Religion and Geopolitics in the New World

When I teach Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative, students often respond with a cynical decoding of Rowlandson’s words: Rowlandson invokes a biblical phrase at every turn of her captivity, they argue, in order to justify her own selfish interests. She does not believe what she is saying, they insist; she only uses religion to make herself look good, particularly in relation to her Native American captors. At this point, I ask the students to engage in a thought experiment: imagine, for a moment, that there is no outside to religion. Rowlandson, I suggest, inhabits Puritanism as a kind of ether, outside of which she cannot conceive of existing in any coherent way. Certainly she can and does use the resources offered to her by Puritanism as a means to help herself live, but there is no alternative to Puritanism for her, only life lived through it. For students who understand religion as a choice, and a choice from which one may just as well demur altogether as not, this thought experiment has something of the fantastic about it. The strangeness of such an all-encompassing religious faith—a faith that requires little faith because it is simply a fact of life, a faith that is a great faith because it determines everything—is worth pausing over.

The essays in this special issue partake in an effort to use religion as a means of making strange key premises, narratives, and methodologies in the field of early American literary studies. They marshal the force of religion as a category-disturbing category to reexamine fixed lines of scholarship in the field. In the introduction to the issue, Jordan Alexander Stein and Justine S. Murison stress the need to understand the methodological force of a focus on religion with respect to the field of early American literary studies; specifically, they argue that a focus on religion will enable new framings and new avenues of thought for the field as a whole. As such, Stein and Murison do not view religion as a subset of early American literary studies (as a content category), but as a historically determined framework that may, or may not, shift the ground of the field altogether when we look closely at it.
Why should religion have this tectonic force attached to it? Why is religion so potentially unsettling or paradigm-shifting for scholars working in early American studies? I would argue that the answer lies in the relation between religion and global geopolitics. Because we live in a world shaped by a Westphalian imaginary, we conceive of a globe mapped in terms of the geopolitical category of the sovereign nation state; most any contemporary map of the world will demonstrate as much—Brazil is yellow, South Africa green, Malaysia orange—the entirety of the globe is carved into discrete, color-coded nations. The Treaty of Westphalia, signed in 1648 between the warring crowned heads of Europe, is normatively taken as the origin point of this geopolitical order, one in which nation states agree to sustain a balance of power based on a principle of independent territorial sovereignty. This Westphalian order is now cited in the language of international politics as the guiding principle of state sovereignty that underwrites, for instance, United Nations policies of noninterventionism and multilateralism. However, I use the term Westphalian imaginary here to point to the extent to which this geopolitics is an epistemic fiction—a story of global import that catches at some, but by no means all, of what occurs on the grounds of the geopolitical. Significantly, moreover, the actual Treaty of Westphalia included another important shift in world politics that tends to disappear from current references to the Westphalian order—namely, the eradication of religion as a suprastate authority. From 1648 forward, the signatory states of the treaty were able to institute religions of their choice, without such an act being considered a declaration of war against the Catholic Church. In effect, then, the Treaty of Westphalia sought to replace an earlier map of the world on which religion, rather than the sovereign state, served as the organizing principle for grasping the globe in its entirety.

That earlier map—one in which the continents of the world are pigmented according to a religious territoriality rather than a state territoriality—reappeared suddenly before our eyes on September 11, 2001. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were warlike acts by individuals who did not have the imprimatur of any state upon them—by nonstate actors, as the idiom has it. But the attackers did present themselves as religious actors; their acts of war were framed in relation to a geopolitics of religion, not one of interstate nationalism. The incommensurability of a geopolitics of religion—a seemingly anachronistic geopolitics
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more familiar to the era of the crusades than to the contemporary world—and that of secular nationalism emerged with some starkness, then, as we struggled to make sense of the searing images of destruction from September 11. The Bush administration responded to the attacks by declaring a “war on terror”—that is, by defining nonstate actors as terrorists or noncitizens/subjects without basic human rights; the geopolitics of religion were suppressed within this state-centered formulation, albeit not entirely erased. Western xenophobia and racism encouraged the collapse of the Bush language of terrorism with that of a geopolitics of religion, enabling a racist vernacular equation to emerge that identified “Muslim” with “terrorist”—an equation that in turn, implicitly helped to authorize the U.S. invasion of Iraq qua an Arab-Muslim nation, despite the known absence of weapons of mass destruction therein. But another, significant response to September 11 has been the return of religion to the attention of the academic world, and the reappearance of religion in the vocabulary of progressive left thinkers. To a large extent, then, the resurgence of scholarly work on religion—attested to in an explosion of interest from Charles Taylor’s critique of secularism to Jürgen Habermas’s recent turn to the study of religion—can be dated to September 11 and to the pressing need made apparent in that event to understand a different map of the world—a map that has been and continues to have meaning in ways that the academy had largely chosen to ignore. What September 11 brought to our attention, then, is the fact that the geopolitics of religion did not disappear in 1648, nor in 1776, nor in 1789, nor have they disappeared today.

