CHAPTER III
DEMYTHIFICATION

Researcher: You have made a rightful scourge of religious superstition in Messiah, Kalki, Julian, etc. What kind of moral teaching would you want society to emulate or would you maintain strict neutrality as do the narrators of the first two novels?

Gore Vidal: Ethics are much the same in every society. I would separate them from Sky God Fathers. The Romans had no official religion other than the Emperor cult, which was hardly religious. They understood how human relations should be conducted without the taboos of a Sky God -- and, worse, absolutions for crimes against others. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you", was said in the 5th century BC by Confucius, founder not of a religion but of an ethical and educational system, still vital.

(See Appendix )

3.1.0 Religion is a very common subject of satire. The serious demands that religion imposes on man and the affectation and hypocrisy that it engenders has always been the butt of ridicule. Both clergy and laymen are thus favourite targets of attack. Yet not many have attacked, mocked or ridiculed Godhead itself. Traditionally, it is a forbidden subject and is considered an act of hubris. But the sense of ennui, meaninglessness of life and the consequent declaration of the "death of god" by the existentialist, during the post-war period, saw the myth of
godhead exploded and made possible a satirical attack of godhead itself. In Messiah (1954), Julian (1964) and Kalki (1978) therefore, Vidal deconstructs the myths of Christ and Kalki and attacks the religious ideologies of Christianity and Hinduism. Through a subversive portrayal of the deities in the protagonists of the novels, Vidal undoes the deityship of Christ and Kalki, contests their doctrinal claims and simultaneously ridicules the adherents of these faiths. In the process Vidal uncovers the superstition, hypocrisy, affectation and destructive force of the religious cults that prosper on the gullibility of masses. Vidal's process of 'demythification' in his novels strikes at the very heart of godhead and the spuriousness of religion itself, thereby positing a re-examination of religious beliefs that man so blindly adheres to.

3.1.1 Religion has played a major role in shaping the character, society and culture of America. As the Pilgrim fathers flew from persecution into the New World, they also created myths that assured them of God's special protection and care. America was, to them, the promised land, and they saw themselves as the covenant people. While the country evolved through the centuries, religion too evolved into a plurality, but the essence of the Christian beliefs was never lost. America still visualised itself as the nation
"under God" and religion directed the social, political and even economic considerations of the country, indeed of life itself.

3.1.2 The decades of the 50s were no exception either. When Vidal wrote Messiah, America was revelling in the optimism of its post-war materialistic boom. Having emerged unscathed from the war and establishing itself as a world power economically, militarily and scientifically, America, proved itself, as it were, to be a nation "under God". As dollars after dollars rolled out from the mint with the legend "In God We Trust", America experienced a religious revival. Simultaneously there occurred a media explosion making the world a "global village". Revivalists were quick to grab this opportunity and turned the television into a pulpit, where sinners could be saved by the "blood of the Lamb". Consequently, religious organizations on the lines of industries and enterprises cropped up, their influence as ever permeating the culture of the States. When Vidal came up with his third novel on religion, Kalki, the religious boom was complete with almost 220 denominations and about 1200 religious groups (Marty 1987, 303). Each of them proclaimed a saviour, a knowledge of afterlife, a second coming and the end of the world with different yet appealing flavours. In spite of the seeping materialism and
scientific spirit America accommodated various mystic theologies propounding life after death that was, in Vidal's view more often than not, ridden with deep-seated superstitious beliefs.

3.2.0 **Messiah, Julian and Kalki** are written in this background but they are primarily products of Vidal's reading of the life of Christ in the Gospels, Ecclesiastical history and the story of the tenth avatar of Vishnu in Puranic literature including Mahabharata, Vayu Purana, Agni Purana etc. The life of Christ and the story of the avatar of Vishnu also exist as extant myths in the national consciousness of the two nations, America and India. This enabled Vidal to accomplish with the participation of the reader, the deconstruction of the myths. Vidal's strategy follows the method explained in the last chapter. As he converts his reading into writing, that is, the history of Christianity and the myths of Kalki and Christ into the novels, Vidal retains the original significance or the formal structure of the history/myth while introducing an opposing signification, thereby rupturing the original mythical/historical text.

3.2.1 Thus in **Messiah** the protagonist John Cave is modelled on Christ but this parallel is undercut by the
introduction of an opposing signification, Antichrist, to whom Cave is also likened. This is worked out on two levels, the ironic and the parodic. On the ironic level, the opposing signification is not an interpolation into the original myth, it forms a separate juxtaposing ironic discourse that undercuts the primary discourse, that is, the narration of John Cave as Christ. The hints of such a discourse are given in the primary paratexts itself. The title of the novel, "Messiah" is taken from the Hebrew word "Masiyach" meaning the anointed one of God and is synonymous with the Greek, "Christos", which means the same and signifies Jesus Christ, the revealed messiah of Christianity. But the epigraph pictures an Antichrist-like figure. Thus "messiah" becomes a word with two significations, a signifier with two signifieds which renders it ambivalent. This ironic discourse, therefore, permeates the novel as John Cave (the protagonist) is identified with Christ and Antichrist, thereby challenging, questioning and relativizing the Christ myth. On the parodic level, Vidal follows the formal structure of the Christ myth but interpolates it with a new content, whose opposing signification, questions and undermines the original version. The method of parody is hence repetition with critical difference. Thus the formal structural features of Christ's life -- his prophesied birth, humble
origins, baptism, ministry, etc., find their parallel in Cave but they are undercut by adding a new and opposing dimension to it. Working on these two levels Vidal renders the text problematic.

