CHAPTER-6.

CHRISTIANITY VS. SPIRITUALISM
It has been generally observed that Christianity as mode and medium of spiritual promotion gets very sharply criticised in almost all the novels of William Styron. The characters representing the religion and its rituals are sometimes presented as grotesque and disgusting. When Robert K. Morris interviewed William Styron, he asked about this aspect:

RKM: All your three major novels are framed by epigraphs of a religious nature; yet in the novels themselves religion per se or at least Christian rituals come in for a hard knock. Is this intended simply as a contrasting irony or something more?

WS: I think I have always been partially intent on contrasting the spiritual impulse as it is defined by Christianity with the hypocritical shallowness and thought that surround much of its manifestations in life. So I consider the use of epigraphs an important device of irony.

This contrasting vein is not common only to the novels that are firmly rooted to the Southern Soil but pervades those novels also in which he has ventured beyond the South. Of
course in the Southern novels of his, the contrasting vein is sharper and much more hard hitting.

In his first novel LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS, Milton pays only lip service to Christianity and that too just to avoid his wife Helen’s displeasure. Since he was trying to pose to be thorough-going Christian, he could not do it for a long time. The mask had to drop and it did very soon.

Milton had neither inherited nor had developed his own ethical philosophy. He had no religious faith to go by. That is why he developed a habit of turning to whiskey for solace and salvation instead of taking refuse into spiritual restraint, discipline and meditation. Analysing this aspect Robert H. Fossum says:

Whereas Milton’s moral sense has no theological foundations, Helen’s is based on stern thoughts and hazy religious beliefs... Milton has inherited a vague moral squeamishness rather than a coherent ethic, gratuitous optimism rather than a religious faith and a habit of turning for solace to whiskey and adultery rather than meditation and spiritual
discipline. His spiritual emptiness and Helen’s twisted religiousity, at best a plaything, at worst a hideous perversion... are undoubtedly among the things which show the failure of Christianity or at least the inability of two generations to credit its validity. 2

When Helen is upset by the affairs at home she begins to go to church regularly. She has a mentally retarded daughter in Maudie, and to make things go from bad to worse Milton has fallen in love with another woman named Dolly Bonner. Her problems go on multiplying. But she has a faith that God in His kindness would set every thing right for her, little realising that she herself would have to make efforts to setting things right in her home.

And when her husband’s infidelity, Peyton’s lack of the sense of social and parental obligations and Maudie’s sickness, make her desperate she runs to Carey Carr with her problems. The representative of the Church listens to all her complaints and tells her to have faith in God. What else could he do? Carey Carr knew that solutions to her
problems lay in herself and at her home, not any where outside. But he didn’t dare to tell the truth to Helen. The novelist describes one such encounter thus:

"Oh Carey! should I get down on my knees to him.? Is that what he wants..? What in the name of God does he want..?" And to this Carey Car wanted to say, "He wants only affection, decency, humanness, and a woman’s tender greetings... Be humble for a moment and perhaps your prayer will cast a light through the darkness around you." But instead he said "I can’t help you, you know. I can only listen. You have to look into your own mind and heart..."3

So here is a representative of Christianity afraid of expressing his ideas candidly. Had he done so, there is little chance Helen would have heeded. But nonetheless he would have got the satisfaction of doing his duty honestly. Helen’s idea was that going to church will solve and sort out her family problems. But it didn’t turn out that way. The problems began getting more and more complicated. And this shook her own belief in Christianity. It is this very Helen
who had once told Milton "I love my God and you don't. That is one thing. You betrayed us when you stopped going to church." is seen banishing God and condemning Him, as she flared up at Carey Carr:

You have been my enemy too. You and your church! Honestly Carey, how could you be such a hypocrite, pretending to understand my problems all these years and mocking me behind my back... Did you too conspire with that tramp, that little whore. Is she on your side with my poor weak Milton in the middle? You should die of shame... Your God is a silly old ass and my God is a devil...

So she is seen here finally discarding the church and priest and its God and her own God as silly old ass and as a devil. On the other hand with Milton it never had been a very serious affair. The few times he had been to church it was inorder to oblige his wife and not because of some inner spiritual compulsion or for some moral or spiritual guidance or enlightenment.