How useful is it, however, to view religion in relation to geopolitics, when we turn from scenes of September 11 to the field of early American literary studies? I would propose a twofold utility: first, such an optic disturbs the deeply entrenched national (U.S., exceptionalist) framing of the field of early American literature. Second, it displaces a secular-religious binary that tends to dominate and more than occasionally exhaust and paralyze academic treatments of religion and early American culture. In both of these two fashions—which I examine at greater length below—it is clear that bringing into focus a geopolitics of religion significantly remaps cosmographies that have organized the production of knowledge in fields of cultural study. In what follows, I consider the productively unsettling work of the scholars in this issue in relation to a geopolitics of religion.

The national-exceptionalist nature of early work in the field of Ameri-
can studies—including, perhaps even archetypically, the work of Perry Miller—has been a topic of ongoing excoriation for at least the past decade and, as such, needs little rehearsal. What is less evident, however, is the extent to which the U.S. nation functions as an implicit framework that delimits the field of early American literary studies. Because the nation framework organizes the structure of the discipline, it can be difficult to see the ways in which nationalism determines how areas of study are carved out for our attention, notwithstanding current critical interest in transatlantic and hemispheric configurations of the field. For instance, in her article on transatlantic evangelical periodicals, Jennifer Snead examines the intriguing transatlantic production and circulation of religious journals in the mid-eighteenth century. Snead uses an analysis of these materials to effectively challenge key tenets of public sphere theory—specifically, she argues that the religious discourse in these periodicals is generative of a public sphere that is not focused on rational, critical debate nor grounded in a narrative of secularization. Snead’s essay thus unsettles the equation of the public sphere with the rational and the secular, but we might add the geopolitics of nationalism to the list of entrenched presuppositions that are in need of reconsideration in light of the transatlantic materials Snead brings to our attention. In effect, Snead is tracing a public sphere that maps onto a geopolitics of religion—a public sphere shaped by supranational concerns with the doctrines of Whitefield and Wesley rather than those of U.S. republicans and Federalists. It is worth noting that the primary theoretical model of the public sphere that Snead turns to—that of Michael Warner—is one that is resolutely national. Warner’s work on the public sphere in the early national period, as Snead points out, subscribes to a secularization narrative which holds that an earlier set of religious identities is displaced by secular formations during the late eighteenth century. However, the use of Warner’s model, which emphasizes rationality and impersonality, has perhaps directed Snead away from a sizeable body of work on the public sphere and religion, transatlantic religion, and feminist critiques of the rational-impersonal model of the public sphere. In other words, an implicit geopolitics of nationalism may augur for the canonicity of the work of someone like Warner, but the implicit nation-based nature of such work tends to eclipse another set of possibilities—those toward which Snead is moving us—that would examine the public sphere in relation to a geopolitics of religion.
Stephanie Kirk and Sarah Rivett’s article, in turn, foregrounds a geopolitics of religion to productive effect in order to explore what one might call Creole gender. Using a comparative approach, Kirk and Rivett examine the experiences of women in New Spain and New England, but the central analytical work of the essay is facilitated less by the comparison between England and Spain than that between Puritanism and Catholicism. During the period that Kirk and Rivett examine, the geopolitics of empire and those of religion were linked in important ways, particularly with respect to England and Spain. But the turn to religion rather than the state as a vector of analysis has the effect of unsettling gender and opening the way for understanding Creole gender in new terms. The gendered division between public and private realms, often addressed as an entirely secular artifact, is here explicated in relation to questions concerning social formation and access to divine voice along gendered lines: as Kirk and Rivett demonstrate, theological matters were instrumental in opening and closing avenues through which women assumed political and literary authority. On the grounds of the geopolitical, Kirk and Rivett suggest the importance of religion for understanding how, at a very basic level, the New World was inhabited and, in turn, structured gendered lives.

