Great indeed is the legacy Levertov and Dickinson have bequeathed to a restless and troubled modern age. Levertov gives us hope with her poetry that is in the main quiet and contemplative, but becomes fierce and impassioned “in the face of the world’s injustice and inhumanity, in the face of war and torture and prejudice” (Bodo 17). Dickinson’s “sense of the anguish of personal existence and the fragility of all life [. . .] reflects our own helpless state of mind when we witness the tortuous social evils which plague our world and an environment which appears to be progressively worsening” (Ferlazzo 150). Nevertheless, courage and the will to endure the exclusions and self-denials the mind must make to preserve its identity and stability shine through Dickinson’s poetry.

What Levertov and Dickinson do for their readers is allow them to experience “Truth’s Superb surprise” (Poem 1129). This seemingly simple task is, of course, a gift. As Emily tells us, “This was a poet – It is that / Distills amazing sense / From ordinary Meanings” (Poem 448). In Levertov and Dickinson we have two dedicated spirits who, though often isolated by truth and by their art, allowed the powers of their creative imagination to flow freely like a mountain waterfall, speaking not only of their own experience, but of the human condition, taking their readers on...
a journey of loving attention. Their poems are more than a sum total of their words; their poems are who they are, for they “lived” their art.

Through a chronological study of Levertov’s poetry one is able to delineate a linear movement from agnosticism to faith that leads to a resolution, as well as a corresponding poetic development towards maturity. Participating in a symposium on myth in 1967, Levertov identified “the sense of life as a pilgrimage” as the myth informing “all of my work from the very beginning” (Poet in the World 62-63). The early collections of the period of agnosticism reveal poems that reflect on the sources of art and imagination as well as poems that press forward on a spiritual journey the purpose of which is to uncover the nature of self and its destiny. Levertov looks for ways of attaining spiritual wholeness in a world that is fragmented and chaotic. A search for the authentic underlies her work and her encounter with truth leads to her affirmation of joy in the physical world. Her quest leads her ultimately to the recognition of her own person, a ready awareness of her self and an increasing conviction that the exercise of the imagination moves one toward faith.

In the second phase, she suffers a loss of authenticity as war casts a shadow over her. She wrestles with her doubts, contemplating the nature of identity, commitment and change. Eventually, through struggle and growth she gains a new spiritual understanding. The collections of the transitional phase reveal her struggle and growth through self-doubt and
self-alienation, desolation and despair, till she is at the threshold of belief, at the beginning of growth, with a mystical belief in a God within herself.

In the works of the third phase, as though in a logical extension of her exploration of the mystery of experience, Levertov is seen moving towards a position of Christian belief. At first God is referred to mostly as a presence or force that unites all experience. *Breathing the Water* reveals Levertov as a religious poet searching for a deeper faith and a clearer vision. The subsequent volumes bear testimony to her deepening faith as she writes poems centred on Christ. They also contain poems that reveal a phase in her spiritual life where she vacillates between belief and unbelief. *Sands of the Well*, her last book before her death, has a defining spiritual perspective as a consequence of her doing the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises and her conversion to Catholicism. The spiritual focus is found in greater depth in the posthumous collection *This Great Unknowing*.

Similarly, Dickinson expended her whole life upon the poetry that described a long pilgrimage to faith. A firm exposition of Dickinson’s pilgrim’s progress of the soul, unlike that of Levertov’s, is hampered by the fact that the dating of many poems is dubious, and even when the chronological order is somewhat established, we can still not be sure that the time of composition did not postdate materially the moment of emotion. So too there is the distressing difficulty of correlating specific poems with events and crises in the poet’s life. In addition, for us, a penalty of her solitude is her silence concerning the theories underlying
her art. Unlike in the case of Levertov, there survive no prefaces or any synthesis of her poetic principles, but only here and there flash illuminating implications in a letter or in hints within the poetry itself. Through critical efforts to distinguish between fact and speculation, between knowledge and myths about Dickinson, we arrive at a gratifying and haunting record of human experience.

Like Levertov, Dickinson too had a fascination for mystery, which is seen in her poems on the mystery of immortality, death, and eternity as well as that of seasonal processes in nature. She never identified nature with the divine but contemplated the external world and examined man’s relation to the world of natural phenomena to understand better man’s inner soul. It is in the poems where she plumbs the depths of the mystery of death and immortality that we see her vacillating between faith and doubt. Levertov too, has a series of poems on death where she seeks to reconcile herself to this baffling phenomenon, and in the process of looking deeply into the mystery of death, she offers a rewarding vision of human experience.