Peyton on the other hand, is, also like her father. She too does not bother much about religion. But her jumping naked out of the
window, her attachment to the clock and flying of birds, have been interpreted to be symbolic of her innocence and conscious guilt. Robert H Fossum thinks that her becoming as naked as on the day she was born and jumping out of the window shows that she was thinking of "delivering herself into the arms of God." But if it was so, it was an attempt to embrace the cosmos itself. This could stand to reason if she had been fed on good books, good christian ideas and thoughts. But since that was not the case with her, her attempt to kill herself can not be regarded as an attempt at trying to embracing cosmos.

But apart from Milton, Helen, and Peyton there is Daddy Faith in the novel who has been presented as a grotesque figure. It is thought that religious faith decreases in direct proportion to rise in sophistication. Accordingly the Negroes are presented as having every faith in Daddy Faith and the Whites don't have much faith in him. But even this Daddy Faith doesn't have any thing spiritual about him. He is presented as talking of war under the flickering sign 'LOVE'. He takes a lot of money from the domestic negro servants
who are his followers. There is not a single instance where this Daddy Faith could be seen preaching the solemn principles of Christianity.

Thus in LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS the religious substance which is expected to illuminate the infinite darkness, is either totally lacking or perverted, as Robert H. Fossum has pointed out:

The journey from the railroad to the cemetry constitutes the time present for the novel. But as we move forward in space and time, listening with the mourners to a murmur of a thunder, both ominous and promising, we move simultaneously into minds of Styron's central characters—Milton, his mistress Dolly Bonner, the Reverened Carey Carr, and Peyton herself, taken into past, preceding this terrible present. The repeated breakdown of cars suggest breakdown of America's technological orientation, emotional and spiritual disruption of a world in which propriety has replaced morality, lust has replaced love and carefully tended housed and lawns of the middle class disguise their spiritual disorder.²

All the three major characters Milton, Helen,
and Peyton are equal in their doom because they don't do anything to prevent the doom. It seems to signify the Indian theory of Karma which dictates "AVASHYAM AV BHOKTAVYAM KRIT KARMAM SHUBHASHUBHAM." meaning that no one can evade or do anything to prevent the punishment or reward for good and bad deeds because they pursue and condition the life after death.

In the novel the presence of Daddy Faith has not been kept as a simple contrast between the black believers and the white non-believers. The contrast is between Carey Carr and Daddy Faith. The Negroes believe in him and on the foundation of that belief are able to conduct a satisfying life. And Carey Carr is rejected his God is rejected, and this rejection leads the non-believers to nothingness. Louis D Rubin Jr. says

If anything, Styron seems to be making, it is a much bleaker pessimistic observation which is, that the moral usefulness of religious truth decreases in direct proportion to the increase in intelligence and sophistication of the believer. The implication is that religion can function effectively as a morality only
when its communicants are ignorant and superstitious. 7

In William Styron's middle class South, the spiritual content seems to have totally disappeared from religion. And it is this that he attacks so often and so powerfully in his novels. Since Styron's middle class has grown out of ignorance and superstitions, religion has stopped being effective. But the truth is that spirituality which is the very life force of religion, is effective only with very highly sophisticated and not with ignorant people. It's failure of the attainment of that high sophistication which is the cause of all the trouble. The failure of this kind in the middle class protestant South has made it choked with county clubs, churches, cocktail parties, socials and what not. Thus it can be said that here Styron seems to be pointing out that Christianity minus spirituality is useless and ineffective.

William Styron's second novel THE LONG MARCH has been explained away by Robert H. Fossum as a kind of parody of religious matters. He thinks that supremacy of military power has evolved as a new kind of religion in
the world. In his own words:

The spirit of this new religion is the famous marine 'Spirit De Corps'; its dogma is the new grandios 'amphibious doctrine'; its incantations are gibberish military pass words; and its ultimate aim is 'the group destiny' of victory over its version of Satan—the aggressor, the enemy. The institution supporting this theology of war is corps. The rock on which its temple is built, its high priest, perhaps even its God, is Colonel Templeton, 'Rocky' wearing a uniform, vestments and a revolver as a sceptre... His only values are strength and obedience and efficiency. The obedient believers (Lawrence, Billy, Hobbs and O'Leary) are immune to God's wrath but with 'pity and vengeance' he declares damnation for heretics like Mannix. Certainly the thirty six miles march marked at each station by increasing pain from the nail in Mannix's shoes recalls Christ's journey to the cross as well as the period of time from his death to his resurrection.10

This is a kind of parody of the christian religious substance. This may be further strengthened by Mannix's recollection of the incident in which he was hung naked, upside
down by his drunk friends, presenting a view of the world turned upside down.

