



RESEARCH ARTICLE

RELIGIOUS MOTIFS IN RAINER MARIA RILKE'S THE NOTEBOOK OF MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE
AND THE LIFE OF THE VIRGIN MARY

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ABSTRACT

The turn-of-the-century brought major changes in the field of technology and natural sciences, economy and industry. The development and growth of metropolitan cities was one of the important phenomenons of this time. Darwin and his theory acquired many admirers. Nietzsche's famous proclamation 'God is dead' (Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Bd. 3, München: Schmitz, 1954, P. 481) and his theory of 'Superman' aroused an extreme excitement at the turn-of-the-century. In the alternating mood of euphoria and apocalypse. Nietzsche declares the end of traditional religion and the belief in God. Religion is displaced from its supreme position and a whole new set of ideas and values emerge in Europe. They lead to a shift in the attitudes towards faith and religiosity. However, religion does not disappear from everyday life or from the art. Poets like Rainer Maria Rilke, Hermann Hesse, Robert Frost, Khalil Gibran, Stefan Georg and thinkers like Rudolf Otto, Emile Durkheim engage with religious themes and motifs. According to the German theologian Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, religion is a central theme of cultural-political discourses and academic debates at the turn-of-the century.

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INTRODUCTION

*A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a church. -Durkheim*¹

The essence of religion is the concept of the sacred that refers to a set of rituals and beliefs consciously chosen, followed and preserved. According to Stephen D Bailey the sacred has four characteristics: "(1) special or unique, (2) it involves values, (3) it is fundamental or primordial in consciousness, and (4) it involves dynamic and ineffable communication."² The French sociologist and philosopher David Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) considered a religion as the most fundamental social institution of humankind, and one that give rise to other social norms. Over time, as emotions became symbolized and interactions ritualized, religion became more organized giving

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rise to the division between the sacred and the profane. In his work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), he asserts that:

"Whether simple or complex, all known religious beliefs display one common characteristics: They presuppose a classification of the real and ideal of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words profane and sacred. This division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought; the beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are either representations or systems of representations which express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers which are attributed to them, or their relations with each other and with profane things."³ For Durkheim the primary characteristic of religion is that it divides the world into the two domains of sacred and profane. Further the sacred is for Durkheim far from being synonymous with the divine. The sacred can also be related to things like "rocks, trees, pieces of wood, a pebble, a house or anything."⁴ In fact sacred refers to things set apart by man including religious beliefs, rites, duties or anything socially defined as

¹ Émile, Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*, Joseph Ward Swain (trans), London and New York: George Allen Unwin, 2011, p. 47.

² Bailey, Stephen D., 'Sacred', In: *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, 1998 pp. 443-445, here, p. 443.

³ Émile, Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*, op.cit., p. 37.

⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

requiring special religious treatment. Durkheim points out that religion was becoming less important in the 20th century as it was being superseded by science and the focus on individualism.

The German theologian Rudolf Otto defines religious experience in his famous work *The Idea of the Sacred*, in German *Das Heilige* (1917) as 'numinous'⁵. The term numinous is taken from the Latin *numen* which describes a strong religious or spiritual quality indicating "the divine will, the will or power of God and etymologically means a nod of the head."⁶ Otto characterizes the numinous as the sacred minus its moral and rational aspects. It is ineffable⁷ but it can be experienced through artistic analogies and approaches: "it denotes the style and means of artistic expression by which the impression of the numinous comes into being."⁸ Further Otto divides numinous into three moments viz., *mysterium, tremendum et fascinans*. The *mysterium* moment is experienced as 'wholly other'. It is mystic and amazing, hidden secret, inexpressible and being totally outside of one's normal experience, i.e. "In the presence of that which is a Mystery inexpressible and above all creatures."⁹ According to Otto:

"Taken in the religious sense, that which is 'mysterious' is—to give it perhaps the most striking expression—the 'wholly other', that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the 'canny', and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment."¹⁰

