
Religious Expression in American Literature

by Ruth K. Zimmer

It is common knowledge that religious expression was the dominant motif of our earliest American colonial literature. Though rationalism, romanticism, realism, naturalism, and now existentialism have all at some time threatened to drown out the religious and moral concerns in American literature, the expression of the spiritual dilemma of man and the spiritual needs of the human spirit continue to be heard in various forms in our literature: in our dissent literature, in the new popularity and demand for devotional and meditational writings (part of our heritage since before 1650!), and always in the lyric cry of the simple, separate person (either poet or novelist) who at some depth of his consciousness cannot wholly accept his culture's value system but seems eternally torn between materialism and progress and his intuitive sense of the need and importance of some transcending eternal values.

All of this reminds us of our heritage: of those in the American past who have left a record for us of their trust and faith in God and His care of them in the great "American" experiment. In this bicentennial year, it seems only fitting that we look back into our American past somewhat. You may remember C. S. Lewis had his experienced devil, Screwtape, advise the young, inexperienced devil, Wormwood, in Letter 27 that one of their chief tasks as devils was to separate modern man from his past, and to "cut him off," by any means, from the great thinkers of the past. Screwtape writes:

Since we cannot deceive the whole human race *all* the time, it is most important . . . to cut every generation off from the others . . . (p. 129).

But we must not let our past be taken from us. Especially in this bi-

Mrs. Ruth K. Zimmer is Associate Professor of English at Asbury College. She holds the doctor's degree from the University of Kentucky. Dr. Zimmer is listed in Outstanding Educators of America, and holds membership in the American Association of University Women and in the Kentucky Philological Association.

centennial year it is good to remember, as William Bradford so faithfully recorded for us in *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1620-1647), that when the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, "they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of Heaven who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, . . . to set their feet on the firm and stable earth . . ." America. This was a memorable moment in our history, beautifully illustrating the sincerity and faith of our forefathers in the power and the providential care of God for His children. Surely the Pilgrims started New England with a clear sense of Godly purpose and intentions. The stylistic repetitions and parallelisms in this literary masterpiece of Bradford's also reminds us that its author knew his Bible well. Others have acknowledged, of course, that the Bible has been the greatest single influence on American literature, but surely it is a point worth repeating early in even a brief treatment of religious expression in American literature. As has often been pointed out by literary historians, our major American writers have usually been steeped in Biblical imagery, phrasing and rhythms. This has been true both of the "orthodox" writers and the "unorthodox" (in the Biblical sense).

Historically, as is well known, the Puritans in England found themselves in direct opposition to the leading "high" churchman, Archbishop Laud. Standing for simplicity of worship, the Puritans wanted to rid the English church of the elaborate ceremonies and abuses which they felt came from Rome. And so they became "dissenters," many migrating to Massachusetts. Thus was established the great tradition of dissent literature in America.

Some of the great landmarks in American literature have been in this tradition of dissent as illustrated by the following four titles, one from each of the four centuries of American history: Roger Williams' *The Bloody Tenant of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (1644); *The Declaration of Independence* (1776); Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* (1849); and *I'll Take my Stand* (1930) by "Twelve Southerners." The importance of the continued vitality of this tradition in the American experience cannot be overstated at a time like the present, when the dissenting spirit is seriously threatened by totalitarian pressures all around us. 1984 has become a present-day threat to all of us in the world community, if not an actuality in many socialist-communist countries. Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life* is meant for all of us — it is an indictment against oppression and totalitarianism

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in any form, the ruthless silencing and putting down of the “dissenting voice.”

It is well, then, for us to remember that if we should lose this dissenting spirit, America should become something a great deal less than it has been.

From its beginnings, American literature has also been an individualistic literature designed to explore the passions and emotions (an aspect of the Puritan character often overlooked). As a result, when the Puritan turned inward, emphasizing the spiritual, devotional side of his religious experience, his poetry took on the form of the lyric cry of the simple, separate person.

