

The Varieties of Religious Expedience

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Review of *Interior States: Essays*, by Meghan O’Gieblyn, New York: Anchor Books, 2018

Abstract. This is a review of a collection of literary essays centred around two themes: (i) Christianity and post-Christian culture, and (ii) the American Midwest. I offer a synopsis of some of the key essays, and identify some argumentative ‘through-lines’ that link the essays across the two themes. The collection’s distinguishing merit, I argue, is that way that it models the difference between two kinds of intellectual-cum-political attitudes: awareness and perspective. Where the former tends to favour simplifying explanations of social phenomena, the latter tends to favour subtler, more complex, and ultimately more explanatorily conscientious (if less satisfying) explanations. O’Gieblyn’s essays argue for the importance of perspective, in how we understand Christianity’s role in American public life, and demonstrate in practice what perspective in this topical area looks like.

“How can they say they believe in Jesus, but then worship someone as un-Christ-like as Trump?” “If they’re so tired of arrogant coastal elites who don’t represent ‘their’ America, why are they spellbound by this *paragon* of arrogance, this man whose entire *brand* is gilded elitism?” Despite three years of hot takes and think pieces, these questions remain perplexing for many of us. And this is partly because answering them properly would require us to have a clear perspective on the enigmatic *they* that the questions are asking about. We are aware of causal cofactors that are implicated in Trump-era cultural schisms: *deindustrialization*, *media echo chambers*, resurgent *white supremacy*, and assorted forms of *geographical resentment* related to each of the above. But the people mobilized by these forces

– the identities coming to life in the counterswing of the identity politics pendulum – remain as opaque to us as they did to Hillary Clinton when she spoke about the basket of deplorables.

Of course we are also aware that *Christianity* is an ingredient in these schisms. But this awareness actually makes it harder to see inside the basket, because it gives us – us, the disenchanting secular folks – an inquiry-stopping placeholder theory of what makes *them* tick: they're just *religious nutjobs*. To get beyond this sort of pat non-explanation, we would need to somehow understand these communities from the inside. We would have to see how their faith, and their sense of national and regional identity, can all mix together to create a vision of society so alien to our own.

Megan O'Gieblyn's *Interior States* doesn't pretend to have the final word on any of these sociological questions. But it is more curious about what makes *them* tick – deeper and more resolute in its curiosity – than any other recent writing I have encountered in this area. The book is made up of 15 essays and geared around two related themes: Christianity (the afterlife, creationism, apocalypse, alcoholics anonymous) and the Midwest (the great lakes, post-industrialism, regional social customs, and the hipsters of Madison, WI). O'Gieblyn handles these topics with the gracious air of someone whose own identitarian loyalties are divided. She says she would prefer to live anywhere *but* the Midwest [xiv], and she long ago traded in the suburban evangelicalism of her upbringing for liberal arts erudition. But she resists running off to the coasts, instead living in Madison and Muskegon. And when she finds herself the third one in the ring for an argumentative wrestling match between Christianity and secularism, she often winds up taking the side of the former. She is well-placed to illuminate Christian thinking and anti-coastal-elitist sentiment, then, in part because she retains some of the subcutaneous affinities that normally get excised by people who drop out of a Midwestern Bible College to pursue a literary career.



The Christianity-themed essays pay close attention to religion's role in shaping modern America's cultural divides. In "Sniffing Glue", for example, O'Gieblyn shows how Christian musicians of the 1990s were outflanked – in their efforts to reach a mass audience – by the secular music industry's increasingly sophisticated marketing. By trying to second-guess youth cultural trends, Christian artists actually cemented their fringe status, while also squandering the authenticity that was their only real USP for disillusioned youths [152]. "The End" explores gloomier terrain, mapping out a potted history of apocalypticism as an influence on American public life, from the founding of fundamentalist seminaries a century ago, through to the Y2K panic and today's secular doom-mongering. When we

