

## CHAPTER 23.

# FOR SITES BOTH SACRED AND SECULAR: COMPOSING A LANGUAGE TO BRIDGE SPIRITUAL IDENTITY AND RHETORICAL PRACTICE

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We require an ethical vocabulary that speaks beyond the practices of skepticism and critique to address the possibilities of opening dialogues, finding affinities, acknowledging interdependencies, and talking to those strangers we most fear and distrust.

– John Duffy, “The Good Writer:  
Virtue Ethics and the Teaching of Writing”

In 2001, Anne Gere wrote in *College English* that “[t]hose who wish to write about religion not only lack the highly complex and compelling language of, say, queer theory, but they face an implacable secularism” (Brandt et al. 47). Her essay—part of a symposium focused on exploring the politics of the personal in relation to composition and literacy studies—came at a time when little space had been made for these matters in those fields, or in higher education more broadly. Though she reflects on her experiences as a Christian professor, the text is not about her individual negotiation of religious beliefs at a public university. Rather, she highlights the consequences for an academic world that fails to engage seriously with the spiritual: it becomes a rhetorical space in which a significant dimension of human identity is excluded, and one in which it is easy to exoticize and dismiss religious and spiritual practices that “fall outside traditional norms” (Brandt et al. 46).

Gere was calling not simply for the inclusion of religious ideas but for an intentionally *academic and intellectual* engagement with them. Queerness existed long before queer theory, of course, but theory sprung from the recognition of queerness as a subject of intellectual import—and not only to those who identify as queer. Theoretical lenses and languages are applied to the complex and the

critical, to that which is considered worthy of academic attention. Gere's point was not to equate the silencing she experienced to the struggles faced by queer people but to highlight the ways in which the "highly complex and compelling language" of theory can make way for the careful examination of experience—and for questioning various forms of "implacable" resistance.

In 2001, composition scholarship that engaged with religious discourses was sparse, but the two decades since have brought forth a burgeoning body of work in which we see the development and evolution of the "complex and compelling language" that Gere identified as a critical need. This chapter traces the lineage of what is becoming a robust area of study and highlights how Gere's work has been foundational to it.

## HISTORY AND CONTEXT

The historical ties between religion (Protestant Christianity in particular) and universities in the US may have made Gere's call for greater academic attention to religion seem odd to some. How could we lack a complex language for something that dominated education for hundreds of years? Hasn't a stricter separation of the religious and the secular in higher education made way for the inclusion of people traditionally denied access? Given the myriad political and cultural issues that orbit religion—not to mention the ways in which religion has been weaponized against various peoples—it may seem like simple common sense to, as Gere puts it, "militate against writing about religious experience" (Brandt et al. 46–47). However, as Gere and now many others have observed, a strict no-admission policy for religion carries significant risks.

Before exploring the 21st-century surge of scholarship on religion, it is important to examine how, by the late 20th century, U.S. higher education had developed "a scholarly culture that tends to assume that religion is a dead force intellectually" (Turner 20). Though tensions between religious interests and higher education have a long and complex history, I focus here on a few key moments that historians such as George Marsden and Warren Nord point to as crucial times of change or turmoil for American universities as they struggled with and against their Protestant Christian heritage. The first is the mid to late 19th century. In the mid-century, even state universities typically "had all Protestant faculties, had clergymen as presidents, and required Protestant chapel services" (Marsden, *The Soul...Revisited* 4). By 1890, most state universities still had institutionalized religious practices such as required chapel services, but higher education was rapidly secularizing (Nord 84). Evangelicalism and literal biblical interpretation were beginning to come under fire as Enlightenment ideals and the work of intellectuals like John Dewey and Charles Darwin gained popularity.

By the 1920s, chapel services were no longer mandatory at most state universities, there had been a sharp decline in Christian campus ministries, and changing mores around sex and alcohol had contributed to a decrease in student involvement in Christian churches and groups (Marsden, *The Soul* 343–44). In the 1940s–1950s, however, there was a resurgence of religious fervor on college campuses and in the United States more broadly, precipitated by WWII and the emergence of totalitarian governments. In the 1950s, college students were as likely as the rest of the population to belong to a church, and mainline Protestantism “could genuinely be considered to be flourishing” (Marsden, *The Soul* 14).<sup>1</sup> Even during this time, however, formal institutionalization of Christianity was held at bay by questions of pluralism—particularly in terms of whether institutionalized religion meant including Jewish and Catholic faculty members and heritage—and by educational secularism, which had grown in favor beginning in the late 19th century.

