

## Religion And Literature

SURENDER KUMAR

MA(English Literature) B.Ed.,PGDY (Yoga),Contact no.9467169084

Email-skumarjangra29@gmail.com

Distt.Bhiwani (Haryana)127021

### Abstract

*Religion can be thought of as a set of institutions, a set of ideas and beliefs, or a lived practice (including the rituals, behaviors, and day-to-day life of individuals and communities)—all of which have complex relations with each other, and all of which are affected by and in turn affect literature (not least in the interpretations of scriptures). As a critical approach, literature and religion asks how these impulses compete, coordinate, or otherwise inform one another and other practices and traditions. At Washington University, scholars specialize in medieval culture and blasphemy; literatures of sin and confession; early modern drama and English religious life; early American religious culture and its impact on literary traditions; political theology and theory; narratives of secularization and the cultures of religion that challenge secularity; and, finally, the emerging relations among religion, philosophy and psychology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Beyond these multiple specialties, we are aided by close interactions with Religious Studies and the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics. Necessarily interdisciplinary, literature and religion at Washington University takes seriously the study of belief and disbelief, studying how each emerges from and shapes literary, political, and philosophical traditions.*

Keywords: Religion,

### Introduction

Religion and literature have so much common regarding their origin as they spring from the same fundamental sources. Religion stands upon the relation of man with ultimate being. It is concerned with the substance that lies behind phenomena, and also with the duty which man owes to this universal and eternal being. It is concerned, too, with the questions what, whence, whither. Literature, in reality, represents the same fundamental relationship: it seeks to explain, to justify, to reconcile, to interpret, and even to comfort and to console. The Homeric poems are pervaded with the religious atmosphere of wonder, of obedience to the eternal, and of the recognition 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 inevitability of penalty, and the assurance of some kind of reward represent great forces in the Greek tragedians. 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.

### Literature's Indebtedness to Religion

Religion provides literature with vast and rich materials. Its sacred books themselves constitute great literatures and also furnish 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, has 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 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 had been, for thousands of years, the custodians of the most precious treasures of literature. The medieval period was dark and damaging to humanity's highest interests as in times of war not only are the 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 until the invention of printing.

### **Early Modern English Literature and Religion**

One would be hard pressed to imagine a time in the history of the British nations when questions of religion were more central to the development of society and culture than the early modern period. Religious belief and practice were already at the heart of daily lives, both public and private, but the consequences of the Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century had such an enormous and direct impact that very few people on those islands would remain unaffected by it. Temporal and spiritual allegiances shifted; churches and liturgies were re-ordered. English replaced Latin as the language of prayer and Scripture, and reforms challenged long-established ways of understanding the bases of faith and the consequences of sin and spiritual failure. This was a turbulent era, full of debate, dissent, and contention on fundamental issues not only of life, but also of death and eternity. From the opening of Henry VII's reign to the death of Queen Anne, the realm witnessed a sequence of momentous religious and political events: the decisive break between the monarchy and the papacy; a succession of arresting changes to the religious regime; the proliferation of spy networks, plots of infiltration, and an unending process of international factionalizing; the establishment of a Protestant national Church; the formation of sectarian groups; civil wars and insurrections, and the great religio-political debates that followed in their wake. It was a time of danger and exile, of conspiracy and planned invasion, of war and bloodshed (both on the battlefield and the scaffold), but also of impassioned argument, of the genesis of faith communities, and of a multiplicity of visions testing key tenets of belief.

The relationship between these religious developments and the literature produced in English from the first Tudor sovereign to the last of the later Stuarts is profound and fascinating, and continues to constitute one of the most dynamic areas of early modern scholarship. Moreover, just as the era was one of the liveliest in Britain's religious and political history, so, too, it stands as one of the greatest periods of writing in English—a strikingly fertile age of literary innovation and creativity. As each chapter of this collection indicates, to a very great extent this literary output was deeply exercised by religious (p. xxviii) issues, not only because spiritual questions were central to the early modern sense of the world and the self, but also because theology and rhetoric, the very ability to give expression to thought, went hand in hand. The key controversies of the Reformation were focused on the power of the word, the agency of intercession, and the efficacy of the sacraments: should the Bible be given pride of place above tradition and priestly authority, and what did it mean to repeat Christ's words 'This is my body' over the bread of the Eucharist? These two central questions so often went straight to the heart of the undertaking of writing in the period: the power of language, and the function of the metaphorical imagination. Prose, drama, and poetry were deeply affected by the

