

Christian Literary Studies

A discussion paper written for a conference in 2004 of the Christian Academic Network.

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Christian academics and teachers would agree that schoolchildren and students need help in approaching English literature or literary studies from a Biblical perspective. Many academics and teachers would admit to needing help too. This is an area where there are significant challenges to faith and understanding.

A. Some preliminary matters

Consider these related issues:

1. Many don't know where to look for help. There are many books and articles which have been written from a Christian perspective or one sympathetic to Christianity; there are indeed many people with expertise in the area who could help individuals or small groups (see below).
2. Many, both students and others, want an identifiable message, a safe and authoritative voice: 'the' Christian perspective, 'the' Biblical view. A difficulty is that this is an area where interpretative strategies have multiplied, and there is no such thing as 'the' Christian view. This makes the area suspect for many church people, and some populist recent work has reinforced this (see below).
3. Many don't know where this whole subject fits in relation to Christian discipleship, and indeed believe it to be irrelevant. Some take the pragmatic view that trotting out the expected answer (at whatever level) is all that is necessary. Few see the opportunities to develop an understanding of the world and humanity, the Bible and God, through wrestling with the ideas and analysis literary study puts before them.

One preliminary issue that may be discussed here is that there has been a shift of understanding within the church recently. It used to be felt that Science was the enemy of faith, but that is no longer the case. A recent newspaper article suggested that Richard Dawkins was one of the scientists who most influenced some people in *accepting* Christianity. The place of 'enemy of faith' has in some quarters been taken by Cultural Studies/Critical Theory/Literary Theory/Postmodernism, a complex of ideas and interpretative strategies too varied to admit of concise definition. So in a popular book, *Meltdown* by Marcus Honeysett (2002), the writer quotes with approval the aphorism that 'Postmodernism is long, fancy word for sin' (p. 93) and suggests that 'the assault on Christian truth is particularly potent in universities' (p. 104), going on to identify the discipline of English as 'a particular breeding ground for Postmodern theory' (p. 106). As a counterblast to 'corrosive' theory, he proposes naive Biblicism and assumes that 'absolute truth' is 'objectively' available from the Bible without any process of interpretation. The subject of Literary Studies is marginalised by Christians in a way that issues of science and faith are not.

Readers of *Meltdown* will divide readily into two camps. There will be those who think it is right and that young people need to be warned off such anti-Christian ideas as might feature in English Literature classes. (And they do, of course; English is no different in this from Economics or Biology, or any other subject in the school curriculum.) And there will be those who think that Christians ought to understand the world in which they live better, and ought to read the Bible more carefully and with greater literary sensitivity – or at the very least, learn to express their concerns more carefully. (A fine treatment of this kind of approach is Kevin J Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (1998)). An issue, then, for school kids, students and indeed academics, is that some in the church regard the very process of critical reading (of the Bible or anything else) as morally dubious or even sinful. Not everyone wants 'robust thinking' in this area because it has already been decided that such thinking is not fully Christian. So while we welcome every initiative to help students think Christianly about their courses, we fear that this might not be an invitation to creative engagement with their studies, which will lead to intellectual integrity and maturity, but to compartmentalisation on the one hand, or alienation from the church on the other. We in the church cannot maintain that 'all truth is God's truth' if we do not

trust and support those who work and struggle with challenging ideas which may nevertheless be part of God's truth. This is an issue that has been widely addressed in recent years, and indeed the prevailing anti-intellectualism of the church in general has been anatomised by a number of scholars (Mark Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994) in particular). But it is not going too far to suggest that one of the reasons for the lack of impact of Christian faith on young people in some parts of the church is that we have not nurtured a mature, enquiring and open mind towards questions of how we might understand the world, our culture and society, and the artefacts they have produced and are producing.

B. Substantive response

This is a good time for Christian academics to be thinking about literary studies, not only because of the issues outlined above and considered further below, but also because scholars in literary studies are increasingly interested and concerned about religion in its various forms. Roger Pooley here discusses how literature works, the return to religion in contemporary criticism, and some useful Christian work in the subject.

