

## Religion and Culture in Literature

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### **Introduction**

“The most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations”. (Cook 192)

Religion has been a unifying force among humans throughout the ages. The term “religion” originated from Old French and Anglo-Norman in the 1200s AD, and it signifies a sense of right, moral obligation, sanctity, what is sacred, and reverence for the gods. (“Religion”) Since then humans are acquainted with this concept and have used it to guide their understanding of what is right, moral, and respectful. The modern term “culture” can be traced back to the ancient Roman orator Cicero, who used it in his *Tusculanae Disputationes* (Cicero 231).

The word “Religion” indeed has a longer history than “Culture” in human society, although both concepts are equally important. However, issues can arise when individuals misunderstand and conflate Religion and Culture, mistaking them for the same thing. The question arises: What and who has prompted us to contemplate the distinctions between ‘Religion & Culture’ and ‘Religion vs Culture’? How do these two concepts influence literature and humanity as a whole? Additionally, what are some historical, medieval, and modern works that serve as reflections of the interplay between Religion and Culture?

There isn’t any particular answer to these questions, as the exploration of Religion and Culture has been a complex and ongoing process throughout human history. Various philosophers, theologians, scholars, and artists – often influenced by their cultural and historical contexts – have contributed to these discussions. Works from different periods in

history provide insights into how Religion and Culture have influenced societies. Religion and culture, like characters in a novel, breathe life into the pages of literature, shaping the stories we tell and the stories that shape us. In ancient times, Dante's *Divine Comedy* stands as a prominent work filled with religious references, mythical narratives, and Biblical stories. It serves as a vivid illustration of the interplay between Religion and Culture. (Blauvelt n.p.) In the Middle Ages, the hybridity of Religion and Culture can be exemplified in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Wittreich 569-589) This epic poem delves deeply into theological and cultural themes, exploring the fall of man and the clash of divine forces. As we progress into the 20th century, *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot captures our attention with its profound exploration and questioning quest. (Bloom 102) This modern masterpiece raises thought-provoking inquiries about the human condition and the complexities of existence, further reflecting the intricate relationship between Religion and Culture. They have left an indelible mark on literature and human society, serving as a source of inspiration, reflection, and sometimes conflict.

## **Definitions and Interpretations of Religion and Culture**

Defining religion and culture is challenging due to their complexity and the diversity of human beliefs and practices. There is no universally accepted definition for either concept. Additionally, these definitions are often context dependent. Some definitions of religion emphasize belief in the supernatural, while others focus on rituals, community, or moral codes. Culture definitions range from all-encompassing worldviews to more specific aspects like language and customs. Different cultures and religions have their unique expressions and interpretations, making it challenging to create universally applicable definitions. Here are some of the Definitions of Religion and Culture.

Emile Durkheim defined Religion as "Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them" (Taves 16).

Max Lynn Stackhouse defined Religion as a “. . . comprehensive worldview or ‘metaphysical moral vision’ that is accepted as binding because it is held to be in itself basically true and just even if all dimensions of it cannot be either fully confirmed or refuted” (Nelson n.p.).

Edward Burnett Tylor defined Culture as “. . . that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (White n.p.).

The concepts of religion and culture are complex, evolving, and context-dependent. They have undergone significant historical shifts, and scholars like Max Stackhouse, Edward Burnett Tylor, and Emile Durkheim have contributed to our understanding of these concepts by emphasizing the importance of cultural context and the need for nuanced interpretations.

Clifford Geertz, an influential anthropologist, is known for his symbolic interpretation of religion. He argued that religion is not just a set of beliefs and practices but a system of symbols that conveys meaning. Geertz emphasized the importance of understanding these symbols within their cultural context to grasp the deeper significance of religious practices. Talal Asad, a prominent anthropologist of religion, has critiqued the Western-centric concept of religion. He argues that “the term ‘religion’ itself is a product of Western history and thought and does not adequately capture non-Western belief systems. Asad calls for a more culturally sensitive approach to studying religious phenomena, taking into account the historical and social contexts in which they occur” (Asad 237-259).

