Encyclopedia of Religion in America

Literature: Contemporary

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At least two characteristics mark the post–World War II era in American literature. First, the threat of nuclear annihilation sparked by the dropping of atomic bombs in 1945 on two Japanese cities gave rise to uncertainty—if not outright anxiety—about the existence of metaphysical truths. This existential dread caused some writers to strengthen their belief in a divinity and others to qualify, question, or reject such belief. Second, the postwar era witnessed a broadening of the literary spectrum to include a greater number of nonwhite, non-Christian, and female perspectives. These two characteristics exhibit the extent to which the collective American literary imagination has departed from its seventeenth-century Puritan origins.

The Christian Search for Meaning in Postwar America

Roman Catholicism: Robert Lowell and Flannery O'Connor

The gulf between America’s Puritan origins and postwar angst is exemplified by the poet Robert Lowell (1917–1977). A descendant of famous Massachusetts Puritans (as well as poets James Russell Lowell and Amy Lowell), Lowell rejected his patrician Protestant upbringing and converted to Catholicism at age twenty-three. His disillusionment with Protestant theology in general and Puritanism in particular is captured in the poem “Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts,” which declares outright that “Edwards's great millstone and rock / of hope has crumbled” (1–2). Lowell's poetry shows a deep brooding about Americans’ spiritual moorings in an age of consumerism, conformity, and psychological isolation. In his confessional poem “Memories of West Street and Lepke,” Lowell juxtaposes his pacifist Catholicism with the spiritual numbness of the “tranquillized” 1950s. The embodiment of the new era is the lobotomized assassin Czar Lepke, who lives his life of incarceration “in sheepish calm” (49) Yet just as Lowell had abandoned Protestantism at an earlier moment in his life, he later became similarly disenchanted with Catholicism. In his poem “Beyond the Alps,” Lowell looks skeptically at the Vatican's decision to make Mary’s heavenly assumption official dogma, asking, “Who believed this?” (23). The skepticism turns even darker as the poem invokes Mussolini, who sparked the same type of mass enthusiasm that dogmatizing Mary’s assumption had. The poem leaves readers to wonder what, if anything, in the postwar world separates religious fervor from Mussolini's mob mentality.

Lowell's contemporary, Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964), retained her belief in Catholicism, though her two novels and thirty-two short stories are not without the ironies that characterize so much of postwar literature. At the heart of O'Connor's fiction is an ardent belief in the need for salvation, or if not for salvation, at least the spiritual revelations that can allow the free-willed individual the chance for grace. In so many of her stories, violence is a prerequisite for any change of heart. Her famous 1955 short story “A Good Man is Hard to Find” depicts an elderly woman, known simply as “the grandmother,” who converts from petty selfishness to compassion—even showing love for the Misfit, who systematically kills members of her family. Echoing Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, the Misfit justifies his murderous actions by explaining that because there is no way of knowing whether Christ is really divine, he does not feel limited by Christian threats of damnation. Although the story never proves the Misfit wrong on this point, the grief-stricken grandmother gestures toward the Christ-like love the Misfit...
eschews. In fact, her own need to touch him is what prompts him to shoot her just as she calls out, “Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!”

An extended meditation on achieving grace through violence is found in O'Connor's 1952 novel *Wise Blood*. If the carnage of World War and the ensuing threat of nuclear annihilation are largely responsible for the existentialist turn in American literature, then Hazel Motes, the novel's protagonist, is in many respects the voice of his generation. Before leaving for the war, Hazel had every intention of becoming a preacher, just like his grandfather before him; but the war helped him to realize that he has no soul. Ironically, then, by determining that he does not have a soul, Hazel searches for salvation from damnation by simply not believing in damnation. His faith in no faith is tested by a number of charlatan preachers, and by the end of the novel, he has embraced the self-abnegation and mortification typical of martyred saints, even binding himself with barbed wire and walking with broken glass in his shoes. As with “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” *Wise Blood* suggests that both revelation and salvation are offered through suffering, and despite Hazel's earlier efforts, his grandfather's lesson would still ring true: “Jesus would have him in the end!”