The 1960s brought dramatic social change—civil rights activism, anti-establishment sentiment, the impact of the war in Vietnam—that had a significant influence on campus life. In 1963, the Supreme Court outlawed formal religious exercises in public schools with its *Abington School District v. Schempp* case (United States). Formerly Protestant institutions were dropping denominational ties and religious standards for faculty members (Marsden, *The Soul...Revisited* 366). Concurrent with these changes in culture and policy was the establishment of religious studies as a discipline defined via the scientific method and social science methods. This move positioned religion as an object of study and corralled it into a specific department, set apart from inquiry in other disciplines. According to Marsden, these factors led to the official disestablishment of Protestant Christianity at public universities (*The Soul* 414, 435).

It is no surprise, then, that when Gere became a professor in the mid-1970s, she “learned early in [her] career that it was better to keep some things to [her] self, especially religion” (Brandt et al. 46). This was not a concern unique to Gere, or to that decade. In the early 1990s, hiding religious identity struck some devout scholars as safer than an attempt to integrate it with one’s intellectual identity. David Holmes, who published *Where the Sacred and Secular Harmonize: Birmingham Mass Meeting Rhetoric and the Prophetic Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement* in 2017, reports that during his graduate study at the University of Southern California in the 1990s and in his early years as a professor, he “kept any connection between [his] growing faith and burgeoning scholarship to [him]self” (172).

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1 It was perhaps not considered by *all* to be flourishing; in 1951, William F. Buckley published *God and Man at Yale*, a scathing critique of what he saw as Yale’s rejection of Christian principles.

In the mid to late 1990s, religion—when it was discussed at all—was most often approached in composition studies as a pedagogical dilemma, a difficulty faced by instructors when religion didn't stay where it belonged. It was also equated almost entirely with Christian beliefs, and Christian *student* beliefs in particular. Even as the emphasis on other facets of identity grew stronger, religion and spirituality were largely absent from scholarly exchanges. This was a time when Christians “were one of the only cultural groups openly and comfortably disparaged by many otherwise sensitive writing instructors” (Perkins 586) and when students' religious beliefs were typically presented as barriers to the work of composing.

## INTIMATE PRACTICES, FROM A DISTANCE

Given the ways that religious belief was often either excluded or disparaged in the 1990s, it is perhaps telling that Gere's scholarly engagement with religion during that decade appeared in a historical study of U.S. women's clubs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880–1920*, Gere acknowledges religion as a significant factor in the rhetorical and social work of women's social clubs, highlighting the influence not only of white Protestant Christian women, but also “considering clubs formed by women from Mormon [and] Jewish” backgrounds, which had traditionally been ignored (3).

This is not to imply that Gere chose this project as a means by which to engage with religious discourses or to represent this book as being primarily about religion (it is not). I simply suggest that this historical consideration of religion—the view of religion as artifact—is indicative of what was primarily available as a respected scholarly approach to religion at the time. A historical study of religion—certainly a worthy enterprise, then and now—is quite different from examining its role(s) in contemporary classrooms and scholarship; it is another step removed from a scholar acknowledging their own orientation toward religion as a subject position relevant to their profession. *Intimate Practices* focuses on a time when Protestant Christianity was the norm, both in and out of the university, when 98.7 percent of U.S. residents were religious—and 97 percent were Christian (Johnson and Zurlo 841).<sup>2</sup> This is the religious nation of a former time, gone the way of the Edwardian fashion that many women in these social clubs would have worn.

The current religious terrain is more complex, with about 64 percent of Americans identifying as Christian and 30 percent identifying as nonreligious

2 Christians (of all types) made up 97 percent of the U.S. population, Jews made up 1.4 percent, and the “nonreligious” made up 1.3 percent.

