

Literature and Religion: Three Levels of Relationship

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When speaking in a Chinese context of literature and religion, the question is often raised as to how the Chinese literary tradition relates to Christianity. This is usually accompanied by the common misconception that Chinese people are not capable of producing a religion of their own, since, it is claimed, they are unaccustomed to "falling on their knees when confronted with adversity". The Chinese are said to lack a sense of guilt, and, therefore, they feel no need for repentance. As result of all this, Chinese literature, especially modern Chinese literature, is often seen by the outsider to be devoid of any religious tradition. While this may indeed have some basis in fact, it seems too facile and restricted an explanation to offer a response that will satisfy every case and situation. We must be aware of the findings of comparative literature, where studies have shown that the areas where literature and religion intersect are as multitudinous as they are complicated, including as they do such a wide range of literary traditions in such a variety of different time-frames.



Given the fact that the religious and aesthetic experiences of East and West are both extremely complex and diverse, using Western literature and Christianity as the norm for measuring all literature smacks of personal whim and bias. I myself feel that while Chinese writers, including modern Chinese writers, may not espouse a particular form of religious persuasion, they are certainly not bereft of spiritual sensibility nor religious faith. They, too, have valid perceptions about such religious concerns as the ultimate destiny of humankind. Any literature that claims to be authentic and genuine must, by its very nature, possess a philosophical dynamism directed towards searching out spiritual

truths. It is also a fact that philosophy and theology have always been closely related to each other ; and, though their practitioners may indeed espouse different intellectual disciplines, they still have much to share in common. It is also my personal belief that those committed to upholding life as an absolute value, be they philosophers or theologians, writers or artists, will also be the first to advocate for it in all its different forms. Such people are also most aware of the need for interdisciplinary dialogue among all sciences, and they are usually among the most willing to cross all barriers to attain it. This is why comparative literature should look upon and increase its dialogue and discussion with its many related disciplines as a major focus for its own development.

In our discussion of the three levels of relationship of literature and religion, we shall keep the above remarks in mind, and, wherever possible, make use of the works of contemporary Chinese authors to illustrate each point in our own line of reasoning.

II

The first level of relationship comes about quite simply and naturally from the fact that literature is a major vehicle for expressing religious experience. The poet Shelley once said that poetry "remains forever the light of life". He contends that it is the task of poetry to make truth, goodness and beauty present to each of us, even in times when the forces of evil seem to predominate within society. "Great works of art," he says, "are like sacred links in the chain of thought, proceeding from the accumulated wisdom of numberless people who are drawn together to where spirit meets spirit; its hidden power attracts like a magnet, uniting, inspiring and holding together all living creatures."² The German theologian Karl Rahner states in his essay "Poetry and Christianity" that God in his mercy is acting within us long before he formally reveals his presence to us. Rahner states that prior to their ever hearing the proclamation of the Gospel, God has already entered into the spirit of human beings through their individual life-experiences.³ We can see from Shelley the poet and Rahner the theologian that a work of art proceeding from the human spirit is essentially sacred and an expression of the highest form of love. Poets with this kind of love at their command are able not only to open themselves to

the finite world about them, but also to transcend its limitations, even though full comprehension of its vast mysteries may still elude them. This movement towards "transcendence" is ignited by the creative imagination. The critic Robert Barth credits the imagination with being the only power capable of bringing together the secular and the sacred, the finite and the infinite. Shelley along with Rahner is convinced that no distinction exists between the literary and the religious imagination. Thus, it is by means of the creative imagination that we are able to come to a comprehensive understanding of the symbolic languages employed by both religion and art.⁴

