament is certainly well supported by the texts he has chosen and might lead readers to test it further with their own examples.

In his Introduction, Spencer establishes three basic premises. The first, he says, is widely agreed upon: "the books of the New Testament are not the infallible Word of God," unlike the written-in-stone (as it were) books of the Old Testament (1). Rather, they are "the inspired words of devout and humble writers," and as such the "texts were in a state of flux during the faith's early centuries" (1). This leads Spencer to his central proposition: the New Testament is *still* being created and recreated as part of a "flexible tradition" that has been continued "throughout the Christian era [by] a vibrant legion of playwrights, poets, and story writers" (1). The evolution of Christian doctrine is not the sole provenance of theologians. "Creative literary artists" reinterpret the narratives of the New Testament for each successive culture and era (2). Thus, Spencer elevates writers—even those not consciously focusing on "religious" themes—to the level of Church fathers. In his initial testing of his hypothesis, Spencer reads Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* as a narrative parallel to Christ's parable of the Prodigal Son, as told in the Gospel of Luke, likening the elder son's grateful return to his father's house to Scrooge's revelations on Christmas morning. Both stories culminate in the rebirth of the sinners and "a festive celebration" (3). Citing biblical scholars Robert Alter (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 1981) and Arthur Dewey (Professor of Religion at Xavier University), Spencer launches a chronological survey of great writers as they "reach for, discover, and transmit profound insights into the human condition, insights as poignant and definitive as those created with an explicit theological and missionary agenda" (5).

Spencer begins with Geoffrey Chaucer, a representative of "late medieval orthodoxy," although his "spirit is extraordinarily humane" (7). This fundamental paradox is reflected in the pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales*, since some are motivated to take their Lenten journey by "honest faith," while others have more profane desires (9). Spencer's focus is the Wife of Bath, "who is clearly a creature more of flesh than faith" (9). Her Prologue shows that she has been exposed to Christian Scriptures, especially Pauline doctrine on virginity and marriage, but she

misinterprets them to suit her own purposes—her desire for sexual satisfaction. The moral of her Tale is given by the old hag in her bedroom lecture, "the voice of Christ," who preaches the value of humility (16). But the Wife fails to hear that message and instead uses the hag's transformation to justify her assertion of power or mastery in marriage. Spencer's reading, though certainly astute, seems to forget that Chaucer is completely enamored with his very human Wife, perhaps the first female character in literature who is frankly sexual but not condemned for it.

Next, Spencer moves forward two centuries to Shakespeare. He argues that *Macbeth* illustrates the political message of Christ that the Kingdom of God must be founded on "a determined commitment to a godly life of mercy and justice" (17) and to "love of God and love of neighbor" (18). The message of the "Scottish Play" to the newly crowned King James I is that his earthly kingdom must be modeled on these Christian values. Macbeth's spiritual, moral, and even physical disintegration results from his murder of the king who embodies these values. Ultimately, "the usurper's kingdom is past cure, both spiritual and bodily," but Macbeth's final defeat establishes "a regenerative moral order," whereby the Christian realm may be healed (29).

Chapters three and four are devoted to three seventeenth-century lyric poets: John Donne is compared first with George Herbert and then with Andrew Marvell. Spencer calls Donne and Herbert "the ecclesiastical descendents" of the Evangelists, though they focus less on dogma and more on "the inner spiritual life and psychology of a sinful man" (31-32). He associates the conclusion of Herbert's "The Collar," when the voice of God the Father calls his straying child back to his priestly vocation, with the father's welcome of the Prodigal Son in Luke's narrative of the parable. In his brief discussion of Donne's "Holy Sonnet #14" ("Batter my heart, three-personed God"), Spencer focuses on the poet's startling paradoxes that express "quite orthodox dogma" about purification of sin. This is one point in his book where Spencer's explication of an important and rich poem is much too abbreviated. He revisits Donne's poetry in the next chapter, in an equally short reading of "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." The main point is the poet's definition of his and his lover's love as separated from the physical, almost entirely spiritual, "priestly, divine, perhaps even celibate" (42). But since Donne's audience is his wife, the "celibate" part of Spencer's definition is stretching the facts, as the number of children born to their union—twelve—testifies. Marvell's "A Dialogue Between Soul and Body" receives slightly more extensive treatment. Marvell maintains the orthodox dichotomy between the two entities but subverts the usual dynamic between them when the body accuses the soul of causing harm and the speaker gives the body the last word in the debate, perhaps reflecting the increasing humanism of Marvell's time. The poet once again revises Christian doctrine.

