

Christian Literature and Living

“Was Blind, But Now I See!”

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On Christian Literature

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What Is Christian Literature?

In this discussion note, we would like to look at what may really constitute Christian Literature, and what are its domains, how Christian Literature can be an effective means of sharing God's love to bring people in loving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. We look at these things from an Indian perspective.

Situation in India: An Example from Tamil

There are several departments of Christian Tamil Literature or Christian Tamil Studies in public universities in Tamilnadu, India such as the University of Madras and Madurai-Kamaraj University. Discussions on defining what constitutes Christian literature, both during the establishment of such departments and during seminars and planning sessions conducted by these departments, must shed some interesting light on the subject. However, such papers are not readily available.

In such discussions, generally speaking, academic viewpoints as well as the socio-political reasons that demand and justify the creation of such departments were articulated. It was also easy, in some sense, to define what Christian literature is, because of the adjectival addition that delimits the application of the term. Moreover, the focus was more on ethnic identity of the entire Tamil community and its various religious segments. So, it was not only Chairs on Tamil Christian Literature but also Chairs on Tamil Islamic Literature, etc. that were established. Initial suggestions that denominations contribute some gifts to the universities for the establishment of chairs appear to be less emphasized as more departments were opened by the government orders.

The Focus of Christian Literature

Literature written by Christians on Christian themes as well as non-Christian themes seems to be the major focus on such efforts. Such literature could be written by non-Tamil Christians as well as Tamil Christians, but these were to be mostly relating to Tamil literature, presented in its manifold genres, Tamil history, Tamil Church History, written throughout the ages, in particular since the introduction of Christianity in Tamilnadu. Enrichment of Tamil literature, in general, through the translation of works such as *Tirukkural* and *Tiruvacakam* may have been done by Christian missionaries, but these were not generally included as part of Christian literature.

Distinguish Christian Religious Work from Literary Work

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A Christian missionary, as part of his or her dedication to the spread of the Word of God among the Tamils, may have developed dictionaries and other materials, but these products are not considered to be Christian literature, even though these were developed by Christians.

There appears to be a distinction made between Christian contributions to the development of Tamil and for the spread of the Gospel, even though items under these categories may fall within the broad definition of Christian literature in some sense. Then, again, literary works such as the first Tamil novel, *Pratapa Mudaliar Charitram*, written by a Christian Tamil, is also generally viewed as part of the general literature, not as Christian literature, possibly because the novel does not emphasize Christian teaching explicitly as part of the story.

Some Questions that We may Raise

Let us list some of the questions that we may have to raise and find answers:

1. Christian lives only?
2. Christian community only?
3. All Christian writings as literature?
4. Only theology writing?
5. Only poetry?
6. Only fiction?
7. Only short stories?
8. Only plays?

Some of these are easy to answer. For example, all questions that focus on various genre of creative literature can be put together. However questions relating to theological writings will demand some deeper discussions.

Related Questions and Developments

There are also other interesting related questions.

A historical review of Christian Literary effort in India reveals that prose became the major medium in Indian languages through Christian contributions.

In Tamil, for example, while use of prose is clearly attested at least 1800 years ago, its widespread use as the chief means of communication in writing was through the good offices of Christian effort.

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Again in Tamil, we also notice, contextualization of Christ, Christian theology and worship makes conscious effort to distinguish native genres and those adopted from the European literature: hymnals were generally speaking translations, whereas the lyrics were, generally speaking, original compositions in Tamil.

This distinction opened up the possibility of using new and current idiom away from the standardized prosody which insisted on various prosody constraints.

And yet another significant development was really based on local situation: Christian works created a new register, but not a new dialect. As Hindus came to Christ, the overall social dialectal situation remained the same even after conversion, forging better communication among social groups. There was no significant effort to create a “Christian dialect.” This trend actually is a great unifying force between Hindus and Christians.

There are many lessons to be learned from these processes, but our note here does not focus on these aspects.

We have presented various examples above to simply delineate what may constitute as Christian literature in pluralistic religious and secular societies.

The Purpose of Christian Literature

While it is an interesting pursuit to define what Christian literature is, the purpose of Christian literature or its goal is not establishing its Christian identity through Christian authorship, Christian characters, and so on. The goal is to minister and portray the intercession of God in the lives of humanity, and love of God for all his creation. That the Holy Spirit is with us and that He is our only Guide and Comforter is emphasized, while human agency, or for that matter, instrumentality of all creation for this purpose, is also recognized.

Again the agency of non-human creation is of limited value, but there are interesting and ingenious ways by which non-human creation is shown to be part of the process of reaching out and seeking God’s love.

Human-Centered; God-Centered

In some sense, Christian narrative is human-centered, but in its wider scope it is God-centered. It deals with how human lives are conducted and transformed, how, in general, creation plays its role, employing whatever will they have been endowed with, and on how God’s abundant grace is there for all to seek and benefit from.

Role of Magic

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One of the major characteristics of Christian literature is that magic, as a means of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in all human lives, is totally abjured. Miracles do happen, but these are not magical happenings. Spectacular characteristic of magical elements are not called upon to convince that what happens in our lives is of God. When this does not happen, when magic and miracle in themselves play a central role in the story or narrative, Evangelical Christians will not accept it as Christian literature.

Hard Teaching

In some biblical sense, Christian literature is on *hard* teaching, but this does not mean that reading and enjoying Christian literature, especially in its storylines as in fiction, drama and poems, etc., should be hard or inaccessible to people. Hard teaching is a concept that was interestingly elaborated in the Bible in the Gospel of John in chapter 6.

Jesus declared in the synagogue in Capernaum:

"I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. ⁵⁵For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. ⁵⁶Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever."

Many of his "disciples" who heard him declare this truth said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

Narrating the Story

While the underlying Spirit is hard for some to appreciate and follow, the story itself is told in a manner that everyone can understand and follow the Spirit behind it. Gospels are clearly examples of how stories can be narrated without much training, and yet how the stories capture the minds and spirits of most of those who read them.

Here lies the basic technique and truth about good stories and techniques of narration. The creative writers' ideas behind their work may be hard (in the sense of moral instruction, ethical warnings, warnings against readers' belief systems and lifestyles, etc., from an ordinary language point of view), but the narration can be made easy, appealing to the readers, and readable even for the average person.

Stories are told in a manner that there is easy transfer from one medium (writing) to the spoken medium. Christian literature has its own didactics, but didactic literature with only instructions and model codes is not its primary form.

Commercialization and Christian Literature

In recent Christian fiction published in western nations such as America, commercialization seems to rule the roost. Some recent trends, which have been termed boundary-pushing, include focus on forces of darkness fully personified and actively described in all their dynamics, in novels written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, and many others. There may be some biblical basis for such narratives, taken often from the Book of Revelation, etc., but the thrill, fear psychosis, mystery to excite expectations, and so on, also cultivates commercialization. Such Christian fiction seems to be in response to developments in the magic genre of novels such as those relating to Harry Potter, et al.

But our submission is that Christian literature is Christian when it abets the transformation of lives and brings glory to our Lord.

Is commercialization useful for the propagation of the Gospel? Widening the base of themes while not giving up the core theology is a useful exercise. Likewise widening the base may result in drawing more to read Christian literature.

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