

Alberto del Pozo Martinez

Center for the Study of Religion and Culture.

Abstract of my research as a Summer Fellow 2006:

My main interest in the research I undertook as a Summer Fellow at the C.S.R.C. was the analysis of a very suggestive crisscrossing between religious and literary discourses, visible in 20th Century Latin American short stories. My hypothesis, at the beginning of my work, was that this crisscrossing of disciplines could be read as a new way of approaching religion: a new and fresh Latin American way, justified by the sociological, political, and spiritual peculiarities of the continent.

After analyzing carefully the short-stories I had chosen for my anthology, my conclusion is sensibly different from what I was expecting to find. The adaptation of religious discourse to literature cannot be read as the most visible explosion of a new spirituality. The presence of religious motifs, themes, and languages within these texts is used by Latin American authors as a method of communication that tries to show the limits of hegemonic discourses.

My conclusion is that religious symbols have been used in these texts as a way of showing us the limits of modern and postmodern discursive practices. Religion, understood as a branch of literature, provided materials that cannot be controlled by these new discursive practices, just because they belong to eras ruled by different epistemological coordinates. As a result, these short stories do not create new religious disciplines, as I previously had thought. But they are convincing enough to make us mull over the limits of our hegemonic discourses, that is to say, the limits of our thinking, as postmodern human beings.

Alberto del Pozo Martínez

Summer Fellow 2006 at the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture

Summary of My Research

J. F. Lyotard wrote in *The Postmodern Condition* that postmodernism was determined by the collapse of the big narratives of human emancipation: which included, of course, Religion. That idea, as he exposed it in his book, forces us to read the crisscrossing of literature and religion as a way of parodying religious identities. My idea, at the beginning of my research, was that the relationship of these two discursive practices could not be understood just as a parody, at least regarding Latin American culture, and specially with regard to the short story. This would have implied that literature has been the space where religious practices could be shown as ridiculous and laughable. In my opinion, however, it shows us the opposite. Latin American short story is a perfect example of a different way of connecting these discourses, even if it is not the way of developing a new spirituality for the continent.

Latin American short stories show us something different. Borges, the most important writer of short stories in the Americas, has been the author that has talked more clearly about this crisscrossing, when he affirms, in "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Teritus" that "Theology is in fact a branch of fantastic literature." This could be understood as a mere attack on religion, but the effect of this idea inaugurates a new way of understanding religious traditions within literature beyond parody. They will not be, talking exclusively in aesthetic terms, doctrines anymore: they will be narratives, and, as narratives, they provide the materials that can be used to understand and defy the limits of other modern and postmodern discourses, specially the ones associated with political power.

In my analysis, I have tried to show how Leopoldo Lugones, in the short story titled “The Rain of Fire,” used the biblical episode of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra to attack the possibilities of the subgenre known as *chronicle* (*journalism*). How Jorge Luis Borges, in “Three Versions of Judas,” did the same in order to attack ethical discourse. How Julio Cortázar tried to go beyond biographical practices, making one of his most famous characters, the jazz musician Johnny Carter, speak as Saint John in the Revelations, in the short story titled “The Hunter”. How Juan José Arreola show us the limits of scientific discourses by playing with famous sentences of the Bible. These examples, and many others, are trying to create a new Hermetic tradition, which is not conceived as alternative to religious identities, but as a more profound alternative to modern and postmodern citizenship.

My conclusion is that religious symbols have been used in these texts as a way of showing us the limits of modern and postmodern discursive practices. Religion, understood as a branch of literature, provided materials that cannot be controlled by these new discursive practices, just because they belong to time periods ruled by different epistemological coordinates. As a result, these short stories do not create new religious disciplines, as I previously had thought. But they are convincing enough to make us reflect about the limits of our hegemonic discourses, that is to say, the limits of our thinking, as postmodern human beings.

Let me use these opportunity to express my gratitude to the members of the CSRC for their economic support, for allowing me to participate in their project, and for helping me refine my ideas for my dissertation.