

***From Gender Binary to Diversity:  
The Image of the Prophet in Tony Kushner's Angels in America as a Stimulus to  
Discuss Gender Issues in Catholic Theology***

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The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2020  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

A theatrical play *Angels in America. A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* by an American playwright Tony Kushner was broadcast in 60 countries and 2500 cinemas around the world at the National Theatre Live Edition in 2017. The main character, Prior Walter, who suffers from AIDS, is a young New Yorker and a gay. The aim of this paper is to present and discuss the original, non-canonical and non-traditional image of Walter as a prophet. Thus, the goal is to analyze the similarities and differences between the Biblical image of a prophet and the prophet from *Angels in America*. The author of the paper will attempt to determine what values these differences imply and whether they could offer a creative opportunity for theologians and other scholars dealing with cultural, theological, and social themes. The basic research hypothesis presupposes that the play is an inspiring way to learn about the theological questions of people in the second half of the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century.

Keywords: Culture, Gender, Faith, Roman Catholic Church

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## Introduction

A theatrical play *Angels in America. A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* by an American playwright Tony Kushner was written in two parts in 1991 and 1993. The work won numerous awards, one of the most important being the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1993 for Kushner's first part of the play *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*. In 2003, American HBO showed the miniseries *Angels in America* directed by Mike Nichols. In 2017, the play was staged at the Royal National Theatre in London and broadcast in 60 countries and 2500 cinemas around the world at the NT Live Edition. One year later the play was presented at the Neil Simon Theatre on Broadway, New York City. The director of both plays from London and New York was Marianne Elliott.

Three and two years ago *Angels in America* provoked once again heated discussions on gender (e.g. Othman, 2014; Omer-Sherman, 2007, pp. 7-30; Frantzen, 2000), sociological and political (e.g. Bultel, 2018; Blazar, 2009, pp. 77-84; Omer-Sherman, 2007, pp. 7-30; Ard, 1996, pp. 91-96; Savran, 1995, pp. 207-227) issues presented in the play. One of the themes is the image of Prior Walter as a prophet. Tanner J. Underwood examines the play and the main character from the perspective of "magical realism," which is the literary inclusion of both realistic and fantastic elements or the unknown into the text. (Underwood, 2019, pp. 109-122). Yair Lipshitz and Anthony Lioi emphasize the Jewish religion and spirituality, particularly the traditions of biblical prophecy (Lipshitz, 2012, pp. 203-238; Lioi, 2004, p. 96). Claudia Barnett presents Prior Walter as sanctified by his proximity to death due to his suffering from AIDS. She interprets his illness as a metaphor of purgatory throughout the play (Barnett, 2010, pp. 471-494).

It is important to highlight that the issue of Prior Walter has not been thoroughly analyzed so far from the perspective of the Roman-Catholic theology on sexuality and gender. Thus the aim of this paper is to compare the image of the prophet in *Angels in America* to the classic, canonical image of a prophet in the Roman-Catholic theology to indicate and evaluate the position of non-heteronormative people in the Catholic Church. In this paper, I will shortly characterize Prior Walter and present the similarities between the image of the prophet from the Kushner's play and the Old and New Testament. Then I will point out the differences between the two images. Finally, I will focus on observations resulting from the differences in the context of gender issues in Catholic theology.

The method of analysis applied in the paper is theological hermeneutics of cultural texts. The notion of hermeneutics has a double genesis. The first, far-reaching origin results from the methodological proposals concerning the exegesis of the Bible as the text of the Revelation containing the word of God addressed to a man (Bartnik, 1999; Jeanrond, 1994). This type of hermeneutics also stems from the consent of the representatives of some religions to place the images of the Creator and the sphere of sacrum in the art. The aesthetic and didactic function of paintings was noticed, among others at the Council of Nice II (787) and the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The development of understanding the role of art appeared in theology among others as a result of the teachings of Pope Paul VI, the decisions of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the thought of John Paul II. They became the basis for more explicit opening of theological hermeneutics of cultural texts (Pasierb, 1983, pp. 296-304).