The very finest American colonial poetry written in this tradition of poetic meditation was that of Edward Taylor. In his poems, which he called *Preparatory Meditations*, written in the mid-seventeenth century, Taylor gave religious expression to the soul's struggle and progress — a poet's view of his personal experience of God and the world. “Lord, melt me all up into love for Thee,/Whose loveliness excels what love can be,” he would write, as he would prepare himself for Holy Communion. One of my favorites is “Meditation Eight” which is taken from the text of John: “I am the living bread.” I find the imagery intensely moving. In this poem the soul is a “Bird of Paradise” in a “wicker cage” — representing man's body. In the poem, the bird (soul) “throws away its food” (for it has “peck'd the fruit forbid”). As a result the bird has fallen into a “Celestial famine sore,” for he has no “soul bread” and the “world” has none to give. But God in His infinite grace and mercy takes His own dear Son — the purest “wheat” in Heaven — and grinds and kneads His Son into the Bread of Life (called “Heaven's Sugar Cake” in the poem), which He sends down from Heaven and offers to the starving bird.

This Soule Bread take . . . This Bread of Life . . . doth cry — Eate,
Eate me, Soul, and thou shalt never dy.”

In the next century, another godly man who poignantly expressed his religious yearnings and experiences was the Quaker, John Woolman. Among the many journals written in America's early period, Woolman's (1774) is unequaled as an enduring literary classic. In its simplicity, candor, purity and grace, it touches the very soul of the reader — be he Quaker or no. It is the revelation of the growth and development of a “schöne seele” — in this case, the beautiful soul of a merchant-tailor,

John Woolman. It is an intimate journey into the soul of another human being.

A contemporary of Woolman's, recognized as the greatest of all Calvinist theologians and philosophers, Jonathan Edwards is also one of the greatest of all American writers before the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, Edwards is known chiefly for one thing: his fire-and-brimstone sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Now Edwards did write and deliver this sermon in the mid-eighteenth century and meant it: men are sinners, and God, he writes, is angry with them for their sins, and does hold out dire punishment. But in a sense, is the present-day prospect of an atomic holocaust less frightening than the Pit of Hell in Edwards' sermon?

On the other hand, it has been too often forgotten that Edwards' gospel is not confined to the negative. He also wrote *A Divine and Supernatural Light*, a positive description of that "true sense of the divine excellency of the things revealed in the Word of God, and a conviction of the truth and reality of them . . ." In this sermon and in his beautiful *Personal Narrative*, Jonathan Edwards transmits a "sense of the loveliness of God's Holiness." These works reveal an appreciation of beauty, a simplicity of illustration, a sensitivity and tenderness — a side of Jonathan Edwards that has been obscured. I recommend a return to reading Edwards' *Personal Narrative*.

It is true that Edwards' severe Calvinistic doctrine can be a stumbling block and barrier to readers, but it is well to remember that Edwards' basic doctrines are, after all, very basic Christian doctrines. There is such a thing as Christian "orthodoxy," and in the present state of the world, the distinguishing and definition of orthodox essentials, or our basic assumptions, are of chief importance. Those usually agreed upon are (1) the sovereignty of God; (2) the divinity of Christ; (3) original sin; (4) atonement, and (5) the inspiration of the Scriptures.

For my purposes in the treating of American literature and religious expression, I use these five traditional points as my criteria for speaking of "orthodox" and "unorthodox" religious expression in American writers. The assumption that most often provides the crucial distinction in our literature, however, concerns the "nature" of man. Thus, I have chosen the chief of these basic "orthodox" essentials to be the writer's recognition or rejection of the doctrine of "original sin." Whether man is regarded as good or bad by nature is the crucial question, and this basic view raises all kinds of questions which concern what is sometimes called "the human condition." This distinction between orthodox

