Is literature essential to religion?

Transcript

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Welcome to this course of lectures on *Literature in a time of unbelief*. First, a word about that overall title. Over the last half century there has been an intense debate about secularization, about how it is to be defined, and whether it is an inevitable feature of modernity. That debate would take me too far away from my present focus, so I will just indicate that my starting point is that of the important book by Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*[^1], which won the Templeton prize last year. He contrasts life in 1500 with life today. In 1500 the reality of God was taken for granted by the whole of society. It was the underlying assumption of both public and private life. Today, by contrast, a religious view of life is simply one option amongst others. Taylor does not think that religion is unbelievable or finished, but it does have to be argued for against other views. Furthermore, at least in some circles, it has to be argued for against the prevailing zeitgeist or world view which does assume that religion simply cannot be believed and is not to be taken seriously. I recognize that picture of where we are in our society today, and perhaps you do as well. It is the picture of a cultural context that is particularly relevant to this series.

It was not until 1917 that the formal study of English was approved at Cambridge. At Oxford, C.S. Lewis returning from the war, read English for an optional fourth year having first completed Greats. Before that time there was some specialist writing on literature, as by Dr Johnson in the 18th century, and a growing interest in the 19th century, but the discussion of poetry and novels was considered part of the general culture of educated people in an intellectual environment that was predominantly Christian and classical. "Men of letters" would write on a range of cultural subjects. All that has now changed in a number of ways.

First, there developed a high seriousness about the English novel, associated with F.R. Leavis at Cambridge, with his small select canon of novelists. Then there emerged literary theories, in combat with what all that had gone before and with one another. All this had the feel of a new religion and it is not surprising that Terry Eagleton sees the rise of English literature in our society as a response to the failure of religion. As a Professor of English at Oxford put it in his inaugural lecture early in the 20th century, the study of literature not only delights and instructs but above all it has "to save our souls and heal the state." This fundamental shift is well reflected in the prestige our society now accords to novelists and the prominence given in our newspapers to reviews and literary prizes compared to the space given over to serious discussion of religion.

Then, from the religious side it has been increasingly recognized over the last 60 years that novels, poetry and drama are essential reading if theological dogmas are to make any sense at a time when by themselves they seem to so many people either incomprehensible abstractions or unbelievable; and if those dogmas are to be more than stale banalities or propaganda.

It is against that background that the importance of the theme *Literature in a time of unbelief* can be seen. There are of course many forms of literature. The Bible itself is a collection of books containing many different forms of literature. But by literature, for my present purposes, I mean the kinds of books that are reviewed in our national broadsheets, and are enjoyed by the readers of those papers. In that literary world, I would suggest, it is on the whole assumed that religion cannot be taken seriously. Almost the only religious books that are reviewed are ones by people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, which are fiercely hostile to religion. Rational defences of a religious view of life, even when written by the most distinguished philosophers, scientists or other scholars get no look in. It is literature in that world of unbelief with which I am concerned. I should make it clear that there are probably many sincere individual believers in that world, certainly amongst the readers of the books, but it is the assumptions of that culture that I am highlighting by the phrase "Literature in a time of unbelief." But I should also emphasise that despite the critical comment I have just made, my approach to that world of literature will be a positive one. So I come to the title of today's lecture, *Is Literature essential to religion?*

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Literature and religion have in common that they both take us into other worlds. Think if you would of the novels you have read and enjoyed since childhood. I think of *Biggles*, which took me into the world of World War I fighter aces; of *Rider Haggard*, who
took me into a mysterious world that included reincarnation; of Thomas Hardy who took me into the world of 19th century rural poverty, with its sense of a hostile fate brooding over life; of Ian McEwan who in Saturday takes us into the world of a top London neurosurgeon—to mention just a very few.

The distinguished Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish died last month to great mourning in the Arab world. When he received a major literary prize in 2004 he said

Poetry is perhaps what teaches us to nurture the charming illusion: how to be reborn out of ourselves over and over again, and use words to construct a better world, a fictitious world that enables us to sign a pact for a permanent and comprehensive peace...with life.

