

Glimpses of Religion in English Literature

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Abstract

Religion and the literature are the fields without frontiers. They are beyond the limits of time and place. They cannot be confined to any particular land or certain society. Their birth is as strange as their growth. There is so much common and so much curious in these two fields that even an ocean of words cannot encompass them. Anyhow an attempt is made in this research to establish the ground of commonalities in these most prominent fields related to human being and to demonstrate the glimpses of religion in the masterpieces of the distinguished English writers.

Keywords: Religion, Indebtedness, pope, Goethe, Wordsworth, Browning, Tennyson, Shakespeare, Milton

Introduction

Apparently religion and literature seem belonging to two separate fields, whereas, in the real sense they are so intertwined and so interdependent that they can be considered as the two organs of the same body. Every literature of the world is deeply saturated in its culture and literature. More appropriately it can be interpreted that literature is the body whereas religious is the soul. While having a deeper study of the literature and the religion we find their salient features as the same; they have the same origin, the same appeal and the same method of approach. This study is meant to discuss these features and disclose their basis of coexistence so as to have a better understanding of both of these fields. In order to be more elaborative pertinent pages pertaining the religious views of some outstanding poets have been cited. In the first part of this discussion we focus on highlighting the common features of religion and literature.

1. Commonalities of Religion and Literature

In the pages that follow a light is shed on salient common features among the religion and literatures.

1.1. Resemblance in the Origin of Religion and Literature

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. In Scandinavian mythology, literature and religion are to a large extent united.

1.2. Similarity in Appeal to Life

Religion and literature not only spring from the same fundamental sources and are formed by the same forces but also they both make an identical appeal to life. They both have appeal to motions and senses as 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 similar and are vital: sin, its origin, penalties, and deliverance there from; 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.

1.3. Identity in Methods of Approach

Religion and literature, in general, adopt methods that are very similar and compatible to each other. 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.

2. 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.

3. Elaborations

In order to give an elaborative tint to the above discussion, the works of some distinguished and scholarly poets are quoted, in the lines that follow.

In pretext to these illustration, it is noteworthy, that the religion that made the strongest appeal to English and German literature in the last two centuries has been of two types: first, *the universal or natural, and, second, the distinctively Christian*; and the poetry to which the appeal has been chiefly addressed has given back a noble response. In illustration of the universal type, the religion which relates itself to literature, we have selected three main poets; Pope, Goethe, and Wordsworth. The "*Universal Prayer*" of Pope, a famous passage in "*Faust*," by Goethe and Wordsworth's the "*Ode to Immortality*" are the most representative of all passages of these three. Moreover illustrations from the works of Tennyson, Browning and Shakespeare has duly been made to give a more elaborative and expansive touch to the topic.

3.1. Pope on Religion

At the first step at the elaborative stage we have a look at the views of Pope on religion as expressed in his famous "Universal Prayer" which is entirely dedicated to DeoOptimoMaximo, declares in its first two verses:

*'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."*

These extracts indicate that as concerns the religion, Pope, in fact, was "Slave to no sect" The same type in essence, although still more general, is found in Faust of Goethe.

3.2. Goethe on Religion

In Corliss Lamont words Goethe had "a vague pantheistic belief." His "Faust" is sometimes called *The Divine Comedy* of modern Humanism.

The *altruistic* philosophy of Goethe can be clearly understood through the study of the passage which is supposed, by some, to represent Goethe's own ideas of religion where 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."*

These line represent "a vague pantheistic belief" of Goethe.

3.3. Wordsworth and Religion

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."*

3.4. Browning and Religion

The teaching of the greatest poets of the last fifty years gives forth lessons even more religious, and also more impressively Christian. 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.

The Pontiff says in "The Pope" in an address made to God:

*" 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 *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 might be continued, but to avoid the boring length we take them as enough to prove the distinctive Christian message of one of the greatest of poets.

