


Łukasz Tischner  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8640-9648>
Jagiellonian University
lukasz.tischner@uj.edu.pl

The Varieties of Religious Experience in Józef Wittlin's *The Salt of the Earth*¹

Abstract: The aim of the article is to present the individual and intense experience of sensing the world in religious categories, an account of which can be found in the novel *The Salt of the Earth*. The term “religious experience” comes from William James. The author of the article first mentions the interpretative difficulties connected with structural irony, which calls into question some of the statements verbalized in the novel. Taking into account this complexity, he points out four elements that justify discussion of a religious experience in *The Salt of the Earth*. First, he points to the title, which evokes a religious perception of the world, and assumes a response to a calling that comes from God. Second, he refers to the *Prologue* (deprived of structural irony), which introduces the theme of war as blasphemy. Third, he analyses those passages in which the narrator shortens his distance from Piotr Niewiadomski's point of view and approvingly accepts the magical interpretation of natural phenomena. Lastly, he refers to the Christian-Orphic-Hutsul theme of the immortality of the soul and contact with the dead.

Keywords: Józef Wittlin, novel, religion and literature, structural irony

Much has been written about *The Salt of the Earth*, and it appears that there is little room for the uncovering of any new dimensions of the novel. Józef Wittlin's religious journey has also been the subject of scholarship, so my reflections may seem superfluous.²

¹ This text was presented at the conference *Józef Wittlin – pisarz kulturowego pogranicza* (“Józef Wittlin: A Writer of the Cultural Borderlands”), which took place on May 29, 2015, at the Catholic University of Lublin. Originally published in *Konteksty Kultury* 2015, vol. 12, no. 4) (the Polish title: “Odmiany doświadczenia religijnego w *Soli ziemi* Józefa Wittlina”).

² See, among others, the following articles: E. Kosakowska, “The War as a Myth: The Analysis of a Development of the Religious Imagery in Joseph Wittlin's *The Salt of the Earth*” [in:] *Between Lvov, New York, and Ulysses' Ithaca: Józef Wittlin. Poet, Essayist, Novelist*, ed. A. Frajlich, New York–Toruń 2001; R. Zajączkowski, “Spotkanie z oddalenia i na piśmie. O niektórych wątkach z listów między Józefem Wittlinem i Romanem Brandstaetterem” [in:] *Etapy Józefa Wittlina*, ed. W. Ligęza, W.S. Woław, Kraków 2014; R. Zajączkowski “malutki kościółek.” *Zarys literackiej*

However, I would like to demonstrate that there still is room for new scholarship on the novel. My proposed reflection on the different forms of religious experiences in *The Salt of the Earth* can reveal an essential trait of Wittlin's experience of the world.

Before I begin, a few disclaimers are necessary. First, the topic that is of interest to me is "religious experience." I have borrowed this term, which is burdened by a certain one-sidedness,³ from William James, who, regardless of the matter of the objective veracity of religious experience, analyzed "**the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine**" (emphasis by William James).⁴ I would like to describe embodied, individual experiences of the world in religious categories, which I will try to read from the pages of the book. I will note the elements of the world presented in Wittlin's work that are motivated by an attitude of confidence (e.g. orientation of a will and not solely a cognitive-rational mindset) on the part of the narrator or the novel's protagonists with regards to divinity conceived of as a certain absolute good.⁵ Such a conceptualization assumes that I will look for signs of what we can refer to as, borrowing from Blaise Pascal, the religion of the heart. Thus I will only indirectly, and only if it is related to a specifically outlined perspective of "religious experience," refer to the following: religious imagery, Biblical themes and quotes, allusions to Greek mythology, the topic of the myth and ritual, etc.

Second, the greatest challenge that one faces while interpreting *The Salt of the Earth* is its omnipresent irony, which makes one doubt the veracity of the convictions expressed by the novel's protagonists or narrator. As is known, structural irony, which consists of the fact that the author takes the point-of-view of a simpleton, is dominant in the novel.⁶ What is the difference between verbal and structural irony? Meyer H. Abrams notes that:

teologii Józefa Wittlina" [in:] *Universitati serviens. Księga pamiątkowa ku czci Księdza Profesora Stanisława Wilka SDB*, Lublin 2014; R. Zajączkowski, "O *Soli* ziemi Józefa Wittlina" [in:] *Poezja i egzystencja. Księga jubileuszowa ku czci Profesora Józefa F. Ferta*, eds. W. Kruszewski, D. Pachonński, Lublin 2015; W. Kudyba, "Święty Franciszek Józefa Wittlina" [in:] *Etapy Józefa Wittlina*, op. cit.