(Kramer et al.). An even greater contrast may appear when we look specifically at faculty: a 2006 survey found that “while most professors believed in at least the possibility of God’s existence, they were more than twice as likely to be skeptics or atheists as the general population” (Barlett). What those numbers mean for scholarship or the academic climate is a matter of debate. Some claim that religious beliefs are held to a much higher standard of evidence than nonreligious beliefs, if they are allowed into academic conversation at all (Edwards 147). Others assert that “religious skepticism represents a minority position, even among professors teaching at elite research universities” (Gross and Simmons 103). What does seem clear is that religion, once an assumed presence across the university, is now a contested one. It was into this more contested space that Gere spoke in 2001.

## A SPARK AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Gere’s contribution to the article she co-authored with Deborah Brandt and their colleagues was published in September 2001, just as the horror of 9/11 thrust religion into the cultural consciousness with debates about whether the attacks were religiously or politically motivated, or both. Remarkable growth in scholarship related to religion followed, and during the first decade of the 21st century, theoretical engagement with religion and its connections to writing, rhetoric, and pedagogy flourished. Anne Gere, along with Tom Amorose, Beth Daniell, David Jolliffe, and Elizabeth Vander Lei, laid the foundation for what would become, in 2003, the CCCC Special Interest Group on Rhetoric and Christian Tradition (now called Rhetoric and Religious Traditions).<sup>3</sup> *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *WPA*, and other prominent journals published articles approaching religion with complexity and rigor. Shari J. Stenberg, in a *College English* article, called the skepticism about Christian students and what they bring to college classrooms “intellectual distrust,” critiquing an academic culture in which “religious ideologies are often considered hindrances to—not vehicles for—critical thought” (271).

The 2005 book *Negotiating Religious Faith in the Composition Classroom*, edited by Elizabeth Vander Lei and Bonnie Lenore Kyburz, took up the task of reflecting on how religious identity affects pedagogical decisions, student-instructor relationships, and institutional mission. The collected essays make a case for “acknowledging the presence of religious faith in our classrooms”

3 A brief history of the Special Interest Group on Rhetoric and Christian Tradition can be found at <https://rhetoricandchristiantradition.wordpress.com/about/>. Information on the Rhetoric and Religious Traditions Special Interest Group is available at <https://sites.google.com/view/rhetoricandreligioustraditions/home>.

and for “teach[ing] students about the potential for religious faith to inspire and nurture effective rhetorical practice” (Vander Lei, “Coming to Terms” 3). This was a text that acknowledged the risks of silencing religious expression that Gere had pointed to a few years earlier. Bronwyn T. Williams, in his contribution to *Negotiating*, writes, “There are no simple solutions to cross-cultural conflicts involving faith and rhetoric. Yet it is folly to imagine that they are not already in the classroom with us. We must bring religion into open discussion ... so that we can engage in thoughtful conversations about its influence in how we write and read” (117). He then warns, “If we don’t address these issues directly, however, they will still emerge, but in ways that anger and frustrate both teacher and students” (117).

In just a few years, the strident secularism that Gere had identified was being challenged by scholars advocating not just for the toleration of religious discourses in the classroom but also for the deliberate acknowledgement and inclusion of them. There were calls for greater scholarly attention to religion as well, with concerns raised about how “rarely topicalized” religion was in comparison to other forms of difference (Wallace 518). Faculty members from various disciplines noted the “increasingly consequential” nature of religion, even at secular institutions (Diamond and Copre xv).

Religion, it seemed, had become too important to dismiss, and its intellectual, rhetorical, and pedagogical significance was coming into sharper focus (Edwards 28; Fish C1; Griffith B6). Sharon Crowley’s book *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism* explored the cultural and rhetorical tensions between liberalism and Christian fundamentalism, which Crowley presented as dominating the “discursive climate” of American life (2). The book won the 2008 CCCC Outstanding Book Award—affirmation from the largest professional organization supporting research in writing studies that religion mattered to the field.

Among the many texts that added to and complicated this growing area of research was *Renovating Rhetoric in Christian Tradition* (2014), edited by Elizabeth Vander Lei, Thomas Amorose, Beth Daniell, and Anne Gere. The book grew out of “a persistent scholarly curiosity about the relationship of rhetoric and religion” and the perspective that “examining this relationship produces useful insights about complex rhetorical acts” (Vander Lei, Introduction ix). Gere’s chapter, titled “Constructing Devout Feminists: A Mormon Case,” dives directly into that rhetorical complexity, exploring the ways in which 19th-century Mormon women would “ally themselves rhetorically with progressive women” on issues such as education and women’s suffrage, even as they remained devoted to a belief system deeply rooted in a patriarchal structure of power (7, 4). The fact that these dual allegiances strike us as an odd—perhaps impossible—pairing

is precisely Gere's point. As Gere puts it, the "impoverished terms of academic discourses about religion make it difficult to perceive and explore the complexities that enable adherents of a given faith to remain completely devout while simultaneously embracing progressive secular causes" (15).