In this distorted view of the world, incidents like Mannix's towel dropping down from his waist leaving him naked before the Negro maid servant and his clutching of the soap in one hand, has been explained away as symbolic of his purification. His nail bruised foot and his thirty six miles long march have also been interpreted as akin to Christ's march to the place of crucifiction. All these symbolic incidents are supposed to identity Al Mannix with Jesus Christ himself.
That is why Irving Malin has said:

Mannix's first word is Jesus Christ. He can be identified with Jesus Christ. Culver can be regarded as the centre of consciousness and Templeton (head of the Temple) as the law-giver. His words and metaphors suggest an old testament wrath...

But this parody of the religious substance presents Captain Mannix as a Christ on one hand on the other hand it also presents him either as Adam or Satan. This is what Robert H Fossum also says:

His nail bruised heel, his
refusal to honour the religion of the corps, the great emptiness in his tormented soul, the smoking bonfire of his hubris smitten spirit—all these imply that he is a type of Satan or old Adam to Templeton's God...12

Whether he is portrayed as a caricature or a parody of Christ or Satan, Templeton as the God of the old testament, the fact remains that the novel presents a kind of mocking parallel of the religious elements and has nothing to do with the spiritual element of Christianity. None of the characters have even the necessary traits or bent of mind for spirituality of any sort.

In Styron's third novel SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE we come across many complicated images of both religious and spiritual nature. Many critics have described the novel as an apocalyptic picture of the world as a purgatory in which man is a tormented inhabitant — just like in a house on fire from which he is presented to be struggling to escape, to get redemption and a glimpse of the God.

Cass Kinsolving finds out that the divine
spirit of inspiration has deserted him. This drives him to embrace the pangs of hell. This was immediately understood by Luigie. That is why he had to hit him on the head to bring him to the positive solid earth then tell him the truth:

You are damnable romantic from the South, the very worse kind at that. In jail you would wallow in your guilt...I did not wish to allow you that luxury...Do you now see why I liked you my friend...For the love of God Cass, consider the good in yourself...Consider hope. Consider joy...That is all I have to say...\textsuperscript{13}

And with those words he had removed the manacle from Cass's wrist. Thus Luigie had allowed him to escape into freedom with a positive attitude which may enable him to see courage, hope, joy and struggle against the evil in order to attain the good that is dormant in him.

Cass's recurrent dreams of web, the tom cat playing with the mouse, the crushed dog refusing to die and the old woman carrying the burden of faggots, all suggest his struggle for freedom from the clutches of the tom cat
that Mason Flagg is, ensnaring Cass into webs of insignificance and self-hatred. Even the central symbol of the novel, that of the swallow bird, suggests Cass’s struggle for freedom:

The central symbol of the novel is the swallow bird, which is trapped inside the palace. It is the bird which swooped down among the fluted columns then upwards and still beat its wings against the sky light towards the inaccessible sun. This is of course a symbol for Cass, struggling to rise above the spiritual abyss into which he has fallen.

Amongst the Hindus it is believed that birds represent higher status of being. They have innumerable stories and analogies comparing human soul to a bird. And folklores all over the world have something akin to this. Robert H Fossum further explains the matter:

The swallow flails upwards in the room where there is frieze of a dingy nymph—giving a contrast between Cass’s hope for spirituality and Mason Flagg’s carnality—which must be transcended...This swallow must escape (Cass must escape) Mason Flagg’s palace for a
rebirth to occur. 15

