

## Loss of Faith and its Reflection in Literature

**Dr. Marie Fernandes**

In his book *God: A Brief History* John Bowker asserts that the search for God began long before writing and printing. In early times therefore, ideas, stories and beliefs had to be remembered and passed on by word of mouth. Much information is still preserved and transmitted in this way, but it is impossible for us to know how old it is or how much it has changed over time. There has never been any human society in which God has not been apart, usually a controlling and creative part.<sup>1</sup>

People tried to find answers to what they experienced around them. Thunder and lightning, earthquakes, pestilence, famine and death were something that frightened them. They remained in awe of the transformation of night to day, the change of seasons, the miracles of seed and harvest and the other wonders they witnessed. Many religions evolved to try to address these concerns.

In the 14th century the Renaissance started in Italy and flourished in Western Europe until about the 17th century. It was the period and intellectual movement in European cultural history that is traditionally seen as ending the Middle Ages and beginning Modern Times. The aim of Renaissance education was to produce the 'complete human being,' the Renaissance man, conversant in the humanities, mathematics and science, the arts and crafts and athletics and sport; to enlarge the bounds of learning and geographical knowledge; to encourage the growth of scepticism and free thought, and the study and imitation of Greek and Latin literature and art.

Humanism was the first feature of the Renaissance. It freed man from the hold of rigour and puritanical negation of life, by advocating that man is the centre of life. Humanism relegated God and religion to the periphery. It was responsible for reducing the hold of the Church on an individual's life and setting him free to develop his natural self. Humanism came to influence different aspects of life, especially art and literature. After many centuries, for the first time, the beauty of the human body came to be depicted without restraint in art and literature. Human nature itself came to be examined in all openness.

The major influence that worked the change in the secularisation of thought and style in literature, in European countries, was that Christian scholars fled to Italy, after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. It was the Eastern Roman Capital. The Western Roman Capital was at Rome. These conservators of culture fled with rare manuscripts of Greek and Roman authors. They were not theologians but pure scholars. The Italian nobles sheltered them and encouraged them to spread learning.

The revival of interest in classical literature in a way served to deepen the glory of man. The glorification of the individual was in direct contrast to the medieval approach. Initially man was looked upon as a product of the original sin of Adam. With the paramountcy of the Catholic Church, every man was regarded as a penitent and had to work out his salvation and the church would co-operate. The Church had a definite influence on man's mind for four hundred years. All knowledge was related to the *Bible* and theology.

With the arrival of the learned men, thought was revolutionised, therefore man's thinking was separated from the Bible and theology and knowledge was secularised. The intention of education was no longer didactic. The poems of Homer and Virgil, the lyrics and satire of Horace and the plays of Seneca were revived as a result of human interest. A growing concern for secular man and his experience was evinced.

The notion of man as an achiever was celebrated. Man was no longer seen as an insignificant thing on earth. *Tamburlaine*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet* exemplify that man has tremendous potential. They celebrate the spiritual aspiration and fulfilment of man. According to Laurie Magnus, the whole philosophy of the Renaissance was contained in Hamlet's perception.

“What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god; the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals —” (*Hamlet*: II, ii, 303-307)

If man was glorified and became the sole concern of the writers, the world of human experience became the focal point of human attention. Writers laid stress on individual man's ambitions, longings and aspirations. Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* celebrates necromancy and the dark arts. It is a deliberate attempt to disrespect Christianity and the

Church. The fruit of the tree of knowledge is no longer forbidden, or, if it is forbidden so much the more exciting. Faustus says with confidence.

‘Had I as many souls as there be stars,  
I’d give them all for Mephistopheles.

(*Dr Faustus* I, iii, 100-101)

Christianity was the religion of Love, which found expression between mother and child and man and God. Since the Virgin Mary lost her importance, the attributes of perfection, generosity and love were transferred from the divine beloved to the human beloved.

Dante, a famous Italian poet, is best known for his epic poem *Divina Comedia* or *The Divine Comedy*. It is an allegorical account of his journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, guided by Virgil and his idealised love Beatrice. His other works include *La Vita Nuova* in which he celebrates his love for Beatrice. He is one of the earliest poets to shift his focus from the divine beloved to the human beloved. He had several followers among the English poets.

Petrarch, the Italian lyric poet and scholar, also celebrated this theme in his *Canzoniere*, which is a sonnet sequence. In these sonnets, the poet craves for the affection, favour and sovereign virtue of his beloved, Laura. Love was a disciplining force, not a form of indulgence. Discipline resulted in restraint. His sonnet sequence was a significant poetic legacy that he gave Europe and England. Each poem expresses an experience of personal love and the idealisation of love. Nature is in sympathy with the poets. Petrarch found imitators among the English poets - Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare.