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (no. 122-129) highlighted the specificity of art and the importance of its questions. The tradition of the existence of Christian iconography has been emphasized as well. Priests were advised to promote what is new and valuable in terms of artistic investments. The works of the sacred art latter were called signs and symbols of the highest matters, not just illustrations of the Bible. It was recognized that artistic creativity has a significant influence on the liturgy and the engagement of the faithful. Additionally, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, (no. 4-16) recommends specific rules in the analysis of theological sources, such as the intellectual character of theological understanding, the relationship between the experience of faith and the hermeneutic process, the preservation of the historical awareness of the Church language, the understanding of the Word of God as embodied in the word of man, the development of the understanding of faith and theology to the fullness of God's righteousness. It appears that hermeneutics does not only function as an understanding between the Revelation and faith, but it also plays a significant role in the process of progressing from faith to understanding (Bartnik, 1999).

The second stimulus conducive to the development of analyzes within the theological hermeneutics of cultural texts was popular in the second half of the 20th century when intellectual trends, such as the analysis of form, symbol and sign, and the theory and practice of hermeneutics of visual arts and literary texts gained in importance (cf. Burke, 2012; Jeanrond, 1994). Hermeneutics signifies the methodology of reading and interpreting texts. In radical terms, it indicates the ontological contexts (the nature of being was considered to be interpretive, the existence of facts was rejected, only interpretation was approved) and existential (the understanding and interpretation were seen as the essence of being in the world). The postmodern methodological proposals reject the functioning of a rigid, closed and stable sense of the world or text as their "truth". As a new meaning, the "truth" and "essence" of being recognized became historical interpretations of the analyzed cultural text (cf. Zawadzki, 2015, pp. 103-115). Methodological issues in the field of philosophical hermeneutics were developed by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, Paul Ricœur, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gianni Vattim, John Caputo. Their theories influenced the development of hermeneutics practiced by theologians, eg. Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Ernst Fuchs, Gerhard Ebeling. Gradually, a trend of research divided into formal categories of visual theology and audio theology was developed. Theatrical play can be interpreted in relation to both categories. Affecting the senses of seeing and hearing, it is one of the sources of theological hermeneutics of cultural works (Kawecki, Wojciechowski, Żukowska-Gardzińska, 2011).

Thus I will apply a method of theological hermeneutics of a literary text in my analysis of *Angel in America*. The method was described by Rev. Prof. Jerzy Szymik, a theological methodologist and a theologian of literature. He concluded that a careful interest of theology towards texts of fictional literature allows theologians to cognitively penetrate the complex mystery of human existence and the existence of the texts. It also serves to establish dialogue between culture and faith in the context of religious, ethical and anthropological issues (Szymik, Wuwer, 2008, p. 44). In addition, Szymik pointed out that the basic problem of this type of hermeneutics is to verify in a detailed analysis whether or not a theology is "in" and speaks up from the pages of the given literary work. The method consists of four steps: hearing,

understanding, discussing, and assessing/evaluating. Hearing has no appreciation of the form and the content of a given literary text. Understanding refers to individual elements of a given theologizing reflection in a literary, historical, political or, possibly, other contexts which are relevant to the work. In the next steps, the content should be discussed and evaluated from the theological perspective. Then, as J. Szymik observes, after these three steps, the theology of literature appears, as a place of encounter with literary theology (existing, rooted in and extracted from the text) and interpreting (contributed, creating a hermeneutic context). The researcher believes that the ultimate effect of his method would be to expand the beauty of theology. This would enrich the method with a broader form and content that would be closer to life thanks to the discovery of literary-theological novelty (Szymik, 2007, p. 129-160; Szymik, 1996, p. 39-40). The final conclusions on four methodological steps encourages to the reflection essential for modern theologians, namely what are the pastoral implications of theological hermeneutics. It appears that the analysis of "Angels in America" may lead to such conclusions which can influence the development of theological, literary and historical-cultural studies on gender issues.

