

The Role of Art and Poetry in Religion

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The impact of media on religion and culture is an important theme because media with its technological conditions constantly expands as industry and technology. The new forms of media compared to art and poetry look to be in a win-win position, deterministic for the viewers.

This is also the reason why the subject of my paper is connected to relating to religion through art and poetry. An additional reason is that I grew up in socialist Hungary in the nineteen sixties where our connection to religion was mainly through art and poetry.

In Hungary there is a rich tradition of poets searching for God independently from their Catholic, Calvinist or Lutheran background. However there is a particular group of poets and writers I would like to mention today. A number of Hungarian poets and writers of Jewish origin converted to the Catholic Church in the early twentieth century because of the attraction of the spiritual and cultural assets of the Catholic Church and wishing to assimilate with majority Hungarians. At the time of the Anti-Jew Laws in 1938, 1939 and 1941 before and during World War II some of the best Hungarian poets, artists and musicians Miklós Radnóti, György Sárközi, Gábor Hajnal¹, the musicians Sándor Vándor, György Justus, László Weiner² and others were singled out, sacked from their jobs and called up to forced labour camps.

One of them, Antal Szerb, the author of a history of Hungarian literature, the author of a history of world literature, the author of wonderful novels – - was removed from his job as Professor of world literature in Szeged University, his books were pulped in , as were books of all Jewish authors though he was baptized catholic at the age of six. ³ On the 27th January, 1945 Szerb was

beaten to death by Hungarian guards in the mine where he was ordered to work. Exactly 70 years ago.

Szerb did not write poetry but since he wrote about some of the poets and poems I take up I think it is appropriate to remember him on this day. Separating, isolating people on the basis of their origin, beliefs or community led to persecution and death of not only Antal Szerb but a group of similarly brilliant people, the lost generation of Hungarian literature at the time when World War II was about to finish.

First, I would like to speak about media that was and is considered to be a very powerful tool. This is why in 1939, the sanction of the Second Anti-Jew Law that banned the employment of Jews in the media led to the mass unemployment of many people who like Antal Szerb had converted to Catholicism, but were still defined as Jews.

Second, after that I would like to go into the details of the varieties of religious feelings, in metaphysical poetry and in some poems by twentieth century Hungarian poets in English translation.

Media

Since the general theme of the symposium is the “Impact of Media on Religion and Culture” I would like to speak very briefly about the relationship between media and religion.

Religion brings individuals together in many areas like education, political resistance, liberation struggle, consumption, but it can also be a powerful tool of discrimination. The various activities may mean that the self emerges from the mediated practice into global communities and practices. Religious messages along with other messages constantly reach us through the media and we can be active receivers of the media messages. According to David Morgan, author and editor of *Key words in Religion, Media and Culture* who along with other researchers looked for religious legacies in consumption and the marketplace we

are capable of choice and effort directed by ideals and reason even within a limited space. Those who have grown up in repressive societies can prove how in a repressive environment countercultural forms developed and people were ready to participate in them.

We are prone to see a divide between religion and media and this originates from our dematerialized and disembodied understanding of religion. There is a spectacular rise and circulation of religious audiovisual cultural forms that we constantly face for example here in Mumbai at the entrance of Dargah of Haji Ali.

Media is expansive with its technological conditions and it invades our culture as industry, text and technology. The question is how far media is a deterministic instrument, and how can human agency be involved in its use.⁴ Some scholars (Stewart Hoover) rate the influence of electronic media on religions as enormous, since media operates sites in which agents, communities and institutions interact. Martin Barbero, one of the experts claims that the use of the electronic media sets processes in motion which introduce the resacralization of the world, which bring people together. This can be considered as a point of departure. Religious communication is possible because of the system of symbols, moods and motivations” which become stronger with the individuals involvement and sensorium and the body are shown to be key sites for shaping religious subjectivities. The senses and bodies of believers are tuned and addressed by shared songs, images, styles of dressing.

An example of the power of the media is the attack on the office of the magazine Charlie Hebdo on the 7th January 2015. This attack shows how extreme reactions to satire on religion can be.

