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“Where do you put Jesus in your thinking?”

Negotiating Belief in Book Clubs

This essay will explore the ways in which a literary author’s explicit encoding of belief impacts narrative interest. Borrowing analytical tools from the fields of narrative theory and pragmatic theology, this essay will analyze recorded book club discussions of Louise Erdrich’s novel *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001). In particular, it will focus on the ways participants negotiated three themes they deemed contentious and ethically problematic in the novel: the descriptions of gender as performative and porous, saintliness or hagiography, and the promotion of hybrid religious practices. This content analysis of participants’ negotiations of the novel’s themes will help elucidate some of the ways in which literary discussion can provide a space for individuals to articulate and refine their personal beliefs.

Although identification with a religious group has dropped in the last half century, the latest national surveys indicate that 81 percent of the adult population in the United States affiliate themselves with a specific religion or denomination (cf. Kosmin and Keysar 2006, 24). This means that in spite of an increase of those who do ascribe to any particular denomination – the “nones” – the overwhelming majority of Americans still practice, confirm, or deepen their belief by regularly attending services in a church, synagogue, meeting, hall, or mosque.¹

In *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (2001), sociologist Wade Clark Roof argues that the high rates of religious observance are due to the fact that many individuals, or “spiritual seekers,” crave a sense of fullness or wholeness in a postmodern world filled with insecurities, risks, uncertainties, and increased isolation. These seekers, interested in lived religion, or the everyday practice of belief, develop and supplement their faith by finding new approaches, combinations, and individual solutions to theological inconsistencies and gaps they may have learned in formal institutions of faith. Elsewhere, Roof and Nathalie Caron (2006, 121f.) state that, given the glut of “spiritual suppliers,” many Americans now blend elements from various belief systems, creating a hybrid, personal system of meaning.

Robert Wuthnow’s *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950’s* (1998a) makes a similar argument, contending that contemporary Americans can neither accommodate nor appreciate the stability offered by traditional institutions of faith, what Wuthnow terms a spirituality of inhabiting, or dwelling. This stable spiritual stance, he argues, has given way to “a new spirituality of seeking” in which individuals must “increasingly negotiate among competing glimpses of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom” (ibid.,

3). Wuthnow's companion study, *Loose Connections: Civic Involvement in America's Fragmented Communities* (1998b), attempts to link the shift from seeking to dwelling mentalities with a similar movement from altruistic volunteerism to self-interested activism in postwar America. Wuthnow details the decline of old categories of civic participation – fraternal orders, men's and women's clubs, and good neighbors, all of which stressed loyalty and long-term commitment – and the simultaneous rise in non-profit, ad-hoc volunteerism and self-help or special interest group participation. These “loose connections,” Wuthnow claims, are often “purely instrumental, thus failing to nurture the casual socializing that leads to deeper friendships” (ibid., 207). Wuthnow proposes that while religious institutions today are less influential than they used to be, they can still help people (re)establish deep and meaningful connections, a process Wuthnow (2002, 165) calls “reassembling.” This is similar to sociologist and Catholic priest Andrew Greeley's (2001, 36) contention that “men and women still want something in which to believe and to which to belong. They aspire to faith and community.”

In this essay, I would like to argue that book clubs – both secular and religious – can serve as a valuable site for seeking, connecting, and reassembling. Such groups offer an opportunity to socialize with other people who have similar tastes and preferences and can therefore help foster new and meaningful interpersonal connections. Furthermore, book club participants can negotiate their personal and collective stance toward the topics embedded in books, such as religious belief. Building upon Roof and Wuthnow's arguments, I would go so far as to say that book clubs provide a setting for individuals to articulate and refine their personal belief systems. In order to support these claims, I will combine theoretical approaches from postclassical narrative theory and pragmatic theology. These approaches are intended to help justify and guide my subsequent analysis of the discursive practices of three American reading group's recorded discussions of Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001). In addition, this content analysis will attempt to shed light on the dispositions and cultural embeddedness of these book club participants.

1. Outline of Approach

In her international, cross-cultural study of reading groups, Bethan Benwell (2009, 308) asserts that a group reading of a text “is very much a negotiated, often contested, collaborative process, which is informed by, and responds to, the conditions and context of its production” (*italics in the original*). Like Benwell, I think that an understanding of “booktalk” as an ongoing process of negotiation is key to approaching the material in a way that can encompass both the discursive practices of the groups and the specific material being exchanged.

As a means of framing my interpretations, I will first briefly describe two complementary approaches. The first, Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck's (2009) analysis of narrative interest as a process of cultural negotiation, provides a specific and operational method for examining the experience of individual readers from the perspective of narrative theory. The authors begin by stating that narrative interest occurs when the material being circulated in a text coincides with a reader's cultural predisposition. The authors stress that narrative interest is not static; rather, it evolves and changes as a reader encounters and interprets the topics or themes, the perceived strengths and weaknesses (assets and liabilities), and the genre conventions (fields) of a text, and adjusts his or her expectations accordingly. By focusing on these three "sites for cultural negotiation," Herman and Vervaeck argue, we can arrive at a better understanding of how a "narrative presented to the reader is transformed into something worthwhile" during and after the act of reading (*ibid.*, 120). They also situate narrative interest in the realm of individual preference, thus avoiding judgments of readers' appraisals and allowing for interpretive variation. Furthermore, their theoretical model accounts for textual features such as the author's writing style and the themes as well as readers' reactions to these elements. For as the authors state: "if interest is construed, it emanates from the interplay between the various elements and parties entering the negotiation. No single element or party is ultimately responsible for narrative interest" (*ibid.*, 113).