Sidney’s poems are a combination of Neo-Platonism, the Petrarchan and the Pastoral convention. His *Astrophel and Stella* sonnet sequence was published in 1591. *Astrophel* means ‘star lover’ and *Stella* means ‘star’. This sequence is partly autobiographical and was published after his death. It was probably written just before and after his proposed marriage to the beautiful Penelope Devereux failed. Sidney is writing in a convention about a courtship that should have ended in marriage. There is sincerity and depth in this sequence and it is written with real feeling.

Spenser's achievement was of a different kind from Sidney's. The *Amoretti* sonnet sequence published in 1595 was written in honour of Elizabeth Boyle. It was a synthesis of various tendencies — the Petrarchan and Neo-Platonic influence and also the use of native English in his treatment and conception of nature. In this sequence the beloved becomes the source of bliss and happiness, a solution to problems, a lodestar and a haven of peace.

Shakespeare's sonnets fall into two distinct categories. About 50 early sonnets are taken to be addressed to a young man whose identity is established but still remains a matter of conjecture. The remaining 100 sonnets are addressed to a female beloved, reputedly to the 'Dark Lady'. Shakespeare's sonnets go well beyond their conventional manner and philosophical idealism, to reveal depths of thought and feeling that are known only to one who have come to grips with life and pondered over his experience with detached and sane judgement.

Following close on the heels of the Renaissance was the period of the Enlightenment. Philosophers and thinkers were of the view that the advances made by science and industry heralded a new age of egalitarianism and progress for mankind. Many voices were expressing sharp criticism of some time-honoured cultural institutions. The Church, in particular, was singled out as thwarting the forward march of human reason. Many intellectuals of the Enlightenment practiced a variety of Deism, which is a rejection of organized, doctrinal religion in favour of a more personal and spiritual kind of faith.

For the first time in recorded Western history, the hegemony of political and religious leaders was weakened to the point that citizens had little to fear in making their opinions known. Criticism was the order of the day, and argumentation was the new mode of conversation.

In Europe, Voltaire and Rousseau were the torchbearers of Enlightenment literature and philosophy. Rousseau was a strong advocate for social reform of all kinds. Voltaire on the other hand used wit and sarcasm to entertain his readers while making convincing arguments for reform. His pen name, Francois-Marie Arouet, probably shielded him from the persecution which his writings encouraged. His writings were caustic and severe for those in power. He reserved especially pointed barbs for the Church, which he reviled as intolerant, backward and too steeped in dogma to realize that the world was leaving the institution behind.

On the other hand, Jonathan Swift writer of *Gulliver's Travels* was very different. He was a clergyman of the Church of Ireland and was a moral defender of the Church. He was convinced that morality, politics and religion were inseparable. He strongly believed the Truth expressed by Christianity was misrepresented, corrupted by people who behaved like Yahoos. Unlike many thinkers of his time, he saw the Church as a force for rationality and moderation.

In the nineteenth century, science held a place of prime importance among the intellectual pursuits of common man. Sir Charles Lyell in his *Principles of Geology* (1833) established first that the earth was millions of years old; when according to the *Book of Genesis* the earth was a few thousand years old. He also maintained that man lived on earth for a much longer period than that given in the Bible.

Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) propounded the theory of 'Natural Selection' and 'Survival of the Fittest' on the basis of 'Might is Right'. *The Descent of Man* (1871) gave a scientific explanation to the theory of evolution and man's descent from the monkey. With this man's faith in Christianity was shaken.

The Victorian age might be regarded as an age of religion. It was an age in which the religion of the middle class set the tone of manner, dress and taste that the lower orders adopted in their struggle towards respectability. It was an age in which even Ministers used religious vocabulary in their speeches.

Yet the Victorian age might be regarded as an age of religious decay and uncontrolled sectarianism. Scientific discoveries like Darwin's theory of evolution about human life on earth shook Orthodox Christians but they refused to face the challenge of science and tried to ignore the problems that the spirit of inquiry raised. But others upheld rationalistic theories and justified the materialistic basis of society. Gissing the novelist made a character in his novel *Born in Exile* say, "What we have to do is to reconstruct a spiritual edifice on the basis of a scientific revolution." Protestantism thus found itself more and more powerless against the new Biblical criticism.

But those Christians who could not find any permanent satisfaction in a purely material conception of life and the universe, became agnostics, in other words they believed that

nothing could exist beyond the limits of this physical universe. Matthew Arnold in his *Study of Poetry*, boldly stated that ‘where religion has failed us, poetry will save us’.