3.2.2 Julian supplements Messiah in its questioning of Christianity. Its method is that of direct denunciation and the traditional ironic differences of ideal and practice / appearance and reality. But the story emerges through the separate discourses of three narrators, which question, relativize each other and render the text problematic. In the context of Christianity, however, Vidal brings such binaries as Old Testament / New Testament, Christianity / Hellenism into play to rupture the deityship of Christ and the doctrines of Christianity. In the process he also works on the image of Julian, redeems him to that of a secularist while simultaneously undercutting it by a contradictory ironic discourse of his belief in Mithraism. He thus renders the figure of Julian problematic by juxtaposing his opposition to Christianity with secularism which is in turn undermined by Julian's faith in Mithraism.

3.2.3 Kalki, however, works more on the parodic level than through a separate ironic discourse. By interpolating foreign material into the formal structure of the original
myth, Vidal undoes it. Kalki or Kalkin of Hindu mythology, is the tenth avatar of Vishnu who is to be born at the end of Kali Yuga as a Brahmana, destroy the wicked and establish the rule of the moral law. But Vidal portrays Kelly, an American born Catholic man, a non-Aryan and a "Mleecha" as Kalki. Through this incongruity of a heterodox portrait, he deconstructs the myth of Kalki. The ironic discourse is embedded into the parodic analogy of the work. This time Vidal exploits the contradictory seeds of rupture within the nature of an incarnation that is based on and given meaning through the juxtaposition of god/man, spirit/flesh, oppositions. He brings these contradictory elements of the myth to the fore, carries the function of each element of the myth to its extreme, thereby destroying the very system of the conceptual opposition on which an incarnation is based.

3.2.4 The essence of deconstruction in the novels is thus the introduction and reversal of binary oppositions. The signifier "Messiah" is undone by the introduction and reversal of the two opposing signifieds Christ/Antichrist and the signifier "Kalki" is ruptured by a play of its opposing signifieds god/man, spirit/flesh, which give meaning to the incarnation while in Julian Christ and Christianity are undermined by the reversion of other
binaries like the Old Testament / New Testament and Christianity / Hellenism. Vidal's play with the binary oppositions undoes the given order of priorities and the very system of conceptual oppositions that makes order possible. This phenomenon is aptly described by Barbara Johnson. Deconstruction, she says, "attempts to elaborate a discourse that says neither "either / or" nor "both/and", nor even "neither/nor" while at the same time not totally abandoning these logics either". She further adds, "deconstruction both opposes and redefines; it both reverses an opposition and reworks the terms of the opposition so that what was formerly understood by them is no longer tenable" (Johnson 1980, 9-10). This then is the essence of Vidal's strategy in Messiah, Julian and Kalki.

3.2.5 The mythical / historical content of all the three novels traverses, crosses and informs each other. But Vidal uses this mythical / historical content in the postmodernist manner. Traditionally mythology and literature were indistinguishable. The primal literature of many nations are thus totally mythological. For example, Greek and Indian literatures cannot be differentiated from their mythology. They are the same. In their use of such a mythology, great masters drew heavily from it in the allusive and archetypal mode. Myths in literature were a
matter of common usage that more often than not provided the plot-structure and story element of many works. It became a wholesome part of the content of these works thus lending to them a universality. In the modern age, however, myths emerged as a technique in the works of modern writers. Coining the term 'mythical method' for this technique, Eliot in his essay on Ulysses in 1923 defined it as a way of controlling and ordering the chaos of contemporary history. Since there was no order in reality, the artist sought, through the mythical method, to create order for himself in his work of art. He provided a semblance of self-satisfying order to fill the lack in reality. But the postmodernist with his decentered view of the world and his acceptance of chaos, sees this as an escape from reality. He disparages this tendency of creating self-sustaining orders of art which cannot resolve the chaos of reality. The postmodernist therefore carries out the "dismemberment of Orpheus". He incorporates myth in his work only to rupture its order, its semblance of unity and to demonstrate the fact that no myth can suffice man's needs. It is this kind of 'demythification' that Vidal indulges in, in Messiah, Julian and Kalki.

3.3.0 In Messiah, Gore Vidal narrates the story of a man called John Cave who resembles the Messiah or Christ. Drawn
on the lines of the life of Jesus Christ, Cave presents many parallels to Christ. Prophesied birth, humble origins, temptations, a three year public ministry and the characteristic betrayal and crucifixion of Christ are the major features of Cave's life. But Cave is also identified with the Antichrist in many ways. This identification of two opposing figures in Cave undermines the signification of the attribution of "messiah" to Cave, and questions not only his Christ-likeness but also the deityship of Christ.

3.3.1 The Christ-likeness of Cave is noted from the very beginning of the novel. Luther, the narrator, draws attention to this fact. He says that Cave did not come to judge the world by fire, he came as messiah to the Americans, a messiah, like "that of the prophets, of the teachers like Jesus before he became Christ ... " (M: 166). Therefore, even when Cave's former profession as an embalmer brings in doubt about this position, he draws consolation from the fact that "a most successful messiah had been a carpenter ..." (M: 57). Similarly, both Christ and Cave have an initiation experience, the one by baptism of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, and the other, as an epiphanic revelation of the truth that to be dead was to belong, to be part of the beautiful darkness of non-being. The temptations of Christ in the wilderness have a parallel in Cave's days in the prison after a hit and run accident.
But both of them pass the test and embark upon their ministry. Coincidentally both have a public ministry of three years when they preach salvation with belief on their person as its basis. Iris, a confidante of Cave remarks, "A society which knows what we know, which believes in Cave and what he says, will be a pleasanter place in which to live...." (M: 69). Further, as Christ is betrayed by Judas, Paul—a close disciple of Cave betrays him. Vidal even introduces a last supper scene, a "family-dinner" in Cave's penthouse where Paul takes the decision to betray him. The result of their "sacrifice" is the perpetuation of their religions. Christianity takes root and gradually spreads all over the world, so does Cavesway. Jesus Christ and John Cave ("A pair of initials calculated to amaze the innocent" [M:31]), Christianity and Cavesway, the Bible and Cavesword; Christmas and Cavesday, Easter and Irisday, these are other obvious parallels between them.

