Masked Atheism
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Published by The Ohio State University Press

LaMonaca, Maria.
Masked Atheism: Catholicism and the Secular Victorian Home.
The Ohio State University Press, 2008.
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This book opened with a discussion of Catholic convert Lady Georgiana Fullerton and closed with a discussion of Catholic converts Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper. I have already remarked how amusing it might be to see these three writers together at a dinner party. Being denied that opportunity, I have been able, at least, to compare my experiences presenting Fullerton’s work in a conference venue, to those I had a few years later, in presenting material from the chapter on Michael Field. When I prepared my conference paper on the Fields, I was a little apprehensive. Even though we now consider homosexual relationships and same-sex domestic partnerships completely normal and unremarkable, I still worried whether or not my conference audience would take the Fields seriously. Even through our twenty-first-century lenses, the Fields can appear undeniably—well, odd. What would my audience make of the fact that Katherine and Edith, in addition to their sexual relationship, were close blood relations? That they were often cloyingly self-absorbed in their insular little home? That their love for their dog, as recorded in their diaries, betrayed some unnervingly erotic undertones? That they mourned for Whym Chow as they would for a departed god or head of state?

My fears were groundless, however; my conference audience, so kind and generous, did not laugh when I described Whym’s funeral, and they nodded very earnestly when I explained that Edith’s love for Chow was “the very core + living of [her] whole heart.” What did make me uneasy, though, was a sudden memory of an earlier conference, at which I presented to my audience Lady Georgiana Fullerton’s Lady-Bird. My audience, although
similarly kind and generous, could not resist laughing at the notion that Lady-Bird’s heroine, Gertrude, could conquer her adulterous love for Adrien d’Arberg simply by praying about it, or that Fullerton could be so grim and humorless as to keep Gertrude and Adrien from marrying at the end, simply to convey a moral lesson. To many, I suspect, Fullerton’s habit of confessing her sins to a priest twice a week would appear more bizarre than the Fields’ worship of Whym Chow. And this dramatic difference in the receptions of Lady Georgiana Fullerton and Michael Field reminded me, as I finished up this manuscript, why I had to write this book.

Well over a decade ago, Jenny Franchot—frustrated and deeply disturbed at the lack of serious engagement with religious belief and culture among Americanist literary scholars—queried, “[W]here is religion? Why so invisible?” (834). Franchot argued that in contrast to American culture at large, in which so many public debates were framed “within religious discourses” (833), literary studies treated religion as an “invisible domain.” “[R]eligious voices, like certain kinds of shame,” she argued, “have become unmentionable. In its place, we talk volubly about conditions of being that [. . .] have been deemed safer: those of gender, race, and to a significantly lesser extent, class” (837). Much has changed. Since 1995, many fine literary studies—both American and British—have emerged which treat religious experience as a category no less important than race, class, or gender in the creation of literary texts and the representation of individual and group identities. But all too often, our work still betrays our inability, or perhaps our unwillingness, to engage with something that has grown so radically foreign to us.

One reason why today’s readers may relate to Michael Field more easily than, say, Lady Georgiana Fullerton or Elizabeth Sewell, is because the Fields had no qualms about customizing their religious beliefs to suit their unique private circumstances. “I’m not religious, but I am spiritual,” many of my students say, and this comment seems to imply a distancing from any communal, orthodox worldview, and a simultaneous embrace of self-identity and self-governance. In many ways, the Fields also seem more “spiritual” than “religious,” in that Catholicism became, in a sense, one more shade of ink the Fields used to write the poetry of their lives together. What do we do, however, when faced with religious beliefs, such as Fullerton’s, Sewell’s, or even Charlotte Brontë’s, that seem oriented more toward self-constraint and cultural conformity than self-assertion? As this study suggests, such religious beliefs, when examined closely, are often not as limiting as we might expect. And when they are, it is reductive and dishonest to present them otherwise, as if Charlotte Brontë or
Christina Rossetti were just forerunners of radical feminist theologians like Mary Daly. One must accept, finally, that orthodox religious beliefs do not negate the possibility that the writer might still have something worthwhile to say.

The Fields represent the Victorians’ worst nightmare in more ways than one. Not just because they embraced homosexuality and rejected conventional marriage and motherhood, but because their highly personalized attitude toward religion was a dramatic departure from earlier understandings of it. I do not wish to make the error of overstating the Fields’ individuality in religious matters here, as they subjected themselves to the judgment and moral advice of their confessors, attended Mass regularly, and followed—in letter, if not in spirit—the Catholic Church’s teachings on celibacy outside of heterosexual marriage. But their religious sensibilities do provide evidence of a widespread cultural shift over the course of the nineteenth century, a shift from a shared worldview—a tacit public agreement that “God [was] in his heaven and all [was] right with the world”—to the notion of religion as a private and highly personal matter. This attitude, of course, did not emerge in the fin de siècle. Religion had begun its retreat into the private sphere even before the early nineteenth century, when Hannah More depicted Charles and Lucilla’s domestic paradise in Coelebs in Search of a Wife. Unlike Lucilla, however, Katherine and Edith did not promulgate their beliefs among younger siblings and the community at large—their faith, rather, might be considered a Gnostic creed: available and comprehensible only to a privileged few, namely, two poets and their dog.

