



**UNION**

*Religious Worlds of New York* • *Curriculum Development Project*

## Felony and Faith: Crime and Religion in Southern Literary Nonfiction

*Chris Watkins, Baylor School, Chattanooga, TN*

### Abstract

Dennis Covington's *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* and John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* each feature storylines that revolve around crime. This is not unusual for literary nonfiction, but in these cases the crime is linked to religious beliefs and practices that many seniors in my co-ed, urban, Southern, and predominantly white and Protestant college preparatory school may find at least alien if not extreme.<sup>1</sup> Students are inclined to ignore such "religious voices," thus marginalizing them and rendering them irrelevant (Nord and Haynes 47). The faiths, however, are both rooted and active in the region, although the majority of my students are not aware or have very little (or an uninformed) knowledge of them. Nord and Haynes argue that "literature...provide[s] marvelous ways of coming to understand religion from the 'inside'" (131).

Over the course of 6 to 8 weeks in a contemporary literature course, as the students develop a framework and construct context (Stage 1), and then study the books themselves (Stage 2), they will focus on the interplay between *inside expressions* and *outside assessments* of faith. This document will outline the essential steps of the unit, and include two key background readings referenced below.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Baylor School aspires to uphold the belief "that faith is central to every person's life and that the study of religion is an essential part of a complete education. While the majority of [its] students and faculty are Christian, all major world religions are represented in the school." As far as religious and ethical education are concerned, the school espouses the following: "We consider it the prerogative of parents to indoctrinate their children in their family's faith tradition. It is the school's job to build character and train students in religious literacy, as a requirement of citizenship and as a means of exploring their own spirituality effectively. Our goal is to help every member of the school community deepen their sense of reverence, ethical discernment, and understanding of their own faith traditions and the traditions of others." A final vital bit of contextual information is the fact that other than students attending "a weekly chapel program, which includes lectures, artistic presentations, and declarations of faith from diverse traditions...in the Upper School, the academic study of advanced ethics, the Bible and other sacred texts, and the history of world religions are available [only] through elective courses." To that end, helping students navigate and appreciate texts in which religious beliefs figure prominently is crucial to their academic, social, and personal development.

## Stage 1: Pre-Reading on Religious, Criminal, and Economic Landscapes

For each of the following research, response, and reading activities, students should do some work in class and finish for homework. The next day, we discuss their research findings, centering the discussion on the inferences they make, especially *how* and *why* they have drawn such conclusions. They also react to the readings in their journals for 5-10 minutes by summarizing the main points and by writing about a personal connection.

### Day 1

- Peruse the Pew Research Center's "[Religious Landscape Study](#)."
- Focusing on regional statistics pertaining to "Beliefs and Practices," answer the following guided response questions:
  - ***What is the most surprising piece of information? Briefly explain.***
  - ***What is the least surprising piece of information? Briefly explain.***
  - ***What are three inferences you can make from this information?***
- Read entry on "Ecstasy" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Psychology* (included below)

### Day 2

- Access the Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics [database](#) to investigate regional crime statistics.
- In response to your findings, answer the same three guided response questions listed above in Day 1.
- Read entry on "Criminality" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Psychology* (included below)

### Day 3

- Research the U.S. Census Bureau's [Poverty Data Tools](#), restricting your search to statistics about Alabama, Tennessee, and Georgia.
- React to the regional economic statistics by answering the same three guided response questions listed above in Day 1.

### Day 4

- Read "[The Original Underclass](#)," a review of *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* and *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*

### Day 5

- Read Robert Orsi's essay "[Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion](#)"

### Day 6

- Read "[Stretching the Sacred](#)"

## Stage 2: Reading and Studying *Salvation* and *Midnight*

Students follow annotation guidelines while reading – reading with pencil or pen in hand, marking 2-4 passages per chapter that demonstrate the religious faith/belief/worldview from an insider's perspective or an outsider's perspective.

At the start of each class, students complete one of the following three kinds of writing assignments, whichever the teacher (or student) chooses for the day:

- Passage analysis: What narrative techniques does the writer use to signal that a specific passage is either an inside or an outside perspective?
- Passage comparison: How does an inside perspective differ from an outside perspective in last night's reading?
- Passage connection: How can you connect a passage you annotated to an earlier article or piece of data?

Students also use their in-class writing and other annotations as fodder for discussion.

### Pedagogic Goals

As students work with these two nonfiction works, they will come to a fuller appreciation of unusual religious practices that are local but somewhat hidden, while also considering how writers contextualize the lived religion experience through exploring its connections to location, class, institutionalized religion, and crime.

Along the way, students will continue to develop their abilities in critical reading, thinking, and writing through guided annotation, focused whole-class and small-group discussions, and analytical writing assignments. They also practice interpreting and synthesizing different types of data.

