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Introduction

Throughout centuries, church leaders and Christian communities all over the world have struggled to keep themselves pure from the influence of the surrounding unbelief and immorality. This has often caused neglect or even disdain for non-Christian arts, including literature. Back in the Patristic period, many Christians perceived Greek literature as part of paganism. Augustine had to stand against the tendency to reject everything that came from a “profane source,”¹ arguing that believers “ought not to refuse to learn letters because they say that Mercury discovered them” and calling “every true Christian [to] understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master” (Augustine).

One of the rare patristic works related to the subject is Basil the Great’s (330–379 CE) *Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature*, in which the author encourages young Christians to read secular literature and gives instructions on how they should do it. Basil advises young believers to study “profane writings” before they are mature enough to begin studying the Bible:

Into the life eternal the Holy Scriptures lead us, which teach us through divine words. But so long as our immaturity forbids our understanding their deep thought, we exercise our spiritual perceptions upon profane writings, which are not altogether different, and in which we perceive the truth as it were in shadows and in mirrors. . . . To be sure, we shall become more intimately acquainted with these precepts in the sacred writings, but it is incumbent upon us, for the present, to trace, as it were, the silhouette of virtue in the pagan authors. (Basil)

Basil talks of two categories of writings—“sacred” (the Bible) and “profane” (non-Christian literature)—but he never mentions “Christian” literature, such as sermons and the writings of the Church Fathers. Possibly he considered theological and philosophical works a separate category of texts, different from literary works. Note that Basil affirmed that profane writings were “not altogether different” from the Holy Scriptures, classifying biblical books as literary texts.

This view of the purpose of reading non-Christian literature is also interesting and quite unexpected for modern Christians. Basil considered reading literature useful to “exercise our spiritual perceptions” so we can grow mature enough to handle the Bible. This may first sound like an outdated idea of someone who lived back in the fourth century CE, more than a thousand years before the invention of the printing press. If we reflect on

¹ In this article, I use the term “profane” in the sense of “secular,” as opposed to “sacred, religious.”

the numerous errors and misinterpretations of Scripture that arise from modern Christians' poor understanding of its literary features, however, Basil's advice will appear to be more reasonable and deserving of attention. Today, many Christians believe they don't need to learn the cultural and literary background of biblical books to read and understand the Bible. As John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy put it,

It is tempting to assume that infinite truth can be completely removed from finite culture, or that information from outside the Bible is not essential for interpretation inside the Bible, or that backgrounds are not crucial for applying Scripture to the issues of the twenty-first century. But such is not the case. While the Bible is truly one of a kind—largely because it is God's kind—it bears clear marks of humankind. Divine truth is inextricably interwoven within human culture, which means the categories of thinking, the expressions, the imagery, the motifs are drawn from the cultures in which God's truth became incarnate. It couldn't be any other way: it was necessary for God to speak in ways humans could understand, and he specifically chose the Greco-Roman-Jewish world of the first century for revealing the New Testament. Paul called it the fullness of times (Gal 4:4). (Walton and Sandy 2013, 78)

There may be a profound wisdom in Basil's instruction to first read literature and learn to understand its mechanisms in different genres and styles and then approach Scripture with a more mature mind. Perhaps a reason for the many questionable interpretations of the book of Revelation is the Christian teachers' immaturity and misunderstanding of literary genres.

Arguments Against Neglecting Literature

Today, some Christians tend to divide literature into "Christian" and "non-Christian" (or "secular, worldly"), which differs from Basil's categories of "sacred writings" and "profane writings." Basil's dichotomy is between the Bible and pagan literary works, while modern Christians' dichotomy is between "Christian" works (such as the works of church fathers and other Christian teachers from ancient times to nowadays, and some literary works, such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*) and "non-Christian" works (written outside the church or by non-Christian authors). The Bible is not a part of this dichotomy because Christians don't view it as literature but classify it as a separate category, God's Word. The disdain for "non-Christian" literature is often perceived as an expression of deep respect for the Lord and his Word. The same is true of other kinds of art and social activities. There is a tendency to view life in black and white, separating everything in life into "Christian" and "worldly."

In the early twentieth century, Christian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev criticized the Russian Orthodox Church for its lack of involvement in society because of its conviction that preaching the gospel and achieving personal salvation are the only valuable uses of time and resources.

The Church is concerned with salvation, the secular world however is concerned with creativity. The creative act, which the secular world is concerned with, is not given justification, is not sanctified by the Church. There is a profound disdain, almost a contempt of the churchly world towards those creative deeds in the life of culture, in the life of society, which fully are processes, transpiring within the world. At best creativity is admitted, it is tolerated, one peeks at it through the fingers, not granting it profound a justification. Salvation is a matter of the first sort, the one thing necessary, creativity however is a matter of the second or third sort, applicable to life, but not the very essence of it. (Berdyaev)

By “creativity,” Berdyaev meant active involvement in all areas of life, including culture, society, and the economy. The problem of a lack of interest in being involved in society’s cultural life is not confined to the Russian Orthodox Church but exists in many Protestant churches, too. Berdyaev points out that such an attitude contradicts the very purpose of personal salvation because a person’s salvation means the affirmation of his or her creativity.

[T]he creativity of man, and learning, art, discoveries, the betterment of society, etc., etc., is necessary not for personal salvation, but for the realisation of God’s intent for the world and for mankind, for the transfiguration of the cosmos, for the Kingdom of God, into which enters all the fullness of being. . . . Such is God’s plan about man, that the nature of the human person is creative. The person is saved. But for this, that the personhood be saved, it is necessary that it be affirmed in its authentic nature. The authentic indeed nature of the person is in this, that it is the centre of creative energy. Outside of creativity there is no personhood. The creative person is saved for eternity. The affirmation in opposition to creativity is an affirmation of the salvation of emptiness, of non-being. (Berdyaev)

This reasoning leads the philosopher to conclude that the church failed to fulfill its mission by neglecting its duty to be involved in creativity. People from outside the church took their place, and God used them to realize his intent for the world.