My second theoretical frame draws from the field of pragmatic theology. My stance toward the use of religious narratives aligns with Chris Hermans's (2013) descriptions of a pragmatic epistemology based on a weak notion of rationality. The theoretical premise outlined by Hermans – similar to the one outlined by Roof – is that narratives can help one gain self-knowledge and experience a sense of spiritual fullness or wholeness (*ibid.*, 55). Furthermore, this pragmatic stance asserts that "all claims about reality are weak, in the sense that every judgement is made in the context of an epistemic community, based on arguments and ideas which are accepted in that community" (*ibid.*, 63). This approach, according to James Day (2013, 37), conceptualizes religion as "something that is done, as much as believed," and is therefore more concerned with how individuals enact and articulate their religious beliefs than the actual truth value of their religious claims. For theorists like Day (1993, 216), the religious narratives that individuals employ can tell researchers about the broader cultural communities to which these individuals belong and the "grammars of ascription" they have acquired through their participation in these communities.

From this theoretical position, an individual's personal belief system, or lived religion, consists of "the numerous combinations of stories and performances rooted in and subject to the languages of religious communities and in the processes of talk, relationship, and ritual enactment that those communities afford and regulate" (*ibid.*, 218). R. Ruud Ganzevoort's (1998) work on narrative models also examines the social embeddedness of religious narratives and

explores how they are utilized to help individuals position themselves within their social and familial communities. In his research on the personal narratives of sexually abused men, Ganzevoort (2001, 59f.) observes that “the meaning of religion for one individual may vary over the discernable story lines, periods, and relationships. Even in one particular situation, the meaning of religion may be ambiguous.”

These two approaches to narratives – be they fictional, personal, or religious – acknowledge the unique, malleable, and sometimes contradictory character of stories and their interpretive communities. In addition, they account for both the individual disposition of the tellers and interpreters of narratives and the influences of broader community norms and practices. Furthermore, they focus on the significance of personal narratives and narrative interpretations without categorizing a teller’s utterances as correct or incorrect. It is with these issues in mind that I would now like to approach a selection of book club discussions of *Last Report*.

2. Together Through Life: The American Reading Communities Study

The recorded group discussions I will reference in this essay were collected during a larger qualitative study of American reading communities for my doctoral thesis (cf. Milota, 2016a). I used a literary corpus consisting of four contemporary American novels that thematize belief: Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008), which retell the same set of events in a rural Protestant town, first via an epistolary format and second via an omniscient narrator; Allegra Goodman’s novel, *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998), which details daily life in an Orthodox community by means of twenty-four different focalizers; and Louise Erdrich’s *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), part of an eight novel series about Catholic missionaries living amongst the Ojibwe on the fictional Turtle Mountain Reservation.² This corpus of fictional texts thematizes three different faiths – Protestantism, Judaism, and Catholicism – and thus reflects the religious affiliation of the majority of the U.S. population (cf. Coleman 2002). In this essay, I will limit my analysis to the transcripts of three groups’ discussions of Erdrich’s novel. I am not interested here in a textual exploration of the novel, something I have already considered in depth (cf. Milota 2016b). Rather, I would like to focus on other readers’ negotiations of the religious materials they deemed relevant in the literary text.

All participants in this qualitative study (N = 48) were asked to complete a voluntary survey about their reading habits. Regarding religious belief, 77% of respondents (N = 37) reported that they affiliated with a religious denomination; 8 respondents did not answer the question, and 3 reported that they were atheists or agnostics. The breakdown of affiliations can be seen in Figure One.

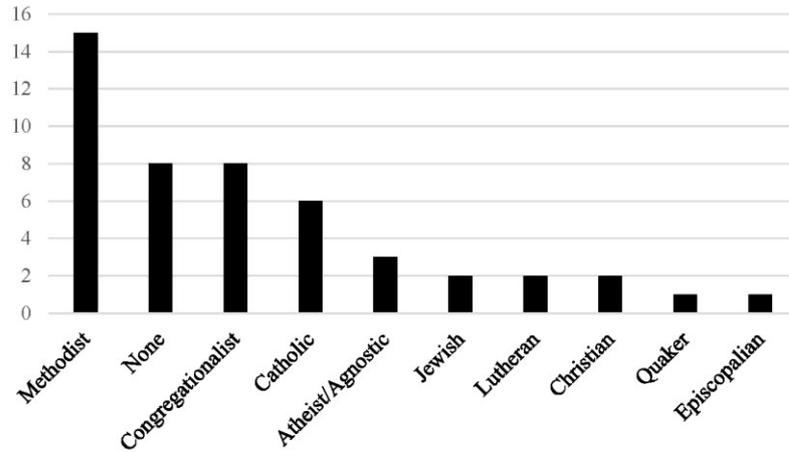


Figure 1: Participants' religious affiliation (N = 48)

Participants' self-ascribed religious practices and belief systems played a significant role in their assessment and analysis of the literary texts, as I will explain in further detail later in this essay.

In the survey, participants were also asked what they considered the three most important features of a narrative. As Figure Two illustrates, respondents deemed a story's characters, style, and plot the most important factors in their assessment.

