

# Reconciling Religion and Literature

**DR. MUHAMMAD SHAHIDULLAH** is best known for his remarkable research on Bangla language and literature. But he is also remembered for his secular, modern mind and his championing the cause of tolerance and peace which he believed, could be achieved through religion. This is an edited version of an article by Dr. Shahidullah that originally appeared in a publication of the International P.E.N Conference in February 1955.

LITERATURE may be defined as the expression of one or more of the sentiments of the human mind. A Sanskrit literary critic has said "*Vakyam rasatmakam kavyam*" i.e., literature is the verbal expression full of human sentiments. Sanskrit authors, generally enumerate eight sentiments -- *sringara* or love, *hasya* or mirth (bathos), *kamna* or tenderness (pathos), *raudra* or anger, *vira* or heroism, *bhayanaka* or terror, *vibhatsa* or disgust and *adbhuta* or wonder. Some add two more sentiments -- *santa* or quietism and *vatsalya* or parental affection. Now religion is a human sentiment composed of love, terror, wonder and quietism. Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, the four greatest theistic religions inculcate the love of God. Moses says, "And thou shalt love thy Lord thy God with all thine heart and all thy soul, and with all thy might." (Deuteronomy 6:5). Jesus Christ quoted this and said "This is the first and great commandment" (Matthew, 22:37,38). The Holy Quran says, "Among men there are some who take idols in preference to God loving them as they should love God, while those who believe are strongest in love for God" (2:165). The Bhagavad-Gita says:

"Keeping Me in mind, be My devotee.  
Pray to Me and salute Me.  
Thus joined in heart with Me,  
Devoted to Me shalt thou reach Me."  
(9:34)

These four great religions also inculcate fear of God. So we conclude that religious sentiment can also give rise to literature.

In primitive minds emotion plays a most important part. Now religion being an emotion also gave an urge to the primitive man to compose literature. Thus the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Old Testament, the Vedas and the Avesta were the first literatures of the Greeks, the Jews, the Aryans and the Iranians respectively.

In the Mediaeval world we find the writers of Miracle plays directly influenced by Christianity. The religious

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sentiment was responsible for the Paradise Lost and "Paradise Regained" of Milton, the *Divina Commedia* of Dante, the *Faust* of Goethe, the poetic compositions of the Sufis and the songs of the Vaishnava devotees.

In modern times there is a strong undercurrent of religious sentiment in the poetry of Browning, Swinburne, Rossetti, Shelly, Rabindranath and Iqbal.

Religion should be a motive in literature. I am not thinking of a book like the Pilgrim's Progress. But faith in God and the future life combined with love and a sense of respect for humanity should be introduced into literature without detracting from its literary value. When I speak of religion in literature I mean the universal traits of the great theistic religions. I shall have no quarrel with a Christian, if he makes Christianity the motive of his book; but it will be good propoganda literature, and not good literature. I believe the sine qua non quality for a piece of good literature is its universality. If a Jew, a Christian, a Zoroastrian, a Muslim and a Hindu can equally appreciate a book with a religious motive, I shall certify it to be of universal application, and as such good literature.

The Holy Quran sets forth the parable of a good word thus "Seest thou not how God sets forth a parable of a good word as a good tree whose root is firm and whose branches are high, yielding its fruit in every season by the permission of its Lord? And God sets forth parables for men that they may be mindful" (14:24, 25). So also a good book should be deep rooted in religion filled with high and noble sentiments and beneficial to mankind for all times to come. What can be more beneficial to Man than to make him conscious of his dignity as one created after God's own image and destined to strive after perfection as God Himself is perfect? Did not Jesus Christ say, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect?" (Matthew 5:48). Did not the Holy Prophet of Islam say, "Be ye endowed with the qualities of God?" (Hadith).