The church has never been actively involved in the social process of creating literature, nor in the academic study of literature. (This is not to deny the involvement of some individual church members, such as C. S. Lewis.) The majority of professional writers and literary scholars have not been part of the church, yet they have often served as messengers of God’s truth. Similarly, the discipline of literary studies was developed apart from the church. Talking of the present crisis of literary studies in the West, Christian scholars David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet explain it “as the outworking of a congenital defect, present at the birth of the discipline” (Jeffrey and Maillet 2011, chap. 9), because the study of literature was taken as a substitute for religion, spiritual transcendence, and the biblical grand narrative that had been dominant in English-speaking countries for centuries. Nevertheless, Jeffrey and Maillet believe there is “a broader cultural imperative . . . for well-trained Christian scholars to take up leading roles in literary study. Properly prepared, they should have a great deal of value to say” (2011, chap. 9).

We Christians should reconsider our attitude to literary art and to the people who are called to labor in the literary field. Active involvement in our society’s literary processes can take the form of artistic activity (creating literary works) and scholarly activity (literary theory and criticism). The potential structures existing today for Christians to proceed in these activities are ethnodoxology and comparative literature.

Ethnodoxology: Engaging with Literature as Art

In recent decades, the church has made significant progress in its approach to arts, defining an academic field for researching arts in its relationship to worshipping and glorifying God. This field was named ethnodoxology. In 2019, the Global Ethnodoxology Network proposed an official definition: “Ethnodoxology is the interdisciplinary study of how Christians in every culture engage with God and the world through their own artistic expressions” (GEN 2025). As an answer to the question “What do you mean by ‘artistic expression’?,” the network mentions “music, dance, drama, poetry, and visual art” (GEN 2025) as a few examples.

Does all literature, including prose texts, belong to the category of artistic expression? The answer to this question depends on the definition of the term *literature*, which is a subject that exceeds the scope of this paper. Literary scholars use the term in the sense of texts with an artistic value that have been published and gained recognition. Literary discourse differs from the scholarly by such artistic characteristics as concreteness, brevity, and figurativeness. In this regard, most biblical books can be classified as literary works. Comparing the Bible to literature, Leland Ryken points out that “[b]iblical writers share the impulse to express themselves concretely rather than abstractly,” and the Bible has a “preference for the brief unit rather than the long and elaborated one.” He concludes that “the Bible is predominantly literary, whereas ordinary history and theology books are not” (Ryken 2015, 18–19).

Robert Alter, professor of comparative literature, approaches the Bible as a literary masterpiece, which leads him to disappointment in most English translations because of their “flattening of the biblical texts” (Alter 2019, chap. 4) and a commendation of the KJV as the translation that “exhibits a good deal of rhythmic integrity—though it is far from consistent—in part because it follows the syntactic configurations of the Hebrew and in part because the seventeenth-century translators, unlike their modern successors, had a good ear for literary English” (Alter 2019, chap. 5).

Lewis compares the experience of reading literature to the experience of enjoying other kinds of art. He discusses the error of “using” literature for some purposes instead of “receiving” it.

We sit down before the picture in order to have something done to us, not that we may do things with it. The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. (Lewis 1961, chap. 3)

“Using” is inferior to “reception” because art, if used rather than received, merely facilitates, brightens, relieves or palliates our life, and does not add to it. . . . The necessary condition of all good reading is “to get ourselves out of the way.” (Lewis 1961, chap. 9)

Thus, if what we mean by *literature* is literary works, such as world classics, then they undoubtedly belong to the category of art and artistic expressions, which makes literature a potential part of ethnodoxological studies. However, there does not appear to have been any serious ethnodoxological research conducted in the field of literary art. More than 60 of the 100 articles published in the journal *Ethnodoxology: A Global Forum on Arts and Christian Faith* of the Global Ethnodoxology Network through 2025 are related to music and liturgy, and only three articles have some connection to literature; one is about stories, one about poetry, and one discusses translation of Psalms, mainly related to orality (*Ethnodoxology* 2025). Despite this apparent disinterest in studying national literature as art, the ethnodoxological categories spelled out by the members of the Global Ethnodoxology Network are well applicable to literature as well.

In their arts manual, ethnodoxologists Brian Schrag and Julisa Rowe mention the following three approaches to arts in Christian missions: Bring It—Teach It, Build New Bridges, and Find It—Encourage It. The first approach, practiced throughout church history, is teaching foreign art forms to local communities. In the second approach, cross-cultural workers learn enough about another community’s arts to influence how they use their own arts in ministry. In the third approach, Christian workers learn to know local artists and their arts and encourage the artists to create in the forms they know best. Schrag and Rowe embrace the third approach because they see it as

the model of Jesus who was with local people, learned from them, and then gave to them, and because they believe the church is largely neglecting this approach in its mission strategies (Schrag and Rowe 2020, xviii–xix).

These ethnodoxological categories can be applied to any art, including the art of literature. In literature, the first two approaches are mainly represented by translation projects, engaging only with Christian books and rejecting the other literary works as “worldly” or “heretic.” The first approach is simply translating books by foreign Christian authors into the local language. The second approach may be translating Christian books with a certain degree of adaptation to the local culture or even encouraging local Christian leaders to write their own books, provided it is done in the same way the foreign Christian authors write their books. Such local literary productions are similar to translations because they imitate foreign writing patterns and disregard their national literary heritage.