³ Charles Taylor wrote about some of the limitations of this term (see: Ch. Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*, Cambridge 2002). He above all noted James' downplaying of the communal aspects of religious experiences and his mistrust of organized forms of worship.

⁴ W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York 1958, p. 42.

⁵ This volitional aspect of faith in James' writing has been accurately described by Hans Joas: "Faith is, then, an attitude towards reality sustained by a conviction that a stronger power is present. (...) Experience shows that arguments for or against do not have the same force as this certainty that emanates from a sense of presence. Faith cannot be instilled by proofs, but neither can it be refuted by them" (H. Joas, *The Genesis of Values*, trans. G. Moore, Chicago 2000, p. 49).

⁶ See: "Irony, definition" [in:] M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Fort Worth-Tokyo 1993, pp. 97-98.

Verbal irony depends on knowledge of the ironic *intention* of the fictional speaker, which is shared by both the speaker and the reader; structural irony depends on knowledge of the ironic intention of the author, which is shared by the reader but is not the intention of the fictional speaker.⁷

It is not always easy to decipher Wittlin's ironic intentions (structural irony). Piotr Niewiadomski cannot be considered to be a typical simpleton character often found in eighteenth-century philosophical tales. He is highly individualized and steeped in the world of the Hutsuls and in that of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The author not infrequently ridicules Piotr Niewiadomski, but more often he appears to use him as a device for ridiculing others. Let us recall a certain characteristic statement by Józef Wittlin himself:

He's a primitive man who has already become degenerate because of civilization. (...) In my view, he is not a fool. (...) I feel complete solidarity with his 'foolishness' and I often make him my *porte-parole*. He says everything that I myself don't want to say for me. War and the world generally are seen through his eyes; this is my own world. I use his eyes and his mouth just as we sometimes use children when we don't have enough courage to tell the world what we think of it. (...) Thus Piotr Niewiadomski, the humble protagonist of *The Salt of the Earth*, is not only my friend and host, and my savior from many instances of oppression, but he is also my child. He is my soul's child and I use him when I want my soul to speak. However, I do not idealize him; I know all his flaws and weaknesses well.⁸

Despite this "father-like" declaration, it is difficult to believe that the author, who hides behind an auctorial narrator, also shares the convictions ascribed to Piotr. After all, the narrator does make statements that reveal great distance from the "patient foot soldier." For example: "Not even Piotr Niewiadomski was so naïve as to suppose that lives were not lost in times of victory too."⁹ A further complication results from the fact that the auctorial narrator assumes the guise of an epic *oidos*, who speaks in the name of the entire community: the Hutsuls, but also in the name of the subjects of Emperor Franz Joseph (a broader perspective is presented in the *Prologue*). This guise introduces yet another mediation, which makes it difficult to unambiguously decipher the narrator's ironic judgments.

These rather obvious introductory remarks can allow me to fulfill the aim I would like to achieve. I plan on pointing out those elements of the presented world that contain a description of religious experience that is immune

⁷ Ibidem, p. 98.

⁸ J. Wittlin, *Pisma pośmiertne i inne eseje*, ed. J. Zieliński, Warszawa 1991, p. 353.

⁹ Idem, *The Salt of the Earth*, trans. P.J. Corness, London 2019, p. 231; all further quotes come from this translation.

to ironic negation and are described by the narrator/author with approval. For this reason, I will avoid the theme of Subordination which, to quote Witold Gombrowicz, is an “interhuman” imitation of religion that nips the impulses of the heart in the bud. I will also leave the wartime mythology of Mount Olympus on the back burner.

I will limit myself to four topics that, in my opinion, are the most significant.

Title and Motto

First of all, it is important to note the novel’s title and motto. The title of the first part of the unfinished trilogy, repeated in the motto borrowed from Matthew 5: 13, gives us an important guideline for interpretation suggested by the author. The title has been borrowed from Jesus’ address to His disciples, and is, as a matter of fact, an admonishment to persist in what is not of this world (in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, “salt” is later metaphorically identified with “light,” which is supposed to show not only good deeds but also the glory of the Father in heaven). Indeed, the titular phrase is supposed to refer to those who want to be Jesus’ disciples.¹⁰ The phrase “salt of the earth” used in the title also indirectly signals a conviction of creative subordination to God, a thought that Wittlin developed in his commentary:

I very much like the view of the protagonist of *The Salt of the Earth* (...) who believes that another’s life can only be taken away by the one who gave him that life in the first place. (...) Piotr Niewiadomski is convinced – and I fully agree with him – that the Creator gave him life with the aid of his mother, a Hutsul woman named Wasylina, and his Polish father.¹¹

Thus the title introduces a dimension of understanding the novel that evokes a religious view of the world; it assumes a response to the universal vocation coming from God.

