

COAXING BETWEEN RELIGION AND LITERATURE

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Abstract

Religion creates and illuminates literature and literature expresses and exposes religion so they act as twins of the same family. Any student of religion cannot live indifferent towards literature and any man of letters can disregard religion. Literature may it be classical or romantic, may it belong to ancient or recent era of the human history, reflects some religious glimpses. Even the so called creators of secularist literature seem giving their work with some religious tint while obviously trying to produce a non religious piece of art. Touch any poet, read any novelist, study any modernist, assess any traditionalist none is found untouched with religion and none remains without expressing on spiritual aspect of life whether assertively or non assertively. Some literatures as produced by the proclaimers of transcendentalism in the west and the Sufism in the east stand purely on religious bases. Literature and the religion both help bring closer the humans from around the globe and so does the literature.

Keywords: religion, illustration, literature, ultimate Being, theme, appeal, Indebtedness,

Introduction

Study of religion and literature is as old as that of the human history. Man emerged on this planet with some sort of religion and that religion gave birth to literature, literature compatible to that religion. Human history advanced and so did the literature. With the passage of time diversity appeared and versatility developed in both of these fields and that development proved mostly harmonious and rarely acrimonious to each other.

Though the expression or projection of some sort of religious ideology is evident in every sphere of literature but poetry is the genre which best exposes such themes. Poetry is found mostly saturated with the spirituality and is the best tool of assimilating the religious dogmas.

Whereas literature of every age to some extent got infused with topics related to religious aspect of human life, over the last few hundred years the element of religion or spirituality in literature has become a subject of particular attention.

As a pertinent reference to this discussion can be presented the transcendentalism of the nineteenth century, which originally took its shape as a shoot from the stem of Unitarianism, and the literature that has sprung thereof have a very close kinship with religion.

Apart from that relationship, even when having a broader view of the religion and literature it appears that they are so closely associated to each other that discussion on any one of them separately could go unbalanced and if relationship between these two genres is not brought to light adequately the topic may suffer ambiguity.

Religion and literature are not only indebted to each other for their growth but existence as well. Religions can not grow without literature and literature can not flourish without the element of religion. Religion in literature creates anxiety and curiosity. It develops appeal and attraction and thus enhances value of the literature.

Moreover, both religion and literature, as elaborated in the pages that follow, have some commonalities in them which makes their kinship more firm and more factual.

1. Identical In Origin

A careful study of religion and literature reveals that they both take shape and develop from the similar sources. Religion defines the relation which man bears to ultimate Being. It is concerned with the substance which lies behind phenomena, and also with the duty which man owes to that ultimate Being, universal and eternal. It is also concerned with the questions what, whence and whither.

Literature, in and its final analysis, represents the same fundamental relationship as it seeks to explain, to justify, to reconcile, to interpret, and even to comfort and to console. The Homeric poems are permeated with the religious atmosphere of wonder, of obedience to the eternal, and of the acknowledgement of the interest of the gods in human affairs. A significant place is held by religion in Greek tragedy. A Divine Providence, the eternity, universality, and immutability of law, the inevitableness of penalty, and the assurance of reward represent great forces in the three chief Greek tragedians. Less impressively, yet with significance, the poems of Vergil are bathed in the air of religious mystery and submission. The great work of Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, is, of course, an expression of the human mind in its attempt to penetrate the mysteries of being.

The mythology, too, of the non-Christian nations of the north, as well as the literature of the medieval peoples, is concerned with the existence and the work of the gods. In Scandinavian mythology, literature and religion are too a large extent united.

2. Identity In Themes And Appeal

Not only do religion and literature spring from the same fundamental sources, but also they are formed and shaped by the same forces. They both have a constant appeal to life. They assume the presence and orderly use of the reason. They accept the strength of the human emotions of love, fear, curiosity, reverence, and they both presume and accept the categorical imperative of the conscience and the freedom and force of the will of man. Both gain in dominance, prestige, and usefulness as they are the more intimately related to life. The great themes of religion and literature are identical and are vital. Both deal with sin, its origin, penalties, and deliverance therefrom; love-the passion, and the will-its place and its limitations; righteousness, and the relation of men to each other.