The third approach involves studying existing national literature, which is often non-Christian, and encouraging local believers to read it, learn from it, and, in its context and tradition, create new literary works for God’s kingdom. This approach encourages the church to leave its comfort zone and become more actively involved in society. It requires a significant change of attitude, looking at this process as a two-way road where the church not only uses literature to teach something *to* the world but also approaches non-Christian literature with a humble and teachable attitude, recognizing that there may be something valuable the church can learn *from* the world. This is what Christian author Philip Yancey pointed out in his book *Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived the Church*, where he discussed some outstanding authors whose books helped him in his faith journey. Some of them—for example, John Donne and G. K. Chesterton—were part of the church, and their writings may be considered Christian, others were not affiliated with the church, and some cannot be called Christian at all. Yancey admits, “Strangely, those furthest from orthodox Christianity—Gandhi, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Endo—have best helped me understand my own faith, by shining light on it from an angle I had not considered” (Yancey 2001, 9).

One of the deepest concerns of sincere Christians when approaching non-Christian literature is that it may negatively influence readers. Basil expressed that concern when he said, “We should not accept everything without discrimination, but only what is useful.” He explains his idea of a careful selection of literary works for Christians to read in the part of his article in which he talks about poets:

When they recount the words and deeds of good men, you should both love and imitate them, earnestly emulating such conduct. But when they portray base conduct, you must flee from them and stop up your ears, as Odysseus is said to have fled past the song of the sirens, for familiarity with evil writings paves the way for evil deeds. Therefore the soul must be guarded with great care, lest through our love for letters it receive some contamination unawares, as men drink in poison with honey. We shall not praise the poets when they scoff and rail, when they represent fornicators and winebibbers, when they define blissfulness by groaning tables and wanton songs. (Basil)

There is a certain degree of truth in Basil’s selective approach. Christian morals and beliefs are highly important to the church, and Christians don’t want to contaminate themselves with immoral or heretical texts. Nevertheless, Lewis rejected this kind of selectivity as a moralistic and dogmatic approach to literary art. He wrote,

Dramatists and novelists are praised as if they were doing, essentially, what used to be expected of theologians and philosophers, and the qualities which belong to their works as inventions and as designs are neglected. They are revered as teachers and insufficiently appreciated as artists. (Lewis 1961, chap. 8)

Lewis reasons that since literary works are art masterpieces, we cannot treat them as mere vehicles for truth. He proposes to look at the literary work as “something said” (*logos*) and “something made” (*poiema*). Using these two Greek terms, he describes literary works as not merely *logos* but also *poiema*, in contrast to nonartistic linguistic texts, which serve as mere means of communication (*logos*).

In an episode in the book of Acts, the Apostle Paul speaks to the Greeks in Athens and quotes their well-known authors who were not part of God’s people. In talking about why God created all the nations, Paul says,

From one ancestor he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “*In him we live and move and have our being*”; as even some of your own poets have said, “*For we, too, are his offspring.*” (Acts 17:26–28 NRSVUE; quotations from Greek in italics)

The quoted phrases come from the Greek philosopher Cleanthes and the Greek poet Aratus. These quotes from pagan literature in the God-inspired Scriptures can hardly be accidental. Paul filled these texts with a meaning that was quite different from that of the pagan authors. “In Him we live and move and have our being” is a quote from Cleanthes’s “Hymn to Zeus,” a reference to Zeus, not Yahweh. However, Paul interpreted this sentence from a monotheistic perspective. Knowing that the Greeks in Athens were familiar with these texts, he quoted them in his communication with this audience.

Lewis says, “The mark of strictly literary reading, as opposed to scientific or otherwise informative reading, is that we need not believe or approve the Logos. Most of us do not believe that Dante’s universe is at all like the real one” (Lewis 1961, epilogue). The *logos* of the Greek texts was different from Paul’s interpretation. The way Paul quoted these texts and the meaning he put into them confirms Lewis’s words. Paul didn’t believe in Zeus, and by quoting the texts written to Zeus and for Zeus, Paul didn’t approve of their author’s intended *logos*. He focused on the *poiema* of these texts and made them sound like something meaningful, “submitted them to Christ.”

Supporters of the principle of interpreting texts according to the author’s intent may object to Paul’s practice. However, modern literary studies support this practice with a theoretical basis. Wolfgang Iser points out that a text never exists without a reader, just as the communication process never happens without a sender and a receiver. Thus, “reading causes the literary work to unfold its inherently dynamic character” (Iser 1972, 280). A text’s interaction with different readers results in what Michel Foucault called “proliferation of meaning” (Foucault 1998, 222). In other words, different people will interpret the same text based on their presuppositions, which were shaped by their knowledge and experience, and each person will inevitably have a somewhat different interpretation of the meaning. The dynamic nature of a literary text arises from its relation to the reader’s response: “If the text actually possessed only the meaning brought to light by interpretation, then there would remain very little else for the reader. He could only take it or leave it” (Iser 1998, 226).

Considering the dynamic nature of texts, especially literary works, as artistic expressions, Paul’s manipulation of non-Christian literature makes perfect sense. We can imitate Paul’s practice by interpreting literary works according to our perception in the light of the Truth. There is nothing deceitful or dishonest about it because it

simply reflects the dynamic nature of our reading and communication. We always interpret texts according to what we know and believe. This understanding enables the church to approach literature positively, as art, in ways that will help it better communicate with society and glorify God.

The emergence of ethnodoxology as a Christian faith-based interdisciplinary study of how Christians in every culture engage with God and the world through their own artistic expressions presents a great opportunity for Christian authors and literary researchers to develop their peculiar ethnodoxological branch focused on the practical study of literature as art: reading and reinterpreting non-Christian literature and learning the artistic ways in their culture. This should enhance the Christian authors' effectiveness in creating meaningful literary works in the flow of their people's artistic tradition and facilitate communication between the church and society. The literary branch of ethnodoxology can also be a unique platform for a mutually beneficial collaboration between Christian authors and Christian literary scholars who can also be actively involved in secular literary studies.