¹⁰ Ryszard Zajązkowski, who has noted that the motto should be understood as “an appeal to wisdom in the Biblical meaning of the term directed towards all who desire peace,” is correct (R. Zajązkowski, “O *Soli ziemi* Józefa Wittlina,” op. cit., p. 428). This is consistent with the interpretation of this logion proposed by the renowned Biblical scholar Geza Vermes: “[T]he meaning implied in the Gospels is that the followers of Jesus are instructed to cultivate the spiritual values represented by salt which, like fire, will keep them purified and enable them to be of one mind and live peacefully with one another” (G. Vermes *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus*, New York 2004, p. 89).

¹¹ J. Wittlin, “Mały komentarz do *Soli ziemi*” [in:] idem, *Sól ziemi*, Wrocław 1991, p. 289.

Prologue

Some attention needs to be devoted to the *Prologue*, because it does not yet contain structural irony (although it does contain verbal irony and the guise of an epic *aidos*), so the statements of the auctorial narrator can be considered to be more direct. As a result of the Biblical style and hidden quotations, the *Prologue* introduces the theme of war as a form of blasphemy, which Ewa Kosakowska later wrote about in relation to the entire novel.¹² This is indicated by the telling comments about the Pilate-like typesetter who creates the word “war” out of several letters (*The Salt of the Earth*, pp. 28–29); an ironic comment about new recruits who “cast aside the former individual” (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 34 – in Polish, “dawnego człowieka” which can also be translated as “the old man”), which refers in a negative way to St. Paul’s doctrine about renewing oneself in the image of God; and, finally, a sarcastic sentence about progress in armaments: “The equipment sings the praises of its inventors. Glory to the men on high, on land and under water!” (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 38).

We can infer that blasphemy is suggested by two additional references to crosses that appear in the *Prologue*. Wittlin writes that “the most illustrious crosses and stars” will blossom on the breast the Chief of the General Staff (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 6). At first glance, this is merely an anticipation of his promotion, but the mythic style (in this case, suggested by the verb “to blossom”) allows us to perceive Wittlin’s preferred stylistic technique: that of the “literalization” of metaphor.¹³ If this is the case, these crosses and stars can evoke cosmic and religious meaning. The second time Wittlin refers to religious (and, more specifically, apocalyptic) meaning is indisputable. I am referring to the fragment in which the distraught emperor hesitates to sign a declaration of war: “The glittering cross on the crown of St. Stephen leant even farther, threatening to fall on the old man’s head” (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 26).

That the motif of the cross signals particular sensitivity to blasphemy is attested by Wittlin’s note from one of his unpublished notebooks: “Oversensitive with regards to anything that has something to do with the cross, crucifixion, etc., for example, ‘to cross one path,’ to cross, or to crucify.”¹⁴

The theme of war as blasphemy also derives from the fable-like stylization that presents the act of the emperor signing the declaration of war as a pact with the devil (the scratch and the drop of blood). In this case, however, we are dealing with irony, bolstered by the costume of the *aidos* epic.

¹² See: E. Kosakowska, “The War as a Myth: The Analysis of a Development of the Religious Imagery in Joseph Wittlin’s *The Salt of the Earth*,” op. cit.

¹³ For comments on the topic of the “literalization” of metaphor, see: Z. Yurieff, *Joseph Wittlin*, New York 1973.

¹⁴ Undated; the manuscript has been provided to me courtesy of Elżbieta Wittlin-Lipton.

As a side note, I would like to add that the theme of war as blasphemy could also be encompassed in the categories of possession by the “ditko” (the Hut-sul name for a devil).

The End of the World?