In illustration of the identities of the themes of religion and literature, one may refer to Dante's "Divine Comedy," which is concerned with the passing from and through Hell, where live those who knew not Christ in the earthly life, or, if they knew him, refused to obey, through Purgatory, where dwell those whose sins are not mortal, and into the Paradise where dwell the righteous in an eternity of light and of love. The great poem of the Middle Ages is at once great literature and a certain type of religion. French literature is also pervaded by the religious atmosphere. The religious element in the system of Descartes-both philosophy in literature and literature in philosophy-and of his followers is marked, and from them later French literature drew religion and inspiration. This inspiration, be it said, was both emotional and intellectual. The whole field of modern fiction abounds in examples of the connection between literature and religion; Hawthorne significantly represents the more modern unity in America of the two forces, and among all his works *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Marble Faun* are in this respect most notable. In English fiction George Eliot exemplifies this unity, and of her works *Adam Bede* is an impressive illustration.

3. Similarity In Methods

Religion and literature adopt methods having a lot similar and little dissimilar, the most identical and the least unidentical. They stand for the value of the imagination; they represent the artistic, rather than the scientific, methods of interpreting life and phenomena. If theology, which is the science of religion, lends itself to definition and to rational processes largely, religion belongs to the realm of the sentiments and sensibilities-the heart, the conscience, and the will. Literature, too, likewise declines to enter the realm of the formal definition; it is the product of the imagination, and to the imagination it makes its primary appeal, especially in poetry and, to some extent, in noble prose composition. Neither argues or dogmatizes; both intimate, suggest, and seek to interpret; neither holds definite and precise intellectual judgements regarding things eternal, universal, or divine, but each possesses general beliefs and assurances respecting the divine and the eternal. Neither has a system, a scheme, but each has an intellectual interpretativeness and emotional sympathy with the personal in life and in being.

4. Literature's Indebtedness to Religion.

Religion contributes literature with so vast and so rich materials. The sacred books of religion not only themselves constitute great literatures but also provide materials for great literature. The translation of the Bible into Gothic by Ulphilas not only preserved the Bible, but also helped to create and to perpetuate literature. Luther's translation of the Bible and the King James' Version are not only themselves great literatures, but also have helped to form great literatures in modern life. German and English speech, as well as letters, have been made more pure, more intellectual, and more inspiring by these great translations. It may be also added that the sermons of Robert South and of Isaac Barrow (qq.v.) are themselves worthy pieces of literature and might be compared with Burke's Orations.

It is also to be remembered that the institutions of religion, as the monasteries and cathedral chapter houses, were, for a thousand years, the custodians of the most precious treasures of literature. The medieval period was dark and damaging to humanity's highest interests.

In times of war not only are laws silent, but also literature. It was the monks who preserved the manuscripts of ancient Greece and of Rome, copying and re-copying and commenting from the year 500 till the invention of printing. As the priests were astronomers, not only in Europe, but also in India, in order to fix and to preserve the feast and other holy days, so the monks of the Middle Ages in Europe, if not literary men themselves, were the guardians of the holy lamp of letters.

5. Illustrations

The religion which has exerted remarkable influence and made the strongest appeal to English and German literatures over the last two hundred years has been of two types. First one is the universal or natural and the second one distinctively Christian. It is the poetry that best exhibits the religious and spiritual features of any era and the same is true with the English and German poetry.

As illustration of the universal or natural type of religion, the one that relates itself to literature works of the three great poets, Pope, Goethe, and Wordsworth are usually preferred. The "Universal Prayer" of Pope, a famous passage in Goethe's "Faust," and the "Ode to Immortality" by Wordsworth are the most representative of all passages of the three.

But the spectrum of study on the harmoniousness and coexistence of religion and literature may appear narrower if the poets of the first rank like Browning and Tennyson are ignored, as their poetry represent refined nature of the Christian religion, therefore, the reference to their works is also included in this study.