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and unorthodox Christian writers, I believe, is a useful one, for the blurring of this distinction has led to an interesting and rather significant anomaly — a paradoxical conclusion regarding our American democratic culture. Is it not ironical indeed, from the Christian standpoint, that the “unorthodox” writers have come to be regarded as “more American” or “more democratic” than the “orthodox”? Yet most of our accepted literary historians have led us to believe, sometimes by implication and sometimes by direct statement, that our American democratic culture can best be defined by the heterodox ideas of say Jefferson, Emerson, or Whitman. But valuable and even Christian as many of the ideas of these great Americans are, this confusion of orthodox and unorthodox Christian thinking has seemed to imply that “democracy” and “Christianity” are necessarily incompatible. In this bicentennial year, should we not undertake a re-examination and a serious re-thinking of the bases of our democratic assumptions? Does Emerson’s assertion that “the highest revelation is that God is in every man” express the true spirit of our democracy? On the contrary, Emerson’s tendency to deify man, in the long run, can be seen to be an unworkable as well as unsatisfactory rational basis for the democratic way of life (as well as heretical Christian doctrine).

What is at center here is the most fundamental of all questions. *What is the nature of man?* Any view which asserts man’s intrinsic goodness is denying original sin, and thus reduces the Cross to nothing more than a superfluous symbol. This view has been proven in ages past as well as in our present age to be most inadequate as a preparation for “Life.”

However, though I think of Emerson and Whitman as “unorthodox” thinkers, representing as they did the early nineteenth century belief that man is innately good, and reflecting the accompanying optimistic faith in “progress,” I nevertheless recognize the genuine Christian concerns in their lyric cry for brotherly love, for us to see *all* our brothers and sisters on earth as fellow *souls*, and to strive to perceive and experience the reality and importance of the spirit. Surely they gave beautiful religious expression to the soul’s yearnings. They recognized and committed themselves to living with a daily sensitivity to the present importance of ultimate things and challenged their readers to do the same. Make the most of every day, Emerson urges in his poem “Days.” Think in terms of a meaningful life. Open your eyes to the constant spiritual reality that is available — even offered to you, and receive as many spiritual gifts (which he calls “diadems” in the poem) as you can, for

the more you take, the more there are, and the more you create for others. Emerson saw clearly the problem of lesser “things” taking control in men’s lives — as he wrote in his famous “Ode to Channing”: “Things are in the saddle,/And ride mankind.” Emerson’s works as a whole constitute a “poetic vision” of reality — *not* a religious philosophic system. Or, at least to the Christian, his philosophy is invalid, but his “poetic vision” of reality — in the symbolic sense — is often valid and helpful to the sensitive reader.

The same can be said for Whitman. His *Song of Myself* is not a logical philosophic treatise, but a symphonic imaginative expression of a journey of the soul (the “true self”) through America. His story is what his “Soul” discovers about itself and “other selves” on his journey, and he passes this poetic vision on to you — all you future “Souls” who may read him. I do find it interesting that Whitman in his later years and later poetry calls more upon God, and less upon the “Oversoul” or the “Great Float of Eternity.”

Thoreau in his *Walden* is also concerned with discovering spiritual Truth. But first, he warns, we need to awaken. We need to throw off sleep (apathy), and anticipate the dawn so we can be alert to what is. “A man sits as many risks as he runs,” he reminds us. “Read not the Times — Read Eternities.” Spend the day for spiritual profit, for you cannot “kill time, without injuring Eternity.” Thoreau makes us ask the right questions. In his section on *Economy* he teaches a lesson in rather unorthodox economics. Ben Franklin said “Time is money.” But to Thoreau, time is also “Life.” Therefore, whatever you buy costs you a certain amount of life. We are spending life for things, he reminds us. Are you getting a good bargain? If you are going to be an economist — be a real one. “A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can . . . leave alone”

Although Thoreau never leaves Concord, he takes us on inward journeys into the recesses of our souls — forcing us to seek answers for our “dear life’s sake” which he says is “too precious a commodity” to be spent frivolously or lightly.

Longfellow, in contrast to Thoreau, traveled widely and wrote of many far-away places or happenings. But he brought them all back to the family hearthside — making the unfamiliar, familiar. Remember these famous lines from *Day is Done*?

. . . And the night shall be filled with music,
And the cares that infest the day,
Shall fold their tents, like the Arabs,

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And as silently steal away.