### References

Nash, Jo. "Ecstasy." *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*. 2nd ed., 2014, pp. 572-574.

Nord, Warren A. and Charles Haynes. *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*. ASCD and First Amendment Center, 1998.

Van Denend, Jessica. "Criminality." *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*. 2nd ed., 2014, pp. 422-425.

**For information about the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, see: [www.religiousworldsnyc.org](http://www.religiousworldsnyc.org).**

## Appendix 1

Nash, Jo. "Ecstasy." *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*. 2nd ed., 2014, pp. 572-574.

### Definition

The word ecstasy is derived from the Greek "ekstasis," meaning "beyond or outside the self," and has different meanings depending on whether it is used in a religious or psychological context. One definition that can be used to underscore these different ecstasies might be "an experience of blissful non-duality." This involves an experience of dissolution of ontological boundaries between an internal sense of self and external otherness, leading to an intense affective experience of oneness or union of rapturous intensity called ecstatic.

### Religious Perspectives

Religious accounts of ecstatic experience are present in the mystical wings of most major world religions, including the Abrahamic, Dharmic, and "indigenous" traditions (also known as shamanic or pagan faiths). Accounts of ecstatic experience are common to charismatic and contemplative Christianity, the Sufis of Islam, the Kabbalists of Judaism, the Vajrayana practitioners of Buddhism, Tantric Hinduism, and the mystics of Sikhism. Ecstatic experience in a religious context derives from the devotional practices and contemplative disciplines used to dissolve the boundaries between one's sense of an enclosed separate "self" or "I" and the godhead (Yahweh, God, Allah, Brahman, Nam), omnipresent awakened mind (Buddha) or other divine source of being, such as the nature spirits of indigenous and shamanic traditions. Religious ecstasy may be evoked by the affective intensity of the practitioners' devotional fervor, expressed in chants, dance, song, poetry, and other physical practices, such as fasting and ritual, or the cognitive space and stillness of contemplative discipline, comprised of meditation or prayer. In many cases, a mixture of both active devotion and contemplative stillness is used to achieve the dissolution of dualistic perceptions and evoke the non-dual experience of ecstatic bliss. This experience would be deemed desirable by most religious practitioners and indicative of spiritual progress. However, the understanding of ecstasy from a psychological perspective is somewhat different.

### Depth Psychology Perspectives

From an object relations psychoanalytic perspective, a loss of boundaries of this kind would imply the dissolution of the ego and a possible regression to a manic defense against separation (Klein 1940), first deployed by the infant in denial of the absent breast, and so a kind of hallucination that defends against unbearable loss of original oneness with the mother's body. Re-experienced in adulthood, an unmediated, boundariless state of bliss could indicate at best a defensive denial of depression and at worst a psychotic mood disorder of the manic or bipolar kind. The one exception to this pathologizing of ecstasy would be the bliss of orgasm experienced during sexual climax with another person and the ensuing sense of intersubjective merging deemed necessary for a healthy intimate relationship.

From an archetypal psychology perspective, the understanding of ecstatic experience is different again. Jungian psychologist Robert A. Johnson's (1987) book *Ecstasy: Understanding the Psychology of Joy* proposes that Western civilization has repressed an innate human ability to experience this "oneness," due to guilt and alienation from our bodies at the heart of modern consumerist society, now harbored by the Western collective unconscious. He calls for us to return to the days of Dionysian celebration of the pleasures of the body and the senses and reclaim our birthright to a regular experience of cosmic bliss and ecstasy. This enables human beings to retain vitality, joy, and a sense of being alive that is absent in the lives of so many Western adults. A loss of ritual celebration has occurred with secularization, causing a kind of exhaustion at the heart of a culture that prohibits this need for periodic Dionysian play and wildness, says Johnson. This exhaustion may be partly responsible for the pandemic of depression and anxiety plaguing secularized Western societies.

## Neuropsychology Perspectives

However, a neuropsychological analysis of ecstasy uses scientific studies of brain activity to explain the phenomenon of blissful, non-dual experience. Neuropsychologists Newberg and D'Aquili (2000) write:

During certain types of meditation... We have proposed that as the hypertrophotropic state creates a state of oceanic bliss, the ergotropic eruption results in the experience of a sense of a tremendous release of energy... activity is so extreme that 'spillover' occurs... This may be associated with the experience of an orgasmic, rapturous or ecstatic rush, arising from a generalized sense of flow and resulting in a trance-like state (pp. 255–256).