### **1. Similarities between the prophet from *Angels in America* and the Biblical prophets**

Before discussing the similarities between Biblical prophets and the protagonist of Kushner's play it seems vital to present briefly the prophet from *Angels in America*. Prior Walter is a young, over 30-year-old New Yorker who seems to be in control of his life. He is an atheist who comes from a Christian family of British origin back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. According to Jean E. Howard, "with this lineage, he should be the 'unmarked' American inside, the one who belongs, the one not marked by ethnicity, race, or religion as marginal or eccentric. But Marked he is, both by his sexuality, we infer, means that the unbroken succession of Walters will cease with him, and marked by his disease, the wine-dark lesions that spread across his body" (Howard, 2012). Prior Walter stands out with his ironic sense of humour and elegant style. At the beginning of the play, Walter informs his partner, Louis Ironson that he suffers from AIDS. After some time Ironson leaves Walter. This events destroy Walter's world and crushes him as a human being. He loses his joy of life and becomes a wholly different person. Mentally, he gets dragged down into hell. According to Prior Walter, one of the signs of his appalling physical and mental condition is some kind of feeling of contact with supernatural sphere. As it turns out, the feeling is not a figment of his imagination. It is a real experience which initiates his dialog with an Angel and his role as a prophet. In the course of the play, Walter discovers his vocation and struggles with his mission. He tries to define his role in history and society. Finally, at the end of the play, he understands common and individual dimension of the prophecy he has to proclaim to other people.

It seems that Prior Walter experiences very dramatic happenings which transform his whole perception of life. And in this situation, he receives a prophecy. He is called to be a prophet and to some extent, he is similar to the prophets form the Holy Bible.

Prior Walter embodies several features inherent to the biblical image of the prophet. The overall image is based on the following characters from the Old Testament: the four Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel) and the Twelve who are also called the Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum,

Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) (Pikor, 2012, p. 503-504). Firstly, Prior Walter's calling follows the same structure as that of the biblical prophets: 1) he is called to receive a prophecy given by an angel to the whole world; 2) he is resistant to this; 3) then, there are the signs about the supernatural assistance, for example, the Angel's voice and the open burning book apparition; 4) finally, there is one more sign which confirms the vocation; namely Walter's spiritual assumption and participation in Heaven.

Secondly, the prophet from *Angels in America* receives a message in the manner typical of biblical prophecy: audio, visual and audiovisual in a mystical way (Duda, 2012, p. 495). Walter gains ecstatic elation to which his body and psyche react. He is physically turned on. He feels embraced by a supernatural reality. From a certain point of view, he spontaneously submits to the inspiration. He starts preaching and he is both genuine and persuasive in his prophetic activity.

Thirdly, there is the word's content. What Walter gets may be defined as similar to the biblical prophecies (Pikor, 2012, pp. 501-506; Duda, 2012, pp. 494-496). The message comes from the supernatural world and is delivered by a being essentially higher than the man, i.e. an Angel. What is more, the news is intended for everybody as it relates to the present and to the future. It is a kind of advice about the life of individuals, societies and generally people around the world. The recipients of the message need a prophet to lead, guide, advise them, and to create a community. It should be noted that all of the features appear in the biblical cases of prophecy in the Old Testament.

Finally, Walter acquires a social position characteristic of biblical prophets in the Old and the New Testament, including Jesus Christ as a prophet (Pikor, 2012, pp. 501-506; Duda, 2012, pp. 494-496). Like them, he plays a peripheral or central role depending on his relationship with others. On the one hand, he feels lonely and lost. He belongs to a group of people suffering from AIDS who feel ostracized by some part of the American society of the 1980s. On the other hand, he represents a social group of young Americans who experience life in tough times. Just like the prophets from the Holy Bible, Walter becomes a symbolic voice of the oppressed (in the Kushner's play these are people suffering from AIDS). Prior embodies the conscience of political power. He makes certain moral demands on American Republican politicians and society and is a proclaimer of a new message. As a result, he becomes a *prophètes* (from the classical Greek: προφῆτες) - the one who solemnly declares to people what he has received by inspiration, concerning future events, and in particular those that relate to the cause, the kingdom of God and to human salvation. Prior is a teacher who matured in his role and, a defender of social justice. His mission consists in communicating the mystery of a renewal.

However, apart from the similarities, there are several significant differences between Prior Walter's image and the prophets from the Old and New Testament.