A geopolitics of religion, then, offers a different means of structuring the field imaginary than does that of nationalism. Further, I would argue that religion construed in geopolitical terms offers additional critical insight into a key narrative that is addressed by every scholar in this collection, namely the narrative of secularization. Michael Kaufmann provides a particularly surefooted account of the narrative of secularization and recent critical response to it. The secular narrative proposes the “supersessionary” triumph of the secular-rational over a degraded religious-primitive-enchantment, but, Kaufmann points out, a postmodern transvaluation of values has drained this triumph of its glory as well as its explanatory force. In this useful genealogy of academic engagement with the question of religion, Kaufmann pairs postmodern intellectual impulses with the work of “post-secular” scholars in the field of early American studies. The key trope of this marriage is the deconstruction of binaries: just as postmodern thought wields deconstruction as a signature move, so does the post-secular scholar attain his or her membership in the set by deconstructing the binary divide between the secular and the religious. Kaufmann thus defines a new scholarly methodology—the post-secular—and
thereby identifies a mode of analysis that unsettles the secularization narrative by disrupting the religious-secular temporal divide imposed by such a narrative. Wendy Raphael Roberts similarly takes aim at the secularization narrative in her discussion of aurality and eighteenth-century poetry: deconstructing the temporal narrative of secularization, Roberts aims, as well, to deconstruct a visual/aural divide in our understanding of the early American sensorium as well as a related novel/poetry divide in the field of early American literary studies. In relation to Kaufmann’s account of the methodology of a post-secular analytics, Roberts thus demonstrates the extent to which the secularization narrative subtends a series of other substantive framings that inform the field (the priority of print, visuality, and prose over, respectively, the spoken word, aurality, and poetry).

Without diminishing the significant nature of the work that both Kaufmann and Roberts delineate and exemplify, I would suggest that a focus on religion as a geopolitics might augment such an analytics, and offer, in particular, a way to move beyond some of the familiar inertia that can settle in the wake of deconstructive analysis. Whereas the distinction between the religious and the secular is binary in nature, the distinction I have drawn between a Westphalian imaginary and a geopolitics of religion is not; rather, the Westphalian map and the religious map can conceivably overlay one another, coinciding at some points and diverging at others and yet, from another perspective, the two maps are cosmographies—that is, they each represent an effort to grasp the world as a totality—and as such, are radically incompatible: one cannot simultaneously subscribe to both understandings of the world. To dilate a little, I would say that the geopolitics of religion and sovereign nationalism do not stand in a relation of opposition, but one of mutual denial and displacement—thinking the one displaces the other and reorients an understanding of space itself; as such, each is a cosmography of its own. In related terms, religion as a cosmography implies an understanding of history and as such, suggests the way in which religion (and the secular) are not simply moments to be identified within a historical narrative, but rather modes of understanding the world that determine what constitutes history itself.

The term *cosmography* is central to Jared Hickman’s account of race and religion that appears in this volume, and Hickman gives a superb account of the meaning and stakes of this term for the field of early American studies. Specifically, Hickman argues that the moment of New World en-
counter in 1492 entails reconceiving the world as a unified field of knowledge and that the terms in which that unification is thought can only be a cosmography, that is, knowledge of the world as a unified cosmos can only be an epistemology organized in relation to an account of transcendent value—an epistemology shot through with religion. In effect, then, Hickman argues that Enlightenment universalism is a religion, not a form of secular knowledge: European empiricism is a cosmography, and, as Hickman argues at length, it is one that deploys race and racialization as a central article of faith. The effect of the New World encounter on the cosmography of Europe was, “the (re)routing of the theological through the anthropological, indeed, the ethnological.” Or, as I read Hickman to argue, a European, Christian cosmography invented race, and then disappeared into it, emerging as secular universalism with racism at its core.