theological debates which engaged tightly with the fundamental undertakings of writing itself from a host of differing perspectives. Furthermore, the interaction between literature and religion irrevocably shaped modes of textual production, circulation, and consumption throughout the period covered in this collection in constantly changing ways. The doctrinal disputes and intellectual energies of the era were given vent through the power of oral rhetoric in sermons, dramas, demagoguery, and polemical debate, and through the circulation of myriad written texts in manuscript and, primarily, print. Spirituality and textuality were intimately aligned.

In order to offer a firm historical basis for the subsequent discussions of literature and theology, this handbook begins with a section in which the hotly debated religious history of early modern Britain is set out in a clear and informative manner. The individual chapters in the section, proceeding in chronological sequence, analyse the events, doctrines, forms, and practices pertaining to each distinctive stage of the two hundred and fifty years under consideration. Nonetheless, at no point in the handbook's preparation has there been any wish to neglect, or deflect attention from, the critical controversies of interpretation which surround the subject of early modern English literature and religion. Contributors were given full rein to speak to and, where the need arose, to speak at variance with each other, giving telling insights into aspects of early modern culture and belief which continue to challenge scrutiny and analysis.

### **Religion And Literature in a Secular Age**

There is a long history of people exploring the relationship between religion and literature. We might go back to sacred texts from different traditions and think, for instance, about why there is such a vast array of literary forms in the Judaeo-Christian Bible. Or we might consider the role that religion plays in the literary tradition, from the clear Christian content of texts such as *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*, to the extensive engagement with theological motifs, symbols, and ideas that is such a striking feature of so many modern texts.

While there are many ways of telling a story about how religion and literature relate to one another, it is worth pondering why our thinking about this relationship continues to gather pace. The latter part of the 20th century saw the emergence of three major journals focused on this area—*Religion and Literature*, *Christianity and Literature*, and *Literature and Theology*—and interest has intensified further in the early years of the 21st century with the so-called “religious turn” in the humanities. If our modern western age is increasingly secular, as many would have us think, then why the ongoing interest?

One way of answering this question comes from the work of Charles Taylor, whose book *A Secular Age* (2007) has proved so pivotal for many scholars working in the humanities. Taylor argues that our secular age is not one in which religion has gone away but is, rather, an era characterised by the new position in which religion now finds itself. Whereas pre-modern western thought saw Christianity ensconced as the dominant ideology, our modern age is one in which religious belief is one option among many.

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Taylor's epic story of religion and secularity has come in for plenty of criticism, as one might expect of a work that tries to cover so much historical ground. But his basic premise about the pluralised context for belief in the modern age offers a valuable means of understanding the snowballing interest in the study of religion and literature. Literature has long been the most promiscuous of forms, covering any area of thought and experience with which a writer happens to be concerned. Since the emergence of literary studies in the late-19th century, critics have struggled to identify the precise content of the discipline, and they have frequently brought neighbouring fields of knowledge—history, psychology, philosophy, science, art, religion, and so on—into their reflections on literary form and language. The promiscuity of literature, and the literary criticism that accompanies it, might be said to epitomise our modern secular age. And it is in this setting that religious belief continues to play a major role, as it is routinely put into conversation with other ways of thinking.

We can see how Christianity sits alongside and butts up against other systems of belief in the novels of Charles Dickens. Critics have long debated whether Dickens should be thought of as a religious writer, and one can see why this question has proved hard to resolve. Dickens can be highly critical about parts of the church, and it is certainly not the case that his novels are written with pious ends in mind. But it is hard to think of another Victorian writer who quotes from the Bible and the Christian tradition more extensively. Many of the most poignant moments in his novels, from the death of Jo in *Bleak House* as he is led in a recital of the Lord's Prayer, to the climactic role given to ideas of atonement and resurrection in *A Tale of Two Cities*, are indebted to Christian thought. The sacred and secular are regularly commingled in Dickens's fiction. What we find in his work, as in so much modern western literature, is the myriad of ways in which the Christian faith jostles with other systems of belief.

