

BIBLE AND LITERATURE FOR THE (ORTHODOX) THEOLOGICAL ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The importance of the bible as/ for literature cannot be denied and outstanding developments such as Northrop Frye's to the field (*The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, 1981) testify to this reality. However, as an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) trainer, the purpose of our paper is to account for the extent to which canonical literature can be brought into play to the Theological English classroom to improve our students' biblical and literary knowledge and develop their productive and receptive skills in a communicative language teaching (CLT) environment; thus, if Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers* (1930-1943) can be definitely considered for study at a Romanian Orthodox faculty, José Saramago's controversial *Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991) and *Cain* (2009) less so, due to the materialistic atheism prophesized. Consequently, our material consists of several canonical works, the above mentioned ones included, and our methods draw on general and ESP teaching methodology without ignoring the purpose of a Christian English teacher (CET). We will discuss the results of our research emphasizing the general impact of Bible and literature on the professional and personal development of the theological students in their academic life and likely career (priests, sacral artists or social workers in a Christian environment).

Keywords: *Bible and literature, CET, CLT, ESP, Orthodox Theology students.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Theological English (TE) is a less researched branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) than its siblings, i.e. Business English, Legal English, etc. which can be internationally assessed; for instance, Cambridge offers an International Legal English Certificate (ILEC) and a Business English Certificate (BEC), among others, whereas a learner of TE can only have his general English skills verified and graded. However, the literature of the field has increased steadily for the past three decades and its contribution to the ESP core cannot be denied.

As previously stated in our research (PETRARU, 2015), on the international stage a distinction between English for Bible and Theology (EBT) and Theological English (TE) was made; the former refers to "the teaching or learning of the specific variety of English used in Bible and theology classes, textbooks and articles in these disciplines, sermons, etc. One subtype of EBT is Theological English (TE), which focuses on aspects of English related to the study of theology, including theological terms, the range of complex sentence structures used in theological writing, and even the broader organisational patterns used by theologians in their teaching and writing" (PIERSON *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, as a branch of ESP, EBT and TE have a role similar to English for Engineering or Medicine for future physicians and is different from English for Occupational purposes (EOP) which was tailored for the needs of workers in the hospitality industry, nurses and other professional categories such as physicists or various engineers. In our approach we combine elements of TE and its branch, EBT to develop our students' receptive (reading and listening) and productive skills (speaking and writing) in a communicative language teaching (CLT) context against an Orthodox Theological English background. In this respect, we share in common with general teaching methodology which reads that an ESP teacher is more than a 'traditional' language teacher as s/he needs to consider the students' special knowledge acquired at mainstream academic courses (pertaining to the field of Orthodox Theology, in our case); furthermore, as a non-native speaker we should "discern the particular vocabulary, discourses and processes that are essential to the ESP training of students

within a specialised context" (JOHNS & PRICE-MACHADO, 2001). We also draw on CLT and its recent developments which stress the importance of building communicative competence at a sociocultural level without ignoring grammar and strategic discourse, all aiming at "fostering students' positive attitude towards communicating in a foreign language and heightening their interest in language and culture, thus deepening international understanding" (SAVIGNON, 2001). Last but not least, we are aware that our role as a teacher is to pass on knowledge to students in a theological setting and the learners we target are mostly pre-experience(d) ones; as a result, as opposed to the low-experience or job-experienced students with hands on practical knowledge acquired at work, which can be brought into play in the classroom, the pre-experience(d) students only come with a theoretical background from their specialty courses. We are dealing with undergraduate students (in their first and second year) from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, "Dumitru Stăniloae" at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania namely: pastoral students who will become priests, future social workers in a Christian Orthodox setting and sacral artists (icon or church wall painters and restorers of old religious books) There is no rule without exception, hence a small number of older low-experience/ job-experienced students in our classes: already priests, monks, nuns or people from various environments (engineers, doctors, etc.) enrolled to get a degree and advance in their careers or simply enhance their spiritual development. All in all, we aim at teaching our students, irrespective of their background and type, in the spirit of the Great Commandment, "Love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt 22: 37-39) and the Golden Rule - "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matt 7: 12) (BARNHOUSE PURGASSON, 2016). Thus, we are more than a language teacher whose purpose is to develop the four skills in a CLT environment; our role as a socially responsible individual is to determine learners to make the world a better place and "avoid racial stereotypes, stop teaching, think before they toss a plastic bag