This connection to our current academic discourses is what makes Gere's study of 19th-century women in "Constructing Devout Feminists" so distinct from the one in *Intimate Practices*. Here, the reader is considering these women and their work not as distant history but as reflections of our current rhetorical (mis)understanding of the many ways that religious faith informs culture, politics, and education. As she did in 2001, Gere points to the continued need for theoretical tools to help scholars "'see' religion in a secular context" ("Constructing Devout Feminists" 15). She highlights how the "conflation of institutional with intellectual secularization has rendered the discourses surrounding religion stunted" and left us with such "limited secular academic language for religion" that the agency and complexity of religious rhetors is left unexamined (15). In "Constructing Devout Feminists" Gere invites the reader to imagine common rhetorical ground with women whose religious practices may be unfamiliar and even repugnant to them. Through this rhetorical connection, Gere expands and complicates the notion of how religious perspectives may be enacted.

Gere's essay stretches the discourses surrounding religion to supply new and more nuanced language for considering religious rhetoric. *Renovating Rhetoric in Christian Tradition* as a collection presents the possibility of "religious belief as a dynamic process of meaning-making"—a significant divergence from the common view of religion as rigid, anti-intellectual, and repressive (Vander Lei, Introduction xi). It also lays the foundation for subsequent work exploring the rhetorical possibilities of religious belief. Michael-John DePalma, for example, builds on the ways that the contributors to *Renovating Rhetoric* "challenge the binaries associated with religious discourses" in order to explore "the potential of undergraduate writing courses centered on religious rhetorics to cultivate capacities that are essential to thoughtful civic engagement" (253). My own article, which follows DePalma's in the same volume of *College English*, suggests that "[r]ather than simply *hope* that students will either leave religious discourses out of their writing or use them appropriately, instructors can direct students' attention to how these discourses might effectively be used" by engaging in thoughtful, rhetorically-grounded discussions (Thomson-Bunn 293). In their introduction to *Mapping Christian Rhetorics*, Michael-John DePalma and Jeffrey M. Ringer write that "Christian rhetorics specifically and religious rhetorics more broadly are *essential* to rhetorical studies" (2). It is difficult to see how such assertions could have been made effectively—let alone published for a wide readership—without the conversations that Gere, Amorose, Daniell, Vander Lei, and others began.



Kelly Ritter's "From the Editor" introduction to that volume of *College English* is compelling for the way it reveals the shifting disciplinary perceptions of religious belief and its relationship to writing and rhetoric. Despite being "a nonreligious person [her]self, who actively *avoids* discussions of faith in [her] own classes," Ritter observes that we are "in need of a meaningful education in rhetoric and ethics—one that is not in opposition to forces such as religious faith, for example, or other personal imperatives, but is instead in productive dialogue with it" (225, 223). This is a scholar with no personal or scholarly investment in religion, positing religious belief as culturally, ethically, and pedagogically relevant—to everyone.

## DESCENDANTS

Gere's scholarship, in both breadth and depth, is staggering; it is daunting to read just a *list* of her publications and awards. What may not be as noticeable, or as widely celebrated, is the breadth and depth of her mentorship. Beyond her significant individual contributions to composition, rhetoric, literacy studies, and education, she has nurtured the scholarship of many students, encouraging their voices and lines of inquiry.

When I began my doctoral studies at the University of Michigan, I had no plans to write a dissertation exploring religious discourses and their relationship to composition. It was not until the end of my second year, when I composed my Theorization of Learning exam, that I confronted the fact that despite all of my formal education happening in public schools and universities, I could not address my intellectual development without acknowledging my religious upbringing. My earliest thinking—contemplating big questions, struggling with abstract concepts, wondering at the complexity of texts like the Bible—was ignited by my Christian parents and stoked by my church. To have faith—in my experience—was to ponder, to question, to read closely, to reckon with never knowing all. I surmised very early, however, that school was not the place for all that. For the next 20 or so years, I let my academic and spiritual selves develop in separate spheres. It never occurred to me to connect them.