This “spillover” is comprised of the co-activation of both hemispheres of the brain. Meditative techniques that deploy certain kinds of cognitive strategies alongside focused breathwork enable maximal simultaneous stimulation of the causal and holistic operators that then evoke an existential experience of non-duality, selflessness, or “oneness” with all that is conventionally experienced as “other.” The result is ecstasy.

## Psycho-Spiritual Explanations

The above accounts have implications for understanding both the psychology and spirituality of ecstasy as an aspect of an experiential ontology of nonself. Far from being a grandiose, elated sensibility associated with the delusory highs and hallucinations of manic psychoses, rather it may indicate that a sense of a bounded self has been lost or relinquished. This may have both positive and negative results psychologically and spiritually. It may well indicate a regression has taken place but it may also indicate that egocentric object relations have been surrendered, as reported by mystics describing the experience of union with the godhead of monotheisms or merging with the deities or spirits of polytheisms. It may also indicate that the conceptual and ontological boundaries associated with doctrines of the self have been ruptured entirely, as occurs with progressively subtle realizations of “emptiness” or “sunyata” experienced by advanced Buddhist practitioners. Outside the context of religious experience, ecstasy may also be evoked by experience of pure immanence, a kind of blissful integration as depicted in nontheistic poststructural thought of Deleuze (1995/2001).

The key to assessing the function of ecstatic experience must be the observation of the effects. Whether it indicates a psychotic regression or a form of spiritual integration, or just a temporary “peak experience” (Maslow 1964), will be revealed by the longer-term effects on thought, affect, and behavior.

## Appendix 2

Van Denend, Jessica. "Criminality." *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*. 2nd ed., 2014, pp. 422-425.

Criminality is the state of "being" a criminal, a designation generally accompanied by social stigma. A criminal is someone who commits a crime or, in other words, breaks or fails to comply with a law or rule. Implicitly then is the presence of a governing authority dictating law and enacting punishment for failure to adhere to it. The word crime originates from the Latin root *cernō* and Greek *κρίνω* = "I judge."

How social criminality relates to breaches of divine law or covenant – sin in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or *pāpa* in Buddhism and Hinduism – has been complicated and contentious through the centuries. Roman Catholic canon, Puritan moral law, Islamic sharia, and Jewish halakah are examples of religious legal systems which claim absolute and all-encompassing jurisdiction over their adherents and yet must still navigate with political power structures and power-sharing with people from other or no faith. One has only to look as far as contemporary politics in the United States to see the line of demarcation between civil and moral laws, debatably able to be held as an abstraction, grow complicated, and even become erased in practical application as pathology, moral wrongdoing, and criminal activity become blurred: legal prohibitions against alcohol consumption, miscegenation, and homosexuality, being some historical and not-so-historical examples. Depth psychology complicates the matter even further, undermining the simplicity of legal and moral judgments by raising the possibility of motivations and impulses for criminal activity that lie outside the conscious self. What is one's culpability or moral responsibility for actions that result from forces outside one's conscious control, outside one's, in religious terms, free will? Despite his wisdom and incredible intellect, it was not his own decision making but a bigger fate – announced through a prophecy given by the Oracle at Delphi – that eventually dictated Oedipus's path and led to his tragic crimes.

A lot of energy has been put forth in psychological studies towards a new definition of criminality that incorporates the unconscious; the criminal and his/her unconscious has become a fascinating object of study. All of these accounts must take their place within the nexus of biological, psychological, and sociological factors. Cesare Lombroso, a fin de siècle criminologist, thought criminality could be detected as biological degeneracy, which would appear in particular physiognomic features. Others were more inclined to see criminality as housed within psychic reality. It was this view that made Wilhelm Stekel optimistic that criminality could be cured or even eradicated through psychoanalysis, stating, "Perhaps this change of the social order will go so far that in times to come criminals will be analyzed instead of being punished; thus the ideal of a world without a prison does not appear as impossible to us as it did to a former generation" (1933).

Freud gave the famous and still clinically utilized depiction of the "pale criminal," who commits crime out of an unconscious sense of guilt that expresses itself as a "need for punishment" (1916, see also Reik (1925) and Fenichel (1928)). Anna Freud discusses criminality that results from defused aggression (1972), while others (Alexander and Staub 1956; Bromberg 1948; Steckel and London 1933) will talk about criminality as the opposite end on the scale as a neurosis - a too-lenient superego that cannot to control criminal tendencies from the id. Melanie Klein will directly contradict this: rather than weak or nonexistent, she says, the criminal's superego is overly strict, which causes the criminal to feel persecuted and seek to destroy others (1988/1934). Another tendency is to place criminality in an earlier, infantile stage of psychic development, whether in preoedipal rather than oedipal processing of guilt (Klein 1988/1927), a pregenital narcissism that is guided by wants and entitlement (Murray 1967) or a fixation in the anal-sadistic stage (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1978; Simmel 1920). Others, including Simmel, Westwick, and White, add an increased emphasis on the impact of physical and social environments, making room for an understanding of criminality as social protest. D. W. Winnicott links the criminal back to the deprived child, who once had and then lost something good enough from the environment (1984, 1987). Object-relations school will look at criminality in terms of the nexus of family and social relationships (Buckley 1985; L'Abate and Baggett 1997). Criminal acts have been speculated to both as transitional phenomena that attempt to create communication and dependency (Domash and Balter 1979) and as an impasse-creating defense against emotional contact and relationship (Ferro). According to Lacan (1966),

