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***Litteraturen og det hellige***

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Many, if not most, religions have texts at their center. Certainly a large part of what goes on in academic study of religion tends to focus on the sacred texts of the religions being scrutinized. The art of understanding a text, however, is by no means practiced, pondered, and developed within religious studies alone. It is not surprising, therefore, that religious and not least biblical studies have always been informed by what goes on in other branches of text-centered scholarship; the tendency may have been more pronounced during the last three decades or so, but it was by no means absent prior to 1968. Some scholars of biblical and religious studies, however, do not limit themselves to borrowing the tool boxes of their colleagues in the literature departments but actively cultivate research combining insights and subject matter from our own field with those of literary studies. This, too, is not in itself breaking news. The International Society for Religion, Literature and Culture bears witness to this.

The present volume, as Kirsten Nielsen points out in the preface, springs from a need felt also of including in work of this kind the recent regional literatures that are likely to be left out of the field of vision in an international Anglophone context, where the focus will be mostly on a common canon of established classics and/or on British and American literature. A Nordic Network for Religion and Literature has been at work, in recent

years, on emending this lack by working with the topic of Literature and the Sacred in a context focusing on the literature of the Nordic countries (although, admittedly, studies included in the volume touch on Dostoyevsky, Laurence Sterne, Flannery O'Connor, and José Saramago as well).

The volume is large and rich, containing a total of twenty-seven articles by twenty-five authors, two of whom contribute two articles each, namely, one of the editors, Ole Davidsen, and Thomas Hoffmann, a young scholar working in the sparsely populated border regions between Islamic and literary studies. The articles are written in Danish, Swedish, and the two main branches of Norwegian, *bokmål* and *nynorsk*, all of which are so closely related that a reader familiar with one of them should have a fair chance of benefiting from the entire volume. The richness itself of the collection may be its only potential drawback: Such a wide field is covered that few readers will find all of the material of immediate interest to their own work. But the mostly elegant writing and universally conscientious editing of the volume have made even the articles of very peripheral immediate interest to the present reviewer a highly inspiring read, and the book deserves a wide readership

A detailed interaction with all twenty-seven contributions would make for an unreasonably voluminous review, but all the same, I shall attempt to give an idea of the whole of the book, not just of selected articles. The structuring of the book into five sections may conveniently supply the structure of the review as well:

#### 1. The Understanding of Text in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Tradition

As an introductory (and, as it turns out, a highly pertinent) example of the phenomenon of sacred text, Kirsten Nielsen chooses to investigate the book of Psalms, or "Psalms of David," focusing on the duality inherent in the fact that the Psalms present themselves as words directed to God by a human being, but in the process of canonization they become words of God spoken to humans. This is seen as one aspect of the unending interpretability characteristic of all sacred texts, further emphasized by the peculiar fact that the Hebrew Bible is Holy Scripture to more than one religion.

The necessity of interpretation is at the center of Johannes Nissen's contribution as well. He sees the ongoing application of sacred texts to new situations as a sort of incarnation of meaning, in which "the text itself" grows and changes, so that, for example, scriptural demands for the willing submission of women and slaves can no longer be considered valid. This, evidently, is deceptively uncontroversial. One wonders: Would Nissen consider a similar critical approach, for example, to the christological exclusivity derived from passages such as Matt 12:30 and Mark 16:16?

The concept of sacrality or holiness itself is scrutinized by Marianne Schleicher. She distinguishes three aspects of sanctity: the canonical, which focuses on the normative function of the text to the community of believers and paradoxically implies the inalterability of the text as well as its openness to interpretation; the sacred, which describes the individual's relation to the text in meditative or interpretative interaction; and the holy, designating the text as a physical object of veneration. All three aspects are illustrated from the use made of the book of Psalms in the writings of the Hassidic rabbi Nahman of Bretelev.

Next in line is Jesper Svartvik's highly instructive article, in which he utilizes the issue of theodicy as a means of contrasting the worldviews inherent in rabbinic, gnostic, and Augustinian exegesis; the present reviewer learned something new about all three in the process. Rabbinic exegesis is taken up in more detail in the article by Erik Alvstad, in which the, so to speak, "postmodern" ability of the rabbis to hold contradictory views simultaneously is a central issue. The entirely different status of orthodoxy vis-à-vis "orthopraxis" is shown to be the key to this.