3.4.0 Deriving from the Biblical intertext, Vidal parallels Cave with Christ, but while retaining this parallelism, he introduces an opposing signification that undercuts the deityship of Christ.

3.4.1 Thus while he titles his novel "Messiah", the epigraph portrays an Antichrist figure. Vidal quotes from
The Goncourt Journals Nov. 1861:

I sometimes think the day will come when all the modern nations will adore a sort of American god, a god who will have been a man that lived on earth and about whom much will have been written in the popular press; and images of this god will be set up in the churches, not as the imagination of each painter may fancy him... but established, fixed once and for all by photography (M: epigraph).

The description fits the picture of the Antichrist portrayed in the Bible. In Revelation, Antichrist is described as a man who rises out of the sea of humanity and rules the world. By his gift of oratory and miraculous powers he has the world wonder after him. Gradually this man becomes the object of worship like God. Moreover, he permits the image-worship of himself. By virtue of his power he changes times and religion and becomes the supreme authority over all things. No wonder then, that many believe and accept him as a god.

3.4.1.1 In John Cave, Vidal has made such a personality. Iris, a disciple of Cave ruminates, "I suspect John is the Antichrist .... He's come to undo all the wickedness of the Christians" (M: 99-100). Born a commoner, Cave rises in power and influence, not by the virtue of a divine unction but through his own inborn quality as an actor and his instinctive talent for rhetoric (M: 59). The central
factor, however, is his talent for hypnosis, which channelled through the television becomes an effective power of influencing and winning people. As Cavitism (the doctrines of and belief in Cave) spreads all over the States, the Catholic Church becomes uneasy, it suspects the fulfilment of a prophecy. It invokes its entire repertory of anathemas against Cavitism and "... soon it was whispered in devout Christian circles that the Antichrist had come at last, sent to test the faith" (M: 141).

3.4.1.2 The testing of faith, the period of tribulation that the Antichrist brings in, then, begins. Christianity becomes the target of Cavesway. Cave flays the churches and completely undermines "the whole Christian structure" (M: 127). He is of opinion that Churches need no longer exist, for they derive their power from "superstition and bloody deeds" (ibid.). Cavites subvert Christian morality by championing free love and publicly decrying the institution of marriage (M: 173). As the period of tribulation sets in, Christians face persecution from Cavites. Churches as well as ministers are burned (M: 147). Even St.Peter's at Rome is not spared and the Pope becomes martyr when the Cavites set fire to the Vatican (M: 148). Gradually, Christianity is rooted out of existence. And when Bishop Winston, the most vociferous of anti-Cave ministers dies, it is reported
that he had taken Cavesway and renounced Christ. Consequently, Cavesway becomes the sole religion and assumes control over individual life, as well as trade, commerce, the whole structure of the state. Meanwhile the clergy turn Cavites. Indeed, the Antichrist had triumphed in deceiving the very elect.

3.4.1.3 Vidal thus establishes Cave as Antichrist in opposition to his likeness to Christ through this ironic discourse in the novel. The reversal of oppositions serves to undermine the meaning of reference, that the word "messiah" brings up. For in portraying John Cave, Vidal shows how the absence of any objective signified opens up a whole system of codes in which the Antichrist in his saving capacity becomes Christ-like, thereby subverting the very identity of Christ the Messiah.

3.4.2 The parody of the Christ myth touches upon such features as the writing of the gospels, the message of eternal life and Christ's sacrificial death. By inserting either a shifting of the content or introducing a new ideological content to the formal element of the myth, Vidal creates a dangerous supplement that questions and relativizes the myth's original significance.
3.4.2.1 Through a parodistic analogy of the writing of the Gospels, Vidal suggests that the divinity of Christ is the result of image-building by his disciples. He parallels the exaggerated revision of Cave's life to the writing of Gospels. Thus Cave's stature is changed from five-feet eight to six feet, Cave's term in prison is revised and retold as the 'period of persecution' and dialogues written by Luther during the term appears as the 'Prison dialogue' of Cave. Luther also writes "An Introduction to John Cave", a pamphlet where he provides Cave with a "respectable ancestry" (M: 93). Cavesword like the New Testament, written by Luther purportedly records "Cave's views" on the problems of marriage, the family, the world government and many such problems in need of "urgent solution" (M: 139). Iris claims that even though Luther wrote Cavesword, it reflected Cave's thoughts: "I mean you Luther wrote the dialogue but it reflects exactly what he always thought" (M: 164). It is thus Luther's hand which gives a polish and authority to Cavesword which in his opinion could have never been written by Cave "with his limited education and disregard for the works of the past" (M: 62). Luther is undoubtedly none other than the disciple Luke. By drawing such a parallel between the writing on Cave's life and the Gospels, Vidal contests the latter's authenticity. He also implies that the divinity of Christ is just as spurious as
the divinity of Cave who are presented by hagiographers in their revisionary writings of mundane and ordinary lives. So Luther remarks: "His divinity, however, was and is the work of others, shaped and directed by the race's recurrent need" (M: 98).