Otto defines the *tremendum* moment as the experience of dread or awfulness (inspiring awe) and fear. He explains this moment based on ghost stories.¹¹ According to Otto, the spiritual source of every religion lies in this moment of *tremendum*. This he calls "Religion of Primitive Man."¹² Lastly the *fascinans* moment is described as "love, mercy, pity, comfort; these are all aspects of the life, only they are here thought as absolute and in completeness."¹³ This definition of *fascinans* implies a religious experience and that its model should be indeed religious cultural experience. This experience can only be expressed through artistic approach because the core of religious experience is ineffable or indescribable. Otto's theory of numinous treats art and aesthetic as domains of the sacred. One can find many sacred elements and motifs in verbal and visual arts. Rilke also engages with mystical moments in his poetry. The aims and objectives of this article is to exposed religious motives basically from Christianity in Rilke's work. Rilke uses and integrates religious figures, themes, motives, parables, legends mostly from the Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. Rilke wrote poetry and a highly lyrical prose. His poetry is generally characterized by striking visual imagery and musicality. The erotic and spiritual love between men and

women, love, life and death are recurring themes in his works. Rilke's verse is often mystical, using symbolism as a means of expression that bears a strong resemblance to medieval verse. He depicts landscapes and other visual arts in words, which he himself experienced from his journeys and living in different cities and places. He often visited museums and took a keen interest in visual arts.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Rilke (1875-1926) was born in Prague. He belongs to the turn-of-the-century generation of artists at the beginning of the 20th century. He is considered as one of the most lyrically intense German-language poets. Besides poetry, he wrote several essays on art, a monograph of sculptor Auguste Rodin and he undertook numerous translations from French into German. His letters to friends, artists and patrons are also considered part of his literary writing. He is a bilingual poet who wrote in German and also in French. The poetic works of Rilke can be divided into three stages viz. early work, middle work and later work. His early works consist of *The Book of Hours* (1905) and *The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke* (1906). His middle works which are written in Paris comprise of *New poems* (1906), *New Poems: The Other Part* (1908), *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) and *The Life of Mary* (1913). In Paris he wrote a new form of poems which is often termed as *Dinggedicht* (thing poem). His late works consist of *Duino Elegies* (1923) and *The Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923) and also several poems in French. Rilke was exploited by the Nazis, who liked aristocratic characters in his prose and poetry like Cornet and Malte Laurids Brigge. In the post-war Germany, Rilke was thus almost blacklisted. In contemporary German speaking world, he is rehabilitated. In popular culture, Rilke is sometimes quoted in television programs, motion pictures, music and other works. His angelic figures appear in American films like *Awakenings* (1990), *Sister Act 2* (1993) and *City of Angels* (1998). Rilke was raised in the Christian Catholic tradition. Later on he draws inspiration from other religious traditions of the world, of the East and West, and through his journeys to different countries like Russia, Denmark, Germany, France, Belgium, Sweden, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Algeria and Egypt. Rilke believed that art is a commitment in itself i.e. l'art pour l'art. In his essay *Über Kunst* (On Art), Rilke opposed Tolstoy's position in *What is Art* (1896), where Tolstoy proposes his idea of art as a vehicle of social reform. Rilke argues that Tolstoy is defining art by its 'affects' rather than its 'essence'. Rilke sees the work of art as *ein tief inneres Geständnis*¹⁴ (a deep inner confession) that is externalized and given a viable existence independent of its creator. Rilke defines the aesthetic in terms of its autonomy: *Diese Selbständigkeit des Kunstwerkes ist die Schönheit*¹⁵ (Beauty is this self-sufficiency of the art work).

Christianity

In the novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), Rilke's protagonist Malte of Danish origin moves to Paris to become an artist. The novel is set in Paris during the turn-of-the-century. He records his experiences and impressions in Paris, particularly the outcasts, the beggars and the hospitals.

⁵ The German *heilig* can be rendered as either holy or sacred.

⁶ numen in Charlton T. Lewis; Charles Short [1879], *A Latin Dictionary; Founded on Andrews' edition of Freund's Latin dictionary* 1879, <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.12:1079.lewisandshort> accessed on 30.3.2015

⁷ Harvey, John. H (trans), *The idea of the Sacred*, London: Oxford University press, 1936, P. 18

⁸ Ibid., P. 70.

⁹ Ibid., P. 13

¹⁰ Ibid., P. 26

¹¹ Ibid., P. 28

¹² Ibid., P. 16

¹³ Ibid., P. 31

¹⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Über Kunst*, In: *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst* Wien: Gustav Kiepenheuer, 1983, p. 140.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 141.

