

Introduction

Throughout history, the Church has been cautious regarding literary works, having condemned and condoned, suppressed as well as supported works of art. Some writers have adopted a positive attitude towards literature, seeing it as a channel to convey the Christian vision. Others regard literature as hostile to Christian belief, misleading the faithful.

Rooted in the teaching of Paul, the early Church was clearly critical towards literature. Paul teaches that Christians should not compromise with worldly attitudes and values such as those propagated by pagan writings: 'Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever?' (2 Corinthians 6:14-15). However, Paul was a learned man, familiar with the ancient classics. During his speech delivered at the Areopagus in Athens, he referred to Cleanthes, Aratus and Epimenides, who was also critical of the people of Crete: 'For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."' (Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12-13). In some of his writings, Paul also alluded to Homer and Plato.¹

Be that as it may, the classical culture is fraught with contradiction regarding the function of literature. Plato had banned poets from his republic, a policy which Augustine approved wholeheartedly. According to Augustine, the poets 'composed fictions with no regard to the truth or set the worst possible examples before wretched people under the

1. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Literature: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), p. xi.

pretence that they were divine actions'.² However, Paul's speeches and Augustine's writing were steeped in Aristotelian rhetoric.

The attitude of early Christians towards literature was rather ambivalent and nuanced. Early Church Fathers such as Tertullian and Chrysostom were critical of classical literature and sought to minimise their influence within the Christian community. Augustine and Jerome were cautious but also positive towards pagan writings. Christian apologists could see the advantage of literature, with its beauty of expression, to spread the gospel message. Literature can serve to clarify and communicate abstract theological viewpoints. Thus, if people enjoy reading fiction and poetry, it makes sense to present religious truth in literary forms.

For C.S. Lewis, reading has always been a religious experience. Literary insight is like worship where he can transcend and experience himself as he truly is.

The first reading of some literary work is often, to the literary, an experience so momentous that only experience of love, religion, or bereavement can furnish a standard of comparison. Their whole consciousness is changed. They have become what they were not before. But there is no sign of anything like this among the other sort of readers. When they have the story or the novel, nothing much or nothing at all, seems to have happened to them.³

Writers during the Romantic period argued that the language of literature could inspire readers to devotion and piety. William Wordsworth believed that there is a close affinity between poetry and religion; thus his poems are infused with religious and spiritual symbolism. Writers during Wordsworth's time began to see the Bible as literature. In fact, Percy Bysshe Shelley held that the Scripture is revered more for its literary quality than for its spiritual value.

The 'Word' has always been important in Christian teaching. According to John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (1:1). Thus with 'God as author', there is a close connection between the verbal origin of the world and the world of texts. Christian literature can help to teach a

2. Quoted in McGrath, *Christian Literature*, p. xi.

3. Quoted in Lawrence Wood, 'Seeing with a Thousand Eyes', *The Christian Century* 122, no. 10 (2005), p. 7.

set of beliefs such as the Creed, doctrines and sermons. It can also help to inculcate values such as compassion, tolerance and forgiveness. The *lives* of saints, or hagiographies, have played important roles within the church in nurturing and inspiring the faithful. As the 'religion of the book', Christian faith involves extensive use of texts to communicate its message, educate its members and defend its beliefs. Hence, spiritual writings, as a form of literature, can also promote a way of life in accordance with the gospel vision and play a fundamental role in passing the tenets of Christianity from generation to generation.

This work explores the relationship between Christianity and Western literature, with a selection of authors representative of each epoch, from late antiquity, Augustine of Hippo (354-430); the Middle Ages, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321); the Renaissance, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) and John Milton (1608-74); the Romantic period, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834); and the modern era, Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-81) and Graham Greene (1904-91). Exploring the motif of the fall and redemption of humanity, this book examines the themes of creation, sin, suffering, forgiveness, hell, purgatory and heaven.

Augustine's *Confessions*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* were written specially to serve the needs of the Christian community. Each a product of its period, their writings all represent a high standard of cultural and scholarly excellence. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* and Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, though not specific to the Christian faith, have been profoundly influenced by Christian ideas, values, images and narrative. In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, the influence of Christianity is evident in their subject matter. Their novels also challenge and question Christian assumptions by portraying the conflict and tension between the priestly and prophetic understanding of the faith. Written in the modern period, these texts, while defending the truth of Christianity, are critical of the materialism, secularism and socialism prevalent in their societies.