

tradition and to that end succeeds with a high level of scrutiny, lending it considerable weight as a theological polemic as well as a work of historical investigation.

Martin Nesvig
University of Miami

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There Before Us: Religion, Literature, and Culture from Emerson to Wendell Berry. Edited by **Roger Lundin**. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007. xxii + 250 pp. \$18.00 paper.

The essays comprising *There Before Us* leave one wondering how the discipline of literary studies, not to mention the discipline of history, so long denied the deep importance of religion in American life and literature. This fascinating collection contests the clichéd narrative of nineteenth-century American secularization, which, by portraying religion as an anachronistic form of belief that becomes less and less relevant as modernity progresses, has discouraged academic attention to the persistence of religious ideas and concerns. *There Before Us* does not, to be clear, contend that orthodox forms of religion persist unchanged in modern American literature and culture. As Andrew Delbanco explains in the afterword, this is a book about “post-religious writing,” a literature reflecting the “pursuit of religious experience” in a culture that no longer contains “an authoritative doctrine to explain when, or if, the sought has been found” (241–242). With the exception of Katherine Clay Bassard’s essay on the poetry of Francis E. W. Harper, the contributors to this volume focus on the continued relevance of religion in the work of authors who have abandoned Christian certainties.

The subjects of this study share an interest in re-establishing a sense of the sacred in the wake of religious doubt. Barbara Packer describes how Ralph Waldo Emerson, along with Henry David Thoreau and other mid-century seekers, experienced antislavery reform as sacred community untainted by Christian practices that no longer accorded with their own experiences. John Gatta demonstrates that Thoreau’s understanding of the sacred was not straightforward “romantic wilderness worship,” but rather an awareness that, using the tools of higher criticism and developmental science, nature could be read as a sacred text (32). Although he located the divine in “the interactive harmony between nature and the human imagination” rather than in the Bible, Thoreau retained a sense of the need to carefully interpret divine revelation (47). Roger Lundin argues that, rather than rejecting her

religious heritage, Emily Dickinson re-appropriated religious language and concepts in order to describe a form of belief that could encompass doubt. Lundin describes how Dickinson founded belief on the eschatological hope that what the “heart desires will some day come to pass,” rather than on knowledge of facts or assent to doctrine (89). Harold Bush’s essay describes the relationship of freethinkers including Mark Twain and Robert Ingersoll to the development of a northern civil religion that envisioned the nation as a sacred entity. Gail McDonald’s strained attempt to connect modernist poets to the Social Gospel provides a final instance of the relocation of the sacred. According to McDonald, the modernist project of Ezra Pound, H. D., and T. S. Eliot to “make God (or the gods) new is an effort to retain the category of divinity in human thought, to keep the sacred alive and meaningful, to posit a world not utterly divorced from heaven” (214).

Other essays suggest that religious questions and categories persist despite the loss of religious certainty and the decline of biblical authority. Michael Colacurcio’s reading of Herman Melville’s short stories shows that, despite his lack of faith in a benevolent and omnipotent God, Melville continued to grapple with the problem of evil. While, according to Colacurcio’s account, Melville might have accepted the Marxist belief that only the opiate of religion prevented the oppressed from rising up against human injustice, he never substituted a political concern with justice for his fundamentally religious concern with evil. Melville chose to leave unoccupied the space once filled by doctrinal answers to fundamentally theological questions. In his study of William and Henry James, M. D. Walhout suggests that liberal society needs to define its own version of sainthood in order to embody a comprehensive liberal doctrine of the good. He finds such a figure to be implicit in William James’s evaluation of the worth of sainthood according to its support of the liberal virtues of freedom and equality. Walhout identifies Milly Theale of Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) as one of the liberal saints who, he writes, remind “us of the moral limits of society even as they point beyond them” (193).

There Before Us fails to live up to the promise of its expansive subtitle. Despite Lawrence Buell’s quick mention of Wendell Berry, this is a book about the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and, despite Bassard’s essay, the volume as a whole takes no interest in those variants of “religion, literature, and culture” that involve traditional religious belief. This clarification should not be confused with complaint, however, since this book’s value stems from its focus on a particular, agnostic strain of American literary culture. By illuminating the creative efforts of men and women who combined religious doubt with an abiding fascination with the sacred and with a continued interest in fundamentally religious questions, these essays reveal much about the fortunes of religion in a de-Christianized

American literary culture. *There Before Us* should convince both historians and literary scholars of the need to look beyond the notion of secularization to recognize the continued relevance of the religious even after the abandonment of explicitly Christian belief.

Molly Oshatz

Florida State University

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Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics. By **Stephen J. Grabill**. Emory University Studies in Law and Religion. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006. x + 275 pp. \$38.00 paper.

Ignored, derided, or simply missing from many works in Reformed theological ethics during the twentieth century, the theme of natural law is currently enjoying a revival. Whether one is thinking of more conservative writers like Richard J. Mouw, or of liberals like David Little, the idea that there are some moral values that human beings simply cannot fail to acknowledge plays a critical, if controversial, role among authors who self-identify as Calvinists. Stephen J. Grabill proposes to contribute to this revival. In particular, the point of this very ambitious work involves a demonstration of the central place of natural law in historic Reformed theology. Not only Calvin, but Peter Martyr, Althusius, and Francis Turretin make good use of this theme. Further, as Grabill has it, these and other authors developed a specifically Reformed alternative to Thomistic natural law theory. In making these points, Grabill hopes to show, first, that Barth and other twentieth-century writers who rejected the notion of natural law were less than faithful to Reformed tradition; and second, that the association of natural law with Roman Catholicism cited by Barth and those following him involved a failure of understanding; and finally, that advocates of a revival of natural-law thinking in Reformed theological ethics may draw from a number of writers other than Calvin in developing their positions.

Grabill develops each of these points in great detail. The bibliographic work exhibited in the endnotes is impressive, particularly with respect to Dutch material. And it is the Dutch strand of Reformed tradition with which Grabill seems most comfortable, and about which he is best informed. In keeping with this emphasis, Grabill's focus on the importance of scholastic thinkers like Turretin makes sense. As he has it, the Barthian rejection of Reformed scholasticism in favor of a return to Luther and Calvin provides a partial explanation for the eclipse of natural law in the twentieth century.