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## ICLA Research Committee on Religion, Ethics, and Literature

Our committee began with the interrogation of a premise: many Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers, notably Hegel and Marx, imagined that, with the dominance of reason in the modern age, humankind had entered a final, religion-free era, a secular age; the passions of religion were no longer a threat. However, many now find themselves living in a post-secular age in which poverty, violence, terror, and war have prompted not only a “return to religion,” but also the realization that in some parts of the world, modernity did not, after all, entail a wholesale rejection of religion, with its replacement, a secular solution.

Literature has been particularly efficacious in tracing the edges of this “reality” so that this research committee questions how the current overarching discourse of religion and society results from a particular historical conjuncture in the 'west.' In this way, we accent literature’s capability for staging an ethics in relation to religion. However, the committee does not limit itself to a 'western' view of the three main nodes, i.e. religion, ethics and literature. In the interests of a “multi”-cultural committee, we seek a more speculative rather than epistemological view of these three areas of discourse.

The research committee investigates, therefore, the philosophical and theoretical role of religion and ethics in literature, as well as explores the fraught relationship between secularism and post-secularism. It examines global literary phenomena as instances of subject formation in order to think new relationships between religion, ethics, and literature. We are particularly concerned with the modern displacement of religion, and modernity’s epistemological underpinnings as these concepts suggest modern judgments about the world, culture, and its relationship to a religious past. While the examination of religious imagery, symbolism and the role of myth will not be the purview of this committee, the signifiers of religion in as much as they motivate “an ethical turn” in the text is a key element of the committee’s purview.

As a result, the committee has a wide-ranging concern with the interstitial space that literature makes visible, a space that is not reducible to the literary, religious, or ethical, and yet intersects with all of these nodes of expression. In other words, we are most interested in questioning the epistemologies and categories that have founded the ways that religion, literature, and ethics coalesce around the aesthetic object.

Our committee came into existence in 2014 through an inaugural conference at San Francisco State University in California and was certified with ICLA shortly thereafter. Since its certification, the committee has recruited prospective members from the related disciplines of religion, ethics, inside and outside of comparative literature. We identified figures in these affiliated departments internationally whose initial training was in comparative literature and have reestablished a connection with them. Consequently, the research committee on Religion, Ethics, and Literature, experienced a growth spurt in both 2015 and 2016. We are now a cohort of 40 members, and we have a global

membership in the Middle East, Europe, India, Africa, the UK, the U.S., and East Asia, i.e. fifty percent of the committee maintain positions at institutions outside of the U.S. Our members are at every level of the profession, 50% are faculty and 50% are graduate students. The institutional diversity of this cohort underscores the committee's ability to demonstrate relevance to new PH.Ds in the field as well as across the disciplines and to foster collaboration between emerging scholars and established senior comparatists within the organization.

With two seminars sponsored at ACLA 2016, and three seminar streams at the ICLA Congress, our committee continues to conduct a robust research agenda through international conferences. The ICLA Congress seminars reflect the scope of our committee's interests.

- 1) "The Ineffability of Language and Mystic Utterances," chairpersons Dorothy Figueira and Kitty Millet
- 2) "The Text as Being: Ontologies of Redemption and Repair," chairperson Kitty Millet
- 3) "Secular Literary Texts and Sacred Exegesis," chairperson Steven Shankman

The themes of these panels have also enabled us both to attract a broad cohort of participants who are new to our committee and to continue to develop the goals of our formal membership. We will also have a business meeting for prospective and current members at the ICLA Congress. The above panels developed themes presented by the committee's panels at CLAI in Rajasthan (2015) and at the inaugural Fault Lines conference in San Francisco (2014).

The committee has contracted with Bloomsbury for the first publication of its research. A collection of sixteen essays, the contributors represent new Ph.Ds, graduate students and senior scholars who are well known in comparative literature as a discipline. The collection is projected for 2017 and will be available globally to our committee's constituencies on four continents. The collection will be listed as part of the Religion, Philosophy, and Literature division for Bloomsbury, and marketed not only to comparatists, but also scholars within religion and philosophy. This disciplinary depth will ensure that the collection attracts the interests of scholars working in related fields.

The committee website has been actively utilized since the group's inception. Its contribution to our visibility has meant scholars curious about our activities can always find us. It holds a copy of our quarterly reports, lists our sponsored panels, provides a list of our members, updates our publications progress, and offers instructions for membership (<http://online.sfsu.edu/kmillet1/faultlinesgrp.html>). Although Professor Kitty Millet ([kmillet1@sfsu.edu](mailto:kmillet1@sfsu.edu)) chairs the committee, committee members remain actively engaged in growing the committee, determining its next events, and targeting potential audiences. Their activities enable then Professor Millet to identify and develop publication venues for committee research.