Poetry and novels take us into a world of their own. But the point is, and this is the second key feature of both literature, and say, the Bible, is that they illuminate the actual world in which we live. There are forms of writing which do not do this, which are, we might say, purely escapist. They take us into an alternative world and leave us there. Fantasy, popular romance, science fiction are always in danger of doing this. Clearly that is not always the case, and perhaps the test must always be that of Dr Johnson when he said that "The only end of writing is to enable the readers better to enjoy life or better to endure it." However, I have to express a personal preference for writing that seems closer to the world in which we live, and clearly does illuminate it. When I was at school we had a visit from a Canadian High School drama group, who put on a performance of Thornton Wilder's play Our Town. The only scenery and props were a few hard back chairs, but the actors took us into the ordinary life of a small town in a way which was haunting and magical. Years later when I read Peter Brooks The Empty Space, I could see that they had conformed almost perfectly to his ideal of what the theatre is about. Through the power of words they had taken me into lives of others in a way that illuminated my life.

That performance conveyed to me an abiding sense of the poignancy of people's lives, however apparently ordinary. So in one way or another I look for literature, not only to take me into another world, but to illuminate the one in which I live.

If I have to put the answer to this question—about why literature, and indeed all the arts have been and are so important—in a single sentence, it would be that the arts bring home to us the mystery and depth of human existence. They not only take us out of the world of getting and spending but they bring about a realization that what really matters is something very different, and that our usual preoccupations are indeed a laying waste of our powers. In Lear's speech to Cordelia at the end of the harrowing tragedy of King Lear, we feel that we have been brought in touch with something that is fundamental to life, not just for those two but for all of us; and it is art that has done this.

Come, let's away to prison;

We two alone will sing like birds I' the cage:

When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,

And ask of thee forgiveness: and we'll live,

And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh

At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues

Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,

Who loses, and who wins; who's in and who's out;

And take upon's the mystery of things,

As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out,

In a wall'd prison, packs and sets of great ones

That ebb and flow by the moon.

In a speech like that, we are acutely conscious of the mystery and depth of human existence and we begin to sense what it is that might really matter.
It is for this reason, I would suggest, that in a time of unbelief, it is from literature, from novels, poetry and plays for example, that people derive insights that in previous ages they might have gained from the Bible and those one or two hour sermons, that were often the norm. Approaching the matter from the other end, as it were, because the Bible and sermons are for so many a great switch off, it is when the great Christian truths are expressed in or related to the imaginative world of literature, that not only are our defensive barriers breached, but we can see something of the real depth and richness of Christian truth. Until recently one of the major themes of Christian teaching was that humanity is fallen and we are all born in original sin. But what on earth does that mean? Well, you only have to read the novels, say of William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, for example, which so many people studied at school, to grasp something of what is meant. Humanity is redeemed and redeemable says the Christian faith. Again, what on earth does that mean? Is there any literature which might help that have some meaning? That is a much more difficult one, which I will be addressing in my second lecture. The point I am making now is well put by the late Howard Root some time ago, when he wrote.

Where do we look now for faithful, stimulating, profound accounts of what it is to be alive in the twentieth century? The inevitable answer to that question carries a judgement. We look to the poet or the dramatist or film producer. In creative works of art we see ourselves anew, come to understand ourselves better and come into touch with just those sources of imagination which should nourish efforts in natural theology.

The present Pope in describing Shakespeare as an expert on humanity has said that.

We need heralds of the Gospel who are experts in humanity who have shared to the full the joys and hopes, the anguish and the sadness of our day.

Of course we all have our own thoughts and insights, all have a capacity to enter into and imagine other worlds. We are each one of us creative in our own way, that is part of what it is to be made in the image of God. But the point about those who produce what comes to be recognized as great art or literature, is that they enable us to see what we did not as first see ourselves, or at least were not able fully to articulate. As W.H.Auden put it.

The experience the poet has to embody in a poem is the experience of a reality common to all men...that which by providence he has been the first to perceive, it is his duty to share with others.

Auden empasises that the reality is common to us all, but the artist has been the first to experience and articulate some aspect of it; and it is interesting that Auden says that “it is his duty” to share this with others. That is why in my radio broadcasts over the years I have never hesitated to quote from poetry and other literature. A line in a poem will often distil years of experience, and embody some insight that can only be expressed that way. If one has been lucky enough to read it, perhaps again, it is a duty as well as a pleasure to pass it on.

