Introduction
Writing Women’s Religious Agency
in Nineteenth-Century America

This book engages in a deceptively simple task: it reads for religion in antebellum fiction by American women writers. It explores some of the many ways that the imaginative representation of religious doctrine, ritual, and practice offered nineteenth-century women writers a means for imagining new forms of female agency made possible by a rapidly changing religious-secular milieu. Fiction became the medium for exploring these new forms of agency because it provided a space in which women’s religious beliefs and ideas might circulate in the public sphere outside of official sectarian outlets. But fiction also offered an imaginative playground where women might picture to themselves and others new ways of being in the world while remaining faithful to what they took to be sacred truths. For the nineteenth-century women writers I discuss in this book, religious fiction was the arena in which the skeleton of doctrine put on the sinews of personal agency and walked forth into the world.

In some ways it seems impossible not to read for religion in nineteenth-century fiction: antebellum writing by both men and women is saturated with Christian religious language and, at a deeper level, with theological assumptions about the order of the universe. Even the most skeptical of nineteenth-century authors felt compelled to pursue the subject; recall Nathaniel Hawthorne’s comment that his erstwhile friend Herman Melville could “neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief,” but that he was “too honest
and courageous not to try to do one or the other.”¹ As the religious historian John Modern has asserted, “any viable description of the nineteenth century must account for how one’s identity becomes bound up with one’s relationship to the religious.”²

And yet, despite the ubiquity of religious thought and practice in the period, many critical studies of nineteenth-century literature continue to read not for religion but around or even against it. Until fairly recently, as Tracy Fessenden notes, religion received “little attention except when it figure[d] as crucial to a progressive, emancipatory politics (Christian antislavery being the readiest example), and often not even then.”³ The recent rise of secularism studies, which treats our modern condition not as a story about the absence of religion but instead about religion’s continued but ever-shifting presence in public and private life, has done much to redress this issue. But the study of women’s writing has yet to fully benefit from the insights of secularism studies. This is because critics of women’s writing have often taken for granted that religion can serve only as an oppressive force in women’s lives rather than a matter of personal choice, an aspect of communal belonging, a vehicle for intellection and self-expression, and a sincere apprehension of the nature of the universe and human existence.

This book approaches religious belief and practice as potential sites for imagining and enacting women’s agency, and it demonstrates how writing and publishing religious fiction after the Second Great Awakening made it possible for women writers to envision new agentive possibilities that did not rely on political office, clerical ordination, or the franchise. Often, these new agentive options were made possible through the imaginative adaptation of Protestant doctrine. One bedrock assertion of this project is that rather than bringing about the “loss of theology,” as Ann Douglas famously asserted, nineteenth-century women writers engaged in what the religious historian Mary Bednarowski calls “theological creativity”: the willingness and ability to adapt existing doctrines, or even to invent new ones, in ways that are meaningful for individuals and often for the community as a whole.⁴ The authors I study in this book explored their theological ideas in the medium of fiction because fiction provided a space for religious reflection and for imagining alternative ways of being, believing, and acting in the world.

While nineteenth-century women’s writing “does not represent a separate, morally superior female world apart from political, theological, economic, and racial tensions,” the entanglement of women and religion in the Western imaginary means that nineteenth-century women’s religious fiction was neither written nor read in identical terms to religious fiction by men.⁵ While male authors also used fiction to engage with religious questions, published
fiction provided a particularly welcoming space for women writers whose exclusion from seminaries and sectarian journals left them with few other outlets for public religious discussion. But more than a last resort for religious debate, fictional genres provided frameworks for exploring the contours and consequences of theological positions. When Augusta Jane Evans, whose work is the subject of this book’s second chapter, turned to the genre of woman’s fiction to explore the implications of free-will theology for white southern women, she both intervened in an ongoing debate between Calvinist and Arminian thinkers and constructed a model of female agency grounded in Wesleyan theological convictions. For Evans and other women writers, the generic space of the historical novel, the sentimental novel, or the escaped-slave narrative provided imaginative scaffolding for exploring possible forms of female agency, spaces where characters—and by extension authors and readers—could “negotiat[e] belonging to a world.”

These new forms of agency were made possible and available by the constantly shifting boundary between the religious and the nonreligious and the attendant reshaping of the appropriately public and the normatively private that marked the decades before the Civil War. The American nineteenth century was characterized by the public dominance of Protestant Christianity, but to make this statement is to raise difficulties rather than to settle them, since nineteenth-century American Protestantism was not monolithic but made up of myriad and ever-multiplying denominations—denominations that were, in turn, constantly engaged in transformations of doctrine and practice. These transformations were shaped by internal theological innovation, external efforts toward reform or retrenchment, and the pressure of religious alternatives ranging from Catholicism to Spiritualism to atheism. The proliferation of internal and external differences within and among Protestant sects, this book argues, produced the conditions of possibility for women’s religious and literary innovations. The forms of agency this book reveals are those that thrived in these interstitial spaces, claimed by women authors who were willing to imaginatively inhabit such metaphorical gaps.

To recognize the myriad models of religious agency offered in fiction by nineteenth-century women, this book engages in secular reading rather than secularized reading. In making this distinction I am drawing on the recent wave of immensely productive scholarship that has deconstructed the inaccurate and mystifying pronouncements of the secularization thesis and replaced them with a more robust model for studying the complexities of secular modernity. Whereas the secularization thesis once claimed to trace the increasing privatization of religion or even to predict its eventual disappearance, studies of secularity acknowledge the continuing interpenetration of religious and
nonreligious modes of belief, action, and understanding in the modern world. To take the example that is closest to home, the current form of American secularity is one in which a public sphere ostensibly cleansed of religious influence or interference actually remains structured by principles and assumptions directly derived from Protestant Christianity, a status that Winifred Fallers Sullivan calls “small-p protestantism.” The misidentification of secularism as the absence of religion from society rather than as a particular post-Protestant configuration of society allows for the continuing alignment of what is truly “American” with the assumptions of this post-Protestant paradigm and facilitates the othering and exclusion of any religious group that refuses to conform to them. The result is a secular society in which Christian politicians freely quote the Bible in speeches on the Senate floor but Muslim women are harassed for wearing head scarves in public. The American secular public sphere, in other words, is not free from religion but instead tolerates one form of religious display (fundamentalist Christian proof texting) and is openly hostile to another (Muslim sartorial norms). The antebellum secular situation was, of course, different from our own, and engaging in secular reading enables us to see how the religious-secular conditions that marked the antebellum United States enabled certain forms of religious agency to emerge while foreclosing others. This project demonstrates how nineteenth-century women writers used the imaginative space of fiction to negotiate their secular surrounds and to depict new models of religious agency that were grounded in Protestant theological concepts.