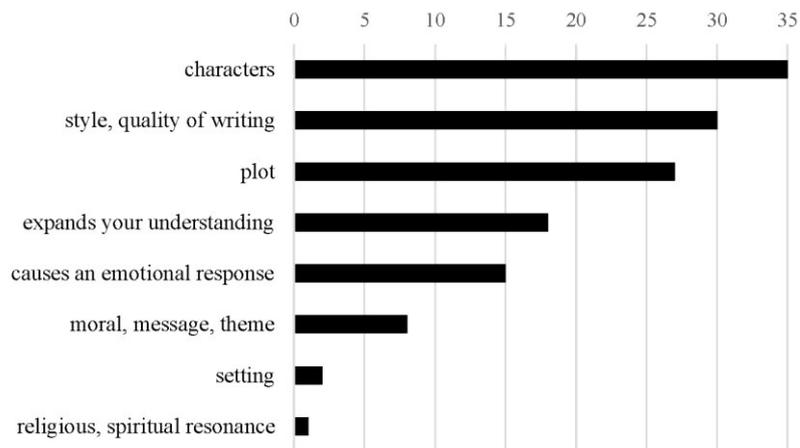


Figure 2: Most important factors in assessment (N = 48)

It is notable that respondents also valued a novel's ability to educate, or expand their understanding. This was confirmed elsewhere in the general survey; when answering the free response question "What made you want to join a reading group?" thirteen respondents mentioned that they wanted to learn something new, discover new books and genres, or "share ideas, information, to expand my reading horizons, to encourage me to learn about new authors, to expand my reading skills."

This study ran from June, 2013 until March, 2015 and received prior approval by the research ethics committee at the University of Antwerp. In total, seven book clubs participated.³ In order to analyze the transcripts of the 12 book club discussions – nearly 95,000 words of text – I used the quantitative analysis software package Atlas.ti. While Atlas.ti is meant to be used as a qualitative exploratory tool, some basic quantitative results can be derived, such as code frequencies and their co-occurrences. My method for coding cannot be called a purely grounded approach, as I began with the list of factors I developed in my quantitative analysis of online reader reviews (cf. Milota 2014). All participants in this study signed consent forms before participating, and I have anonymized members in the transcripts and removed any potentially identifying elements.⁴ But I decided to leave the location and the book club names – when provided – intact.⁵ Table One lists some general information about the groups.

Location	Name (if provided)	Members	Years	Location of meetings	Food/ drink served	Gender of participants	Average age of participants	Books read*
1 Los Angeles, CA		5	20	Restaurant/ Private Home	Yes	Female	84	G
2 Medina, OH	Bodacious Bookers	9	10	Private Home	Yes	Female	60	G, H, LR, KF
3 Strongsville, OH		5	8	Private Home	Yes	Female	61	G, H
4 Keene, VT	UCC Women's Fellowship	10-20	5	Private Home	Yes	Female	59	G
5 Medina, OH	Elizabeth Circle	15-20	5	Public Library	No	Female	71	G, LR
6 Cleveland, OH	Ne{o}lit Book Club	5-20	10	Restaurant/Bar	Yes	Mixed	37	LR
7 Broadview Hts, OH	Perspectives Book Club	5-20	7	Cafe	Yes	Mixed	49	G

* G = *Gilead*, H = *Home*, LR = *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, KF = *Kaaterskill Falls*

Table 1: Study participants

The three groups included in this essay represent three distinct book club types: the Bodacious bookers were long-term friends primarily interested in socializing. This group had the most stable membership. The Elizabeth Circle members shared a common religious affiliation – United Methodist – in addition to their interest in reading. Membership fluctuated, and in the meeting I attended a new member of the church was present at the book club for the first time. This being said, only women with this denominational affiliation were invited to join the book club. The Ne{o}lit Book Club had the most fluid and variable membership; a core group of committed, mixed-gender participants attended monthly meetings and were regularly supplemented by new participants who were “trying out” the group after seeing it on the online platform Meetup.

These differences are important to bear in mind when approaching the groups’ discussions of *Last Report*, as they have a bearing on the cultural predispositions of the participants. As could be expected, the church reading group had a different interest in the religious materials in the novel than the Meetup group. Furthermore, the established group of friends shared more personal narratives in their negotiation of the novel than the participants who had never met each other before. While the three distinct types of book club I will be discussing in this essay are by no means exhaustive, I am confident they will give a more detailed idea about the ways in which personal and group tastes and preferences impact reader assessment.

3. Negotiating Themes

In her study of women’s reading groups in Victoria, Australia, Marilyn Poole’s (2003, 273) concludes that

for them what constitutes a “good” book is a continuing topic with shifting boundaries. What makes a “good read” seems to depend on a number of factors such as: readers can relate to the book on a personal level, there is a vivid portrayal of characters, the book has relevance to contemporary life, the writing style is engaging, and there is an exciting and suspenseful plot-line. Textual analysis seemed to be almost non-existent. Occasionally, structure and themes are mentioned, but only superficially.

The results of my own study confirm the first part of Poole’s statement. But I found that readers’ analyses of the novels’ structure and themes were by no means superficial. Using Herman and Vervaeck’s description of narrative interest, I would argue that these topics were important factors in readers’ appraisals of the novels and thus constituted important assets or liabilities in their analyses. In all of the book club discussions in this study, themes related to belief and specific denominational practices were discussed most frequently, as indicated in Figure Three. Furthermore, the overwhelming number of co-occurrences in codes were for utterances that referenced the theme and the speaker’s personal stance.