White Protestantism: John Updike and Margaret Atwood

The white Protestant investigation of faith in postwar literature has perhaps its greatest articulation in the novels of John Updike (1932–2009), whose Rabbit series of four novels and one novella—*Rabbit Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), and *Rabbit Remembered* (2001)—portrays an America that struggles to live up to the sober-minded ethics of faith, responsibility, and hard work. At the center of this cycle of novels is Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, who, as his last name suggests, is full of angst over getting older and no longer being able to indulge in the kinds of sensual pursuits otherwise afforded to younger unmarried men. Through Harry, these novels investigate American Protestantism's preoccupation with the middle—the middle class and personal moderation in particular. Harry's lack of self-restraint throughout the cycle reveals the Protestant middle's darker underside: mediocrity. After the death of both his parents, Harry realizes that his past fame as a high school athlete from a mid-sized Pennsylvania city is virtually meaningless. He is, in the broader view, simply mediocre. Religious cures for mediocrity appear impotent in Rabbit's world. Neither the serious-minded Lutheran pastor Kruppenbach nor the easy-going Episcopal priest Eccles can offer a spiritual remedy for the adultery, immaturity, and irresponsibility that results from Rabbit's disgust for mediocrity. Harry seems more concerned with lustful thoughts about Eccles's beautiful wife than reconciling himself to his unfulfilling role as Janice's husband or Nelson's father. Spirituality is as much on the run as Rabbit himself.

The spiritual disillusionment found in postwar society, coupled with memories of the totalitarian regimes that sprang up in the western world in the first half of the twentieth century, has its most distilled voice in the fiction of Margaret Atwood (1939–). Although a Canadian citizen, Atwood attended graduate school at both Radcliffe College and Harvard University; and her most famous novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), uses the United States as the setting for a futuristic authoritarian society based on oppressive fundamentalist Christian doctrine. The tale is told in retrospect from the perspective of Offred, who in her
lifetime witnesses the fall of the United States (including the deaths of the president and members of Congress) and takeover by the fundamentalist Sons of Jacob, who then set up the Republic of Gilead. Having abolished the Constitution, the new government sets itself up according to Old Testament law; women are given marginal status and African Americans are labeled the Children of Ham and relegated to “homelands” in the area of the former Dakotas. Offred had received a college education before America's dissolution, but in the new regime she is prohibited from reading—or even speaking—and is forced to become a reproductive concubine for Commander Fred (hence her name “of Fred”). Written in part as a response to both increasing tensions in American-Soviet relations and U.S. political parties' overt courting of religious voters, Atwood's dystopian novel addresses what the melding of church and state could hold for women and ethnic/racial minorities. While speaking in terms of “traditional values,” the men who control the Republic of Gilead are exposed as brutal, self-serving, and irrational.

African American Writers: James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison

The postwar era proved an explosive time for African American authors, whose writings are often framed within the larger historical context of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and its aftermath. The African American Christian experience recorded by these writers is punctuated by concerns not only of racial equality, but also gender and class equality. James Baldwin (1924–1987), one of the most prominent writers of the period, embraced these themes in his semiautobiographical novel Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953). This first novel presents a complex vision of the black church, as a place of both communal solidarity and of deep hypocrisy. This hypocrisy is most evident in Reverend Gabriel Grimes, the stepfather of the main character, John. Despite his prominent position in the church, Gabriel is a womanizer and abusive to his family. John's acceptance of Christ provides a sense of closure for the novel, but even that closure is qualified with the threat that Elizabeth, Gabriel's wife, may learn of her husband's dark past. Baldwin takes an equally complex view of the black church in his 1964 play Blues for Mister Charlie, based loosely on the murder of fifteen-year-old Emmitt Till in 1955, in rural Mississippi. The play centers on Reverend Meridian Henry, who advocates passive resistance to racial oppression in the wake of his son's murder at the hands of a white man. The outraged black community finds an ally in Parnell, the white newspaperman assigned to cover the murder and ensuing trial. The play offers qualified hope that blacks and whites can reach across their segregated religious communities to find an end to racial hatred. When Parnell asks if he can join in the protest march at the end of the play, Juanita, a member of Henry's congregation, replies, “Well, we can walk in the same direction, Parnell.” Juanita's response suggests that even well-intentioned whites cannot truly comprehend the black American experience. The play asks what can provide the best antidote for racism. Will Martin Luther King Jr.'s New Testament injunction to “love they neighbor” prevail, or does Christ-like forgiveness prove ill-equipped in the face of such persistent problems? When is it time—and in fact justified—to raise the sword?