In this book I seek to tell an addition story rather than the paradigmatic “subtraction stories” put forward by narratives of secularization, in which “human beings hav[e] lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge.” Instead of reading for the absence of religion, this project answers Robert Orsi’s call “to approach history and culture with the gods fully present to humans” and to “withhold from absence the intellectual, ethical, and spiritual prestige modernity gives it.” It offers a capacious and critical approach to women’s religious agency under the conditions of nineteenth-century secularity, examining this complex problem in specific literary, doctrinal, communal, racial, gendered, and geographic contexts. In doing so, it reveals how particular sets of secular conditions present in the nineteenth-century United States made it possible for women writers to imagine new models of agency that accorded with their most deeply held beliefs.

This project approaches nineteenth-century fiction as a collection of imaginative worlds in which women’s agency became conceivable precisely insofar as such agency was readable and resonant within the terms of antebellum
religious discourse—as it represented what William James called a “living option” for a predominantly Protestant Christian people. Recognizing these new forms of agency requires more than simple translation or explication. Cathy Davidson has written that fiction “cannot be simply ‘fit into its historical context,’ as if context were some Platonic pigeonhole and all that is dark or obscure in the fiction is illuminated when the text is finally slipped into the right slot.” The same is true for the role of religious doctrine in fiction: investigating a text’s belief system is not simply a matter of researching the details of Calvinist or Unitarian or Spiritualist doctrine and overlaying them onto a text to produce a legible reading of its (or its author’s) theological commitments. While this project addresses aspects of authors’ religious identifications, often as expressed in their journals and letters, it would be reductive to suggest that Catharine Maria Sedgwick, because she joined a Unitarian congregation, could only write Unitarianly, that Susan Warner could only write Presbyterianly, or that Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote first Congregationally and then Episcopally. Rather, this project examines how nineteenth-century fiction provided not a transparent window into an author’s personal beliefs but an imaginative forum for thinking both through and beyond doctrinal and ecclesiastical difference in ways that allowed for new explorations and expressions of personal and communal agency. Since nineteenth-century novels “construct entire fictive worlds in which the validity of a particular set of beliefs is borne out,” the details of doctrine are important because they represent cognitive structures through which individuals and communities understood the meaning of their lives.

Literary genres also provide cognitive and imaginative structures for producing knowledge, and one goal of this book is to tease out linkages between doctrinal structures and literary ones. As Gregory Jackson has demonstrated, nineteenth-century religious fiction was grounded in homiletic models that were instantly recognizable to Christian audiences nursed not only on the Bible but on the Pilgrim’s Progress and other instructive texts. But our “prevailing theories of genre lack a nuanced understanding of the psychology of highly specialized religious readerships” because those theories continue to be guided by secularized reading conventions. Claudia Stokes has urged scholars of antebellum fiction to “recognize narrative form as an agent of religious instruction and evangelism” since “generic conventionality in the nineteenth century also signaled a loyalty to religious conventions and expectations.” Taking up the challenge laid down by Jackson, Stokes, and others, this book demonstrates—through studies of the historical novel, woman’s fiction, the fugitive slave narrative, the theological romance, and the Spiritualist novel—that the generic conventions of antebellum fiction were particularly well suited
to imagining new possibilities for women’s religious agency. Generic conventions, it argues, offer conceptual frameworks for imaginative exploration in much the same way that religious doctrines do. Sometimes these frameworks are cages, but sometimes they are jungle gyms.

It has become a truism of American literary scholarship that texts perform “cultural work”—that they are not only products of culture themselves but that they influence culture in particular ways. This is to say that texts themselves have agency—an agency that is influenced but can never be entirely controlled by the agency of their authors. More than what individual authors do, then, this book is about what texts do—how fiction participates in and shapes culture by presenting new historically and culturally contingent models of religious agency. Just as individuals and communities experience agency within the forms and structures available to them—most saliently, for the purposes of this study, religious forms and structures—texts exhibit agency within certain generic boundaries. To ask what a text does is to investigate both the world from which that text emerged and the reformed world that it makes narratively viable, and to consider what conditions of existence and possibilities for agency it brings into being.

**Women’s Religious Writing as American Theological Tradition**

This project details how U.S. women authors writing between 1820 and 1865 and in various regional, racial, and political circumstances employed powerful combinations of Protestant doctrine and literary genre to imagine fictional worlds full of new agentive possibilities. It approaches the antebellum public sphere as a discourse community in which theological ideas were not simply handed down from clerical authorities to laypeople but instead were socially created. As Gregory Jackson has argued, in nineteenth-century America “elite religious discourse was shadowed—sometimes even overshadowed—by a wealth of popular narrative materials,” and the “‘formal’ doctrine and theology coming out of synods and seminaries . . . were transformed by remarkable men and women on the ground.” Such transformations were significant not only for their effect on the American religious landscape but because they enabled individuals and communities to imagine new ways of being and behaving in the public sphere and new ways of acting in the world.

The texts discussed in this book appeared in the wake of the Second Great Awakening, a wave of religious revivals that swept the newly formed United States between 1790 and 1820. With its emphasis on visible and narratable re-
ligious feeling and on the primacy of personal experience, the Awakening, along with the liberalization of the culturally dominant New England Congregationalist churches, began to redistribute religious identity and authority in a process that the religious historian Nathan Hatch has called the “democratization” of American Christianity. The Awakening saw the creation of myriad new religious movements and the rapid growth of existing ones, particularly revivalist sects including the Methodists, Baptists, and Disciples of Christ. The result was that “within a few years of Jefferson’s election in 1800, it became anachronistic to speak of [religious] dissent in America—as if there were still a commonly recognized center against which new or emerging groups defined themselves.”