We begin with the excerpts from pope's work showing his religious approach.

5.i. Pope

Pope's "Universal Prayer," dedicated to Deo Optimo Maximo, as appears from the very name of it, in first two verses declares;

Thou Great First Cause, least understood!
 Who all my sense confined
 To know but this, that thou art good,
 And that myself am blind;
 Yet gave me in this dark estate,
 To see the good from ill:
 And binding nature fast in fate
 Left free the human will."

And closes with the lines:
 To Thee, whose temple is all space,
 Whose altar, earth, sea, skies,
 One chorus let all being raise;
 All nature's incense rise!"

Between these two sets of verses are found petitions of a distinctive Christian character, as

Teach me to feel another's wo,
 To hide the fault I see;
 That mercy I to others show,
 That mercy show to me."

Teach me to feel another's wo,
 To hide the fault I see;
 That mercy I to others show,
 That mercy show to me."

5.ii. Goethe

The religious ideology of the same essence, although still more general, is found in Faust. In a passage which is taken by some as the most representative of Goethe's own thinkings on religion, Faust says:

The All-enfolding,
 The All-upholding,
 Folds and upholds he not
 Thee, me, Himself?
 Arches not there the sky above us?
 Lies not beneath us, firm, the earth?
 And rise not, on us shining,
 Friendly, the everlasting stars?
 Look I not, eye to eye, on thee,
 And feel'st not, thronging
 To head and heart, the force,
 Still weaving its eternal secret,
 Invisible, visible, round thy life?
 Vast as it is, fill with that force thy heart,
 And when thou in the feeling wholly blessed art,
 Call it, then, what thou wilt,
 Call it Bliss! Heart! Love! God!
 I have no name to give it!
 Feeling is all in all:
 The Name is sound and smoke,
 Obscuring Heaven's clear glow."

5.iii. Wordsworth

With greater eloquence and definiteness, a similar lesson is taught by Wordsworth. The teaching has reference to the immanence of divinity and also to the preexistence of the soul.

" Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
 The Soul that riseth with us, our life's Star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,
 And cometh from afar:
 Not in entire forgetfulness,
 And not in utter nakedness,
 But training clouds of glory do we come
 From God, who is our home:
 Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
 Shades of the prison-house begin to close
 Upon the growing Boy,
 But He beholds the light, and whence it flows
 He sees it in his joy;
 The Youth, who daily farther from the east
 Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
 And by the vision splendid
 Is on his way attended;
 At length the Man perceives it die away,
 And fade into the light of common day.
 Those first affections,
 Those shadowy recollections,
 Which, be they what they may,
 Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
 Are yet a master light of all our seeing;
 Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
 Our noisy years seem moments in the being
 'Of the eternal silence: truths that wake,
 To perish never;
 Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavor,
 Nor Man nor Boy,
 Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
 Can utterly abolish or destroy!
 Hence in a season of calm weather
 Though inland far we be.
 Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
 Which brought us hither.
 Can in a moment travel thither.
 And see the Children sport upon the shore,
 And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore."

It is noteworthy that religious fidelity in literature is not confined to the poetry by Pope, Goethe or Wordsworth, rather, the works of the greatest poets of the classical era gives forth lessons even more religious, and also more impressively Christian.

5.iv. Browning.

The poems of Browning embody a religion more Christian than is found in either Wordsworth or Pope. That God is a Divine Father, almighty and loving, and that Jesus Christ, his Son, is our Lord, are doctrines which embody both the statement and the atmosphere of Robert Browning. In an address made to God in "The Pope" Pontiff says:

" O Thou,-as represented here to me
 In such conception as my soul allows.
 Under Thy measureless, my atom width!

Our known unknown, our God revealed to man.
 Existent somewhere, somehow, as a whole;
 Here, as a whole proportioned to our sense.◆
 There (which is nowhere, speech must babble thus!),
 In the absolute immensity, the whole

Appreciable solely by Thyself.
 Here, by the little mind of man, reduced
 To littleliess that suite his faculty,
 In the degree appreciable too."