Unlike Levertov who affirms God in the accomplishment of her intellectual and moral activity and in the exercise of her imagination, Dickinson remains a doubter throughout with her back and forth movements from scepticism to faith. This is reflected in her poetry wherein there is no poetic development towards maturity, or as Austin Warren puts it, no “late manner so integrally held that she could not, in
conscience, deviate therefrom” (Sewall 103). However, her vacillation cannot be used to refute the religious depth and perceptive insight into spiritual reality that her poetry reveals. As Richard Wilbur puts it, “her poetry, with its articulate faithfulness to inner and outer truth, its insistence on maximum consciousness, is not an avoidance of life, but an eccentric mastery of it” (Sewall 136). Given the variety of Dickinson’s attitudes and moods, it is easy to select evidence to “prove” that she held certain views. But such patterns can be dogmatic and distorting. Her final thoughts on many subjects are hard to know. It is with this caution in mind that this study has been conducted.

Dickinson’s poems and letters from the first phase reveal her ambivalence, her uncertainty about the deepest subjects of the spirit, her vacillations between hope and despair. Her critical consciousness somehow made the assurances of Christian belief unavailable to her in the conventional form. We notice in her an intense fascination with death and immortality and the evanescence of delight, and she was consumed by the sense that finitude was the fundamental human dilemma. Dickinson’s faith of the early years was fragile and the poetry expresses a desperate need for faith.

In the second and most productive phase of Dickinson’s life as a poet we see that religion continued to be a centring concern for her despite the variations in tone and imagery. The beginning of this phase was a time of personal trauma as she gives up the conventional supports
of home, society, and religion, to engage in “The Battle fought between the Soul / And no Man” (Poem 594). Dickinson’s poems project her as a great thinker who had a keen sense of the peculiar ambiguities of belief in her time. Her view of God was neither complacent nor confident, but marked with contention, defiance, and continuous oscillation. Her poetic mission was to express the truth she strove to discover and her poems bear the mark of the spiritual anguish she endured while attempting to find a clue to the mystery of life. We also recognize that ambivalence was more than a poetic strategy for Dickinson, for it went to the heart of her uncertainty about life.

In the third phase, Dickinson’s poetic production and letter writing slackened significantly. Death took an enormous toll on her emotions and health. She struggled to salvage faith in an age of upheavals as she vacillated with considerable spiritual discomfort between belief, disbelief, scepticism, confusion and dismay, and coped with a disposition that could neither believe nor be comfortable in unbelief. Her poems articulate dramatically varying and ephemeral moods as she wrestled with God and continued to write in his shadow till the end.

Thus a pattern of resolution and irresolution emerges from a study of the drama of faith and doubt that unfolds in the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson respectively. The subsequent theological analyses of the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson with regard to the ‘way to faith’, brings into sharp relief certain distinctions in their faith experience and reinforces
this pattern of resolution and irresolution. Levertov’s poetry reflects the factors that eventually lead her to faith in its full and consciously professed form. In Dickinson however, there is no linear evolution of faith or resolution in a conversion. The analysis reveals four major threads running simultaneously through all of Levertov’s collections – a search for the authentic that leads to a recognition of “the Truth” of Christ, an exploration of mystery that leads to her acknowledgment of God the absolute mystery, her belief in the power of the imagination whereby she experiences “work that enfaithes”, and her political engagement which ultimately leads to a commitment in the Catholic Church. Dickinson’s writing testifies to “faith that works” and shows how certain early influences and experiences remained to colour all of her life. For instance, her adolescent responses to death taught her to doubt the character of God, while her education, and interest in science had a lasting influence in developing her sceptical turn of mind.

Likewise, a great distinction emerges in a study of the two poets with regard to the “way of seeing” and eschatological vision revealed in their poetry. Levertov comes to see the whole as life giving, nourishing and gracious, as testified by her poems that trace her journey to order and re-visioning. The grimness of Dickinson’s vision reveals her ambivalence in seeing the whole as hostile, inscrutable, indifferent and rarely beneficent. Further, a study based on the postmodern religious situation reveals that the dichotomy between knowledge and faith and the
cleavage between two conceptions of God seem to underline the basic difference in the faith experience of Levertov and Dickinson.

Finally, philosophical analyses based on the Kierkegaardian and Hegelian matrices foster greater clarity through a dialectical understanding of faith and doubt in Levertov and Dickinson. The evolution of Levertov’s faith is analogous to the dialectical progression of existential stages found in Kierkegaard’s doctrine of the three stages on the way of life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. An awareness of evil enables Levertov to make a transition from the aesthetic level characterized by scepticism, to the ethical. A realization of the sinfulness of man and a recognition of the significance of the Incarnation for salvation enables her to make what Kierkegaard refers to as the leap par excellence by which faith emerges, and with it, a transition to the religious stage. In Dickinson, though, we find a non-realization of such a change from one sphere to the other, and Kierkegaard’s dialectic provides pointers to the impediments to faith – her lack of an awareness of sinfulness and of evil, a lack of consistency and coherence in her actions, and her inability to make commitments and to choose.