The novel is composed of 71 diary-like entries from poetical fragments, impressions, reflections and reminiscences written by the 28 year old Malte Laurids Brigge. It is divided into two parts. The first part of the novel consists of 38 entries and it addresses Malte's experience and impressions of the city. The second part consist of 33 entries and focuses on episodes from Malte's childhood and youth in Denmark. It is unknown, in which chronological order had Rilke arranged the notes. The *Notebook* is Rilke's only novel. It was written while Rilke lived in Paris and was published in the year 1910. The notes are incoherent expressions, perceptions, sensations, emotions, experiences, reports from the past and present. The young Malte leaves his home and begins to settle in Paris. In Paris he lives penniless and sick life. He rents a cheap and small apartment while his belongings rot in storage. The sensual perception of Paris is being depicted. Malte begins writing the first Note one fine afternoon in September with the following address: 11. September, Rue Tooullier and the fifteenth Note has the address *Bibliothèque Nationale*. The rest of the Notes did not contain any place and address. In the end of the 18th Notebook Malte recites the following Bible verse from the Book of Job: 30:

"They were children of fools, yea, children of base men: they were viler than the earth. And now am I their song, yea, I am their byword. They abhor me, they flee far from me, and spare not to spit in my face. Because he hath loosed my cord, and afflicted me, they have also let loose the bridle before me."¹⁶

This Bible verse builds a parallel condition to Malte. In the above verse "They" are the 'outcasts'. Malte is frightened of them, he escapes from them and finds a secure place in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. The encounter with the outcast makes him feel insecure, lonely and unstable. Besides the Biblical verse, Rilke also re-interprets the biblical parable of the prodigal son in which he compares the biblical Prodigal Son with Malte. According to the biblical mythology as written in Luke 15:11-32, a father has two sons. The younger son who is known as the prodigal son flees from the love of his family after he claim his portion of inheritance in terms of money from his father. He starts spending his money by amusing himself with drinking and living a luxurious life. Soon he spent all his fortune and a famine strikes the land. He becomes desperate and begins to work as a swineherd. He feels hungry seeing the pigs eating. He starts to think of his father's house where there are plenty of servants working for his father and sufficient food to eat. Soon he realizes that he sinned against his father and the heaven. He plans to return home and ask for his father's forgiveness. Eventually his father forgive him. He hugs and kisses him. The prodigal son finds his way back home and finds himself in his father's house. He also finds his way back to his family and the society and starts to work for his father and leads a happy life. In Rilke's *Malte Laurids Brigge* the protagonist, who is also a runaway son from his homeland after the death of his parents as he was the sole survival of the family Brigge. He has a passion for writing and wants to become a poet. In search of his passion he moves to a metropolitan city Paris. In Paris he begins to encountered with a severe sickness like fever which he already experienced in his childhood and calls it 'The Big one' "*Das Große*"¹⁷. According to Malte, this sickness is his enemy and it is

following and hunting him wherever he goes. He also encounters with sick and dead people in the sanatoriums and hospitals. Eventually his experienced in Paris change him. He is not the same Mate Laurids Brigge who is of Danish origin. Like the prodigal son from the Bible he is also a runaway son in search for his passions and desires. However unlike the biblical parable, Malte could not find his track among his fellow human beings and family members. He finds himself in Paris having no hope or no one to love him. He feels distanced and strange to them and to the society. He is a totally lost and runaway son from the beginning till the end:

"As the days passed he came to see more clearly that the love they were so vain about and which they secretly encouraged in one another did not affect him. He almost had to smile at the trouble they took and it became obvious that their concern for him could not amount to much. What did they know about who he was? He was now so terribly difficult to love, and he felt there was only the One who was capable of it. But He was not yet willing."¹⁸