Contemporary authors who exemplify this first level of relationship, contrary to what one might suppose, are not just those who are under the spell of Western Christian culture; there are also many to be found among writers rooted in Chinese society as well. One example of the latter is Zhang Chengzhi, a young writer who has a special reverence and veneration for life and for nature. His novel *Golden Pastures* is replete with religious language which he uses to describe his devotion to the earth and faith in the sacredness of pastoral life. Both are a constant source of inspiration for him. At one point in his novel, his hero Xiaoxia engages in ritualistic sacrifice, which takes the form of a dance in celebration of youth and life. In another place, he describes the awe he feels at the sight of a large herd of wild horses thundering across the valley floor, which he finds so inspiring that it "touched the mystical sense deep within my young heart". Xiaoxia yearns to draw closer to Eji, the woman he loves, and to that "spiritual force" which animates her. This is the kind of spiritual world that has always been the object of Zhang's searching and lies at the centre of his art. In Van Gogh's paintings of sunflowers, he sees beyond the flowers to the love that is bursting forth, transcending the mundane and entering "into the realm of the sacred". He feels that it is Van Gogh's love which is the animating element which allows him to abide in the world of the sacred. It is, for Zhang, a religious impulse that drives Van Gogh the artist forward; a spiritual ideal which Zhang himself feels is akin to his own and which impels him, too, towards the same spiritual world he describes in *Golden Pastures*⁵. There can be no doubt that Zhang's affinity with Van Gogh lies in the area of religious ideals. For Zhang, however, attaining religious ideals has also become the sole aim

and purpose of his artistic endeavour.

Zhou Zuoren is another modern Chinese author who gives special attention to this level of the encounter of religion and literature. He sees "the union between the human being and God, the experience of oneness between self and the world" as the one constant and common denominator between religion and literature. He borrows from Kropotkin when trying to explain in detail his conviction that the aim of an artist is to transmit to others the feelings he himself has experienced in nature and life. He says that one can judge by the quality, precision, and force of the feeling transmitted to what extent the artist has or has not achieved his goal. According to Zhou, the highest and purest feelings of which human beings are capable can be found only on the spiritual levels of experience. Hence, art at its best is essentially a religious act.⁶

Zhou, while espousing no particular religious affiliation, recognizes that all great works of art create a sense of spiritual union between subject and object. In the aesthetic process the self and the world are brought together into a oneness that stands on the threshold of the world of the sacred, where God and the human being become one. Zhou calls the religious feeling that is experienced when reading literary works the first level of the relationship between literature and religion.

III

The internal links that join religion and literature make it possible and necessary for them to interact also on the level of ultimate values, i.e. those values which are rooted in faith. Here we may borrow the German theologian Paul Tillich's concept of "ultimate concern", which he uses to describe the reciprocal relationship between literature and religion, as an introduction to our discussion of this second level of relationship. Tillich has written:

This concept ("ultimate concern") embodies a consideration of the two fundamental questions that concern the enduring nature and ultimate value of humanity; namely, what is the meaning of the world in which we live, and how can we explain the destiny of this world, our own personal destiny, as well as the destiny of our fellow creatures?⁷

Tillich is grappling with problems here that touch upon the very mystery of human life: what is the meaning and value of existence, of human suffering, of good and evil, of human anxieties about dying and death and what becomes of the human spirit after death, and how does a belief or lack of belief in an afterlife influence our present commitment to ideals in this life? All these questions occupy the attention of both literary writers and theologians. But this centering of their focus on the major issues of life need not be done in isolation. Each can draw upon the experience and wisdom of the other and learn together how to face such issues with wit and courage. One cannot expect the theologian to substitute literature for the Gospel; on the other hand, no one wants the literary writer to limit his search of "heaven's will" to the works of theology alone. Nonetheless, both writer and theologian share the same starting point, which is an "ultimate concern" for the welfare of the world and the destiny of humankind. Each has his or her own mission in life, and they are essentially different. The writer's responsibility is to express in literary form and make present to the reader the universal feelings and experiences of men and women everywhere. Writers share a concern for people insofar as they are part and parcel of the human condition which is the subject of the writer's craft. They are immersed in the reality of human history, and they must deal with the perplexities which history and society place before them. (Qu Yuan's *Heaven Asks* is a fine example of this.) But it does not fall within the literary writer's expertise to give an ordered and coherent response to the ultimate questions of human life. A theologian deals in religious reflection, and the salvific nature of religion's own spiritual mission makes the theologian vital in this area of human concern. While the literary artist's ideas do not have serious implications for theology, the work of reflective analysis demands of the theologian that he or she go deeper into an understanding of the basic nature of the human condition and the ethical norms that should govern human behaviour. In the words of Tillich:

They (the theologians) must inquire into what constitutes and perpetuates human experience. Why do we know clearly that perfect freedom is not possible and yet feel the need to continue to seek it? If human hope is so fragile, why must we exert so much effort in overcoming death's hopelessness? If life be so

chaotic how can we overcome despair in the face of so many contradictions? If life cannot be without its failures, how are we to rebuild hope and preserve faith? ⁸

Obviously, Chinese writers and Christian theologians do not always share like convictions when it comes to these matters. Liu Xiaofeng is of the opinion that the way of religion is to view the limitations of sensible forms against the backdrop of the Absolute; whereas the way of the Chinese poets, the aesthetic way, is to reach out for the Absolute through the apprehension of sensible forms.

To arrive at the root of the matter, the contradictions between esthetics and religion lie in the antithesis between the individual's natural life of the senses and an eternal life that transcends the individual. It is the contradiction that exists between singing a paean in praise of natural life as opposed to proclaiming a gospel of spiritual gifts and absolute love. It is the contradiction between self-salvation and salvation from that which is other than self. It is the contradiction between escaping human suffering and shouldering the burden of human suffering...⁹

Perhaps Liu Xiaofeng puts too much emphasis on the contradictions. Faith, hope and love are traditionally the "three ways" to God, which Christians believe are capable of saving humanity and bestowing eternal life. Of the three, faith takes precedence. As one comes to accept, in faith, one's finiteness, the limitations of human existence and the inevitability of death, hope then wells up in the believing heart, which is now made capable of reaching out to embrace Christ and his love. It is Christ's love that becomes the sign and symbol of eternal life and serves as the model for all other loves, be they human or divine. Such a love gives to the believer the strength to shoulder every kind of human suffering and even face up to death itself. It is not uncommon to find among Western mystics the notion of death spoken of as the pinnacle of self-sacrificing love. However, faith can be of two kinds: religious or human. Religious faith is a kind of transcendental power of the will which is circumscribed by certain religious teachings while human faith exists on the natural level, where man-made myths or dreams often become the material for a belief system from which many are able to draw substantial strength and meaning in the midst of life's struggles and pain.

Among the Chinese authors writing today, we find some who actually cherish the religious notion of "saving" or "rescuing humanity. Shi Tiesheng is one such writer, and we find in two of his novels, *Original Sin* and *Heart Strings*, examples of what might be called the "saving others" and "saving oneself syndrome.

You will not find acknowledgement of the existence of a godhead in the pages of *Original Sin*. But the author does make use of various kinds of myths in place of a formal religious system of belief to infuse human life with strength, hope and meaning. His main character Shi Shu is a paralytic who is unable to move from the waist down. He lies in bed at home, unable to see the world outside his window. Yet there, alone and isolated, he plays upon his imagination and fashions for himself a world of delicate beauty. From this he gains the strength to go on living. He imagines the biblical symbol of the Kingdom of God as a house of the purest white colour, and he peoples it with characters from stories he remembers told him by story-tellers as a child. He needs these stories to remain in contact with the world he has created around himself. He uses them to reaffirm his own existence and to store up hope for a brighter future. One day a group of children arrive and, pushing his bed outside, they give him the opportunity to search for his beautiful white house, which by now has become "sacred" in his eyes. But alas, he is unable to find it, and he returns to his room depressed and without hope. The children who had brought him outside to see the real world were also disappointed that he had failed to find his dream. Confronted by reality, his "Kingdom of God" disappears; his imagination fails him; he can no longer count on it to provide the spiritual strength necessary to bring him salvation. He becomes ill to the point of death, but he gradually recovers. He then embarked on another plan. This time he would "save himself". Self-salvation meant for him that he would now rely not on his imagination but solely upon his own physical strength. He would blow bubbles, believing that the more bubbles he blew the sooner he would be able to get up and walk. While this was a whim and a myth, which like the bubbles themselves easily dissipated, nonetheless, it became for him a well-spring of new life.