While religious and social historians continue to debate the origins, outline, and effects of the Second Great Awakening, the early nineteenth century undeniably saw “a widening range of spiritual alternatives that turned antebellum America into a unique spiritual hothouse.”

As much as the spate of outdoor revivals that most famously characterized the Second Great Awakening (and most unnerved the leaders of settled denominations like the Congregationalists and Episcopalians), the flurry of pamphlets, printed sermons, tracts, and rebuttals produced during and after it solidified the sense that theological debates among people of different beliefs were best conducted in the print public sphere. In the nineteenth century, Protestant doctrine circulated widely and came under continual debate both explicitly, in sectarian journals and printed sermons, and more subtly in the fictional productions that increasingly occupied the popular imagination. As proscriptions against the writing and publication of fiction that had carried over from the colonial era began to fall away, learning to verbalize the “inner condition of true religion” through the medium of published fiction increasingly offered laypeople a means to enter into a culturally dominant Protestant public sphere whose terms of discourse were often explicitly theological.

Nineteenth-century women writers influenced by the Awakening seized on the opportunity to take part in public religious discourse by producing and publishing poems, essays, sketches, stories, and novels. And just as they decried novels while producing thousands of them, they similarly disclaimed any ambition to be writing or debating “theology” even as they produced texts that engaged deeply with theological ideas. Whereas in the former case, of course, critics have recognized the necessary obfuscations at play and treated women authors as novelists, when it comes to theology, they have often accepted these women’s demurrals, approaching works of fiction as alternatives to theological thinking rather than vehicles for it. As I discuss in this book’s second chapter, studies of women’s religious writing continue to be heavily influenced by Ann Douglas’s religious-historical reading of nineteenth-century sentimentalism.
and by her assertion that women writers and the liberal ministers who imitated them initiated the decline and death of American theology. To make this argument, Douglas narrowly defined theology to include only a specific strain of Calvinist systematic dogma; all other forms of nineteenth-century religious thought were dismissed as “sentimental heresy” or “feminine heresy.” But as E. Brooks Holifield has demonstrated in his magisterial study *Theology in America*, not only did liberal denominations have theologies of their own, but nineteenth-century definitions of theology “were always sufficiently broad to include a variety of genres, such as sermons and popular tracts, and any history of theology in America must consider such sources.” Such popular materials as tracts and novels “joined biblical interpretation to a background theory, explicit or implicit, in a way that constituted ‘theology.’” Furthermore, systematic theology was never the only form of theology that circulated in the United States. In my fourth chapter I demonstrate how Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novels of the late 1850s and early 1860s worked to unite the traditions of speculative and practical theology, thereby satisfying a “demand that theology be practical” that “reflected not only the imperatives of revivalist religion” but “a long history of reflection that had its roots in ancient philosophy.”

To recognize the theologically grounded models of agency made available in women’s religious fiction, we must dispense with several misapprehensions: that theology, systematic or otherwise, is the sole property of men; that “religion” as a force was in decline in the nineteenth century; and that religion is always experienced by adherents—particularly women—in the same way. By insisting on the theological contexts and investments of literature written by women, my goal is not to return our field to a time before the advent of cultural studies or to insist that race, gender, class, sexuality, and other embodied concerns be subordinated to spiritual ones. The assumption that spiritual and theological concerns are necessarily divorced from issues of identity and embodiment—and that we as scholars must choose between them—is itself a false binary induced by the secularization thesis. It is certainly true that a turn to discourses of secularism can underpin conservative critical moves. But the best work on religion and secularity recognizes that religious identifications are inextricable from and not reducible to other forms of identity.

It is the transformation of theology through the medium of fiction and the consequences of that transformation for women’s agency that this book details. It shows how the realm of published fiction provided a conventional space in which women writers might safely explore theological problems and the ramifications of those problems for women’s lives. As Lloyd Pratt has noted, the ability to produce superlative examples of conventional forms was much prized in the first half of the nineteenth century: “convention as much as ca-
pacity for novelty set expectations for what qualified as literature.” But conventionality also provided, in the words of Lauren Berlant, “a profound placeholder that provide[d] an affective confirmation of the idea of a shared confirming imaginary in advance of inhabiting a material world in which that feeling [could] actually be lived.” Fictional genres, in other words, with their established conventions, offered a space in which to imagine new ways of acting in the world.

This project takes up Joanna Brooks’s charge that scholars of American literature should approach literary texts as “an archive of heterodox marginal, dissenting, and emergent theologies.” I begin with a genre that proliferated in the early years of the new republic: the American historical novel. Writing at the end of the Second Great Awakening and at the beginning of an explosion in print publication and circulation, the early national women authors Lydia Maria Child and Catharine Maria Sedgwick initiated a nineteenth-century tradition of women’s writing that engaged deeply with theological questions through the medium of popular literary forms. Struggling with dominant liberal discourses that framed women as irrational and unfit for public life and with a tradition of gothic and seduction novels in which female characters existed primarily as objects of political, economic, and sexual exchange, Child and Sedgwick used the emergent genre of the historical novel to argue for women as individuals capable of exercising religious agency. Their new model of agency was premised on women’s active participation in a religious culture increasingly identified with the public circulation of theological debate, and it invoked an influential Unitarian Christology that rejected violent sacrifice and located Christ’s salvific power in his living language rather than his mutilated body. Applying this theology to tales of colonial North America anchored by devout women, Child and Sedgwick portrayed America’s early women settlers as rational actors capable of participating in an increasingly linguistic and literary public sphere. By grounding women’s claims to religious agency in their powerful language rather than their perishable bodies and in narratives of America’s national origins, Child and Sedgwick made the case for their own authorship and for the generations of religious women writers who would come after them.