3.4.2.2 Vidal questions Christian doctrines as part of the subversion of Christ. Against Christ's gospel of eternal life, Cave preaches a gospel of death. The point that is implied is whether, either eternal life nor death makes any difference. In his scepticism of after-life, Vidal holds both to be the same for neither eternal life nor death has significance to men who cannot see beyond the grave. Luther is an earnest spokesman of Vidal when he says, "Put it this way; finally, accurately: I accept no man's authority in that realm where we are all equally ignorant" (M: 54). Similarly, Vidal reasons against the doctrine of Christ's sacrificial death. In Cave, Christ's death is transformed into a ridiculous murder. Though he preaches the gospel of death, Cave refused to take death voluntarily. He is shot dead by Paul and declared to have taken Cavesway voluntarily, so as to serve as a symbol of sacrifice. Vidal subtly implies, through this repetition with difference, that Christ's death was not voluntary. He was forced into it in such circumstances where he had no choice. To the
all-knowing Clarrisa this is what had clearly happened to Christ. Comparing Cave with Christ, she says: "The same thing happened to Jesus, you know. They kept pushing him to claim the kingdom. Finally, they pushed too hard and he was killed. It was the killing which perpetuated the legend" (M: 194).

3.4.2.3 Christ / Antichrist, eternal life / death, sacrifice / murder, are the oppositions Vidal reverses to undo the deityship of Christ as well as the accompanying doctrines of Christian faith. Cave's ironic portrait, then, works at two levels that counter, question and relativize each other. Vidal neither accepts nor outrightly rejects the Christ in Cave as an individual per se, he unmakes the mythification of the individuals, the trappings that are built around them to lend an aura of divinity.

3.4.3.0 By the 'demythification' of Christ through Cave, Vidal ridicules those who believe in Christ and his doctrine. Simultaneously he satirizes the very falsity, hypocrisy and affectation that religion breeds. He uncovers religion inside out by portraying its corruption by its adherents. This targets the extratextual manifestation of the ideology.
3.4.3.1 Cave's life is by itself one long ironic comment on the mushrooming cult figures of the 1950s, demagogues who ruled people's life on the basis of a message of an afterlife. A professional hypnotist, Cave uses this power on television, to great effect and mesmerizes people into believing in him. Even the rational Luther is taken in by Cave's hypnotism: "Against my will and judgement and inclination, I found myself absorbed by the man, not able to move or react" (M: 60). People gullibly accept Cave's message of death. As Cavesway gradually catches peoples' mind, psychologically trained disciples, residents and communicators continue the work even after Cave's death. The methods employed to win people to Cavesway, the persecution and annihilation of anyone who opposed it, and the mask of spiritual enterprise under a forceful indoctrination turn Cavesway into a totalitarian religious order which spreads the world over in a record time of three years. In a sense Messiah recreates the world of 1984 under the auspices of Cave as "Big Brother".

3.4.3.2 The dichotomy of Cave's character is further reflected in a series of incidents in his life. Cave is once arrested and put in prison on the charges of a hit and run accident, but in the course of Cavite history this is rewritten as a time of persecution by enemies. When the old
man whom Cave has hit, dies, Cave glosses over it in a
typical ironic manner, saying that he had made it easier for
the man to die and thus attain the gift of Cavesway. Paul's
analyst, on the other hand, calls it "a will to disaster"...
the old man wanted to be run over" (M: 106). But this
death-wish theory is, as Luther and Iris suspect, only a
cover-up: "Neither Iris nor I mentioned what we suspected.
Each in his different way accommodated the first of many
crimes" (M: 107). Knowing that such an incident would mar
the career of Cave, Paul has the old man killed.

3.4.3.3 When Cave finally dies the irony doubles over him.
Paul kills the old man as he proved to be a stumbling block
to the image of Cavitism and Cave, but when he finds that
Cave is no longer of any use to the establishment, he kills
Cave too. Significantly Cave who preaches the way of death
refuses to take death voluntarily (M: 196). Yet, by killing
Cave, Paul not only has full control of the establishment
but also gets the much needed symbol of a great sacrifice to
keep alive the legend of Cavitism. Thus, with the death of
Cave, there are astonishing number of suicides. People who
take Cavesway are the maximum ever in the history of
Cavitism. Vidal makes a final grim comment on these deaths.
As Cavesway becomes universal, economists in Washington
privately thank the Cavites for what they were doing to
reduce the population: "There's a theory that by numerous voluntary deaths wars might decrease since -- or so the proposition goes -- they are nature's way of checking population" (M: 120). A very "modest proposal" indeed.

3.4.3.4 Paul's association with Cavitism is another sore point of the establishment. Beginning as a Hollywood publicist gave him the necessary expertise to make Cavitism a successful and powerful enterprise. In his idiosyncratic manner, he remarks, after having met Cave: "I was sold the first time. I got the message" (M: 76). The message that Paul refers to is not the spiritual message of death and salvation that Cave preaches but that this gospel is perfect material for salesmanship. As he puts it:

Anyway he's Cave going to do the preaching part and we're going to handle the sales end, if you get what I mean. We're selling something which nobody else ever sold before, and you know what is that? .... We're selling the truth about life and that's something that nobody, but nobody has ever done before! (ibid.).

3.4.3.5 Through this double-ended discourse of trade/religion Vidal points at the corruption of religion, its transformation into merely a commercial venture. For Paul the message of Cave is a product which has to be advertised and sold in the right manner. He is interested in the message only as a medium of displaying his
salesmanship and thereby fulfilling his ambition of getting to the top. As he says: "I want to see this thing get big, and with me part of it" (M: 79). After having sold soap on television, Paul now applies the same techniques, converts Cave and his message to something as amiable as soap to cater to the taste of the viewers and sell his product. For the success of the sales, Paul has no scruples in applying crooked means. On this count he has no needless affectations:

... In my business you get used to this sort of thing: occupational hazard you might say. I've had to fight my way every inch and I know a lot of people are going to be jostled in the process, which is just too bad for them (M: 78)

The old man who is hit by Cave proves to be one such hazard and is done away by Paul. Later even when Cave stands as an obstacle to Paul's professionalism, he is also killed. Luther, however, has the last laugh when he notes that Paul commits suicide out of frustration, having failed to gain control of Cavite Inc. Unsurprisingly, Paul's suicide is also reported to be a voluntary embrace of Cavesway.