And then, at the third public university I attended, where I'd gone to pursue a degree unrelated (I thought) to religion, the connections seemed obvious and inescapable. Still, I don't know that I would have pursued those connections, or even allowed them into that second-year exam, had I not worked with Anne Gere. I knew what she had written in 2001, and suddenly that text was an invitation.

Her graduate students interested in religion and spirituality not only found the door open to those interests but were equipped with methodologies, texts, and frameworks to support them. When I began my dissertation work in 2006,



I found that in five short years, Gere's call had sparked much important work and that I had walked into a small but blossoming subfield. I am not an isolated case; I witnessed graduate student colleagues like Jim Beitler, Christian Dallahis, Zandra Jordan, and Melody Pugh weave religion and spirituality into their dissertation projects and then on into their professional lives and publications. Their work, then and now, speaks to how carefully Gere made space for her students' minds *and* spirits.

In her foreword for Jim Beitler and Richard Hughes Gibson's 2020 book *Charitable Writing*, Anne Gere writes that she was "a tenured full professor before [she] could utter phrases like 'singing in my church choir' or 'the homeless shelter sponsored by my church' at the university" (xi). She then marvels at the ways the authors—one of whom (Beitler) is her former student, now a tenured professor himself—have connected writing instruction to spiritual formation and "transformed [her] thinking about what it means to write and teach writing" (xiii). The transformation has not moved in only one direction, however. Beitler and Gibson acknowledge Gere as a "guide" to their work, one who years before had "countered the myopia of the field's way of accounting for itself ... [and] sought a more panoramic view of writing lives" (130). She helped prepare the way for scholarship that would transform her own ways of knowing, and those of so many others.

## **PATHS YET TO BE EXPLORED**

As Gere's wide-reaching work attests, she is a scholar attuned to the unexamined. Even in 2001, Gere was resisting a narrow definition of religion and spirituality as she wrote about her own position as a religious person. In fact, the inclusion of minority traditions and thoughtful attention to underrepresented spiritual practices is central to her argument in that piece. She recognizes the risks of marginalizing that which exists outside of mainline Protestant Christianity, and describes how her own "understanding of religion broadened" as her daughter, an Athabascan person, "initiated [her] into Native American spirituality" and sacred rites (Brandt et al. 46). She does not shrug off her own faith, but she is willing to look beyond it.

That more expansive view of religion/spirituality is still relatively rare, but it is making its way into more of our professional spaces. John Duffy argues for an articulation of virtue in the writing classroom that escapes the narrow bounds of Christian morality and invites students to practice humility, honesty, and mutual respect as rhetorical virtues (238). At the Rhetoric and Religion in the 21st Century conference in 2018, Lisa King led an illuminating and well-attended seminar on Indigenous Rhetorics and Rhetorics of Religion. In 2023, the Rhetoric and Religious Traditions conference included panels on Medieval and Renaissance Kabbalah; the intersections of rhetoric, education, and Islamic

traditions; the Sinhala Buddhist rhetoric of sovereignty; disability and Christian rhetorics; queer youth and Catholicism; ritual practices of the Indigenous Galos tribe of India; and Jewish identity in the composition classroom.<sup>4</sup> Conferences and academic journals are beginning to examine religion in ways that few would have imagined not long ago.

Of course, there is much work yet to be done. Higher education in the US is more religiously diverse than it has ever been, and students from other countries are contributing significantly to the changing landscape of religious belief on our campuses (Marsden, *The Soul...Revisited* 357). The intersections of religion, spirituality, rhetoric, writing, literacy, research, and teaching remain nascent areas of study, with many questions not yet asked, let alone answered. Still, in the two decades since Gere was “just beginning to untangle the politics that underlie the insistence upon secular to the exclusion of sacred” (Brandt et al. 47), scholarship and professional discourse in these areas has flourished. That is in no small part due to the rhetorical space that Gere helped to create.

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<sup>4</sup> Among many others: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oLfmwAum8BEMNviTrO3c-Mj9-a3x8cYSu/view>.

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