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Matthew Wickman  
*Brigham Young University*

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**THE SUNSET SONG OF RELIGION,  
OR, HAVE WE EVER BEEN POST-SECULAR?**

*Matthew Wickman*

Crawford Gribben makes an important point in his article, “The Literary Cultures of the Scottish Reformation,” namely that the outsized influence of Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir, each of whom famously disparages the legacy of John Knox and tries to connect modern Scottish writing to a pre-Reformation tradition, causes us to overlook the literary qualities of Scottish Reformed writing. In the process, Gribben introduces readers to important names associated with (or opposed to) that movement—figures like Robert Lindsay, James Kirkwood, Ninian Winzet, Robert Baillie, and many others. As a secondary point, Gribben’s piece also attests to the power of compelling criticism, its capacity to shape cultural narratives—for, in addition to their other gifts, MacDiarmid and Muir were certainly compelling critics. Hence, Gribben’s critical engagement of the past necessarily compensates for the success of its own enterprise: criticism.

But more provocative to me than the persuasive point(s) Gribben makes are some questions that he provoked as I reflected on his intervention: Does the legacy of MacDiarmid and Muir primarily encourage us to overlook a *period of history*, the Reformation? Or is it, rather, an entire *mode of experience*—religious experience, particularly lived religion—that they incline us to dismiss? The latter would seem to be a more encompassing lacuna than our inattention to history, for scholars are usually trained to redress the latter. Gribben himself does so in attending to key writers and stylistic features of Scotland’s sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Indeed, we are hyper-accustomed in our present (historicist) era to retrieve historical information; as Gribben himself acknowledges, the work of scholars like Patrick Collinson, R. D. S. Jack, David Allan, and others means that no historian of the Reformation period labors alone. However, historical *information* is not quite the same thing as historical

*understanding*, for the latter results from a hermeneutical exercise that requires a degree of identification with the past, a perceived basis of commonality: a shared cultural gene through which we perceive key differences in our cultural inheritance. When we lose our ability to relate to the past—including at the level of religious *feeling*, not simply religious *ideas*—we lose our history.

But do we ever truly lose religious feeling? If we lend credence to the Durkheimian thesis that our very capacity for conceptual abstraction is rooted in our religious impulses, or if we discern with more recent anthropologists like Talal Asad that western secularism is itself deeply inscribed by its religious genealogy (in areas from politics and poetry to medicine), then no, we remain a deeply religious species.<sup>1</sup> As Durkheim in particular has it, we might sometimes be religious despite ourselves, for religion is, primordially speaking, less a creed than a cognitive reflex, a way of making meaning, *any* meaning. This is especially true of things we deem sacred, ultimate, “special.”<sup>2</sup> Only at one remove does religion begin to divide and subdivide into formal systems (Jewish, Christian, Moslem, Buddhist, Hindu; Catholic versus Protestant, Lutheran versus Calvinist, New Light versus Auld Licht, and so on). In failing to identify these general, pre-creedal reflexes toward ultimacy as religious, we misrecognize ourselves, which means we confound the past even when we open all archives, release all ghosts.

More problematic, then, than the MacDiarmid-Muir thesis obscuring an extended moment of the religious past would be the inference that *religion itself* were somehow of negligible significance in how we read and understand Scottish literature. Neither Muir nor MacDiarmid asserts as much, but one wonders—and Gribben’s essay gestures evocatively in this direction—whether the imaginative strength of the Muir-MacDiarmid thesis does not inspire something of this view. Then again, perhaps their disparagement of Knox’s legacy produces a different kind of critical reaction. Yes, it seems fair to say that many critics are less attuned to

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<sup>1</sup> See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), esp. 418-448, and Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> For the religious scholar Ann Taves, the term “special” denotes what is sacred, magical, mystical, or spiritual; see her *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), esp. 26-28.