Cass stands somewhere between Milton and Mannix. He knows that not to believe in some kind of salvation is to suffer the pang of worry almost equal to that of hell. That is why he entertains the idea that God is worse than a lie; that he is weaker than the evil that he has created in the world and allowed it to reside into the heart of man. More over he is skeptical about the existence of God, like Peter. But in the end we find him accepting the life for what it is. We find the novelist’s philosophy of existentialism so well enunciated in his words when he tells Peter Leverette:

I can tell you only this; that as for being and nothingness, the one thing I didn’t know was that to choose between them was to choose simply being, not for the sake of being, much less for the desire to be for ever—but in the hope of being, what I could, for a time being. Living. Not where one lives or with whom one lives. But that one lives. 16

This signifies Cass’s ultimate acceptance of life as it is. Of course he has
learnt it a hard way. Though his father was an Episcopical minister and the uncle who had brought him up, was Methodist, this religious aspect in the family had played no part in his redemption. But at the same time the stability and order that he finds in life can not be dissociated from religious values—the ability to love, to care for the near and dear ones, to act justly and responsibly and be kind and generous to every one. And this he was taught by corporal Luigie.

On one level then, the novel seeks to recreate the creative process: all artists try to create order or theme from an apparently random world. The world contains an infinite number and kinds of sounds and from them a composer builds a meaningful melodic pattern. Like wise human experience possesses numerous events of infinite variation and a writer selects and orders them just as Peter does with his own and those of Cass's stories. But Cass's achievement of harmony, love, reconciliation with himself and his family and the contentment attained by Peter at having found out the answer to his questions, are all looked at differently by Richard Pearce.
Cass's dream of being imprisoned, abandoned, and threatened with gasing, comes so close to the experience in Kafka's THE TRIAL...Most critics see Cass as having found salvation—love and harmony— in the reconciliation with his family, in personal retreat, in the acceptance of his own limitations as an artist. But it seems to me that Styron was working intellectually at odds with his imaginative discoveries. He shows Cass's house set on fire. And what he exposes in the novel is the perpetual conflagration the apocalypse suppressed beneath the meretricious surface of American life and false hopefulness of Christianity. Lucianos will thrive in this world. New Saverios will emerge. And Cass like Styron will not fully accept the lessons of hell or learn from Luigie, the Italian who has stoically accommodated to modern reality. Cass like Styron intellectually simplifies the apocalyptic conflict and sees it in the terms of melodrama retaining his American optimism, and retreating to a primal Eden, which is as unrealistic and inconsistent with the novel's experience as Cass's vision from the Paris window.
Styron repeatedly reminds us that both Cass and Peter are skeptical about the existence of a beneficent deity. It is enough for the time being that he has returned back from the state of living death. The philosophical centre of the novel therefore from beginning to the end is simply existential choice between Being and Nothingness in a world where progress from ethical to the religious stage seems to be almost impossible.

William Styron's other novel in sequence is THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER which has been described by the author as a religious allegory. In this novel, the old Testament savagery and rage are converted into the new Testament grace and redemption. Though other novels of Styron are not necessarily religious or allegorical but all of them do deal with religion as a very crucial matter. Biblical and Judeo-Christian mythos and repeated references to grace, damnation and redemption etc., denote the author's keen interest in theology.

Nat identifies himself with Christ. He
also identifies himself with the Old Testament Prophet and his brethren Negro slaves akin to the ancient Jews in Egyptian Bondage. Master turner who takes the trouble of teaching him alphabets is not a church going type but he is the best Christian in the whole book. And those who happen to represent the religion, are presented to be worse. Reverend Epps is a homo-sexual and Richard Whitehead, the minister of the Gospel is almost inhuman. And it is religious dignitaries like these that turn or transform Nat into a black Christ. That is why Robert H Fossum says:

Thinking himself a second Christ, preparing a holy war against Satan, Nat sets out to recrute his discipies...from amongst his own trodden people. But while he tells Margaret that his favourite psalm is that which begins with 'be merciful unto me', he is an instrument of wrath than of mercy, advocates sword not peace, revolt of the flesh not of spirit...For to Nat so sorely sinned against, all nature is charged not with the grandeur of God but with abominations of a generation of white vipers... It is not the language of a suffering servant which inspires Nat and
the followers he slowly gathers around him; it is the language of the Old Testament prophets—Ezekiel, Daniel, Isaiah and Jeremiah. He feels closest kinship with the divinely furious Ezekiel. 18