These spiritual questions find amplification in the works of Baldwin's contemporary Ralph Ellison (1913–1994). Unlike Baldwin, who for a short time early in life was a preacher, Ellison kept Christianity at arm's length. His worldview and his understanding of American history and culture, however, were deeply set within a Christian framework, as is evident in his literary essays and in his two novels, The Invisible Man (1952) and Juneteenth (1999). Ellison believed that slavery and racism constituted America's original sin: “Thus the new edenic
political scene incorporated a flaw ... [that] embodied a serpent-like malignancy that would tempt government and individual alike to a constantly-recurring fall from democratic innocence ... racism took on the force of an original American sin." The drama of the Fall and its repercussions play themselves out in *The Invisible Man* through the unnamed main character, whose literal descent underground by the novel's end carries with it a knowledge of the good and evil that populate the collective American consciousness. Along the way, the novel presents readers with a number of fallen creatures, among them the trickster-preacher Rinehart, whose resemblance to the narrator suggests among other things the relative interchangeability of black individuality in the eyes of the larger society.

The center of *Juneteenth*, Ellison's unfinished, posthumously published novel, is A. Z. Hickman, an African American preacher. Charged with caring for Bliss, the son of a white woman partially responsible for the death of his brother, Hickman sees himself as a latter-day Job scrambling for answers before an inscrutable God. Paralleling O'Connor's necessity for suffering in the quest for illumination and salvation, Hickman concludes that “[God is] going to beat us till we almost melt and then He's going to plunge us into ice-cold water .... He means for us to be a new kind of human.” Bliss eventually rejects his “father,” and later in life he uses the pulpit rhetoric he had learned as a child for crass political advancement. Still, the aging Hickman persists in loving “the boy whom the man had been,” and the novel gives a glimmer of hope that Christ-like love is still the most resilient remedy for an American psyche corrupted by the original sin of racial oppression.

**Popular Fiction: Left Behind and The Da Vinci Code**

Christianity and related aspects of spirituality have been the subject of popular fiction as much as they have been the subject of literary fiction. Novels about the “end of days” detailed in the book of Revelation have taken on a life of their own since World War II, especially since the advent of various social liberation movements (for women, gays, and ethnic minorities) in the late 1960s. So-called “dispensational fiction” by Hal Lindsey (1929–), Larry Burkett (1939–2003), and Frank Peretti (1951–) has also come in response to a general sense of meaninglessness or nihilism that pervaded much of postwar American literature. Life's meaninglessness and the constant deferral of truth are the central themes of the postmodern novels of Thomas Pynchon (1937–), Don DeLillo (1936–), and John Barth (1930–). Clearly, the most successful writers of dispensational fiction, in terms of both readership and financial profit, are Tim LaHaye (1926–) and Jerry Jenkins (1949–), the authors of the *Left Behind* series. The series began with one novel, *Left Behind*, published in 1995, and then grew to a trilogy with the addition of *Tribulation Force* (1996) and *Nicolae* (1997). The series has since grown into double digits. The novels concern a group of characters whose life choices rendered them unsuitable for the Rapture. The Rapture signals the start of the seven-year Tribulation in which Satan's minion Antichrist, in the form of the Romanian media mogul, Nicolae Carpathia, attempts to seize control of the world through a reorganized version of the United Nations. Having learned the errors of their ways, the members of the Tribulation Force spend the seven years before Christ's arrival to thwart Carpathia's efforts at world domination. By the early years of the twenty-first century, the sales of the series had exceeded $50 million. The success of these novels has been attributed not only to the demographic increase of middle-class, suburban evangelicals in the United States, but also to the novels' ability to provide guidance and identity to an evangelical readership that regards itself as simultaneously participants in and victims of modernity. The protagonists who make up the
core of the Tribulation Force must use their advanced technological savvy to defeat Carpathia, who himself is a master of modern communications systems. Moreover, unlike previous dispensationalist novelists whose fiction typically offers no hope for those characters who have been left behind after the Rapture, LaHaye and Jenkins suggest that the seven-year period before Christ's arrival can provide a reprieve to those who have the insight and courage to renounce their previous sinful ways.