This notion of religion as a personal matter may seem liberating, but to many Victorians it was an isolating, solipsistic, chaotic, and untenable state of affairs. Of course, these fears may be difficult for us to relate to today, especially in the United States, where the separation of church and state, and the civic values of freedom and religious tolerance reinforce assumptions that people get along best when religion remains private. But to witness, in our own times, the cultural panic generated by impending secularism (whether defined as the disappearance of all religious belief, or merely religion’s retreat into arbitrary and invisible private realms) one need only pick up a current newspaper or turn on the television. In the United States, of course, we have witnessed a late-twentieth-century Evangelical Protestant revival; for years, the religious right has wielded tremendous political and social influence, often at the expense of strict distinctions between church and state. Europe, in the meantime, has become the backdrop for a “complicated wrestling match involving secularism,
Christianity and Islam” (Shorto 63). Islam is now “the fastest-growing religion in Europe” (Shorto 45) and Pope Benedict XVI, according to Russell Shorto in the 8 April 2007 edition of the *New York Times Magazine*, regards the re-Christianization of Europe as the only corrective to the spread of Islamic radicalism. “Benedict’s goal [is to bring] Europe back into the fold and [to make the Church] a mediator between godless secularism and the fervent Islam of many of the Continent’s newest residents” (63). In Benedict’s view, Muslims are not threatened by Christianity per se, “but by the cynicism of a secularized culture that denies its own foundations” (Ratzinger qtd. in Shorto 44).

A remarkable facet of this contemporary religious/secular “wrestling match” is the emphasis placed on women and gender roles. In Victorian England, the figure of the middle-class woman was co-opted by both Protestants and Catholics anxious about the erosion of traditional religious worldviews. In the twenty-first century, women remain central to debates about secularism and belief. Shorto notes that Benedict’s call for Europeans to turn back to Catholicism may be thwarted by his lack of “interest in reforming some of the basic policies affecting the lives of ordinary Catholics” (63), in particular, policies relating to sexuality and reproduction. Most feminists, of course, are hardly pleased with traditional Catholic teachings on birth control and abortion. The Church’s continued refusal to ordain women, moreover, further alienates feminists, and it also exacerbates the dire shortage of Catholic clergy worldwide. In Islam, even more so than in Catholicism, women’s roles are also fraught with controversy. Just as the Catholic nun elicited different responses from different religious groups in England, the Islamic woman—and in particular, the Islamic woman in hijab—represents very different things to different cultures. Jane Freedman, in her analysis of contemporary European efforts to ban public wearing of the hijab, points out that “the discourse surrounding these policies and legislation is often framed in terms of a defence of the rights of Muslim women against the patriarchal order which requires them to cover their heads” (29). But more than a threat to Western notions of gender equality, traditionally dressed Muslim women have also been represented as “agents of ‘fundamentalism’ or ‘terrorism,’ and as indicators of the inassimilable nature of Muslims in Europe” (30). For Muslim communities, and Muslim women who choose to wear headscarves, however, this item of dress is not “a symbol of religious fundamentalism, but [. . .] something with many more varied meanings” (41), such as an affirmation of cultural identity, or even a source of “empowerment,” in that it allows women to move freely through the public sphere (42).
There are, of course, many differences between the respective situations of Catholics and Protestants in England in the nineteenth century, and Catholics, Protestants, secularists, and Muslims in the West today. But it is striking to observe how, in both eras, debates about women’s roles and rights become symptomatic of larger anxieties about national security and competing worldviews. Without forcing the comparison too far, it may be safe to suggest that many involved in today’s culture wars could relate to the view expressed by John Henry Newman in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864), on why he clung to his own worldview:

I look out of myself into the world of men, and there I see a sight which fills me with unspeakable distress. [...] If I looked into a mirror, and did not see my face, I should have the sort of feeling which actually comes upon me, when I look into this living busy world, and see no reflexion of its Creator. [...] Were it not for this voice, speaking so clearly in my conscience and my heart, I should be an atheist, or a pantheist, or a polytheist when I looked into the world. [...] The sight of the world is nothing else than the prophet’s scroll, full of “lamentations, and mourning, and woe.”

To consider the world in its length and breadth [...] the tokens so faint and broken of a superintending design [...] the greatness and littleness of man, his far-reaching aims, his short duration, the curtain hung over his futurity, the disappointments of life, the defeat of good, the success of evil, physical pain, mental anguish, the prevalence and intensity of sin, the pervading idolatries, the corruptions, the dreary hopeless irreligion, that condition of the whole race, so fearfully yet exactly described in the Apostle’s words, “having no hope and without God in the world,” — all this is a vision to dizzy and appal; and inflicts upon the mind the sense of a profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution.

What shall be said to this heart-piercing, reason-bewildering fact? I can only answer, that either there is no Creator, or this living society of men is in a true sense discarded from His presence. [...] And so I argue about the world; — if there be a God, since there is a God, the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity. It is out of joint with the purposes of its Creator. (186–87; emphasis in original)

In this passage, Newman paints a sobering picture of his world and hints that it could have led him to abandon religious faith just as easily as it compelled him to embrace it. Newman’s words, like this book itself, suggest that religious quests and controversies are far more than arguments for or against the existence of God. They are, on a larger level, reactions to the
“unspeakable distress” and the “heart-piercing, bewildering” experience of looking out into a world which contradicts one’s cherished perceptions of self, society, and the meaning of human life. In Victorian England, as in many cultures today, one of the most rapid and threatening areas of change has been women’s roles and the structure of home and family. It is no accident, therefore, that discourses about social change, religion, and women’s roles were—and still are—completely inextricable from each other.