Comparative Literature: Church-Oriented Studies

As we can see from its definition as “the interdisciplinary study of how Christians in every culture engage with God and the world through their own artistic expressions,” ethnodoxology is interesting for Christian believers but irrelevant to most outsiders. If Christian scholars of literary theory and criticism remain within the limits of ethnodoxological studies, they will not have communication with society. Our purpose is not to withdraw from the world to a comfortable company of like-minded people but to participate in the literary and academic processes in our society. Among the existing academic fields, comparative literature has potential niches for Christian literary scholars' involvement.

Historically, comparative literature began as studies of national literatures and connections between them. As Spanish literary scholar Claudio Guillén points out,

Major emphasis was placed on phenomena of influence, transmission, communication, transit (passage), or the link between activities and works belonging to different national spheres. (Guillén 1993, 47)

However, since World War 2, comparative literature has developed into a much broader field of study. In her book *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, Susan Bassnett defines comparative literature as “the study of texts across cultures . . . concerned with patterns of connection in literatures across time and space” (Bassnett 1993, 1). Henry H. H. Remak goes further, characterizing comparative literature as

the study of literature beyond the confines of a particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences, religion, etc., on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others and *the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression*. (Guillén 1993, 95) (emphasis added)

In this broader area of “the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression,” there are opportunities for Christian scholars of literature to conduct studies oriented at the church. I have developed a concept of “Church-oriented Comparative Literature,” which involves comparing literary works as socio-cultural phenomena with the church as a broader sphere of human expression, a sociocultural reality shared by millions

worldwide. The parameters for this kind of comparison would be similarities and differences in values, beliefs, and ideas.

The rationale for such a scholarly study is to help the church interact with literary art by “explor[ing] the riches of individual literary works, first in their own terms and then also in the light of a Christian worldview” (Jeffrey and Maillet 2011, author’s preface). I have identified three major aspects of literature in which such an interaction can occur: *communicative*, *didactic*, and *linguistic/artistic*. *The communicative aspect* enables the church to communicate better with society. *The didactic aspect* makes literature an instrument of “sanctification,” that is, spiritual growth and improvement. *The linguistic/artistic aspect* enriches the church with the linguistic and artistic means for delivering the truth more effectively.

Church-oriented comparative literary study requires a well-developed methodology based on theoretical studies of relevant disciplines, and I have developed a provisional methodology that can be viewed as the first step toward the goal. A detailed presentation of this methodology is beyond the scope of this paper, but some considerations are briefly presented below. A fuller presentation of the methodology is given in my book *Church, Scripture, and Literature* (forthcoming), in which I explore the field of literature broadly and systematically from a perspective of Scripture, Christian orthodoxy, and related academic disciplines.

Church-Oriented Comparative Literature: Some Methodological Considerations

A serious scholarly study of a literary work requires the researcher to understand its various contexts as broadly as possible. This necessity is based on the “hermeneutic circle,” which originated in Augustine (354–430) and was further developed by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). The circle describes the process of understanding as a continuous movement from the individual parts to the whole and back to the parts. It can be applied to reading: The hermeneutic circle demonstrates the process of our reading a text when we move from sentence to sentence, from one literary unit to another, and as we move forward, we project the possible meanings of the whole in the light of the parts.

The circle can also demonstrate circular movements from the parts to the whole on a larger scale. This is how German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer describes it in his magnum opus on hermeneutics, *Truth and Method*:

Schleiermacher elaborated this hermeneutic circle of part and whole in both its objective and its subjective aspects. As the single word belongs in the total context of the sentence, so the single text belongs in the total context of a writer’s work, and the latter in the whole of the literary genre or of literature. At the same time, however, the same text, as a manifestation of a creative moment, belongs to the whole of its author’s inner life. Full understanding can take place only within this objective and subjective whole. (Gadamer 1994, 291)

Jens Zimmermann explains this broader application of the hermeneutic circle with the following example:

Let’s say, for example, you pick up Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* for the first time. Looking at the book, you probably know that it’s a play of the kind we call tragedy and contains the line “to be or not to be: that is the question.” You have heard this line many times before, in sitcoms or even advertisements. All these prior influences shape your expectations of this play in some way. The hermeneutic circle means that some greater context always influences how we understand a particular part. As you read, however, you will have to revise not only your view of what the play is about but also what this famous line actually means. The point is that

whole and part influence each other. Our better understanding of particular lines will reshape our grasp of the whole. (Zimmermann 2015, chap. 2)

The researcher of a literary work needs broader historical, cultural, biographic, and literary (genre) contexts to fill the gaps in the literary work. Without these contexts, they will inevitably fill the gaps according to his or her presuppositions, and the resultant understanding of the text will be less consistent with the authorial intent. As was mentioned above and demonstrated by the example from Paul's quotes of Greek literature in Acts 17, however, understanding the authorial intent is not the primary goal. In practice, when an author creates a literary work, they do not expect the audience to research all the details about his or her life and all the other related contexts for the perfect understanding but simply release the literary work to the readers. Literary works, by their very nature and purpose, are meant to be "autonomous" texts, independent from their authors and open to various interpretations. For that reason, Jacques Derrida said, "[T]o be a poet is to know how to leave speech. To let it speak alone" (quoted in Gagliardi 2011, 289).

The Bible contains many examples of reinterpreting texts according to God's truth, contrary to the author's initial intent. Jesus and his disciples often quoted the Hebrew Scriptures in meanings that could not possibly be the authors' intent. One of Christ's enemies, the high priest Caiaphas, said, "[It] is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" (John 11:50); we now interpret this as prophetically anticipating Jesus's substitutionary sacrifice, contrary to Caiaphas's intended meaning.