Rilke's Prodigal Son does not concerned about forgiveness and forgiving. Rilke re-interprets in such a way that the Prodigal Son (Malte) have less sympathy and love for the family but the Son love God more. This parable from the Bible have influenced the literature, art and music and the representation can be found in several literary works. For instance a Russian contemporary choreographer George Balanchine composed a one act ballet on the prodigal son. The music was composed by an Ukrainian composer Sergei Prokofiev and was first premiered on May 21, 1929 by the Ballet Russes de Diaghilev at the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt in Paris. Harmensz van Rijn Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* (1688) is one of the oldest representation visual arts about the biblical parable. The artist illustrates in his own unique way from the Gospel of St. Luke (Luke 22: 54-57). Another literary works of the parable is the book by the Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen's *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (1922). The book is based on an encounter with Rembrandt's painting. Besides Nouwen's book a French author and a Nobel Prize winner in Literature André Gide depicts the parable under the title *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1946). Besides this, William Shakespeare referred the Prodigal Son in his play *As You Like It* (1623) and *The Winter's Tale* (1623).

The Life of the Virgin Mary (1912)

Rilke's cycle of poem *The Life of the Virgin Mary* depicts the biblical mythology from the Gospel of St. Luke. Rilke was inspired by the oil painting of Maria by the Italian Renaissance painter Fra Angelico which Rilke saw in Florence in 1898. He began to work intensively with the painting of Angelico along with the biblical figure during his stay in Worpswede (A village in Lower Saxony, Germany, also known as the artists' colony). The icon of Mary is not only portrayed in the Christian tradition but it is also treated as one of the literary figures. *The Life of the Virgin Mary* is composed in the form of a poetical and a cycle of songs. It includes 15 songs with different stations in Mary's life. It begins with the birth of Mary and culminating with Mary's ascent into Heaven. The poem also includes the angel's propagation of Mary's pregnancy, the proclamation to Joseph by the angel that he

¹⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, William Needham (trans), New York: Wolf Pup Books, 2013, p. 47.

¹⁷ Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Sämtliche Werke VI*, 1.Aufl., Frankfurt a.M./Leipzig: Insel, 2000, P. 62

¹⁸ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Op.Cit, p. 240.

should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife and the proclamation to the Shepherds about the birth of Jesus Christ. In literature, Johann Gottfried Herder cycle of Mary under the title *Terpsichore* (1795), the romantic poet Novalis links the story of Gedeons Fliess and Mary in his poetry *Hymnen an die Nacht* (1800), Friedrich von Schlegel *Klagelied der Mutter Gottes* (1830), Bertolt Brecht *Maria* (1922) engaged with the biblical figure of Mary and transform it into their own unique way in their aesthetical literary works. Her religiosity like rosary, Laurentian litany, Marian pilgrimage, devotional objects, her appearance for intercessor adviser, her sympathy, her glorification, her longing for salvation, motherly love, virginity and sinlessness of the heart are the famous quality of Mary which are represented in literature. The themes and motives which are connected with Mary are Propagation, ascent to Heaven, virgin hood, advocate and comforter. So a numerous number of poems, stories, songs, pictures, illustrations and sculptures originated from the biblical figure of Mary.¹⁹ The name 'Mary' itself becomes a famous and renowned name to humankind. Rilke's mother adopted the name 'Mary' (Maria in German) for Rilke's middle name not only for religious symbol but also to replace her death first born girl child.²⁰

According to the Christian tradition Mary is the birth mother of Jesus Christ. She is a virgin lady who is made pregnant by the Holy Spirit. At the same time Rilke grasp the biblical figure along with the myth of her pregnancy in his work *The Life of the Virgin Mary*. This motive have been depicted in one of the cycle of poems *Maria Verkündigung* (Propagation of Maria). The biblical background of this motive as found in the Gospel of Luke 1:26-38 is the meeting of the angel Gabriel and Mary, in which Gabriel brings the message of God to Mary. The message delivered by Gabriel is that, Mary will get pregnant and that she will be giving birth to a baby boy and she should name him 'Jesus'.

