

Silent Spirituality: Religion, *Angels in America*, and the Contemporary  
American Literature Classroom

Paul Reifenheiser, SUNY Sullivan County Community College

Is it worth it to inject religious conversations into the classroom? What if students are offended? What if they think their instructor is being preachy? Shouldn't English professors promote secular values rather than get into the thorny mess of the spiritual, especially when dealing with contemporary American texts? These are valid questions. However, religious discussions can be dynamic rather than offense, and they can enlighten without proselytizing. Their use promotes the ultimate secular value, critical thinking. They are worth it, especially when you make sure that the instructor's podium doesn't become a pulpit. For example, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, if effectively framed, leads to a classroom where students question spirituality and religion while seeing its importance in our contemporary culture and history. Professors need to be careful before applying religious themes to literature. First, they should be able to explain why a religious discussion should take place in an American Literature classroom. Second, and probably most importantly, they need to explain the differences between Religious Studies and Theology, and the basic differences between religion and spirituality. Lastly, they need to promote a vibrant discussion that respects students of all faiths and those of no faith.

**Teaching Religion in an American Literature Classroom?**

When I tell colleagues that one of my interests is religion, spirituality, and literature, I sense their unease. It seems the unofficial prohibition on talking about religion in, for example, a bar extends into the literature classroom. That silence is a problem because students and scholars ignore religion at their own peril. After reading that you may be uneasy. So let me assure you that I *do not* want to convert my students to a religion or to a spiritual position. I do want my students to view religion

and spirituality as another subject worthy of serious critical analysis, not as an untouchable. Let's face it: many Americans spend more time analyzing their choice of a new appliance or car than their choice of a religion. Often it isn't really a choice: it is something passed down and part of an integral bond within a family. I am not trying to say that religion isn't important to Americans – clearly it is. I am not arguing that we shouldn't respect the spiritual choices of our families – we should. I am arguing that most students may know their own religion, but they don't always know about religion. That ignorance can lead to dangerous and difficult divisions in our society. Everyone benefits when students have the ability to critically examine anything in our society, including religion.

So is the literature classroom the right place to teach critical examination of religion and spirituality? The wealth of commonly taught and critically praised texts with clear religious content answers the question. We do a disservice to our students if we ignore valuable literature that expresses the spiritual pluralism of the US. We harm our students if we skip over religious content in a novel in the name of secular values. Ignoring religion is equally as harmful as pushing a specific religion – or spiritual approach – on a student. If we don't teach students to think critically about religion, then who will? Who is going to show students that spirituality in America is more than Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism?

Literature uses aesthetics to reflect and change our culture. That is why so many American Literature survey courses and anthologies present historically marginalized and unheard voices. Yet there are a host of marginalized spiritual voices. A true cultural studies approach to literature must include more than race, class, and gender. It must include religion because literature can show us subjective and individualized facets of spirituality that a broad overview of world religions would miss. Literature shows that spirituality is more than organized worship. It is more than

what mainstream media presents. American Literature offers an opportunity to broaden our spiritual conversation.

Spirituality is clearly a part of our cultural, literary, and aesthetic history. A survey course on pre-Civil War American Literature could easily start with Native American Spirituality (Creation Myths), move towards the variety of Christianity in the Colonies (Calvinists, Lutherans, Quakers), include the influence of the Enlightenment on the early Republic (Deists), offer Emerson's writings (Panentheism), and finish with Whitman's poetry (Pantheism). However, post-Civil War surveys may seem more secular. Maybe religion is easier to talk about when it is in the past, but the Twentieth Century contains the Death of God, a rebirth of alternative and individualize spirituality, and an acceptance of atheism that simply didn't exist in early America. These are religious themes from the past fifty years that are alive today. Can you teach the poetry of the Beats without talking about Buddhism? Can you approach the *Crying of Lot 49* without dealing with Oedipa's "odd, religious moment"? Can you read *Beloved* or the *Bluest Eye* without a spiritual and aesthetic challenge to the concept of a white male God controlling the universe? Can you explain Willy Loman's crisis in *Death of a Salesmen* without the spiritual (and dramatic) loss of God? Of course you can, but you lose something from these texts without a discussion of the spiritual.

