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Religion und Literatur im 20. und 21.
Jahrhundert. Motive, Sprechweisen, Medien.

Edited by Tim Lörke & Robert Walter-Jochum.
Göttingen: V&R Press, 2015.
714 pages, ISBN: 978-3-8471-0375-2
(hardcover) , 978-3-8470-0375-5 (ebk).

REVIEW BY: EVA BAILLIE



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Overview and structure

The present volume is an anthology on the topic of religion and literature in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Written in German, it is edited by Tim Lörke and Robert Walter-Jochum from the Institute for German and Dutch Philology at Freie Universität Berlin and contains thirty-three essays by various contributors from the fields of literature, cultural and religious studies. The aim of the anthology is to give an overview of various academic disciplines dealing with the topic of religion and religiousness, on the basis of the understanding that hermeneutics are crucial to both literature and theology:

Bible, Quran, hagiographies, but also testimonies of individuals who testify their personal journey towards a certain faith, share with literature the analogy of structure, one could even say: through these forms, religion itself is always literature. (p.11, own translation)

The editors also include as “literature” any other form of narrative that deals with religion, as for example religious speech, films, and computer games. The contributors give an insight into their current areas of research; detailed references point to literature reviews, field studies, and further detailed reading on the relevant topics.

The anthology is structured in three sections titled “Motifs”, “Ways of speaking”, and “Media”. Each section is briefly introduced at the very beginning of the book: The section “Motifs” deals with the „big narratives“ that form anchor points throughout the history of text, but can also experience new interpretations in changed cultural settings. “Ways of speaking” refers to a more structural approach in which text relates to different ways of religious language, i.e. prayer, litany, or confession. The third section, “Media”, is dedicated to various medial forms that discuss religious discourses in the twentieth and twenty-first century, with a main focus on picture media as mass media.

Contributions

Without intending to review every single contribution of the volume, an overview of the topics discussed might be useful for readers of languages other than German. In “Motifs”, the reader finds a discussion on Judas and the literary attempt to solve a theological problem (Hans Richard Brittnacher), something that has been done with other problematic theological characters, such as Satan. Another popular motif for literature of the modern era is the apocalypse, in the present volume discussed in two separate essays on Karl Kraus’s *Die letzte Nacht* and Otto Dix’s war paintings (Franziska Thiel) and on Joseph Goebbels’s national socialist novel *Michael* (Imke Rösing). The motifs of election and trial are discussed in

relation to Beer-Hofmann's *Jaákobs Traum* and Stefan Zweig's *Jeremias* (Mathias Meert). The passion narrative is discussed in an analysis of songs by Tom Waits, Nick Cave, and Johnny Cash (Markus Schleich). Another article is devoted to the motif of vampirism in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the American film series *True Blood* (Frank Weiher). Christoph Peter's novel *Ein Zimmer im Haus des Krieges* is analyzed in the context of Islamic fundamentalism in German contemporary fiction (Markus Kraiger). The contribution on Thomas Mann and religion gives a thorough overview on the discussion of religion in recent and contemporary research on Thomas Mann (Yvonne Nilges):

There have sporadically been relevant works since the 1940s, which are, however, often noticeably selective and incomplete, often (in the theological field) dogmatically biased, or (in the field of German literature) theologically amateurish and superficial. (p. 53, own translation)

This judgment is debatable, but it reveals the core issues of the interdisciplinary dialogue between literature and theology: there is a difference in methodology and approach that needs to be acknowledged and possibly integrated in a more theoretical discussion on hermeneutics.

The reading of Daniel Kehlmann's *F* offers a discussion on religion, esoterism, and parapsychology, introducing the three brothers' attempts to define their lives (Monika Wolting). And lastly, matriarchal freedom and Mormon abstinence are motifs in the American novels *House of Night* and *Twilight Saga* (Laura Gemsemer).

In the second section titled "Ways of speaking", a few contributions deal with the question of authorship and religion, such as a reading of Heine's *Tannhäuser* and Irmgard Keun's *Gilgi* (Wolfgang Braungart) or the essay on Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Sand* in relation to literature as theodicy

(Marie Gunreben). Poetry features in three contributions: The religious dimension of Gottfried Benn's poems (Tim Lörke), Jewish prophecy and poetry in Nelly Sachs's poems (Lukas Pallitsch) and theological aspects in the poems of Paul Celan (Pawel Piszczatowski). The subject of postcolonial religion and religiousness is discussed in relation to Mircea Eliade's Indian literature and Ilija Trojanow's *Weltensammler* (Ludmilla Peters). The TV show *Lost* is discussed in relation to Badiou and messianic universalism (Stéphane Boutin), while James Cameron's film *Avatar* is read as a utopia of godly man (Swen Schulte Eickholt). The contribution on literature as litany discusses the influence of Catholic liturgy on the language of literature (Brigitte Schwens-Harrant). Literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is discussed in an essay on Hugo von Hoffmannsthal's *Briefe des Zurückgekehrten* (Jens Ole Schneider) and in a contribution on Oskar Panizza's aesthetic vandalism during the Kaiserreich (Ariane Totzke). Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Josef Winkler are brought together in an essay on religion, sexuality and identity (Robert Walter-Jochum), while Thomas Bernhard's *Frost* is discussed as the prayer of a „hyperchristian“ (Alina Timofte).

The third section is entitled “Media” and starts with a contribution on image and religion in narratives around 1900 (Peter Sprengel). Another essay discusses discourses of church history in the novels of Uwe Johnson (Paul Onasch), while Hubert Fichte's view on Islam and Quran is analyzed in the context of his work *Die Geschichte der Empfindlichkeit* (Michael Fisch). The reception of *Wo bitte geht's zu Gott? Fragte das kleine Ferkel* is discussed in the context of children's literature and didactics (Ralph Olsen/ Sebastian Kuppel). Monty Python's *Life of Brian* is analyzed as an example for religion and postmodernism (Stefan Neuhaus). The volume finishes with four contributions on religious perspectives of computer games, discussing religion in digital games (Benjamin Beil, Kai Matuszkiewicz), the

fictionalization of religion in the game *Assassin's Creed* (Christian Dölker, Lorenz Trein), and games as a medium of deicide (Robert Baumgartner).

An informed selection of contributions on a variety of topics, different styles of writing, and careful editing make the present volume an important read for anybody interested in the academic discussion on religion in contemporary literature and culture. In literary studies, the field of theology and literature has often been regarded with suspicion in relation to a possible instrumentalization of different genres of texts to support theological claims. The present volume comes from literary studies and offers a fresh look at religious elements in narratives. The volume, however, could have benefited from a structural frame that puts the individual contributions into a wider context, positioning the title in the contemporary discourse of theology and literature. This could have been achieved by extending the introductory chapters, in which the editors promise a comprehensive review of the current discussion of religion in literature. In summary, *Religion und Literatur im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert* offers interesting insights for scholars seeking new ways of engaging with religion in contemporary culture by entering a fresh dialogues of the disciplines that still has a lot of unexplored potential in German speaking academia.

EVA BAILLIE