out the window, refrain from domestic violence and respect LGBT people" (*ibidem*).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our material consists of ESP and TE methodology as detailed in the introduction, from which we also extracted our methods. Additional material we found extremely helpful pertains to Romanian developments in TE that do not go beyond mere workbooks for students' use such as Laura Ionică's *English for Theology* which came out at Pitesti University Publishing House in 2002 and focuses on improving reading skills with texts mainly from Biblical parables and beatitudes and some basic grammar and vocabulary, translation exercises included. We found particularly useful Monica Oancă and Maria Băncilă's *English for Students in Theology* published by Bucharest University Press in 2014; the textbook is more comprehensive than the above mentioned one and contains all the necessary information for (Orthodox) theological students, providing authentic material on the daily Orthodox prayers (chapter 1), the reason why vigil lamps are lit in front of icons (ch. 2), how to worship (ch. 3), the symbols of the four evangelists (ch. 4), psalm 50 (ch. 5), the beatitudes (ch. 6), the creed (ch. 7), the Nativity (ch. 8), the Services of Christmas in the Orthodox Church (ch. 9), the Decalogue (ch. 10), Finding a Confessor (ch. 11), elements of church architecture (ch. 13), the clergy and their sacred vestments (ch. 14), elements of Orthodox Christian iconography (ch. 15), the comparative evolution of sacred art in the East and the West (ch. 16), the Annunciation (ch. 17), partakers of divine nature (ch. 18), the human face of God (ch. 19), the Holy Easter (ch. 20), the doctrine of the Trinity (ch. 21), the attributes of God (ch. 22), the structure of the Romanian Patriarchate (ch. 23), tailored to suit their needs plus a glossary of religious terms. The structure of the chapters inspired us in our 'lesson plans' of Bible and literature for theological students: a piece of authentic material for gist reading and topics for discussion meant to develop not only our students' receptive skills (further reading for detail), but also productive ones (speaking/ oral communication and

writing) in a learner centred approach and communicative language teaching environment where pair/ group work and interactive activities are essential.

Donald Snow's account in *English Teaching as Christian Mission: An Applied Theology*, Herald Press, Scottdale, 2001 was also an inspiration for us as the author, in an Asian setting and an evangelical context, could not deny the influence of English as a means to a missionary end, recommending teaching techniques based on understanding the other and otherness, as well as intercultural communication; he addressed the less familiar character of different cultures, stereotypes, ethnocentrism and the learners' tendency to exclude foreigners by critical incident exercises and intercultural sensitizers (ICS) (SNOW, 2001).

The importance of Bible as literature cannot be denied, hence the recent developments in the English language: David Norton's seminal *History of the Bible as Literature Volume One: From Antiquity to 1700* and *Volume Two: From 1700 to the Present Day* (1993; 2000; 2004) or *The Bible and Literature Series* at Bloomsbury publishing that released titles such as *Stories of Heaven and Earth. Bible Heroes in Contemporary Children's Literature* (2005) edited by Hara E. Person and Diane Goetz Person, *Women Recounted. Narrative Thinking or the God of Israel* (1982) by James G. Williams or *Images of Man and God. Old Testament Short Stories in Literary Focus* (1981) by Burke O. Long.