the criminal is one who mistakes the symbolic for the real. Lastly, new understandings of shame (Gilligan 2003) and of trauma have also fed into criminological studies, and a more complex understanding of how victims become victimizers; Sue Grand discusses the “catastrophic loneliness” caused by “malignant trauma” that perpetuates evil (2000). A tangential piece of these studies has been the evolving studies on the criminality of women – back in interest these days in the USA due to rapidly increasing rates of female incarceration.

## Analysis

These studies, while useful towards increasing understanding and implementation of the knowledge of the unconscious, are at their weakest when they profess a definitive characterization of the criminal; taken in their entirety, it seems obvious that the question of what we do with the bad in ourselves and how we contain or act on urges to hurt others are as unique and individual as (and connected to) Freud’s Oedipal gateway or Jung’s process of individuation. What is not unique, depth psychology and religion suggest, is that they are present. The earliest founding story of the Abrahamic traditions, which of the fall from the Garden of Eden, although interpreted differently by different traditions, is based in the concept of a primal crime, inherited by all people. (Freud too, in *Totem and Taboo*, narrates a creation myth in this vein.) According to most interpretations of these stories, who we are as people is born out of a criminal act, and in effect, in religious terms, our “fallenness,” as well as the potential for further criminality, lies in every one of us. In the words of Ferenczi: “I must look for the cause of my own repressed criminality. To some extent I admire the man who dares to do the things I deny to myself” (qtd. by Costello 2002). Or Dostoevsky: “Nobody in the world can be the judge of the criminal before he has realized that he himself is as much a criminal as the one who confronts him” (1957). Or Jesus: “And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not perceive the plank in your own eye?” (Luke 6:41–42, NRSV).

Seeing the criminal as an object of study, then, has the potential to reify him/her as a subjective other, separate and quantitatively different from the investigator. It is important to ask what function morality is serving, who is doing the judging, and when do those human authorities benefit from remaining unquestioned or invisible or equated with the divine. Also, there is further thought to be done on the process of transformation from crime (action) to criminal (person) – when actions designated as “good” or “bad” designate people as inherently “good” or “bad.” DeGrazia writes that society has a stake in maintaining the clear split between “good” and “bad,” arguing that we need the preservation of order and of our ability to make decisions based on knowing who is bad and who is good (1952). Perhaps, yet we cannot pretend that we live in a world without principalities and powers. William A. White writes that “the criminal becomes the scapegoat upon which [man] can transfer his own tendency to sinfulness and thus by punishing the criminal he deludes himself into feeling a religious righteous indignation” (1966, see also Menninger on the desire for vengeance). Neil Altman lists criminality, along with exploitation, greed, unrestrained sexual passion as displaced by white people on to persons of color.

Lastly, studies focusing solely on the individual criminal can have the unhelpful consequence of obscuring the equally if not more relevant criminality of groups, societies, and nations. Jerome Miller criticizes psychologists and other social scientists for their complacency towards an emphasis on individual pathology, being willing to provide “the labels necessary to proceed with the most punitive recommendations available” (2001). Even some laws may in fact be criminal, as advocates against segregation, apartheid, systems of colonialism would historically attest, and as opponents of, for example, the Rockefeller Drug Laws in New York State would argue today.

Religion must answer to Freud’s criticism of it as an agent of moral repression; it must decide how much of its function is indeed in reinforcing prohibitions or how much it also has a stake in providing a new space with which to evaluate the power structures, a separate authority that may trump improper usage of power and inequitable power structures. Historically, it has been the mechanism by which good and bad are kept far apart, and inequities are maintained, as well as the voice of conscience that, for example, led a few pastors to resist Nazi power, even by becoming criminals. Perhaps there is something to be said for breaking the rules. Jung took issue with religion aligning itself too much with the “good.” Freud (1910) criticizes him for suffering from the “vice of virtue.” He writes, “One must become a bad character, disregard the rules, sacrifice oneself, betray, behave like an artist who buys paints with his wife’s household money or burns the furniture to heat the studio for his model. Without such a bit of criminality there is no real achievement.”