3.4.3.6 Luther is the only sane one among the indoctrinated Cavites. He alone sees through the facade of spirituality of Cavitism and reveals the truth about it in his memoir. Because of his opposition to Cavitism he is
forced to flee to Egypt under the guise of an archaeologist and a false name. Himself having helped perpetuate Cavesway by publishing Cavesword, "An Introduction to John Cave", etc., a series of plausible lies, now as Richard Hudson he questions and contests them. In his scepticism of life-after-death and his questioning of Cavitism, he emerges as a spokesman for Vidal. Hence, when Cave argues that his "quarrel is not with Christ but his keepers" (M: 132), because they derive their power from superstition, Luther is sceptical about Cavitism itself, which, he remarks "... will do more harm than good by attempting to supplant old dogmas and customs with new dogmas" (M: 122).

3.4.3.7 Ironically, however, Luther works for Cave not out of faith in his message but because he could have the feel of power along with Cave. Messiah9 like Cave do not concern him at all. He declares to Iris that he is not a believer and adds that he would not "... be so presumptuous as to make a choice among the many thousand of recorded revelations of truth, accepting one at the expense of all the others" (M: 53). This rationalistic view of things would beg the approval of Vidal.

3.4.4 In Messiah, then, Vidal subverts the deityship of Christ and disputes the doctrines of Christian faith -- the
gospel of eternal life and the sacrificial death on the cross. At the same time through John Cave, the Knave, he mocks at the gullibility of a people who accept every messianic frenzy with equal faith. In an age of increasing materialism, science and reason, faith without any rational analysis implies Vidal, is an anomaly. Apart from his satire of religious ideology, Vidal targets religion's spuriousness -- its merchandising, its breeding of superstition and violence, its perpetuation of affectation and hypocrisy. Even in the 20th century, Vidal's society had not come a long way from that of Chaucer's pardoner and summoner, producing religious knaves who feed on the gullible.

3.5.0 Julian targets the history of Christianity. By reading into the past and uncovering Christianity inside out, Vidal not only exposes the hitherto spotless image of the religion but also reveals Julian, the 'apostate', in a new light. The differences between ideal and practice, divisions in the church, the evolution of doctrines which end in absolutism, the contradictions between the Old and New Testaments and the appropriation of Hellenism portray Christianity as an evil, while Julian's anti-Christian image is redeemed to that of a secularist.
Julian's questioning of Christianity starts on a personal level. At an early age his father is killed by Constantius who is supposed to be a devout Christian. On another occasion in childhood, Julian witnesses two old men being man-handled by priests for being heretics. These events of his childhood sow the seeds of rebellion in him against Christianity. He reflects: "Even a child could see the divisions between what the Galileans say they believe and what, in fact, they do believe as demonstrated by their action" (J: 31). Later the divisions that arise from doctrinal quarrels and the violence they engender establish his opposition to the religion. The Athanasian and Arians differed on the interpretation of Jesus' relationship to the Father and engaged in continuous quarrels over it. Protestantism and Catholicism also took root in Julian's lifetime and resulted in much strife, violence and bloodshed. Moreover, these divisions based on differing doctrines were themselves made by extrapolatory interpretation of the scripture in a series of Ecumenical councils. The dogmatism, absolutism and intolerance of others made Christianity a very disturbing and peace-breaking religion. Julian's analysis of early Christianity is very much Vidalian. He calls it "an age diseased by the quarrels and intolerance of sect..." (J: 22). Castigating the religion with utmost contempt, he says: "No evil ever
entered the world quite so vividly or on such a vast scale as Christianity did" (J:129). Elsewhere Vidal makes the point that American society has been shaped morally and intellectually for good or ill by Christianity. He says:

The murderous instincts of Christian absolutism first emerged in the fourth century. And I do not think it an exaggeration to say that over the centuries, Christianity has been responsible for more bloodshed than any other force in Western life (Vidal 1965a, 163)

3.5.2 Julian's record of contradictions between the Old and the New Testaments is rather naive for an intellectual of his stature. Nevertheless they present indubitable paradoxes that challenge the unity of the scriptures which are explained away as mysteries. Julian contends that Jesus could not be the Son of God since he was a Jew and therefore calling himself Son of God would mean blasphemy (J:287). He also disagrees with Paul's view that God is God both of Jews and gentiles because by God's own admission God is jealous God (J:80). Of Jesus's deityship, Julian says ,"Are we to believe that there was no god until the appearance of a rabble-rousing carpenter three-hundred years ago"(J: 149). In Vidal's final analysis, Jesus is a rebel Jewish rabbi who acted out each prophetic requirement in order to fight the Roman empire (J:287).
3.5.3 Julian also accuses Christianity of appropriating all the myths of Hellenism. He notes that in Christianity feastdays and saint were created as in Hellenism. Jesus was called saviour-healer like Asklepois, while the doctrine of trinity is modelled on the Hellenist triune Apollos, Helios and Mithras. In this context Priscus remarks: "The Christians have slyly incorporated most of the popular elements of Mithras and Demeter and Dionysus into their own rites. Modern Christianity is an encyclopedia of traditional superstition" (J:84)