Jerome's view of Paul's practice of quoting Greek poets is interesting in this respect:

[Jerome] notes in particular that in the New Testament Paul quotes from Greek poets such as Epimenides (Tit 1:12), Menander (1 Cor 15:33) and Aratus (Acts 17:28). This, he says, far from representing an impurity of purpose (or syncretism) on the part of the apostle merely establishes an order of appropriation such that Paul can make skillful, fitting, often ironic use of alien instruments, much as when David uses Goliath's own sword to hack off the fallen giant's head. (Jeffrey and Maillet 2011, chap. 4)

I argue for a healthy balance between the two extremes: the extreme of the postmodern tendency of self-serving interpretations with no regard to the authorial intent, and the extreme of fanatical adherence to the rigid rule of quoting texts only in the way intended by the author. Reinterpreting a text because of a misunderstanding or postmodern disregard for its meaning is unacceptable, but reinterpreting it in the light of the truth and God's grand narrative is often beneficial. While studying various contexts of literary work is important to avoid wrong conclusions, the background information should not constrain our creativity in interpretation.

After conducting sufficient research on the contexts (background information), the researcher can proceed to analyze the literary work. Assuming that prior to studying the contexts, the researcher had read the selected literary work, the next step should be rereading and analyzing it from the vantage point of their progress on the hermeneutic circle. At this stage, the researcher takes notes with a more systematic analysis in view.

After rereading the text, the researcher can systematize the notes and complete their church-oriented study by writing a report on the literary work. Since analyzing works of art is inevitably subjective, we cannot expect the report to be perfectly objective. However, subjectivity should not go beyond the boundaries of reason and common sense or contain blatant distortions.

A church-oriented comparative literary study focuses on the elements of our faith in the literary work: the main themes, ideas, and values that relate to our beliefs, values, and truths; interesting and fascinating analogies; concrete expressions of general abstract truths; tropes that help us look at things from the author's perspective; and other meaningful and artistic elements of the literary work. In summary, the process of church-oriented literary analysis can include the following activities:

1. Researching the background information that helps us understand the literary work as part of larger systems;
2. Identifying the elements of our faith in the text (quotes from Scripture, allusions, themes, other sources mentioned, such as traditions) and comparing the author's perspective to that of the church (*the communicative aspect*);
3. Identifying the main themes or messages of the literary work and analyzing the extent to which these messages correspond to our faith (*the communicative aspect*);
4. Exploring the analogies the literary text may bring to the mind of a follower of Christ (*the didactic aspect*);
5. Finding the concrete parts of the literary work that express one or more of the church's general truths (*the didactic aspect*);
6. Discovering the tropes that can be a valuable connection to our faith (*the communicative, didactic, and linguistic/artistic aspects*).

As we can see, most of these activities relate to the communicative and didactic aspects of literature, and only the last one is aimed at the linguistic/artistic aspect. The linguistic/artistic aspect is a more pervasive, overarching element of a literary work, however, and it is present in all the activities to a higher or lower degree.

This methodology is based on broad scholarly studies ranging from semiotics (see Chandler 2007) to studies of fiction (see Cullhed and Rydholm 2014; Pettersson 2014; Rossholm 2014).

In the following section, I will demonstrate a practical application of this methodology by presenting a shortened version of the report on a church-oriented analysis of a Ukrainian novel, *Sad hetsymanskyi* (*Garden of Gethsemane*), by Ivan Bahrianyi.

An Example of Church-Oriented Analysis

Background Information

Ivan Bahrianyi (1906/7–1963)² is one of the most famous writers of the Ukrainian diaspora. He was one of the victims of Stalin's Great Purge. He was arrested twice, in 1932 and 1938. In 1932, he was held in Kharkiv's "internal prison" for eleven months and then sent on a five-year exile. During his second imprisonment (June 16, 1938–April 2, 1940), he spent most of his time in Kharkiv's "internal prison" and experienced the worst horrors of the repression there, including various forms of intimidation, threat, and torture. Bahrianyi was fortunate to be released "due to lung disease and insufficient materials for conviction" (Lushchii 2024). Following his release, he stayed in Western Ukraine and, in 1945, emigrated to Germany.

² The year of his birth is not known for sure. Different sources indicate it as 1906 or 1907.

The nearly two-year period of the writer's second imprisonment was taken as the basis for his novel *The Garden of Gethsemane*. He worked on this novel in Germany in 1948–1950, and though it is a work of fiction, it can be considered historical, even documentary, as the author describes events that he witnessed and participated in. At the beginning of the work, he notes that

All the names in this book, including the names of all the NKVD officers and prison administrators depicted here without exception, as well as all the names of the prisoners (with the exception of only a few that have been changed), are true. (Bahrianyi 1950)³

Bahrianyi was one of the few people fortunate enough to survive the dreadful NKVD prison in Kharkiv. Thanks to this novel, we have the opportunity to learn about his experiences there. During one of the episodes of torture of the main character of the novel, Andrii Chumak, the torturers confidently state that no one would ever find out what they did to the prisoners there. Ironically, the novel proves them wrong.

But that we're sitting here and what we're going to do with you—that the world doesn't know. Eh? What do you think?

—It will know . . . someday . . .

—Hahaha! . . . No, brother, no way! . . . Hahaha!

The biographical sources I researched contain no evidence of Ivan Bahrianyi's adherence to Christianity or the church. However, the novel itself contains numerous references to the Bible and Christian faith, indicating the author's generally positive attitude toward Christianity.

The Elements of Our Faith

The novel touches on many biblical and Christian themes. The very title of the novel is taken directly from Matthew's Gospel, and the epigraph to the work is a biblical quotation:

O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me . . .

And while he yet spake, lo, Judas, one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and elders of the people. . . . Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus and took him . . .

The Gospel according to St. Matthew, chap. 26.⁴

In the first pages of the novel, the author introduces us to the Chumak family and mentions "Chumak's old Bible, a very thick book that Chumak loved to read in the fall evenings." Here we learn about the significance of the Bible in the family of Andrii Chumak, the main character of the novel. Andrii's father enjoyed reading the Bible, and even though later in the novel Andrii identifies himself as a nonbeliever, many of his values, feelings, and actions reflect the influence of the Holy Scriptures.