But if a postmodern novel such as Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, replete with moral relativism and a preoccupation with conspiracy theories, would cause concern among evangelical readers looking for metaphysical certainty, it would find kindred spirits in the novels of Dan Brown (1964–), *Angels and Demons* (2000) and *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). The latter has become one of the best selling novels of all time, selling 60.5 million copies in its first three years of publication. Unlike the *Left Behind* series, *The Da Vinci Code* cultivates its readers' suspicion about the reliability of traditional Christian narratives. The novel revolves around two characters, Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu, who learn that Jesus Christ married Mary Magdalene (challenging the legend that she was a prostitute), and that at the time of Christ's Crucifixion, the pregnant Mary escaped to a Jewish settlement in Gaul (present-day France) where she gave birth to Christ's daughter, Sarah. The Holy Grail is therefore not the cup Christ used during the Last Supper to metaphorically share his blood with the disciples, but rather the very body of Mary, which is the receptacle of her husband's seed and which keeps Christ's bloodline alive. Sophie, the novel ultimately reveals, is the descendant of that line. Both the novel and its 2006 film adaptation had to be defended against accusations of heresy and anti-Catholicism. The simultaneous success of *The Da Vinci Code* and the novels comprising the *Left Behind* series, as diametrically opposed as they are in their treatment of metaphysical truth and biblical narrative, reveals Christianity's durability as a fertile ground for the literary imagination.

**Jewish American Writing in the Wake of the Holocaust**

The Jewish experience in postwar America has been chronicled by a number of famous writers, among them Philip Roth (1933–), Bernard Malamud (1914–1986), Joseph Heller (1923–1999), Isaac Bashevis Singer (1902–1991), Cynthia Ozick (1928–), Irena Klepfisz (1941–), and Wendy Wasserstein (1950–2006). The literary record of the experience, although diverse, frequently returns to a number of themes, including coming to terms with the Holocaust (even if the authors or their characters did not experience it firsthand) and reconciling one's Jewish identity with one's American identity.

**Philip Roth**

Philip Roth in particular takes up these themes in his many works. In *The Anatomy Lesson* (1985), the narrative explains how Mrs. Zuckerman's brain tumor prevents her from remembering or writing her own name, but it does not prevent her from writing the word "Holocaust," even though “before that morning she'd never spoken that word aloud.” For postwar Jewish American writers such as Roth (or his fictional alter ego Nathan Zuckerman), one need not be involved in the Holocaust for it to be a part of one's consciousness. At other times in Roth's fiction, the Holocaust or the prewar immigration experience can provide a
strong point of juxtaposition for American Jews living a life of material comfort. The juxtaposition is made clear in Roth's early novella *Good-bye Columbus* (1959), which depicts Neil Klugman's summer romance with the spoiled, acquisitive Jewish suburbanite Brenda Patimkin. Drawn in by Brenda's beauty and by her family's parvenu wealth, Neil periodically suffers a conflict of conscience, especially after being reminded of the difficult immigration experiences his family members of an earlier generation experienced. For that group, Jewishness is bound up in this diasporic struggle, but for the Patimkins, Jewishness becomes synonymous in Neil's mind with crass, yet seductive, materialism. *The Plot Against America* (2004) sets up a “what-if” scenario in which Charles Lindbergh beats Franklin Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential election and quickly signs a nonaggression pact with Hitler. The novel forces its Jewish characters—one of whom is young Phil Roth, another fictional alter ego of the author—to find and retain those parts of an American identity that do not conflict with their Jewish identity.

*Cynthia Ozick*

While Roth's characters often show significant ambivalence in holding tight to traditional Jewish culture and spirituality, the characters of novelist and short story writer Cynthia Ozick find a more affirmative and instructive vision for a Jewish American identity. Ozick explains her vision for a Jewish American literary voice in her essay “Toward a New Yiddish,” found in the collection *Art and Ardor* (1983). This literature, she declares, should be “centrally Jewish in its concerns,” yet not reductive or overtly moralizing. The essay also enjoins like-minded authors to write in New Yiddish—a cross between English and Yiddish—so that they may “pour not merely the Jewish sensibility, but the Jewish vision, into the vision of English.” In terms of themes, Ozick’s fiction frequently takes up the persistent tension among Hellenism, Christianity, and Hebraism in the life of American Jews. Her first novel, *Trust* (1966), depicts an unnamed female protagonist whose mother’s three husbands embody each of these traditions. Hebraism, represented in Enoch Vand, ultimately holds the most rhetorical and moral sway in the novel. Through his research into the Holocaust, Vand is able to achieve a sense of historical imminence with the event and with his fellow Jews that many characters in Roth's fiction fail to achieve. Vand is able to carry out many of the prescriptions that Ozick later made in “Toward a New Yiddish.” Her short story “Envy; or Yiddish in America” (1989) is thematically similar to *Trust*, portraying the poet-protagonist Edelshtein, whose concern over the loss of Yiddish language and literature in American Jewish life prompts him to seek out a translator. The story is not without its ironies, however; Edelshtein may criticize those such as Roth and Saul Bellow for ignoring or rejecting Yiddish, but his search for a suitable translator constantly reminds the reader of his own shortcomings and inconsistencies.