These are areas, which are crucial involving the media and having a massive role on political processes. As a result of this attack we may also think over ideas of public and private opinion formation, the ideas of censorship and self-censorship, and the freedom of the press.

Religion and Privacy

William James⁵ defines religion as „the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude”. Both James and Julia Kristeva describe religious experience as a private feeling involving - melancholia, panic, guilt - overcome by a process in which the self becomes unified through „moments of sentimental and mystical experience —that carry an enormous sense of inner authority and illumination with them when they come.”

This is what conversion signifies for James and Kristeva who interpreted autobiographies, novels and paintings in this context. David Morgan and his associates in *Key-words in Religion, Media and Culture* focus on emerging patterns of religion, spirituality and the range of new practices⁶. William James’s and Julia Kristeva’s perspective is in contrast to David Morgan or Martin Barbero’s views who see the media as a possible way of resacralization of the world and a key-site for shaping religious sensitivities.

Poetry, art and media are crucial in the manner in which images convey a sense of divine presence. Our total sensorial experience of the world and our sensuous knowledge give us the means to perceive images through our five senses texture, taste, smell, sound, visible shape and colour.

The poets who put us face to face with the sensuous knowledge of the world were the metaphysical poets. John Donne’s, (1572-1631) poem *A Hymn to God the Father* on sin is built on confession, the sin he has committed, he wallowed in, he continues with and deplors. It is the drama of feeling and thought. Antal Szerb, the writer I mentioned in the beginning of my key-note address emphasizes the paradox of combination of feeling and thought, that creates drama in the poetry of metaphysical poets. Szerb also underlines the combination of devotion and contempt. In the poem Donne confesses about sin, committed by him and the poem accentuates the sense of original sin that continued in a postlapsarian world and his approach challenges the aesthetic sensibilities and the sense of guilt, and complexes. T.S. Eliot in his essay on the Metaphysical poets refers to the “massive music of Donne, which comes with looking into the heart”.⁷

The poem⁸ is built to a great extent on the linguistic pun, the participle form of the verb 'do' – 'done' and Donne's name. There is a connection between the first and the last stanza the sin that was forgiven, but the poet still runs. „When thou hast done thou hast not done, For I have more.” The image of the shore and the reference to the speaker's death in the last stanza „I have spun my last thread” for the image of the Son, „But swear by thyself that at my death thy Son shall shine as he shines now , and heretofore , And having done that thou hast done/ i fear no more.”

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
Others to sin, and made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
A year or two, but wallow'd in, a score?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, thou hast done;
I fear no more.

Around the time of Donne's birth in 1522 Hans Holbein, the Younger painted an unusual painting of the Dead Christ⁹. The bluish-greenish tone of the painting makes it clear that we deal with a dead body, a corpse. The hair and the beard show in a realistic way that death has taken place not long before the event.



Hans Holbein, the Younger The Body of Dead Christ in the Tomb, 1520-22
Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, [Basel](#)

The painting shows the stigmata on the chest, on his right hand and right foot of Christ. The viewer's perspective is from below upward and is limited by the roof of the tomb. In Holbein's painting we see Christ and identify with the aftermath of suffering and the dreadful beauty of the body. The roof of the tomb looks firmly fixed, without any hint of resurrection. This detail adds a different dimension to the painting.

In some other paintings for example in Andrea Mantegna's painting¹⁰, the viewer can see the mourners: Virgin Mary and St. John and the sorrow is visible on their faces which we can identify with. Mary Magdalene is also present behind Virgin Mary (she is hardly visible, but her presence is signified by her vessel of ointment on the left).

Julia Kristeva¹¹ in her study on *Holbein's Dead Christ* brings in the question of faith and belief in the context of Holbein's painting and his depiction of the process of decomposition of the dead body. Kristeva starts her study of Holbein's painting with a quotation of Dostoevki's novel, *The Idiot*. Prince Myshkin, the protagonist of the novel after looking at a copy of the Holbein painting in Rogozhin's house remarks „Looking at this painting some people may even lose their faith”. Kristeva underlines the contrast between Mantegna's and Holbein's painting and refers to Blaise Pascal. Pascal emphasized that Christ was dead and seen on the cross by his followers and his enemies, while when he was dead he was hidden in the sepulchre from his enemies.

