

Editorial

Introduction to Special Issue “English Poetry and Christianity”

Kevin Hart

Department of Religious Studies, University of Virginia, 323 Gibson Hall, 1540 Jefferson Park Avenue, P.O. Box 400126, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4126, USA; kjh9u@eservices.virginia.edu

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The hallowed scholarly area known as “Religion and Literature” has been seeking to expand itself, clarify itself, and even justify itself over the last decade or two. One sign of this mixture of unease and adventure is an invitation that I received from a distinguished publisher a few years ago. The proposal was for me to edit a companion to “Religion and Literature”; it would consist of twelve or thirteen essays, and would cover all the world religions and literature in all relevant languages. Beneath the sheer impossibility of editing such a volume—no one person, or even an editorial team, could possibly command the languages, literatures, and religious traditions—I could see what prompted the publisher to make his request: how good it would be to see, at a glance, as it were, the many ways in which religions have interacted with literatures, and vice versa; and how fascinating it would be to be lifted from one’s own little world to take in a vast panorama of human experience of the sacred. The volume that he proposed marked a genuine gap. Yet it was not the only gap around. For there could also be a similar, more manageable, companion to Christianity and literature in the American South, another one to Judaism and the novel in America, yet another on Buddhism and Modern Anglophone poetry, and so on.

The borders of “Religion and Literature” can be tested in various ways. When I was approached to edit a special number of *Religions*, I thought of one way. It was very simple in concept, even if the process of bringing it to fruition has uncovered resistances of all sorts. The idea was for a spectrum of contributors, ranging from established scholars to emerging scholars, from people whose main intellectual focus is religion to people whose central interest is literature, each to write an essay on Christianity and poetry in English—with one clause that could not be modified. Those poems that usually appear under that rubric would not be allowed as subjects of discussion. So there could be no essays on poets whose work has become a staple in the field: George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Geoffrey Hill, along with a handful of others. One would have to ponder other poets, people usually bypassed or overlooked, and see if the frame of “Christianity and poetry in English” would add something new and important to how we read them or, equally, how we think of “Religion and Literature”.

This prompt was intended to make people, myself included, ponder what “Christianity” might mean in poetry and not only in life. First of all, one need not be a practicing Christian in order to write poetry that draws on motifs and images that are themselves Christian. In the West we all live in Christendom, however attenuated it may be here or there, even if many of us are not Christian. For people who profess belief in Christ, there are many ways of being Christian, not all of them accounted for by the broadening of the faith since the Reformation. Even within the Catholic world, the sheer proliferation of saints indicates that there are a great many ways in which one may excel in one’s religious vocation. The kind of excellence one sees in Thomas Aquinas is not the same as is apparent in Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Might the same be true in poetry? Might there be poems that use Christian motifs in ways that we tend not to notice? Many people, including some poets, remain on the borderlands of the faith, at once questioning its claims and actions and finding themselves attracted to some of its practices, whether ethical or liturgical. They may not be “religious” but they are

“spiritual”, to invoke a commonplace of our day. Others who set themselves starkly against the faith might nonetheless make use of all sorts of Christian motifs. Not all agnostics and atheists are pure sorts; some are tinged by arguments they have with the God of Catholics or the God of Protestants. Is there poetry of Christian agnosticism or Christian atheism?

A similar dispersal of possibilities occurs when we think of poetry that is written in English. It varies from formalism, indeed “new formalism”, to L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetry and rap poetry, from poetry that is nourished by British or American traditions to poetry that takes at least one of its cues from verse in English translation, whether that is originally from Africa, Asia, Europe, India, the Middle East, Russia, South America, or elsewhere. One does not usually think of experimental poetry, or indeed L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetry, as having Christian motifs. But is that an assumption or a known truth? This special issue of *Religions* would provide an opportunity for people to ask exactly that question, along with related questions. Perhaps if I posed some new questions, contributors would be led to formulate others.

Any attempt to breach borders runs against border patrols, and this special issue of *Religions* is no exception. Some readers of contributions expressed unease when a theologian would start speaking about poetry, for inevitably one would do so differently from a literary critic, and sometimes one’s flank was not fully covered. Others objected when an apparently secular poet was found to be saying something that could be coded, at least in part, as Christian. Yet others noted that their favorite poet had long been regarded as “religious” or “spiritual” but in a quite another way than was being proposed. All these were valuable responses, and invariably they sharpened the final version of the essay concerned. The anonymous reviewers of essays have done a great service, and I thank them for their work. They are invisible contributors to this special issue of *Religions*.

No one knows what “Religion and Literature” will look like as a scholarly area in ten, twenty, or thirty years. One can only hope that it will do two things at once: to bring into the fold scholars outside the Abrahamic constellation so that we may better see the ways in which literature, however it be construed, engages with those religions, and to broaden investigations into the literary exploration of religious experience and teaching in the religions that are familiar to us in Europe and North America. This special number of *Religions* seeks to be a modest contribution to the latter endeavor.

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