## **How did Religion and Culture spread through Literature?**

Certainly, when discussing the dissemination of culture and religion, Literature plays a significant role. Religious texts such as the Bible, Mahabharata, Ramayana, and the Quran are exemplary in conveying information about religion and, by extension, culture. These texts have historically been instrumental in educating humanity about religious beliefs

and cultural practices. Throughout history, various literary works have also played a pivotal role in influencing people's understanding of religion and culture. Works such as Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1476), Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-80), Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) hold the power to shape individuals' perspectives on both religious and cultural matters. These literary masterpieces serve as vehicles for exploring complex themes, fostering critical thinking, and deepening our insights into the intricate interplay between religion and culture. While delving further into the realm of culture, one can take note of what Ray Bradbury articulated in his work *Fahrenheit 451*, "You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them" (Bradbury 199-202).

## **Relationship between Religion and Culture in Literature**

Particularly, discussing one or two works under the section of Religion and Culture is a bit challenging, but I will try to explain it by taking the best examples from each era when the works were written. First, there is Dante's *Divine Comedy*, second is John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and third is T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Certainly, discussing the intersection of religion and culture in the context of these three literary works is a fascinating endeavor. Each of these works represents a significant exploration of religious themes within the cultural and historical contexts of their respective times.

### ***Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (14th Century)**

The *Divine Comedy*, known as 'La divina commedia' in Italian, is an epic three-part poem - Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso - authored by Dante Alighieri, and it was published in the year 1320 (Blauvelt n.p.). This work is deeply rooted in the Christian faith and reflects the medieval Catholic worldview. It explores themes of sin, redemption, and divine justice. Dante's depiction of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven offers a vivid portrayal of the moral and religious beliefs of his time. This work has

had a profound influence on Western literature and culture. Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy* in Italian rather than Latin, which was the dominant language for serious literature at the time. This choice played a crucial role in the development of the Italian language and culture, helping to establish it as a literary language. Dante's use of the vernacular made his work accessible to a broader audience, contributing to the cultural identity of Italy (Alighieri 307).

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is deeply rooted in Catholic theology. It reflects the religious beliefs and practices of the time, and Dante's journey through the afterlife serves as a spiritual allegory. Dante's encounters with various figures, including saints, sinners, and biblical characters, illustrate his understanding of the Christian faith and the consequences of one's actions in life. It remains a timeless exploration of the human soul's journey toward God. He skillfully blends Christian theology with pagan Greco-Roman mythology, presenting them as if both coexist in a harmonious narrative. To employ a term often found in modern science fiction and fantasy literature, he seamlessly interweaves these traditions (Blauvelt n.p.).

The poem's enduring significance lies in its ability to provide insights into the complex relationship between religion and culture during that era, making it a timeless work of literature that continues to be studied and appreciated today.

### ***Paradise Lost* by John Milton (17th Century)**

*Paradise Lost*, authored by the 17th-century English poet John Milton (1608–1674), is an epic poem written in blank verse. This is an epic poem that retells the biblical story of the Fall of Man, focusing on Satan's rebellion, the temptation of Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, often considered the greatest epic poem in the English language, has been a subject of debate among critics. Its impact on English literature ranks second only to Shakespeare's, as noted by Benjamin Ramm. Milton's religious vocabulary, intended to elucidate a world in decline, has faded into obscurity. However, it's essential not to diminish the poem's profound

theological core. As Christopher Ricks, the critic, aptly expressed regarding *Paradise Lost*, “Art for art’s sake? Art for God’s sake” (Ramm n.p.). Milton’s work grapples with complex theological questions, such as the nature of free will, theodicy (the problem of evil), and the concept of redemption. It reflects the Protestant beliefs of the time and explores the relationship between humanity and divinity.