Or the equally famous lines from "A Psalm to Life."

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream! . . .

.
Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time . . .

Longfellow and his Quaker friend and fellow-poet, Whittier, transmit genuine faith and trust, giving assurances that the alternative to day-dreams is *not* nightmares, but reality — that dreams can help consolidate one's sense of day-to-day reality, rather than threaten it. Longfellow and Whittier offered spiritual guidance, encouragement, and inspiration in their poetry, giving assurance and comfort to troubled readers. My own favorite of Whittier's, (besides "Snowbound" which calls for a long winter evening to fully enjoy), is his "First-Day Thoughts." (The Quakers designated the days of the week by numbers, and "First-Day" is Sunday.)

In calm and cool and silence, once again
I find my old accustomed place among
My brethern, where, perchance, no human tongue
Shall utter words; . . .
There, syllabled by silence, let me hear
The still small voice which reached the prophet's ear;
.
There let me strive with each besetting sin,
Recall my wandering fancies, and restrain
The sore disquiet of a restless brain,
And, as the path of duty is made plain,
May grace be given that I may walk therein,
Not like the hireling, for his selfish gain,
With backward glances and reluctant tread, . . .
But cheerful, in the light around me thrown,
Walking as one to pleasant service led;
Doing God's will as if it were my own,
Yet trusting not in mine, but in His strength alone!

Twentieth century critics for the most part have rejected and neglected the "Fireside Poets" as too superficial, too optimistic, and too

“religious,” moralistic or didactic, lacking what the moderns have termed “tragic vision.” Stylistically they also have been rejected as they do not speak in paradox, ambiguities, and complexities — the only style the moderns feel suitable for our “mixed-up” twentieth century!

However, we have had many other American poets and novelists well able, it seems, to add the tragic dimension to the human condition — men of “dark vision.” As we examine the human condition of the American, as most of our great writers have set it forth, we find him depicted as both a responsible moral agent and a tragic figure. The eternal moral warfare within himself makes man a “tragic figure,” for he finds himself imperfect and fallible. Try as he might to perfect himself and his society through social reforms and programs, science and technology, as he has been since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he finds he is not a machine, and cannot be improved by technology or scientific “programs.” Instead, indeed, with great zeal he often seems perversely to be ingeniously inventing new means to bring about his own destruction.

But our greatest American writers have not left man in this hopeless state unless by his own stubborn willfulness man has chosen self-destruction (usually both physical and spiritual). Instead, the alternative of God’s redeeming grace is always there, never beyond man’s reach. This is the essence of the Christian hope in human experience as it has been presented dramatically and poetically by many of our great American writers.

However, man as moral agent also cannot escape his own responsibility and complicity in all the evil both around him and within him. Thus he is still a “tragic” figure. This tragic aspect is dramatized powerfully, for example, in three of the great American writers of so-called “dark vision”: Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner. In Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, the spiritually-devastated preacher, Dimmsdale, finally rises to the scaffold, with Hester and Pearl at his side to confess his complicity and guilt. Melville’s obsessed Ahab blasphemes as he insists on making that final suicidal attack on the enigmatic white whale. Then in the twentieth century, Faulkner gives us Joe Christmas hounded by the intolerable conflicts and hostilities both within him and surrounding him. All these characters and situations and many more illustrate man’s eternal moral warfare with the evil forces within his own soul and without in the society around him. Arthur Dimmsdale’s civil war would have continued in any part of the world. He could not flee with Hester through the forest to England and “freedom.” Only his confes-

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sion on the scaffold resolves his difficulty and “frees” him from his moral guilt.