In Rilke's poem the name of the angel is not mention, yet he delivers the same message identical to the passage of the Bible. Moreover Mary and the angel in Rilke's text do not come into conversation and the message is delivered by a third person narrator, while Mary and Gabriel have a conversation in the Bible:

"Not that an angel entered (mark this)
was she startled. Little as others start
when a ray of sun or the moon by night busies itself about their
room,
would she have been disturbed by the shape
in which an angel went:
she scarcely guessed that this sojourn is irksome for angels. (O
if we knew
how pure she was. Did not a hind, that,
recumbent, once espied her in the wood,
so lose itself in looking, that in it,
quite without pairing, the unicorn begot itself,
the creature of light, the pure creature-.)
Not that he entered, but that he,
the angel, so bent close to her
a youth's face that his gaze and that

with which she looked up struck together,
as though outside it were suddenly all empty
and what millions saw, did, bore,
were crowded into them: just she and he;
seeing and what is seen, eye and eye's delight
nowhere else save at this spot: lo,
this is startling. And they were startled both.

Then the angel sang his melody"²¹

In fact, the whole poem is narrated by a third person narrator. The line 'the creature of light, the pure creature' is an analogy to the birth of Jesus that Mary will bear a child. Interestingly Rilke used the adjective 'pure' or 'pure creature'. Pure or purity can have a multi-faceted meaning in a sense that, it implies a new born baby along with the virginity of Mary. Biblically emphasizing, pure also means sinlessness, pure heart, pure spirit and soul. The purity can also be treated as holy and sacred. According to Christian tradition Jesus is the savior because he has a pure soul without any sins. In relation to purity one can also analyze the figures of Mary and Jesus on the level of visual arts. Most of the catholic churches and cathedrals have the sculptures, images or statues of Jesus and Mary inbuilt or erected. It is not only treated as pure but also as sacred. Another common theme in Rilke's work and the Bible is that, Maria acts as the recipient of the divine message.

The following poems narrate the story of Jesus from birth to death. It portrays her concern and emotional attachment of Mary with Jesus. Mary eventually come into words and narrates her lost and laments the death of her son. The outcry of Mary evokes a painful feeling:

"Now is my misery full, and namelessly
it fills me. I am stark, as the stone's
inside is stark.
Hard as I am, I know but one thing:
You grew-
...and grew
in order to stand forth
as too great forth
as too great pain
quite beyond my heart's grasping.
Now you are lying straight across my lap,
now I can no longer
give you birth."²²

Through the representation of the virgin lady, Rilke correlates the relationship between literature and religion along with myth and legend.

The angelic Figure in *The Life of the Virgin Mary*

The angel acts as a messenger of God and as a guardian angel according to the biblical mythology. In fact angels are a mediator between believers and God. God often appear through the angel in order to communicate with the human being. They have the qualities of attractiveness and popularity. They also appear in a powerful form of "human being or a

¹⁹ Sowa, Agnieszka, *Marienmotive in der deutschsprachigen Literatur nach 1918*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków, 2013, P. 16

²⁰ Stahl, August, Rilkes ausdauernde Arbeit am Mythos, In: Norbert Fischer, (Hg.), *Gott in der Dichtung Rainer Maria Rilkes*, Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2014, P. 47, Op.cit., S.47

²¹ M.D. Herter Norton, Rainer Maria Rilke, Translations from *The poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, W.W. Norton & Company, 1962, P. 201

²² Rilke, Pieté, *The Life of the Virgin Mary*, in: *Translations from the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Herter Norton, New York: Norton & Company, 1938, P. 221

fantastic being like animals.”²³ Dating back from the ancient times till modern era the angelic figures are represented in different types of literary genre and also in visual arts. The emergence of angelic motifs in European literature and culture is naturally inspired from the ancient and Jewish-Christian representation of angels. The Old Testament of the Bible contains a numerous texts about the angels. In Rilke's text the angel is a singer. He delivered God's message in the form of speech and song, "Then the angel sang his melody".

The angel moves from one place to another. Firstly he appears before Mary, then before Joseph and then before the shepherds. However he had only one task in common i.e. the annunciation of the birth of Jesus. Firstly, the spectacular angel appears one night before Mary. He appears with ray of sunlight. Mary could not even see his face. This representation of angel with sunlight depicts that he is a powerful being, that he even scared Mary:

"Not that an angel entered (mark this) was she startled. Little as others start when a ray of sun or the moon by night busies itself about their room"²⁴

At first Mary was scared and troubled by the greeting of the angel. She wondered what sort of greeting this might be. The appearance of angel is what according to the theologian Rudolf Otto *mysterium, tremendum et fascinans*. On the level of *mysterium* (mystery) it is a secret and sacred experience yet *tremendum* because the appearance of the angel evoke something wonderful at the same time frightful and *fascinans* as Mary was curious and fascinated by the appearance of the angel. It is totally ineffable for Mary to describe in words what she encounters with. It is a religious experience which is mystic and amazing.

