

Christian Literature: Mirror of God's Truth, Goodness, and Beauty

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The term “Christian literature” is a broad category, encompassing a wide variety of genres, themes, and purposes: some works of Christian literature are predominantly catechetical while others are narrative, some are prose while some are poetry, and some deal predominantly with religious themes while others appear on the surface remarkably secular. Yet, while there are no strict rules about what constitutes Christian literature, truly Christian works have a common foundation, namely the ultimate Truth about God and his creation. Christians come to know this Truth through God's self-revelation which is present in his creation, the words of the prophets, and ultimately in the person of the Word, Jesus Christ. Although Christian literature adds nothing substantial to divine revelation, it builds upon it as a house built upon a rock. There are many ways that authors have built on this foundation, and even the myriad of differences in this regard is a tiny mirror of the multiplicity of God's creation. For regardless of the form, Christian writers participate in God's very act of creation by creating in the medium of language a work that reflects God's Truth, His Goodness, and His Beauty. Christian writers are essentially co-creators by whose work God is revealed more clearly to the world, according to the needs of different times and places.

The literature that most clearly expresses God and His ways is the Holy Bible. Scripture is qualitatively different from other literature, because it not only builds upon divine revelation but contains it. However, nothing at all can be said about Christian literature without beginning with the Christian literature par excellence. For the Scriptures are the very word of God, written by the Holy Spirit through its human authors. Its language is the language of God Himself in which Christians find a real expression of His Truth and Beauty. Within the books of the Old

and New Testament are contained many truths about God, about man, and about the whole of creation, but the Scripture is not a text to be dissected for its “meaning” alone, because the form of the text expresses something, too. Scripture is written beautifully, and this too is God’s self-revelation. A perfect example is found in the beauty and order of the prologue of John’s Gospel.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him: and without him was made nothing that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (John 1:1-5)

This text, written by the apostle John under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, expresses a deep truth in language which reflects the beauty of the mystery of the Incarnation and the person of Jesus. Scripture is the model and inspiration for all Christian authors, who attempt not to reproduce Scripture, but to present the Truth in a manner faithful to the word written by God Himself.

Another source that all Christian authors must read is the book of nature. Although Christians have received the gift of supernatural revelation, God also instilled meaning in the natural order, much of which is accessible to reason alone. Even pagans have been able to reach some understanding of Him through reason. For the gift of divine revelation does not annihilate human reason, but rather builds on it so that man might come to know God more, and through that knowledge to love and serve Him and eventually reach eternal salvation. It can be said, then, that Christian literature embraces many works written by pagans, even if these works might not be called “Christian literature” as such. Many pagans were honestly seeking God according to the lights granted them, and they discovered real, God-given truths through their intellects.

Christians, by the grace of the Incarnation, possess the full plan of salvation history and can read these pagan truths as they really were, genuine though partial. Pagan literature and philosophy is read in light of Christ, who is the eternal plan of God, and for whom all things, secular and religious, extraordinary and mundane, have come to pass: “For in him were all things created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones, or dominations, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him and in him. And he is before all, and by him all things consist” (Col. 1:16-17). Though Christians must be cautious not to project Christian faith onto pagan authors—for instance, we must not say that Virgil had some special knowledge of the Incarnation—we can have confidence that we read their works in a fuller context of divine revelation than even the pagan author himself. For whether or not the author realized it, all Truth and Beauty are drawn from and fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

St. Basil the Great directly instructed young men to read pagan literature, always being careful to “discriminate between the helpful and the injurious, accepting the one, but closing one’s ears to the siren song of the other” (Basil IV). Pagan writings, he says, are of particular use when they spur us on to natural virtue, of which many of the pagans were great models. An excellent example of pagan literature that can be read in light of Christian truth is Virgil’s epic poem, the *Aeneid*. Virgil carefully emphasizes Aeneas’ *pietas*, that is, his duty to gods, family, and country, and the way in which his virtue informs both his reason and his passions. After he is exhorted by the gods to leave Dido, he responds with zeal:

Amazed, and shocked to the bottom of his soul

By what his eyes had seen, Aeneas felt

His hackles rise, his voice choke in his throat.

As the sharp admonition and command

From heaven had shaken him awake, he now

Burned only to be gone, to leave that land
Of the sweet life behind. (Virgil 4.274-281)

Aeneas' zeal for the will of the gods is so powerful that it overcomes all his natural opposition. St. Basil urged young men to become familiar with pagan characters like Aeneas, so that they would imitate his virtues, for "one who has been instructed in the pagan examples will no longer hold Christian precepts impracticable" (Basil VII). Young people especially, he argued can be inspired by the heroic examples in pagan literature.