3.5.4 Having shown early/historical Christianity in a denigrating light, Vidal now establishes Julian as a secularist. He portrays Julian's tolerance of all religions. After having become an emperor, Julian issues an edict to the effect that all religions should be tolerated. But the vindication of Julian does not overlook his weaknesses either. As Vidal lets Christianity fall on its own shortcomings, so he allows the anti-rational and superstitious side of Julian's personality to be revealed. Julian embraces Hellenism through rituals and mysteries, which to Priscus is as nonsensical as Christianity:

Granted, no educated man can accept the idea of a Jewish rebel as god. But having rejected that myth, how can then one believe that the Persian hero-god Mithras was born of light striking rock on December, 25...(J:84).
Pricus sees no essential difference between Christianity and Mithraism. But Julian embraces it and feels that he is "born again", that he is the chosen one of the Sun god for the accomplishment of a mission. Once more, Priscus notes that Julian's belief in a magic ceremony makes him fall into the same nonsense as the superstition of the Christians. Thus while allowing Julian to undermine Christianity, Vidal does not vindicate Julian's fanatical adherence to Hellenism. Julian's belief in Mithraism is shown to be as perverse as the belief in Christianity. By debunking / decentering Christianity as a religion of superstition and ritual, Julian undercuts his own rational stand, his only saving grace being his secularism. However Vidal rewrites the early history of Christianity and through it reshapes the personality of Julian to a positive one. The historical apostate of the Christian point of view is changed to a secularist in Vidal's version. While in Messiah Vidal displaces Christ from the center of history in Julian, he redeems Julian from the marginal and foregrounds him into the center, thus reversing the historical understanding of Julian's image of apostasy.

3.6.0 Kalki continues this attack on religious ideologies. Meanwhile twenty years had elapsed between the novels, increasing, as ever, the influence of religion in
the States. The religious revival of the 50s, followed in the 60s by the counter-culture, the Beat movement, the Feminist movement and the effects of an attendant mass culture provided the perfect backdrop for cults to prosper on the uncertainty of the youth, now fed-up with the meaninglessness and emptiness of life. Vidal's name dropping of contemporaries -- Jacqueline Cochran, Indira Gandhi, Joan Baez, Kate Millet, Michel Foucault, Nelson Rock Feller, Norman Mailer, John Wayne, etc., -- marks the extratextual context of his writing and signals, too, the targets of his satire -- Mary Baker Eddy, Reverend Sun Moon, Jehovah's Witness, Seventh Day Adventists and the likes of it.

3.6.1 Kalki, the last avatar of Vishnu is supposed to be born as a Brahamana who will later appear in a white horse with a flaming sword in his hand to end the Kali Yuga and establish the golden age of dharma. This golden age would have a few survivors from among the devotees of Vishnu. Later, the golden age would be adorned by the procreation of a new human race through Brahma the creator. Once again, Vidal, in the absence of any objective signified, deconstructs the myth of Kalki. Since the signifier explains itself only in language, that is, a system of signs, Vidal opens up the gap between them and invents
freely to do away with our preconceived concept of codes that signify Kalki. In other words, his portrayal of Kalki is so glaringly heterodox and yet so convincing that our notions of the incarnation of Vishnu is completely undone by Vidal's deconstruction of it.

3.6.1.1 In portraying Kalki, Vidal has followed in toto the framework of the construct (myth). Kalki is incarnated on earth in the flesh of James J. Kelly who declares himself as such, and settles down in an ashram at Nepal. From here he spreads the message of "the end of the world" and invites people to believe in him, purify themselves and thereby prepare for the end. The response is a mocking of Kalki all over the world. Yet he perseveres. One fine morning he dances the dance of death and earth's five billion die. Only five of his close disciples or perfect masters are saved. They rule over the world ready to recreate a new race of human beings and hence begin the golden age.

3.6.2 The reading and repetition of the myth is not without any difference. As Vidal problematizes the identification of John Cave with Jesus Christ by the introduction of an opposing signification, so he does with Kelly alias Kalki. The all too obvious difference is that Kalki is incarnated in an American born Catholic. The
Agnipurana visualizes Kalki in a white horse, not white flesh. In spite of keeping up the appearances as the tenth incarnation of Vishnu, by wearing a golden bracelet set with Cabochon ruby and being clean shaven, except for a single tuft of hair in the center of his chest, according to tradition, Kalki's incarnation in white flesh is conspicuously anti-traditional and anti-Hinduistic. Ironically, millions of Hindus accept Kelly as the incarnation of Vishnu.

3.6.3 In Kalki, the flesh, however, always asserts itself and presents another dichotomy of this incarnation. Being a god does not efface his fleshly lusts as he is encased in the body of James J.Kelly. Vidal asserts the fleshly nature of Kelly/Kalki time and again by showing his sensuality, in his interaction with characters in the novels. Thus when Ottinger meets Kalki for the first time she is attracted not to Kalki's divinity, but sensuality. It is Kalki's blondeness and aphrodisiac voice that attract her. She finds her "latent heterosexuality slowly beginning to assert itself" (K: 65) and therefore Ottinger's first impressions of Kalki is that he is a "marvellous seducer" (K: 67). Emphasising the sensuality of Kalki is not enough for Vidal. He goes on to dismantle the very essence of the divinity of Kalki by portraying him having sex with
Ottinger. Kalki shrewdly hints at his intentions to Ottinger when they are alone and she realised that Kalki wanted sex (K: 92). Yet after the act is over, Ottinger does not question the morality of the god with whom she sleeps, for to her, it is merely an instinctive human desire. As she puts it: "God granting favours was not so different from man giving, graciously, of his virile energy" (K: 92). But Vidal has Kalki justify the act in a pseudospiritual reply. Answering as to why he has to do such mundane acts as learning how to ride a horse (in spite of being a god) and why he had sex with her, Kalki says: "'But at the moment god is incorporated. I wear James J.Kelly's body. I am limited by his flesh. How did you like him by the way?' 'Nice', replies Ottinger, and is told, 'His body liked yours' " (K: 94). Kalki, the god, tries to distance himself from his flesh, which, however, corrupts and questions his divinity. Geraldine's intimacy with Kalki too, is, as Ottinger suspects, physical not spiritual. Plainly the fleshly desire of this god-man undercuts all claims to divinity.