*Wendy Wasserstein*

Wendy Wasserstein, one of the leading Jewish women's voices in theater, was born to a wealthy Jewish father and a Jewish mother from Poland. Wasserstein is known for humorous dramas that explore the lives of the educated upper-middle class. Unlike many of the characters in Ozick's fiction, however, the Jewish characters in Wasserstein's plays are typically more secular, and they often progress by seeking some form of accommodation with the larger non-Jewish, patriarchal world around them. As is evident in *Isn't It Romantic* (1983) and *The Sisters Rosensweig* (1992), Wasserstein's female characters in particular must find...
these accommodations even within their own families. Janie Blumberg, the main character of *Isn't It Romantic*, is not only concerned with “having to pay the telephone bill, be[ing] nice to the super, find[ing] meaningful work, fall[ing] in love, [and] get[t ing] hurt,” but also she feels the old familial pull to be the dutiful daughter. At her mother’s prodding, she dates a wealthy Jewish doctor, even though he belittles her. In these dramas, burgeoning Jewish womanhood typically confronts the specter of motherhood, be it in the form of the main characters’ own mothers or in the main characters’ attempt to become mothers themselves. In many of Wasserstein’s plays, the main female characters find their mature identities by reconciling their previous idealism and commitment to progressive politics (much of it sparked by the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s) with the realities of adulthood. Heidi Holland, the protagonist of Wasserstein’s Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning play, *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988), laments the lack of female solidarity she had experienced at Mount Holyoke, saying, “I thought the point was that we were all in this together.” By the end of the play, Heidi (whose religious background is ambiguous) finds peace by adopting a daughter, which is simultaneously a break with patriarchal patterns and a reaffirmation of motherhood.

**Beyond the Judeo-Christian Tradition**

The writing of the postwar period contains the deepest exploration of religion outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The tension between Native American and European-American cultures, the conflict over religion and religious rituals, and the role of religious belief are among the themes embodied in the literature of what has been called the Native American Renaissance.

**Native American Renaissance**

Leslie Marmon Silko (1948–) M. Scott Momaday (1934–), James Welch (1940–2003), and Louise Erdrich (1954–) are among the guiding forces behind the Native American Renaissance. Silko, of European, Mexican, and Native American (Laguna Pueblo) descent, addresses the inevitable confrontations between Native American and Euro-American cultures in her novels. Her earliest and still most famous novel is *Ceremony* (1977), which depicts Tayo’s return home to the Laguna reservation from the Philippines, where he survived the Bataan death march during World War II. Tayo’s homecoming is less than heroic, however. His constant vomiting and urination show how deeply traumatized he is by the loss of his cousin Rocky on the death march. Moreover, Tayo returns home to his aunt, who raised him but who also resents him for surviving while her own son perished. Moreover, Auntie’s conversion to Catholicism provides a continual source of agitation for Tayo as he seeks relief from his emotional and physical traumas. Help first comes in the form of the medicine man Ku’oosh, but it is not complete until Navajo healer Betonie provides a ceremony that allows Tayo to understand the interconnectedness of people—white and native alike. Attesting to the scarring effects of the Second World War, Tayo envisions the nearby Trinity site, where the U.S. government tested the first atomic bomb, and he realizes that the menace of nuclear annihilation must be resisted through the power of stories and religious ritual. By placing the main narrative alongside sections detailing various Laguna myths, the novel gives readers the chance to see Tayo’s struggle through a completely non-Anglo, non-Christian perspective. Still, *Ceremony* does not insist on the primacy of any single religious tradition to make Tayo
Like Silko, feminist essayist and poet Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004) looked toward the Southwest for a source of spiritual and aesthetic cultivation. Having first coedited the groundbreaking anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1980) with Cherri Moraga, Anzaldúa then published *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), a text written in both English and Spanish that is simultaneously a personal manifesto, a religious treatise, a regional history, and a book of poetry. The Mexico-United States border is the main geographical focus of the text, but Anzaldúa explains in the preface that “[t]he psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory.” The book then addresses the ways in which the line separating the United States from Mexico has been the source of hatred, violence, and spiritual isolation. Rather than understanding identity as a fixed and rigid set of markers, Anzaldúa argues, it should be regarded as fluid and open to outside influences. The thrust of this exploration of physical and emotional borderlands is facilitated by references to the *Coatlicue*, an ancient Aztec goddess who “depicts the contradictory. In her figure, all the symbols important to the religion and philosophy of the Aztecs are integrated. Like Medusa, the Gorgon, she is a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror.” Religions indigenous to the borderlands are also prominently featured in the book’s poetry. “La curandera” tells the story in verse of a woman who returns from death and is taught by mystical serpents how to cultivate certain plants to become a healer. In one of the closing poems of the book, “To live in the Borderlands means you,” Anzaldúa explains, “To survive the Borderlands / you must live sin fronteras [without borders] / be a crossroads.” Personal identity, as the example of the goddess *Coatlicue* makes plain, is a kinetic mixture of opposing forces.