Milton crafts a poem that engages deeply with religion, challenging our faith in a thought-provoking manner. While not overtly stated, Defoe does seem to ultimately acknowledge Milton for portraying “a fully formed Devil, harboring Hell within his own heart,” in alignment with Satan’s renowned proclamation from *Paradise Lost*, where he declares, “the mind is its own place,” and “my self am Hell.” (Wittreich 569-589) It seems to be true what William Blake said, “Milton was a true Poet and of the Devil’s party without knowing it” (Ramm n.p.). *Paradise Lost* has been interpreted in various ways over the centuries. Some readers focus on its religious and theological aspects, while others emphasize its cultural and literary significance. The poem can be seen as a cultural response to the political and religious conflicts of his time. It explores themes of authority, tyranny, and the struggle for freedom - themes that resonated with the cultural and political climate of the English Civil War. The poem’s portrayal of Satan as a charismatic and tragic figure has invited cultural interpretations that explore themes of rebellion, individualism, and the complexity of evil too. This work illustrates the intricate relationship between religion and culture in a 17th-century English context. While it is fundamentally a religious work, it also reflects the cultural and political dynamics of its time, making it a multifaceted epic that continues to be studied for its religious, literary, and cultural significance. The poem’s ability to bridge religious and cultural dimensions makes it a rich and enduring work of literature.

### **The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot (20th Century)**

‘Human kind cannot bear very much reality’. (Eliot lines 44-45)

*The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot Published in the autumn of 1922, the poem was regarded as revolutionary, emerging in the aftermath of the

First World War and a worldwide pandemic. It has also earned the distinguished title of “the preeminent poem of the 20th century” according to Literary Hub (Ahlborn n.p.). *The Waste Land* is a modernist poem that reflects the disillusionment and it weaves together various voices and cultural references in a fragmented narrative. It reflects the cultural upheaval of its time and is often interpreted as a commentary on the spiritual and moral crisis of modernity. Its exploration of religious themes in a secular age is emblematic of the cultural shifts of the early 20th century.

If one has to talk about what is in the poem, “The Waste Land” is rich with religious imagery and references, encompassing diverse religious traditions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the mythos of the Fisher King. These elements are interwoven throughout the five parts of the poem, which are titled: “The Burial of the Dead,” “A Game of Chess,” “The Fire Sermon,” “Death by Water,” and “What the Thunder Said.” The poem incorporates mythological figures like Tiresias, Tristan, and Isolde, as well as lines from various poems, operas, and literary works that traverse a wide array of genres and cultural origins (Frey n.p.).

Patricia Sloane writes about Fisher King in Richard Wagner’s Arthurian Sources, Jessie L. Weston, and T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, “Eliot’s Fisher King may appear not only as any hero of myth or romance but also as any hero or anti-hero of literature, history, or real life” (Sloane 30-53).

The poem opens with the famous line “April is the cruellest month,” juxtaposing the renewal of spring with a sense of spiritual desolation, suggesting a loss of religious and cultural meaning. Throughout the poem, there is a pervasive sense of spiritual desolation and alienation. The characters and voices in the poem grapple with a world that has lost its religious and cultural moorings. This reflects the broader cultural disillusionment of the post-World War I era, where traditional values and beliefs were shattered by the horrors of war and the rapid changes of the modern age. Eliot’s use of religious motifs suggests that even in

a culturally fragmented world, there may be a path to redemption through spiritual exploration and rediscovery.

“When examining a few of the original lines to describe it...”

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain. (Eliot line 4)

These lines introduce the theme of renewal and rebirth, which has religious undertones, as April traditionally represents a time of new life and resurrection in Christian culture.

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,  
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell  
And the profit and loss. (Eliot line 313)

While not explicitly religious, the mention of Phlebas, a character who has experienced death and perhaps some form of afterlife, touches on themes of mortality and the unknown, which often intersect with religious ideas about the afterlife.

“Shantih shantih shantih” (Eliot line 430).

These lines conclude the poem and are a reference to the Sanskrit word “shanti,” which means “peace.” It is a repeated chant and a form of benediction, reflecting a sense of spiritual or divine peace.

