REVIEWS

Rhetorics of Religion in American Fiction: Faith, Fundamentalism, and Fanaticism in the Age of Terror **by Liliana M. Naydan. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2016. 234 pp. $85.00 Hardcover.**

In her *Rhetorics of Religion in American Fiction,* Liliana M. Naydan considers a religiously diverse cast of contemporary novelists writing in the decade or so following the 9/11 terror attacks. Including Mohsin Hamid, Laila Halaby, Philip Roth, Don DeLillo, John Updike, and Barbara Kingsolver, this group represents Islam, Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Pantheism, with occasional nods to other religions. Selected thanks to their notable record of religion-inspired fiction prior to the attacks, these authors went on to create "a memorial to 9/11 that underscores the value of compromise, understanding, and imagination of the sort that fiction has the unique capacity to stimulate and propagate" (p. 2). Offering her study in addition to earlier work including Kristiaan Versluy's (2009) *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* and Martin Randall's (2014) *9/11 and the Literature of Terror*, Naydan examines religion as a "rhetorical phenomenon in fiction," and fiction as "written for an audience and with a purpose" (p. 14).

As the book's subtitle suggests, the discourse around faith in the early 21st century became abruptly and justifiably fixated on *fundamentalism* and *fanaticism*. In this context, traditional, broad-based treatments of religious or artistic rhetoric—such as Kenneth Burke's (1970) *The Rhetoric of Religion* and Wayne Booth's (1983) *The Rhetoric of Fiction*—seemed suddenly inadequate for the analytical tasks at hand. Thus, Naydan seeks to provide a *kairotic* treatment of religious rhetoric situated in the literature of a very particular place and time.

Her analysis hinges on the identification and interrogation of various "dialogic impasses" forged by the contradictions inherent to American life. The first of these is that between religious belief and secularism, since America is widely imagined both as a "Christian nation" and as a beacon of Enlightenment rationality. These dueling perspectives engender dueling logics and languages to the degree that compromise and consensus often fall outside the bounds of discursive possibility. The breadth of this impasse is demonstrated in the strange agreement expressed by Christian and Islamic fundamentalists in the days following the attacks—al Qaeda claimed to have acted in the name of God, and Jerry Falwell claimed that God had let them do it. Most Americans reacted dismissively to both claims, struggling instead to identify reasonable, if unsophisticated, explanations.

The second notable impasse thus concerns the tension between fundamentalisms and non-fundamentalisms. In some—but not all—ways this second impasse is actually a subset of the first. Certainly religious fundamentalisms of whatever variety are immune to secular reason and prone to motivate fanatical belief and behavior. But Naydan observes that fundamentalisms exist without religion as well as within, often discernible in ways of reading and thinking about the world. The literalist impulse that drives religious zealots to simplistic readings of holy texts may also be found in secular

thinkers who embrace simplistic readings of current events, as in the case of those who concluded, along with President Bush, that the terrorists "hate us for our freedom." She notes, too, that literalism is also prominent among "market fundamentalists," those who place unwavering faith in the invisible hand of the free market, justifying thereby the type of global intervention and exploitation that often incentivizes radicalism. Her analysis draws heavily on Sharon Crowley's (2006) work in her *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism,* a book that diagnoses the failures of discourse in an age when fundamentalisms compete with liberalism for hegemonic control. Indeed, both Naydan and Crowley understand rhetoric to be an artistic force for change in the world, and a vital intermediary in the struggle.

The 9/11 attacks inaugurated a tense discursive environment fraught with recrimination and suspicion, in which thoughtful consideration of life, death, faith, and international diplomacy became extraordinarily complex. Yet Naydan notes that if the ubiquitous pundit class failed to appreciate the nuances of the moment, fiction writers were better equipped to sound the depths in conscientious ways. In chapter one, for instance, she considers works by Hamid and Halaby, tracing how each author explores the problem of hybrid identity through characters that are simultaneously Arab, Muslim, and American in the days of hyper-simplified post-9/11 discourse. In chapter two, she turns to Jewish author Roth, who "valorizes art as a counterliteralist, countercapitalistic, and hence counterfundamentalist force" in his *Everyman* and *Exit Ghost* (p. 57). In chapter three, she examines a pair of works by Catholic author DeLillo, arguing that he troubles the popular perception of terroristic acts by demonstrating how fundamentalist mindsets and small, everyday terrorisms surround us even within ordinary life. In chapter four, she places William James in conversation with Updike's Protestant perspective in the latter's "Varieties of Religious Experience" and *Terrorist.* Finally, in chapter five, Naydan examines two books within Kingsolver's blended Protestant-Pantheism, suggesting that she challenges her readers to contemplate the many workaday fundamentalisms driving popular discourses such as those related to science and market economics. In each case, the argument goes, a creative writer uses his or her fictional works to interrogate complex current events, all subtly pushing their readers to adopt more a thoughtful perspective.

Naydan closes with an analysis of the National September 11 Memorial in New York City, and its imposition of a clear, uncomplicated, overtly patriotic narrative upon the attacks, as well as its pious deference to market fundamentalism. Itself representative of popular literalist readings of contemporary life, the literal Memorial is rivaled by the *literary* memorial found in the works under consideration. Though Naydan's book runs the risk of becoming a historical artifact in itself—Crowley's work, for instance, has been critiqued as a scholarly product of a very particular moment—her conclusions seem broad enough to remain applicable into the future. At minimum, she demonstrates the rhetorical potency of fictional works to deepen and humanize our understandings of religious faith in modern life. Recommended for all scholars of rhetoric, religion, and fiction, this volume is best read in tandem with the books it explores.

Eric C. Miller, Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania[1]

[1] Eric C. Miller is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses on Christian Right political activism in the United States.