### **Theology and Religious Studies**

In a March 23, 2004 *New York Times* Op-Ed piece -- about the Pledge of Allegiance in the NY Times -- David Brooks wrote: "The lesson I draw from all this is that prayer should not be permitted in public schools, but maybe theology should be mandatory. Students should be introduced to the prophets, to the Old and New Testaments, to the Koran, to a few of the commentators who argue about these texts." Brooks was wrong. We don't need theology. We need religious studies. I assume he simply didn't know the difference, because most people I meet, including literature

professors, don't know it either. It is safe to assume that most of our students won't know the difference as well.<sup>1</sup>

A general definition offers that theology works toward validating faith in a particular religion, thus confirming its origins and benefits for its followers. Religious studies acts as an academic analysis that seeks to explain but not necessarily affirm religion, employing a wide range of critical methodologies. Religious studies mandates that students no longer view religion as holding a position of theological privilege, something distinct from other academic study. Rather, it must be an open entity exposed to the critique of, for example, sociology, anthropology, and literary studies. Religious studies wipes the slate clean in the classroom. No one's religion can be the "one" religion, so religions don't compete. Sacred scriptures become texts open to literary interpretation. J. Samuel Pruess's *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* offers that the study of religion changes when academics stop asking what religion is and try to determine why religion exists. For Pruess "the goal, after all, is not to legitimate religion but to explain it" (xx). That needs to be a goal in the classroom as well.

So let's return to Brooks' comments for a moment. America clearly has a great religious diversity, meaning we have a wealth of religions and spiritual approaches. However, that doesn't mean we have reached the ideal state of religious pluralism where those of different spiritual positions co-exist harmoniously.<sup>2</sup> I sense that Brooks argues that giving students more exposure to religion can lead towards a greater sense of pluralism. However, religious studies is a better approach than theology because it doesn't aim to legitimize religions. The goal is to inform rather than endorse. Brooks is correct in noting that we need a greater discussion

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<sup>1</sup> See Schubert M. Ogden, "Theology and Religious Studies: Their Difference and the Difference it Makes," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46, no.1 (1978): 3-15.

<sup>2</sup> See William R Hutchinson's *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal*. New Haven: Yale Up, 2003 for a discussion of the difference between religious diversity and religious pluralism.

religion in our culture. We can synthesize religion and literature to create an earnest discussion of the pros and cons of a variety of spiritual positions. That doesn't need to take place exclusively in a survey of world religions course. Including a discussion of literature allows access to unique and alternative spiritual positions that otherwise might be silenced.

It is vital to set the rules of the classroom discussion early and explain them using the definitions of theology and religious studies. If a student begins to preach, simply note that not everyone believes in the same values and that a class discussion based on religious studies doesn't allow anyone to impose religious worldviews. Of course, you must be fair. Religious studies should not mean that, for example, atheist, secularist, and humanist worldviews may be imposed. Instead level the playing field to achieve more dynamic discussions. I have used this approach for over a decade, and students respond well when they realize that I am not trying to convert them or to attack their religion. I explain to students that countless people have questioned their faith and come back stronger and countless have questioned a faith and left forever. Literature can be a tool in that process. They understand when I explain that a serious faith allows its members to ask tough questions, just as we ask tough questions in class about literature and culture. A religious studies approach mandates that all questions about a faith are viable. Thus, the closest I come to mandating any religious principle is when I announce the following: students should be skeptical of any religion – or any institution at all – that censors certain questions. You may not always agree with the answers, but in a free society and a free classroom, you must be allowed to ask tough questions and to seek potential answers.