Someone once said that “All ethics is a training in sympathy”; and the great enlightenment philosopher David Hume put our capacity to empathise with others at the heart of his ethical theory. Literature has the amazing ability not only to take us into other worlds but to enlarge our sympathy by so doing. Many will have read *The Kite Runner*, which takes us into the brutal world of growing up in Afghanistan in recent decades, and its sequel written from the perspective of women in that country. Not only are we drawn into the experience of others, we come face to face with the great moral themes of humanity, above all issues of loyalty and betrayal.

There is a very powerful witness to literature’s ability to engage and enlarge our sympathies by the Israeli writer Amos Oz. Because of the Nazi experience he made a vow to himself as a young man that he would not have anything to do with post World War II Germany. Then he read some of the writers of that time, and he wrote

They made me imagine myself in their place. I’ll put it more sharply: they seduced me to imagine myself in their stead, back in the dark years, and just before the dark years, and just after..Reading these authors, and others, I could no longer go on simply hating everything German, past, present and future...They introduced me to the healing powers of literature. Imagining the other is not only an aesthetic tool. It is, in my view, also a major moral imperative.

One of the ways in which such imaginative sympathy expresses itself is in the ability to enter into the minds of people with fundamentally opposed views or characters. This is indeed one of the marks that distinguishes literature from propaganda. It is one of the reasons why we find it so difficult to place someone like Shakespeare as being a believer or non-believer, a Catholic or a Protestant.
David Mamet's play *Oleanna* is about a university teacher who is accused by one of his girl students of sexual harassment. I saw the play with my daughter. When we came out we realized she had experienced the play through the student who believed she had been harrassed, I had done so through the lecturer who believed the girl had manipulated him. When the play was shown in America, it sharply divided audiences in a similar way. That was a mark of its status as an important piece of literature.

One aspect of this capacity to be multi-faceted means that reading a good novel, or seeing a great play, we are conscious again of the complexity of human life, the ambiguity of so much behaviour, the mixture of qualities and motives in all of us. All this is a very healthy and important antidote to moralism. There is a human tendency to divide the world up into goodies and baddies. This can be so if religion is brought into it, though moralism certainly isn't the preserve of religion. One of the great themes of Jesus in the Gospels is the way he tries to shake us out of all easy moralizing. We are directed to look at ourselves, at the great plank in our own eye before we call attention to the speck of dust in our neighbour's eye. So literature, in bringing home to us the complexity, ambiguity and thoroughly mixed nature of human behaviour spells out and reinforces one of the central elements in the New Testament. Graham Greene, whose novels are a byword for this aspect of human character-for example in *The Power and the Glory* where the hero, if that is the right word, is a failed alcoholic priest with a hidden mistress and child-took some words of the 19th century poet Robert Browning almost as his motto for them.

Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things:

The honest thief, the tender murderer

Literature sets life before us. It brings before us humanity in all our glory and misery, as Pascal describes it. This fact itself is highly significant from a theological point of view. As Nicholas Boyle has put it

Representation affirms - more, it enacts - the worth to God of what is represented. However appalling or dispiriting, however low or laughable, the life that is represented, sinful life just as it is, serving no further purpose but just being there - life as it is for its Maker and Redeemer - is affirmed by the act of representation to be worth the labour and love and attention that goes into showing it (by the artist) and the recognising it (by the audience). . . . Life does not have to be shown as having a discernable purpose in order to be shown as capable of being forgiven: it only has to be loved enough to be worth representing, and worth the labour of understanding that goes into enjoying the representation.[3]

From a theological point of view we may say then that literature, just by depicting life, is a reflection of the most fundamental of all acts of creativity, the bringing into being of a universe and the moment by moment holding it in being; and as the great monotheistic faiths have always wanted to echo the words of Genesis 1, 31 "And God saw all that he had made and it was very good" so what we see reflected in the worlds created by literary creativity is good. And conversely, intuiting that these worlds are good, does in its turn bears witness to the goodness of creation.

Boyle emphasizes that it is the existence of literature itself, in itself, not necessarily serving any other purpose, which is significant. The fact that we regard it as worth producing and appreciating witnesses to its worthwhileness in itself for itself.