³ All quotes from the novel are given in my translation [I.P.], based on the original text of the online version of the novel.

⁴ In this section, I use the KJV version for biblical quotations, because I believe it best reproduces the style of the Ukrainian quotations in the novel.

The novel contains numerous references to biblical stories. In addition to Christ's suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane, the author refers to biblical stories about Judas's betrayal, Cain's fratricide, the crowing of the rooster after Peter's denial, the two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus, and the high priest Caiaphas.

When describing a young Jew named David, who courageously endured torture at the hands of NKVD officers, the author compares him to the three young men who were thrown into the fiery furnace in the book of Daniel: "Andrii was looking at David's inclined face, at his almost maidenly profile, which had something biblical about it, perhaps reminiscent of those youths who were thrown into the fiery furnace and did not burn in it." The author adds, "But that was a different furnace! In this one, everything burns!" Indeed, the NKVD prison was so terrible that it resembled a furnace that was impossible to get out of alive.

An important ecclesiastical element of the novel is the impressive description of Father Petrovskiy, who was in the same cell as Andrii Chumak and a large group of prisoners and was tortured like everyone else. He would tell his fellow prisoners stories from the Bible and pray quietly. The author describes this holy man and the impression he made on Andrii in the following way:

He was exhausted, pale, and . . . majestic. And the most touching feature was that he did not exalt himself, did not play the saint, as most of his kind do, did not lecture anyone, and did not obtrude his heroic faith on others. He was a deeply intelligent, quiet, calm, and unwavering person, fundamentally grounded in his faith. He never complained about anything, nor did he get angry—Andrii cannot recall a single instance of this. There is something mysterious and unshakable about this man, something that is not of this world. Perhaps all the early Christians were like that, as they were tortured, yet harbored neither malice nor despair in their hearts, and gazed up above people's heads into a great mystery known and accessible only to them. . . .

He spoke softly and sorrowfully of how Christ, sentenced to crucifixion, prayed about the cup, sweating from grief and mental anguish. . . . He prayed for spiritual strength so that he could drink the cup to the very bottom. . . . He spoke of the Garden of Gethsemane. . . .

Andrii knew this since childhood, just as he knew the entire Bible, and this passage always struck him the most, touching his heart. However, when spoken by Petrovskiy, this quiet, unnoticed martyr, the familiar words took on a special meaning, and the familiar legend took on a special significance. . . . The second most powerful text in the entire Bible for Andrii was Solomon's "Song of Songs"—for some reason, it came to his mind involuntarily, perhaps to balance the terrible tragedy of the human heart facing crucifixion. The inimitable Song of Songs! The song about great, immeasurable, divine, and all-conquering love.

As an extraordinary person of great faith, Petrovskiy resembles Bishop Bienvenu Myriel in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Father Zosima in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and countless other faithful servants of Christ portrayed in masterpieces of world literature. Authors write literary works based on their personal experiences, and it is encouraging to see that despite all the struggles and corruption in many Christian churches all over the world, Hugo in France, Dostoevsky in Russia, and Bahrianyi in Ukraine all had positive experiences with the church and met some people of extraordinary faith and character.

Andrii shows an impressive attitude toward the Bible, as if he were a believer. Elsewhere, however, he calls himself a "nonbeliever." He asks Petrovskiy: "Father . . . I am not a believer . . . But . . . tell me more, tell me about the Garden of Gethsemane." Obviously, Andrii realizes that his life is not what the life of a true Christian should be. And yet his soul yearns to hear the gospel story once again.

When Petrovskiy spoke about the Garden of Gethsemane, Andrii would “bite his lip and stare at the ceiling, beyond the ceiling, somewhere into the unknown . . . as he heard about Judas, he would think about his brothers.” In Andrii’s (and the author’s) value system, brothers occupy one of the highest positions. Faith in people generally, and especially in his brothers, is extremely important to him: “Blood runs quicker through my veins and my soul becomes gentler—that’s when I regain my shaken and shattered faith in people. . . . It’s as if the sun is rising from behind the clouds. . . . The most precious treasure a person has is faith in oneself and in one’s fellow beings! At least Andrii’s soul has been grounded on this all his life, and this is what he is now convinced of.”

Here we can see that Andrii was not a believer in the true sense of the word, because for a true believer, the most precious treasure is Christ, and life is based on faith in God, not in people. Nevertheless, that “very thick book,” his father’s Bible, laid the foundation of a general Christian morality, which gave Andrii, as the main character of the novel and as the author’s own image, the spiritual strength to endure torture for his ideals.

Main Themes and Message: The Communicative Aspect

Theme 1. The spirit of fear

In this novel, Bahrianyi masterfully portrays the gruesome reality of servile life in the Soviet system of compulsion and intimidation. This atmosphere of fear, which prevailed in the USSR, especially in Stalin’s period, is perfectly captured in the following two paragraphs from the novel:

Andrii was looking at the buildings, cars, trams, police officers at their posts, people scurrying along the streets and squares, shrunken with fear; then he turned his gaze to the people in the tram, and saw the same mark on everything. Finally, he understood:

It’s all about fear! Unspoken, hidden, but incessant fear! It’s a kind of fear that makes older people keep their mouths tightly shut, and the young to stifle their laughter and jokes, and constantly look around. It is a fear that makes everyone keep their wits about them and look around every time they see a policeman or soldier, and makes everyone silent whenever one of these bearers of official uniform, symbols of authority, enters the tram.