The analyses also reveal that the life and work of Levertov and Dickinson proceed along a pathway of doubt and despair, as in the Hegelian dialectical process involving the three stages of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. What makes Dickinson’s faith dynamic is her constant vacillation. Her movement is not progressive in the Hegelian
sense. More often than not, as belief is confronted by doubt, there is no resolution in a synthesis. Rather what we have, as thesis confronts antithesis, is an impasse. She is thus unable to attain a unified synthesis of reality in the Hegelian sense. Levertov’s search for the authentic follows a dialectical progression towards the absolute truth and her later work shows the emergence of Christian faith as a defining concern. As she seeks to construct a unified whole, the oppositions she meets with are overcome and reconciled in a higher form as in the Hegelian matrix, enabling us to see the transcended parts as constituting the stages of her spiritual evolution. Thus Levertov’s search ends in a resolution whereas Dickinson’s quest is more a seeking than a finding and so ends in irresolution.

“One of life’s greatest challenges” according to John Delli Carpini, “is to so integrate spirituality and religion that our spirit moves us to worship, while our religious practice intensifies our relationship with God” (2). Spirituality and religion are not one and the same. Every human being has a spiritual component, a yearning for the transcendent, but is not necessarily religious. In other words, one may have an active spiritual life, with or without practising one’s religion. Spirituality is from the Latin word “spiritus” meaning breath or wind. Therefore living a spiritual life is recognizing and responding to God’s breath within us. Religion, on the other hand, is the expression of one’s spirituality – the organization, rituals, and practice of one’s beliefs. While religion is part of
every person’s cultural knapsack, a part of our heritage, spirituality is a conscious choice and develops over a lifetime.

While Levertov was able to strike a balance between the two over a lifetime, with her gradual conversion to Christianity and an orthodox form of belief as she “prayed, worshipped, participated in the rituals of the church” (NSE 242), Dickinson avoided doctrine and dogma as she grew older, attending fewer and fewer church services, preferring, instead, to speak with God privately and to ponder life’s mysteries in unorthodox ways and places such as in her garden: “It was a short procession, / The Bobolink was there – / An aged Bee addressed us – / And then we knelt in prayer – ” (Poem 18).

Elizabeth Phillips remarks of Dickinson thus: “Had she accepted the shibboleths of conventional Christianity, she would not only have been a different poet but a less disquieting one” (201-202). In Emily’s realm of religious thought, we find that both doubt and belief occupy minor places beside a direct and hostile attack upon the orthodox position. It is therefore possible that her poem denouncing the Bible as “an antique Volume” (Poem 1545) may be a complaint against a Puritan interpretation of the Bible. So also, as Budick suggests, the hostility to God often expressed in Dickinson’s poetry does not necessarily represent the heart of her deepest felt convictions. She is not “simply venting an irrational antitheological rage. Rather, she is suggesting how an idealist and especially a Christian neoplatonist interpretation of cosmic
organization can, in the end, force us to deny God and abandon faith” (94). However, a great contrast arises in that while Dickinson expressed an apparently heretical rampage against the deity and religion in her poetry, Levertov “hated to see” religious faith and practice “mocked or sneered at even in [her] most doubting periods” (*Contemporary Authors* 322).

Wolff points out that “poetry in America had already begun to change by 1886, and the great poets who came after Emily Dickinson were forced to create their art in a world where God no longer held sway” (537). Speaking of Dickinson who stands at the threshold of modernity, Wolosky says that later poets “could reach toward some resolution of the conflict between human and divine utterance [. . .]. Dickinson, too, attempts such resolutions, but she does so without final success” (Introduction xx). Having dealt with Dickinson’s “syntax of contention,” her “logos” and the “status of Language,” Wolosky concludes:

The world of Dickinson’s poetry remains pressed between the invisible and the visible, the unspoken and the spoken, in a tension she cannot resolve. She can only raise her voice against a divine world and language that clashes with, but asserts its claim upon her own. (171)

In Levertov’s early poetry we find an avoidance of “God-talk” which is less and less meaningful to the modern mind, as she produces a body of poetry particularly congenial to the outlook of contemporary
radical theology. With her transition into the final phase of her career, we find her reaffirming her prophetic mode, defending the environment and speaking for the silenced voices of the exploited and helpless. She continued to seek for the numinous, and within both the poems of conscience and the poems of immanence, there arose both a sense of the presence of God, and a sense of His absence or silence. As a new wave of critical opinion sought to discredit her poetics of immanence, she recognized that the shift in critical fashion would nullify the prestige she had won for herself. However, she chose to defy it and began to write explicitly religious poems. We find therefore, as Denise Lynch remarks of her work, that

The most compelling poems take Levertov’s pilgrimage into the mysteries of language and faith, where the Logos is revealed through the flesh of Christian tradition, and even the terror of a nuclear age yields to the numinous moment.