Nothing in this life is value free. Nothing is neutral, whether it is the life of an institution, an educational programme or a book. It is simply a form of delusion to think that anything in this life can be created free from a point of view. There is nothing sinister about this. We just need to be aware of it and allow for it. Sometimes that point of view is very obvious. Take the plays of Brecht for example. In his great drama about the clash between Galileo and the church he has Galileo criticizing a monk at some point for urging that people submit to the hardship and poverty of life with patience

Virtues are not an offshoot of poverty, my dear fellow. If your people were happy and prosperous, they could develop the virtues of happiness and prosperity. At present the virtues of exhaustion derive from exhausted fields, and I reject them. Sir, my new pumps will perform more miracles in that direction than all your ridiculous slaving.[4]

In many other plays, novels and poems the standpoint is less obvious, Chekhov perhaps. But it is an illusion to think that there is no standpoint. There is certainly a perspective, just a different one.

That said, most of us can recognize propaganda when we come across it, and there is indeed a real different between genuine literature with a point of view, and propaganda. Characters in a work of propaganda seem to have no real life of their own. They are cardboard cutouts to convey a message. The work is schematized in order to reach a desired conclusion, never allowing it to take off with a life of its own. But making a real distinction between propaganda and genuine art should not blind us into thinking that art somehow occupies a value free sphere. There is no such thing. Jane Austen was quite clear that she did not
want to write moralizing novels like those of Hannah More[5] but no one can doubt the strong values that emerge in all her novels. They are not neutral. Certain values like integrity, constancy, valuing people for their own sake shine forth. The trouble is that people tend to have a very narrow view as to what constitutes morality. I once organized a major conference for writers and directors of TV soap operas. I wanted them to reflect on the kinds of values they were conveying. The conference, in my opinion, was not a great success, because I could not really get people away from thinking that morality was about sex. All soap operas have a perspective on life that assumes certain values. Some are rather good, like inclusivity and tolerance. I wanted people to bring them out in the open and reflect on them, but I did not really succeed.

This means that literature does not just bring life before us, it brings life from a particular perspective. The material has been selected and organized in one way rather than any other. The characters show particular characteristics and express certain views. The implication of this is that literature not only brings life before us, it can show the truth of life. George Devine the first artistic director of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre said

For me theatre is really a religion or way of life. You must feel what life is about and what you want to say about it, so that everything in the theatre you work in is saying the same thing; a theatre must have a recognisable attitude. It will have one whether you like it or not.

This has four important implications.

First, if literature comes to us written from a particular perspective, bringing home to us in a new or fresh way, some insight into human life and behaviour, we can learn from it. I am not of course suggesting that the prime purpose of literature is a didactic one. I take it for granted that we are reading because we find the book interesting and enjoyable. But given that, it is likely that we find the work interesting and enjoyable in part because of the insights it is bringing. As the distinguished English Scholar Professor Knights once put it

Art matters, not (certainly) because it indulges our feelings, not simply because it gives pleasure, but because it offers a form of knowledge.

Or as another scholar, Professor Coulson said, literature arouses our imagination, which is different from fantasy for

It marks the arousal of a state of deep but highly ordered feeling which is never mere feeling but has its object a new sense of reality.

This new sense of reality can change us. I find that I view certain landscapes and certain scenes through eyes that have been educated and shaped by particular painting I have seen. Works of literature not only change the way we see thing, but the way we feel about them and hence how we respond to them. We cannot remain unchanged by what Coulson termed a "state of deep but highly ordered feeling". There was a dramatic example of this in the reaction to the early performances of Arthur Miller's play Death of a Salesman. In his autobiography Miller describes the effect in these words

As sometimes happened later on during the run, there was no applause at the final curtain of the first performance. Strange things began to go on in the audience. With the curtain down, some people stood to put their coats on and then sat again, some, especially men, were bent forward covering their faces, and others were openly weeping. People crossed the theatre to stand quietly talking to one another. It seemed forever before someone remembered to applaud, and then there was no end to it. I was standing at the back and saw a distinguished-looking elderly man being led up the aisle; he was talking excitedly into the ear of what seemed to be his male secretary or assistant. This, I learned, was Bernard Gimbel, head of the department store chain, who that night gave an order that no one in his stores was to be fired for being overage.[6]

Secondly, if literature comes to us with a point of view that can reveal some aspect of the truth of life, it can also come with a point of view that distorts the truth, or is so one sided that the effect is distorting. I do not see how we can avoid this conclusion or why we should baulk at the fact that some literature might in fact be corrupting. This is not of course an argument for censorship, just that we face the fact that points of view are not neutral, and that an inevitable corollary of works being truth bearing is that they also have the capacity to be truth distorting

Thirdly, it opens up the possibility of a work of literature being written from a consciously Christian or believing point of view. If it is inevitable that say the novel will have a perspective on life, on what possible grounds could a Christian writer be excluded from expressing her faith in her art? Indeed, it seems to me it would be inevitable that in one way or another it would be impossible for a real faith to avoid doing this.
Fourthly, this raises the question whether it is legitimate to criticize the point of view that comes across in a work of literature; or to be more precise, whether or not it is legitimate to bring a Christian theological critique to bear on it?

