

Sacred Other: Boundaries and Pores in the Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur'an as Literary Works

The American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) conference, held on 23-26 March 2006 at Princeton University, featured over 120 panels, each with about three presenters. The theme of the conference, "The Human and Its Other," inspired a broad spectrum of imaginative considerations of this fascinating topic. The field of comparative literature specializes in interdisciplinary work that crosses the boundaries of language, nationality, culture, historical period, and religion by examining the common ground shared by creative works.

The conference doubled its size of previous years to 1,200 participants from around the world. This year it included a reading by Joyce Carol Oates, a conversation with Nobel prize winner Toni Morrison, a performance by the American Ballet Theater dancers, and a talk on human rights by noted postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak. The ACLA conference uses a two- and three-panel series format to structure panels, thereby allowing panelists in each series to dialogue over a two- or three-day period.

One of the three-panel series, "Sacred Other: Boundaries and Pores in the Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur'an as Literary Works," focused on the three sacred texts as literary works. Chaired by Roberta Sabbath (University of Nevada, Las Vegas), the panel topic continued her three-year project of chairing similar panels at major literary conferences in the United States. The topic enables a dialogue between scholars primarily from the fields of literary and religious studies. A variety of literary theoretical lenses enlisted by participants enriched the understanding of the sacred texts themselves and their vast influence on cultural production.

Panelists stretched the word *otherness* to include a variety of meanings. The survey of topics below reflects the depth of the conversation. While religious, social, and cultural institutional practices encourage thinking about the many levels of human experience in terms of an inclusive/exclusive sensibility, these panelists made no such distinction. While labels define individuals in society, papers in this panel series fractured stereotypical thinking. While labels also limit the understanding of the human experience of spirituality, alienation, emotion, influence, and community, these panelists exploded the myth that any of these human experiences adhered to boundaries or limitations. On the contrary, the porous nature of life at the material,

emotional, communal, and spiritual levels was explored by examining the sacred texts' figurative language and narratives.

Presenters in the first panel included Mehnaz Afridi (University of South Africa), who, speaking to "Islam and Its Forgotten Others," sees the ummah as the acceptance of the "Other." Ummah means the unity of Muslims regardless of race or ethnicity and includes all people, not only Muslims. In her "Choreographing the Golem and the Dybbuk: Portrait of the Other, Jewish Folklore in Dance," Margot Mink Colbert (University of Nevada, Las Vegas) described her own ballet choreography inspired by the story of the Golem of Prague, the spirit who saved an innocent young Jewish man accused of blood libel from certain death. Dayton Haskin (Boston College) remarked on the absence of religious discourse within the hallowed halls of the nineteenth-century academe in his "An Erasure of Jewishness: The Case of 'the Jew of Malta.'" William McBride's (Illinois State University) paper, "Homo Fictilis: Thrown Clay – Fallible, Malleable, Asleep," explored the figurative language of Adam's creation out of clay and the potter's wheel as expressing the human feeling of existential otherness.

In the second panel, Othman Shibly (University of Buffalo) used his "Otherness in the Quran," to cite Qur'anic texts that emphasize the universality and priority of human rights. Nineteenth-century popular culture described its outlaw hero in Biblical terms, reported Jennifer Koosed (Albright College) and Robert Seesengood (Drew University) in "Crossing Outlaws: The Legendary Lives and Deaths of Jesse James and Jesus of Nazareth." The torment of alienation from both oneself and from unfeeling nature is expressed in the Book of Job, as read by J'annine Jobling and Alan Roughley (both of Liverpool Hope University), in "Betting on Disaster: Readings of Job."

In the third panel, Catherine Winiarski's (University of California, Irvine) "Reformation Iconoclasm: Christianity between Hebrew and Greek" explored how the spiritual and material image of the second commandment (viz., You shall not make any graven image, or any likeness of any thing in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth: you shall not bow down to them nor serve them . . . [Exodus 20: 4-5]) shifts in the hands of New Testament writers and leaders. Toni Tidswell (University of New England, Australia) highlighted the strength, independence, and power of the remarkable Qur'anic figure in "The Literary Type of the Desiring 'Other': The Queen of Sheba in the Tanakh and the Qur'an." Forms of divinity, including the experience of both the immanence and transcendence of the divine as expressed within the Tanakh, were explored by Roberta Sabbath

(University of Nevada, Las Vegas) in “The Rock between the Trees: Pantheist and Panentheist Subtext in the Tanakh.”

The spirit of the panels themselves was clearly inclusive. Panelists typically read “against the grain” of the obvious interpretation or of the interpretation often privileged for ideological purposes. Sacred text narratives provide the figurative language to express the alienation and loneliness that is a part of the human experience. Often that sense of alienation is emotional, sometimes spiritual. The sacred narratives bequeath meaning to our everyday lives by making someone a devil or a savior or by explaining events as having some spiritual purpose. Sacred role models, even those submerged female figures, inspire our individual lives. And sometimes, even though our experience of spirituality is not exactly what is suggested by these sacred texts, it is, nevertheless, inspired by the values that these texts endorse. In the eyes of the panelists, the sacred texts insist upon the value of the individual and the polymorphous human experience.

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