After the annunciation to Mary, the angel appears before Joseph (the father of Jesus). Here the angel comes into words and shouts: "Carpenter, don't you see yet that God is at work here?"²⁵ Like Mary, Joseph is also frightened yet fascinated with the appearance of the angel. The poem ends with a song of praise. In the Bible Gabriel appears in Joseph's dream and he announced the pregnancy of Mary and that he should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife. Rilke however did not integrate the exact lines from the Bible but it is clear that when the angel shouts and says that God had managed everything. The third station of the angel is the appearance before the shepherds. The angel announced the birth of Jesus. He said:

"In this strong light
so much will happen. In you I can confide,
for I can trust you well to be discreet [...] God in His unfathomable wisdom has chosen to bless a virgin's womb."²⁶

The light is a metaphor indicating the birth of Jesus and that a virgin lady will give birth to him. Interestingly the angel appears before the shepherds in the form of star and he claims himself as a new upcoming star, strong and powerful being with full of lights:

"I am a new and rising star. My entire being burns and shines so strongly, and is so immensely full of light, that the far-flung firmament can no longer hold me."²⁷

Like the biblical angels, Rilke's angels also deliver the divine message by employing a poetical language in order to portray the relationship between human being and angel.

Rilke's angels are often interpreted as "the incalculable nature of inspiration, its dangers, its glories, its inexorability"²⁸ Through the figures of Mary and angel, Rilke reconnects the dual realms of heaven and earth, angelic being and earthly existence, eternity and time, life and death, invisible idea and manifest thing. Rilke links imaginations of the earth, the angel and their poetic intermediary between the heavenly God and the human being.

Rilke is brought up by his mother in Catholic tradition. During his early teenage years he lost faith, he began indulging in strident, overtly anti-Christian polemics.²⁹ Symbols and figures of Christianity appear however later on in his works:

"God is the most ancient work of art. He is very badly preserved and ramshackle bits have been substituted later for many parts that were missing. But of course it belongs to one's education to be able to talk about him and to have seen the remains."³⁰

During his trip to Russia, he acquired a number of religious artifacts, a 17th century silver cross and various Russian icons. Using symbols from Orthodox Church in Russia, he integrates them in his works. He also went through phases of interest in theater and dance, he read about religious, mystical and occult traditions. His concentration for godliness, sacred objects, the religious holidays and the cemeteries are instantly visible in his works.

Moreover, Rilke is a regular church visitor. He visits chapels, churches and cathedrals. His visit and stay in Russia is known for his interest in the Christian God and religion. The archaic peasant way of life in which religiosity is ostensibly visible fascinates Rilke the most.³¹ The outcome of his visit to Russia is that he begins to write cycle of poems *The Life of the Virgin Mary*.

For Rilke Christianity plays a dual role in his literary works. On the one hand, he strongly criticize the dogmas and doctrines of Christianity. For him Christianity is a device with telephone where one can rings up God: "Holla, wer dort?- und niemand antwortet"³² (Hello, who's there?- and nobody answered) On the other hand, he intensively engage with the Bible and the ideas of God including symbols, figures, legends and parables from Christianity. The traditional Christianity is

²⁷ Ibid., P. 132

²⁸ E.M. Butler, *Rainer Maria Rilke*, New York: Octagon Books, 1973, P. 325.

²⁹ Rosenthal, Peggy, *The Poets' Jesus*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 114.

³⁰ cited from Schoolfield, George C, *Young Rilke and His Time*, New York: Camden House, 2009, p 102.

³¹ Bruangart, Wolfgang, Engel, Manfred und Lauterbach, Dorothea (Hg.), *Rilke Handbuch: Leben-Werk Wirkung*, 1. Aufl., Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2004, P.216

³² Rilke, Rainer Maria Brief an Maria von Thurn und Taxis vom 17.12.1912. In: Nalewski Horst (Hrsg), *Rainer Maria Rilke Briefe in zwei Bänden, Erster Band, 1896 bis 1919*, Frankfurt a.M.: Leipzig: Insel, 1991, S. 448.

