

Book Reviews

***Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature an Introduction* by Mark Knight and Emma Mason. Published in United States by Oxford University Press 2006, pp 245, £18.00, ISBN 978-0-19-927711-7.**

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This thought-provoking and enriching book makes for a good pleasure reading, to students and scholars alike. The authors Mark Knight is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Roehampton University and Emma Mason is a Lecturer in the Department of English and comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick.

The book contains six chapters, each dealing with the different religious developments that took place in the nineteenth century Europe. The attempt has been made by the authors to show the relationship between the literature and religion in the period 1780-1900. As the title suggests that it is *An Introduction* therefore, it serves as an initiation towards thinking and speculating about religion as an integral part of human existence. However one cannot ignore the scholarly details and treatment of the subject by the authors. In other words it is not only an introduction, but a complete discourse in itself. The book carefully guide the readers in the realm of contemporary theological and doctrinal concerns while we are also given the concrete life situation by the literary works of towering writers of the time like Blake, Wordsworth, Eliot, Dickens and so on. The authors Knight and Mason give us the plethora of denominations of Christianity which emerged in the nineteenth century and all of these are nothing but the manifestation of the religion and belief of the time. So the inclusive nature of the nineteenth century religion is highlighted in this book.

In Chapter 1 we read about the Protestant dissent, moving from the 1740s and the rise of Methodism into the first few decades of the nineteenth century. This chapter also discusses about the 'Old Dissent' which had two main concerns namely the relationship between God and the believer; and the organization of the Christian Church. Chapter 2 then portrays the influence of Unitarians from the 1790s into mid-century. The Unitarians held the unity of The One, in other words the polytheism was the matter of concern. Chapter 3 discusses the Oxford Movement and its legacies, while the next chapter turns to "orthodox" (Trinitarian) evangelical Christianity in a period beginning with the opening of Exeter Hall in 1831. Chapter 5 gives us the idea of how Secularism played another role of religion's declining agency. This chapter elaborately talks about the writers such as Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and so on writing on the theme of secularism. Chapter 6 gives insights into the British Catholicism playing a role of another unifying factor. Towards the end of this chapter we find the authors discussing about the Mysticism versus Religion.

About the book its blurb asserts that it is “[a] brilliant and concise introduction to the increasingly innovative and ever-urgent relationship between religion and literature. Knight’s lucid and percipient grasp of theological and biblical debate, as well as of recent theoretical and philosophical methodologies, grants his close readings rare insight students and academics will readily appreciate.” As a co-authoress of the book Watson observes that Knight in his “sharp exploration of ideas such as the creation, sin and eschatology, leads us through a dazzling array of literary texts (from Shakespeare and Donne, to Rossetti and Dickens, Rushdie and McEwan) to illustrate what it means to pursue a religious reading. In doing so, he reveals that religious reading, an approach often wrongly assumed to be dependent on sacred or moral content, is rather grounded in the critical ability to renew and re-imagine language within a framework that opens up new ways of thinking about subjectivity, community, hope, vision and love.”(back page)

After reading the book finally we can say that religion has always been an integral part of the literary tradition: many canonical and non-canonical texts engage extensively with religious ideas, and the development of English Literature as a professional discipline began with an explicit consideration of the relationship between religion and literature. So is the case with literature. Both the recent theological turn of literary theory and the renewed political significance of religious debate in contemporary western culture have generated further interest in this interdisciplinary area. This book offers a clear, accessible and thoughtful introduction to the study of religion and literature. While the focus is on Christian theology and post-1800 British literature, substantial reference is made to earlier writers, texts from North America and mainland Europe, and other faith positions. Each chapter takes up a major theological idea and explores it through close readings of well-known and influential literary texts.