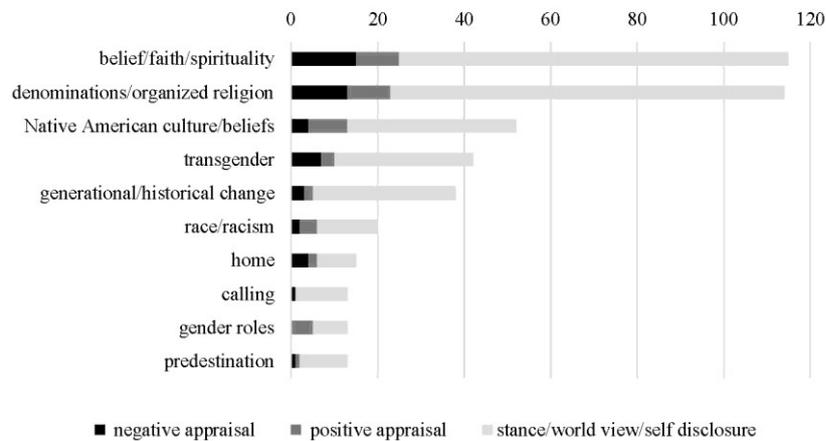


Figure 3: Top ten themes (number of coded passages)

I consider Benwell’s analysis of book club discussions that breached the subject of race more in line with my own research and interests than Poole’s study, in particular her observation that “self-recognition, of course, is not only an act in and of itself, but also a form of social action and identity *work* in interaction” (2012, 360; italics in the original). The same argument can be made for discussions of *religious* belief; when negotiating religious topics in *Last Report*, book club members in this study actively interrogated their own stance toward the issue and used personal experience and knowledge as means of addressing the topics. In order to highlight these nuances and variations in interpretation between groups, I will focus on three predominant themes from the novel that were discussed at length in all three groups’ discussions: the hybrid Catholic and Native American beliefs described and practiced by the characters; the notion of “saintliness”; and the role of gender in religious observance.

3.1 Hybrid Religious Practices

The narrative events in *Last Report* begin in 1996, with the decagenarian Father Damien writing the last of a long series of letters to the Pope. As readers, we quickly learn that Father Damien is actually Agnes de Witt, whose knowledge of the Catholic rituals stems from her time as a novice named Sister Cecilia. The series of events that led to Agnes / Cecilia’s transformation into Father Damien and her subsequent ministry on the Ojibwe reservation of Little No Horse, we are told, began “eighty-some years previous, through a town that was to flourish and past a farm that would disappear” (Erdrich 2001, 11) in a devastating storm. After being washed away with her farmhouse and eventually drifting ashore, Agnes decides to take on the persona of Father Damien, a mis-

sionary on his way to the reservation whose body she finds in the detritus of the flood.

According to Christopher Vescey's *Traditional Ojibwa Religion* (1983), Catholic missionaries first approached the Ojibwe⁶ in the early seventeenth century (24). While the peak of missionary fervor seems to have passed, Roman Catholics have maintained their pastoral and educational outposts in most of the Ojibwe territories (ibid.). Vescey paints a grim picture of the gradual decline in and fragmentation of Ojibwe religious practices due to the missionaries' sustained efforts to discourage traditional religious rituals. Still he admits that "Christianity has helped destroy the traditional Ojibwa religion but it has not replaced it as the center of Ojibwa life" (ibid.). Erdrich has sharply criticized Catholic boarding schools in her poetry, fiction, and essays. But when asked to describe her interactions with and views of Catholic religion, her stance is more nuanced. In multiple interviews (cf. Chavkin and Chavkin 1994), she describes growing up in Turtle Mountain, where everyone attended church and where she witnessed people practicing a hybrid, or syncretic form of Christianity. In an interview she describes her grandfather's hybrid faith, concluding that "my grandfather has had a real mixture of old time and church religion – which is another way of incorporating. He would do pipe ceremonies for ordination and things like that. He just had a grasp on both realities, on both religions" (Bruchac 1987, 99).

In *Last Report*, aspects of the Catholic missionary are depicted in a negative light, but the depictions of Father Damien's evolving sense of belief resembles the "grasp on both realities" practiced by Erdrich's grandfather. After arriving at the reservation Father Damien tries to understand the Ojibwe way of life and belief; he ministers to his parishioners but at no point does he force them to adhere to Catholic dogma. And in the course of his many years serving the community, he begins to develop and practice a hybrid mix of faiths. When praying for guidance for his goddaughter Lulu, for example, Damien asks for help from both Christian and Ojibwe spiritual beings, for "such were Damien's sources. His bedrock was aggregate. The voices that spoke to him arose sometimes out of wind and at other times form the pages of religious books" (Erdrich 2001, 266). Linda Krumholz (2014, 176) has observed that "through Father Damien Erdrich creates an alternative concept of conversion. Instead of depicting conversion as a transformation from one belief to another, Erdrich constructs an idea of conversion as a potential to see beyond the singularity of any one belief." This is analogous to Susan Stanford Friedman's (1994, 119) comment about one of Erdrich's earlier Turtle Mountain novels, *Tracks* (1988), namely that "the mysteries of Catholicism appear not to be exorcized but to serve as pathways to a syncretist spirituality."

The Ne{o}lit Book club discussed the theme of syncretism explicitly and at length, with two participants taking turns in rapid succession summarizing plot elements, asking for clarification and articulating their own knowledge and experience of Catholicism to better understand what syncretism in the context of the novel specifically entailed:

- S2 Like when the devil was coming for her she was like I'll get away by going, you know, to the Ojibwe like instead of –
- S1 Oh yeah she did the sweat lodge and all kinds of things that were against her religion –
- S2 Were they against Catholicism or were they in excess to what Catholicism preaches? Being in a sweat lodge, would that be a problem doing so?
- S1 Well there is precedence for Catholic priests that went to very remote areas instead of outright rejecting their beliefs incorporating people's beliefs into Catholicism.
- S2 Syncretism.
- S1 Yeah.
(Ne{o}lit)

Speaker One – who at the beginning of the recorded discussion tells the group that he studied briefly at a Catholic seminary – uses historical and personal anecdotes such as the one above throughout the course of the discussion. Rather than dominating the conversation, his contributions help nuance or clarify the positions taken by the other group members and thus enrich and extend the collaborative evaluation of the novel's themes and plot elements.