Spencer breaks the chronological progression of his chapters with "A Geological Interlude: Tennyson's *In Memoriam* & the Rise of Science." This brief interlude actually serves as a prelude to the following chapter on Milton and

Golding. Spencer reflects on the monumental shift in perspective caused by the geological discoveries of the nineteenth century. He quotes the beginning of Poem CXXII from *In Memoriam*, "O earth, what changes hast thou seen!" (l. 2) to prove Tennyson's awareness of the scientific revision of the Genesis narrative of creation. This revolution accounts for the difference in the narratives of the Fall in Milton's mid-seventeenth-century epic *Paradise Lost* and Golding's mid-twentieth-century novel *The Inheritors*.

Chapter five, "William Golding & John Milton: Twin Falls," is the central and longest chapter of Spencer's book. The juxtaposition of *Paradise Lost* with *The Inheritors* is startling at first. But the connections do become clear. Golding's novel focuses on an important evolutionary transition point, as the last "static and very unimaginative" Neanderthals die out and are replaced by the more progressive but also violent Cro-Magnons (59). It is a parabolic narrative of Darwinian "survival of the fittest," in which (ironically) Golding "has adapted Judeo-Christian motifs from the Garden of Eden story, over and above 'the fall'" (60). Spencer links Golding's novel to Tennyson's vision of evolution and then to Milton's portrait of Eden: "Both writers are exploring the nature of humankind, its character and behavior, before the fall" (65). He focuses on Milton's "convincing psychological insights" (65) to the characters of Adam and Eve, particularly in what Milton scholars call "the Separation Scene" on the morning of the Fall. Spencer describes Milton's portrayal of Satan as "a personal and poetic re-telling and original creation of ideas barely whispered in Holy Writ" (69). And of Eve's fall, he says, "Milton takes that brief moment from Genesis and loads it with his knowledge of New Testament writings and thoughts" (75). My own longtime reading of the epic leads me to disagree with Spencer when he concludes that it ends, like Golding's novel, in darkness and hopelessness. Rather, *Paradise Lost* ends in great hope for the future, with Adam and Eve looking forward to the promise of redemption and the world before them full of possibilities.

Chapter six is a brief discussion of George Bernard Shaw's play *Major Barbara* that begins with a digression exploring Roman imperialism in the time of Jesus, which foreshadowed the social activism advocated by Shaw in the protagonists of his plays *St. Joan* and *Major Barbara*. In this chapter, Spencer spends so much time leading up to his main subject that the play in question is barely mentioned at the end.

More successful is chapter seven on "William Faulkner's 'Barn Burning': A Modern, Secular Vision of Community." Spencer argues that the story is about more than one young boy's coming of age and rejection of his father's blood lust for revenge because it shows "the evolution of society overall from tribe to social compact" (101). He relates the boy Sarty's standing up for justice and law as "the same kind of nourishing, ethical civil order proposed in *Macbeth*" (102). But Sarty's decision to warn Major De Spain and betray his father "reverses Macbeth's trajectory," as Sarty moves toward integration with society and away from the tragic hero's isolation (103).

The final two chapters of *Fictional Religion* are devoted to the poetry of Philip Larkin and the science fiction of C. S. Lewis. After comparing Larkin's modern, twentieth-century perspective to those of Yeats in "The Second Coming" and Eliot in "Journey of the Magi," Spencer gives brief explications of several of Larkin's lyric poems, culminating in the dark vision of "Faith Healing." He concludes, "Larkin is an un-churched modern man for whom religious talk and ritual [are], while endlessly tempting, pointless and deceiving" (119). However, Spencer ends his book on a much more positive note with his final chapter on C. S. Lewis' series of children's fantasies *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Whereas the reader might expect him to focus on Lewis' nonfiction works that specifically address Christian issues, Spencer chooses instead to liken the magical world of Narnia to the Gospel narratives of Christ's miracles (121-22), and in particular the character Aslan becomes a Christ-figure who is sent to redeem and rescue the boy adventurer Eustace (124, 133).

To conclude, Spencer's book is often provocative, intentionally to be sure. It is clearly not meant to be a thoroughgoing or dense work of literary criticism. Literary critics are not his audience, as he often defines the most basic literary terms like *image* and *conceit*. Rather, it is categorized as a text on "Religion," and if his goal is to introduce literature to those interested in "Religious Studies," he certainly succeeds. But for literary critics, his readings are often thoughtful but rudimentary. The book suffers from a lack of careful editing, with some grammar and usage errors. And more than once, Spencer misquotes the end of the third line of *Paradise Lost* as "and all *that* woe" instead of "and all *our* woe." But his book is ultimately valuable because of his fascinating premise that creative writers continue the inspired work of the first evangelists by, as his subtitle suggests, *Keeping the New Testament New.*

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In the book *Literature and Theology: New Interdisciplinary Spaces*, the authors set out to demonstrate the opportunity for a relationship between literature and theology. While this union is not a simple one, the essays seek to show the many varieties of ways that such interdisciplinary work can be achieved. Instead of going through each article individually, this review shall briefly examine the main themes of this collection of essays and show the positive and negative aspects of this book.