

Religious Education as the Basis of Medieval Literature

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Abstract

The medieval literature was written with a purpose to teach Christian dogmas to the masses. The prose and poetry of the time meant to show men the ugliness of sin and the beauty of goodness. Critics are of the view that English drama originated from Christian religious rituals with the purpose to provide religious education to the masses and strengthen the faith of the worshippers. The plays stirred the minds of the people to good deeds, and devotion. The stories from the Bible, the Old and the New Testament showed the death, Burial and Resurrection of Christ in dumb shows. This Research paper will study the origin and aim of English literature during the Medieval Era.

Key Words: Monasteries, Church, Religion, Schools

Discussion

Literature has been considered to have a dual purpose, to teach and to delight. During the Medieval Era it was believed that Human activity is not autonomous. Men are incapable to act as individuals- all men belonged to the Catholic Church, which expected them to believe and follow what it taught. The destiny of mankind was in the hands of the Divine. Men were dependent creatures, unable to exist without God. It was believed that Man is finite, he is made of dust and to dust he shall return. The sole purpose of life was to please God. Religion was the pivot of society and mankind was relegated in the background. England moved within the narrow shell of Scholastic philosophy. Churches and monasteries were the schools. They were operated by the clergy. The schools were dreary and cold, and physical activity was severely repressed. Few men could read and write. The Church authorities were the most learned people. They had access to all kinds of information. There were few books in Latin; it was very difficult for a common man to understand them.

The early 12th century saw a revival of the study of Latin classics, prose, and verse. The priests translated, wrote and re-wrote books. The Cathedral schools at Chartres, Orleans, and Canterbury were centers of Latin literature staffed by notable scholars. John of Salisbury, secretary at Canterbury, became the bishop of Chartres. Salisbury held Cicero in the highest regard in philosophy, language, and the humanities. The translators possessed and read virtually all the Latin authors such as Ovid, Virgil, Terence, Horace, Seneca, and Cicero. In poetry, Virgil was universally admired. The 12th century renaissance saw a revival of interest in classic poetry and the contemporary poets produced significant works. But this revival of the pagan Roman Literature was not permanent. The religious authorities opposed pagan Roman literature and **'...dogma, definite and defined, was cast like a shell over the adolescent mind of medieval Europe.'**(Durrant,104,1964) 1

The monasteries were used as schools and libraries and all information flowed through them. This information was religion based. Most of the students became members of the clergy. According to H. E. Marshall, **'The clerks, as the students were called, often took some kind of vow,-they wore a gown and shaved their heads in some fashion or the other. The colleges too were built very much after the style of monasteries. The life in every way was like the life in a monastery. It was only by slow degrees that the life and the teaching grew away from the old model.'**(Marshall, 123,1909)2 The curriculum of the time laid stress on theology. The schools taught students to read Latin so that they could copy, preserve and perpetuate the writings of the Church. They were taught mathematics so that they could calculate the dates of religious festivals; they practiced singing so that they could take part in church services.

The Greeks and the Romans considered physical health a part of education but the church considered human body as a part of the profane world, something to be ignored or harshly disciplined. It was believed that Man is born evil so the task of education was to curb the sinful nature of Man. Unlike the Greek and Roman schools, which sought to prepare men for this life, the church schools sought to prepare men for life beyond the grave through the contemplation of God during their life on Earth.

People learned the history of their country and their religion from the works of priests and monk. Even the songs and the plays were written by the minstrels. The poets wrote songs in praise of God. Caedmon was the first English song writer. In one of his songs he praises God in the following words and says

**Now must we praise the guardian of heaven's kingdom, /The creator's might and his mind's thought;
.....He first framed for the children of earth/ The heaven as a roof; holy Creator! /Then mid-earth, the
Guardian of mankind, The eternal Lord, afterwards produced; /The earth of men, Lord Almighty.**

One of Caedmon's famous poems is called **The Genesis**. The poem is about the rebellion of Satan against God; how Satan, in his pride, rebelled against God and how he was expelled from the Heaven. John Skelton, also known as John Shelton was an English poet. He was the favourite teacher of King Henry VIII of England. He was satirist of both political and religious subjects.