It could be asked, however, why we should study anything but the Scripture. After all, if Scripture has the fullest revelation of truth, why should we read anything less, especially if those lesser works were written by pagan authors with no knowledge of Christ? St. Basil responds to this point, too. We read profane writings not because they are better—or even equal—in themselves, but because they may be better for us, weak as we are. St. Basil writes that

“into the life eternal the Holy Scriptures lead us, which teach us through divine words. But so long as our immaturity forbids our understanding their deep thought, we exercise our spiritual perceptions upon profane writings, which are not altogether different, and in which we perceive the truth as it were in shadows and in mirrors” (Basil II).

Basil writes specifically about pagan literature, but what he writes holds true of all Christian literature. Fallen as we are, we are not always capable of perceiving the truth in its whole, but must rather adjust our eyes slowly to the truth, or it will so dazzle that it will blind.

This principle is illustrated in Dante's journey and his various guides throughout the *Divine Comedy*. Dante cannot travel straight to Heaven, but must rather descend first into Hell, then rise to Purgatory, where his vision is slowly purified, and finally reach Heaven. Though his journey is prompted initially by the Virgin Mary, Dante's journey begins not with Mary, but travels rather through a chain of command involving St. Lucy and then Beatrice, and finally the

pagan poet Virgil, who serves as his guide for the first half of the *Comedy*. If the Virgin Mary had appeared to Dante in the dark wood, he could not have survived the light, but instead he is led by Virgil, who is symbolic of human reason and whose light will not blind. However, once he reaches Heaven, he finds himself blinded not just once, but over and over again, by the ever-increasing glory shown him:

Just as fire
 Trammeled up in a thundercloud bursts forth
 by welling broader than the cloud can seize,
 and opposite its nature, smites the earth,
 My mind, grown great among those delicacies,
 burst itself and its limits like that flame. (*Paradiso* 23.39-44)

Those of us who are still imperfect on earth read Christian literature so that we may not burst ourselves and our limits. We recognize that we are weak and cannot yet look directly into the light. Therefore we glean light from lesser sources as we can find it, and pray that our vision may be slowly purified until we reach the point, where we, “beholding the glory of the Lord with open face, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18).

Literature written by Christians for a holy purpose, can serve as a somewhat brighter reflection than pagan literature, since its authors were possessed of the whole of divine revelation. The Incarnation of Christ allows us to read meaning backwards into both Jewish and pagan literature, and it radically changes the nature of new literature, because writers after Christ have received the fullness of revelation (cf. Heb. 1:1-2). Christian literature may reflect directly on Christ or the mysteries of the faith, as for instance Dante Alighieri does in the *Divine Comedy*, but it may also contain no Christian doctrines, and sometimes no explicit mention of Christianity at all. Works of Christian literature are called Christian not because of their subject

matter but because of the truths they portray about the world, about grace and human nature, and about sin and redemption. By taking on material, human flesh, Christ invested the natural order with new meaning, and Christian authors participate in this meaning at many different levels.

Even the act of creating literature is itself a participation in God's creative work, a sort of co-creation, in which the creative work of Christian authors participates in the very creative action of God. God is the source of all Goodness, all Truth, and all Beauty, and everything that God creates mirrors these qualities back to him. Although Christ is the perfect embodiment of his goodness, the creation account shows that God doesn't hoard his own perfections, but rather scatters his goodness like ten thousand seeds that grow into ten thousand mirrors of his perfection. Most Christian authors, reflecting on the Beauty of God present in Himself and in His creatures, create literature with beauty as a primary goal. Although *The Divine Comedy*, for instance, is full of Christian truths, Dante's principal aim is not to teach with truth, but to exhort with beauty. Thomas Aquinas, who lived only a few decades before Dante, portrayed truth far more succinctly, but Dante wanted primarily to present beauty and thus to awaken Christian desire for God. For all things, Dante says, draw us to him:

“For this world's very being, and my own,
 the death He suffered so that I might live,
 the joy that I and all believing men
 Hope for, with that sure knowledge ever alive,
 have drawn me from the ocean that deceives
 and set me on the shores of the true love” (*Paradiso* 26.58-63)

All things are good, and in their goodness, draw us to Him. A focal point of the *Divine Comedy* is the power of the woman Beatrice in leading Dante towards God, but he here explains that it is not only her beauty that have drawn him, but also the beauty of the world and even his own

heart. Throughout the *Divine Comedy*, Dante expresses for his readers the beauty that he has witnessed, both in form and in language. Many of Dante's passages, especially about earthly Paradise, and even more so about Heaven, are filled with beautiful, luscious imagery that affect the reader's heart as much as his mind.

Yet, not all passages of the *Divine Comedy* are beautiful. Dante always maintains his striking terza-rima form, but he bestows his language carefully, reserving his most beautiful writing for beautiful subjects, those who are being progressively purified in Purgatory and especially God and the blessed in Heaven. In *Inferno*, however, Dante does not shy away from explicit ugliness. In the circle of the flatterers, Virgil tells Dante to look over and see

“the filthy face

Of that hair-rumpled and disgusting wench

who claws herself with shit beneath her nails,

now standing up, now squatting on her haunch” (*Inferno* 18.129-32).