### **Defining Religion**

The power of this pedagogical approach is that you don't need to be a religious scholar to raise religious issues. Of course, some basic concepts are helpful to classroom discussion. So I want to delve briefly

into a complicated issue: how to define religion. Possible traditional definitions of religion revolve around separating the sacred and the profane (Eliade and Durkheim),<sup>3</sup> a worldview or cultural system motivated by supernatural or superhuman entities (Geertz, Tylor, and Spiro),<sup>4</sup> and sociological perspectives (Berger and Luckman).<sup>5</sup> These definitions attempt to create objective lines between the secular and religious worldview. However, in practice these objective lines are blurred. Thus, I almost never mention them to my students. Instead I focus on American culture and creativity to define religion.

Robert Ellwood describes modern religion in the United States, which he thinks reached its zenith during the 1950s, as denominational activity within organized religious groups offering objective solutions. He notes, "that it was American to have a religion, and it didn't matter what it was – so long as it was within the respectable, culturally acceptable Protestant-Catholic-Jewish orbit" (*Fifties* 17). However, Ellwood argues that the cultural changes in the 1960s led to a rise in secularism, a decrease in denominational activity, and the proliferation of more individualized spiritual forms. He writes:

Sixties religion has been far less a matter of traditional kinds of denominationalism and parish activity, and much more one of "personal autonomy" involving readiness to switch religions and church affiliations for subjective reasons. In short, external

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<sup>3</sup> See William R Hutchinson's *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal*. New Haven: Yale Up, 2003 for a discussion of the difference between religious diversity and religious pluralism.

<sup>4</sup> See Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religio.*, edited by Michael Banton. London: Tavistock Publications, 1966; also see E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Cultures*, 2 Vols. London: John Murray, 1870; Also, see Melford E. Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definitions and Explanation," *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Banton. London: Tavistock Publications, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of Sociological Theory of Religion*. 1967; reprint, New York: Random House, 1990.; also, see Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. New York: Macmillan, 1967.

religious authority is widely rejected in favor of one's right to find a religion that meets one's own perceived needs -- though, paradoxically but understandably, sometimes that religion is conservative and demanding. . . . Religion was also "multilayered" in belief and practice, meaning one could, and often did, combine items from several sources in one's personal religious style. (*Sixties* 8-9)<sup>6</sup>

As America became increasingly fragmented, more Americans began to define themselves as spiritual but not religious.<sup>7</sup> Understanding this challenge to orthodox is absolutely necessary for a complete understanding of contemporary culture. Literary and religious scholars are debating the effect of religious changes on our culture. Why shouldn't that vibrant and varied conversation influence how we teach literature?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For more on 1960s religion see Mark Oppenheimer's *Knockin on Heaven's Door: American Religion in the Age of the Counterculture*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003 offers the latest work to delve into 1960s spirituality. Many key works preceded that venture. Theodore Roszak, in *Making of a Counterculture Reflections of the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1969 charts the spiritual unrest of the counterculture. Wade Clark Roof charts spirituality and the baby boom generation in *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993 and *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent discussion of religious changes in the United States see Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but not Religious : Understanding Unchurched America* (New York Oxford UP, 2002), and Amanda Porterfield, *Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late-Twentieth-Century Awakening* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001). For important studies on apostasy see Richard John Neuhaus, ed., *American Apostasy: The Triumph of "Other" Gospels* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1989); David Bromley, ed., *Falling from Faith: Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1988); David Caplovitz, and Fred Sherrow, *The Religious Drop-outs: Apostasy Among College Graduates* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> John A McClure has an excellent approach: he sees our world as post-secular, when both the secular and the sacred have been found wanting . See John A. McClure. "Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality", *Modern Fiction Studies* 41, no 1 (Spring 1995): 148. The Bibliography in Steven Conner's *Postmodernist Culture* offers a section on "Postmodernism and Religion." The following texts also offer excellent starting points for a discussion of this uneasy union: *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*, edited by Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick. New York: Routledge, 1992; Terrence W. Tilley, *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity*. New York: Orbis Books, 1995; Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1998)