Kristeva asks in the conclusion of her paper „Can painting become a substitute for prayer?” and answers it „Contemplating the painting may become a substitute of prayer, when death becomes the final aspect of life.” and it also means that there is no afterlife.

In the rest of my paper I am going to deal with three Hungarian poems by three Hungarian poets written in the twentieth century.

„Confrontation with the essence of existence is poetry, and the main motivation force in Poetry” – says István Jelenits, a Professor of Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest a priest who is also a literary historian.¹² Much of Hungarian religious poetry shows the search for the hidden God, *deus absconditus* as Pascal formulated it in his *Pensees*¹³ „It endeavours equally to establish these two things: that God has set up in the Church visible signs to make Himself known to those who should seek Him sincerely, and that He has nevertheless so disguised them that He will only be perceived by those who seek Him with all their heart.”

Hungarian poets like Endre Ady, Mihály Babits, Béla Balázs represent the tradition of search for the “hidden God”. Novalis and Rilke in German poetry can also be considered as part of this tradition.

Endre Ady’s poem¹⁴ *On Elijah’s Chariot* is one of the three Hungarian poems I am going to take up in this context. Ady’s work (1877-1919) ushered in modernism in Hungarian literature. He was a Calvinist by denomination but considered himself a freethinker. Yet in his poems belief is present in the paradox of relying on God, trusting God whose existence he is not certain of. His poetry derived much material from the Old Testament, especially the melody and the vocabulary of the psalms, the memory of the religious experiences of childhood and the Calvinist community in Transylvania where he was born. His belief is the best expressed by the title of one of his poems “I believe in God without believing”. Ady longs for God as shelter, glorifies him, but he is concerned about his autonomy. Conversion and distance, arrival and departure could characterize Ady’s relationship to God.

In 1910 Ady wrote in the literary journal, *Nyugat* in the context of Andre Gide's book *Strait is the Gate* „I am a freethinker ..., but I do not know any better way of free thinking than the restless and critical engagement with God. Either-or, finally somebody finds him or finally gets even with him that could lead to the beautiful, great relief and freedom in human life.”

Giovanni Battista Piazzetta *Elijah taken up in the Chariot*¹⁵ is based on the *Book of Kings* depicting the moment when God takes Elijah away in his chariot and Elisha, his pupil falls on his knees in admiration of the miracle.

Ady's poem *On Elijah's Chariot* deals with the mission of poetry. In the poem the Lord selects the poets, artists, „His darlings, those with harshest lots” and he takes them away in his fiery chariot. Elijah's chariot reaches the Himalayas that is a no-man's land between Earth and Heaven. The fate of artists and poets is statelessness, they are „tossed and hurled” between Earth and Heaven they do not belong to either. In the last stanza the oppositions are emphasized „Their hearts burn bright”, but „their brows are hung with icicles”. Diamond dust „like ice” is scattered in their way by the Sun. In the poem „ice” and „icicles” express loneliness and individualism similarly to Ady's other poems.

Endre Ady

On Elijah's Chariot

The Lord, like Elijah, gathers up
His darlings, those with harshest lots:
Those gifted with quick hearts of flame
Become his fiery chariots.

Elijah's nation rush to heaven
And stop there in perpetual snow,
The ice-bound Himalayan peaks
Their ragged rattling chariots go.

Bleak statelessness, nor earth nor heaven,
 By winds of fate they're tossed and hurled.
 Elijah's car makes for the cool
 And wicked beauties of the world.

Their hearts burn bright, their brows are hung
 With icicles. And how Earth laughs.
 The Sun meanwhile strew diamond dust
 Like ice along their frozen paths.
 Translation by George Szirtes

Attila József's poem (1905-1937) *Tumble out of the Flood* ¹⁶ was written a few months before the poet's suicide after he went through a period of psychoanalysis. „The Flood” in the title of the poem epitomizes suffering, physical and psychological deprivation. Attila József was born in the slums of the capital, Budapest, and in the countryside where his mother was forced by her circumstances to send him to adoptive parents. It was in the threatening external surroundings of suppressed labour movements, with a ban on the social-democratic parties, the preparation of anti-Jew laws that Attila József wrote about his search for God.