The medieval drama was written and performed with a purpose to teach Christian dogmas to the masses. The plays were meant to show men the ugliness of sin and the beauty of goodness. Critics are of the view that English drama originated from Christian religious rituals with the purpose to provide religious education to the masses. The earliest form of English drama was the Miracle, Mystery and the Morality plays. The richly robed priests passed along the aisles in stately processions enveloped in fragrant clouds of incense so that the eye of the spectator catch religious knowledge, the priests as they read the Bible stories sometimes displayed painted rolls which vividly pictured the principal events of the day's lesson. The mystery and the miracle plays were gradually replaced by a kindred species which had long been growing up beside them, namely the Morality Plays.

The Morality Play were performed by the priests to teach the principles of Christian living in a more direct fashion through the Bible stories of the Mysteries. In its strict form the Morality Play was an offshoot from the Mysteries. In Moralities the actors appeared as abstract allegorical figures, either good or bad, such as The Seven Deadly Sins, and Raise-Slander. Basically, they were simple, didactic exemplums, reminding people of death and emphasizing the absolute necessity of repentance and the severity of the last judgment. Moralities had no claim to 'real, factual' events, yet they performed what happens to everyone in the course of his life and thus confirm the medieval world-view. They represented the medieval idea that life is a pilgrimage from birth towards either Heaven or Hell. Man often appears in these plays as 'Mankind.', as the allegorical-essential-typical embodiment of general human features, being the battle-ground of good and evil forces- the battle for the soul. The good forces or virtue was personified in the Good Angel, in Good Deeds or in Knowledge, and the evil ones in the Bad Angel in the Seven Deadly Sins, the Flesh or the World, and the Devil. In one of the morality plays with the title Everyman, the protagonist speaks the lesson of the play:

Take example, all ye that this do hear or see, /How they that I loved best do forsake me,/ Except my Good Deeds that bideth truly.

Commending his soul into the Lord's hands, Everyman disappears into the grave with Good Deeds. An Angel appears with Everyman's Book of Reckoning to receive the soul as it rises from the grave. A doctor appears to give the epilogue, in which he tells the hearers to forsake Pride, Beauty, Five Wits, Strength and Discretion. Everyman has a very clear moral that earthly comforts are fleeting. Only good deeds and God's grace can provide salvation. The lessons of the play are delivered by the allegorical characters, each one representing a variety of abstract concepts i.e. Good Deeds, Material Possessions, and Knowledge. The play Everyman displays a transformation from tragedy to comedy, from doom to salvation. For the Medieval mind a happy ending of a play was understood to be happy when one gets to Heaven, while tragedy depicted the state of separateness from God, such as the Fall of Adam. The Moralities represented the medieval world-view by their reliance on allegory. The Medieval Universe was itself essentially allegorical: the earthly hierarchy corresponded to the Heavenly one, in which man had a fixed and well-defined place. The Moralities reflected how Man yields to temptation but at last in spite of all his flaws and folly is saved by Perseverance and Repentance, pardoned through God's mercy, and assured of salvation.

Drama slowly moved out of the church-building into the church-yard, then to the market-place and the streets and other areas of the town. The performance of these religious plays became the concern of the trade-guilds, each being responsible for particular episodes of the Bible for example the masons for Noah, the weavers for the Crucifixion, the bakers for the Last Supper and the Mercers for the spectacular Last Judgment scene. This resulted in the creation of the cycle plays. The cycles were presented on the great Christian festivals: on Christmas, Palm Sunday, at Easter, and especially on Corpus Christi Day. Each play was mounted on a wagon with a curtained scaffold. Each wagon presented a different scene of the cycle, and the wagons were following each other, repeating the scenes at successive stations. So, in the course of a day, the people in a city were able to see a complete cycle. The plays were anonymous: the story was important and not the author. Some of the most famous cycle plays are Chester, York, Towneley, Wakefield and Coventry cycle. The cycle plays were named after the towns in which they were performed. In the cycle plays the whole story of man from Creation to the Day of Judgment was acted. In this way people were taught the story of the original rebellion of Lucifer and the story of the Original Sin. God seated on a raised mansion or stage and around him stood the angles. Lucifer is introduced as Man's principal antagonist. The two famous Cycle plays were The Fall of Man and the Noah's Arch.