### **Literature and Religion Faculty Experts**

Modern readers have lost their religious values. They don't have the wisdom to be able to obtain knowledge of life, comparing one view against the other. Moreover, the knowledge of life that we obtain from fiction is not of life itself but is knowledge of other people's knowledge of life. What adds to the problem is that there are too many books and the reader is confused. Only modern writers of eminence have an improving effect, otherwise the contemporary writers have an effect that is degrading. The reader must keep in mind two things – 'what we like', that is, what we really feel; and 'what we ought to like', that is, understanding our shortcomings. As honest men we must not assume that what we like is what we ought to like; and as honest Christians we should assume that we do like what we ought to like.

Majority of the people consider economic ills as cause of all the problems and call for drastic economic changes, while others want more or less drastic social changes. Both types of changes are opposed to each other but a common point is that they hold the assumption of secularization. Some want the individual to subordinate his interests to those of the state. But Eliot does not agree with these people. Eliot does not complain about modern literature because it is immoral or even amoral but because it instigates people to try out every kind of experience and not to stay back or miss any. A Christian reader should add to the literary criticism followed by the rest of the world. He should, in addition, apply ethical and theological standards to it."

*Eliot argues that "Contemporary literature as a whole tends to be degrading". He feels that one guard against the dangers of much of the contemporary literature at our disposal is*

*through an approach of wide-reading. "It is valuable because in the process of being affected by one powerful personality after another, we cease to be dominated by any one, or by a small number." Delving into the problem with contemporary literature more deeply, he surmises that "the liberal-minded...are convinced that if everybody says what he thinks, and does what he likes, things will somehow, by some automatic compensation and adjustment, come out right in the end...These liberals are convinced that only by what is called unrestrained individualism will truth ever emerge...Anyone who dissents from this view must be either a mediaevalist, wishful only to set back the clock, or else a fascist, and probably both."*

*Eliot believes that what sets modern day society apart from what has transpired in the past is that "There never was a time, I believe, when those who read at all, read so many more books by living authors than books by dead authors; there never was a time so completely parochial, so shut off from the past...it is more difficult today to be an individual than it ever was before." He sees a great vice prevalent in contemporary literature and society. He says, "the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over natural life".*

*Eliot says that readers today, particularly Christians, need to be acutely aware of two things - what they like, and what they 'ought' to like. "The two forms of self-consciousness, knowing what we are and what we ought to be, must go together..What I believe to incumbent upon all Christians is the duty of maintaining consciously certain standards and criteria of criticism over and above those applied by the rest of the world; and that by these criteria and standards everything that we read must be tested...the greater part of our current reading matter is written for us by people who have no real belief in a supernatural order...And a greater part of our reading matter is coming to be written by people who not only have no such belief, but are even ignorant of the fact that there are still people in the world so 'backward' or so 'eccentric' as to continue to believe." He feels that by applying Christian principles and standards to our literary choices (and I add in here musical, theatrical, tv and movies), we are in the advantageous position of being able to extract from it all what good it has to offer us. A great problem that a Christian should have with those who promote Secularism is, "they concern themselves only with changes of a temporal, material, and external nature; they concern themselves with morals only of a collective nature...but I think that we should all repudiate a morality which has no higher ideal to set before us than that." Secularism is a gospel of this world and of this world alone...It is simply that it repudiates, or is wholly ignorant of, our most fundamental and important beliefs."*

## **Conclusion**

Religion and literature spring from the same fundamental sources. Religion is 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 this Being, universal and eternal. It is concerned, too, with the questions what, whence, whither. Literature, in and its final analysis, represents the same fundamental relationship: it seeks to explain, to justify, to reconcile, to interpret, and even to comfort and to console. The Homeric poems are pervaded with the religious atmosphere of wonder, of obedience to the eternal, and of the recognition 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 in no small degree united.

1. *Helen Gardner, ed., The Faber Book of Religious Verse (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p 7*
2. *T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber Ltd.), pp 37-44 (p 38)*
3. *Bruce Toien, "T.S. Eliot's Spiritual Rebirth", DeKalb Literary Arts Journal vol. 10, no. 4 (1977), pp 37-45 (p 37)*
4. *B. Rajan, "The Dialect of the Tribe", in The Waste Land in Different Voices ed. A.D. Moody (London: Edward Arnold, 1974) pp. 1-14 (p 5)*
5. *T.S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature", in Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber Ltd.), pp 97-106 (p 100)*