religion than they might be. But might this extend even to those who dedicate themselves to documenting the religious past? Consider how MacDiarmid and Muir identify a cultural wellspring in the ancient Scottish world, attribute lapsarian qualities to the Reformation, and vividly denounce the emptiness of Scotland's literary inheritance; in Muir's memorable words: Walter Scott "spent most of his days in a hiatus, in a country ... [that] had, instead of a centre, a blank, an Edinburgh, in the middle of it."<sup>3</sup> Might this not inspire almost the opposite tendency in critics? That is, precisely because Muir and MacDiarmid disparage the religious past, might Scottish critics alert to religion become almost too literal in their rebuttals, citing chapter and verse in showing where Muir and MacDiarmid got it wrong? Without disregarding the importance of such—historical—specificity, what happens here to religious *experience*: encounters with the sacred, the ultimate, and the special? How do they communicate themselves in criticism? Might we misread *either* when we dismiss religion *or* when we too quickly attach it to creed and creed to history? In a way, isn't this what MacDiarmid and Muir condemned in the first place – forms of worshipful attention that accommodate the hyper-specificity of dogma, and that curtail our sense of religious possibility as a result?

I do not wish to downplay the importance of good historical scholarship. But to get at the problem Muir and MacDiarmid represent today in Scottish literary criticism, it may take more than enumerating the literary qualities (and acolytes) of the Scottish Reformation. Gribben's article is, to be sure, an important step. But a more searching analysis of the problems his article raises may require us to engage a little more liberally the enduring *feeling* for religion in Scottish writing. In other words, we need to inquire not only into the material aspects of the Scottish religious past, but also into the elusive presence of something like a postsecular impulse in Scottish literature.

By invoking the postsecular, I direct us down a particular avenue of the so-called "religious turn" in criticism over the past couple of decades. The broader religious turn emerged with the renewed interest in theology by French phenomenologists during the 1970s and '80s. Key figures here included Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida, and others. Much of this work was predicated on a careful rereading of the German phenomenological

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<sup>3</sup> Muir, *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (New York: Robert Speller, 1938), 11-12.

tradition rooted in the philosophy of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger. Asking pointed questions about what it means to perceive objects, interpret scripture, pray, and experience the sacred, the theological turn finds meaningful inheritors today in, for example, the “anatheism” (or exploration of dynamic religious origins) of Richard Kearney and thoughtful reflection on the spiritual senses by Kevin Hart.<sup>4</sup>

The postsecular is something a little different. At least in the United States, the term mostly came to the fore after September 11, 2001, and designates less a specified body of work than a general affect, a structure of feeling.<sup>5</sup> The seminal text here is Charles Taylor’s massive historical tome (to some eyes, the loose, baggy monster), *A Secular Age*. Taylor takes aim at the long-dominant secularization thesis, the presumption that during the nineteenth century, especially, traditional beliefs in God evaporated under the hot sun of evolutionary science and Marxian critique. This is not only overly simplistic, Taylor argues, it is manifestly untrue. What we find, rather, is “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged ... to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”<sup>6</sup> Today, no belief goes “unchallenged,” whether theistic, atheistic, or agnostic; or, as Taylor says elsewhere, in “a pluralist world ... many forms of belief and unbelief jostle, and hence fragilize each other” (Taylor, 531). No viewpoint seems secure, which means many seem possible.

Building on this sense of possibility, Lori Branch argues that the postsecular is about a particular kind of openness, whether to the radical otherness of God, the proximal otherness of strangers, the obligations and affordances of communities, or simply the willingness to entertain big questions. These are the kinds of question, she asserts, to which historicism alone is inadequate:

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<sup>4</sup> While Kearney and Hart have since published lengthier meditations on these issues, shorter versions of them may be found in *Material Spirit: Religion and Literature Intranscendent*, eds. Gregory C. Stallings, Manuel Asensi, and Carl Good (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014). Kearney’s chapter is titled “Eucharistic Imaginings in Proust and Woolf” (pp. 11-34) and Hart’s ““For the Life Was Manifested”” (pp. 73-93).

<sup>5</sup> The term gained wider critical currency from Jurgen Habermas’s 2007 lecture “Notes on Post-Secular Society,” English translation in *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25.4 (Fall 2008): 17-29. On postsecularity as a structure of feeling, see Mark Eaton’s forthcoming book, *Religion and American Literature since 1950* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 3.

