

# The formation of canon in religion

[Religion](#)



It is in the nature of human beings to select things among others based on the rules of taste or necessity. The preference of one thing over another is tightly linked to human desires, be they personal or collective. This scenario is found at work in our dealing with literary works. Personal taste in literature refers to the choice of an individual person of a given text without a clear ‘external coercion’. As for collective taste, it is hardly a reality in that no two people have exactly the same feelings toward a given novel or poem even if they both happen to cherish that novel or poem.

The choice of some literary works as having higher values comes out as an extension of the canonization in religious matters. Jewish, Christians, and Muslims initially worked hard to preserve the authentic divine revelations. In other words, they endeavored to compile sets of texts seen as canonical. Thus, what is the definition of canon? What is the process of canon formation in religion? Does this process change when it comes to secular literature? If yes, how? Attempting to answer these questions fully in this short paper is not realistic. However, I will try to answer them as briefly as possible by bringing in precise and concise information.

Etymologically, the term canon comes from Latin *canōn*, from Ancient Greek measuring rod, or standard. Today the term canon is widely used in connection to religious books and literature. The meaning of “ canon” differs a little from religion to literary studies. However, the two applications of the term are related. According to John Anthony Cuddon, “ the Greek word ‘ kanon’, signifying a measuring rod or a rule, was extended to denote a list or catalogue, then came to be applied to the list of books in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament which were designated by church authorities as the

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genuine Holy Scriptures”. From this understanding of canon, it can be seen that the use of ‘ canon’ by Jews and Christians is an extension of the initial Greek meaning of the word. Hence, canon acquired different meanings in the course of time. From rod or rule, it would later designate a list or a catalogue; later still, it would designate genuine writings in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The present signification of literary canon is itself an extension of its religious meaning. To refer again to Cuddon, “ the term ‘ canon’ was later used in a literary application to signify the list of secular works accepted by experts as genuinely written by a particular author”. From this literary perspective, as it is from religious meaning, a canon is considered as genuine. Even though there may be some slight discrepancies as to the meaning of canon, the concept may be thought of as referring to something of good origin. However, the process of making a given text or book a canon—canonization—is not straightforward.

Canon formation in religion was a subject for debates and disagreements. Which books should be included in the Hebrew Bible (now known as the Old Testament)? Which books should be put in the Christian Bible (today referred to as the New Testament)? And based on which principles should this canonization process be carried out? Miller, in his article “ The Story of the Christian Canon,” divides the canonization of the Old Testament into four steps, namely, composing, copying, collecting, and canonizing. He does quite the same for the New Testament. For some conservative scholars, Moses was the first to compose the Old Testament, around 1450 BC, dating back the last book –Nehemiah or Malachi—between 450 and 400 BC. The books <https://assignbuster.com/the-formation-of-canon-in-religion/>

which would be hailed as the apocrypha “ were largely composed during the first and second centuries BC”. Thus, roughly it took 1000 years to compose the Old Testament. For the canonizing, it is important to note that the Greek language was introduced in Alexandria, Egypt, through the conquests of Alexander the Great. Miller provides this account of Greek language introduction and the canonizing of the Old Testament in the following terms:

The conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) widely spread the koine—or “ common” Greek language. Jews, especially those outside Palestine, were not immune to this linguistic revolution. As a result, beginning during the third century BC, a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures arose among the large Jewish community of Alexandria, Egypt. Both the name “ Septuagint” (Latin septuaginta, “ seventy”) and its abbreviation, “ LXX,” reflect the legend found in the Letter of Aristeas that 72 elders, six from each tribe of Israel, created the translation. Christianity was born into this Hellenistic world. That all 27 books of the New Testament are Greek compositions is telling, and it is natural that the Septuagint quickly became the Old Testament of the church.

At this juncture the case of the Apocrypha, about 15 Jewish books and parts of books, emerged. The Roman Catholic Church considered these books as canonical but Jews and Protestants rejected them. In 1534, Martin Luther led “ reformers” to repudiate the Apocrypha. This would prompt the Council of Trent to announce, in 1546, “ an anathema upon those who would ‘ not accept as sacred and canonical’ any book of either testament ‘ in their entirety and with all their parts’ . This is the first time a church council openly stated about the canonical books.

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The New Testament comprises 27 books. However, it was arrived at only after disagreements. Events such as Gnosticism (which produced literature teaching people about the origin of God); the publication by Marcion of a list of authoritative New Testament writings around A. D. 140, in which he rejected the Old Testament and accepted only 10 of Paul's epistles; Montanism a movement during 2nd century AD, which added to the Scriptures, claiming the gift of prophesy; the prosecution of Christians by Roman emperors who set out confiscating Christian writings; all these events paved the way to the canonization of the New Testament. Miller writes that:

Questions about the role of Marcion and the date of the Muratorian Fragment forbid certainty about early canon activity. One date, however, is certain. On Easter Sunday, AD 367, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt, listed in his Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter the 27 books now known as the New Testament, adding the caveat, " Let no one add to these; let nothing be taken away from them" (p. 9).