In other passages Browning speaks of "a need, a trust, a yearning after God." The sir is called "the clear, pure breath of God that loveth us." (Crowell's ed., vii. 203.)

The **divinity of Christ** is also a doctrine taught by Browning. In "Christmas Eve" Christ stands forth as-

" He who trod,
 Very man and very God.
 This earth in weakness, shame, and pain;"

In the coordinate poem of "Easter" Christ is likewise spoken of as "Thou Love of God." In other passages, too, is found a similar teaching.

" Believe in Me,
 Who lived and died, yet essentially
 Am Lord of Life."

" The very God I think, Abib; dost thou think"
 So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving, too."

" And thou must love Me, who have died for thee."

" Call Christ, then, the illimitable God."

" He, the Truth, is, too, the Word."

" The Great Word which makes all things new."

" The Star which chose to stoop and stay for us."

" That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
 Or decomposes but to recompose.

Become my universe that feels and knows."

These quotations could be expanded, but they are sufficient to prove the distinctive Christian message of one of the greatest of poets.

5.v. Tennyson.

Tennyson is not so definite in his teaching of Christianity as Browning. But Tennyson's greatest poems contain many passages which embody most direct Christian lessons, expressing as well, with an impressiveness which no other poet has ever attained, the lesson of the soul's immortality. Tennyson is; above all, the apostle of the immortal life. The argument for the life immortal, if an argument it can be called, arises from the infinity and the eternity of love, and also from the fact that even on the evolutionary hypothesis man is made by God. The essence of the creation is personal. God is immanent, not only in man, but in the universe. The union of all men in God creates brotherhood, and this union, also, evolves into righteousness and love. God is immortal love; God is also immortal life, and immortal life and immortal love belong to those who are in God. The evolutionary hypothesis was declared, and had come to be generally accepted in Tennyson's life-time. The last poems indicate his acceptance of evolution. His belief was that evolution would carry man, through God, unto perfection. He declares "Hallelujah to the Maker. It is finished. Man is made." Near his death he wrote, in "God and the Universe," "The face of death is toward the Sun of Life-his truer name is ` Onward."

The above illustrations on the relation of religion and literature, lack any reference to either Shakespeare or Milton. The reason is that in Shakespearean work there is hardly any account of religion. Shakespeare was, to a certain extent, impressed by the fundamental truths which constitute religion but it is also clear that his great inspiration springs from human, and not from divine, relationships. At the opposite extreme stands John Milton, who was far more a theologian than a religious poet. If Shakespeare represents the inspiration arising from human relationships, John Milton represents inspiration drawn from those dogmatic formulas which represent the skeleton, but not the life, of the Christian system.

It is apparently singular that the larger share of the illustrations used to present the relations existing between religion and literature are drawn from poetry. The singularity is, however, only superficial. For poetry is the highest and richest form and expression of literature; it represents the highest notes of the scale of thought, feeling, and imagination. Religion is the highest type of being, for it represents the relation of man to God and of God to man. Each, therefore, rises the highest in its own scale of being; each, therefore, becomes more clearly and closely akin to the other than are the other higher forces of humanity. They are related to each other far more intimately and constantly than can any type of prose literature be related to religion, either Christian or natural.

Conclusion

Religion and literature, as indispensable ingredients of human life, have much common in their birth and growth. The similarity in the seeds and soil of religion and literature make them require the same environment for their growth. Besides that, Religion and literature are so intertwined and so closely associated with human life that the study of any one of these excluding the other could prove meaningless and futile. Religion throbs as the heart of the literature, and literature works as driving force for the religion. Literature absorbs various religious ideologies and religion enhances appeal of the literature. Religion owes its survival to literature and in particular to poetry as poetry is the genre which best represents religion. Its rhythmic expressions best suit to the interpretation of the religious ideology as they specifically influence the head and heart of the reader. Every literature classical or modern, more or less, is saturated with religion. The study reveals that every notable poet has, intentionally or even unintentionally, given some sort of religious tint to his work and it is with the same tint of religion that poetry works as a medium to link man with almighty.

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