²³ cf. Rosenberg, Alfons: *Engel und Dämonen*. München 1967, S. 16

²⁴ Rilke, *The Life of the Virgin Mary*, in: *Translations from the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Herter Norton, Op.Cit. P. 125

²⁵ Ibid., P. 131

²⁶ Ibid., P. 133

for him a source of his inspiration. In short the Bible act as a *Stoffreservoir und als Inspirationsquelle* (material reservoir and source of inspiration)³³

Between 1907 and 1930, Rilke was regarded almost exclusively as a religious poet with a strong mystical bent. Various works of criticism of that time use stereotypical terms like: "Rilke the outsider, the mystic, the aristocratic God seeker, the advocate of the soul, the quite dreamer, and the religious idealist."³⁴ During Rilke's earliest years in Prague, he felt rejected and humiliated by the German writers. For instance a scholar like Eva Wernick clearly erred in describing Rilke as a theologian rather than a poet. My hypothesis is that Rilke is a poet with modern sensibilities per se who blends sacred motifs in a specific manner in his aesthetic works. He borrows these motifs not only from his own Christian tradition but from other traditions like Islam and Buddhism and also Greek and Egyptian antiquities as well.

The poet and literary critic Eliot criticizes the tendency in his times the exclusion of sacred motifs from literature:

"I am convinced that we fail to realize how completely, and yet how irrationally, we separate our literary from our religious judgments. If there could be a complete separation, perhaps it might not matter: but the separation is not, and never can be, complete. If we exemplify literature by the novel for the novel is the form in which literature affects the greatest number – we may remark this gradual secularization of literature during at least the last three hundred years."³⁵

With Nietzsche's famous proclamation 'God is Dead' at the end of the 19th century and the march of science and technology, religion was displaced from its supreme position and a whole new set of ideas and values emerged in Europe. Metaphysics had been neglected from academic interest of the 20th century. Science and technology, secularism and socialism together lead to the virtual neglect of religious studies. According to the reputed German literary critic W.G. Sebald, literary criticism and scholarship in the second half of the 20th century have treated metaphysics as "a kind of lumber room". "There is today hardly any discourse, in which metaphysics can claim a space for itself", laments Sebald.³⁶ This state of academic disinterest is today undergoing a gradual change. One realizes that religion, its role in society and its hold over people in various parts of the world are still important factors and that require an academic approach. One of the possible academic approaches is exploring religious and sacred motifs which are found in the aesthetics of arts like painting, architecture and sculptures in temples, churches, monasteries, mosques, historical buildings, religious symbols and figures etc. The blending of aesthetics and the sacred can be seen for example in the sculptures of the Renaissance painter, sculptor, architect and poet Michelangelo. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) wrote an essay on Michelangelo's famous sculpture of Moses *The Moses of Michelangelo* (1951) in which he carry out a

psychoanalytical interpretation. Aesthetics and sacred are thus not two distinct domains. Sacred motifs are also integrated in music and poetry. For instance Sufi music comprises of devotional hymns to God. In the so-called secular age the 20th century poets such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Hermann Hesse, Hugo von Hoffmannsthal, T.S. Eliot, William Butler Yeats, Rabindranath Tagore, Robert Frost and Khalil Gibran engaged with sacred and spiritual motifs in their works. Tagore, considered as the first modernist of India, is a poet and painter. One of his famous works is *Gitanjali* (1910), a collection of poems in Bengali, which are sacred and devotional songs.

Historically, religion in Western Europe has tended to be defined by churches with its adoption as the State church since the Roman Empire. The 19th century characterized as the century of science, reached high levels of tension in the relationship between faith and science. With the turn-of-the-century this doctrinal system of religion and the scientific theories and experiment has been altered where authors, critics and poets like Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, Aby Warburg, Ernst Cassirer, Walter Benjamin, Emile Durkheim, Rudolf Otto, Rainer Maria Rilke began to draw attention on theories, poetry and literary criticism in various disciplines like psychology, philosophy, history of art, sociology, literature.