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the relationship between theology and literature. The OUP have published *The Journal of Literature and Theology* since 1987 and last year was published the substantial *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*. This set out the half a dozen or so ways in which this subject can be approached, for example, the Bible itself can be studied from a literary point of view, as can some theological literature, or theological themes can be explored in some novels. The fourth question I have just raised, about whether it is legitimate to criticize the point of view that comes across in a work of literature itself raises all kinds of other questions. It is a highly controversial area to say the least. But at this stage let me just point to one distinguished scholar who has argued for this approach, Nicolas Boyle whom I quoted earlier, who has written highly regarded books on Goethe and Coleridge, has also argued that if we are serious about the relationship of literature and theology, then this encourages not only a literary evaluation of the scriptures, but a theological evaluation of literature from the standpoint of that provided by the Bible. His standpoint is that of Levinas for whom the Bible is a book with a moral imperative at its heart. Readers are summoned to responsibility to and for our neighbour. From a Christian perspective the neighbour is someone like ourselves who is created, lost and found again.

He illustrates what he means by reference to various novels, including Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Here Fanny, by resisting all short term unsatisfactory alternatives shows the value of constancy, a constancy which has its definitive importance outlined in the Bible. Furthermore, in the actual circumstances of the England of that time it is the much derided Georgian church that represents and safeguards such fundamental values.

That, I think, is a relatively uncontroversial example. A value exhibited in a novel is recognized as such, affirmed and related to what is held to be its prototype in the Bible. But suppose instead of affirming a value present in novel, the whole alleged standpoint of the novel is found wanting? We are then on much more controversial ground. There is the question of whose standpoint we are talking about. Is it of the author himself? Or the authorial voice which she or he is using in writing the novel? Or that of some main character within in? For the purposes of these lectures, what I mean is the authorial voice. That there is such a voice, with a distinctive perspective I have no doubt. Take for example the writing of William Trevor, which I much admire. His short stories, and especially his novel *The Story of Lucy Gault* seem to me to be unremittingly sad. I do not know William Trevor, and have absolutely no idea of what kind of person he is, in particular whether his own view of life is a sad one. For all I know he may have adopted this particular persona, this tone of voice, to write his stories. You may say it would be surprising if there was no relationship between his personal stance on life and the perspective in his writings. That may be so, but it would be quite possible, and we must leave the author's own view out of it. The question is whether the set of values and perhaps beliefs as well, that is conveyed in and through that authorial voice should be critiqued in some way.

There are different kinds of difficulty with taking the viewpoint of the central character in a book. A friend has given a lecture entitled "Will the real Mr Dostoevsky stand up?" It is easy to take Alyosha, the believer of the Karamazov brothers to be the standpoint of Dostoevsky's great novel. But the vitality and greatness of the novel clearly owes a great deal to the fact that Ivan Karamazov the rebel atheist also articulates what was clearly part of Dostoevsky himself.

Nevertheless with some hesitation and due qualifications I am going to take the idea of an authorial voice or stance as something with which one can engage from a theological point of view. But here again another question arises. What I have read of the prize willing novelist Coetzee, in particular his novel *Disgrace* conveys to me a view of existence so bleak, so one sided, as to be seriously wanting from a Christian point of view. In *Disgrace* for example, human beings seem to be regarded as of no more value than the carcass of dead dogs. I could find no gleam of human dignity, let alone hope or redemption. What interests me is the question, one on which I have no definite answer at the moment, whether what is regarded as theologically defective reveals itself as in some way defective from a literary point of view as well? Or are we to recognize that these are two entirely separate spheres, and that a work may express a bleak, cruel point of view but still be a literary masterpiece? Or will some literary defects inevitably be present because the basic stance on life is so distorted? This is a question I will particularly be bring to bear when I look at some influential atheistic literature in my third lecture, that of Samuel Beckett, though I must put in a caveat at this point as to whether he was in fact an atheist, Philip Pullman and Ian McEwan.