Most thought provoking are the fragments of the novel in which the narrator takes on Piotr’s perspective, but at the same time enters into dialogue with him, revealing his own convictions or simply views that are consistent with basic scientific knowledge. I mean especially the passages that imply the magical interpretation of natural phenomena. In this respect, the fifth chapter, which deals with the death of the pope, and the sixth, which is about the solar eclipse, are unique. In the fifth chapter, the narrator poetically describes nightfall:

The night was cool. The moon had not yet crept out of its lair, which was behind the hill, beyond Czernielica, though it was already sprinkling Topory with its silvery powder. The stars twinkled encouragingly at him, but they were minute and pale, flickering like the flames of tiny oil lamps. The moon bided its time; it was up to something that night (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 146).

Next, in *free indirect discourse*, the narrator reports Piotr’s stream of consciousness, which he responds to with his own commentary:

He sat down on the threshold and looked up at the stars. One of the stars broke away from its flock, crossed the entire breadth of the horizon and disappeared into the river Prut. (...) He had heard that falling stars were seen when someone was going to die. He laughed out loud – if a star fell for every peasant who snuffed it in the war, they would have to fall incessantly like a hailstorm. Soon there would be not a single one left in the sky. He did not know that there were more flaring and extinct worlds than there were soldiers in the service of His Imperial and Royal Majesty (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 149).

The narrator’s instruction on glowing and falling stars is supposed to call attention to Piotr’s naivety, but paradoxically it authenticates the magical conviction that falling stars foreshadow the death of a person. This is also evident in the fact that, slightly later in the novel, the premonition that the moon is “determinedly hatching something” (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 153) is repeated by the narrator, who ties its late arrival to the death of the pope in the distant Vatican. In this case, it is the narrator, not Piotr, who presents a magical interpretation of natural phenomena, which are seen as God (or the gods) speaking in response to the moral condition of the world. This superstition can be related to the guise of the epic *aoidos*; nonetheless, at this point Wittlin does not use structural irony.

The sixth chapter describes the solar eclipse, which the Hutsuls, not knowing its true causes, consider to be an omen preceding the end of the world. It seems that the basis of the entire chapter is a comical *quid pro quo*. However, the narrator weakens the effect of structural irony by confessing that:

The sun was extinguished almost completely, and the world went dark, as if people's eyes were veiled in mourning crepe. Fear fell on the whole of Pokuttya, although many Hutsuls knew that it was a solar eclipse. Knowing the astronomical fact that the moon is intruding between the earth and the sun does not ward off that fear of sudden, unexpected darkness rooted deep in the soul, any more than the biological interpretation of the phenomenon of death diminishes our dread. It is pointless to explain to the dying that the disintegration of proteins in their bodies is caused by enzymes, that the putrefaction of the corpse is merely the passive decaying of proteins, and that the poisons forming in the corpse are the product of this decay. Not even a naturalist, when dying, is consoled by well-known certainties, and in the last moments of consciousness he does not reassure his family with the principle he has asserted throughout his life, that 'nothing in nature is lost' (*The Salt of the Earth*, pp. 167–168).

Under the influence of the eclipse, something like a *mysterium tremendum*, Piotr experiences a conversion and kneels, begging God for mercy. After this fragment, the narrator's quasi-theological comment appears: "The Creator graciously listened to the prayers of this poor Hutsul and for the last time, truly the last time, he forgave the sins of the world. And just as suddenly as it had fallen, the darkness began to retreat and gradually the world became visible again" (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 171). Of course, it sounds ironic. I would like to note the surprising apposition: "truly the last time." How are we to understand this? It is easy to decipher the explanation that "the Creator graciously listened," because this can be considered as a meteorological comment. Nonetheless, the apposition emphasizing the limitations of this forgiveness can no longer refer to atmospheric phenomena. Should we assume that the author shares his omniscience at this point in a non-ironic way, thus suggesting that God will turn away from the world under the influence of the course of wartime incidents? The pessimistic image of the fate of the foot soldiers who fall into the clutches of the priest of demonic Subordination makes us suppose that the "new creation" will lose its soul, and at the same time move towards eternal perdition.

This hypothesis is confirmed in the last scene of the novel, in which Piotr as a "new man" created in the image and likeness of the gods of Subordination tries to say a prayer, but cannot do so because he cannot move his hand: "He wanted to raise a hand, but he could not do so. It lay dead on the seam of the Imperial trousers, as if paralyzed by Bachmatiuk's words" (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 318).

