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Religion Around Emily Dickinson, by W. Clark Gilpin (review)

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W. Clark Gilpin. "Religion Around Emily Dickinson" (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014). Pp. 201. Notes, Bibliography, index. Cloth, \$34.95; Paper, \$29.64.

This is the second volume in an ambitious series from Pennsylvania State University Press entitled *Religion Around*. The series applies the New Historicism to literary and cultural figures of various times, places, and genres. The first effort by series editor Peter Iver Kaufman explored religious ideas, writers, and debates revolving around Shakespeare. Future proposed additions to the series may focus on various cultural figures such as Dante, Edward Gibbon, and Walter Scott or Langston Hughes, Billie Holliday, Allen Ginsberg, and Sting. The series aspires to shed light on the religious ideas that shaped the selected iconic life and creative work while also considering ways that individual subjects contributed to and resisted, perhaps in previously unrecognized ways, the religious movements and debates swirling around them. The works carve out a new genre, resisting the forms of more traditional biographies, religious histories, literary histories, and literary criticisms at the same time they mine those secondary sources to analyze "religion around."

Gilpin's long and productive career has been firmly situated in the religious history of Christianity in the United States, with special focus on religious literature. His contribution to this series tackles three subjects that most Americans today, even the literate and the scholarly, often find dense and difficult to access--theology, poetry, and, specifically, the life and work of the poet Emily Dickinson. Gilpin traces the relationship between these subjects by inviting the reader into his personal intellectual exploration of the religious milieu in which Dickinson lived and worked and her use of religious themes and metaphors in her poems as well as in her letters. Dickinson's life and works span the middle decades of the nineteenth century, a period of social, economic, political, religious, and cultural transformation in her native New England and beyond. Her most prolific years of writing poetry coincided with the traumatic years of the Civil War. According to Gilpin, Dickinson was by no means a mere product of her time and place, however. She resisted the ambient Protestant culture as often as she mirrored it; she was an incisive cultural critic.

Gilpin situates Dickinson's religious motifs and criticisms within this broader context of religious, intellectual, and cultural history. His primary sources reach back to the Puritan Jonathan Edwards in colonial New England but focus on nineteenth-century Protestant evangelicals such as the Beechers, Horace Bushnell, and Phoebe Palmer, the Romantic writers Emerson and Thoreau, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, the novelists Susan Warner and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and many others. Dickinson and her family subscribed to many periodicals of the time, listened to the preachers and lecturers who came through her hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts, sang the hymns, read the King James Bible, and engaged in political debate. Gilpin cannot identify exact connections between Dickinson and other writers beyond her correspondence with mentor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the noted Unitarian clergyman, author, abolitionist, and women's rights advocate. Instead, within that broader context, Gilpin identifies a long-standing imaginary conversation among American religious and intellectual thinkers about the relationships between the interior self and soul, the exterior world of nature and society, and the transcendent realm of God, immortality, and eternity.

Religion around the poet Emily Dickinson, then, is not just doctrines or beliefs, practices or affiliation. Indeed, Dickinson never joined her family's church and rarely attended in adulthood. Religion around her is, however, metaphors and tropes, ideas and ideals, ways of thinking, debates or dialogues, correspondence, literary and other artful expression and experience. In a chapter entitled "Society and Solitude," Gilpin situates Dickinson's legendary reclusiveness into a long religious tradition of retreat and self-examination, whether in the closet or the woods, in prayer or in writing. This tradition helps explain Dickinson's choice for solitude, though her place of withdrawal was the domestic and gendered space of

house and garden and her writing a very distinctive style of poetry. The chapter, “Domesticity and the Divine,” explores ways that Dickinson and her contemporaries constructed the home as a religious sphere. In the chapter, “An Intimate Absence,” Gilpin describes the circumstances of nineteenth-century mourning rituals and the nation in deep mourning during and after the Civil War, comparing them to the religious language of mourning over the distance between parted and departed friends and loved ones that infuses Dickinson’s letters and poetry. Likewise, Dickinson’s preoccupation with marking time— between past, present, and future—draws on metaphors of days and seasons just as religious calendars and theology draw on events such as birth, death, and resurrection to demarcate lives and biblical narratives. Dickinson’s poetry probes the pain and mystery of death and the efforts of the living to part the veil that separates them from the dead while largely avoiding explicit mention of the Civil War and spiritualism, cultural contexts that surely informed her poetic imagination.

Though Gilpin situates himself in a post-modernist critical stance that values pluralism over consensus, he might have considered at greater length the social and cultural consequences of New England Protestantism and literary culture on a white, middle-class, educated, intellectually vibrant, and unmarried woman. As Gilpin notes, Dickinson confined herself to a domestic sphere dictated by that culture. He also describes how other women writers and the evangelist Phoebe Palmer employed the parlor as a literary forum and a religious pulpit. But Dickinson largely rejected even these modestly public female spaces. She also resisted much of the traditional responsibility of that domestic sphere. Many of her contemporaries—women writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lydia Maria Childs—wrote while saddled with husbands and children; they published in part to support those families. Gilpin might have probed more deeply the resonant religious rhetoric about woman’s place that Dickinson both accepts and resists in her life, her correspondence, and her poems. Dickinson did leave poems and letters that shed light on love, marriage, and women’s place even as she retreated more deeply into her family’s domestic sphere, remained unmarried, rejected publication, and, for the last decades of her adult life, became less productive as a writer. Similarly, Gilpin’s look at religion around Dickinson does not stray far from New England Protestantism, yet even that strong tradition was challenged by growing diversity during the poet’s lifetime. Instead, Gilpin mirrors what he calls Dickinson’s “self-aware provincialism.” Finally, more attention to Dickinson’s justification for her vocation, to her identity as a poet, might also illuminate the religion in and around her.

In sum, Gilpin does an excellent job of organizing the most important religious traditions and trends to provide a religious context for understanding the poet’s critical, skeptical, singular eye on religion. Yet, it is not an exhaustive portrait of religion in her time or in her writing. Instead, it is the senior scholar’s “roundabout” and intriguing exploration of the two with selected instances of their intersection.

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