From his hope of finding the Kingdom of God (his pure white house) to his disappointment of not being able to step on

the earth and walk, Shi Shu represents one kind of Chinese spiritual reality. Shi Shu was, in fact, always waiting for salvation to come to him. Even his efforts at "self-salvation" were based on a myth of his own creation. On the other hand, his father is portrayed in the book as a true seeker after "self-salvation". The whole purpose of his life was to earn the money to buy medicines to cure his son. It did not matter to him that the medicines he bought proved ineffective, nor would anyone dare to suggest he give up his fruitless efforts. All life was for him concentrated on the hope of his son one day being able to walk again. This hope gave him enough strength to carry on with his life. But his faith in reason also proved wanting in the end when his son out of fear and naivete posed "ultimate questions" about the meaning of the universe. "Is the world as we know it rushing headlong towards self-destruction? And if so, can science provide another place where human life can continue?" The boy asked his father, but his father could only reply: "I believe that it is possible." Here the father admits to his son that faith is also a necessary prerequisite for scientists. It is only by their faith that they are able to affirm that science may have meaning for humanity's survival.

The blind man of Shi's tragedy, *Heart Stings*, is also linked to the ageless human myth. He is fated to wander the world playing his lute and telling his stories as his only source of hope. He believed that when he heard the sound of his lute string snap for the 1,000th time, he would then be able to remove from inside the instrument a scrap of paper on which was written the cure of his blindness. The tragedy is not in the man being blind but rather in that he has invested his hope in an empty dream. For after a lifetime of labour when the string of his bow breaks for the 1,000th time, he finds within the lute only a blank piece of paper. Shi's title, *Heart Strings*, underlines the author's meaning that it was not just the lute but the strings of the old man's heart that were ultimately broken as he saw the purpose and meaning of his travels, his songs and stories, his life itself evaporate before his eyes. What Shi Tiesheng is saying in his novel is that the strings of the human heart are also fixed upon two points: the first is to have some goal to seek, and the second is to find meaning in seeking it. Only when the strings of our heart are firmly bound to both of these can the instrument of our lives play music. The old man's young disciple, who is also

blind, has his dreams shattered in turn when it comes about that the girl whom he loves is married to another man. Both teacher and disciple withdraw into separate solitudes. But Shi will not have them sit stoically waiting for death, nor pay for a salvation that may or may not come from the outside. The blind old man remembers with fond compassion his young disciple from whom he is now separated and who is also destined to endure a similar fate as his own. He loves him with an abiding love and remembers the words of his own former master who once told him that life of itself had no purpose: "The fate of human beings is like a stringed instrument. Only when the strings are tightly drawn and taut can it be played, and then all that is necessary is to play the instrument well. For those destined by fate to be blind, even a vain hope of one day 'seeing' is enough to bring forth the playing of music and the singing of songs." In this way, the old man uses his master's "illusion" to "save" his young disciple, and in saving him, he himself is saved.

Shi spins a tragic tale. Perhaps his own unfortunate accident which left him half-paralyzed caused all his writings to be imbued with a brooding sense of fatalism. Fatalism is not of itself a religious sentiment; however, Shi does make use of such religious concepts as original sin to explain what he sees and feels to be the negative side of an inescapable reality. On the surface, he seems to be seeking a religious solution to the dilemma of life, but as I understand him, Shi's faith remains always on the human level. While he makes use of religious words such as "salvation" and "self-salvation", he does so merely to explain the tragic nature of the human condition and the futility of pursuing ultimate human concerns.