There are also contributions to English as a Second Language (ESL)/ English as a Foreign Language (EFL); for instance, Cheri Pierson, Will Bankston and Marilyn Lewis's *Exploring Parables in Luke: Integrated Skills for ESL/ EFL Students of Theology* (2014) comes with a theological content designed to "encourage critical thinking through making connections" and the articles can be used as a "theological compass" to understand theology as "comprehensive (necessary for every area of life), cohesive (comprising a unity corresponding to the unified, biblical testimony of the Triune God), creative (requiring application within unique cultural and situational contexts) and confessional (derived from the Bible and informed by the creeds, confessions, and teachings of the church)" (PIERSON *et al.*, 2014). However, we limit our material to

canonical literature of biblical inspiration. Consequently, we will not discuss bestsellers such as Jeffrey Archer's *Kane and Abel* (1979) or SF classics, i.e. the *Destination: Void* trilogy by Frank Herbert and Bill Ransom, *The Jesus Incident* (1979), *The Lazarus Effect* (1983) and *The Ascension Factor* (1988), also available in Romanian translations. It is our belief that such writings, are the landmark of a work's ultimate stage of reception due to the literary celebrity of the book of books, in this case; motifs and characters are borrowed from the Bible to produce original works that only found a touch of inspiration in the original and rise above other adaptations (as understood by the emerging (sub)-field of Adaptation Studies).

For English literature, our material draws on classics such as Northrop Frye's *Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1981) and Harold Bloom's list of writers in *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994) for the rest which were used in English translation. Thus, among the writings we considered were: Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers* (1930-1943), Robert Graves's controversial *King Jesus* (1946), Nikos Kazantzakis's *Christ Recrucified* (1948) and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1955) or José Saramago's *Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991) and *Cain* (2009). We preferred novels which we found more accessible to our students than poetry or drama and left older works aside (Milton's *Paradise Lost* included), not only because of old English forms that the students' intermediate level might not afford, but also due to our sharing in common with Bloom's belief when excluding valuable works of ancient Greek and Latin literature from the Theocratic Age since "the common reader is unlikely to have time to read them. As history lengthens, the older canon necessarily narrows." (BLOOM, 1994)

In what follows, we will render a part of the lesson plan (the gist reading and the reading for detail, respectively) we followed in our classes with the Pastoral, Social Work and Sacral Art students from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology Dumitru Stăniloae at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania where we have been teaching Theological English as associate assistant since 2014.

1. Read the following excerpt from José Saramago's *Cain* and summarize the main events described.

"Where is your brother, he asked, and Cain responded with another question. Am I my brother's keeper, You killed him, Yes, I did, but you are the one who is really to blame, I would have given my life for him if you had not destroyed mine, It was a question of putting you to the test, But why put to the test the very thing you yourself created, Because I am the sovereign lord of all things, And of all beings you will say, but not of me and my freedom, What, the freedom to kill, Just as you had the freedom to stop me killing Abel, which was perfectly within your capabilities, all you had to do, just for a moment, was to abandon that pride in your infallibility that you share with all the other gods, and, again just for a moment, to be truly merciful and accept my offering with humility, because you shouldn't have refused it, you gods, you and all the others, have a duty to those you claim to have created, This is seditious talk, Yes, possibly, but I can guarantee you that if I were God, I would repeat every day Blessed are those who choose sedition because theirs is the kingdom of the earth, That's sacrilege, Maybe, but no more sacrilegious than you allowing Abel to die, You were the one who killed him, True, but you were the one who pronounced sentence, whereas I merely carried out the execution, That blood over there wasn't spilled by me, you could have chosen between good and evil, but you chose evil and must pay for it, The person who stays to keep watch over the guard is just as much a thief as the one who actually goes into the vineyard, said Cain, That blood is crying out for vengeance, insisted God, In that case, you will have your revenge both for a real death and for another that did not take place, Explain yourself, You won't like what you hear, Don't worry about that, speak, It's simple enough, I killed Abel because I couldn't kill you, so, in intent, you are dead too, Yes, I see what you mean, but death is forbidden for the gods, Oh, I know, but you gods should still take the blame for all the crimes committed in your name or because of you, God is innocent, it would be just the same if I didn't exist, But because I killed someone, I could now be slain by anyone who