Another of the twentieth century writers, T. S. Eliot, became an Anglo-Catholic in the late 1920's. In Eliot's poetry the reader discovers a steady progression toward religious belief as the poet attempts to solve his own moral crisis. But it is not an easy, spontaneous affirmation. Instead the reader is taken inside the mind of a modern intellectual who perceives the spiritual sterility both within himself and in everything and everybody around him in his “social” world. His various poems dramatically and symbolically describe the poet's growing consciousness of his *need*, his feeling of *necessity* for religious faith, yet his difficulty as a “modern intellectual” in accepting a “simple” religious faith. The poet finds this “simplicity” of religious faith almost impossible, for it is the antithesis of the modern “complexity” of his world. His poems reflect this agonized struggle for belief through the complex consciousness of a modern mind on the brink of total despair because, though fully conscious of his spiritual famine, he finds himself, as his famous “anti-hero,” J. Alfred Prufrock, “incapable of action.” In utter desperation, however, he gradually strives consciously (through his poems) for religious faith – perhaps illustrating again the old idea that “God's opportunity waits upon man's extremity.” This is fully expressed in *The Wasteland*. Francis Schaeffer in *Art and the Bible* comments how Eliot's fragmented form in this poem matches his vision of fragmented modern man. In the final part of the poem, called “What the Thunder Said,” Eliot has the “thunder” (*possibly* a symbol for God's voice) say three words that suggest an answer to man's spiritual wasteland: Give; Sympathize; and Control.

Each of these words is given fuller meaning in the context of the poem. However, these words are given in Sanskrit in the poem: Datta; Dayadhyam; Damyata, and then explained in a footnote by Eliot. Eliot used Sanskrit, the parent-language of Western culture, to suggest (symbolically) the continuity of Western religious experience. Eliot then closes his poem with another Sanskrit word – repeated three times: Shantih; Shantih; Shantih [sic]. In another footnote he tells us this word is a formal ending or benediction meaning roughly “the peace which passeth understanding.” Immediately Christians will think of Paul's various benedictions in his Epistles, particularly Philipians 4:7: “And the peace of God which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

The Wasteland was published in 1922, before Eliot was converted.

Ash Wednesday written in 1930 and after Eliot's conversion, has been called his "Conversion Poem." Francis Shaeffer (again in *Art and the Bible*) points out that the style of this poem changes, as it must — to convey Christian hope, order, and peace restored to fragmented modern man.

This poem has been called by some critics "one of the chief Christian poems of our time." Though the opening lines suggest a hopelessness akin to that of "Prufrock" and *The Wasteland* ("Because I do not hope to turn again/Because I do not hope . . ."), the *ending* is quite different. The poem progresses to a state of hope, and the soul moves from unbelief to belief, thus having the effect of impressing upon the reader the tremendous spiritual change taking place in the poem. Whereas the ending of *Prufrock* gives the reader a feeling of drowning — dramatically expressing *Prufrock's* sense of his overwhelming inadequacy to face or meet life's demands, *Ash Wednesday* closes with a prayer or, more accurately, a petition. It is the cry of the new believer for the divine "grace" he realizes he will need in order to subdue and make subject his impatient, selfish, individual will to the divine will:

Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace in His will . . .
And even among these rocks
.
Suffer me not to be separated
.
And let my cry come unto Thee

Thus, American writers continue to give religious expression to their sense of the "present importance of ultimate things" from the lyric cries of the Colonial American poet in the mid-seventeenth century, Edward Taylor, the purity of the revelation of the beautiful, quiet spirit of the Quaker, John Woolman, and the penetrating, deeply moving prose of Jonathan Edwards in the mid-eighteenth century, to the flowering of American literature in all its complexity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the positive, affirmative challenges to a fuller life of spiritual awareness of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman and the confident assurances of Christian faith and trust expressed by Longfellow and Whittier, counterbalanced by the dark vision of Hawthorne and Melville in the nineteenth century and Faulkner and T. S. Eliot in the twentieth century — all haunted by man's sinful nature and the

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spiritual chaos, destruction and emptiness his sin has brought upon himself and his world — all calling for the need of love, understanding, and brotherhood, to supplant the cold and indifferent alienation modern man experiences in his mechanistic and materialistic world. Yes, the American lyric cry today continues to express the confusions of conflicts and stresses within the mind and soul, and a sense of deep need and yearning for spiritual love and peace.