1. How literature works

The act of reading is an act of decoding. Until our everyday habits are disrupted, we don't realise how complex a process it is. Sitting in a tearoom in a shopping centre (not big enough to be a mall), I noticed an emergency exit with the notice 'This door is alarmed' and began to wonder why a door should be worried. Of course, I am not meant to read it that way, but I can, because the language is multivalent. It is a literary reading, if you like; if you don't you might think it paranoia, but then there has often been a close relation between literature and madness. Freud's analysis of his patients' dreams in *The Interpretation of Dreams* reads like virtuoso literary criticism as much as diagnosis. Transposing a sentence into a different context can change its meaning. This means that students of literature need to know about context – history, politics, and religion, for example. But they also have to be aware of genre, the signal a book sends out that says you have to see me as a tragedy, or a sonnet, or a biology textbook, and respond accordingly. However, even that is a choice for the reader. When *The Pilgrim's Progress* was first published in 1678, Bunyan used a quotation from Hosea on the title page ('I have used similitudes') and wrote a long verse 'Apology' which instructs the reader to read its images in a particular way. Because he says he 'fell into an allegory', it must be an allegory, and we read it as such. Yet there is no such prefatory permission in *The Song of Songs* in the Bible, and that has often been read as an allegory. Is that kind of reading illegitimate? No, but it is open to challenge, because the meaning and effect of any literary work (and the Bible is a literary work, though that is not all it is) is a complex negotiation between author and readers. Generic expectation is not just a matter of finding signals and obeying the rules, though. Think of epic, among the earliest of genres (Homer, the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*), and one of the most prestigious and ambitious. Epics are about heroes, the foundation of countries, or (like *Paradise Lost*) the foundation of the world. In our own time, the epic has retreated into the fantastic, or into irony, that characteristic contemporary (even postmodern) mode. As in Roy Fisher's 'Epic', quoted in its entirety below, the grand claims of the traditional epic hero are ripe for undermining:

Stranger, in your own land
how do men call you?

'I will tell you. Men call me Roy
Fisher. Women call me
remote.'

Literary reading, then, is a high-level skill (to use the jargon of education), which responds to complex invitations to discern and play with words and meaning, and introduces its own complexities of understanding. It is much more than downloading, or accessing information. It is a human activity, too, because meaning exists in a position between speakers, writers and readers. The readers are not just individuals, alone with a book in the quiet of a study or bedroom; they are part of communities, in schools and colleges, or learned societies, or congregations, or book groups, or people who read the same book reviews. Each of those has its protocols, its way of debating, of establishing authority, and of recognising what counts as an interesting or legitimate reading. Many readers will belong to more than one of these communities. A Christian student of literature will belong to several, and may find the tensions between them difficult to negotiate. She (or, occasionally, he) will be a member of a church, which will have a particular approach to the Biblical text and to other texts of contemporary culture; and maybe a Bible study group or Christian Union which will have a similar approach but perhaps a less hierarchical, more subjective practice of reflective reading. On top of that, she will be a student in an English department, which will promote a range of approaches to reading, but may have an individual tutor with a quite specific theoretical approach. Those approaches may conflict with what she has successfully practised at A level. Like most sophisticated readers, she will be able to switch from one to the other more or less successfully. But sometimes that switch may demand too much. Coleridge famously described the experience of poetry as 'That willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith' (*Biographia Literaria*, 1817, ch.14). That provisional granting of oneself to someone else's perceptual world is what makes reading, watching or listening an adventure in dialogue, or something unsettling and disorienting.

On the one hand, we might feel, with Luke Ferretter, that 'Most contemporary literary theories are atheistic' (*Towards a Christian Literary Theory*, 2003). The easy conclusion might be that a Christian approach needs to look back, to critics of literature from the Christian tradition like T.S. Eliot or C.S. Lewis. But that is to close off debate, and to retreat into a comfort zone. Many contemporary Christian critics, such as Valentine Cunningham in *In the Reading Gaol*, Kevin Mills in *Justifying Language* and John Schad, most recently in *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida*, have confronted the challenge of deconstruction with more subtlety and respect than a search and destroy mission. Equally, we need to recognise that some of the most influential philosopher-critics of the recent past have been much involved with religion, Derrida especially. Some of them, such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Paul Ricoeur, have done so from a Christian perspective that needs a bit of uncovering, but it is undoubtedly there (see, for example, Ruth Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin*).

The theoretical conflict is serious and sometimes pressing, but there is another, week-by-week issue, which is the challenge of literary texts themselves. Here, sometimes, Christian academics and Christian students have an advantage – they recognise Biblical and religious ideas where their contemporaries don't. This may make them seem obsessive, but most of the time they are welcomed as repositories of knowledge in an era which has lost the Biblical literacy of previous generations. The fact that most of them/us don't read the Bible in the King James Version, or worship according to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, is a disadvantage in this respect, though. This is by no means confined to the explicitly Christian canonical writers of the Middle Ages or the seventeenth century. It can apply equally to *Jane Eyre*, or *Waiting for Godot*, or the stories of Flannery O'Connor.

To see that there is a Christian reference in a text is, perhaps, no more than a good edition's footnotes should give you anyway. However, when many students (as my colleagues complain) have so little in the way of intellectual furniture, ideas with which to operate, then it is a Christian student's calling to equip themselves with some decent theology. On creativity and the idea of creation, for example, read Genesis, of course, but also Colin Gunton *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (1993), and the first part of David Thistlethwaite, *The Art of God and the Religions of Art* (1998). This would give an interesting basis for

looking at the poetics of creation in Wordsworth and Coleridge, for example. Coleridge in particular locates the act of imagination within theological co-ordinates.

2. The return to religion in contemporary criticism

When Stanley Fish, the influential and combative American literary critic, was asked recently what would happen to criticism now Derrida, the father of deconstruction, has died, he replied simply 'religion'. This could mean that criticism in America will go the way of presidential politics in America, but it is much more complex than that. In a way Fish was only reporting what was already happening. Derrida himself, at least since *Glas* (published in French in 1974) had confronted questions of religion with sympathy and acuity.