We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us.

(*The Study of Poetry*, Para 2)

But literature came to the aid of religion and upheld an idealistic view of the Universe. Carlyle preached the necessity of faith and declared that the existing social ideals were inadequate. Tennyson’s poetry reflected this struggle of man against his religious faith, in his poem *In Memoriam*. He expressed the agnostic view when he wrote.

“We have but faith; we cannot know!  
For knowledge is of things we see”

Liberalism that made democracy and reform the keynotes of the Victorian age had a disturbing effect on religion. Liberals like John Stuart Mill valued Christianity only as a code of ethics and rejected its mystery and dogma. This secularisation of religion provoked a strong protest from the orthodox in the form of what came to be called *The Oxford Movement*. A group of clergymen –John Keble, Edward Bouverie Pusey and Henry Newman wrote a series of sermons called *Tracts for the Times* between 1833 and 1841. They pleaded for the revival of orthodox Christianity with the emphasis on dogma and ritual and thus tried to reduce the difference between Protestant and Catholic churches.

To reconcile scientific temperament with religious temperament had become difficult for intellectuals. The cry of Jean Paul Sartre on his deathbed “Oh God, if there is a God, save my soul, if there is a soul” shows how scepticism had made reason prevail over reason and faith.

However scepticism and agnosticism did not disturb the orderly life of individuals. Soon the intellectuals began to feel that agnosticism which was the product of man’s rationalism

made an individual starve his emotional side. Beatrice Webb who had turned away from Catholicism said that it was impossible for a woman to live in agnosticism. Later she wrote, "It was the habit of prayer that enabled me to survive and emerge relatively sound in body and sane in mind." By prayer Beatrice Webb meant "communication with an all embracing spiritual force."

In the late Victorian period those intellectuals who found commercialisation and agnosticism of English life stifling, turned to Hinduism, Buddhism, theosophy and other cults. Hinduism and Buddhism influenced Yeats. Thomas Hardy turned to 'Determinism', the 'Powers that be.' that frustrate the efforts of man. An increasingly large number of educated men and women developed a humanistic attitude to life that made them accept the human condition of love, loyalty, duty, respect for intelligence and feelings. Humanism helped to keep alive and maintain standards of sincerity, delicacy and intellectual honesty by which religion itself had to be judged. Writers like Arnold, Huxley, Trevelyan, Thomas Carlyle helped to create levels of understanding and agreement between the two opposites of science and religion.

At the beginning of the Victorian period Romanticism was not dead but its creative force was not as intense as during the Romantic Revival period. Instinctively, after the rule of emotions, dreams and the tumults of the soul, the mind turned to reason and the need for order prevailed. This search for balance is most general and most typical feature of the Victorian age. The pendulum which was about to swing away from Romanticism of the early nineteenth century swung back, and the anti-Victorian movements – The Oxford Movement, the Pre-Raphaelite Movement and the Aesthetic Movement made Romanticism challenge the threat of the supremacy of reason.

In the twentieth century life and literature were shaped by the two world wars. Victorian morality was replaced by sensuous desire and erotic carnality. It was a literature of isolation and helplessness with fractured minds and shattered sensibilities. T. S. Eliot's poems *The Waste Land* deals with the damaged psyche. Europe had lost a whole generation of young men to the horrors of the wars causing a general catastrophe as survivors struggled to find their place in a radically altered society. *The Hollow Men* beautifully articulates the condition of modern humanity. These are bodies like a scarecrows stuffed with straw, incapable of feeling or thinking and more importantly, lacking a soul.

We are the hollow men  
 We are the stuffed men  
 Leaning together  
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!  
 Our dried voices, when  
 We whisper together  
 Are quiet and meaningless  
 As wind in dry grass  
 Or rats' feet over broken glass  
 In our dry cellar.

*(The Hollow Men)*

In our own times a whole new range of books offer answers to some of life's most difficult questions. In his book, *What God Wants* Neale Donald Walsch argues that most religions preach a Separation Theology that excludes the other. He asserts that God want *Nothing*. *God is life and life is God*. Nothing stands outside God and therefore there is no separation between God and anything at all. If God is All in All, there is nothing that can exist except God, in its varying forms. He says, 'God IS you'. He preaches the Theology of Oneness and advocates the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have it done unto you. He finally invites us to see ourselves connected with all of nature, to experience God in everything.<sup>2</sup>

### **Endnotes**

- 1 John Bowker, *God: A Brief History* (London: D.K. Pub., 2002)
- 2 Neale Donald Walsch, *What God Wants* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2005)

### **Reference:**

1. David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature* (London: Martin & Warburg, 1960)