When negotiating the topic of hybridity, many of the book club members in this study actively interrogated their own stance toward the issue and used personal experience and knowledge as a means of breaching the topic. This is evident in the previous example, and it can also be seen in the following excerpt from the Bodacious Bookers' discussion of *Last Report*:

- M Do you think Erdrich is making fun of Catholicism?
- S3 I don't think it [the novel] knocks Catholicism. I think it talks about a culture that is so different from Catholicism that they had no reference points and yet they still believe in the Divine Being. They still believed, I mean Nanapush still gets along with the priest even though he knows he's a woman.
[uh huh]
They get along they share a common belief system and they loved him or her [Damien], whatever.
[laughing]
- S4 I thought of Mother Teresa because I think Mother Teresa ministering to the very poor in India. She questioned her faith, and I think the whole book is an exploration of the faith. I don't think one religion, whether Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, or Judaism, whatever religion that you have it's all a blend and I think she blended it. And it's not about religion it's about faith.
- S3 Exactly. And about spirituality. She believed. She just believed. She had always been that way, she just metamorphed [sic] and added on to herself as she moved along.
(Bodacious Bookers)

As mentioned above, the women in this group had known each other for years, and were well aware of each other's religious affiliation and stance. Still, at the beginning of the recorded discussion Speaker Four reiterates that she is a practicing Catholic. Her link later in the conversation with Mother Teresa can be seen as both an assertion of her knowledge of the nun's work within her self-ascribed denominational affiliation and as an example that will be easily recognizable to the other participants. Her personal interpretation serves as a jumping-off point for Speaker Three to make the rather vehement assertion that Agnes / Damien "just believed." The other participants in the group voice their agreement with these two speakers' collaborative answer to the moderator's question, indicating a consensus that Erdrich's depiction of hybrid faith is not shallow or in jest. Throughout their discussion, members of the Bodacious Bookers use the terms *faith*, *belief*, and *spirituality* interchangeably. Still, Speaker Four makes a distinction between *religion* and *faith*, with the former pertaining presumably to the practices specific to a particular religious institution and the latter referring to belief in God in general. She goes on to assert that "Methodist, Lutheran, or Judaism, whatever religion that you have it's all a blend." This assertion could be an acknowledgement of the group members' various religious affiliations, and if so it also serves the purpose of positing an assessment of the theme being discussed that is acceptable to all the group members. In the course of the discussion, the participants come to the agreement that faith and a spiritual outlook are more important than adherence to a particular church's dogma.

As the brief excerpts from the Ne{o}lit Book Club and the Bodacious Bookers illustrate, these two groups positively appraised the theme of hybrid belief in *Last Report*. Using Herman and Vervaeck's terminology, Erdrich's treatment of this theme could thus be considered an asset for these readers. For some members of the Elizabeth Circle, though, Agnes / Damien's blending of faiths was considered offensive, and thus constituted a weakness or liability in their appraisal:

- S3 I think she was aware she had a bigger commitment as a Christian.
- S1 She did not believe! She doesn't believe in the resurrection. She said when she was being asked, I marked it, where is it, she doesn't believe. It's on page 239. So he just went on being a priest there because he felt like whatever he had done or the priests before him had done had damaged the tribe. And he just went up trying to sop up the dross that they already plugged into. I read, one of my classes read a story, a short story, about a Jesuit priest who went out to minister to the Indians, my grandfather did that too, and the Indians never could get completely into the Christian faith. They had a kind of like a, what do you call it when you put two things together kind of in a wishy-washy way, kind of, you know, they weren't really Christian believers, they weren't really still pagan, but they put it all together. And that's kind of like an Oprah religion, pick one from each.
- [agreement]

S3 And believe what you want. And that's kind of what I think happened here.

(Elizabeth Circle)

As Speaker One makes clear in this excerpt, she interprets Damien's syncretic belief as "wishy-washy," vague, and "kind of like an Oprah religion, pick one from each." Unlike the Bodacious Bookers, who contend that all religions blend and borrow ideas and practices to some extent, some of the members of the Elizabeth Circle are insistent that the religious practices described in *Last Report* are somehow disingenuous or diluted.

The exchanges pertaining to religious themes at times even became divisive in the Elizabeth Circle because the negative stance toward the materials offered by members like Speaker One were vastly different from other members' appraisals of the materials. In other words, even though they all belong to the same religious organization, members of the Elizabeth Circle do not all articulate the same theological convictions. This divergence in religious stance can be seen in the following excerpt as well:

S6 That's the way I took it also because I think she was deeply spiritual and she was deeply religious. And I think she acknowledged God and virtually everything. But she also realized, I think, as the years went on, that the Native American culture was also very, very deeply religious.

S1 But there's a difference between religion and spirituality and Christianity.

S6 And many of the things that Native Americans believed were essentially the same as what Christians believe but they had different words and different names for it. Does it really matter if we call God God or we call it by some ancient Native American name? I guess I don't feel like that's, um, not being Christian. And I also felt like Father Jude was talking much more about Catholicism rather than Christianity. And there's far more to Christianity than there is to, I mean, none of us are Catholic, so we have rejected aspects of that particular denomination. But I won't say that I'm not Christian because I've rejected that.