This raises the whole question of a religious perspective in literature. As is I hope obvious from what I have said already, we cannot rule out the legitimacy of this in principle. What we can say I think is that if people with religious beliefs or religious institutions are to appear, they must be a natural part of the context of the book or play, and those contexts will vary a great deal. In Jane Austen religion makes its appearance through clergy who are looking for a "good living", that is, a parish with a reasonable endowment to it. Some of the clergy depicted are thoroughly decent people, others, like Mr Collins are horrid. In the
19th century there were a lot of novels concerned with one of the major religious issues of the time for many devout members of the Church of England which was whether they should “Pope”, that is, become Roman Catholics at a time when this would literally split a family. Some contexts are unapologetically Roman Catholic of a pre-Vatican II kind, the novels of Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene for example, in which miracles are looked for and expected.

The context today is very different. In short it is those plays and novels which depict the difficulty of belief that are likely to ring true. In a later lecture I will be looking at the poetry of R.S. Thomas who more than anyone over the last fifty years has explored the apparent absence of God. And this highlights a paradox, in that it is very often the believer who articulates most powerfully the difficulties of belief. It is they who really understand what it is not to believe. As the Oxford English scholar Kathleen Duncan Jones has put it:

It is hardly surprising that some of the most explicit Christian poets, writers like Herbert and Hopkins, have written with great feeling about the anguish of absence from God, for it is obvious that it must be to a committed Christian that the loss or absence of faith is experienced as most terrible.

David Hare’s play *Racing Demon* has a vicar as a central character, wonderfully played in the original production by Oliver Ford Davies. It open with him on the stage saying:

God. Where are you? I wish you would talk to me. God. It isn’t just me. There’s a general feeling. This is what people are saying in the parish. They want to know where you are….I mean, let’s be honest—it’s just beginning to get some of us down. You know? Is that unreasonable? There are an awful lot of people in a very bad way. And they need something besides silence.

But then, amidst all the institutional grinding over homosexuality, the Vicar has an intimate talk with a girl who has rebelled against religion and he tells her why he doesn’t talk to people about religion:

The moment you start talking in those terms you distance people. And it’s not important. He’s there. He loves them whether they know it or not. Why put people off with all the cultural baggage? It sets up a resistance. They’re bored before you even get into all that stuff…a priest should be like any other man. Only full of God’s love.

That moment of intimacy is a kind of holy moment. There is just a hint that all is not quite lost for the cause of religion. The suggestion of a mystery which we cannot quite grasp.

In the modern context I think it is probably only a holding together of radical doubt with a faith that is conscious of ultimate mystery and the limitation of words that can convince in literature. The point is however that it keeps the possibility of belief open, keeps the rumour of God alive as has been said. The sense is well caught in a poem of the Australian poet Les Murray when he writes:

Full religion is the large poem in loving repetition;

and God is the poetry caught in any religion,

caught, not imprisoned. Caught as in a mirror

that he attracted, being in the world as poetry

is in the poem, a law against closure.

An important phrase there is “A law against closure”. To believe is to be open to a horizon beyond our present horizon, to refuse to clamp down in a settled outlook with stereotyped phrases, whether of a religious or anti-religious.

If, as I suggested earlier, literature has this capacity to depict multiple points of view, with all the complexity and ambiguity of life, and this is important in avoiding easy moralizing, it is also a valuable feature when it comes to depicting something of the religious flavour of our own age.

Finally, I want finally to consider the bearing of one particular form of literature on religious belief today: tragedy. I use the word to
indicate not just a particular form of drama, but the large number of novels today which have a story that seems irredeemably tragic.

In popular usage the word tragedy indicates serious loss and destruction; something that cannot be put right which brings grief and lasting sadness. We may say, for example, about a car crash in which a mother and her children are killed, that's really tragic.

In ancient Greece, however, tragedy on the stage also indicated a strong sense of fate; of larger forces at work, perhaps the gods. This did not mean that human choices did not matter. They did, but very often they seem the weaker element in a wider, inexorable drama.

As tragedy on the stage has come to be understood in the West, there is a third element, one which helps us to understand the puzzle of why it is that the depiction of something tragic on the stage, can yet be uplifting. The famous English scholar, F.R. Leavis, once wrote that tragedy involves a recognising positive value as in some way defined and vindicated by death.