This cultural approach to defining religion only goes so far. The question of how to differentiate between what is and is not religion in a time when the sacred and secular have blurred is an enormously difficult task. Frederick Ferré believes that religions may act as creative modes but must be both intensive and comprehensive; individuals must passionately feel and comprehensively apply a religion to their life.<sup>9</sup> He uses this as a means to move beyond would-be fetishized and trivialized religions. This distinction seemingly thwarts those who would worship, for example, exercise, a sports team, NASCAR, or Disney, as a form of religion. Demanding comprehensive coverage of a religion also challenges those who use an easy blend of syncretism to create a religion without responsibility or difficulty. However, the ultimate concern lies with who determines the comprehensiveness, intensity, and validity of a religion. That question is perhaps best left to a classroom devoted to a discussion of religion.<sup>10</sup> Instead I like to point out the complexity and subjectivity involved in defining religion. Then I offer a more simple definition: religion is a creative impulse that offers ways of viewing the unknown. This definition widens the field of religious approaches. As a result, we simply cannot discuss American culture and literature without religious language and inquiries. The individual and the group merge. The sacred and the secular blur. Religious studies and literary studies blend together in the classroom.

Literature allows us to chart religious patterns that left behind no established churches, membership lists, or rituals. This blending of literary and religious studies allows a crossing of ideas and texts that previously some would not consider religious; this intersection offers ample room to discuss both triumphs and abuses of evolving religious patterns. Literature invites us to pursue the mega-church with thousands

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<sup>9</sup> See Frederick Ferré, "The Definition of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38 (1970): 3-16.

<sup>10</sup> See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

of members and the individual forging a personalized religion in relative isolation. A dialogue with religion becomes not only possible, but also absolutely necessary for a complete understanding of contemporary culture. This approach recognizes the secular by including rather than denying religion and spirituality. This method opens a path to a real religious pluralism that can include subjective/personalized spirituality, alternative religions, and traditional forms. More importantly, in the classroom this invites key questions about religious definitions, community, solipsism, abuse, conformity, patriarchy, immanence, transcendence, inerrancy, and interpretation. This creates an opportunity to understand how literature and religion act on culture; it shows how disparate cultural and religious groups co-exist and forge our national identity. We need a discussion between not only those on the extremes of religious belief, but also those in the liminal space in between. Our ability to entertain that conversation marks an important and groundbreaking difference between the United States and other countries where Enlightenment principles have yet to firmly take hold. We can start in the classroom. I like to start with Kushner's *Angels in America*.

### ***Angels in America***

If we allow for more personalized definitions of religion, then novels, plays, poems and other texts can become forms of scripture. As in Kushner's play, this opens a world of exciting cross-disciplinary possibilities. *Angels in America* shows great respect for traditional religions, but it also assails them. Kushner attacks an anthropomorphic conception of deity, but he recognizes the great power that God shows. He shows sympathy for a pantheistic sense of divinity, but in his afterward to the play Kushner seemingly critiques Walt Whitman's "universal I." The play brings together characters that normally are not associated with each other (Harper, a Mormon housewife with a Valium addiction; Prior, a drag queens infected with AIDS; Joe, a Mormon conservative struggling with

his sexuality; and Louis, a Jewish liberal who leaves his dying lover). The script intensifies their merger by running split scenes and by having the same actors play different roles in the play. All these devices work to create a powerful and religious sense of interconnectedness that doesn't rely on a traditional version of God but doesn't fully abandon "Him" as well. To stimulate class discussion, I focus on how teleology, anthropomorphism, pantheism, and religious diversity and pluralism function in the play.

Of course it is important to define terms like teleology, anthropomorphic, and pantheism for students. I try not to define terms only with religious examples, because some students may think that these notions only apply to the spiritual. For example, it isn't hard to describe a Marxist teleological position. It is easy to show how humans tend to anthropomorphize their dogs and cats. Of course, this leads to the more difficult pantheistic idea of God as not human. Some students may have seen the movie *Dogma*, in which female singer Alanis Morissette plays the role of God. My students have told me that they find this concept of God as a woman to be radical. I explain that it is more radical to see God as a non-human entity. To make the point, I mention that having a woman elected as the President of the United States wouldn't be as radical a change as electing, for example, my beagle and then rewriting the Constitution. The analogy is poor, but it starts to get the point across. Since pantheism can be difficult to define, it helps to define immanence -- god as being within -- and transcendence -- god as being without. Sometimes I'll use a chart to show the following: Deists as fully transcendent (God starts the world then leaves it alone without contact); revealed religion as a mix that leans towards transcendence (God is both a part of the world and apart from the world, but divinely revealed scriptures explain the relationship); Panentheism leans toward immanence (God's spirit is within all of us, humans especially, yet God remains distinct); and finally Pantheism (God is within all of us and within