S1 Where do you put Jesus in your thinking?

S6 In my thinking? Personally?

S1 What you just explained. That God is, it doesn't matter what you call him, if you call him god or whatever they call him.

S6 I personally feel, very, very firmly that Jesus is the son of God. He is the personal manifestation that came to us. And he is salvation. But I also have a hard time saying that someone who is very, very spiritual and very, very religious in a completely different religion is automatically doomed to eternal damnation. Jesus sits at the right hand of God and Jesus is the one that decides. Not us. And who am I to say that someone who is very deeply devout in a different religion is 100% wrong and I'm 100% right? I'm a human, it's not my decision to make. That's not my judgment to call. That's for God and Jesus to make that call.

(Elizabeth Circle)

It is interesting to note that, in stark contrast to the Bodacious Bookers' discussion of syncretic faith, Speaker One asserts that "there's a *difference* between religion and spirituality and Christianity" (my emphasis). The dichotomy estab-

lished here is pretty clear: one is a Christian (and presumably a Methodist) or one is a “wishy-washy” adherent to a less genuine or valid form of belief. A core aspect of Methodist doctrine is that belief in Jesus Christ is a prerequisite for salvation.⁷ Speaker Six, like Speaker Three in the previous excerpt, who throughout the course of the book club discussion takes a positive and approving stance toward the religious materials in *Last Report*, tries to defend her position by explicitly linking it to this aspect of Methodism. Her articulation of her conviction that “Jesus is the son of God. He is the personal manifestation that came to us. And he is salvation” is an attempt to confirm that her interpretation and appraisal of the novel still aligns with the expressed religious convictions of the other participants. This utterance can be interpreted as a means of garnering the other members’ support for her subsequent interpretation. Following this statement, however, she rejects the idea that those who are not Christian, as Speaker One previously implied, are automatically doomed to eternal damnation. This may appear to be in direct opposition to Methodist doctrine, but she adds that “that’s not my judgment to call. That’s for God and Jesus to make that call.” Her utterance is consistent with the more moderate stance toward other faiths as articulated in the *Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church*. This stance, in turn, stems from the “Building New Bridges in Hope” resolution set at the 1996 General Summit as a means of encouraging better Methodist-Jewish relations, and was later expanded to include other non-Christian faiths (cf. Numrich 2013). Taking these recent shifts in Methodist doctrinal stance into account, the schism that appears in the Elizabeth Circle discussion can be framed as one between more conservative, essentialist Methodists and more moderate, or pragmatic, members of the Methodist church.

3.2 Saintliness

In addition to their analysis of the religious practices and organizations in the novel, readers in this study also discussed *Last Report*’s treatment of hagiography, or saint legends. Not only do the characters within the storyworld ruminate on what qualifies as exemplary behavior, Agnes / Damien’s actions provide readers with an example of a modern, albeit modified saint narrative. Father Jude, who was sent to the reservation to write a saint legend about Father Damien’s sadistic colleague Sister Leopolda, asks at the beginning of the novel: “Were saints only saints by virtue of their influence, their following, their reputation for the marvelous, or was there room for personal failure?” (Erdrich 2001, 130) He is ultimately incapable of writing a positive report about Leopolda, for “he was having trouble with passion, from the Latin *pati*, to suffer, defined in the Catholic Dictionary as *A written account of the sufferings and death of one who laid down his life for the faith*” (ibid., 336, italics in the original). Jude cannot justify Pauline’s behavior or answer his original question, especial-

ly when he considers Damien's life in relation to the second part of the Catholic Dictionary's definition:

The life of sacrifice, the life of ordinary acts of daily kindness, the life of devotion, humility, and purpose. The life of Father Damien also included miracles and direct shows of God's love, gifts of the spirit, humorous incidents as well as tragic encounters and examples of heroic virtue. Sainthood, thought Jude almost idly, then caught himself in wonder. Sainthood? Father Damien? Am I writing the wrong Saint's Passion? (Ibid., 341; italics in the original)

During their discussion of the novel's treatment of hagiography, the participants in the Ne{o}lit Book Club come to a similar conclusion as Father Jude, namely that Father Damien / Agnes fulfilled the Catholic requirements for sainthood by living a life of kindness, devotion, humility, and purpose, even if she was breaking a fundamental rule by posing as male priest:

- S6 She's always presented as very, like, I think they used the term devout but she's certainly religious, like even if she doesn't appeal to the letter of the law she definitely is obeying the spirit of the law.
- S5 Absolutely I think that she – no one could argue that the Agnes Modeste isn't truly devout in her faith in trying to save the people of the reservation.
- S6 Yes.
- S5 Whether or not she's going to save the Catholics or whether she's just saving their souls to a better cause...
- S6 She certainly thinks she's doing good.
- S5 She's doing good.
- S6 And that's her mission.
- S5 She's not being a good Catholic by any stretch of the imagination but she's doing good.
- (Ne{o}lit)

In the midst of the Bodacious Bookers' discussion of *Last Report*, one participant initiates the discussion of Damien's saintliness by reading the aforementioned passage out loud:

- S4 There was one thing I had marked and I think this probably in all religions it talks about the purpose of life. It's on page 341. [Reads passage]. I mean that's right.
- S2 That's it.
[mmmhmmm]
- S4 I'm hoping that's enough to get you into heaven.
[laughing]
I can't do miracles or direct shows God's love.
- S5 I think that's the whole point I think that's why 90% of Americans probably believe, because we do have a good life here but you always want to be in line for the next good life!
[laughing]
(Bodacious Bookers)

Speaker Four finishes her citation with the affirmation “that’s right,” which is immediately mirrored by Speaker Two and confirmed by other members of the group. This assessment is followed by a series of lighthearted jokes about getting into heaven, arguably indications that the members do not feel uncomfortable breaching the subject, are not offended by the theme, and do not consider it a liability in their appraisal of the novel. This is in sharp contrast to the Elizabeth Circle’s discussion of *Last Report*, where participants were much less lighthearted in their discussion of the novel, possibly because of the feeling within the group that something important was at stake: the perceived inviolability of their religious stance.