The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno in his *The Tragic Sense of Life*, which caused some raised eyebrows in Spain during the 1930's when it was first published, teaches that tragedy is a result of a contradiction within the human heart. The soul desires eternal life, but the mind says this is only a dream.¹⁰ Perhaps the tragedy of Shi who wants to walk again and the blind men who want to see lies in their refusal to accept the limitations of their crippled condition. May this not be compared to the tragedy of those who, while sound in body, are unwilling to accept a life that ends in death but continue to hope for a life that is everlasting? While religion and literature may differ in the ways they seek to resolve the tragic dilemmas of

human life, they are one in their common concern for the human being.

IV

The most direct link between literature and religion is where the subject matter and its form of expression interact, permeate and influence each other. I would call this the third level of inter-relationship. When it comes to subject matter, the influence of religion on literature is the more striking. Literary works that deal directly with religion are of two kinds: those that probe the concrete religious influences that have confronted and brought contradictions into the lives of individuals and society, and the body of religious literature which deals directly with religious teaching. In contemporary Chinese society, literary works dealing strictly with religion in the second sense are very few. But after 30 years of political oppression and social rejection of religion, works that touch upon clashes between religion and authority, believers and ideologists are more common. An early example of this is *Sunset's Afterglow*, written by Li Ping and published in 1981. The author gives a rather lengthy personal interpretation of religion and its teachings. Li states clearly that the meaning of religion is not to be found in belief in the existence of God, but rather in its capability to purify and sanctify, to further the exaltation, perfection and enlightenment of human beings.

Another work that reflects the clash between religion and ideology is Zhu Lin's story about Heaven and Hell. It concerns Li Yu, an overseas Chinese and former Christian, who has returned from abroad to live. During the Cultural Revolution, she throws her support behind the cause and with a "religious devotion" shows her complete commitment to the proletarian revolution. However, brutal and merciless acts soon render her "offering", spiritual and physical, and "ideals" worth next to nothing. She was betrayed, entrapped, and in the end put to death unjustly. But it is the author's contention that while her body suffered torment in this world, Li Yu's soul attained eternal peace with God in heaven. While this kind of literature contains little formal religious teaching, it does affirm the values of religious faith. Zhu Lin makes use of the Christian concepts of truth, goodness and beauty to place them in contrast with the

lies, the evils, and the unrelieved ugliness of the political struggles of that time.

After the Cultural Revolution a new kind of literature began to emerge. It was anti-ideology and a literature of torment. Works with religious themes were few, however, and those that did appear seemed quite shallow. This situation reflected more the authors' superficial knowledge of religion than anything else. Even so, such works were to break new ground for the appearance of what was to be a more mature and relevant religious literature.

I mentioned previously that both literature and religion make equal use of imagination, linking the secular and the sacred, the finite and the infinite. In this they have many literary forms in common. One example is their common use of poetic language. The literary value of the Bible is without precedent in the West. Both the Old and New Testaments make frequent use of songs, canticles and other literary forms to praise God and God's works. And in the New Testament the parable is only one of many literary forms used to relate salvation history.

In Chinese literature, however, this third level of relationship is rather weak, especially when it comes to modern Chinese literature.

Lao She, while giving a lecture to a group of Buddhist monks at the Han-Tibetan Academy during the 1940's, said among other things: "It is regrettable that one cannot find in all of Chinese literature one reference to the human 'soul'."¹¹ He also said that Chinese literature makes no formal exhortation to the individual to do good and to avoid evil. Many will quote the aphorism: "Good will be rewarded with good and evil with evil." But there is no attempt to make the spiritual life a mainstay of Chinese literature. Perhaps it is true, as Liu Xiaofeng has observed, that China's traditional cultural morality is too detached in spirit to allow even China's greatest poets to transcend the limitations of human reason to rise to the heights of religious spirituality. Confucians propose the unity of heaven and earth; Buddhists teach the transitory nature of life; the Daoists advocate a life lived to the full. All of them have had such a profound influence in defining the interests of Chinese writers and limiting their focus to this life only that few have given time to the serious consideration of the question of death and the hereafter. The Confucian saying: "If I do not know life,

know death?" and Zhuangze's "Life and death are determined by fate" seem to have provided the Chinese with satisfactory answers to such mysteries for many centuries. Death was viewed as an occasion for showing filial piety and personal responsibility to one's country, one's ancestors, one's family and friends. Little serious thought, however, has ever been given to the final destination of the soul.