The poem shows a rich layering of consciousness of self-awareness, the forces within the mind and outside. The speaker implores God to be the ultimate authority in his life, measure of moderation, proportion and restraint. The limits of his forces and his sensitivity could be considered by God more than by him, the poet.

Child-like innocence is an issue in the poem and in each stanza we discover the child: he implores God to „sweep him asunder”, he is knocked down by the horse and as a result he is „in dirt”, „in cipher” and yet he „plays with knives of pain”.

The speaker plays with fire, and he asks to be „rapped on the hand”. Stanza after stanza he asks God to control him „hammer it into me” „that innocence could be my cage.” The surrender and submission lead to defiance and disobedience. The last stanza of the poem is a stanza of rebellion that raises the question of non-believing belief with the poet „looking boldly into the eye” of God, or „the human-

faced unbeing.” The admission goes with the sense of tempest and pain, that tosses the speaker from one position to the opposite.

The poem is built on this dichotomy of belief and non-belief, the existence and non-existence of God . Belief and lack of belief are both contained in the poem, which is written out of the wish to have God and defy him at the same time..

Attila József

Tumble out of the Flood
 Terrify me, my hidden God,
 I need your wrath, your scourge, your thunder;
 quick, come tumble out of the flood,
 lest nothingness sweep us asunder.

I am the one the horse knocks down,
 up to my eyes in dirt, a cipher,
 and yet I play with knives of pain
 too monstrous for man's heart to suffer.

How easily I flame! the sun
 is not more prone to burn - be frightening,
 scream at me: leave the fire alone!
 Rap my hands with your bolt of lightning.

Hammer it into me with rage
 or grace: it's innocence that's evil!
 that innocence could be my cage
 burns at me fiercer than a devil.

A fragment from a wreck I lie,
 tossed by a cruel tempest frothing;
 alone; I dare, and I defy:
 all merely signifying nothing.

I'd choke my very breath, to die,
 your rod and staff thus disobeying,
 and look you boldly in the eye,
 you empty, human-faced unbeing!

Translation by Frederick Turner and Ozsváth, Zsuzsanna

In the case of János Pilinszky (1921-1981) we can see the mystical trend in Hungarian poetry that has different sources and aesthetics from the search for God by the earlier two poets, the ambivalence of Endre Ady and Attila József. Pilinszky was called up to the Army in the last year of World War II. He was moving through Europe and on his way he saw the concentration camps of Dachau, Buchenwald and Ravensbrück. This was a life- changing experience for him.

Pilinszky's poetry runs in a similar tradition as what we see in Simone Weil's philosophy (1909-1943) or Jacob Boehme's (1575-1624) and Suso's (1290-1365) poetry. Simone Weil studied philosophy and her involvement as an anarchist, and a trade union worker took her to the Republicans side in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. In 1938 she had her mystical experiences¹⁷, which made her convert to Catholicism. János Pilinszky wrote about Weil's work, *Gravity and Grace* and it was a point of reference for him. Pilinszky's poetry stands out with its affinity to mysticism, a reduction of expression and the acceptance of Platonism. The reduction concerns the relationship between people, their conditions, the order of the world that can also lead to their identity. In a lecture Pilinszky spoke about "unmoving commitment". The themes of Pilinszky's poetry are the presence of Man in the world and in God, "the bloody fabric" of history, love and the insult, man's subordination to nature and extasis, time and atemporality.

Pilinszky's poem¹⁸ *Fish in the net*, uses the plural first person "like fish hauled on land/we gasp in the net" and this identifies fish with the species, man. The fish and human metonymy follows up to the end of the poem. There is an atemporal dimension in the poem, it is unclear, whether the "gasping", "cramming""struggle" and "tremble" go on for eternity, or the length of human life. In the fifth line

middle we also get a hint : “The element we’ve left and lost/whispers in vain”. identifies water and the state of the embryo, man before birth. There is a blind mechanism that is at work in the poem and it continues until the end “maybe we end at midnight” in a “cosmic fisherman’s frying pan.”