scoff at end-is-nigh rants from religious wackos, O’Gieblyn suggests, this is “at least in part because they embody an unflattering reflection of our own obsession with apocalypse” [137]. An adjacent idea runs through “Ghost in the Cloud”, which lays out a compelling historical argument for the thesis that present-day transhumanist ideas about humanity’s future “are a secular outgrowth of Christian eschatology” [181]. In each of these pieces the cultural insights are brought to life via surreal anecdotes that authenticate O’Gieblyn’s claim to be a denizen of both Americas. Exhibit A: for most of the author’s senior year her family ate dried meat and powdered mash, left over from prepping for the apocalypse that failed to materialise on 01/01/2000. Exhibit B: The first time the author heard *Smells Like Teen Spirit* – and in that Damascene instant, understood the lameness of Christian rock – was in a Moscow hotel room, accompanying her grandfather on a lobbying trip to try to get Christian ethics taught in Russian schools.

The book’s longest and most trenchant piece on Christianity examines the modern church’s move away from hellfire preaching. When O’Gieblyn was a teenager, pastors were making her and her classmates watch *videos* depicting unsaved youths being transported to the bad place in steampunk elevators. Hellfire theology was alive and well, and self-assured enough to package itself in lurid televisual scare tactics. But in a little over a decade this fervour turned cold, and evangelical leaders were at pains to avoid even mentioning the H-word. The ground moved so quickly that by the 2010s the orthodox view was playing third fiddle. The central debate was between moderates like Bill Hybels and Rick Warren, who saw damnation as bad PR for their growing *megachurches* (while still quietly believing in it), and reformers like Rob Bell, trying to promote ideas of *universal salvation* among the evangelical set.

O’Gieblyn offers a shrewd analysis of this shift. It is grossly unfair for people to be condemned to eternal torment thanks to the unchosen legacy of original sin and the flukey misfortune of not hearing the gospel. Granted, *many theologians* have tried to philosophise the unfairness away. But O’Gieblyn attended Moody Bible Institute as a young adult, thus learning all of the philosophical manoeuvres that she would have to make to defend an undiluted doctrine of hell. And knowing these moves didn’t dispel her concerns. The moral backflips involved in praising a God whose Justice is unjust was, O’Gieblyn says, one of the pulled threads that started unravelling her faith. The point of this is that she clearly recognizes – in a more vividly personal way than most of us – why hellfire theology was and is a problem for Christianity.

But O’Gieblyn can’t abide the moderate and reformist solutions to this problem. Her essay opens with the tale of a marketing consultant who in 2011, for a lark, devised a slick *corporate rebranding* strategy for hell. O’Gieblyn invites us to see moderates like Warren as playing a similarly glib game, minus the ironic cushioning. The squeamishness of their soteriology is the mark of a faith dissolving into commercialism. “Pastors who are trying to ‘sell’ God”, as O’Gieblyn says, “won’t

mention hell any more than a Gap ad will call attention to child labor” [36]. As for the universalist reformers, their ideas about salvation – having been self-exempted from any requirements of Biblical fidelity or doctrinal precision – crumble into “a simplistic story of moral progress” [47], “a Disneyesque vision of humanity”, which serves as a Jesusy corollary to “the contemporary gospel of human perfectibility that is routinely hyped in TED talks” [46]. For all its downsides, the outmoded Christian view of sin and salvation at least invited us to face up to the human capacity for evil. It created space for an “acknowledgement of collective guilt” – an acknowledgement that “makes it possible for a community to observe the core virtues of the faith: mercy, forgiveness, grace” [47]. Christianity could do some good today by resensitizing us to these and other virtues that have been devalued by late capitalist society. But the church is instead “becoming a symptom of the culture rather than an antidote to it” [47].



The worry that people who think they’re remedying social ills will become a symptom of the culture rather than an antidote to it turns out to be a key thematic link between the book’s Christianity-themed essays and its Midwestern-themed essays. The specific form of futile well-meaningness that O’Gieblyn has in her sights, vis-à-vis the Midwest, is what I’d like to call *Vacuous Heartland Progressivism*. In essence VHP is about being in the Midwest – with various attendant benefits: clean air, affordable housing – but not *of* the Midwest. It’s about heartlanders identifying politically and aesthetically (or even *culinarily*) with coastal urbanity. When O’Gieblyn feels herself and her peers lapsing into VHP, she kicks back against it, and any conceited positioning of themselves as being “above the rubble of hinterland ignorance” [16].