This image is purposefully repulsive, designed to make the reader fearful of sin lest the same horror should befall him. Dante used images of beauty to draw the heart toward God and images of ugliness and sin to repulse the sinner from evil ways.

Other Christian authors present very little beauty in their literature and instead focus almost solely on the ugliness of sin. Flannery O'Connor is one such Christian author, whose story, *A Good Man is Hard to Find* presents the messiness of life in all its unredeemed reality. From the beginning, the family members are terribly antagonistic towards one another, and then the Misfit and his accomplices enter the plot with their almost casual wickedness. O'Connor informs the audience of the murders with shocking candor, explaining that, as he returned from the woods, “Bobby Lee was dragging a yellow shirt with bright blue parrots in it” (O, Connor

150). However, buried amidst the darkness and the shocking triviality of her tone is the reason for the Misfit's crime:

"Maybe He didn't raise the dead," the old lady mumbled, not knowing what she was saying and feeling so dizzy that she sank down in the ditch with her legs twisted under her. "I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't," The Misfit said. "I wisht I had of been there," he said, hitting the ground with his fist. "It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen lady," he said in a high voice, "if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now" (O'Connor 152).

O'Connor traps her audience into judging anyone and everyone, from the grandmother, to the parents, from the children to the Misfit. Yet, here she turns the tables, and forces the reader to see himself in the grandmother's shoes, questioning: Have I really understood the full truth of the Resurrection? Have I lived it out to its logical conclusion? The Misfit is the only figure in the story that actually takes the Resurrection seriously, but sadly, he hasn't allowed himself to be grasped by Faith. But there is a second kind of ugliness that is perhaps even sadder, or as Flannery presents it, more ridiculous. This is the ugliness of the grandmother and the family, of taking belief for granted, which O'Connor presents in all its disturbing implications.

Flannery O'Connor tailored her Christian literature to a world of believers that, for all its piety, did not sincerely believe in or understand the fallenness of the world and its need for redemption. Her fiction was profoundly contemporary, designed to shock and sometimes horrify the pious, the naïve, and the complacent of her day. All Christian authors are, like O'Connor, situated in a particular historical context. Basil the Great wrote *On the Right Use of Greek Literature* to defend and clarify the use of pagan literature at a time when there was no separate genre of Christian literature. Dante decried various corruptions in the Church of his day, from the avarice and gluttony of the religious orders to the ambition of the clergy and the pope. The

York Mystery Plays were designed for a Medieval English audience that already knew the Scriptural stories and a good bit of the theology behind them, and attempted to draw that audience deeper into the mystery through reflection. T.S. Eliot responded to the modernist fears about fragmentation of the self and society, proposing Christian faith as the force capable of providing stability. Gerard Manley Hopkins presented the natural world as the primary image of God's glory in an increasingly scientific and materialistic culture. Christian literature is highly varied, not only because different authors choose to convey different elements of the Christian tradition, but also because they respond to the needs of their particular time. Scripture, as the revelation of God Himself, is the only perfectly universal text. All other works are bound by a particular time, place, and purpose. And yet, even to call them *bound* is to miss something of the truth, for in their particularities, they are *perfectly suited* to move hearts and minds of the people in the time for which it was written.

And this is the ultimate goal of Christian literature, not merely to touch people's hearts and minds, but to move them. Christian literature should lead to greater conversion, either by turning the heart towards God or by drawing it away from sin. For, as St. Augustine writes, "it should be our desire that they all [all people] love God together with us, and all the help that we give to or receive from them must be related to this one end" (Augustine 22). Christian authors take this injunction seriously, and seek to draw their readers to the love of God. By the increase and perfection of love, we will reach eternal life with Him in heaven and be transformed into another Christ, to the glory of God. For as Gerard Manley Hopkins, writes:

the just man justices;

Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;

Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —

Christ — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,

Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his

To the Father through the features of men's faces (Hopkins).

Christian authors write so that their readers may become the just men, and as such, reflections of Christ. They write so that Christ may play in ten thousand more places, in the hearts of ten thousand more readers, so that they may give glory “to the Father through the features of men’s faces” (Hopkins).

Christian literature, whether prose or poetry, catechetical or narrative—whatever form it may take—participates in the very creative action of God. For just as God draws his Truth, Goodness, and Beauty from nothing, Christian authors draw language from the nothingness of silence to reflect some aspect of God or his truth. The most marvelous of God’s creative actions, however, is the re-creation of man in his own image, and Christian authors participate in this re-creation as well, helping to draw hearts and minds away from sin and darkness and into the new life of God. Christian authors are not perfect, nor are they all saints or even theologians. They are still pilgrims on the journey, but, by the grace of God, they are also co-creators, drawing others with them along the path to God.

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