The court appointed lawyer Thomas Grey is totally anti-christ. He begins to make fun of Nat’s faith in the divine guidance. He argues with Nat and tries to convince him that Christianity is going to be finished and God is just a lie. And for a time it seems Nat is taken in by his arguments. Though temporarily, but he too begins to think that God is dead and gone and that is why he can no more have him as a guide. Thomas Grey tells Nat:

Christianity! Rapine, plunder, butchery, death and destruction! And misery and suffering for untold generations. That was the accomplishment of your Christianity... Nineteen hundred years of Christian teaching plus a black preacher is all it takes to prove that God is a God durned lie... 19

Thomas Grey’s attempt at proving to Nat that God was a hoax, succeeded temporarily.
For some time Nat believed that God was dead and gone and that was why he was forgetting his name. But very soon this phase disappeared and he died thinking of the morning star which is supposed to be the sign of salvation.

In the novel there is a very cleverly worked out comparison between Nat and Hark. A close reading of the novel shows that just a few minutes before he was taken to the gallows Nat, in his fevered state of mind, had imaginatively intercourse with Miss Whitehead and ejaculated so profusely that he had fainted. And Hark on the other hand was in no kind of mental stress. He was totally reconciled with the present. As he was being taken to the gallows and was passing by the Cell of Nat he called out to him and said:

Hark was bound in seated shape like the silhouette of some marvelous black potentate, borne in stately procession towards his throne, passes slowly by my door. "Dis yere is some way to go". I hear Hark say, "Good bye Ole Nat" He calls "Hit gwine be all right. every thin' gwine be all right...Dis here ain't nothin' Nat, nothin' at all. Goodbye Ole Nat, goodbye".
How does one explain Hark's "this here ain't nothing." Christianity believes that every thing—sin, atonement, purification and the judgement day will all be here. It does not have anything like the Sanathan religion's concept of the seven worlds of spiritual dimensions. It could stand to reason if Nat had said it under effect of the anti-christ teachings of Thomas Grey. But Hark whose spirit seemed to be more at peace than Nat's, says this which goes to prove that though he had never thought himself to be a second Christ, he was spiritually rich and totally at peace with himself.

Even the scene of passing the verdict tries to attempt some kind of unification of religious and spiritual elements together. During the trial Cobb looks very awesome to Nat. Nat regards Cobb as a father God "condemning his son to a fore-ordained crucifixion...like some predestinating deity... profound as all eternity showing a secret to the condemned man" 21. Styron has done his best to project Nat into the image of a man struggling to find spiritual sustenance in the God foreshaken world. George Core has
summed up the whole thing very aptly:

Styron begins his dramatic rendering of the failure of religion in the upcountry Tidewater. The society revealed in the early part of the novel is what Allen Tate has called 'a feudal society without a feudal religion, hence only a semi-feudal society!... the old South was incapable of creating an appropriate religion for its way of life...the economy, politics and culture of the region...the God of the region of the old South was created by the New World merchants of the sixteenth century. The mythology of the old South was therefore incomplete: the fabric of its life was fatally marred by the divergence between the secular and religious impulses. Religion can not be perfunctory and formalistic in a traditional society, if that way of life is to survive...The enveloping action of THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER deals in a large part with this failure of protestantism...22

Thus the novel is generated by a deeply religious impulse. The arrogant commercialism which had made people inhuman was the result of failure of protestantism in the South. The
inhumanity is just the result of total spiritual bankruptcy. Thus in this novel spirituality and Christianity have been brought face to face and Christianity has been presented to be a failure.

William Styron's next novel SOPHIE'S CHOICE too has its fair share of religious and spiritual matter. Shophie herself was born of a very religious minded parents. Cracow had one of the most ancient churches in the world. the novel portrays how the strife for ethnic superiority can madden people to become inhuman and spiritually bankrupt.