Two final articles in this section deal with holy scripture in Islam. The textuality of the Qur'an is the topic of Thomas Hoffmann's article. That the Qur'an (the very name meaning "recitation") is in a way a halfway house between orality and textual fixedness is in itself a platitude, and it has sometimes been taken simply as an expression of the book's origin in a semiliterate society. Hoffmann analyzes the many nuances of both vocality and textuality and shows the Qur'an to be not a mixture or an in-between phenomenon but belonging to a category in its own right.

John Møller Larsen writes about the Qur'anic exegesis of Sayyid Qutb, a prominent member of the Islamic Brotherhood in 1950s and 1960s Egypt. While militant legalism became part of his program, the larger part of his exegesis, however, was very much of a literary and aesthetic character, characterized by the expectation that the beauty of the Qur'an would make readers accept its message.

## 2. The Liturgical Text between Canon and Literature

As the caption suggests, an individual literary genre may be fruitfully distinguished, consisting of texts meant for liturgical use but not canonical in the conventional sense. Fixed prayers and other ritual texts obviously fall into this category, but sermons, too, would seem to belong to it. They are written to be performed in a cultic setting but may be published and read for personal edification or, for that matter, as *belles-lettres* pure and simple.

An intricate example of the latter occurs when a sermon written by a fictional parson in a novel is actually a real-life sermon previously given in church. This is the case with the sermon on Heb 13:18 accidentally found tucked away inside a book in volume 2 of *Tristram Shandy*. It had been read in church by Sterne prior to its use in the novel. To further complicate matters, Sterne later included the sermon in an entire published collection of sermons by his fictitious parson, Yorick. The intricate nature of the metamorphosis that a text undergoes in changing its context from church service to novel to *faux* book of edification is traced in the essay by Rolv Nøtvik Jakobsen.

Over the last three-and-a-half decades, the (Lutheran) Church of Norway has had the custom of sending a book to a child on the four-year anniversary of his or her infant baptism. Such books were published in 1972, 1986, and 1996, a new book being written from scratch each time. Astri Ramsfjell analyzes the books and finds vast changes in theology and in outlook but a completely unaltered idea of the socioeconomic status of the intended reader: he or she remains a member of a secure, small-town, middle-class family with two parents.

The delicate task of defining the generic difference between a hymn functioning as a liturgical entity in itself and a religious song in the wider sense is undertaken by Ole Davidsen. Not content to rest his case on the externals of the *Sitz im Leben* of the church service as opposed to other contexts, he defines the hymn by text-internal criteria in semiotic terms on the basis of the relation between *énonciation* and *énoncé* (the act of utterance and the “content” uttered), the hymn being characterized by metonymically transposing its singer to the time or sphere of which the hymn tells. The point is copiously illustrated by an analysis of the much-loved Danish hymn “Et barn er født i Betlehem” (A Child Is Born in Bethlehem). It would be interesting to see if all of the poems actually found in the Danish hymnal would count as hymns by this definition.

Andreas G. Lombnæs in his essay with the punning title “Det hellige(s) tegn” (roughly, “Signs of the Holy—or Holiness of the Sign”) reflects upon the mirror image of studying sacred texts “as literature,” namely, ascribing religious power to “merely” literary texts. Examples are culled primarily from contemporary Norwegian poets, but Derrida’s reading of Kafka’s “Before the Law” is invoked too.

### 3. The Sacred in Fiction

The longest section of the book comprises six studies of fictional bodies of work, as well as one essay applying the question of what it means for a text to be fictional to the biblical text itself.