**African American Literature: Beyond Christianity**

Two African American women writers, Toni Morrison (1931–) and Alice Walker (1944–), rose to prominence in the early 1970s. Walker's fiction in particular depicts the Judeo-Christian tradition as a point from which her African American characters—especially her female characters—depart in their explorations of myth, history, and self. Unlike Lowell or Updike, Walker does not see spirituality as a dead force in the world; rather, she sees it in need of recovery or reconceptualization. Such an undertaking, however, will involve a religious vision that expands beyond the white male–authorized versions of Christianity found throughout western history. Her most famous fictional attempt at reconceptualization is in *The Color Purple* (1982). The novel is told through a series of letters, most of them from the main character, Celie, to the Judeo-Christian God. In these letters, Celie confides in God her most intimate secrets—particularly her rape by her stepfather and her developing love for another woman, the blues singer Shug Avery. As her relationship with Shug grows and as she finds a stack of concealed letters from her sister Nettie in Africa, Celie rejects the Judeo-Christian notion of God in favor of a more inclusive, less male-centered deity. At one point Shug admonishes Celie for not recognizing God's presence in a field of beautiful purple flowers; in
response Celie adopts a new understanding of divinity that in many ways resembles the pantheistic God found in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendentalism. Walker's 1989 *The Temple of My Familiar* furthers these expansive notions of divinity. The story is often told from the perspective of Lissie, an African-based deity who over the ages has manifested itself as both male and female (and at other times even in nonhuman form). A record of Lissie’s experiences is recovered by the academic Suwelo and his ex-wife Fanny (Celie’s granddaughter). From these records they both learn a new type of inner and interpersonal harmony. Fanny in particular pushes past conventional notions of Christianity, seeing her newfound ability to masturbate as a triumph over the male-centered creeds that insist on self-abnegation and the marginalization of women.

**The Beats and Buddhism**

Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) is another writer who moved beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition for personal growth and artistic inspiration. Born to Jewish parents in Newark, New Jersey (also the birthplace of Philip Roth and the setting for many of his novels), Ginsberg incorporated many Jewish themes and motifs in his poetry; but after his conversion to Buddhism in 1971, he then drew on Buddhist philosophy to drive his poetics. Early in his career, Ginsberg became known as a member of the Beats, a group of writers that included William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Gregory Corso. Although the work of these individuals is varied and wide-ranging, they frequently address what they view as a conformist, postwar America that has become tired, or “beat.” The name can equally apply to the writers’ experiments with rhythmic poetry and prose (based largely on jazz and bop). The Beat movement was equally concerned about spirituality, for as Kerouac once remarked, “beat” stood for “beatific.”

