

John C. Stephens. *Between Three Worlds: Spiritual Travelers in the Western Literary Tradition.* Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2023. 154 p. ISBN: 9781666758733. Paperback: US\$ 25

Reviewed by PATRÍCIA CALVÁRIO
 Université Catholique de Louvain
 patricia.calvario@uclouvain.be

This book explores the theme of the spiritual journey in Western literature, from the Middle Ages to the Modern Period. The author defines a spiritual journey as the quest for the *summum bonum*, the ultimate reality that fulfils the human desire for knowledge and love.

Stephens classifies the spiritual journey narratives into theological, mystical, mythopoetic and allegorical. Through this framework, he analyses the works of Augustine, Peter Abelard, Margery Kempe, Swedenborg, Hawthorne, Kafka, Hermann Hesse, and C.S. Lewis. The aim is to reveal how they handled their ardent quests to connect with the divine, to which they have equated the “ultimate end”.

The book begins with a preface that clarifies the main concepts –*Summum Bonum* and the spiritual journey–, outlines the work’s goals, and places the subject in context while addressing its complexities, particularly in relation to the modern period, during which literary narratives express a critical stance towards the fundamental values of Christianity.

The book includes twelve chapters. The first one, an introduction (pp. 1-14), begins by demonstrating that the idea of a spiritual journey was already present in Palaeolithic religious expressions, such as shamanism. The phenomenon of shamanism is also a characteristic of contemporary indigenous cultures, which include cosmological journeys of the soul. Moreover, the concept of journey is reflected in rites of passage and pilgrimages, which can be geographical, metaphorical, or both. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, for instance, uses the concept of pilgrimage as a metaphor to describe his journey to God (p. 12).

Chapter 2 (pp. 15-26), titled *The Spiritual Journeys of Prophets, Sages and Philosophers*, explores the journeys of Siddhartha, Zoroaster, Muhammad, Pythagoras, Abraham, Jesus, and Paul. These journeys illustrate that their goals could vary significantly. For example, Siddhartha sought enlightenment, Pythagoras pursued spiritual wisdom, and the Hebrew prophets were commissioned by God to travel across the land. Paul and Zoroaster undertook missionary work, while Jesus is described as a “spiritual traveller who traversed the cosmos to provide salvation for humanity” (p. 23).

Chapters 3 and 4 (pp. 27-52), titled *Augustine and His Confessions* and *The Many Misfortunes of Peter Abelard*, respectively, examine Augustine’s and Abelard’s personal

quests to find God, which Stephens designates as theological journeys. In his autobiographical writing, Augustine employs the metaphor of a journey or pilgrimage, with the concept of *summum bonum* as the ultimate goal of his spiritual journey. As for Abelard, he focuses on his “misfortunes” (p. 44).

Chapters 5, *Margery Kempe, the Mystical Pilgrim*, and 6, *The Occult World of Emanuel Swedenborg* (pp. 53-75), are devoted to two distinctive examples of what Stephens designates as mystical journeys, each offering a perspective on the quest for the divine. The first is the spiritual journey of the medieval laywoman Margery Kempe (1373-1438), whose autobiographical work, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, chronicles her intense spiritual experiences, including visions, revelations, and divine encounters. The second is the eighteenth-century journey of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Swedish philosopher, theologian, and mystic, whose *Heaven and Hell* presents his visionary experiences of the afterlife and detailed accounts of the spiritual world. Both authors claim to have been divinely inspired visionaries, receiving direct revelations from God. In these chapters, Stephens examines how their writings, while separated by centuries and different cultural contexts, reflect the personal journeys of spiritual travellers who sought to transcend the earthly realm in pursuit of divine love and truth.

In Chapter 7, titled *The Mythopoetic Journey: Medieval and Classical Texts* (pp. 76-86), Stephens explores the concept of the mythopoetic journey, a third distinct category of spiritual journey. These journeys often depict the voyages of gods and heroes, conveyed through the mediums of poetry and mythology. Stephens aims to identify the underlying features of the mythopoetic journey by comparing two medieval Christian narratives – *Sir Orfeo* and Dante’s *Inferno* – with their classical counterparts – Ovid’s story of Orpheus and Eurydice and Virgil’s *Aeneid*. By analysing the similarities and differences between these works, Stephens seeks to clarify some of the key elements that have shaped the mythopoetic journey in the history of Western literature.

In Chapter 8, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory in Medieval Christianity* (pp. 87-98), the author examines a range of narratives that describe mythopoetic journeys to heaven, hell, and purgatory, with a particular focus on themes of “sin” and moral concerns. Stephens discusses works such as Chaucer’s *The Parson’s Tale*, the visions of St. Fursey, *Drythelm’s visit to Purgatory* as narrated by Bede, *St. Andrew’s journey to heaven*, the *Purgatory of St. Patrick*, and the *vision of Tundale*.

Chapter 9 (pp. 99-111) focuses on *allegorical journeys in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Era*. The author examines the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood*, the medieval poem *The Pearl*, William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, and John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The author aims to highlight that there is a common theme in these stories: following Christian principles leads to salvation and the attainment of the *summum bonum*. This optimism contrasts with the “spiritual pessimism” of Hawthorne and Kafka, explored in Chapter 10, titled *Descending into the World of Spiritual Pessimism: Hawthorne and Kafka* (pp. 112-124).

Finally, in Chapter 11, *The Spiritual Journey Re-envisioned: Hermann Hesse and C.S. Lewis* (pp. 125-137), Stephens analyzes the efforts of Hesse and Lewis to reformulate or reinterpret Western spirituality by introducing new symbols and religious ideas that address the questions or crises of faith of their time.

The book, *Between Three Worlds: Spiritual Travelers in the Western Literary Tradition*, concludes with a comprehensive summary of the key themes explored in each chapter. By examining how spiritual travelers in Western literature navigate between the physical, metaphysical, and allegorical realms, Stephens highlights the human quest for meaning, transcendence, and the ultimate good. This work not only sheds light on the richness of spiritual narratives in Western literature but also invites readers to contemplate the relevance of these journeys in contemporary contexts.