3.6.4 The duplicity of Kalki is further uncovered in his involvement with drug trafficking. Kalki is a drug dealer and, a member of Chaochow, one of the principal drug syndicates of the world. When Ottinger confronts Kalki with
this accusation, he replies in his characteristic double-ended manner, that she might be right but hastens to add, "There are no rules except those that I choose to make" (K: 73). Kalki's drug business and its affiliation to religion, is a mystery that Ottinger cannot decipher but to Senator White, the religious front is a perfect cover-up, since "religion is tax exempt" (K: 131). Later, when Ottinger becomes a perfect master she is taken into confidence by Kalki who confesses that he is involved in drug trafficking so that he can run the Kalki Enterprises: "Money. For the ashrams. The mandali. The books, pamphlets. Where else could we get so much so quickly?" (K: 162). Once again, the claim of being an avatar is undermined in Kalki's dealing with drugs.

3.6.5 Kalki's flesh thus always undercuts his claims to divinity. White flesh, fleshly lusts and fleshly deeds attest to an 'other' identity of Kalki, that of being a man, even though he tries to spiritualize everything and create an impression of divinity. Attempting to explain away the dichotomy in his character, Kalki, claims that he does not have only two identities but several: "Since Vishnu is all things, all things are Vishnu" (K: 268). Yet even after Vishnu alias Kalki takes charge of Vaikuntha, the duality of his character is not resolved. It is revealed in his
habitual double talk, the human always opposing the divine: "Shiva whispers, annihilate man. Vishnu whispers, preserve. Brahma whispers, begin a new cycle. Is there any beer?" (K: 254). In his portrayal and rendering of the myth of Kalki, Vidal exploits the self-contradictory nature of an incarnation -- god/man, man/god, divine/human, spirit/flesh -- and gives full freeplay to the polarities of these oppositions of an incarnation. In effect each element of the myth is torn apart, diminished in significance, distorted and corrupted. In the end, the Icon is broken.

3.7.0 In his most imaginative manner Vidal makes Kalki an imitation of the mythical divinity and yet introduces elements of incongruity that question and relativize the authenticity of the divinity as already seen. But the satire is not yet complete. The ridicule of cultism and its adherents reaches its apex in the method Kalki utilizes to achieve his end of destroying the human race and establishing the golden age with a new creation.

3.7.1 This is accomplished by the mind of the evil genius James J. Kelly, an ex-sergeant of the US Army. Having produced a dreaded virus, "Yersinia entercolititia" during the Vietnam war, Kalki alias Kelly has it distributed all over the world in form of a paper lotus through a jet liner
piloted by Geraldine. Three days later on April 3rd, Kalki dances the dance of death and the whole human race is wiped out, with the effect of the virus in the paper lotus being perfectly timed with the dance. However, five of them including Lakshmi, Geraldine, Giles, Ottinger and Kalki, are saved, not by dint of Kalki's divinity but because they have been immunised against the virus before the "end of the world". Moreover, the virus affects only the homosapiens, hence all animal life is preserved. The White House now becomes Vaikuntha and Kalki rules over the putrid flesh of the world's dead billions. Vishnu alias Kalki is shown to have literally preserved himself.

3.7.2 Now is Kalki's turn to recreate the new human race. He has also had this meticulously planned out. Each one of his perfect masters is sexually impotent. Giles had undergone vasectomy (later discovered to be untrue), Ottinger went beyond motherhood when she had her tubes cauterized and Geraldine also had undergone tubectomy. Only Lakshmi impregnated by the lingam of Shiva could conceive and bear a child. This is how Kelly alias Kalki acquires the powers of procreation. Apart from Lakshmi and him, all are sterile. When Geraldine points out that a man is not necessary for impregnation, sperms could do the job. Kalki laughs, for he has taken care of that too. With the
electricity off, the sperms which can exist only at a certain temperature in the sperm banks, are now dead: "The human races only future', said Kalki, 'is here!' slowly, he closed one hand over his crotch. We were all startled. And appalled. Not so much by the gesture but by its demonstrable truth" (K: 273). Kalki's dramatic statement startles Geraldine and Ottinger into the recognition of the truth. Kelly the evil genius had again triumphed.

3.7.3 Vidal allows the myth to go so far undermining it at every stage of its progress. But he is yet to give the final blow. As Kalki spells out his creative genius in his plans for a new human race, so Vidal as his producer / manipulator deals him a final shot. Kalki bears a still born child through Lakshmi. It is discovered that Lakshmi's blood group is Rh-negative while Kalki's is Rh-positive whose combination is invariably disastrous. In desperation Lakshmi is treated with Rho Gam as a solution but this proves ineffective. She is permanently sensitized. By this freak of chance Kalki's monumental plan is destroyed. On this count at least Kalki's plans fail. He had trusted Dr. Lowell too much. Dr. Lowell knew all along the chemistry of their blood but would not reveal it because he was in love with Lakshmi and had the intention of playing Shiva to Lakshmi and thereby fathering a new race. In a final show
of authority Kalki kills Giles. He purports that Giles was the avatar of Ravana. Forty-three years after the "end of the world", the curtain falls on the novel with the lone survivor Kalki proclaiming: "I am the Brahma. I am without beginning, middle or end. At the time of the end, I annihilate all worlds. I am Shiva" (K: 285).

