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A truly complicated subject of discussion

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Panel: Religion and Writing. The author discusses how religious heritage shapes an author's writing.

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A truly complicated subject of discussion

By Enrique Serrano (Colombia)

Writing has been inextricably linked to religion since its inception at least five thousand years ago. The deliberate action of inscription of signs and symbols aimed at something important and perdurable has sacred implications and consequences, even when it has other functions. For instance, it challenges the normal vacuity of oral expression and its incidental effects. It has implied – since very early on, and because of the permanent influence of priests in ancient societies – the consecration of the Word by giving normal and profane language an original form that grants it the trademark of archetype and gives it long-lasting legitimacy.

The main advantage of writing comes from its natural capacity to challenge time and last forever, or at least, for a long time. It transcends ordinary limits, thereby overcoming the unavoidable expiration of normal life. That capacity of everlasting influence gives to that special Word a resonance that changes the human world forever. This is the overwhelming effect religion has on any kind of Scripture as sacred the everlasting Word, the same Word that many established religions teach, respect and preserve with jealous and vigilant persistence.

Furthermore, Religion is humankind's most ancient and most developed way of expressing humbleness, fragility, anxiety and pain, and of transforming these disabilities into strength, new life and a source of hope. It is the *essential way* to reconstruct and recover from the certainty of death, illness, angst and loss. Thus, it is natural for religion to adopt writing as one of the main methods of obtaining and preserving that legitimacy in order to restore, with sacred words, the debilitating human condition.

In spite of this, many things have been changing in the modern world, in philosophical terms and in current discourse. Today's Religion has bad press, and for many people it represents a *naïf* doctrine, a tremendous misconception of the world, and Secularism has triumphed in so many battlefields that for some people Religion is no longer an issue to be seriously discussed. In some places and disciplines it has even been removed from academic discussion.

Secularism, in short, as the dominant mode of thought in our times, especially among scholars, impedes the conception of the sacred as a reality, even less as *the reality, the supreme reality*. For sure, the majority of the world is radically unsecular. For them, certain writing "inspired" and conceived in special conditions can express a primeval and primordial reality. It brings simplicity and wholeness because it is conceived as the necessary, trustworthy and reliable truth through its symbols, forms, contracts, presences and consequences.

But what then, are the main implications of this sacred nature of the Word for literature as part of human art, and for literary schools and concerns? It is, really, a very interesting subject of speculation, and fully explains my own interpretation of the relationship between writing and religion.

The history of literature is also a history of man's imagination. History of mentalities and values, all of them formed and performed for millennia through religion, any sort of religion. Therefore,

ancient literature always had to be related to and intertwined with religious affairs. That means, of course, religious expressions, religious concerns and sacred preoccupations. That also means religious criteria to fix their importance, value and meaning in society.

For instance, success, in very literary terms, could be expressed by and compared with the possibility of establishing, in profane words, the outward appearance of sacred things, actions, persons, places, etc. It becomes a special text, unique, as metaphorically inspired by gods or forces – and not only human strength – to be one of a kind, worthy of remembrance, and to be delivered from oblivion. Something radically different from ordinary speech or conventional writing, even possessed by Beauty itself, as Plato wrote. That is, in short, the very real and truthful product of supernatural inspiration. A sort of Revelation, fruit of an epiphany, and not simply an incidental or arbitrary text.

There is something else at stake. The writer, at least the good one, is nothing but a kind of priest, a magician that bewitches with words, words that do not really belong to him or her. These profane words and ideas, presumably the casual fruit of his or her brain, suddenly become immortal ones, blessed with transcendent nature and the confirmation of old words, the very old truths and revelations that represent the heritage of humankind's quintessential past.

So, for Harold Bloom, for instance, the human canon is among these sacred things, and has to be preserved as a sort of sacred – but deeply human – inheritance, inasmuch as great religious leaders like Jesus Christ, Confucius, Muhammad or Siddhartha Gautama Buddha so strongly influenced great authors like Mengzi, Sun-tzu, Kalidasa, Tagore, Homer, Dante, Cervantes or Shakespeare.

That is why it's so interesting to study and discuss with reasoned arguments the complicated relationship between Writing and Religion. It will always be a very controversial subject, full of nuances, misunderstandings and uncertainties. It is nevertheless worth exploring with a serene tone and proper style.