everything without any sense of hierarchy).<sup>11</sup> Even describing these basic concepts asks students critically think about religion in ways they may have never previously considered. That has been my experience teaching *Angels in America* at both a research university at my current community college.

In the play Louis claims that "Well for us it's not the verdict that counts, it's the act of judgment. That's why I could never be a lawyer. In court all that matters is the verdict" (*Millennium* 38). Louis's problem with verdicts in *Angels in America* is symbolic of his troublesome relationship with teleological myths about progress. On the one hand he believes so strongly in a "neo-Hegalian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something" (*Millennium* 25) that he can't adjust to his boyfriend's sickness. On the other hand, he wants to ponder the evidence and keep all options open without rendering a final judgment. He doesn't want "some stamp of salvation or damnation which disperses all the complexity in some unsatisfying little decision" (39). Louis is conflicted because he wants to believe in a larger sense of historical progress, but he selfishly leaves his dying lover – Prior – because he can't handle his death well: he can't accept the finality but doesn't want this one act to define how he is judged. Kushner's play uses Louis to show the difficulty of abandoning teleological assumptions about progress, especially religious ones. Yet the idea of everything moving toward a harmonious goal continually breaks down in the play. When Louis returns to Prior later in the play, all is not forgiven, but the lesson is learned. We must find a balance between the extremes of final judgment and never-ending deliberation. We must find a similar balance in the classroom and as we discuss religious impulses through literary interpretation.

The scene where Louis declares his neo-Hegalian philosophy is split with Joe talking to his wife Harper about his own teleological

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Levine's book *Pantheism* offers the best philosophical overview of the subject. See Levine, Michael P. *Pantheism: A Non-Theistic Concept of Deity*. New York:

assumptions. His vision is tied to the truth as embodied by Ronald Reagan. Joe's visualization causes him to ignore the severity of his wife's deep malaise and her growing Valium addiction. His inability to incorporate negativity into his worldview also causes him to suppress his own homosexuality. Thus, both Joe and Louis reveal the danger of teleological positions that ignore data that contradicts their goals. *Angels* dramatizes Reagan's decision in the 1980s to ignore the AIDS crisis because it didn't mesh with the President's idea of America as a shining city on a hill. By showing individual characters suffering with AIDS (including well known conservative Roy Cohn) Kushner puts a face on a disease that, at the time, was abstract for too many. It thwarts us from viewing the disease as one that only afflicts a certain "group" of people.

However, Kushner goes a step further and enters more religious ground. By bringing together characters that normally would not intermingle, he places an important emphasis on community and challenges anthropomorphic conceptions of God. The spread of AIDS and global warming's effect on the ozone layer (two motifs in the play) are often seen as other people's problems. Yet they affect everyone around the world. Harper likens the ozone layer to a gift from God. She states, "guardian angels, hands linked, make a spherical net, a blue-green nesting orb, a shell of safety for life itself. But everywhere, things are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving way. . . . This is why, Joe, I shouldn't be left alone" (*Millennium* 17). As the ozone layer breaks down it becomes a metaphor for the loss of God. Joe would rather ignore the loss. He doesn't have to deal with the destruction of the ozone layer, and he would rather keep faith in God even when his entire worldview crumbles around him. Harper can't ignore the loss of either the ozone layer or her sense of God, but she doesn't know how to cope with the loss. Kushner offers hope for a path out of this wasteland that T.S. Eliot described earlier in the century. Harper is right: she should not be

left alone. We must bring together more people to the religious table. However, looking to the heavens for answers will not suffice. The image of an all-knowing, white, male, heterosexual God will not suffice.