In addition to writing historical novels, Catharine Maria Sedgwick also inaugurated the genre of woman’s fiction with her 1822 novel A New-England Tale. My second chapter explores woman’s fiction as a vehicle for practical theology informed by contemporary doctrinal debates. Sentimental fiction in general and woman’s fiction in particular have long been approached by critics as a form committed to promoting an undifferentiated and generalized Protestantism. By eschewing doctrinal debate in favor of an emotional and
INTRODUCTION

antitheological “evangelicalism,” the argument goes, sentimental fiction contributed to the feminization and privatization of religious belief and thus to the ultimate secularization of the American public sphere. My chapter challenges this critical narrative through a careful reading of Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* and Augusta Jane Evans’s *Beulah*. While both novels adopt the standard woman’s fiction plot identified by Nina Baym, in which an orphaned girl seeks and finds a new family after years of difficult struggle, Warner’s novel takes place in a Calvinist universe of predetermined salvational outcomes while Evans’s heroine navigates an Arminian cosmos in which eternal damnation is a real and terrifying possibility. My analysis demonstrates how the seemingly simplistic formal elements of woman’s fiction enabled Warner, Evans, and other female authors to contribute to the most pressing theological debate of their day—the extent of human and divine agency—in the space of woman’s fiction.

By aligning women’s life stories with recognizable doctrinal patterns, woman’s fiction worked to claim theology for women while strengthening an ideological alignment between Christianity and whiteness. When Harriet Jacobs chose the genre of sentimental woman’s fiction as the vehicle for her anonymized autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she both inherited and transformed this dubious tradition. My third chapter reads Jacobs’s *Incidents* as a spiritual autobiography that draws on a nascent tradition of black women’s religious narrative founded by the itinerant preachers Jarena Lee and Sojourner Truth. Exploring the moments of confession, repentance, and exhortation that structure Jacobs’s narrative reveals how Linda Brent’s sexual sin becomes the precondition for religious agency rather than the occasion for its destruction. By claiming a prophetic voice that she subtly but repeatedly likens to that of the slave preacher Nat Turner, Jacobs frames Linda’s fall from grace as a necessary rebellion against the hypocrisy of white slaveholding Christianity.

Jacobs’s *Incidents* engages in both explicit and implicit conversation with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s sentimental blockbuster *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). My fourth chapter explores Stowe’s post-*Uncle Tom* novels *The Minister’s Wooing* and *Agnes of Sorrento*, which I classify as theological romances. I argue that these texts depict forms of communal religious agency rooted in both Protestant millennialism and Catholic Mariology and intended to suture the widening cultural divisions between practical and speculative theology, between public and private religion, and between the “masculine” realms of business and commerce and the “feminine” realm of the home. The women of Stowe’s theological romances find their agency in connection with one another and with the communion of saints, living and dead, who populate their lives. Draw-
ing on the work of critics who have studied Stowe’s career-spanning interest in Mary the mother of Jesus, I argue that Stowe’s fictional Marys, including Mary Scudder and Virginie de Frontignac of *The Minister’s Wooing* and the eponymous heroine of *Agnes of Sorrento*, are simultaneously incarnational and iconographic, both representing Mary and reenacting her active role in Christian history. In stories that revise the origins of American Protestantism, Stowe invokes Mary as an incarnation of spiritual and cultural wholeness and an embodiment of women’s religious agency.

My final chapter examines another genre of female-authored fiction that reached beyond the boundaries of doctrinal Protestantism to seek agency in an expanded secular milieu: it uncovers the role of Spiritualist doctrine and practice in Elizabeth Oakes Smith’s *Bertha and Lily*, Elizabeth Stoddard’s *The Morgesons*, and Kate Field’s *Planchette’s Diary*. As a set of disruptive religious practices that uncoupled agency from accepted hierarchies of authority and placed power in the joined hands of the weak, the poor, the sick, and the politically disenfranchised, Spiritualist mediumship and spirit communication offered opportunities for sympathetic connection and collaborative action among those with the least access to institutionalized religious and political power. In *The Morgesons*, the Morgeson sisters’ mediumistic gifts, including clairvoyance and spirit traveling, enable them to circumvent entrenched romantic, domestic, and economic expectations, while *Bertha and Lily* adapts the village tale to address issues of sexual assault and illegitimacy. Field’s *Planchette’s Diary* enacts a Spiritualist form of collaboration between Field as editor and “Madame Planchette” as author that would facilitate Field’s career as a female public intellectual. These and other Spiritualist novels employed and modeled shared forms of agency at both the textual and the metatextual levels, inaugurating a specifically female form of Spiritualist fiction that offered a new kind of authorial agency to women writers.

I end the book with a conclusion that discusses the difficulty of reading for religion today, as persistent and inaccurate narratives of secularization continue to shape our public and political discourse. I then offer a few examples of women’s religious agency in our own time—a time that is remarkably similar in some ways to the antebellum period discussed in the rest of this book. Religious women of the twenty-first-century United States, like their nineteenth-century forebears, have seized the opportunities presented by a range of new media platforms to intervene in public discussions about women’s role in the religious and political life of the nation. By adapting their words and actions to their own secular situation, they have forged new models of female religious agency that challenge existing structures of authority while remaining recognizable to co-religionists as extensions of shared beliefs.
INTRODUCTION

From Secularized Reading to Secular Reading

That nineteenth-century fiction shows an abiding concern with matters of religious belief and practice is not a new observation. But until recently many treatments of nineteenth-century religious fiction—and particularly religious fiction written by women—have been hampered by inaccurate historical-theological models that remain stubbornly dependent on the premises of the secularization thesis. Arising from Enlightenment-era philosophical ideas and coming to fruition in the early twentieth century in the sociological theories of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, versions of the secularization thesis posit, among other things, that Western culture is becoming less religious over time, that religion is a private matter that must be held separate from the public arena of politics and commerce, and (in the strongest versions of the theory) that religion will eventually die out entirely as a result of increasing rationalism and scientific discovery. In some formulations, the thesis traces a narrative of progress (or decline, depending on one’s point of view) according to which the irrational superstitions of the past are being gradually replaced by rational certainties; Weber called this process Entzauberung, a word usually translated as “disenchantment” that has been more literally limned by the religious historian Molly McGarry as “the elimination of magic from the world.”