Beata Agrell describes the changes in the role of the sacred in the Scandinavian literatures in the early twentieth century as consisting in a movement “from transcendence lost to immanence gained.” Rather than disappear from the realm of fiction, the sacred has formed alliances with aspects of existence that would previously be counted nonsacral. Øivind T. Gulliksen traces the motif of baptism in the work of two Norwegian authors, Oskar Braaten and Ole E. Rølvaag (the latter an immigrant to the American Midwest), as well as Flannery O’Connor. Anders Tyrberg reads Per Olov Enquist’s novel *Lewis Resa* [“Lewi’s Journey”] in intertextual relation to *A Pilgrim’s Progress* and, in the process, finds a sacramental aspect to the act of telling a story. Jonas Andersson gives multiple examples of fictional authors striving to make sense of the Cain and Abel story, but the main thrust of his article takes him from his own reading (inspired by René Girard) of the biblical story and back to throw light from this reading on some literary reworkings of the text. Sverre Wiland proposes a reinterpretation of the later *oeuvre* of Norwegian author Tarjei Vesaas, stressing the religious aspect toned down by a number of other scholars. And conclusively, British guest star George Pattison writes (in impeccable Danish) on the uses of the Bible in Dostoyevsky. The focus is not on biblical motifs being reused but on the occurrence within the narrative of the physical Bible being read aloud. Such passages are shown to be keys to the understanding of the individual novel.

In this section of the book we also find Torsten Pettersson’s fascinating investigation of the relation of biblical narrative to the genres of prose fiction and journalistic reporting or historiography, respectively. In other words: Does the Bible purport to relate “what really happened”? It has been frequently claimed—but less frequently argued—by proponents of the “Copenhagen school” in Old Testament studies that the biblical writers intended no such thing as historiography. If this article were to settle the question, it would definitely be worth the price of the entire book in itself. Pettersson, however, does an excellent job of defining what it means for a text to have “referential ambition” but in the end concludes that our knowledge of genre conventions in antiquity is probably too scant to allow us any secure judgment.

#### 4. Orthodoxy and Blasphemy in Literature

Texts dealing with matters religious, be they texts of fiction or “religious texts” in the narrower sense, also navigate within a field of tension between orthodoxy and heresy or even blasphemy.

Two articles approach these issues from a primarily historical angle. Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen demonstrates the many and partly quite arbitrary factors that go into making one text accepted and another of very closely related content heretical. The texts singled out as examples are two tracts written in the vernacular (Dutch and French, respectively)

in the thirteenth century by Beatrice of Nazareth and Marguerite Porete. Wiberg Pedersen demonstrates how the very different fates meted out to the two texts resulted only peripherally from their actual content and very much from their reception. One writer was made the topic of a hagiographical *vita* with obvious consequences for the status of the author's own text.

Bo Kristian Holm deals with the period of the reformation and the semicanonical status ascribed to the writings (and persons!) of the Reformers—a phenomenon seemingly at odds with the principle of *sola scriptura*. Holm approaches this in relation to the definition of heresy. In stressing the falsehood of every human (Ps 116:11/Rom 3:4), the Reformers “democratized” heresy as well as holiness: everyone is guilty of misrepresenting the Truth, but this, at the same time, makes it possible to construe the Reformers as sinful humans while at the same time elevating their interpretations of Scripture to a status bordering on that of Scripture itself.

“Blasphemy as an aesthetic category” is the topic of Stefan Klint's contribution, in which he attempts to demonstrate that blasphemy, defined as “speaking against God or against religious institutions,” may be a fruitful artistic strategy and even possibly “an element of genuine *imitatio Christi*.” He builds his case around analyses of three texts: the Book of Job, in which the issue, according to Klint, is not so much theodicy as the question of whether Job is justified in speaking of God as he does; the controversies between Jesus and his opponents in the Gospels, described by means of Gérard Genette's concept of hypertextuality as a sort of “rewriting” of the Jewish tradition; and a novel by Swedish author Jonas Gardell in which a homosexual love story is played out between the two actors doing the parts of Jesus and Judas in a passion play. In his apology for blasphemy, Klint obviously does not mention the silly acts of provocation that resulted in the recent Danish “cartoon crisis” (this happened after the writing of the book), but also not the matter of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*.