To close our discussion on canon formation process in religion, it is necessary to point to the fact that throughout history, Christians around the world " have not shared a single canon". The basis for canonization differs from one church to another. For some, the test of canonicity is whether the book is written by a prophet of God, whether it tells truth about God or whether the canonical status is confirmed by an act of God; for others, religious values, the language—Hebrew, for example, in the case of the Old Testament—Christian character, age, conformity to Torah—in the case of the New Testament—or religious community determine canonicity. Even though today it is hard to add to or delete something from the Old Testament, the <https://assignbuster.com/the-formation-of-canon-in-religion/>

New testament, and even the Quran, some minor disagreements still persist as to the real authentic books. This links us to the instability of canon in literary studies.

For centuries, scholars have been trying to delimitate what should constitute canon in the literary domain. Centuries ago before the invention of publishing techniques, most literature was performed in the form of poetry and drama. Epic poetry, for example, was largely received and cherished. To be treated as classic or canon in the period before the 18th and 19th centuries, one should compose the poetic genre which was held as higher to the others. For Aristotle, tragedy was the best poetry whereas for others epic was the norm. Alastair Fowler made genre the center of his article about the formation of canon. He characterizes genres in the courses of history. Some genres appeared to be more considered than others at given times but after change in genre taste, these once-elevated genres would be relegated to the lower category. For Fowler, “ changes in the literary canon may often be referred to revaluation or devaluation of the genres that the canonical works represent”. He brings in the idea of “ generic hierarchy” to refer to that value according to the genre to which a given literary work belongs. This is true in contemporary literary trends. Today, for a writer to be canonical, widely known, he or she must write in today’s most celebrated genre: the novel. Most famous writers today in Africa, for example, are novelists or at least have written one great novel. The case of Wole Soyinka is instructive. He is better in drama, however, it was his complex novel *The Interpreters* that gained him the Nobel prize in literature in 1986.

For some people, literary canonicity should be tested against the originality and timelessness of a work. Thus William Shakespeare is today considered as an influential writer, a canon, not only in England but throughout the world because of the timelessness of his plays. In this spirit, Harold Bloom, an eminent professor of literature, wrote *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994). In this book Bloom discussed 26 writers he considers the canon of the Western countries. The rule for canonicity is the originality, creative talent, and global outlook. Bloom dedicates a chapter to Shakespeare entitled 'Shakespeare, the Center of Canon'. He talks of Shakespeare in the following terms: "Shakespeare and Dante are the center of the Canon because they excel all other Western writers in cognitive acuity, linguistic energy, and power of invention". This position of Bloom in relation to canon formation is linked to the place he gives to aesthetics in the canonization process. However, some groups of critics denounce the hegemonic stance of Bloom. They criticize him of "perpetuating the Western ideology" based on racism and capitalist interests.

Marxists, post colonialists and feminists, for instance, reject any evaluation of literary works based on aesthetics. Imposing aesthetics is like imposing a given worldview on people, the Western worldview. These people oppose the formation of canon. Bloom, sadly seeing a progressive rejection of aesthetics in the canon formation, composes a chapter on An 'Elegy for the Canon'. In a review of Bloom's *The Western Canon*, R. W. French (1994) remarks that:

"The title is deliberately combative: *The Western Canon*. There are enemies out there, and Professor Bloom knows who they are: "Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, Semioticians"—all of whom

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Bloom gathers under the contentious epithet, “ the School of Resentment.” (Another version of the list includes “ Afrocentrists” as well.) In this age of multicultural pluralism, Professor Bloom finds degeneracy rampant and loss pervasive. “ We are,” he asserts, “ destroying all intellectual and aesthetic standards in the humanities and social sciences, in the name of social justice”.

Despite the emergence of Marxists, capitalism remains a force at work in the canon formation. Since capitalists own the means of publication, they publish only works liable to bring more profit. Even the awarding of literary prizes and awards to published writers is a way of advertising writers at national and international levels. This is the main theme of an article by Doseline Kiguru, ‘ Literary Prizes, Writers’ Organizations, and Canon Formation in Africa’ in which Doseline shows how literary prizes such as the Caine Prize for African Writing and the Commonwealth Prize determine the books to be given excellence in the African continent.

Exploring the highly controversial issue of canon formation may require a lengthy book. What canon is or what the canon should be is never definite or absolute. In religion, one talks about such things as authenticity and divine inspiration. In literature today, one talks about originality, timelessness, artistic value, or interest. A conciliatory move may seem a Herculean task. Nonetheless, we can retain that in general a canon—whether religious or literary—is a work or a set of works considered to embody higher values than anything of the sort. Following this, one can extend the concept of canon to other domains such as philosophy or sociology