The contemporary German theoretician Daniel Weidner also reiterates these views. According to him, after a long phase of neglect, there is a 'religious turn' in contemporary literary and cultural studies particularly in the last 15 years since 9/11, 2001, which he terms as a 'renaissance':

"The current renaissance is all the more astonishing, since religion had quite disappeared from the academic agenda in the decades before. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s there had been a lively debate about the "secularization" of modern society, the shift of theory toward deconstruction, discourse analysis, and post colonialism in the 1980s turned away from religion. The phenomenon of religion and even the concept of secularization did not disappear, however, all these new approaches still rely on the silent presupposition that historically, some kind of secularization has taken place. But today, facing a global renaissance of religion's public role — and its increasing influence in the private realm — this assumption seems no longer tenable. Secularization is not enough, religion reenters the discourse of culture and theory, and a theoretical approach exists to explain what happens here."³⁷

One of the important Rilke experts Jacob Steiner interprets the *Duino Elegies* not as religious and philosophical problems, but as poetry, self contained and autonomous. For Steiner even the Egyptian symbols are Rilke's poetic symbols. In the early religious interpretations of Rilke like Eva Wernick's *Die Religiosität des Stundenbuches von Rilke* (1926), Wernick explores not how Rilke uses the figure of God as reflective of the human subject, rather how the human subject is reflective of God. Fülleborn treats Rilke as an avangarde poet of 20th turn-of-the-century literature. In the 20th century, Rilke's literary work influence readers, critics, translators and scholars in different ways. Some consider the works as artistic creature

³³ Löwenstein, Sascha: Rainer Maria Rilkes Stunden-Buch. Theologie und Ästhetik, Berlin: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2005, S. 128.

³⁴ Metzger, Erika A and Metzger, Michael M (Ed), *A companion to the works of Rainer Maria Rilke*, New York: Camden House, 2001, p. 4.

³⁵ Eliot, T.S., 'Religion and Literature', In: *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, Frank Kermode (Ed), London: Faber and Faber, 1936, p 97-106, here, p 100.

³⁶ W.G. Sebald, 'Jenseits der Grenze – Peter Handke's Erzählung Die Wiederholung' In: W.G. Sebald: *Unheimliche Heimat. Essays zur österreichischen Literatur*, Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 4. Aufl., 2012, S. 162–178, hier S.163. (translated by me)

³⁷ Weidner, Daniel, 'Thinking beyond Secularization, Walter Benjamin, the Religious Turn and the Poetics of Theory', In: *New German Critique*, 111, 2010, p. 131-148, here, p. 133-134.

while some perceive them as a religious work. Wolfgang Braungart's essay on Duino Elegies under the title *Das Schweigen der Engel und der Hinweg des Subjekts: Sprachsuche, Selbstsuche, Gottsuche in Rilkes Duineser Elegien* is a hermeneutic interpretation of the *Duino Elegies*. The central theme of his essay is the quest for language, self, subjectivity and the sacred in Rilke.³⁸ Rilke's work has captured the imagination of musicians, philosophers, artists, writers, and poetry lovers. Marlene Dietrich, Martin Heidegger and Warren Zevon all recited Rilke poems by heart.³⁹ *Rilke Handbuch* (2004) by Manfred Engel covers Rilke's life and works extensively. In the 70s, 80s and 90s, Rilke was blacklisted. Manfred Engel calls it *Rilke-Finsternis* (Rilke's darkness). According to Engel the reason is that "he (Rilke) was condemned as anti modernistic and politically incorrect."⁴⁰

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³⁸ Braungart, Wolfgang, 'Das Schweigen der Engel und der Hinweg des Subjekts: Sprachsuche, Selbstsuche, Gottsuche in Rilkes Duineser Elegien', In: *Gott in der Dichtung Rainer Maria Rilkes*, Fischer, Norbert (Hg.), Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2014, pp. 257-297, here, p. 257.

³⁹ Baer, Ulrich (Ed. & Trans), *Rainer Maria Rilke. Letters on Life: New Prose Translations*, New York: Modern Library Inc., 2006, p. iv.

⁴⁰ Engel, Manfred (Hg): *Rilke Handbuch: Leben-Werk-Werkung*, 1. Aufl., Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2004, p. xi.