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Tracy Fessenden. *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2007. 349 pp.

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The dichotomy between religion and secularism has recently come to occupy a dominant place in public and academic spheres in corners of the world where heated discussions flourish over the (in)appropriateness of visible religious manifestations outside strictly religious contexts. If Turkey is a country that experiences such discussions in vivid forms, the United States is equally familiar with tension between religious and secular interpretations of a state's founding ethos. In fact, it is crucially important to understand accurately the U.S. chapter in the world's history of religious and cultural systems, for it is frequently used as a touchstone by both camps in the contest between religious and secularist ethics: each side attributes almost a normative value to American practice and seeks therein the justification for its arguments. Tracy Fessenden's book, aimed at a specialised audience, offers an alternative, critical approach to the mainstream narrative of American religious and literary history. Revisiting a number of historical convictions that have long prevailed within the intellectual domains of American religiousness and secularity, hers is an important contribution to a more subtle and variegated knowledge of the role of religion in American culture.

Fessenden, who is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Women's and Gender Studies at Arizona State University, dwells on "the interplay of different religions and different secularisms in American literary history" in hopes of bringing "these differences to a discussion from which a simplified narrative of secularization-as-progress has erased them, obscuring a great deal else besides" (12). According to the author, from the colonial period onwards it has been the Protestant definition of religion and secularism that has constituted the default meaning of (good) religion, progress, and tolerance in American political, and cultural discourse. Over the course of time such discourse has acquired a normative status and skilfully excluded non-Protestant, non-Christian, and non-white elements by folding them into "a new, inclusively American sensibility" (9). The significance of Fessenden's book, of course, does

not lie in this hardly new argument. The author's real contribution to American religious and literary history owes much to her alternative readings of notable texts of the American literary canon. In the hands of the author a wide range of sources, including sermons, children's books, and some very popular as well as classic novels of American literature undergo a critical discourse analysis that unveils the complicated tenets of religion and secularity embedded in them.

Fessenden's content analyses of Cotton Mather's sermons, the New England Primer, the nineteenth-century polemics later called the "Bible Wars," and the classical works of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and F. Scott Fitzgerald help her pin down the interaction between different religions and different secularisms that in the end served further to enhance the Protestant neutrality of the American identity. *Culture and Redemption* is noteworthy for the way in which it comprehensively demonstrates how "other" varieties of faith, nationality, gender, and sexuality have been shoehorned into the secularised Protestant culture, thus overwhelming genuine voices of plurality in the American homeland. In her Conclusion, in which she quotes appositely from Amy Kaplan, Fessenden asserts that in the post-September 11 world, the US—clinging to received discursive logic—has pursued a foreign policy aimed at neutralizing unacceptable versions of non-Western religions, Islam in particular. In other words, the project of neutralising or eliminating varieties of the religiously different, as first practiced by New England Puritanism, is far from over.

While explaining her reasons for bringing forth such a volume, the author stresses that religion has been obscured in discussions of American literary contexts, if not completely erased from them. A change in the mainstream secular approach toward those contexts would result in the recognition and reconstitution of religion in American cultural and literary history. The author expresses the wish that such a revisionist approach will not be limited to her own work, but that the next generation of scholars will follow a similar path "forward and backward from the middle decades of the twentieth century" (12) where she stops her inquiry. At this point she communicates her scholarly apprehension that, in the absence of such intellectual endeavour, the topic of religion might disappear wholly from the American critical perspective. She views the existence of the "increasingly public discourse of religion" necessary to "clear the way for more nuanced assessments of the contradictions and ideological limitations of the secularization narrative" (217).

Nevertheless, the ongoing heated debates about the American empire, to which Fessenden draws our attention in her conclusion, pose a threat to the fragile balance that she seeks between the religious and secular in the US politics, culture, literature, and society. The increasing symbolic and discursive power of religion not just in the US but across the entire world has coincided with the unveiling of "this new American imperialism" (216) and subsequently attached an inevitable religious dimension to the domestic and foreign perceptions of the US. It should not, therefore, be surprising to see that students of international relations, political science, history, and literature globally posit religion as an essential explicative element in their attempts to understand the American existence. And such emphasis on religion tends to render the secular tone of literary undertakings in and on the US dismissible.