

Literature in the Context of “European” Religions (An Introduction)

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This thematic issue has been written by colleagues in related areas or research fields – especially philosophy, religious studies, and literary criticism. Elaborating on historical account of various cross-sections of literature and religion in European culture, the contributions seek to give some significant guidelines for contemporary investigation both in religious studies and literary criticism.

The interdisciplinary field of literary and religious or spiritual is known for difficulty to be thought of adequately, to the extent that we are dealing with the proximity of two singularities. Religion could be, on the one hand, thought of as the source of what in the West became to be signified as literature, yet on the other hand it is hard to ignore the fact that in contemporary European culture religious beliefs (and spirituality in general) are treated as a sort of aberration within the framework of human rationality. Yet this ambivalence can itself be seen as primary motivation for a thorough and deepened survey. Furthermore, we believe that not enough attention has been given to the topic in Slovene academia.

We are not in any way attempting to impose a special definition of spirituality, but for the sake of this introduction, we must at least attempt to explain what we mean by the term “spiritual”. To put it shortly: spiritual has to be taken as almost synonymous to “religious”, albeit it can be reflected upon as transcending stable cultural and religious boundaries. Thus, spiritual is not necessarily denominational, or confessional, and sometimes not even religious per se. Broadly speaking, spirituality is essentially existential phenomenon, yet never being merely a subjective appropriation of religion. Moreover, spirituality has nothing to do with the esoteric, hermetic, the intrusion of marvelous, extraordinary. It can be safely thought of as an openness to all dimensions of human existence, and as such is chiefly in accordance with inherited knowledge, wisdom, that has sedimentated in the so-called spiritual traditions.

This brings us to another important question – what is (spiritual/religious) tradition? Firstly, there is something that we might call “hori-

zontal” notion of tradition that is attuned to the historicist conception of history as successive progression of time, epoch, and periods. The other option is to consider tradition “vertically” that is as linked to *event* that exceeds all human anticipation and as such functions as transcendental condition of history, i.e. renders the linearity of time representable and thinkable in the first place. This aspect may be designated as historicity (of tradition), and paves the way to a more determined understanding of spiritual experience. At the core of such experience (sometimes even called mystical) is a moment of heterogeneity that cannot be appropriated by psychological sphere of human subjectivity as it exceeds the boundaries of representational, the sheer immanence of describability, and is manifested as an erosion of linguistic constants at the level of literary texts. The spiritual experience – or the striving after such experience – is essentially an openness for the Other, a capacity for transcendence. Within the religious studies the notion of this *Ganz Andere* was defined negatively. Classic formulation is given by Rudolf Otto in *Das Heilige* (Breslau 1917):

Sie [die Mystik] nennt es schließlich “das Nichts” selbst. Sie meint mit dem Nichts nicht nur das was durch nichts besagbar ist sondern das schlechthin und wesentlich Andere und Gegensätzliche zu allem was ist und gedacht werden kann. (34–35)

While we may not have succeeded to give comprehensive picture of European spiritual traditions as they are manifested in literature (that would be too ambitious), yet to a various degree we have attempted to pluralize, as much it was possible, the historical context of European spirituality. Besides Christianity, we have been able to include the influence of Jewish and Muslim mysticism on European literature.

However, the structure of this issue is neither haphazard nor exhaustive. The first essay, by Matic Kocijančič, deals with Sophocles’s *Antigone* and discusses the most influential interpretations of the question of the double burial in its psychological, theological and narrative dimensions, and the decisive importance of this question for contemporary thought on the place of reality in Greek drama.

Next, Borut Škodlar and Jan Ciglencečki focus on the patristic and Byzantine spiritual heritages. They engage in special reading of Dionysius the Areopagite and John Climacus and define their works as kenotic literature. The term “kenotic” should be linked with emptying of oneself, and this process is characterized as gradual abandoning of the attachment to particular parts of narrative self, which func-

tion as disturbances in the form of thoughts, ideas, emotions, wishes, temptations and fears.

Then we move on to Middle Ages. Nena Bobovnik explores the mystical theology of Nikolaus Kempf which *floruit* in charterhouses of Pleterje and Jurklošter at the eve of the Reformation. She attempts to demonstrate that his work was also related to the Rhineland and Flemish mysticism and that Kempf was important figure in the mysticism of late medieval West. The essay of Zajc touches on Eastern Christianity. She provides an overview of the theology and spirituality of Maxim the Greek, and considers his use of the verses from the tradition of Byzantine hymnography as a “valid introduction to the original Slavonic spiritual poetry in the European Renaissance”. Islamic mysticism, which has been important for European culture in many ways, is explored by Raid al-Daghistani. In his essay he is suggesting that Goethe was influenced especially by the aesthetic dimension of *Quran*.

Next essay, by Blaž Zabel, reminds us of the so-called Nature mysticism, understood as primordial oneness with Nature. He demonstrates that reading practices of Homer influenced romantic understanding of antiquity as a period when primordial oneness with Nature was still possible. Milosav Gudović engages in comparative reading of the two great literary figures of the nineteenth century, Hölderlin and Dostoevsky. His approach to the textual analysis draws on phenomenological and hermeneutical tradition. In his detailed reading of key images and metaphors of both authors, he opens up the possibility of “kenotic” interpretation of the literary.

Although Jewish mysticism took place on the fringes of European culture and history, it is an important theme for some contemporary writers. In his essay on one of the most prominent modernist poets as proclaimed by the current scholarship, Paul Celan, Vid Snoj argues that Celan, especially in his “Psalm”, when God is addresses as No One, may pursue Kabbalah. Martin Uranič focuses on interpretation of Kundera’s famous novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, while he draws on Nietzsche. As he writes: “The dichotomy of lightness and weight invites us to rethink the European spiritual tradition, which, stemming from its ancient Greek origins, moves within Plato’s *chorismos* between the intelligible world of extrasensory ideas and the cave world of sensory experience.”

In the final essay, Dejan Kos faces us with reflexion on the origin of poetry as has been expounded in European thought. He is opting for an understanding of origins that go beyond causality and ontology. Kos concludes with the insightful statement: “European poetry always

preserves elementary connection with its spiritual source. And this does not appear only on esoteric fringes of literary traditions, but in all their layers and especially in their summits.”