As one critic has rather waggishly noted, “recent interventions into the secularization thesis of classical sociology have resulted in a new consensus: that secularization never happened.” And certainly at the most basic demographic level, the thesis is simply historically inaccurate, at least in the United States, where religious adherence has held steady and occasionally risen over the last two hundred years and where religion has never been successfully shunted to the private sphere but instead remains a matter for public debate and political concern. But this pithy overstatement also points to a gap between the secularization thesis’s various descriptive functions and its aspirations to predictiveness. While there can be little doubt that Western cultures look radically different now than they did five hundred or even one hundred years ago, changes at the level of civilizations can rarely be explained as “thoroughgoing metaphysical and epistemological totalities” that can be traced back to a single cause and projected forward to a utopian future.

Beyond its descriptive inadequacies, bigger problems arise when the secularization thesis is applied prescriptively, as a yardstick to separate the enlightened sheep from the primitive goats. In its strongest form, the thesis has been used to justify the othering of groups not considered sufficiently secularized—those for whom magic has demonstrably not been eliminated from their worlds. At the global level it serves as a prop to claims of Western cultural
superiority: secularized societies are “the province of an Enlightened and white majority, describing and prescribing a transparent world set apart from primitive enchantments, mystery, and things that [go] bump in the night.” At the national and regional level it helps to define what is truly (un-)American: religious individuals and groups are tolerated so long as they behave in ways that do not seem particularly “religious”—so long as their beliefs and practices are “rational, word-centered, nonritualistic, middle class, unemotional, [and] compatible with democracy and the liberal state.” Groups and individuals who do not fit these categories—who maintain distinctive ritual practices, engage in charismatic forms of worship, reject or defy the norms of the nuclear family (by embracing polygamy or unrestricted childbearing), or show an affinity for nonmainstream political and economic movements—are grouped together under a “nomenclature of marginalization (cults, sects, primitives, and so on)” and subjected to harassment and discrimination.

Responding both to the historical inaccuracy of the secularization thesis and to the way it undergirds critical discourses that obscure and marginalize religious people and their meaning-making processes, anthropologists, religious historians, cultural theorists, and literary critics have posited various theories of modern secularity as correctives to the secularization thesis. Rather than describing a decline in religious adherence or policing the division between a “public” realm of disembodied rationalism and a “private” realm of emotionality, superstition, and belief, studies of secularity describe the state of affairs, present in North American history since the earliest European colonization and always in flux, that creates the conditions of possibility for religious pluralism and cultural change. To study secularity is to describe the “conceptual environment—emergent since at least the Protestant Reformation and early Enlightenment—that has made ‘religion’ a recognizable and vital thing in the world.” Our modern situation—our “secular age,” as Charles Taylor has dubbed it—is one in which individuals and religious communities “can no longer maintain religious belief without the simultaneous knowledge that others do not believe, or that others believe differently.” This does not imply (or predict) the disappearance of religious adherence, but it does acknowledge that religion in the modern world exists as a salient category for analysis rather than as the accepted background condition of existence.

In the U.S. context, secularity since the early nineteenth century has been the precondition for religious pluralism: the set of circumstances that makes it possible to ask how and in what way one might believe in a particular representation of God as over and against another representation—God as loving father, for instance, rather than God as angry arbiter of punishment. Thus, when Catharine Maria Sedgwick used the historical novel as a medium through
which to investigate the doctrine of atonement and the nature of divine forgiveness, she was not “secularizing” the problem of vicarious sacrifice by fictionalizing it. Instead, she was bringing into being a religious-secular configuration in which fiction would become an accepted space for exploring the true nature of God’s relation to the world. But secularity is also the set of conditions under which one may question the very nature of religion and its role in modern life. This is the religious-secular configuration at evidence in Elizabeth Stoddard’s *The Morgesons*, a novel that is less concerned with the kind of god one believes in than with the way that the rise of spirit communication offered women access to nonhierarchical forms of communal religious experience. It is precisely the descriptive flexibility of secularity studies—its acknowledgment that the religious and the secular are not static categories but are constructed through particular historical events and human identities—that makes it a productive framework for reading for religion in nineteenth-century women’s writing.

In a 2018 essay for *Christianity and Literature*, Dawn Coleman argued for the unique contribution of literary studies to the scholarship of secularism. Noting that much major work in the field had been produced by political scientists, anthropologists, philosophers, sociologists, and scholars trained in religious or cultural studies, Coleman insisted that literary texts, including those from the nineteenth century, offer representations of the felt experience of secularity: “By staying close to the weft and warp of experience, literature makes visible the illiberal and non-rational aspects of modern spirituality—the feelings beyond reason, the contingencies that defy theory, the exceptions and specificities of individual lives.” But as Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman have demonstrated, bringing the insights of secularism studies to bear on literary texts—and producing new insights of our own—requires that we as critics dislodge the assumptions about religion and secularization that remain embedded in almost every facet of modern scholarship. The forms of criticism valued by twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics have often combined an implicit or explicit characterization of all religious belief as irrational, primitive, and dogmatic with an unexamined belief in criticism itself as a fully and unproblematically secularized project. Beginning from these faulty premises, secularized criticism draws a number of unfounded inferences about religious adherence: that religion is primarily a tool of patriarchy and dominance imposed on believers from above; that gender, race, and class are more authentic sources of personal identity than religion is; that religious language is a code, adopted consciously or unconsciously, behind which “real” concerns are hidden; that religious belief results from ignorance or lack of education; and
that nineteenth-century subjects would have been better off without their religious affiliations than with them.

Such misapprehensions are particularly distorting when applied to women writers, and the inaccuracy of secularized criticism is often revealed in the interpretive paradox it produces: the nineteenth-century woman author who values religious adherence and identity appears at one and the same time both shrewd and deluded, both canny and duped. One critic, puzzling over the question of why nineteenth-century women did not leave the Protestant churches in which they were denied leadership positions, posits that perhaps they “needed the consolation of religion more than they wanted to see what it did to them . . . [or] perhaps the lack of education prevented the development of the habit of intellectual analysis.” Such readings position religious adherence as self-imposed delusion or simple ignorance and are often offered despite clear accompanying evidence of women authors’ education, intelligence, and self-determination. When we as critics read around or through spiritual experience rather than for it, we overlook the complex interleaving of cognition, emotion, memory, and desire that constitutes religious identity; the distinctive intersections of belief, tradition, and ritual that mark particular religious communities; and the norms of affiliation and behavior arising from those intersections.