3.5. Tennyson about Religion

When we come to Tennyson, he is not found so definite in his teaching of Christianity as Browning, however, 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*. In Section 131, the last remaining section that precedes the Epilogue in his poem *"In Memoriam"* Tennyson champions man's *"living will that shalt endure."* In other words, the poet elevates man's ability to endure hardship by turning to the Lord, as he did, for spiritual support and guidance. Thus, there is a subtle style of *reconciling religion and the biological Type* in Tennyson's *"In Memoriam"*

*O living will that shalt endure
 When all that seems shall suffer shock,
 Rise in the spiritual rock,
 Flow thro' our deeds and make them pure,
 That we may lift from out of dust
 A voice as unto him that hears,
 A cry above the conquer'd years*

*To one that with us works, and trust,
With faith that comes of self-control,
The truths that never can be proved
Until we close with all we loved,
And all we flow from, soul in soul.*

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. 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.

3.6. Shakespeare on Religion

While discussing on the relation of religion with literature, it would be unjust to ignore Shakespearean expression on religion through the characters of his great artistic creations. Shakespeare was, no doubt, to a certain degree, impressed by the fundamental truths which constitute religion whereas his great inspiration he drew from human, and not from divine, relationships. It is quite obvious that forbidden Catholic doctrines surface curiously in his plays to enable dramatic action. The ghost of the elder Hamlet, as has often been noted, hails from purgatory.

*I am thy father's spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away.*

This Catholic view of *the afterlife motivates and underlies the action of the play*, though the Ghost's penance, presumably, does not include his Senecan exhortation to revenge.

Teasing references to *the sacrament of penance and related terms*—shriving, absolution, confession—run throughout Shakespeare's work, sometimes in unmistakably Catholic constructions. Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, for example, praises Camillo:

*I have trusted thee, Camillo,
With all the nearest things to my heart, as well
My chamber councils, wherein, priestlike, thou
Hast cleansed my bosom. I from thee departed
Thy penitent reformed.*

The passage, moreover, occurs in a play much concerned with sin, repentance, and, finally, forgiveness and redemption.

3.7. Milton and Religion

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.

Generally, Milton about religion is interpreted in the light of the views expressed through the Satanic rebel character of the '*Paradise Lost*', whereas, in my viewpoint he was not, by nature, a Satanic rebel seeking to overthrow a cause from without by proclaiming his *non serviam* and resorting to subversion and insurrection to achieve his ends. Rather, he sought always, as long as it remained possible to do so, to work for change and reformation within the framework of constituted authority. On more than one occasion over the course of his career, he had just cause to view himself in the role of an *Abdiel*, that *faithful seraph whose steadfastness in the face of rebellion*, the blind poet, was to have the Almighty praise in the words:

*Servant of God, well done, well hast thou fought
 The better fight, who single hast maintained
 Against revolted multitudes the cause
 Of truth, in word mightier than they in arms;
 And for the testimony of truth hast borne
 Universal reproach, far worse to bear
 Than violence: for this was all thy care
 To stand approved in sight of God, though worlds
 Judged thee perverse.* (PL,VI, 29-37)

These unending illustrations can be continued unlimitedly, as both religion and literature, are limitless fields, but to avoid the undue length of this paper we come to the final remarks.

It is noteworthy that in this research, the larger share of the illustrations used to present the relations existing between religion and literature has been drawn from poetry, as 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 prose literature.

Conclusion

The above discussion on religion and literature brings us to the conclusion that both of them are interdependent. Both of them took their birth simultaneously and both of them flourished gradually. We never see any spasmodic innovation in both of these fields. Literature and religion both pass through the same stages in the course of their life. They take birth, crawl and then get strength to rise and grow. Religion leaves a great impact on literature. No writer can go uninfluenced by some kind of religion or religious dogmas, whether positively or negatively. Intentionally or unintentionally, every writer expresses such thoughts in his work which reflect religious background. Religion prospers through literature and literature saturates religion. They enjoy harmonious and health coexistence when people understand them properly and places provide them pleasant atmosphere.

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