The fall of Man

Satan:

...The Godhead that I saw so clear,
And perceived that he would take kind
of a degree,
That he had wrought,
And I denied that angel kind
Should it not be.
For we were fair and bright;
Therefore methought that he,
Take one of us he might . . .
Yet he disdained me....
And soon I shall essay.
In a worm's likeness will I wend,
And try to feign a likely lie.

Eve:

For our Lord God forbids us it,
The fruit of it, Adam nor I,
To nigh it near;
And if we did, we both should die,
He said, and cease our solace here.

Satan:

Ah, Eve....

To eat thereof forbade he you
I know it well; this was his skill
Because he would none other knew
Those great virtues that belong to it.
For wilt thou see
Who eats the fruit of good and ill
Shall have knowing as well as he....

Eve:

Then will I to thy teaching trust,
And take this fruit unto our food.

Satan:

Bite boldly on; be not abashed.
Give Adam some, to amend his mood
And eke his bliss.

Eve:

Adam, have here of fruit full good....
ADAM
Ah, Eve, thou art to blame;
To this enticed thou me.

God:

Adam! Adam Where art thou there?

Adam:

I hear thee, Lord, and see thee not.

God:

Say, Eve, why hast thou made thy mate/ Eat fruit I bade thee should hang still,
And commanded none of it to take?

Eve:

A worm, Lord, enticed me thereto. So well away!
That ever I did deed so ill!

God:

Adam and Eve, ...In earth now shall ye sweat and swink And travail for your food.

Adam:

Alas, when might we sink, We that had all world's good? Full grievous may we think.

http://archive.org/stream/religiousdrama2m007883mbp/religiousdrama2m007883mbp_djvu.txt 3

Beside the stories of Genesis and Satan's rebellion against God, the cycle plays performed the story of Noah and his wife.

Noah's Flood

Noah:

.....Now, in the name of God, I will begin
To make the ship

God:

Noah, take thou thy family,
And in the ship look that thou hie;
For none so righteous man to me
Is now on earth living.

Noah:

Lord, at your bidding I am bain;
Since no other grace will gain,
It will I fulfil fain,/
For gracious I the#\find.

Noah:

Welcome, wife, into this boat.....

GOD:

Noah, take thy wife anon,
And thy children every one;
Out of the ship thou shalt be gone,

And they all with thee...
And this promise I make
My blessing now I give thee here,
To thee, Noah, my servant dear,
For vengeance shall no more appear;
And now farewell, my darling dear.

http://archive.org/stream/religiousdrama2m007883mbp/religiousdrama2m007883mbp_djvu.txt 4

Much of the theater in the early medieval period originated from the church. Faced with the task of educating an illiterate population, the church opted to bring the stories of the Bible to life through dramatization.

The function of literature has always been to 'teach and delight'. Aristotle was of the view that those things which are in themselves horrible, such as cruel battles, unnatural monsters, are made in poetical imitation delightful. In 6th-century a British cleric Gildas wrote a famous book *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* (English: *On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain*). It is one of the most interesting source for the history of England in the 5th and 6th centuries. The work contains a narrative of British history from the Roman conquest to Gildas' time; it includes references to Britons' victory against the Saxons at the Battle of Mons Badonicus. It is a condemnation of the kings for their various sins. The book criticizes the British clergy of the age. Gildas's work is of great importance to historians, because although it is not intended primarily as history, it is almost the only surviving source written by a near-contemporary of British events in the fifth and sixth centuries. Gildas' intent in his writing offers one of the first descriptions of Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall. *De Excidio* remains an important work not only for medieval history but also for British history in general, as it is one of the few works written in Britain to survive from the 6th century.