Responding to the erasures and distortions produced by secularized criticism, over the last several decades scholars have increasingly called for more and better explanations of the role of religion in American literature and culture. As early as 1995, Jenny Franchot complained that scholars of American literature were being trained to ignore “mystery” and “conscience”—primary concerns of early Americans—because “academic orthodoxy ha[d] deemed them deviant.” Instead of engaging with the religious beliefs and behaviors of their subjects, literary scholars were expected to perform acts of “translation or ‘demystification’” that would “resituate a particular sacred or an individual’s interior life into an understanding of culture that denies transcendence.” The cultural studies scholar Susan Mizruchi blamed the neglect of religion on the rise of both high theory and a particular brand of Christian fundamentalism. The result was that religion had been “demoted” among scholars to simply “another ideology at play within literature, one that could be taken up, ignored, or seen as a mystification of the economic realities or power relations behind it.” This tendency was undergirded by the modern academy’s self-conscious positioning as a site for producing “the triumph of empiricism over superstition, reason over faith, and the emancipation of all spheres—science, knowledge, the market, the state—from the
oppressive and authoritarian ‘yoke of religion.’” This positioning made it difficult to study religion in any manner that did not reduce it to an anomaly to be explained or a disease to be cured.

Fortunately, a recent wave of American literary scholarship has begun to redress secularized critical practices and to demonstrate how careful attention to religion—not as a reified foil but as a vibrant, varied feature of the lives of individuals and communities—can enrich our understanding of the figures and texts we study. Some of this work (including my own) has appeared under the sign of “the secular,” which has offered literary critics a set of flexible theoretical terms for discussing the deep imbrication of religion and culture that does not reduce all religious change to decline. Tracy Fessenden’s *Culture and Redemption* (2007) launched a wave of scholarship about the role of American literature in producing and obscuring the particular form of post-Protestant secularity in which we live and move and have our being. Soon evidence of a new “turn around” religion in the United States (to borrow the title of a 2011 essay collection celebrating the work of Sacvan Bercovitch) began to appear: in special issues of *Early American Literature, American Literature*, and *American Literary History*; in edited collections exploring the “spiritual imagination” of nineteenth-century America and the “lived theologies” of women writers; in monographs by Dawn Coleman, Claudia Stokes, Kevin Pelletier, Jared Hickman, and others; and in the work of emerging scholars, including Toni Wall Jaudon, Molly Robey, Ashley Barnes, and Susanna Compton Underland.

This book joins this recent flowering of scholarship on nineteenth-century religious writing and seeks to further unmask “to what extent our very analytic tools and categories are built to produce the very secularization theses history has since disproven.” To do so, it engages in what I am calling secular reading, in contradistinction to the secularized reading that for so long guided our critical projects. I argue that in order to recognize religious agency—and particularly women’s religious agency—scholars must engage in secular reading practices. This will seem paradoxical only if we think of the secular (incorrectly, as I have shown) as the space from which religion has been evacuated rather than the space within which religious discourse is constituted. As Nancy Glazener has succinctly stated, critics who wish to illuminate a text must strive to recognize “what assumptions about life and meaning and social relations are the preconditions for its legibility.” For nineteenth-century women writers and readers, the preconditions for a text’s legibility included the secular conditions under which that text was written and read: the de facto Protestant assumptions that structured the literary milieu into which the text entered, the norms of the religious communities to which the author and reader (almost certainly) belonged, the author or reader’s own beliefs and prac-
tices, and, crucially, the cradling of all of those interrelated concerns within larger understandings of cosmological truth.

Secular reading acknowledges and works to apprehend such preconditions for legibility. To read secularly is to recognize how religious beliefs, intellec-
tions, impulses, and affects shape our subjects’ experience of their own agency, their relationships with those around them, and their apprehensions of temporal and eternal good. To read secularly is to enter into partnership with an author and her characters and to acknowledge that the spiritual reality a text inhabits is as much a part of that text as the letters and punctuation on the page. In secular reading, characters, author, and reader navigate “a much more complex world, one in which there are multiple agencies possible,” including forms of agency exercised communally, nonrationally, or in collaboration with other realms. The critic who reads secularly must not merely recognize “the power of beliefs over those who hold them” but must also admit “the possibility of the truth of those beliefs.” Secular reading, in other words, requires the critic to at least temporarily suspend her own professional disbelief.

Secular reading is not to be confused with Edward Said’s model of “secu-
lar criticism,” which I am inclined to call secularized criticism precisely because of the way Said employs the term religion as a shibboleth to mean “an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly.” The framing of religious adherence as by definition closed, shut off, lazy, and cowardly is a fabulation based on critical presumption rather than on any consideration for the lives of religious persons. But if to engage in “secular criticism” is to attend to “the realities of power and authority—as well as the resistances offered by men, women, and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies,” then this book engages in secular criticism. But it is a secular criticism that does not simplistically position religion as its opposite and that attends to the ways agency operates within religious structures and communities, not just against them.

Recognizing Women’s Religious Agency

The persistence of secularized critical narratives has made it difficult to accu-
rately assess the importance of religion to nineteenth-century literary history and to women writers in particular because these narratives not only discount the importance of religious adherence but also obscure the forms of religious experience most likely to be engaged in by women: informed by theology but also characterized by ritual, emotion, connection, or collective action. One
The assertion of this book is that in order to recognize religious agency and the new forms it might take in fiction, it is necessary both to understand a variety of nineteenth-century secular situations—the particular doctrinal and denominational contexts of women’s religious writing—and to acknowledge modes of agency, individual and collective, that do not appear to be classically willful or self-determined. These modes of agency might include religious rituals, careful ascription to rules, unregulated emotional experiences, or nonnormative (dis)embodiments; there may even be circumstances in which passivity itself becomes an act of agency.

These agentive configurations can seem paradoxical because they do not conform to the assumptions of Western liberal political theory, which constructs agency as a force wielded by autonomous individuals who make rational choices based on enlightened self-interest. Models of agency based on this liberal formulation import the assumption that agency can only be accessed by individual subjects who reject any authority except that to which they have consented—that which they have chosen for themselves. Such models are ill fitted to describe the desires and actions of religious persons and communities, who in many cases attribute ultimate authority to gods or other beings whose will commands the universe. Furthermore, most religious experience—even the “word-centered” Protestant religious experience that has come to serve as a norm for proper religiosity in the United States—is communal, involving the shared beliefs and collective practices of a group that is often (but not always) connected by a common race, region, or nation. Liberal philosophy’s emphasis on the rational power of autonomous individuals to select acceptable forms of authority for themselves obscures modes of collective or corporate agency (one reason it is so hard to hold institutions responsible for their crimes) and instances of agency not based in rational choice.