Global politics since 9/11 have for some only intensified strategies for avoiding questions that seem “big” or religious—where do I come from? what happens to me when I die? what does it mean to live well or beautifully? what is love?—as though entertaining the questions texts pose as anything other than objects of historical inquiry would be either to return us to the (naïve or bad-faith) orthodoxies of the New Critics, or to make us violent fundamentalists.<sup>7</sup>

To pose these questions seriously—to recognize that historicism alone provides a paucity of explanations for what it means to exist, to be, to *mean*—is to draw on the traditions that have asked such questions most thoughtfully. And this means returning to religion—better said, to something like religious feeling—and exploring what such affects as faith and hope, reverence and awe might mean in a world that increasingly merges religion and secularity, and in which pluralism describes the complexity of competing belief systems *within* individuals, the fragile status of their own life credos.

All this has me thinking again about *Sunset Song*, the first novel in Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s classic trilogy, *A Scots Quair*. Gibbon was a contemporary of MacDiarmid’s and Muir’s and, like them, he was none too enthusiastic about the legacy of the Scottish Reformation. *Sunset Song* lends expression to that distaste in various ways, among them the presence of a lecherous minister and the brutishness of a supposedly God-fearing father who drives his wife to suicide, entertains incestuous thoughts toward his daughter, and nearly beats his son to death over the son’s jocular taking of the Lord’s name in vain. For Alan MacGillivray and Douglas Gifford, Gibbon’s novel reveals how “the dark strand of Scottish religion, in the form of Calvinist Presbyterianism, although a declining force, [is] still ... [an] inhibiting element in community life.”<sup>8</sup> Scott Lyall adds that “*Sunset Song*—notwithstanding the admiration shown in the novel for the Presbyterian Covenanters—is about the largely malign influence of religion, specifically Calvinism, upon the community of Kinraddie, which the Reverend Gibbon” in the novel, a kind of stick-figure stand-in for the

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<sup>7</sup> Lori Branch, “Postsecular Studies,” *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion*, ed. Mark Knight (London: Routledge, 2016), 99.

<sup>8</sup> Alan MacGillivray and Douglas Gifford [and Simon Hall], “Lewis Grassie Gibbon [and Eric Linklater],” in *Scottish Literature*, eds. Douglas Gifford, Sarah Dunnigan, and Alan MacGillivray (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 587.

author, “calls ‘a rotten kailyard.’”<sup>9</sup>

These observations generally capture the tenor of criticism regarding Gibbon’s religious views. To cite some additional examples, Marshall Walker remarks that Gibbon’s “trilogy moves from legend to history,” tracing the standard course of secularization.<sup>10</sup> Philippe Laplace reads the status of religion in Gibbon’s novel by way of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of “contradictory consciousness,” in which a rebellious spirit (evident in the spoken and tacit complaints of the people of Kinraddie) ultimately settles into an acceptance of its own subjection (with religious sermons as one means to that end).<sup>11</sup> Margery Palmer McCulloch reiterates the received wisdom that Chris’s father personifies “Old Testament religion” but then adds, with greater subtlety, that Gibbon, like Marx, believed that while “history was deterministic, carrying human beings along with it,” people nevertheless have “the power to shape if not to alter that historical process.”<sup>12</sup>

As evidence of Gibbon’s views on that subject, McCulloch invokes Gibbon’s essay “Religion,” an outwardly antagonistic characterization of formal creeds that has set the tone for much of the criticism of religion in Gibbon’s work. Gibbon was trained as a journalist, and “Religion” frequently has a punchy, sententious quality that lacks the emotional nuance of *Sunset Song*. In fact, Gibbon’s essay may be responsible for overdetermining the perception of religion in his novel. Appearing in *Scottish Scene*, the 1934 book of essays Gibbon published with MacDiarmid, “Religion” is a rhetorical and affective cousin to the criticisms of MacDiarmid and Muir: “Release from the secular power of the Kirk ... had effects on the Scots similar to those that sunlight and wine

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<sup>9</sup> Scott Lyall, “‘Tenshillingland’: Community and Commerce, Myth and Madness in the Modern Scottish Novel,” *Community in Modern Scottish Literature*, ed. Scott Lyall (Leiden: SCROLL/Brill/Rodopi, 2016), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Marshall Walker, *Scottish Literature Since 1707* (London: Longman, 1996), 235. For a recent discussion of Gibbon and secularization, see Ian Campbell, “‘A Thin and Tattered Veil’: Lewis Grassie Gibbon and the Church of Scotland,” *SSL*, 43.1 (2017): 115-123: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol43/iss1/11/>.

