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**Hanna Bingel.** *Fictions of spirituality: Die narrative Verhandlung von Religiosität und spiritueller Sinnsuche in ausgewählten US-amerikanischen Gegenwartromanen.* Cultures in America in Transition 5. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013, 276 pp., € 32.00.

The volume *Fictions of spirituality* by Hanna Bingel is a welcome addition to the study of literature and religion. ‘Fictions of spirituality’ are to be understood as

fictions that place emphasis on a dialogic relationship between literary productions of religious themes and contemporary discourses of religion and theology – as opposed to existing terminology that highlights, for example, denominations rather than religious plurality. In addition, the focus is on the literary production, problematization, and processing of spiritual quests for meaning, religious experiences, and theological questions on a formal and structural level as a leitmotif. This typology – in analogy to other ‘fictions’ – provides the opportunity to conceptualize the heterogeneity and complex relationships of fictional text, sociocultural context, and dominant references of the novels discussed here (cf. 18–24). More details about the ‘fictions of spirituality’ are elaborated throughout the first major part of the book, which also contains a table with core features of the different types (116–117).

Organized into five parts and a list of works cited, this volume first approaches the topic from a theoretical perspective before applying the approaches to selected contemporary novels. After a general introduction Bingel situates her work in the context of contemporary research on literature and religion, the religious turn, and genres of spiritual writing, while also outlining her project’s goals and presuppositions. This general introduction is followed by a more detailed account of premises both from the perspective of religious as well as literary studies. In the first part, the discussion of the religious studies context introduces key terms as well as the cultural historical context with a special focus on the contemporary U.S.A. In the second part, the potential of fiction with regard to discussing religiousness in society is elaborated. This part concludes by outlining four main functions of ‘fictions of spirituality’ that provide the basis for the further explorations and structuring of the novels in this study.

In the following theoretical section, Bingel develops a ‘poetics of religiousness’ (72, my translation) which, according to this chapter’s title, investigates ‘the narrative production of religiousness and transcendence in the novel and its literary components’ (my translation) and draws on narratology and reception theory as a framework. In this section, theoretical insights are combined with a wide scope of textual examples from American literature. In addition, the conceptual framework for the case studies is presented from a theoretical perspective. This section ends with proposals for a genre typology of the ‘fictions of spirituality’. The typology is then applied to four contemporary examples situated, according to the title, ‘between religious orthodoxy and postmodern (a)theology: case studies of literary productions of religiousness and spiritual quests for meaning’ (my translation). These case studies are analyses of Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*, John Irving’s *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, John Updike’s *Roger’s Version*, and Edgar L. Doctorow’s *City of God*.

In the respective sections and chapters of the case studies, Bingel takes both content and form of the novels into account. This is one of the strengths and important contributions of this study since, as Bingel argues in the introduction, form has so far been neglected over content in the study of what she refers to as 'fictions of spirituality'. In her case studies, she proves the importance of form in a reading of novels that negotiate religiousness and spiritual quests for meaning by revealing multiple functions that form can have in this negotiation. Each of the case studies focuses on a different example in this typology, but they are all simultaneously related to each other. Robinson's *Gilead* serves, as indicated in the chapter's title, as an example to negotiate 'religious quests for self, memory, and identity' (my translation), in the discussion of Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany* the focus is on 'spiritual doubt and ambivalent religiousness' (my translation), 'heresy and paradox religiousness' (my translation) are foregrounded in Bingel's reading of Updike's *Roger's Version*, and 'epistemological skepticism and de(con)struction of religious tradition' (my translation) mark the approach to Doctorow's *City of God*. Each of these case studies addresses, apart from the content features referred to in the titles, different narrative elements of analysis within the typology that are linked with the theoretical explorations from the previous parts of the study as well as insightful references and explanations. Through the cross references, various functions of the textual elements are presented. Thereby, Bingel convincingly proves the importance of the inclusion of form in the analysis of 'fictions of spirituality' and discusses potential functions of form in that context.

The conclusion adds some implications of this study. As promised in the introduction, this book offers heuristic tools to broaden the view in the analysis of 'fictions of spirituality'. So far, however, they have been confined to contemporary novels in the Judeo-Christian tradition by white U.S. American writers and may, as suggested by Bingel, be broadened to include other text types as well as other religions and spiritual backgrounds. Considering, for example, the impact of 9/11 on discussions of literature and religion in the contemporary U.S.A., this is a noteworthy research goal, which might be supported by the fact that even one of the authors from the case studies, John Updike, devoted a full novel (*Terrorist*, which features a young Muslim in a Jewish, Judeo-Christian and Muslim environment, basically an environment of Abrahamic religions and secular worldviews) to a different religious context than his previous mainly Judeo-Christian work. In general, American literature consists of a multitude of literary explorations of various forms of religion and spirituality, which provide ample opportunities to broaden the scope and to explore how different backgrounds may shape these literary explorations.

Bingel's study and genre typology of 'fictions of spirituality' therefore adds a valuable component to the study of such texts and widens the perspective from a

major focus on content towards more attention to literary features in form and style. As Bingel's case studies prove, form and style add important aspects to an analysis of 'fictions of spirituality', and the tools are presented in a way that invites further research to broaden the scope of their usage. This welcome broadening in the analysis appears to be the most important contribution that this study makes to the contemporary discussion of literature and religion. However, in times of transnational American Studies, it is somewhat unfortunate that it is published in German and thereby confined to a relatively small audience. Therefore, a broadening of the scope to include more diverse authors and spiritual backgrounds as well as a wider potential readership in transnational American Studies would be promising next steps based on this volume.

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