meets me, No, I'll make an agreement with you, God make an agreement with a reprobate, asked Cain, unable to believe what he was hearing, Let's say it's an agreement based on our shared responsibility for Abel's death, So you recognise your share in the blame, Yes, I do, but don't tell anyone, it will be a secret between God and Cain, This can't be true, I must be dreaming, That often happens with gods, Is that because your ways are, as they say, mysterious, asked Cain, No God I know ever said such a thing, it would never even occur to us that our ways are mysterious, no, that was something invented by men who presume to know God intimately, So I won't be punished for my crime then, asked Cain, My portion of the blame does not absolve yours, you will have your punishment, Which is, You will be a fugitive and a vagabond upon the earth, In that case, anyone will have the right to kill me, No, because I will put a mark upon your forehead, and no one will harm you, but to repay me for my benevolence, you must try to do no harm to anyone else, said the Lord, and with the tip of his index finger he touched Cain's forehead on which there appeared a small black mark, That is the mark of your condemnation, added the Lord, but it is also a sign that for the whole of your life you will be subject to my protection and to my censure too, I will be watching you wherever you are, All right, I accept, said Cain, You have no option, When does my punishment begin, Now, May I say goodbye to my parents, asked Cain, That's up to you, I don't involve myself in family matters, but they will certainly want to know where Abel is and I don't imagine you're going to tell them you killed him, No, No what, No, I won't say goodbye to my parents, Off you go, then. There was nothing more to be said. The Lord disappeared before Cain had even taken his first step." (SARAMAGO, 2009)

2. Topics for discussion

a) Does the author's interpretation resemble the Book of Genesis 4: 9-16? Read it and, in pairs, write down all the differences and similarities you can find:

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the

ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."

But the LORD said to him, "Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

b) What are Cain's reproaches to God, also José Saramago's landmarks of materialistic atheism?

c) One of the novel's reviewers argued that "Saramago's prose always sounds like the beginnings of a stand-up routine or a shaggy dog story*. With Saramago, the tongue is always in the cheek, the eyebrows always arched, the nose raised, eyes forever rolling." (SANSOM, 2011) Comment on the allegations referring to the present fragment.

* a long story or joke with an ending that is disappointing or that makes no sense (Source: www.merriam-webster.com)

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of Saramago's excerpt and of the activities designed unfortunately comes against the background of a narrow-mindedness common in Romanian (Orthodox) Theological education especially at secondary level; some of the students complained that during high school they were told at Romanian language and literature classes that only king David wrote 'accurate' psalms and all other (re)interpretations were blasphemies. This includes the works of one of our greatest poets, Tudor Arghezi, great interwar literary figure praised for his aesthetic of the grotesque. Naturally, Saramago's version of the Genesis came to some as a shock but they were encouraged to regard it as a Nobel laureate's literary perspective on the issue.

The ice breaker activity in which they were asked if they were familiar with controversial (literary) works that led to disputes all over the world or brought great popularity to the authors, students mentioned Dan Brown's novels which they were mostly familiar with from the film adaptations they had watched. We agreed that misguided and often biased visions led to the stigmatization of writers due to their works, whilst it increased the popularity of others. For instance, Salman Rushdie was condemned to death in 1989 by Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of Iran who issued a fatwa against the British Indian novelist and essayist because of the offense brought to the Muslim world in the *Satanic Verses* (1988), partially drawing on the life of prophet Muhammad; Saramago also had his share of public ordeal because of his controversial *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991; 1994 for the English translation); the novel was extremely criticized by the majority of the Catholic world which declared it a blasphemy and was excluded from the list of the European Union Prize for Literature. Both writers lived in exile, Rushdie hiding for one decade in Great Britain and Saramago leaving Portugal for the Canary island of Lanzarote. However, Dan Brown's bestseller, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), despite the controversy it stirred, boosted the author's literary celebrity to an almost unprecedented level, courtesy of the considerable amount of critical studies published, i.e. Bart D. Ehrman's *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code*, Richard Abanes's *The Truth Behind The Da Vinci Code: A Challenging Response to the Bestselling Novel* or Hank Hanegraaff and Paul Maier's *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?*, to name but a few titles that came out in 2004; it also made the tourism industry flourish since fans have made trips to the (sacred) places mentioned in the book, under the undeniable influence of the screen adaptation, as well, a reality that even film studies record (MARTIN-JONES, 2014).

