ABSTRACT: Many historical processes have been identified with secularization. My paper will focus on two: 1) the spread of ascetic discipline beyond the cloister and 2) the religiously-motivated assault on “the sacramental” that, according to theorists like Charles Taylor, characterized not only Protestantism but the Axial religions generally, which suggests that “disenchantment” can be analyzed as a variety of religious experience in its own right. It’s not just the analytical category of the “post-secular,” then, but the familiar paradoxes of secularization theory itself that challenge any straightforward equation of modernity with the decline of religion.

But how useful is the category of “a secularizing religion”? My talk will take up this question on the grounds of eighteenth-century Methodist writing. Methodists wrote continually, generating a staggering archive of testimonials in the form of diaries, journals, and letters, along with the better-known verse and hymns. Literary scholars have barely begun to take stock of this writing, much of which was produced by people with no education above the artisanal level. To uncover the central role of writing in Methodist discipline—its commitment to the empirical study of emotion, its highly sophisticated theorizations of habit, and its continual narrative experimentation—is to recover its deep links to the culture of sensibility and the literary genre most identified with the modern: the novel.

Joanna Picciotto is an Associate Professor of English at UC Berkeley. She is the author of Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England (Harvard University Press, 2010) and the 2006 recipient of the Milton Society of America’s James Holly Hanford Award for her essay on Paradise Lost. Her research has been supported by a Guggenheim fellowship, an ACLS Fellowship, and a Huntington Library NEH Fellowship.