Contemporary literature is at the center also in Kari Syreeni's article on José Saramago's “The Gospel according to Jesus Christ.” Taking a less cheerful view of challenges to religious tradition than Klint, Syreeni finds the novel artistically not quite successful, easily read as a mere anti-Gospel, but suggests that its real contribution is to be found in “the story *not* told,” in passages suggesting what might have happened, had the characters of the novel acted differently.

## 5. The Religious Discourse

How should religious texts be approached? Taking his point of departure squarely within the Christian tradition, Lars Albinus presents two approaches decidedly at odds but

shows considerable empathy to both. He contrasts the philosophical approach of Nicholas Wolterstorff to the hermeneutics of Paul Ricœur. Wolterstorff's focus is on communication and speech-act theory: reading a text implies a sender of a message, so reading the text as a sacred text implies the divinity of the sender. To Ricœur, on the other hand, reception is the constitutive aspect of the reading of the canonical text: applying the text to the reader's life is the reader's own work. Albinus attempts a mediation between the two in the light of the concept of *auctoritas* in the sense of "author-ity" understood not just as power but as persuasive quality.

What does canonicity do to a text? Geert Hallbäck answers this question in lucid and intriguing fashion by means of concepts taken from structural linguistics. Just as the setting of a given word within the context of a specific sentence "actualizes" some potential aspects of meaning in the word while excluding others, so the meaning of a given early Christian writing is defined by its being included in the context of the canon: a "formation of meaning" takes place. Out of, for example, Mark and John individually, Christologies might be read that are excluded when the two are read together as part of the same canon. On the other hand, potential meaning is not only excluded, but new meaning also added in the combinatory process: James, when read side by side with Paul, has things to say that he could not say on his own. (Hallbäck brings his project to a halt at the outer limits of the New Testament canon. It seems to me, however, that a fruitful perspective on the ever-evasive idea of a "biblical theology" might come from applying this manner of thinking to the "formation of meaning" that takes place when the New Testament writings as a whole are joined to the Hebrew Bible.)

The funniest contribution to the volume comes from the pen of editor Ole Davidsen, one of the approximately three grand old men of semiotic biblical studies in Denmark. Reminiscing about his youthful student days, he tells the story of an enigmatic graffiti of four short words written in chalk upon the door of a block of flats in 1970s Copenhagen and goes on to subject this "text" to the full range of analytical methods. And the partly tongue-in-cheek starting point by no means inhibits the string of insightful remarks on textuality and sacrality that make up the article.

It is well known from biblical studies that reading the same text as a literary or a religious utterance may not be quite the same thing. Thomas Hoffmann introduces recent developments in qur'anic studies that have led to similar realizations. He finds fascinating parallels between the two as well, however: having first demonstrated that the Qur'an does indeed have all the characteristics of a poetic text, he goes on to analyze its reception of its literary predecessors; he sees this as a perfect example of Harold Bloom's "influence anxiety," the poet's simultaneous embrace and rejection of the classics on whose shoulder he stands. Turning back to traditional study of Islam, however, the

process thus described in literary terms is found to be quite parallel to the purely historical reconstructions of, for example, Nöldeke.

As a suitable coda to this symphony of studies, Anders Klostergaard Petersen discusses criteria for defining and categorizing religious texts. Taking his cue from Ole Davidsen, one criterion suggested is the formal one of insistence upon the identity of the world of the text and that of the reader, but to this is added issues of content (religious texts involve a worldview that distinguishes the immanent and the transcendent) and finally the role of the reader, who may ascribe quasi-religious significance to a text not obviously religious in itself. The three criteria are deemed workable only in combination. In addition to this, a classification of religious texts is attempted, categorizing texts according to their degree of intertextuality relative to the sacred texts proper.

There are no indices, but the frequent cross-references between articles bear witness to the careful editing and the underlying unity of the book despite the vastness of the terrain covered. A very minor quibble: there is a lack of consistency from article to article in the transcription of Hebrew—but as is so often the case, the reader who knows little or no Hebrew may not notice, and the reader who does is not placed at any serious disadvantage. The review may suitably be summed up in the words of the Augustinian anecdote that is referred to in more than one article in the book: *Tolle lege*.