Stephen Greenblatt, the founder of New Historicism, one of the most influential schools of criticism practised today, has become increasingly concerned with Shakespeare's religion, in particular with his father's Catholicism. In *Hamlet in Purgatory*, and the more recent biography *Will in the World*, he has developed a picture of Shakespeare as responding creatively to the Reformation:

Shakespeare grasped that crucial death rituals in his culture had been gutted. He may have felt this with enormous pain at his son's graveside. [Hamnet died in 1596, aged 11]. But he also believed that the theatre – and his theatrical art in particular – could tap into the great reservoir of passionate feelings that, for him and for thousands of his contemporaries, no longer had a satisfactory outlet...Shakespeare drew upon the pity, confusion and dread of death in a world of damaged rituals (the world in which most of us continue to live) because he himself experienced those same emotions at the core of his being...He responded not with prayers but with the deepest expression of his being: *Hamlet*. (321).

Now, this is not a response to Shakespeare from a Christian faith position, but it is a recognition of the importance of religion to the creation and reception of a key literary work. Specialists in seventeenth-century literature are used to sophisticated, theologically aware studies of Christian writers like Milton, Bunyan and Herbert, but, apart from Marlowe's alleged atheism, the religious dimensions of theatrical writing have been sidelined. Now, with Greenblatt's books, Richard Wilson's research on the Lancastrian Shakespeare, and Stephen Marx's more modest but in some ways more useful study, *Shakespeare and the Bible*, the emphasis is changing. It may be that, as one of Greenblatt's reviewers has noted, he needs Shakespeare to be a Catholic, and that is a fragile position. But the point I am making is different. There is a moment in academic criticism when the study of religion and its relation to literature has become more viable because those who do not necessarily share that kind of belief have recognised its importance.

We can see this in the textbooks, too. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* is now in its third edition (2004) and is widely used and accepted in English departments. Because it does not deal with theories one by one (as does, for example, Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory*, possibly even more widely used) it has space for dealing with the familiar terms in which literature is viewed (character, laughter, war, for example) as well as the postmodern and the queer. And so, chapter 19 has ten pages on God, sandwiched between sexual difference and ideology. It is an invigorating and revealing chapter, based round six 'edicts': 'God is an anthropomorphism', 'God is dead', 'To acknowledge the idea that God is an anthropomorphism or that he is dead is not the same as getting rid of him', 'religion is everywhere', 'literature has an evil streak', and 'literature is sacred'. Maybe for a student unsure of his or her faith, that would be threatening, but for anyone prepared to take it on, it offers a space for thinking about literature from a Christian perspective.

3. Some pointers on the relationships of Christianity and Literature.

Try the essays in *The Discerning Reader*, ed. Barratt, Pooley & Ryken (Leicester, 1995) and Michael Edwards, *Towards a Christian Poetics* (1984). For A level or book group readers, a useful book is Bridget Nichols, *Literature in Christian perspective: becoming faithful readers* (2000). There is a long Christian tradition of poetics by imaginative writers in England, from Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*

to the essays of T S Eliot and W H Auden. The Inklings work is interesting, too: most useful for the Christian critic is Tolkien's work in *Tree and Leaf*. Of more realistic writers, Flannery O'Connor's essays and letters are invaluable. She offers a plausible theology of Christian realism. For reference, consult David Lyle Jeffrey, *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* and Isabel Rivers, *Classical and Christian ideas in English Renaissance Poetry*. The CD Rom *Images of Salvation in Medieval Art and Literature*, produced by the Christianity and Culture group, is attractive and valuable for students and teachers.

There are two academic journals, *Christianity and Literature* and *Literature and Theology*, which publish high-quality articles on a regular basis. Many university libraries will subscribe to one or both of these. *The Glass* comes out once or twice a year from the Christian Literary Studies Group, who also hold annual conferences (visit www.clsj.org). There are some more popular American periodicals, *Books and Culture* and *The New Pantagruel*, which often have useful material on the arts, and sometimes read like a plea not to despise culture and intellect addressed to the American Christian situation. When the current Archbishop of Canterbury is a published poet, the situation in this country may be a bit different. But then think of the rubbish we tolerate as words to worship songs! (See Nick Page, *And now for a time of nonsense...why worship songs are failing the church*; and contrast the magisterial work on the English hymn tradition by J R Watson, a recently retired professor of English at Durham.)

C. Conclusion

There are no easy answers to the question of how Christians should approach literature and literary studies. Some innovative work is being done to produce resources, and new projects associated with Bible Society, Stapleford House Education Centre, the Association of Christian Teachers and Christianity and Culture are in process. Students, teachers and academics are alert to the needs. It would be good if in due course, alongside the Bible and science books, some Christianity and literature books appeared in every church library and Christian bookstall. Our reading shapes our lives.