Leavis refers to the World War I poet Isaac Rosenberg in these words.

The value of what was destroyed seemed to him to have been brought into sight only by the destruction.

I believe that literature that has these marks of the tragic, and I am, as I say, referring to all works of art, not just drama in a narrow sense, are crucially important from a Christian point of view for a number of reasons. First, it is a healthy antidote to all superficial optimism, a Pollyanna approach to life, or that of Professor Pangloss, satirized by Voltaire in Candide for parroting after each calamity "All is for the best in this best of all possible worlds."

Secondly, however, because the tragic highlights and reinforces the value of what is destroyed, and we find this deeply satisfying, despite everything, it is an indication that there might be a deeper meaning to life, that goes beyond a simple calculus of pain and pleasure.

The anti-Christian philosopher Nietzsche wrote of

The metaphysical comfort-with which, I am suggesting even now, every true tragedy leaves us-that life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable.

He also wrote

Tragedy does not teach "resignation" - To represent terrible and questionable things is in itself an instinct for power and magnificence in an artist: he does not fear them...There is no such thing as pessimistic art-Art affirms...For a philosopher to say, "the good and the beautiful are one" is infamy: if he goes on to add, "also the true", one ought to thrash him. Truth is ugly.

We possess art lest we perish of the truth.

That is a fascinating view. Deeply pessimistic in one sense, the truth has to be faced that life is neither good nor beautiful. But art not only enables us to respond to life, it is a way of mastering it, and in this way we come to say "Yes" to life, despite the suffering.

I would want to draw some theological implications from these words of Nietzsche, but this is not the point to do it. The point for now is the way that literature can help us affirm life as it is, without blinking or baulking at its terrible elements.

A famous book has the title The tragic sense of life. I think I would want to argue that a tragic sense of life is an essential aspect of the Christian faith. You may say, that with a belief in the resurrection of Christ and the hope of everlasting life, Christianity offers something more than the tragic. It does. But that more does not mean to say that the tragic sense is out of place. Or to put it in specifically Christian terms, the Christian hope based on Christ's resurrection has to be seen in relation to Christ's suffering on the cross, and his continuing to share in human anguish.

I now want to look at a modern novel which does I think bring out the points I am making, Philip Roth's The Human Stain. I am not going into the details of the plot, which are quite complicated and can be boring for people who have not read it, but one of the reasons I found it so powerful is because of the integral inter-relationship of the personal and the political. Two academics live
lives based on self-deception. But this is in part a reaction to the wider malaise in society, in particular American Racism. One academic is killed. But his death is linked to the terrible US war in Vietnam. The characters make important personal decisions, for which they are responsible, but those decisions have to be seen as made in a society where wider, destructive forces are at work. But the third element of the tragic that I mentioned before is also present. There is one character, admittedly not a major figure in the book, whose straightforwardness, honesty and good will, whose truth to herself, shines out from all the deception around her.

It is interesting that Philip Roth quotes some lines from a Greek tragedy at the beginning; and that is clearly how he sees the story. For me this raises an interesting question about the relationship between sin and tragedy. Sin is not a word we hear very often, but it refers to conscious, freely willed wrong doing, against both God and our neighbour. Tragedy, as already suggested hints at larger forces at work in the light of which whilst we may not be powerless, we are certainly weak. I think Philip Roth's novel, show both sin and tragedy present. And this again I think shows how literature can indicate what is meant by a Christian dogma that might otherwise remain meaningless. For, to put it in thoroughly old-fashioned Christian terms which I would not normally use, the novel shows us a humanity that is living in original sin, which is fallen; a humanity which is pretty helpless in itself and needs redeeming. It is interesting that the title of the novel is *The Human Stain*. It is a nicely ambiguous term, which could refer to us being a stain on the rest of the universe, or it could refer to the fact that we are stained.

I have suggested that the tragic sense of life is not something that simply goes out of the window when you have a religious faith. Indeed it might be reinforced. But this does pose the question of how, without losing that sense, we can also talk or write about life in more optimistic terms. It is a problem that arises for all writers, but it presses in a particularly acute form for those trying to communicate the Christian faith in the modern world. It is what I will be considering next time under the title *Are happy endings real?* If you have found this emphasis on the tragic sense of life a bit depressing, let's see whether anything more hopeful can be conveyed, without any loss of artistic or moral integrity.

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