Bede was a monk and a well known writer. One of his most famous works is *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The first of the five books begins with some geographical background, and then sketches the history of England, beginning with Caesar's invasion in 55 BC. A brief account of Christianity in Roman Britain, including the martyrdom of St Alban, is followed by the story of Augustine's mission to England in 597, which brought Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons. The second book begins with the death of Gregory the Great in 604, and follows the further progress of Christianity in Kent and the first attempts to evangelise Northumbria. The climax of the third book is the account of the Council of Whitby, traditionally seen as a major turning point in English history. The fourth book begins with the consecration of Theodore as Archbishop of Canterbury, and recounts Wilfrid's efforts to bring Christianity to the kingdom of Sussex. The fifth book brings the story up to Bede's day, and includes an account of missionary work in Frisia, and of the conflict with the British church over the correct dating of Easter. Bede's primary intention in writing the *Historia Ecclesiastica* was to show the growth of the united church throughout England. He wanted to instruct and entertain the reader by spiritual examples and by adding stories about many of the places he travelled.

Bede wrote some works designed to teach grammar in the abbey school. One of these was his *De Arte Metrica*, a discussion of the composition of Latin verse. It was based on Donatus' *De Pedibus* and Servius' *De Finalibus*, and used examples from Christian poets as well as Virgil. It became a standard text for the teaching of Latin verse during the next few centuries. Theodor Roosevelt was of the view that, **'Macaulay the historian is read by countless thousands to whom otherwise history would be a sealed book; because Macaulay's works are material additions to the great sum of English literature. There is need for vivid and powerful presentation of scientific matter in literary form..... The true historian will bring the past before our eyes as if it were the present. He will make us see as living men the hard-faced archers of Agincourt, and the war-worn spearmen who followed Alexander down beyond the rim of the known world. We shall hear grate on the coast of Britain the keels of the Low-Dutch sea-thieves whose children's children were to inherit unknown continents. We shall thrill to the triumphs of Hannibal. Gorgeous in our sight will rise the splendor of dead cities, and the might of the elder empires of which the very ruins crumbled to dust ages ago. Along ancient trade-routes, across the world's waste spaces, the caravans shall move; and the admirals of uncharted seas shall furrow the oceans with their lonely prows. Beyond the dim centuries we shall see the banners float above armed hosts. We shall see conquerors riding forward to victories that have changed the course of time. We shall listen to the prophecies of forgotten seers. Ours shall be the dreams of dreamers who dreamed greatly, who saw in their vision peaks so lofty that never yet have they been reached by the sons and daughters of men.'**

Dead poets shall sing to us the deeds of men of might and the love and the beauty of women. We shall see the dancing girls of Memphis. The scent of the flowers in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon will be heavy to our senses. We shall sit at feast with the kings of Nineveh when they drink from ivory and gold. With Queen Maeve in her sun-parlor we shall watch the nearing chariots of the champions. For us the war-horns of King Olaf shall wail across the flood, and the harps sound high at festivals in forgotten halls. The frowning strongholds of the barons of old shall rise before us, and the white palace-castles from whose windows Syrian princes once looked across the blue Aegean. We shall know the valor of the two-sworded Samurai. Ours shall be the hoary wisdom and the strange, crooked folly of the immemorial civilizations which tottered to a living death in India and in China. We shall see the terrible horsemen of Timur the Lame ride over the roof of the world; we shall hear the drums beat as the armies of Gustavus and Frederick and Napoleon drive forward to victory. Ours shall be the woe of burgher and peasant, and ours the stern joy when freemen triumph and justice comes to her own. The agony of the galley-slaves shall be ours, and the rejoicing when the wicked are brought low and the men of evil days have their reward. We shall see the glory of triumphant violence, and the revel of those who do wrong in high places; and the broken-hearted despair that lies beneath the glory and the revel. We shall also see the supreme righteousness of the wars for freedom and justice, and know that the men who fell in these wars made all mankind their debtors.” <http://www.bartleby.com/56/1.html> . 5