János Pilinszky

Fish in the net
Writhing in a star-net
like fish hauled on land
we gasp in the emptiness
our gills filled with sand
The element we’ve left and lost
whispers in vain
we pant on the shingle
were we’ve been thrown.
Crammed one against the other
fighting for breath
we struggle and tremble
in the face of death.
From the wriggling mass
come stifled cries
but the massacre continues
till one, then other, dies.
Atonement and repentance
are the language of the soul
but nothing can save us
from this hopeless hell –
We writhe in the net
of some cosmic fisherman
and maybe at midnight
will be in his frying pan.

Translation by Kenneth White

A quatrain¹⁹ by Pilinszky translated by Ted Hughes and János Csokits takes up the motives of crucifixion the nails, the icecold sand and combines them with elements of modern urbanity: Poster-loneliness, the lights on the corridor, two images put next to each other which the reader can connect and give meaning to.

Quatrain

Nails asleep under frozen sand.

Nights soaked in poster-loneliness.

You left the light on in the corridor.

Today my blood is shed.

Translation by Ted Hughes and János Csokits

In conclusion let me briefly say that the engagement with religion may take many forms as it can be observed in various forms of media, the poetry of metaphysical poets, in the poems of search for God in Endre Ady and Attila József and in the religious poetry of János Pilinszky. The search for *deus absconditus* originates in the ambivalence of God's absence, the dichotomy of absence and presence and the desire for his presence. János Pilinszky, the mystical poet whose poems *Fish in the net* and *Quatrain* were discussed last perceives the world in the framework of eternity, crowded loneliness and undending space.

(Footnotes)

- 1 Lőránt Czigány, *Victims of Persecution*, in: *A History of Hungarian Literature, From the Earliest times to the mid-1970's*, 1984, <http://mek.oszk.hu/02000/02042/html/68.html>
- 2 Ágnes Kory, *Jewish Musicians in Hungary Music and the Holocaust*, <http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/hungary/>
- 3 József Havasréti, Szerb Antal, *Magvető*, Budapest, 2013, p.12.
- 4 Peter Horsfield, *Media*, in: David Morgan, *Key words in Religion, Media and Culture*, p.111
- 5 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 35-36.
http://www.worldu.edu/library/william_james_var.pdf
- 6 David Morgan, *Key words in Religion, Media and Culture*, p.43.

- 7 T.S. Eliot, *The Metaphysical Poets* (1921) in, *Selected Essays*, Faber, London, 1976, pp.281-291.
- 8 <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173371>
- 9 <https://www.google.co.in/search?q=hans+holbein+the+younger,+christ+in+the+tomb&newwindow>
- 10 <https://www.google.co.in/search?q=Andrea+Mantegna,+Lamentation+of+Dead+Christ>
- 11 Julia Kristeva, *Holbein's Dead Christ*, in: *Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1980, pp.106-138.
- 12 <http://www.kortaronline.hu/2012/12/irodalom-vasadi/12664>
- 13 Pascal's *Pensees*, Chapter 3
<http://www.leaderu.com/cyber/books/pensees/pensees-SECTION-2.html>
- 14 Endre Ady, *Az Illés szekerén* in *Hungarian and in the translation of George Szirtes* in: *The Lost Rider*, A bilingual anthology, Corvina, Budapest, 1997, pp.154-155.
- 15 Piazzetta's painting
<http://www.cgfaonlineartmuseum.com/piazzetta/p-piazzetta9.htm>
- 16 Hungarian original and English translation by Frederick Turner and Zsuzsanna Ozsváth,
http://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/J%C3%B3zsef_Attila/Bukj_f%C3%B6l_az_%C3%A1rb%C3%B3l/en/31087-Tumble_out_of_the_Flood?interfaceLang=hu
- 17 http://www.bodysoulandspirit.net/mystical_experiences/read/notables/weil.shtml
- 18 Hungarian original and English translation by Kenneth White
http://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/Pilinszky_J%C3%A1nos-1921/Halak_a_h%C3%A1l%C3%B3ban/en/3519-Fish_in_the_net
- 19 Hungarian original and translation
http://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/Pilinszky_J%C3%A1nos-1921/N%C3%A9gygyorsos/en/2107-Quatrain