## **2. Differences between the prophet from Tony Kushner's play and prophets of the Old and New Testament**

Despite several similarities between the Biblical image of a prophet and the prophet from *Angels in America* certain differences should be emphasized. The main one is

that Prior Walter is a thirty-year-old New Yorker who is not a follower of any religion. He is gay and suffers from AIDS. These facts are the key features which define his non-canonical image as a prophet.

These differences imply several observations. Kushner seems to suggest that the prophet does not have to be a person living in Biblical times. He or she might live contemporarily in a city such as New York. Therefore, New York City may be interpreted as a symbol of any place of the Western civilization or even any place in the whole world. In other words, the prophecy is not a reality of the ancient history, but it may happen to anybody in any time. Thus a universal nature of prophecy is highlighted in the play by the presentation of Prior Walter's life and his relationship with the supernatural sphere.

Furthermore, Prior Walter's image accentuates the present position of non-heteronormative persons in theological and religious debates. Tony Kushner as a playwright suggests that the mission of a prophet may be given not only to a faithful, religious Catholic or a representative of other religion but also to any person. The mission can be offered to a man with non-heteronormative gender identity. Thus, Kushner's approach revises the position of LGBTQ persons in the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. For ages the Church has been preaching that homosexual activities are sinful. It was especially articulated in the context of the sexual revolution of the 60s and 70s of the 20th century in western Europe and the United States and clearly manifested in Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter *Humanae vitae* from 1968 and John Paul II's *Veritatis splendor* from 1993. The reaction of these two popes to the sexual revolution of the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was seen as a strong disapproval of any other sexual practices except for the ones between a man and a woman united in the sacrament of Matrimony. The view of John Paul II was further emphasized by a document *Homosexualitatis problema. Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, issued in Rome by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1986, signed, among others, by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI since 2013). The document signaled the necessity of offering care to homosexuals as part of expressing love to wrongdoers and the condemnation of sin. A moral estimation of sexual activity with another person than a spouse did not change in subsequent documents. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (first published in 1992) recommends treating non-heteronormative people with 'respect' and 'sensitivity'. Yet alongside these recommendations, it stresses that 'tendencies' of non-heteronormative people are 'objectively disordered'; what is more, a homosexual activity (just as a heterosexual activity outside marriage) – according to the current Church teaching – is thought to be a sin so that active homosexuals are not permitted to receive communion (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1992, no 2358).

Pope Francis, in his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* from 2016 teaches that “every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while every sign of unjust discrimination is to be carefully avoided, particularly any form of aggression and violence” (Pope Francis, 2016, no. 250). The pontiff quotes a passage from *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992). There was also a note stating that “basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that ‘homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.’ They are contrary to the natural law.

They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1992, no. 2357). “The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible.” (no. 2358). In the next point Pope Francis adds that “homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection” (no. 2359). Pope Francis seems to emphasize the challenges and suffering homosexual people have to face and encourages all members of the Church to respect, sympathize and show sensitivity to them. He also condemns any form of discrimination towards them and calls them to “fulfill God's will in their lives” (no. 2358). Francis is clearly an advocate of inclusion, integration, pastoral care and accompanying spiritually the people experiencing their own gender identity (Wooden, 2016).

It should be noted that Francis' thought refers to the earlier Catholic documents. For example, during the pontificate of John Paul II published a document which asked “the bishops to support, with the means at their disposal, the development of appropriate forms of pastoral care for homosexual persons” (Congregation to the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986, no. 1). This letter, addressed to all the bishops of the Catholic Church, was entitled *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*. It was signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at that time prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The letter gave instructions on how the clergy should deal with, and respond to, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. There was a will to cooperate with the LGBTQ persons, but at the same time no change in the moral teaching was introduced. The document emphasized the following: “Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder” (no. 3).