Like most of Styron's novels SOPHIE'S CHOICE too has a war - the Second World War, in the background. It was this war that made America one of the richest nations in the world. It was this war that bailed America out of the depression. But wealth in its turn made its citizens a congregation of discontented, loudmouthed, barbarous, lot, devoid of universal values of theology, self-reliance, morality, good manners and general decency in thought speech and behaviour. This further deteriorated into developing a death-wish - a suicidal mania in the people, finding an
expression in the form of hippi-cult, drug-addiction, an experimentation with marijuana and hashis, spreading so widely in America of the eightees. According to Styron it was all because of the spiritual bankruptcy.

As the novel tells us, Sophie had made her beginning as a stout catholic and Stingo as a strong christian child. As they grow and gather the experience of the then surroundings and the world around, they loose their faith in religion. "After Auschwitz I didn't believe in God or if He existed."23 said Sophie once to Stingo. And Stingo on the other hand is seen talking against Christ "I had been betrayed chiefly by Jesus"24 Also towards the end of the novel we find Stingo regarding Bible as "an appendage for my costume as Reverened Entwistle."25 This clearly shows how religion has lost all sanctity for all these three major characters in the novel.

It becomes much more pronounced when we see Sophie expressing her bitterness to Stingo. She tells Stingo:

"I love Nathan but now feel this hate of life and God. Fuck God and all his handiwork. And life too. And fuck even
what remains of love. This clearly indicates she has reached such a low ebb in her assessment that she is forced to reject the very existence of God. But it is not the denial of the existence of God that is so heinous as the disbelief in the humanness of human beings: "At Auschwitz, tell me where was God?" And the answer: Where was man?"27

In fact God's absence would not have mattered, had man's humanness remained alive. The loss of faith in God and in religion becomes complete when at the burial of Sophie and Nathan, Reverened De Witt,

Droned on insultingly invoking Lincoln, Ralph, Waldo Emerson, Dale Carnage, Spinoza, Thomas Edison and Freud. He mentioned Christ once in rather a distant way—not that I minded. I sank lower and lower in my stall...These lost children. Victims of an age of rampant materialism. Loss of universal values. Failure of old principles of self-reliance. Inability to intercommunicate...28

On this occasion, Stingo himself read out something from Emily Dickinson's book and not from the Bible, because he knew that it was
Emily Dickinson's book that had brought them close to each other.

All this goes to prove how in this novel, like in all others, religion has been treated just as a useless thing, having no sanctity, no value, and no utility of any kind. And as a contrast to it the spiritual aspect has been equally highlighted:

Let your love flow out on all living things...But there are a couple of problems about this precept of mine. The first is of course, that it is not mine. It springs from the universe and is the property of God and the words have been intercepted—on the wing, so to speak—by such meditators as Lao-tzu, Jesus, Gautam Buddha and thousand upon thousands of lesser prophets, including your narrator, who heard the terrible truth of their drumming somewhere...29

After this realisation, comes the finale of the novel in which we find the Narrator falling asleep on the beach. He dreams that he is being buried alive. In the morning he wakes up to find that two children had protectively covered him with sand. He wakes up to face the new day full of new
possibilities. This is considered as a kind of resurrection. And then he finds a way to resurrect Sophie as well—for making of art is a religious or spiritual act which offers its own special kind of resurrection for the dead. Thus once again this novel too exemplifies William Styron’s philosophy of transcendentalism.

Thus beginning with LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS, down up to SOPHIE’S CHOICE all the novels of William Styron treat religion with disdain, contempt, and even mockery. In LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS Helen calls God a silly old ass and rejects Carey Carr and his church. Milton never had any belief in Christ and his Christianity. The LONG MARCH presents a kind of parody of religion with Templeton as God, the father and law-giver and Mannix as the Satan and Christ both. SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE on the other hand presents the novelist’s philosophy of existentialism. It presents the material well being and spiritual bankruptcy of the seventeens. THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER has the best of the religious elements. Through Thomas Grey the author points out that if Christianity remains dissociated from
spirituality for too long it might get finished. For its own survival and for the good of the humanity, the format of religion will have to be made spiritualistic. And SOPHIE'S CHOICE has the worst kind of rejection of God. It points an accusing finger at the spiritual bankruptcy of humanity at large when it says,"At Auschwitz where was God" and answers, in another interrogation, "Where was man."?"30
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