



## **Evaluation of the MA Thesis *The Importance of Religion and Spirituality in Feminist Science Fiction Literature* by Özge Okur**

In this thesis Özge Okur examines the role of religion and spirituality in the gendered societal and ecological organisation depicted in the novels *The Handmaid's Tale* by Canadian writer M. Atwood (1985) and *The Fifth Sacred Thing* by American writer and neopagan witch Starhawk (1993). These novels are taken as exemplars of 'feminist science fiction', a genre in which Okur argues 'the role of religion is crucial' (p. 9) but 'often ignored in feminist analysis' (ibid.). Okur sets out to explore *how* religion and spirituality are important for relations of power in these novels but gives few indications what approach and methods she adopts to carry out her analysis.

The introduction already discusses select scenes from the novels that purport to 'capture the essence of religion' (p. 3). It also offers a biographical note about the author's ambivalent feelings regarding the gendered practices of religion ('Positionality') and a chapter preview. The literature review is the longest chapter (28 pages, no subheadings) and organised along a summary of articles by feminist critics that refer to the two novels and other feminist sci-fi (Le Guin, O. Butler; Russ) that the author does not appear to have read herself. The review introduces the genre 'feminist science fiction' as emerging in the north American context of 1970s women's liberation, as well as 'key concepts of feminist science fiction' (p. 10), specifically aporia and indeterminacy; (gendered) human nature; risk-taking and agency; and time. It further discusses sexism in Christianity, and the rise and politicisation of (Evangelical) Christian fundamentalism and neopaganism as the societal inspirations that inform the two novels.

Two shorter empirical chapters (16 pages and 10 pages) zoom in on rituals of enforced sex, public punishment and prosecution cast in a new language, and legitimatised by citations of the Old Testament in the case of *Handmaid's Tale*; and a discussion of practices of witchcraft, non-violence, sex, erotics and ecology in the case of *Fifth Sacred Thing*. These practices are again discussed in relation to existing practices in the US. A brief conclusion summarises the different takes of the two novels where 'religion is clearly a tool to manipulate women' in *Handmaid's Tale* and 'empowers women' (66) in *Fifth Sacred Thing*.

The thesis seems a little rushed, with repetitive sketches of the main plotlines and the general thesis that 'spirituality or religion can be both used as force for good and evil' (9). References to Emerson and Hartman, Greene, and Zaki are missing. While the introduction contains a chapter overview, the chapters themselves do not signpost the argument or provide more symmetrical foci (e.g. in subheadings) to facilitate a comparative approach. There is little evidence for the claim that religion and spirituality are important in feminist sci-fi or

speculative fiction more broadly, and unclarity how 'religion' and 'spirituality' are conceptualised, and how the 'key categories' introduced in the literature review inform the analysis that follows. Together with a strong reliance on secondary literature in the empirical analysis this makes it harder to appreciate what the author contributes to the question of *how* religion and spirituality are informing women's oppression and resistance in social organisation.

In view of this I would like to invite Özge to clarify and expand on the following three aspects.

First, clarify how 'religion' and 'spirituality' (that are sometimes used interchangeably, sometimes distinguished) are defined in this work. This is significant analytically since one could argue provocatively that there is no spirituality in the *Handmaid's Tale* (the term is not used in the analysis) and so the religious framing might not be decisive for the mechanisms and practices of women's oppression. Conversely Neopaganism, enacted in earth care and sexual practice might be a 'ways of living' (57) not a 'religion'; hence the thesis compares apples and oranges, so to say.

Second, can the author take one of the analytical categories she introduced and demonstrate by way of example what insights it can generate into the workings of 'religion' and 'spirituality' in the two novels? This might be an opportunity to pinpoint a more fine-grained comparison highlighted in the thesis abstract.

Third, what inspirations does the author find the two novels offer for 'feminist visions of the future' (p. 2), 'subverting gendered power dynamics' (p. 9) and 'new and transgressive positions' (p. 16)? In other words, what is their relevance in and for the feminist present?

And optionally: Were there moments where the author's 'positionality' was a difference that made a difference in terms of how the analysis was approached?

I recommend the grade 2-3.

Prague 18.9.2020

Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer, Ph.D., opponent