It is worth noting that this is a very different claim regarding the limitations of the secularization narrative than those advanced by other scholars in this volume. Hickman is not arguing that secularization is overdrawn or that it obscures religion from view; rather, he is arguing that secularism in its European universalist form is, at base, religious in nature. And indeed, the argument Hickman subsequently advances regarding racialization as a form of ontotheology is very close to that set forth by the postcolonial theorist Sylvia Wynter, whose body of work has consistently revealed the epistemic foreclosures of Western Enlightenment, particularly with regard to the space of the Caribbean, and the figure of the woman of color (“Beyond Miranda's Meanings,” “1492”). What Hickman's account of 1492 opens up, in particular, is the possibility—indeed, the necessity—of considering the alternative cosmographies generated by the New World encounter and its aftermath, whether Nahua or Afro-diasporic. Hickman thus displaces the secular-religious binary with a field of cosmographies, and, as such, opens the space for serious attention to be paid to these cosmographies as alternative modes of inhabiting the world.

Geopolitics concerns issues of habitation: it concerns the way in which territory is occupied by a political community—the way in which, for instance, Mary Rowlandson and other Puritans inhabited Lancaster, Massachusetts, in 1675. The Westphalian imaginary tends to suppose that the transcendent organizing force of the community and of territorial occupation is the state. Political theorists argue that we are now moving rapidly into a post-Westphalian world—one in which the sovereign authority of
the nation state has been “unbundled,” to use the words of Saskia Sassen (3), and is increasingly parceled out elsewhere, such as into the hands of global capital or international political bodies. Perhaps that unbundling has helped to reveal that one enduring mode of inhabiting the earth and forming communities is in relation to the transcendent organizing force of religion. Certainly at the moment of the New World encounter—and from that moment forward—what it meant to inhabit the earth began to change, and modes of territorial habitation were the subject of extreme contestation and innovation. As the essays in this volume illustrate, a focus on religion brings into view the extremity of the question (one fraught with possibility) of how one inhabits this new earth and inhabits the earth anew.

NOTES

1. Despite the contemporary currency of the term Westphalian order for describing a doctrine of state sovereignty and nonintervention across state borders, historians have argued that the actual Peace of Westphalia was not as decisive for the implementation of policies of toleration and nonintervention as it has subsequently been credited with. For a historicist critique of Westphalian sovereignty, see Osiander; Keene.

2. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the very real limitations of the Westphalian imaginary; however, the (controversial) political theorist Carl Schmitt proposed that the territories of the New World were instrumental in securing the Peace of Westphalia insofar as they offered an unregulated space for the growth of European empire that counterbalanced the newly regulated territory of Europe. Schmitt writes, “The appearance of vast free spaces and the land-appropriation of a new world made possible a new European international law . . . [which] arose solely from the emergence of a new spatial order—a balance of territorial states on the European continent in relation to the maritime British Empire and against the background of vast free spaces” (144). Schmitt thus argues that the balance-of-powers model of state sovereignty in Europe was premised on the ongoing pursuit of territorial empire (often allied with religion) in the space of the colonies. Although there is much to argue with in Schmitt’s account, his work is particularly useful in pointing out the relation between Westphalian notions of state sovereignty and an ongoing religious-imperial geopolitical order that has particular salience for the history of the Americas.

3. David Zaret, for instance, argues that “[n]ot simply protestantism but its lay initiative created the first body of public opinion, the public sphere of religion, whose participants saw it in terms of ‘critical reflections of a public competent to form its own judgments’” (223). On the transatlantic circulation of religious debates and
letters, see, for instance, Field; Round; and Stevens. On feminist theories of the public sphere that address both issues of rational impersonality and the public/private divide, see Dillon; Fraser; and Young.

4. While the Ibero-Anglo comparison maps the geopolitics of empire and those of religion rather neatly on top of one another, it is worth noting that the Dutch-Anglo comparison, at a similar point in time, would reveal a different dynamic—that is, the collapse of any notion of a unified Protestant empire and thus an imperative to begin mapping the world in newly national, rather than religious, terms. For further discussion, see Pincus.

WORKS CITED


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