This movement away from a traditional anthropomorphic concept of God in *Angels in America* starts with Kushner's ability to bring people together. Louis and Joe eventually become lovers and are able to pull each other away from their extreme positions: Joe starts to accept his homosexuality and Louis returns to Prior. However, Harper and Prior offer more interesting relationships with the unknown. Prior is declared a prophet, is visited by dead ancestors and angels, and is sent to visit a crumbling vision of heaven. Harper delves into her own hallucinations and visits the South Pole. Despite these miraculous interventions, the most powerful scenes in the play come when these characters look to each other through immanent displays of spirituality -- found within each other -- rather than from transcendent forms -- found from above. In an early scene of *Part One: Millennium Approaches*, Harper and Prior enter each others dream and reach the "threshold of revelation," a point not of complete understanding but a recognition of their connection. Their ability to connect supercedes the divine revelations of the angels and ghosts; later the Diorama scene in *Part Two: Perestroika* offers more guidance and insight than their hallucinations and miraculous ascents.

The angels that send visions to Prior are spectacular but incompetent. They cannot create or invent and Prior calls them both "fabulous and dull all at once" (*Perestroika* 41). God abandoned heaven at the start of Twentieth Century. The angels left in charge want humans to "Neither Mix Nor Intermarry: Let Deep Roots Grow" (45). They believe that our growing diversity has caused the disappearance of God. Prior, emboldened by his earlier interaction with Harper, denies the angelic request. The comical nature of the request underlies a serious truth: the transcendent God is dead. Infinite visions of God remain possible, but the notion of one God that all will find agreement upon is a farce. The God of

our culture and the God that left heaven in the play are the same. Both held massive power when people believed: he was real and alive. We cannot simply begin to believe in the same way; too much in our culture has changed. The Angel continually tells Prior to "look up," but that advice fails him. We can no longer only look above for conceptions of divinity. We're better off if we spend more time looking at each other.

An important scene at The Mormon Visitor's Center in Manhattan revolves around a diorama depicting the Mormon exodus to Utah. Earlier in the play Louis comments that we have no angels in America because we have killed off all the spirits native to the land. However, the rise of the Mormon Church is a phenomenon created in America. It is a native spirit, but the diorama depicts the insular nature of the group as they sought to distance themselves and create their own enclave. Kushner both admonishes them for seeking isolation and pays homage to their ascension in the religious landscape. When confronting Joe about being a Mormon, while both are miles away from the center, Louis suddenly becomes a part of the diorama—with Harper and Prior watching at the center -- as Louis asks Joe: "Ok yeah yeah yeah but then answer me this: How can a fundamentalist theocratic religion function participatorily in a pluralist secular society?" (63). In the scene there is an odd connection between Prior, Louis, Harper, and Joe. That connection answers Louis's question.

A theocratic fundamentalist religion may not be able to function in a pluralist secular society, but individual members of the church can. That is why Hannah – Joe's mother who came to help her son after he calls her to confess his homosexuality– remains as a powerful character as the play closes. She is the only Mormon in the closing scene. She is a strong figure and embraces the weird "interconnectedness" of life. In the final scene Hannah, Belize (a nurse who arguably plays the most angelic pantheistic role), Prior, and Louis take turns telling the religious/mythic/symbolic story of the angel Bethesda. The play closes

with the characters paying a homage to traditional religious texts and a recognition of their fluid and symbolic nature. These characters have become individuals forging an uncommon community. They have moved from having diversity towards a more inclusive and respectful pluralism. The great work that begins as the play closes is progress towards inclusion, community, and open dialogue. The vision of a transcendent God that is male, white, Christian, and heterosexual offers a hierarchy that can create serious divisions. This concept can encourage religious groups to adopt a vision of deity and protect it by remaining too insular. When considered from this perspective, it isn't surprising that *Angels* focus on oppressed minorities and insular religious groups. They are the byproduct of hierarchies imposed by a mostly Christian society. A pantheistic embrace of immanence asks communities to see the power of the divine running through everyone without first having an other-worldly God channel that power. In the play this dispels destructive hierarchies and makes it harder to stereotype individuals based on the groups to which they belong. It is almost too easy to make an analogy here between the play and a diverse classroom where authority is diffused and everyone learns from each other rather than just a lecturing professor.