I still remember that enslaving atmosphere from my childhood years in the Soviet Ukraine. It completely contrasts with the freedom that God grants to individuals:

For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. (2 Timothy 1:7)

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear. (1 John 4:18)

For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. (Romans 8:15)

Theme 2. The value of human beings

In the Soviet state, built on the foundation of atheism, the attitude toward man was the very opposite of the biblical one. Instead of God’s commandments “Thou shalt not kill” and “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour” (Exodus 20:13, 16), the servants of the Soviet system profess “new commandments such as ‘It is better to break the ribs of a hundred innocent people than to let one guilty person go free.’” The depreciation of the value of human beings is simply staggering. The satanic system is ready to destroy a hundred people who are

not its enemies to prevent one enemy from escaping punishment. This contrasts with the teaching of Jesus Christ about God seeking one lost soul, even if he already has ninety-nine saved:

For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost. How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish. (Matthew 18:11–14)

The Christian worldview affirms the value of human life because, according to the Bible, God created man in his own image and likeness. The atheistic worldview does not recognize this value, and therefore, it is not surprising that the attitude toward people in the USSR was so demeaning. This inhuman attitude is very well expressed in the words of the investigator who tortured Andrii:

Don't expect any mercy, because man is *nothing*. You're terribly mistaken if you think anyone here will pamper you. We don't have time to pamper anyone. You—and not only you personally, but everyone there—will be crushed like a fly, and no one will have any pity, not even the slightest. There are enough people in the USSR! . . . You will tell us everything here. If you won't tell us standing up, you will tell us lying down. If you won't tell us in your right mind, you will tell us when you're out of your mind. But you will talk! Nobody here has ever managed to hold out to the end by playing the hero. You are not a hero here; you are not even a human being; you are just a *hole in a bagel*.

The Soviet authorities forced prisoners to make false statements, and this revealed their satanic nature. Jesus taught that the devil is “the father of lies” (John 8:44 NRSVUE). In the Soviet system, everything was built on lies. If the authorities needed to pass off a lie as the truth, they used intimidation and torture to achieve this. The investigator assured Andrii that sooner or later, torture would force him to sign a confession to crimes he had never committed:

You shall sign it. Even if it were written that you are the Japanese emperor, you would sign it as the very truth. Understand!?

Theme 3. The strength to endure suffering

When the investigator told Andrii that in this prison nobody “has ever managed to hold out to the end by playing the hero,” he was lying. Although most prisoners could not endure the torture and “cracked”—that is, agreed to sign what was demanded of them—there were some heroes among them who bravely endured the most terrible acts of torture.

At the beginning of his imprisonment, Andrii used to wonder how prisoners could laugh in such unbearable conditions. A fellow prisoner explained to him:

Today is Sunday, so it's a day off for the great horror, because today no one is being taken in for questioning (except for some people, maybe), that's one thing. Second, tomorrow will come and Sunday will be gone, because Monday is not Sunday. And finally, “the proletariat has nothing to lose except for . . .”—this famously genius thesis is undoubtedly the basis of “gallows humor” of all the ages. So, “Seize the moment! When you have a chance to laugh today, don't put it off until tomorrow. Laugh today, because tomorrow you won't be allowed to, and it may be too late tomorrow.”

The Bible says, “neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10). Laughter and joy in the most difficult circumstances can give people strength, and prisoners seemed to understand this intuitively. I remember that, in the late 1980s, my mother told Soviet jokes to some American guests, and they were deeply shocked to hear us joking about Chernobyl. They considered it unacceptable to laugh at such a tragedy. In our circumstances, however, it was quite natural. We joked because otherwise we could have lost our minds!

Analogy: The Didactic Aspect

From among the abstract truths that this novel could teach its readers, I would like to highlight two in particular: 1) There are no “happy coincidences” in life, but there is divine providence; 2) Most of our difficulties, sorrows, and sufferings are not worth complaining about.

Truth 1. There are no “happy coincidences” in life, but there is divine providence.

In several cases, when Andrii was on the verge of making a terrible mistake or about to “crack,” an invisible force, resembling a happy coincidence, saved him and prevented tragedy.

And this thread is so thin that even Andrii can no longer rely on it! He realizes this with anguish and is drenched in sweat. If this thread of his shattered will breaks, he will fall into the abyss—the abyss of disgrace, after which one can no longer live in this world.

Since this is an autobiographical novel, there is a high probability that such incidents really happened in the author's life during his imprisonment in Kharkiv's NKVD prison. Even if they are fictional, however, the author undoubtedly based them on his own experiences. Every believer has experienced many such “happy coincidences,” when God's hand could be clearly seen. In one episode in the novel, Andrii even acknowledges the hand of God and suggests that it may be the answer to Father Petrovskyi's prayers. In this episode, the authorities put Andrii in a punishment cell for twenty days, and he considered it God's blessing and salvation.

What a wonderful thing a punishment cell is!

You can sit there—sit endlessly, resting your soul and body, and thinking endlessly, thinking and dreaming. And most importantly, you can hear nothing and see nothing, staring into the fiery spectrum. You can forget everything, knowing in advance that twenty days (twenty long days! That's a lifetime!) are guaranteed to you, belong to you, and you alone.

Andrii rejoiced with all his being that he had been sent to a punishment cell, and for such a long term; he considered it a blessing from God. . . . This was an unexpected favor of fortune. Perhaps Petrovskyi had prayed hard for him. After all, this meant salvation for him.

Truth 2. Most of our difficulties, sorrows, and sufferings are not worth complaining about.

Under normal circumstances, a punishment cell is terrible, but in this case, Andrii and his fellow prisoners were in such appalling conditions that it seemed like a place of rest. People who have never experienced the conditions the author endured for many years will have difficulty understanding this. When I read this novel, I felt shame and remorse for all my complaints and grievances, because I realized that my so-called “suffering” was not really suffering at all. Millions of people who went through the torment of Soviet prisons, as well as the millions who are currently experiencing similar suffering in various parts of the world, would regard my life struggles as

happiness. This novel made me realize how grateful I should be to God for my relatively easy and trouble-free life.

The following excerpts briefly describe the living conditions of prisoners under the Soviet regime.