Thus, the Catholic pastoral magisterial thought on the LGBTQ people has been changed slightly but without any moral evaluation of non-heteronormative sexual activities. According to the teaching of the Church, among homosexuals there are always people who may need pastoral care and require some kind of spiritual assistance and guidance especially if they grew up in Catholic faith. In this context, it must be noted that Tony Kushner presents a completely different view in *Angels in America*. Prior Walter, the play's main protagonist, does not seem to be in need of pastoral care from any Church minister. He is an atheist who became a prophet-priest. As an individual he presents his teaching independently of any human or institutional Church's regulation. He offers the revealed content he has been given and this is the entirely new kind of relationship between a man with non-heteronormative gender identity and the Catholic Church.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper, Prior Walter's image as a prophet was compared to a traditional representation of biblical prophets taking into account the similarities and differences between them. As it has been presented above, the image of a prophet from *Angels in America* offers a new vision of the status of the LGBTQ people towards the Catholic Church and her Magisterium. Based on the play, non-heteronormative persons are no

longer the people in need of pastoral care. With their deep life experience, they may become the messengers of a specific revelation; they teach and enrich society with their diversity. As it seems, the key to Prior Walter's action is his independence from any religious system or the Church. It may be concluded that he represents a holistic and humanistic view of a prophet which interacts with Kushner's artistic image of Angel, Heaven, and God.

As an individual Walter can be discussed in the context of the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on gender. This debate implies an idea of some development in the Church's thought and practice. The appreciation of the rich and sometimes dramatic life experience of LGBTQ people may result in a reduction of ingrained heteronormativity in the Catholic Church as a religious institution. Consequently, the gender diversity will be able to be more supported by the religiosity which will less related to prejudice against sexual and gender minorities, and not support only gender or sex binary (cf. Toorn, Pliskin, Morgenroth 2020, p. 160-165). The discovery of this perspective of the LGBTQ people's interpretation seems to be a chance and a task for the institutional and hierarchical Church to gain a deeper recognition and understanding of the social and theological value of gender diversity in society.

Giving LGBTQ people a louder voice on their faith experience in the discussion on gender issues in the society and the Catholic Church, in particular, listening to that voice and understanding it by the clergy and laity may improve the situation of non-heteronormative persons in the Church and change the relationship between them and people of different gender identities for better. Subsequently, it will positively affect the promotion of equality in theology, widening the ecclesial community, social dialog, engaging faithful LGBTQ persons to participate in Church practices, policies, and ceremonies. It may be interpreted as realizing Pope Francis' postulate of inclusion and integration of people experiencing their own homosexual or other gender identity. As it was noted in an article *I'm Gay and I'm Catholic: Negotiating Two Complex Identities at a Catholic University* by Robbee Wedow, Landon Schnabel, Lindsey Wedow, Mary Ellen Konieczny "Reinterpretation among those who integrate gay and Catholic identities could be understood as informal "lived" theology being done in conjunction with, but also in distinction from more formal debates among professional theologians" (Wedow, Schnabel, Wedow, Konieczny, 2017, p. 290). Thus, these proposals of theory and practice in the Church do not have to be assessed as idealistic and utopian. In the paper *I'm Gay and I'm Catholic*, the above-mentioned researchers claim that an integrated non-heteronormative identity is possible in society or institutions such as a Catholic university (p. 298-303). The success of this assumption depends largely on the support of social groups in which LGBTQ people function. The attitude of society members may develop and open to gender diversity, e.g. thanks to the texts of symbolic culture, such as *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner. David Blazar proves it by using "performance pedagogy" to help students understand LGBTQ issues (Blazar, 2009, p. 77-84).

It appears that the original, non-canonical and non-traditional approach from a symbolic cultural text of *Angels in America* leads to several conclusions. The theatrical play could be a creative opportunity for theologians and other experts interested in cultural, gender and theological questions. It may be interpreted as an inspiring way to learn about the theological questions of people in the second half of the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century. After all, culture can be legitimately



considered a theological source and a *locus theologicus* - a metaphorical place where theology takes its inspiration for researchers. They could be drawn to the pastoral potential of the play and to other cultural texts presenting a non-traditional and non-canonical theological point of view to get to know, understand, discuss, and answer the current individual and social theological issues.

### **Acknowledgements**

I acknowledge Rev. Sebastian Wydrowski (MA, STB, JCL) and Anna Olkiewicz-Mantilla (PhD) for proofreading this article.

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