<sup>11</sup> Philippe Laplace, “Freedom and Subservience in Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s *Sunset Song*,” *Taking Liberties: Scottish Literature and Expressions of Freedom*, ed. by Ian Brown, David Clark and Rubén Jarazo-Álvarez (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2016), 146-47.

<sup>12</sup> Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Scottish Modernism and its Contexts, 1918-1959: Literature, National Identity and Cultural Exchange* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 136.

might have on a prisoner emerging from long years in a dank cellar.”<sup>13</sup>

However, also like MacDiarmid and Muir, Gibbon is reaching for something other than mere Kirk-critique. From whence religion—the very impulse? It does not derive from altruism, awe, “the exercise of a super-conscious sense,” ethics, or morality. “Instead, a Religion is no more than a corpus of archaic science” with utilitarian motives: “Religion for the Scot was essentially a means of assuring himself life in the next world, health in this, prosperity, wealth, fruitful wombs and harvests” (313-14). In the primitive world that Gibbon romanticized, and perhaps fetishized, in the form of Diffusionism (a theory of peaceful human habitation prior to civilization—and taken to an extreme that would have made Rousseau proud), there was not—not *yet*—religion: “Man is naturally irreligious. Religion is no more fundamental to the human character than cancer is fundamental to the human brain” (313). Religion is, rather, a product of history, which is precisely what makes it dangerous: “The present writer had no hand in bringing about the decay of Religion; nor, alas, is he likely to have any hand in planning its succession. That succession lies with great economic and historical movements now in being,” and was taking its most dour form, in the historical moment of the 1930s, in the looming specter of Fascism: “What has happened in Italy and Germany may happen in Scotland. The various Scots nationalist parties have large elements of Fascism within them” (325). Hence, Gibbon professed to be against religion altogether:

Of the future of Religion ultimately the historian can have little doubt: he sees its coming in ancient times, in the world of the Simple Men, as a cortical abortion, a misapprehension of the functions and activities of nature.... He sees its passing from the human scene—even the Scots scene—in the processes of change, immutable and unsayable (325).

Religion as a “dank cellar,” a “cancer,” a “cortical abortion”; Fascism as religion in its modern form: such expressions, though vivid, leave little room for ambiguity. As Lyall insightfully remarks, however, the picture is more complicated:

The critique of Calvinism in *Sunset Song* clears the way for new forms of religion and new ideas of community in the following two novels of the *Scots Quair* trilogy: the Reverend Colquhoun’s

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<sup>13</sup> Gibbon, “Religion,” in Gibbon and MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene; or, The Intelligent Man’s Guide to Albyn* (London: Jarrolds, 1934), 323. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

humane but ineffectual Christian socialism in *Cloud Howe* (1933) and Ewan's anti-humanist revolutionary communism in *Grey Granite* (1934).<sup>14</sup>

And not only that: *Sunset Song* frequently appeals to a quality of place and experience irreducible to the boundaries of history. Hence, where Gibbon's essay criticizes formalized religion, his novel reaches for something purer, holier, more sacred—and, on that very basis, religious.

Indeed, *Sunset Song* exhibits keen and sometimes poignant religious sensibilities in its attentiveness to the sacred. It gives expression to these sensibilities through, for example, the attitudes of its narrator toward members of the community, of Chris Guthrie to matters of ultimate value, and of the characters and narrator toward the vitality of the land and the residual presence of those who once graced it, labored on it, and lived and died on it. This seems evident in one of the novel's most oft-cited passages, an important turning point when Chris reflects on "Greek words of forgotten lessons ... *Nothing endures.*"

And then a queer thought came to her there in the drookèd fields, that nothing endured at all, nothing but the land she passed across, tossed and turned and perpetually changed below the hands of the crofter folk since the oldest of them had set the Standing Stones by the loch of Blawearie and climbed there on their holy days and saw their terraced crops ride brave in the wind and sun. Sea and sky and folk who wrote and fought and were learned, teaching and saying and praying, they lasted but as a breath, a mist of fog in the hills, but the land was forever, it moved and changed below you, but was forever, you were close to it and it to you, not at a bleak remove it held you and hurted you.<sup>15</sup>