In critiquing this viewpoint, the author certainly isn’t encouraging us to buy into its ideological opposite: a homespun, humble-braggy vision of flyover country as a place that time forgot and the decades cannot improve, where the women are strong, the men are good looking, etc. Quite the contrary: O’Gieblyn gets considerable mileage out of unmasking several varieties of bogus Midwestern self-mythology. At best these Midwestern myths are oversimplified hokum; at worst they’re strategic cover stories for the region’s socio-political problems. She makes a persuasive case for this on a number of fronts, pulling back the curtain on the hypocrisy of romantic pastoralism in great lakes *tourism ads* (in “Pure Michigan”), the politically iffy nostalgia of the Greenfield Village *historical town* (in “Midwest-world”), and the xenophobic underbelly of genteel Hoosier hospitality (in “American Niceness”). O’Gieblyn shares the hope that Midwestern-ness might be more and better than a hodgepodge of ethical pretences. But she thinks that VHP doesn’t provide a proper alternative value-system to the reactionary facets of Midwestern life, or the wider malaise that they reflect. In “Dispatch from Flyover

Country”, for example, she gives vent to feelings of frustration about the bourgeois wokeness of the Madison dinner party circuit. She says

At the end of these nights, I would get into the car with the first throb of a migraine, saying that we didn’t have any business discussing anything until we could, all of us, articulate a coherent ideology. It seemed to me then that we suffered from the fundamental delusion... that fair trade coffee and Orange You Glad It’s Vegan? cake had somehow redeemed us of our sins. [16]

When her husband presses her to say exactly what it is about VHP that bothers her, O’Gieblyn can’t find the right word for it. “Self-satisfied? Self-congratulatory? I could never get past aesthetics” [15]. At one moment in the piece on “American Niceness”, ‘being unable to get past aesthetics’ looms as the very thing that O’Gieblyn finds objectionable in VHP. She talks about how performative gestures – ritually acknowledging privilege, using the right pronouns, buying fair trade – lead young leftists, including herself, to feel that “while we may belong to an ugly nation, we ourselves constitute a more welcoming and benign elect” [159]. The thesis behind the critical barbs is that people cannot provide an antidote to an unjust political culture just by identifying with the right attitudes and causes. In the previously-discussed “Hell” essay, O’Gieblyn recounts childhood episodes in which she freaked herself out by imagining that she might think a damnable thought – “Jesus go out of my heart” – and, in that moment of being technically unsaved, die of a brain aneurysm before reciting a salvific counter-thought [23]. VHP is a little bit like a secular counterpart to this callow conception of salvation by faith alone: neurotically preoccupied with right-thinking, oblivious to the material demands of good works. In “Contemporaries”, once again trying to put a fine point on why she feels uneasy about the well-meaning progressive sentiments being exchanged by nice folks over dinner, O’Gieblyn says

We all believed we could correctly identify our own self-deception, a conviction that seemed, the more I considered it, peculiar to people my age... we are content merely to insist that we’re cognizant of the delusions that animate our lives, that we can approximate their location in the byways of our psyches. [66]

That one cannot cogitate one’s way out of a compromised political position seems quite right. But notice that O’Gieblyn’s thesis cannot be that right thinking by itself doesn’t fix anything. This thesis hoists itself with its own petard: if right thinking alone doesn’t fix anything, then thinking about how “right thinking alone doesn’t fix anything” doesn’t fix anything either. O’Gieblyn’s thesis is a little subtler, though, and it evades this trap. Her key claim about the shortcomings of VHP – and of progressive secularism more broadly – is that “awareness is not the same as perspective”, and that “sometimes the former is an obstacle to the latter” [66]. The problem with VHP isn’t that it puts too much stock in right thinking, but that it is wrong about what right thinking consists of. People with perspective can distinguish the urgent from the important. They know when they should

try to get the log out of their own eye, before picking at a splinter in their brother's eye. A politics that prizes awareness – of every outrage *du jour*, and every faddish virtue-signalling innovation – actually jeopardizes perspective, thus construed. It distracts us from the kind of historically-enriched, systematic interpretation of contemporary events that's a precondition for thinking the political in a properly discriminating and non-hypocritical fashion.