The Immortality of the Soul

Finally, I will present the last observation, which deals with the Christian-Orphic-Hutsul motif of the immortality of the soul and contact with the dead. We can find the most on this topic in the eighth chapter, which contains the moving fragment about the soup that lures Piotr's young mother from the netherworld. There had previously appeared references to Piotr's soul as being "heavy" and "overburdened" (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 78) and, upon receiving a summons to an army commission, feeling solidarity with the entirety of creation, particularly with the dog Bass, which "was also recalling former upsets, perhaps from a former existence, but he was not barking at the war any more" (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 79). After a moment, however, the narrator weakens the suggestion about the animal's metempsychosis, adding that "[h]e might have had a toothache" (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 79).

Let us return to the eighth chapter, which begins with a discussion about the souls of Orthodox Jews that are forced to eat pork in the army; the narrator claims this will not go unpunished, because "[o]ne day the Emperor himself would answer to the Almighty for their tainted souls" (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 228). Without a doubt, this last warning is said by the narrator who distances himself here from the novel's protagonist, because Piotr was convinced that, despite their zealous prayers, Jews would go to hell (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 128). When thinking about the body and soul, which Piotr considered to be immortal (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 228), the scent of the consumed soup brings Wasylina Niewiadomska back to earth. Her surprisingly young face emerges from the army mess tin:

It was still a young, wrinkle-free face, as he barely remembered it from his childhood. He had never seen it with such clarity before. And that is what scared him. In other circumstances, he would undoubtedly have been very pleased. But why, after all these years, had this forgotten face appeared to him? What paths had it taken to make it all the way here, to Hungary, to find the troops? She became clearer and clearer to him (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 232).

Of course, this scene is psychologically motivated (recalling a childhood illness and the soup-medicine), but it contains something supernatural. The moment when the mother visits her son is not accidental. In the plot, Wasylina becomes something of a messenger from the netherworld. She appears right before Piotr loses his soul in order to save him. The novel's protagonist recalls the words of his mother who fed him when he was ill: "Eat up, Piotr, eat up, it will keep you alive!"

Afterwards, he thinks: "Keep me alive? Of course it will! The soup had saved him at the time. But what meaning did that have now? Could the Imperial soup also save you from death? Who knows? Was that why the Emperor feeds it to his soldiers, his children, every day?" (*The Salt of the Earth*, pp. 234–235).

The comment that appears immediately after Piotr's young mother vanishes suggests possible supernatural causes for her appearance: "In vain Piotr tried to recall her with all the forces of imagination he could muster. He closed his eyes. It was in vain. God alone knows what powers govern apparitions of the dead! An opportunity like that occurs once in a blue moon. If you squander it, that's your own fault" (*The Salt of the Earth*, pp. 234–235).

The results of my inquiry are far from conclusive. It is difficult to unambiguously describe what kind of religious experience can be ascribed to the narrator/author hidden behind the character of Piotr Niewiadomski. Without a doubt, the conviction that God has a particular vocation for every person, and the belief that life is sacred and the soul is immortal (a notion originating above all in Christianity, although Orphic and folk pagan elements are also clearly visible in his vision of the world and of the netherworld) are undoubtedly close to him. To borrow Charles Taylor's term, we can say that the author of *The Salt of the Earth* does not want to be a modern "buffered self," which depends entirely on the power of reason, establishes the significance of the things it encounters, and isolates oneself from what lies beyond the limits of his or her mind. He prefers to live in an "enchanted world," and to be a "porous self" vulnerable to the influence of impersonal forces and senses sympathetic ties with the cosmos.¹⁵ However, unlike the inhabitants of the "enchanted world," he is a skeptic (as expressed in the novel's pervasive irony), and deeply pessimistic. He seems to more frequently perceive the impact of impersonal forces as cunning of the demon ditko than as expressions of providential care. Does Piotr not ultimately lose his soul?

We can say that the religious experience in *The Salt of the Earth* is expressed above all as – to use William James' phrase – "the will to believe."¹⁶ However, this orientation of a will should not be interpreted in terms of consolation, *Feuerbachian* projection theory, but instead as a necessary condition of faith: openness to the reality that is accessible only as a result of previous commitment.¹⁷ This reality is usually manifested in a negative way, as an area of life that is mocked and subject to blasphemy.

Translated by Filip Mazurczak

¹⁵ Ch. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Mass.–London 2007, p. 28–41.

¹⁶ See: W. James, "The Will to Believe" [in:] idem, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Cambridge, Mass.–London 1979.

¹⁷ See: Ch. Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: Charles Taylor Revisited*, op. cit., p. 50–51.

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