What seems important about this passage is not only its train of association—from the wisdom of the pre-Socratics and the durability of the land to the virtual ghosts of the people who once dwelled on it and their life habits ("teaching and saying and praying")—but also the conjunctive rhythm of the language: "tossed *and* turned *and* perpetually changed ... climbed there on their holy days *and* saw their terraced crops ... Sea *and* sky *and* folk who wrote *and* fought *and* were learned," and so on. The rhetorical cadence and string of associations act almost as a kind of *genius loci*, a spirit neither pagan nor creedal but very much present, lighting on figure after figure across the horizon: "you were close to it and it to you, not at a bleak remove

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<sup>14</sup> Lyall, "Tenshillingland," 11.

<sup>15</sup> Gibbon, *Sunset Song*, ed. by William K. Malcolm (London: Penguin 2007), 126. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

it held you....”

The writing is not recognizably sectarian, but it is evocatively religious. Better said, it is spiritual, replete with a sense of the land as what transcends and yet lends value to individual human lives, as what forges connections across time and communities. This is what Chae Strachan, Kinraddie’s sentimental socialist, tries to communicate to his local rival (and beloved friend) Long Rob of the Mill, an atheist who later becomes a martyr of war: “*Something there IS up there, Rob man, there’s no denying that. If I thought there wasn’t I’d out and cut my throat this minute*” (107, italics in original). The suicidal threat is the human touch of maudlin absurdity set against the experience of “*Something*” to which the narrative itself persistently attests, as when Chris indignantly refutes the anti-nationalist invective her brother Will hurls at her—and that Gibbon himself was known to formulate:

Chris felt a sudden burst of anger through her heart ... and then she looked round Kinraddie in the evening light, seeing it so quiet and secure and still, thinking of the seeds that pushed up their shoots from a thousand earthy mouths. Daft of Will to say that: Scotland lived, she could never die, the land would outlast them all.... (220).<sup>16</sup>

Scotland as *nation* is different, here, from Scotland as *land*: toward the former, Chris often expresses frustration; toward the latter, her feelings frequently border on awe. Or again, at her father’s funeral, a prospect she had previously welcomed, Chris suddenly finds herself taken with a sense of cosmic connectedness to her own kin: “she looked down and couldn’t see, for now she was crying, she hadn’t thought she would ever cry for father, but she hadn’t known, she hadn’t known this thing that was happening to him!... *Father, father, I didn’t know! Oh father, I didn’t KNOW!*” (123). Creedal religion makes its appearance here—“only God had beaten him in the end”; Chris hears “the Reverend Gibbon’s voice drone out *Dust to dust, ashes to ashes*” (123)—but such language is almost like Chae’s line about suicide: instances of human weakness before the sublime temple of life itself. It is the latter, the raw vitality of life, that *Sunset Song* repeatedly invokes in a virtual liturgy of pagan reverence. This is not religious writing if we take religion to signify a formal theological tradition. But the prose poetry of Gibbon’s novel is deeply spiritual, dense with religious *feeling*.

And this brings me back to where I started—Crawford Gibben’s

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<sup>16</sup> Contrast that with Gibbon’s political critique of the same: “What a curse to the earth are small nations!” See Gibbon, “Glasgow,” in *Scottish Scene*, 144.

thoughtful intervention on the subject of religion in Scottish literary criticism. I am most grateful to Gribben's article for reminding us to attend more thoughtfully to this aspect of Scottish literature. Yes, Gribben brings important attention to an overlooked period of Scottish literary history; and yes, the literature of that period is often directly attached to formal religion. We—I—have much to learn here. But more fruitful still may be the inclusion of less historically specific, but more conceptually capacious, postsecular perspectives onto Scottish literature. I am not arguing that postsecular criticism should be the primary way to read the rich Scottish literary tradition, or that it should displace strong religious criticism like Gribben's own. But integrating postsecularity into the breadth of critical resources already abundantly deployed in our interpretive practices is likely to help us become better readers of complex, nuanced texts like *Sunset Song*—indeed, of dozens, even hundreds of texts from Scotland's prismatic past. Further integration of postsecular thought into Scottish criticism is also likely to attune us more broadly to the range of affects, literary *and critical*, that make texts not only mean what they mean but also make them more *meaningful*, more dynamic and alive, for us.

*Brigham Young University*