3.3 Gender and Religious Practice

In *Last Report*, Agnes’ spiritual and personal development leads to a sense of faith that is untroubled by contradictions or ambiguity and is guided instead by a sense of passionate loyalty and love. More controversial is the novel’s apparent message that a woman can serve the Catholic Church as a priest, albeit secretly, and that she can excel both in her service to her congregation and the Holy See.

In their discussion of this aspect of *Last Report*, members of the Ne{o}lit Book Club were again positive in their appraisals. As the following excerpt illustrates, they acknowledge that Erdrich’s choice to write about a female priest is provocative, but agree that she treated the topic with sensitivity and respect:

- S2 That’s the part that I really enjoyed about it. Like I thought the author did a really good job in taking a subject that could be and is a really controversial topic in the Catholic Church and presents it in a really human way and presents it in a way that could be seen as positive. Like if, I find it really hard to look at women that I’ve seen do ministry and do it well and say you’re not allowed to do that or God does not ordain you to do this, it’s impossible to me. And so you take this story of a woman who is really good at being a priest and she could have written it differently, she could have written it as a way to poke the Catholic Church in the eye.
- S1 Absolutely.
- S2 But I thought she was really sensitive to it, I thought she was really realistic about it and I found it very powerful and meaningful.
- (Ne{o}lit)

As I mentioned already, the Ne{o}lit Book Club’s discussion of the theological and ethical aspects of the novel was nuanced and informed by the members’ various religious upbringings. This could be one reason why participants were able to discuss the depictions of Catholic and Native American faiths and practices from a variety of angles and without any detectable distaste or approbation.

The Ne{o}lit Book Club's positive appraisal of *Last Report* is thus in marked contrast to the Elizabeth Circle's treatment of the novel, which became discordant and negative whenever the discussion turned to the religious themes. In the recorded discussion of the religious materials in the novel, participants are clearly split in their reactions. One subgroup of readers tries to understand and ultimately accept Agnes's decision to pretend to be a male priest and practice a hybrid form of devotion. The other subgroup argues that Agnes's actions are reproachable, and that the Native American belief is irreconcilable with their Methodist faith. At one point in the group discussion, a tentative collaborative floor is established in an attempt to develop a group stance that can reconcile these vastly disparate interpretations. But the brief alignment in stance between participants is broken when Speaker Seven admits that she simply can't accept that Agnes's actions as a priest should count within what she considers to be Catholic doctrine.

S7 And what about the fact that everything he did was, I can't think of another term for it, was not legal. I mean, since he wasn't a priest he didn't, well, I guess a person can baptize another person, but marriages, absolution for sins and that sort of thing. I – she wasn't a priest!

S5 She was wracked by guilt over that.

S7 I know, but what about the repercussions, too. And I don't know if the Native Americans would feel this way. I know if she married my husband and I found out later on, I would be devastated. I'd be amazed. I'd be angry.

(Elizabeth Circle)

Speaker Seven's admonition that Agnes's actions are "not legal" according to Catholic rules again confirms the importance of an established religious stance to some of the participants in the Elizabeth Circle discussion. This position forms the foundation of these readers' negative appraisal of the themes in the novel, and ultimately causes these readers to reject the narrative as blasphemous and offensive. As I discussed already, this position is in opposition to that of participants like Speaker Five, who argues from a more moderate religious position, one that validates and normalizes Agnes's decision to pose as a priest, and ultimately leads to a positive appraisal of the novel.

The tension between these two readings built up throughout the course of the recorded meeting, and could ultimately not be resolved. Still, in the impassioned dialogue revolving around these contentious themes, members on both sides of the debate used theologically and theoretically astute arguments to support their reading, and more fundamentally, their religious beliefs. After this discussion, I was told by my contact in the group that they had decided not to read any more books in the study. Apparently, some participants found the discussion too divisive and the material in *Last Report* too offensive, and worried that the two remaining novels in the study (*Home* and *Kaaterskill Falls*) would lead to similar debates.

4. Group Dynamics and Cultural Negotiation

Ultimately, my aim in this essay was to explore the ways in which “self and culture come to terms with each other through narrative” (McAdams 2006, 289). As I also hope to have illustrated, a book club can be a site for multiple forms of negotiation. Book clubs provide a meaningful setting for socialization, relaxation, and pleasure. They also serve as a platform for articulating and critically examining both individual and collective religious narratives. During the course of a group conversation, participants can weave their personal stories, experiences, and assessments with the textual materials. In addition, participants often interchangeably analyze and appraise the fictional narratives’ textual features – such as the themes – and their own beliefs and religious stance. In these settings, personal narratives, sometimes ones directly related to a religious experience or sense of belief, even have the power to usurp the fictional narratives and become the primary topic of discussion.