Andrii's first impression of the cell

He found himself in a new world, the existence of which he had never even suspected. He had seen prisons and cells, but such a thing! . . . It was beyond his wildest imagination. This cell could only have appeared in the delirium of a sick or extremely drunk person. Andrii leaned on his elbow, squinted his eyes, and carefully studied the world he had been thrust into.

It was ridiculous. Perhaps it was even the same cell he had once been in; at least it looked just like it. But even the harsh conditions of the GPU ("State Security Department") seemed like a fantasy compared to this. At the GPU, it was a single-person cell, there was a bed here, covered with something resembling bedding, with a gray blanket on top, a nightstand and a stool, and the floor was painted and waxed to a shine, which the prisoner had to maintain himself every day by scrubbing the floor with a brush handed out by the guard through the "feeder" (the window in the cell door). The walls were relatively clean. Wasn't that the "dream"?! But the twenty-eight people lying on the dirty, wet floor were an absolute refutation of that "dream" as something unreal, impossible. Even the damned solitary confinement cell seemed like a fantasy. This could not be true! But it was just as it was. . . . Only a small vent was open. It was supposed to let air in, but the air did not seem to be coming in at all, as it was unable to penetrate, and there was not enough air to breathe in the cell.

What was prohibited

It is prohibited to pace in the cell, prohibited to stand (it is only allowed with special permission); walks are prohibited, and the prisoners are not taken outside even for a minute. Some have not seen sunlight or blue skies for months. It is prohibited to write anything using any means, prohibited to sew with anything, even with a match, prohibited to kill fleas on the walls or elsewhere, prohibited not only to sleep but to nap during the day, prohibited. . . . Good Lord! Everything is prohibited because all these are "enemies of the people" who are under investigation. And all the cells in this prison are filled with such "enemies."

Food and drinks in the prison

The most terrible prison in the Russian Empire was like heaven compared to this one.

Living conditions in another prison in Kharkiv.

Another prison in Kharkiv, to which Andrii and his comrades were transferred, seemed like paradise compared to the NKVD prison.

Their experiences there cannot be described in words.

Dreams seemed more real than waking life.

Tropes: The Artistic Aspect

Bahrianyi was a genuine artist, and therefore, reading this novel is a pleasant and rewarding experience for all lovers of the literary arts. I will give four excerpts that are particularly impressive in my opinion, highlighting the tropes in bold.

The episode of Andrii's reunion with his mother and sister after years of separation:

Galya shrieked and *threw herself at her brother's neck as if propelled by a spring*. Their mother leaped up and, *raising her arms out as wings, like a seagull*, staggered forward, weeping tears of joy. Andrii put his suitcase down and embraced the aged and the young. They were hanging on his sturdy arms as he smiled and gently patted his mother on the back.

A striking description of the prison as a place that is easy to get into but difficult to get out of:

Once you have walked through *this door*, brother, *which is so wide in one direction and so narrow in the other*, you will surely learn everything.

A striking description of the freedom that Andrii was deprived of:

Andrii gazed at the world at length. Before leaving it, perhaps for good, he eagerly looked at everything around him, trying to capture it all, to store it in his brain cells, so that later he could remember what that "freedom" was like, what that world was like, *a world that lacked space for him*.

A wonderful description of chestnuts in Kyiv, along with two trees outside the prison cell window:

*Chestnuts, like large candelabra,*⁵ are pompously arrayed along the street, protruding from the black earth moistened by the May rain. They stand and triumphantly *cast golden dust, fragrance, and the exuberant pathos of blossom into the sky, while raindrops are glittering like diamonds* on the leaves and petals, *shining with rainbows*. . . . And there is *youth walking down the street, dancing and laughing*, their youth, his youth. . . .

Chestnuts . . .

And the two trees outside the window are *like messengers from them*. When it rains at night, you can hear a distinct noise outside the window—rain falling on the trees. It sounds to the prisoner's ear *as if someone is playing the harp*—the rain lashes against groups of leaves, striking different surfaces at different angles, large and small leaves, and the prisoner's sensitive ear can distinguish all these sounds. *The wind walks and turns the branches*, and they creak as twigs hit each other, dropping dry bits that crack and fly down, touching the leaves: one, two, lower, tinkling on the leaves from top to bottom, then flying to the ground at some point. And when the rain ceases, and the wind calms down after it, *the sounds* of different tones *continue to drip* for a long time as drops break off and fall from one leaf to another, from one leaf to another—one, two, three, four. . . . *Trees! They are a whole world, a vast garden, even though there are only two of them*. They rustle with leaves behind bars, and *they rustle in the soul* . . .

⁵ The Ukrainian term "паникадила," translated as "candelabra," is the Greek "πολυκάνδηλον" (multicandle) and is used for a large central chandelier with candles in an Orthodox church.

Conclusion

The church should be involved in the cultural life of society and in all the arts, including literature. If Christians neglect this field, others will fill their place, and as a result, anti-Christian forces will exert their influence through it. A rare example of a Christian author and scholar who made a significant contribution to English, and even world, literature is C. S. Lewis. He is an excellent example from which Christian authors and scholars can learn. Today, Christian authors have an advantage that Lewis didn't have: the new emerging Christian field of ethnodoxology and a more developed modern comparative literature.

In this paper, I have presented my vision of "Church-Oriented Comparative Literature," a brief description of its provisional methodology, and a shortened version of a report on a church-oriented analysis of a literary work. Many questions still need to be answered. Will "Church-Oriented Comparative Literature" be integrated into ethnodoxology? Will there be an interest in developing it further? This paper is an expression of my belief in the importance of our more active and purposeful involvement in the literary field. This belief has motivated me to conduct comprehensive research in the relevant disciplines, develop the concept of "Church-Oriented Comparative Literature," and work on its methodology and practical application.

I hope this paper will move us toward fruitful discussions of both the theoretical and practical issues of Christians' involvement in the literary field and the perspectives of "Church-Oriented Comparative Literature," for the glory of God and the good of people.

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