As argued in the class, these reactions testify to a general misunderstanding of literary norms and conventions, the presumed and assumed literary pact between an author and his readers who agree with the implied and implicit fact that they are dealing with a work of fiction, the result of an auctorial perspective and narrative point of view.

The gist reading prompted students to give the following sequence of events: God asks Cain about Abel, the former acknowledges that he killed the latter to punish God who only wanted to test him; after some sacrilege and blasphemy words from Cain's part for God's stupefaction, God admits that he was somehow responsible for Abel's death and makes a deal with Cain: he will be punished to wander the earth but no wrongs will come to him unless he hurts others and he will die from natural causes because God shall see to it. In this sense, God marked Cain and a black spot appeared on his forehead. Cain leaves to serve his time for the crime committed without a farewell to his parents and God disappears.

Regarding the reading for detail, students agreed on the Portuguese writer's partial fidelity to the events described in the Book of Genesis (Abel's killing by Cain, God's punishment of Cain) with the mention that some others were added: Cain's intention to say goodbye to his parents and the blasphemous talk between him and God, his desire to kill God, instead of Abel and God's acquiescence of a part of the blame for murder, included. Cain's reproaches to God reminded some of the students of Dostoevsky's *Grand Inquisitor* and Ivan Karamazov's questioning of God's grace, His impassibility before the suffering and death of others especially innocent children by the hand of a merciless human free will. According to Cain and most likely, the author's materialistic atheism, instead of taking action which was the wise and commonsensical thing to do, Saramago's God remained passive before the death of a subject whose offering he had enjoyed. As far as the author's prose was concerned, students complained it was quite difficult to follow because of the form, the Portuguese writer's style with endless sentences resembling the stream of consciousness in modernist writing, namely Molly Bloom's long soliloquy in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and its lack of punctuation marks. Characters' names beginning with small, not capital letters were also noticed and some of our fiercest defenders of the Biblical truth further pleaded the case of the writer's undermining it. Then students found legitimate the reviewer's claims due to Saramago's exceeding irony, even

sarcasm in rewriting the Old Testament, in general and the Genesis, in this particular fragment; Cain's poisonous tongue prophesized a reversed, dark gospel in which blessing and inheritance of the kingdom of earth was given to the seditious, not the meek or the poor in spirit for the earth and the kingdom (of heaven), respectively, as the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12 read (BIBLE GATEWAY b).

To summarize, our students enjoyed the fragment and praised its author for the literary talent that brought him the well-deserved Nobel Prize in literature in 1998. Most of them wanted more of a same and even asked for fragments from *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*. There were few exceptions, mainly older priests and some monks and nuns that overtly expressed their preference for classics (Thomas Mann, Fyodor Dostoevsky) in English translation at our TE classes, motivating their choice by what they called an unwritten, yet widely accepted rule in a theological setting, that some things should not be tampered with, especially holy ones.

4. CONCLUSION

By bringing into play literature of biblical inspiration to the Theological English classroom, we challenged our students to open up to interpretations that were less likely to occur in their mainstream courses, in general and Old or New Testament classes, in particular, while developing their productive and receptive skills in a communicative language teaching environment. Thus, we hope to have contributed to the preparation for their future careers (as priests, sacral artists and social workers in a Christian environment) and strengthened their personal development with a controversial excerpt from José Saramago's *Cain* (2009), a rewriting of the Biblical Genesis 4: 9-16. Issues such as the ones addressed by the Portuguese writer in his novel, i.e. suspicion of God's good nature and the impassibility towards the evil occurring in the world were previously tackled with (in Dostoevsky's writings, for instance, through *The Grand Inquisitor*); consequently our students could make use of the knowledge acquired through the activities we designed in a

receptive skills lesson (gist reading and reading for detail) in their professional contexts (during sermons, speeches at various events addressing a large or restricted audience, etc.) (BIBLE GATEWAY a).

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