Art and literature influenced the scientific theories of the time. During the Middle Ages the scholars of the time aimed at a better understanding of the fundamental truths of Christianity and did not favour scientific research. The pioneers of scientific discovery risked the accusation of witchcraft. No one was allowed to question the teachings of the church. Those Christians who deviated from Christian dogmas were considered as heretics. Books were so scarce, lessons had to be dictated and then memorized, and scholars were often expected to accept the unreasoned and the unproved. Then, knowledge was an authoritative body of revealed truth. It was not for a scholar to observe nature and to test, question, and discover truth for himself but to interpret and believe accepted doctrines; orthodoxy tried to put restraints on freedom of mind. It established that human dignity was rooted in knowledge of an objective order in which humanity was ascribed a stable and humble place. As mentioned earlier, the purpose of education was ethical and religious. Learning was considered as a pathway to manners, fidelity, and respect for authority. The scholars aim was to restore ‘to fallen mankind, the perfect system of knowledge of mankind at the moment of Creation.

According to Theodor Roosevelt “ **There was a time—...when history was distinguished neither from poetry, from mythology, nor from the first dim beginnings of science... when poetry was accepted by a great scientific philosopher as the appropriate vehicle for teaching the lessons of science and philosophy..... Poetry is still used as a vehicle for the teaching of philosophy.’** <http://www.bartleby.com/56/1.html> .”⁶ In 1215 in Paris two men named Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, set loose a change in the world by differentiating between knowledge derived from theology and knowledge derived from science. Aquinas reconciled philosophy and theology by arguing that Aristotle’s philosophy, which was produced without the benefit of Christian inspiration, was the greatest achievement of human reason. Aristotle’s writings are considered as masterpieces of art, literature, and sciences even today. Thomas Aquinas accepted Aristotle’s philosophy of nature and said that nature was valuable because God created it. Secular knowledge could help man understand God and His creation. By expanding his own knowledge, man was becoming more like God. Even Goethe was as profound a thinker as Kant. He has influenced the thought of mankind far more deeply than Kant because he was also a great poet.

The church refused to accept this fact. It refused to accept any change. It claimed that aspiring for more and more knowledge was the original temptation and sin which leads to the fall of man; when it enters into a man, it makes him swell with pride and pride is one of the deadly sins. Giordano Bruno was an Italian Dominican friar, philosopher, mathematician, poet and astrologer. He proposed that the Sun was just another star moving in space, and claimed that the universe contained an infinite number of inhabited worlds populated by other intelligent beings. The Roman Inquisition found him guilty of heresy, and he was burnt at stake. Bruno's ideas about the universe played a role in his trial. His beliefs differed from the interpretations of God held by the Catholic Church. His crime was his belief that the universe does not revolve around the human being: God is no fixed point or central government but rather is poured in waves, through all things.

He was of the view that **“Unless you make yourself equal to God, you cannot understand God: for the like is not intelligible save to the like... Make yourself grow to greatness beyond measure, by a bound free yourself from the body; raise yourself above all time, become Eternity; then you will understand God. Believe that nothing is impossible for you, think yourself immortal and capable of understanding all, all arts, all sciences, the nature of every living being. Mount higher than the highest height; descend lower than the lowest depth...Draw into yourself all sensations of everything created, fire and water, dry and moist, imagining that you are everywhere, on earth, in the sea, in the sky, that you are not yet born, in the maternal womb, adolescent, old, dead, beyond death. If you embrace in your thought all things at once, times, places, substances, qualities, quantities, you may understand God.”**
http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/61876.Giordano_Bruno.7

Conclusion

Near the dawn of the new Era the philosophers and the writers acknowledged the shortcomings of the medieval thought. They stood for the individuality of man and emphasized that each ‘soul was coloured by the individual’s mind.’ The mood of the time gave birth to a movement which marks the close of the Middle Ages. This Movement is called the Renaissance Period. Unlike the Medieval Era it was a time when the philosophers and the researchers followed reason wherever it led.

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