The inclusion of religious references highlights the enduring presence of religious themes and symbols in the cultural consciousness, even in a secular and disillusioned age. “The Waste Land” is a complex and allusive poem that explores various themes, including cultural and spiritual desolation; the above lines demonstrate how religious references and themes are woven into the poem’s fabric. In *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot offers a bleak yet deeply reflective portrayal of the relationship between religion and culture in the early 20th century. His work stands as evidence of the enduring significance of religious and cultural concern in an ever-evolving world.

## **Religion is the Opium**

The concept of Religion and Culture as “opium” is closely associated with the work of Karl Marx, who famously stated, “Religion is the opium of the people.” Marx’s statement implies that religion, like a drug, can be used to dull the pain and suffering experienced by individuals in a capitalist society. It can also serve as a tool of social control, keeping the working class content and submissive (Pedersen 354-387).

Dante’s work is a complex allegorical journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. It explores themes of sin, redemption, and the afterlife within a Christian framework. In the context of Marx’s statement, one could argue that Dante’s portrayal of the Church and its teachings could be seen as a form of “opium” that provides solace to individuals in the midst of their suffering. The promise of salvation and eternal life might be viewed as a means of coping with the hardships of life. Dante also critiques the corruption within the Church, suggesting that the institution may sometimes exploit people’s faith for its own gain, which aligns with Marx’s criticism of religion as a tool of control.

Similar to Dante, one can argue that Milton’s work presents religion as a powerful force that shapes human behavior and understanding of the world. The promise of paradise and the threat of damnation can be seen as a form of “opium” that influences characters’ decisions. Additionally, Milton grapples with the idea of free will and the consequences of individual choices, which can be related to Marx’s critique of religion as a means of control. In this case, it’s the fear of divine punishment that serves as a form of social control.

Eliot’s work can be seen as reflecting the idea that religion and culture, which may have served as “opium” in the past, are no longer effective in addressing the existential crises of the modern era.

In summary, while the works of Dante, Milton, and Eliot do not explicitly endorse or reject Marx’s assertion about religion as “opium,” they do engage with religious and cultural themes in ways that allow for interpretation in light of this concept. Each work explores the role of

religion and culture in providing solace, control, or meaning in the lives of individuals and societies.

## Why these Three Works for Religion and Cultural Reference?

Religion and culture serve as two central aspects that function like threads in human relationships, binding us together while also possessing the potential to divide us. These dynamics are vividly exemplified in literature. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* all serve as reflections of the cultural and religious beliefs of their respective eras. In *Divine Comedy*, there is a vivid depiction of Hell, and both Hell and Heaven are central themes in *Paradise Lost*, while *The Waste Land* brims with religious, cultural, historical references, and ideas. The blending of these three works and their exploration of themes such as Hell, Heaven, history, culture, and religion are the primary reasons why they stand as works that reflect the thoughts, ideas, and epochs in which they were created.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of religion and culture in literature is a profound journey that spans centuries and reflects the ever-evolving relationship between these two central aspects of human existence. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* stand as monumental pillars in this exploration, each offering a unique perspective on the interplay between religion and culture within their respective historical contexts. These works illuminate the enduring significance of religious and cultural themes in literature, revealing how they shape and reflect the values, beliefs, and anxieties of their times. Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven in *Divine Comedy* provides a timeless allegory of the human soul's quest for redemption, while Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* grapples with theological questions and political allegory, offering a rich tapestry of religious and cultural ideas. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a masterpiece of modernist literature, captures the disintegration of traditional values and beliefs in the 20th century, raising profound questions about the role

of religion and culture in an increasingly fragmented world. In essence, these works serve as windows into the intricate web of human thought, belief, and identity, showcasing the enduring relevance of religion and culture in the realm of literature. They remind us that these two central systems continue to shape our understanding of the world and ourselves, making the study of their interplay a timeless and invaluable pursuit in the exploration of human experience.

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