Taken holistically, I think what *Interior States* offers us is a call for perspective, and an exemplary model of what perspective looks like, specifically with regards to our understanding of religion's place in American public life. In part this means recognizing the Christian roots of 'novel' secular ideas, and O'Gieblyn makes a contribution on that front in the way she historicizes several strands of secular futurology. But her more distinctive contribution, to our understanding of the place of religion in American public life, is in revealing the complexity of the Biblical and doctrinal reasoning that feeds into surface-level Christian commitments. Flyover country isn't just driven by a brute aversion to all things secular and cosmopolitan. It has a theology.

The book's final essay, "Exiled", is in my view, the most impressive example of this element of O'Gieblyn's work. It develops an analysis of the theological underpinnings of Mike Pence's politics that is somehow playful, meticulous, and sobering all at the same time. The gist of it is that Pence is seen – by some of his supporters, certainly, and possibly by himself – as a modern day Daniel: one of God's chosen people, acting as an advisor to the pagan ruler (Trump's America = Babylon), while remaining steadfast in his faith and working to promote the cause of God's chosen ones during the period of exile. It would all sound a tad conspiratorial but for the numerous sources in Pence circles who invite roughly this take on things, and which O'Gieblyn lays out for us – including the pastor of the church Pence attended while Governor of Indiana, likening Daniel's position in Nebuchadnezzar's court to the Vice Presidency [209], and Indiana's former Secretary of State, announcing that "Mike could wind up as the foremost counsellor to the king, like in the Bible" [210].

The point of the piece, though, isn't just to run forensics on the Pencian evangelical worldview, but to assess this worldview's impact on the broader fate of Trump-era conservative causes. June 2015 saw the Supreme Court guarantee marriage rights to same-sex couples in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, but in March 2015, Indiana's *Religious Freedom Restoration Act* had already ensured that the proprietors of God-fearing Indianan pizzerias would be spared the trouble of catering any resultant nuptials. The evangelical self-conception of a holy people exiled in a pagan kingdom was nourished by this push-and-pull of Federal-level liberalization and state-level counter-politics. Pence's Vice Presidential nomination in 2016 won

evangelical support for Trump, not only because Pence himself was evangelical, but because of how his faith could be woven into the Exile/Babylon/Covenant/Daniel narrative that was already in train. O’Gieblyn ties off her absorbing account of these turns by highlighting a dark irony that surrounds US evangelicals’ invocation of Old Testament exile rhetoric, namely, its clearing the way “for an administration that is waging war on actual political exiles – particularly those who come from the land of the Old Testament” [216].

In this piece O’Gieblyn is modelling the difference between awareness and perspective. Mainstream progressive opinion is aware that evangelicals comprise a large portion of the Republican Party’s reactionary-nationalist wing. But it has no deeper explanation of this ideological alliance, beyond airy claims about “*false consciousness*”, or something like Clinton’s Manichean retreat to the idea of the Deploable. Other recent books that promise an insider perspective on both Americas, and which try to reveal something about what makes *them* tick – like J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*, and Tara Westover’s *Educated* – betray an awareness of religion’s involvement in a red state *weltanschauung*, while tending to portray it as a by-product of other forces (mental illness, the cultural rot of intergenerational poverty), rather than a world-shaping force in its own right. In trying to making sense of this American Other, it takes a more patient and theologically-informed perspective to countenance a prospect that is both more respectful of its subject, and more unsettling. When conservatives explain their political views by invoking Old Testament prophecies and apocalyptic themes from the Book of Revelation, maybe they mean what they’re saying.