Recently, Chen Pingyuan said that the principle character of modern religion seems to be found in morality and in its ethical influence on the individual and society. He writes:

Buddha and God have passed from being the end to becoming merely a means. The ultimate aim of faith no longer seems to be a religious experience, that is to say a mystical passage transcending gain and suffering to arrive at ultimate happiness in the presence of Buddha or God. Now religion is used as a way of purifying one's emotions, strengthening one's courage, and as an ally in the struggle against the forces of misfortune and suffering.¹²

This is an accurate description of how the writers I have discussed above view religion. All of them manifest to some degree this tendency in their works.

In the face of objective reality, I can only state that the forces of culture are deep and tenacious and cannot be dismissed or diverted by wishes alone. However, cultures are very much inter-related and one local culture can indeed assimilate the values of another in a very natural sort of way. It is happening all the time. But when it comes to traditional cultures, a rather long and drawn out process of accepting and rejecting, shifting and evaluating must precede any substantial changes. The influence of Christian culture on contemporary Chinese society is undeniable. But we shall have to wait and see whether Christianity will follow the path of Buddhism, that is to say, will it eventually be assimilated into the larger Chinese culture, and if so, what new form it will take.

From the perspective of inter-disciplinary studies, however, it is well-worth the effort to continue to explore the terrain of literature and religion. From the cultural standpoint these two subjects are intimately connected both in terms of matter and spirit. These are gold mines which continually unearth new riches. In the context of China and the West, our mutual study

is not limited to discovering similarities, but also to lead us to celebrate the differences in our literary and religious backgrounds and traditions. Great value is to be found for both sides in the differing interpretations of the mystery of life, and we are not lacking in writers and poets of spirit to lead the way. Perhaps what we need most at this time is a renewed commitment to increased dialogue and discussions among experts from the fields of religion and literature that can assure a continuing development of sound research for both disciplines.

Notes

1. Mo Mo (Liu Xiaofeng), "The Fears and Loves of Our Generation", *Study*, Issue 6, 1988.
 2. "A Defense of Poetry" re-quoted from Robert Barth, "Literature and Religious Imagination" in *Literature and Religion--Collection of Articles from the First International Meeting on Literature and Religion*, Taiwan, Sept. 1989.
 3. op. cit. "Literature and Religious Imagination".
 4. op. cit.
 5. Zhang Chengzhi, "Confined Flames", *Harvests* #2, 1988.
 6. Zhou Zuoren, "The Sacred Books and Chinese Literature", Originally published in *The Monthly Novel*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1921. Reprinted in *Chinese Comparative Literature Research Studies, 1910-1949*, Peking University Press, March, 1989.
 7. Liu Xiaofeng, *Salvation and the Transitory World*, Shanghai People's Press, April 1988, p. 78.
 8. *Religion and Wisdom*, Hesse and Brecht's works on China, Karl Joseph Kuss, Lin Qipan translators, *Literature and Religion*, cf. footnote #2.
 9. op. cit. *Salvation and the Transitory World*, p. 36.
 10. Helen Gardener, "Concerning Various Concepts on the Nature of Tragedy", *Religion and Literature*, Sichuan People's Press, Feb. 1989.
 11. "Spiritual Literature and Buddhism", originally published in *The Sound of the Tide*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1941. Reprinted in *Chinese Comparative Literature Research Studies, 1919-1949*, cf. footnote 6.
 12. "On Chen Pingyuan Religious Coloring of and Xudishan's novels", published in *Clashes between Eastern and Western Cultures*, Zhejiang Art Press, Dec. 1987.
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