Of course, pantheism isn't without its troubles as well. In his afterward Kushner admonishes his readers about the troubles of individualism by writing: "We are all children of 'Song of Myself.' And maybe in this spacious under- and depopulated, as yet only lightly inscribed country, the Individual will finally expand to its unstable, insupportably swollen limits, and pop" (*Perestroika* 150). I like this passage because it offers at least two different readings. Maybe Kushner seems to see Whitman's legacy as one of selfishness and solipsism. We are all children of Whitman and have over-indulged our individualized egos. However, perhaps he sees Whitman's "universal I" as a movement beyond the individual, and as his children we must pop our selves, destroying the bloated individual and creating community. I prefer the

latter interpretation because one could argue that the American religious merger that Kushner advocates started over one hundred years earlier when Emerson, in "The Poet" called for more fluid religious symbols and demanded an American poet to take on a priest-like role in embracing the Oversoul and a divine interconnectedness. Perhaps it really began to gain momentum when Whitman responded to Emerson with *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's poetic merging of Mesmerism, Swedenborgianism, and Spiritualism (all culled from the democratization of American religion in the tide of Evangelism that followed the Second Great Awakening) with Emersonian Transcendentalism, Deism, Quakerism, and Pantheism blurred the sacred and secular and hint at what would come in later decades. Whitman created a distinctly new American spiritual and literary vision, but his approach never held the same religious importance as the Evangelical traditions that he followed with interest but never joined.<sup>12</sup> So while I may (or may not) disagree with Kushner's reading of Whitman, I think the conversation it generates is important, and I enjoy entertaining the differences in a classroom setting. That is one start of the great work that Kushner's plat begins, and it must be continued.

### **Conclusion**

A teacher's ability to discuss religious ideals begins in the classroom but must end in the public sphere. We must accept that secularity does not preclude a discussion about religion. For example, the Supreme Court outlawed prayer in public schools in the 1960s, allowing teaching *about* religions but not teaching that *advocates* any one religion. Since that time it has become common for religion to have little to no discussion in public schools. There are two groups to blame for this problem: secularists and religious zealots. First, secularists who wish to

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<sup>12</sup> See David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (Vintage Books, 1995). His eighth chapter, "Earth, Body, Soul: Science and Religion," is particularly helpful in its discussion of Whitman and spirituality.

ignore religion thwart a healthy discussion of spirituality. Instead of using education as a means to spread critical thinking about religion, they opt to ignore it. Rather than show the amazing power of faith and its destructive abuses, they allow the terms of the debate to find definition outside of the classroom. This problem in public high schools is too often replicated in colleges and universities where English professors would rather see religion go away. Second, religious zealots who would rather not see an open side-by-side analysis of religious ideals close down discussions on religion. They don't want religion taught in schools, they want their specific religion or none discussed. Both groups cause great harm by thwarting open and honest discussions of our nation's religious diversity.

Teaching works like *Angels in America* allows for an open discussion of religion and culture. Yet too often the play is discussed without an emphasis on the role of spirituality.<sup>13</sup> Our students, and the members of our communities, must look for education about religion in other places. To reach our communities, we need to drop our own stereotypes about religious groups and their members. We must not always expect them to be true to what Prior in the play calls their "demographic profiles." Furthermore, we need to speak to people without making them feel as if we are ridiculing their beliefs. That means we must advance our understanding of how the secular and the religious collide in literary works. However, along the way we need to remember to speak clearly to those who care about religion but may not have heard of, for example, conceptions of immanence and transcendence. Our deliberations must start in the classroom and spread beyond the walls of our institutions. Too much is at stake to ignore religion any longer.

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<sup>13</sup> For other approaches to *Angels in America* see: *Essays on Kushner's Angels*. Edited by Per Brask. Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing, 1995; and *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*. Edited by Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997.

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