3.7.4 Vidal portrays in Kalki a schizophrenic cult leader who believes that he is the tenth incarnation of Vishnu and attempts to recreate the myth to jot and tittle. Following the myth closely, Vidal dismantles the bi-polar elements of an incarnation and plays them to the extent of reductio absurdum so that the significance of the myth, is completely vitiated. He enters into a play of opposing signification in each element of the myth and thereby loosens the closedness of the mythic text. The opposing signification is underlined by the ironic structure of the work with the introduction of a foreign content to the formal construct of the myth, thus undercutting and subverting it.

3.8.0 Vidal's undoing of the Kalki cult also points to his targeting of other cults in the novel. Mary Baker Eddy (Christian Science), Reverend Sun Moon, Jehovah's witness, the Seventh Day Adventist, etc.
3.8.1 Watching the mandali sitting with rapt attention in the ashram Teddy Ottinger remarks:

They were like androids, waiting to be switched on....the seventies were a perfect time to start a religion. If you are born knowing that you don't really exist, that there's nobody home, why, then let god -- any god -- fill up the empty space.

(K: 82)

As Ottinger points out, the milieu formed a fitting background for the breeding of cults and their gods. Kalki is one such god. While other gods give a message of hope, of eternal security, even Kalki's message of non-hope is accepted, believed upon, especially by the Hindus. Of course, such credulity is mocked at by the Americans who do not believe in a Hindu 'god' and his announcement of the End. But, implies Vidal, if the Kalki story is too fantastic and absurd to be realized, it is put aside as superstition in the developed world, how then does one account for the belief of Christians, all over the world, in the doctrines of the Rapture, the Millennium Kingdom, the Second Coming of Christ and the New Heaven and New Earth. Vidal underscores such a comparison by paralleling Kalki with Christ -- the wilderness experience (K: 36), the incarnation (K: 126) and trinity (K: 182).

3.8.2 Vidal's attack on the spuriousness of many religious organisations concerned with underhand dealings is
exemplified in Kalki's prosperous drug trafficking business. And the comparison with Reverend Sun Moon is not unfounded. Incidentally, Vidal's attack on Moon proves to be prophetic. In 1982, Moon was convicted of income-tax evasion (Encyclopedia Americana). Vidal's interest in Rev. Moon seems to have been more than just casual. Moon's sacred text, The Divine Principle envisages a golden age, a perfect kingdom where marriages of perfect men and women would take place. Moon had it practised on earth with free sex at the communes. The divine vision with altogether mundane activities is what relates Moon's cult to Kalki's.

3.8.3 Vidal also ridicules the juxtaposition of science with religion in his feint at Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. The combination to him is disastrous. The dangers of such a combination are epitomised in Kalki himself. It is his religious mania and scientific temper which unite to produce the lethal drug that 'destroys the whole human race'. Geraldine is another example of this dangerous coalition. Her belief in Kalki as god and her aptitude for science draws Ottinger's attention. She thus says of Geraldine: "...religious faith combined with a pure passion for the science of genetics made it possible for her [Geraldine] to help make an ending of the human race that had been found wanting" (K: 240). Vidal's apprehension of such a combination is as pertinent today as it was then.
3.9.0 In *Messiah*, *Julian* and *Kalki* Vidal's deconstructive satire demythifies the divinity of Christ and Kalki, exalts Julian the renegade and thereby attacks the spuriousness of religion itself. Consequently, he mocks at those who believe in these deities and the affectation and hypocrisy of those who practice it. In choosing to examine two diametrically opposite religions, one Occidental and one Oriental, Vidal points at the underlying continuum of incredulous beliefs that have grasped people's mind in the two hemispheres. The contrast between the two cultures and the two religions is, however, overcome by the underlying similarity of the archetype of the incarnations. Though Christ and Kalki seem so different on the surface, the Second Coming of Christ bears a significant semblance to the myth of Kalki. This fact undercuts and mocks the monotheism of Christianity which accepts one ideology at the expense of the other. *Messiah*, *Julian* and *Kalki*, thus have sceptical narrators who do not believe in an after-life and as Luther points out, do not accept one recorded revelation at the expense of the other. Yet ambiguously, Julian the intellectual who rejects Christianity, almost embraces Mithraism.

3.9.1 If life after death is a myth, then religion is spurious and the cults of Cave and Kalki epitomise this
spuriousness. In traditional satirical terms they are knaves who exploit and prosper on the gullibility of people whose desire for an after-life makes them credulous enough to be exploited by the cultists. Vidal also warns of the dangers of cults. His description of historical Christianity and portrayal of Cave and Kalki show how an organisation with a religious front could overcome the state, acquire the powers of the government and turn totalitarian or through the madness of a schizophrenic leader, destroy the whole human race.

3.9.2 Vidal's questioning of the religious ideologies of Christianity and Hinduism, subversion of the divinities of Christ and Kalki and exaltation of Julian demonstrate that man himself could fabricate such ideologies for selfish ends. It opens the religious ideologies to a re-examination, a testing of its validity without blind adherence to them, and is therefore to be viewed in a positive light. It is pertinent that in his early twenties, Gore Vidal met Santayana at the hospital of the Blue Nuns in Rome. At his parting Santayana told him: "I think you'll have a happy life because you lack superstition (qtd. in Berryman 1980, 88). The prophecy has proved true.