By summarizing and retelling aspects of the narrative, participants in the three groups discussed in this essay were simultaneously working together toward a consensus about how to interpret the religious materials in the novel while integrating them into their personal understandings of belief. The often seamless shifting between light, bantering analysis and more intense thematic and theological interpretations gradually helped members come to a collaborative stance toward *Last Report’s* admittedly complex and morally fraught topic. The disagreements that arose, either as a result of readers’ opposing stance toward the religious materials presented in the literary text or in response to differing viewpoints of their fellow interlocutors, nevertheless provided an opportunity for participants to articulate their personal beliefs.

Herman and Vervaeck (2009, 118) make the argument that “there must be some form of homology between the fields of production (telling) and consumption (listening or reading)” for narrative interest to occur. One could conclude from the content analysis of the three book club meetings that such a homology existed for the participants in the Bodacious Bookers group and the Ne{o}lit book club. The same cannot be said for all of the members of the Elizabeth Circle. One explanation for this could be that the shared practices and beliefs of some of the members of this religious group were simply too far removed from the descriptions of “the flesh and bone of the social bodies that structure religious life” (Morgan 2012, xviii) as depicted in the novel.

Another explanation could be that the hybrid, “seeking” religious narratives in the novel irritated the book club participants who valued coherent, consistent, and denominationally-aligned descriptions of belief. This source of frustration, according to Dawn Coleman (2018), is also one of literature’s greatest assets. For literature, she argues, “gives us spirituality’s loops and turns, its contradictions and ambiguities, its shifting moods and drives and scriptures. Its power lies in its specificity, its ability to offer exempla of modern spirituality” (ibid., 524f.). Regardless of whether their appraisals were negative

or positive, for the modern readers quoted in this essay, the modern spirituality depicted in *Last Report* proved to be an important determinant of narrative interest.

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¹ See, for example, Kosmin and Keysar's ARIS Study, the Baylor Religion Study, or relevant data on religion from the General Social Survey, which has been collecting data since 1972. For an exhaustive compilation of relevant surveys and their results, see Smith (2009).

² Ten of Louise Erdrich's sixteen published novels take place on or around a fictional reservation, which is sometimes – but not always – called Little No Horse. This reservation is loosely based on the actual Turtle Mountain reservation in North Dakota, where Erdrich was raised by her German-American father and half-Ojibwe mother. The Ojibwe alternatively refer to themselves as Anishinaabe, or “first people.” Their tribal name was mispronounced by French fur trappers as Chippewa in the nineteenth century, and this has become the predominant name used by non-Native people. According to the latest Census Bureau report from 2010, there were 170,740 official members of the Chippewa (Ojibwe) tribe, making it the fifth largest tribal group in the United States. For more information about the Catholic missionary work on the Ojibwe reservations, see Murray (1984). Erdrich discusses the Catholic missionaries in her non-fictional piece *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country: Traveling through the Land of my Ancestors* (2014) as well. Here she also describes in detail the history of her tribe, noting that “the Anishinaabe have been in Lake of the Woods forever, according to Tobasonakwut [a prominent Ojibwe teacher, activist, and father of Erdrich's youngest daughter]. Since at least two thousand years before the birth of Christ, according to archeologists” (39).

³ I am using what Stake (2000) would call the collective case study. These cases may or may not have common characteristics, but “they are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases” (437).

⁴ When I sat down to transcribe the audio recordings of the book club discussions, I had to make some decisions about the detail in which I would write them out. I considered using Coates's (1996) musical notation system, which visually reflects what she calls the “jam session” nature of women's conversation. But much like the standard transcription practices for conversation analysis and discursive psychology, I personally find the line organization and the degree of detail distracting. As my interest is in the content of the discussions, not the length of the pauses between turns, the rising or falling intonation of utterances, or any of the other linguistic features that the linguistically geared transcription methods record, I have decided to use a more simplified practice commonly used by discourse psychologists and critical discourse analysts. In other words, I have transcribed the recordings as accurately as possible, but made some compensations for readability. For instance, I used punctuation in the same way it is utilized in written form, and I have removed redundant spoken glitches. Finally, I recorded overlapping utterances or sounds within brackets, such as: [laughing].

⁵ I based my decision to use city and group names on Proctor and Benwell's (2015) rationalization in *Reading Across Worlds: Transnational Book Groups and the Reception of Difference*. As they contend, “we were keen to reflect the issues of location and identity that are so central to our project, and indeed to celebrate the rich and insightful contributions made by these book group communities” (xiii). While location does not play as prominent a role in my study as it did in Proctor and Benwell's, I agree that the sense of pride and collectivity embedded in the group names are worth honoring and preserving.

⁶ There seem to be a variety of accepted spellings of *Ojibwe* and *Anishinaabe* – even Erdrich is inconsistent –, but I will use these for the sake of consistency.

⁷ Tom W. Smith (1990), an analyst for the General Social Survey and the National Opinion Research Center, argues that the most comprehensive way to categorize the array of Christian institutions of faith today is to organize them on a scale based on their core doctrines. The most fundamental side of the scale, then, would include churches that purport the inerrancy of the Bible, a born-again experience, Adventism, proselytizing, and what Smith calls “traditional beliefs,” which include a belief in angels and devils, the Trinity, and the Virgin birth. On the most liberal side of the scale are churches whose biggest concern is with social action and progressive reform, acceptance of secular change and scientific progress, a belief that the Bible is not literal, and a non-Adventist stance. According to this scale, then, the evangelical churches, which include the Baptists, Methodists, and Adventists would be on the fundamentalist side of the scale; the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Unitarians would be on the liberal side, and the Episcopalians and Catholics would be somewhere in the middle.