Rather than assuming that agency is dependent on individual autonomy, this project employs instead a model of agency grounded in the philosophies of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. As Butler has shown, the liberal model of autonomous (or sovereign) agency is a fantasy of the white Western imagination; because subjectivity and agency are enabled by discourse, and because discourse requires, at minimum, both a speaker and a listener, “the address that inaugurates the possibility of agency, in a single stroke, forecloses the possibility of radical autonomy.” Subjects are interpellated through discourse, including (and sometimes primarily) religious discourse, and because “the process by which one becomes subjected to relations of power also constitutes the conditions for the exercise of one’s agency,” no act can be entirely autonomous or liberated. To recognize how historical and literary actors access agency, then, we must “think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to re-
lations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create."54 Agency, in other words, is better defined as an ongoing process of adaptation to the power structures within which one lives than as a series of occasional challenges to those structures. Agency, including religious agency, is exercised within a matrix of norms, laws, customs, and geographic and historical conditions and is also expressed in multiple realms—public, private, or somewhere in between. One goal of this book is to deepen our understanding of women’s religious agency by prizing agency apart from the related but quite different terms with which it has too often been equated in liberal discourse, including power, autonomy, and self-determination.

As with so many of our critical terms, agency has its roots in theological discourses and debates, in this case about the nature of the divine and its relationship to the human. Jonathan Edwards’s essay *Freedom of the Will* (1754), which I discuss in my second chapter, is an extended interrogation of the relationship between “the moral agency of God” and “the moral agency of created thinking beings.”55 As my fifth chapter shows, opponents of Spiritualism in the nineteenth century were often concerned not with whether supernatural phenomena were real but with whether the agent at work at the séance table or in the trance lecture was divine or demonic. In employing *agency* as my operative term, then, I am invoking both recent theoretical formulations and these earlier meditations and debates.

The interpellation of the subject brings agency into being whether “the address that inaugurates the possibility of agency” is a negative one or a positive one: negative speech interpellates the subject—discursively calls the subject into being—just as efficiently as other forms of speech. This insight is key to understanding how oppressed peoples are able to reinterpret religious doctrines that seem to define them as unworthy or unclean and to transform those doctrines into vehicles for exploring their own agency. Just as Frederick Douglass learned that reading and writing were worth pursuing precisely because Hugh Auld forbade him access to them, nineteenth-century women told by their ministers to “keep silence in the church” and African Americans condemned by the curse of Ham intuited how powerful their own religious agency might be by noting its careful circumscription.56 Kept out of the pulpit, they found other discursive outlets for their religious ideas.

If we think of agency in these terms, religious adherence “does not in itself deny agency; rather, it creates particular forms of agency”—forms that are shaped, enabled, or foreclosed by specific social and historical conditions.57 Within religious contexts, agency may be shared, circulated, fluid, or collaborative. The will of individuals may be subordinated to the perceived
well-being of the group, or agency may be understood as originating with immaterial beings rather than with individual men and women. For the nineteenth-century women—real and fictional—considered in this book, the expression of their intellectual, emotional, and moral agency was deeply important, and it was exercised through their religious identities, not in spite of them. When Ellen Montgomery, the child heroine of Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, submits herself to the religious teachings of Alice Humphreys rather than the nonreligious commandments of Fortune Emerson, she is exercising agency within the Calvinist doctrinal terms that give her experiences meaning—terms in which subjection to God’s and the church’s legitimate authority, not the subversion of those authorities, is the highest good.

The assumptions of secular liberalism have made it difficult to recognize religious agency generally but have made it nearly impossible to correctly apprehend women’s religious agency. This is because of the fraught position that women hold under Western liberal secularism—a position that scholars of the secular are only beginning to address. Post-Enlightenment rhetorical constructions of the public and private spheres assigned both religion and women to the realm of the normatively “private.” By severing reason from religion and consigning the latter to the private sphere, Enlightenment political theorists hoped to both protect politics from unreasoning dogma and protect religion from the meddlesome intervention of the state. At the same time, republican rhetoric assigned women to the private sphere by claiming that their reproductive responsibilities made them “naturally” more attuned to social and familial—namely, private—concerns. The rhetorical, political, and civic separation of the public and private spheres that produced modern liberal secularity relegated both women and religion to the realm of the appropriately private so that, by the nineteenth century, “‘public’ and ‘private’ separated the market and politics, instrumental rationality and bureaucratic organization from home and family, spirituality, affective relationality, and sexual intimacy. Men figured on the public side, women on the side of the private.” Both religious expression and female identity came to be associated with the private sphere and, crucially, with one another.

Under these conditions, instances of women’s public religious expression became the scandal of secularity, an unruly irruption of the properly private into an ostensibly secular, de-sexed, and abstractly rational public sphere. Bryce Traister has argued that women’s religious expression poses a problem “on either side of an imagined religious/secular divide” because it instantiates “what the secularization narrative finds troubling about its own religious past: namely that religion is irrational, feminine in its performance and, in its commitment to inner experience, opposed to the political life of public rationality.
that is an important ideal of modern secularism itself.”60 This entanglement has made gender a central arena of contention in secular modernity, the “flash point” for clashes between “the religious” and “the secular.”61 Whether the question involves contemporary Muslim women wearing hijab or nineteenth-century Quaker women giving abolitionist speeches to mixed audiences, women’s public religious expression has long laid bare the gendered underpinnings of Western secular arrangements.