Such concern with spirituality is found throughout Ginsberg's poetry of the period, most prominently the long poems *Howl* (1956) and *Kaddish* (1961). In *Howl* the poet appears as a latter-day Jeremiah, decrying the spiritual and imaginative degeneration he sees around him and foreseeing his country's further capitulation to a mechanistic, soulless mindset. Typical of prophetic poetry, sight is a major vehicle for the poem's development. *Howl* begins: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, / angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night” (1–4). These references to men groping for, but ultimately losing their hold on, a spiritual vision carries through to the poem's later section, which is addressed to Moloch, an ancient Phoenician deity to whom, appropriately enough, the young were sacrificed. In *Howl*, however, Moloch has its modern analogue in industrialized civilization. The Jewish tradition is even more evident in Ginsberg's later long poem *Kaddish*, an elegy resembling a traditional Jewish Kaddish (or prayer of mourning) written for his mother. The poem begins, “Strange now to think of you,” and continues as if the poem provides a means by which Ginsberg can reacquaint himself with his dead mother, whose institutionalization and lobotomy he authorized. In the final section of the poem, the poet envisions his mother's gravesite, where “crows shriek in the white sun.” The poem ends on a brooding note with the recitation, “Lord, Lord, Lord,” which struggles to lift above the shrieks of the crows.
After becoming the pupil of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a renowned Tibetan Buddhist, in 1971, Ginsberg made the conversion to Vajrayana-style Buddhism. Jokingly referring to himself from then on as “the Buddhist Jew,” he incorporated Buddhist themes and philosophies into his poetry. The poem “Plutonian Ode” (1978) is an example. In it, the poet addresses the looming specter of mass human annihilation and proposes Buddhist principles of introspection and meditation as the means of thwarting such a threat: “Take this wheel of syllables in hand, these vowels and consonants to breath’s end / take this inhalation of black poison to your heart, breathe out this blessing from your breast on our creation” (60–61). Ginsberg’s devotion to Buddhism also changed his view of the world. He felt that he no longer had “a negative fix on the ‘fall of America,’” as is evident in a poem such as Howl. Rather, the “fatal karmic flaws” he saw in the country he also saw in himself; such an epiphany had prompted him to find “some basis for reconstruction of a humanly useful society, based mainly on a less attached, less apocalyptic view.”

Nation of Islam

Islam has one of its most famous and most vocal postwar representatives in the controversial poet Amiri Baraka (b. 1934 as Everett LeRoi Jones). Baraka’s literary career has been marked by a number of philosophical, political, and religious upheavals. After graduating from Howard University and serving in the military in the mid-1950s, Jones moved to New York, where he fell under the influence of the Beat movement. By the 1960s he had committed to black nationalism, and as a part of this commitment, he converted to Islam, rejected his birth name (considering it to be his “slave name”), and was reborn spiritually and politically as Amiri Baraka (meaning “Blessed Prince”). Although Baraka had committed to Marxist socialism by 1974, his poetry from the late 1960s and early 1970s reveals the extent to which his black nationalism was infused with his Islamic faith. In “A Poem for Black Hearts” (1969), Baraka elegizes the slain black Muslim leader Malcolm X, lamenting, “For Great Malcolm a prince of the earth, let nothing in us rest / until we avenge ourselves for his death, stupid animals / that killed him, let us never breathe a pure breath if / we fail, and white men call us faggots till the end of / the earth” (23–27). For Baraka, Malcolm X’s philosophy of militant separatism was the right course of action for blacks looking to distinguish themselves politically from both whites and from a complacent black bourgeoisie. In other poems, such as “It’s Nation Time” (1970), Baraka invokes Allah as the source of not only his poetic inspiration, but also as the source of the nascent black nation on American soil. Using the same inflammatory style found in “A Poem for Black Hearts,” Baraka exhorts: “niggers come out, brothers are we / with you and your sons your daughters are ours / and we are the same, all the blackness from one black allah / when the word is clear you'll be with us / come out niggers come out” (75–79). Yet as the poem “When We'll Worship Jesus” (1975) suggests, Baraka’s turn toward socialism left him questioning Islam and black cultural nationalism. At first explaining, “We'll worship Jesus / when jesus do / Somethin” (1–3), he then warns, “[Jesus] and his boy allah / too, need to be checked / out!” (48–50). Neither Christianity’s directive to “turn the other cheek” nor an Islamic jihad based on black solidarity can get at the root of race antagonisms, because at the base of such antagonisms, as scientific Marxism contends, lies the looming specter of economic exploitation.

Conclusion

As the literature of the post–World War II period shows, neither the existentialism sparked by
the threat of nuclear annihilation nor social and political upheaval signaled the end of the Judeo-Christian tradition. At the same time, this tradition changed to meet an evolving nation—a nation whose literature found a more diverse spectrum of religious representation than it had ever before witnessed.

See also Buddhism in North America; Fundamentalism: Contemporary; Frontier and Borderlands; Judaism: Jewish Culture; Literature: African American; Nation(s) of Islam; Native American Religion: Post-Contact; Roman Catholicism: Cultural Impact; Sexuality and Sexual Identity; Women: African American.

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