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# Languages and literature

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## The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion

Edited by Susan M. Felch

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2016

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Cambridge Companions to Religion

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Acts of reading take many forms, not least of all written and oral, and they are particularly interesting and complex where religion and literature cross over. Immediately, we are confronted with definitions of “religion” and “literature”, as well as making sense of where religious texts (scriptural, liturgical and so forth) are themselves “literary” (in the sense that they can be seen as narratives or poetry or recital material). Then many ways exist in which literature (such as novels and poetry) draw on religious imagery and language: in the West we think of Milton and Herrick, for example. Even these definitions need expansion – there are literary works that deal with exile and repentance, journeys of the spirit and a search for meaning, all typical of many religious works and traditions. This confluence of two strands is the focus of this new companion, a well-established series where other possibly relevant works here include guides to allegory and utopias, medieval mysticism and textual scholarship and *Piers Plowman*. Examining such acts of reading invite us to look at meaning and interpretation, authority and religious practices and a plurality of approaches to the epistemic and the true.

The companion is targeted at undergraduate and graduate readers and at academics engaged in both fields. It will be of equal interest to students of literature and religion, not only because it offers a well-designed set of essays showing exemplary approaches to the topic today but also because it succeeds in taking the

reader into the mindset and cultural context and assumptions of key angles on the topic.

Examples of such angles are developed imaginatively throughout the book – in Section one, with three types of reading experience (theological, confessional and post-secular); in Section two, with five intersections (ethics, dwelling, imagination, sacrifice and repetition); and in Section three, with eight essays on major religious areas (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism and World Christianity). These are well-documented topics and so the editor (Susan Felch of Calvin College, Michigan) and her contributors have tried (and succeeded) in creating something distinctive – topical, critically subtle, sensitively contextual, clearly expressed, and with entries that are mutually exclusive.

Rightly, no one stark dogmatic definition of “literature” or “religion” emerges at the start: rather the scope and nature of these fields emerge through the essays, each one offering an insight into what they mean, how they are interpreted, why we are interested and what literary and religious texts and practices exist for study today. Each one wears its scholarship lightly, making the essays user-friendly for newcomers. Rowan Williams (author of a study of Dostoyevsky) analyses three modern plays with religious themes, asking how such texts explore human dilemmas and meanings. James Matthew Wilson takes *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a starting point to diagnose beauty and illusion, taking the reader on into how (and if) faith provides a route to real beauty. Zhang Ni’s post-secular reading is centred on *Hunger Games*, the book for young adults with a film franchise, and where the representation of romantic love tests boundaries between the sacred and the secular. In similar ways, later contributors draw in literary and religious texts to illuminate the ways in which things intersect. For instance, the interest (even preoccupation) of religion with ethics and morality can gain insight from studying literary works like Mary Gordon’s novel *Pearl* (with characters who search for fullness) and where inquiry and reflection are common practices between literature and religion.

Such intersections take us in unexpected and exciting directions: the chapter “Dwelling” is one, in one sense how we might relate to the divine in the Bible, and, metaphorically, how the space we occupy and the structures we create have allegorical significance for what happens to us. Challengingly, the Jonah story and the plot of Shakespeare’s *Pericles* ask the reader to consider such issues. Imagination is, in many senses of the term, something shared by literature and religion: for Matthew Potts, imagination in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* is a place where we are asked to reimagine memory



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and meaning, and where comparisons between the way the past shapes the present in the novel is an analogy with the narrative of Jesus in the Gospels. For sacrifice, Michon Matthiesen takes us to the fiction of Flannery O'Connor and to her *Prayer Journal* of 2013. Illness in O'Connor's own life comes through in the suffering shown in the short stories, and the spiritual journey draws on both Carmelite tradition and Aquinas. These juxtapositions are elegantly and persuasively put together, and they are explained convincingly. More explicit perhaps is the element of repetition in liturgical works and prayers, as well as in poetry like Herrick's litany. How emotion is handled and enhanced by repetition is something well-known by liturgists, reshaping time and space, as well as by poets.

In many ways, the final section on major faith traditions might have been the hardest to write in a distinctive way. After all, the historiography both of literature and religion is voluminous and intimidating. However, each contributor has managed to tease out something special. Cleo Kearns provides an excellent introduction to Hindu texts using Sanskrit writing as the frame, explaining fusions between the spiritual and the aesthetic in the dharmic tradition (as opposed to the Abrahamic – both are developed in the companion), and citing the Gita and other texts to say how they present themes of mystery and the divine, and how openness and experience of self are central in the critical tradition. Richard Payne's essay on Buddhism, too, provides a clear interpretive context: Buddhist "literature" is more than the sayings of the Buddha and expression of divine intentions many Western readers expect. The Buddhist path is epistemic (truth-searching) rather than a revelation of divine intention and regulation, a factor we must heed in reading and using religious and literary materials.

Susan Handelman's essay on Judaism highlights the dialogic character of the Torah, human beings with God, and explains how the rabbinic midrash (hermeneutic tradition) is an important example of interpretive methodologies common to both literature and religion. Other traditions unfold in the companion – Eastern Orthodoxy, with its search for paradise and experience of the love of God (taking the contributors to two modern authors, Papadiamandis and Steinhardt, one exploring murder as a path to love, the other suffering in prison); Roman Catholicism, with its central focus on the incarnation (a wide-ranging survey of literature of all periods); Islam, where the Quran understandably influences later texts, including *The Wine Ode* and Iqbal's political work on Satan in the modern world); and a post-colonialist study of Protestantism from Willie James Jennings. A final essay on World

Christianity takes two modern African works as a way of discussing new forms of syncretism and religious/political identity.

Summing up, then, a companion full of fertile and topical critical insights and ideas, offering a platform for further study, drilling down into unexpectedly original literary texts to make cross-disciplinary points, and making it clear that there is no one paradigm (and certainly not that of the traditionalist Christian West) that copes with the plurality and hybrid nature of religious and literary writing today. In helping readers to think outside the box, in a field where critical material is so extensive, it is a real achievement. This volume is an imaginative addition to a successful series.

**Stuart Hannabuss**

*Independent Reviewer and Researcher,  
Aberdeen, UK*

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### The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature

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The market in companions to philosophy continues to flourish. The series of *Routledge Philosophy Companions* have now chalked up 22 volumes, of which this is the latest. There are another ten forthcoming. The format remains the same: prestigious editors, several articles written by different hands, with notes and accompanying guides to further reading. At 500 pages, this volume is shorter than some of its predecessors.

The introduction by the editors takes pains to distinguish its subject from so-called literary theory and from philosophy in literature. They comment in their introduction that their primary goal was to produce a work "that will be attractive to both researchers and university instructors (for use in graduate and upper-level undergraduate courses)". Contributors were asked to strike a balance "between survey and originality, and to write in such a way that readers new to the field will acquire a sense not only of the showcase debates but also of how one might go about making innovative contributions to them." The volume's 40