In the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century United States, the carefully maintained demarcation between a rational (male) public sphere and an emotional (female) private sphere was instantiated in an insistent division of religion into two separate realms: theology and piety. Men ostensibly had intellectual minds to think about difficult theological subjects, while women had only passionate hearts to apprehend the more emotional aspects of religion. This was true even for the most religiously liberal denominations: William Ellery Channing, the unofficial head of the Unitarian church in the early nineteenth century, wrote approvingly of “woman’s touching expressions of religion, not learned in theological institutions, but in the schools of affection, of sorrow, of experience, of domestic charge.”62 Rancorous theological debate—the masculine form of nineteenth-century religious expression—took place in the public forum of the pulpit, the pamphlet, the newspaper, or the sectarian journal. Personal piety and devotion—nineteenth-century Protestantism’s feminine form—took place in the private space of the home and, increasingly, in what Elizabeth Maddock Dillon calls the “intermediary location” of the literary public sphere. Dillon argues that whereas our theoretical models of public and private have tended to assign the print public sphere “to the public side of the public/private divide,” the literary public sphere is better understood as “a social space that links public and private and mediates between the two.”63 I demonstrate throughout this book that the intermediary space of the literary public sphere enabled women writers to enter into discussions about the ostensibly masculine subject of theology by bringing it into fictional spaces characterized by feminine piety and devotion. Nineteenth-century women’s novels, I suggest, make public theological arguments by means of private domestic subjects, and they do so as a means of establishing women’s claims to full religious participation and, therefore, to full humanity.

One of the dominant historical processes of secular modernity, particularly in the United States, has been the series of slow and painful steps by which women have fought their ideological consignment to the realm of the private, the coercive, the embodied, and the irrational and sought to perform themselves as full participants in the public sphere. In describing this precarious process, historians and critics have often assumed that for women, moving into
the public sphere required divorcing themselves from the private matter of religion—that feminist progress is and should be accompanied by secularization. Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini note that “because the discourse of universal secularism equates secularism to progress and claims for itself the mantle of freedom and emancipation, secularism is often promoted as the antidote to women’s subordination under conservative religion.”64 The anthropologist and scholar of secularism Saba Mahmood calls this set of assumptions the “progressive-secular imaginary”: the “conventional wisdom that secularization, sexual freedom, and women’s emancipation run always on parallel tracks.”65 The progressive-secular imaginary is not only inaccurate but potentially dangerous, as it can provide a warrant for particularly virulent strains of white supremacy and Western exceptionalism by reinforcing the idea that non-Christian women in the United States or women in non-Western countries would necessarily be better off—more liberated, more like “us”—if they would only leave behind their primitive religious commitments. Deconstructing it can help Western scholars recognize—in our own culture and others—the important role that religious identification and adherence play in shaping women’s agency.

Women and Secular Subj ecthood

As scholars of secularism have thoroughly demonstrated over the last several decades, religion and secularism are not opposing forces, not ends of a spectrum. They are sides of a coin or, perhaps more accurately, the coils on a Möbius strip. Long-standing and ever-shifting discourses of secularism have shaped how religion continues to exist in the world: which religious formations are conceived as salutary and which are “destructive,” which can be exercised in public and which must be kept private, which are appropriately “personal” and which are dangerously “political.” When we talk about secularity, we are talking about religion, and when we talk about religion, we are talking about secularity. Thus, religious agency is not the opposite of secular agency. The forms of religious agency I discuss in this book are, in fact, case studies in secular agency, the special relativity to secular agency’s general relativity.

The question of agency is of central concern to scholars of secularism and liberalism because the claim to wield autonomous and sovereign agency, to be enlightened and free from supernatural coercion, stands at the center of modern secular subjecthood. The paradigmatic modern subject, according to Bruno Latour, is one who desires total freedom; for Talal Asad, the idealized
secular agent is a person who seeks complete self-knowledge and self-control. But as Emily Ogden has recently demonstrated, enlightenment and enchantment, independence and dependence, are mutually constitutive, and thus total freedom and self-control can never be fully realized. Ogden details how persons seeking to become modern secular agents have constructed the sense of their own freedom from coercion and delusion by endlessly producing the credulity and enchantment of others, as the mesmerist does with his subject. Because the paradigmatic secular agent is a MacGuffin, a phantasm hiding a hole or wound at the center of modernity, the quest for total freedom and autonomy is doomed and “the impossibility of these demands prompts a range of compensatory strategies: attempts to feel like a secular agent if one cannot be one.” The primary characteristic separating the modern secular agent from the premodern agent, then, is the capacity for self-deception. To be perfectly modern is to be in denial.

For the modern subject enchanted by the fantasy of total autonomy, the phantasmic character of secular agency will seem like a nightmare. If one is deeply invested in the goal of becoming a paradigmatic secular agent—entirely free, entirely self-controlled—certainly the impossibility of achieving one’s goal will prompt the kind of destructive compensatory strategies embodied, as Ogden shows, in Melville’s Ahab or, more recently, in Donald Trump. But at every stage of secular modernity there have always been those who lived the impossibility of total autonomy—who have understood what it was to inhabit “the excluded middle,” the space between the poles of “enchanter or enchanted, agent or patient.” Many, though certainly not all, of these people have been women. I have written a book about women’s religious agency in part because examining women’s religious agency is the best way to see what cannot be directly observed: the phantasmic character of secular agency. Just as the only way to apprehend the true nature of political liberalism is to look at what—which is to say, whom—it excludes, the only way to see the true nature of secular agency is to look at the forms of religious agency (partial, collaborative, collective, nonautonomous) against which it defines itself. Since we cannot actually observe a nothing, I offer instead the obverse of that nothing, a story of women who exercised their agency through webs of relation instead of seeking an (impossible) route to complete independence and self-determination.

If you are a woman for whom it has always been self-evident that complete autonomy is a mirage, the impossibility of total self-determination is in many ways simply a fact, an everyday occurrence, something you put in your purse and take with you as you move through the carpool line, the morning staff meeting, airport security. In the hands of a Susan Warner, a Harriet Jacobs,
an Elizabeth Stoddard (or, more recently, a Toni Morrison, a Marilynne Robinson, or a Barbara Kingsolver), stories of women navigating the everyday compromises and negotiations of a world where total autonomy is never possible become every bit as compelling—perhaps more—than stories of men dashing themselves against the rocks of inevitable dependency. In other words, to understand the workings of secular agency, don’t look to men, always enchanted by the chimera of their own self-reliance. Look to women and women’s books instead.