(Gelpi 288)

“Levertov was consistently a deep poet from the beginning” says Bodo, and we find a “continuance in her work.” Speaking about her deepening faith he remarks,

[. . .] it both gave a new direction to the content of her poems and chronicled what she called her own slow movement from agnosticism to Christian faith. I believe her faith was there like a seed from the beginning and her “conversion”
gave her a way of articulating what was there from the beginning. Her later poems are like an uncovering of what was there in her soul from the beginning. (Appendix)

Emily Dickinson likewise, undertook a major poetic quest in which she sought to solve the riddles of existence. Her poems therefore, narrate the progress of this quest and reveal her moments of ecstasy, doubt and fear. However, the factor of conscious plan in the poetry of Dickinson is almost negligible unlike what we find in Levertov. So too, it is hard to locate a developing pattern in Dickinson’s poems on death, immortality, and religious questions. She wanted to believe in God and immortality and possibly her faith increased in her middle and later years. However, serious expressions of doubt persist, apparently to the very end. Her conflicting views of the divine existed simultaneously and unresolved in her long struggle with faith. Even many of her major poems close on a note of irresolution as they “move from certainty to doubt, from affirmative statement to questioning” (Benfey 16). In contrast, Levertov’s poems move from doubt to certainty.

Emily Dickinson’s quest is successful, if we measure success by unflagging effort and intellectual honesty rather than by the presence of optimistic “resolution.” Dickinson hoped that the ultimate reward of the anguish of art was, if not faith, a deep abiding peace:

The Martyr Poets – did not tell –

But wrought their Pang in syllable –
That when their mortal name be numb -
Their mortal fate - encourage Some -

The Martyr Painters - never spoke -
Bequeathing - rather - to their Work -
That when their conscious fingers cease -
Some seek in Art - the Art of Peace - (Poem 544)

Levertov’s quest successfully ends in resolution with her faith developing into its “full Christological and ecclesiastical, explicit, social, consciously professed form” (Rahner 310), with her “decision to join the church” as she confesses in an interview with Nancy K. Gish in 1990 (NSE 180). The contributing factors were her aesthetic, her political stance with her values of racial and economic justice and nonviolence, and her belief in the power of the imagination. People such as Archbishop Romero, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton and many others, mostly Catholic, had a profound influence in strengthening Levertov’s commitment to peace and justice and were catalysts for her entry into the Church. This, and the fact that the Catholic Church has modern traditions of high intellectual discourse and major artistic contributions, eventually led to her movement into the Catholic Church. It appears, therefore, that Catholicism played a great role in bringing about such a happy conclusion to her quest, which was also a search for the authentic and a celebration of mystery. We have the words of Father Murray Bodo, who
accompanied her on her spiritual journey for over twenty years as her spiritual mentor and friend.

Levertov was not one to merely embrace whatever religion was bequeathed to her; she needed to work it through in her own deep search for God, for a religion that addressed the problems of the world that she was most concerned about, and for a religion that reverenced mystery. She found that religion in Catholicism, in its sacramental approach to reality and in its teachings on social justice, especially as she saw them exemplified in Catholics she’d met like the Trappist, Thomas Merton, and Daniel Berrigan, the Jesuit activist. Despite her reservations about the hierarchical Church’s stance toward women and often toward social issues, especially in Latin America, she was drawn to Catholicism as she saw it lived out in the lives of people she admired and in the dynamic and mystery of the Catholic liturgy and Sacraments. (Appendix)

Concurrent with her coming to Catholicism, Levertov was drawn into the Church’s tradition and the circle of believers who have gone before and live on in the communion of saints. This was another contributing factor to the success of her journey of faith, her search for God and religion as testified by her poems on Caedmon, St. Peter, Thomas Didymus, Brother Lawrence and Julian of Norwich.
One of the consistent principles in Levertov’s writings and in her life as an activist is that in the final analysis deeds are more important than words, works more powerful than faith. She seemed to favour the Catholic idea of “works that enfaith” rather than the Protestant idea of a faith that works.

“Works that enfaith” is the very essence of the Sacramental theology of the Catholic Church. It is also a phrase that describes her own life’s work, both as a poet and an activist. Every thing she wrote “enfaithed” something she believed in deeply and which was a part of her Faith at the time of the poem’s writing. (Bodo, Appendix)

That perhaps Dickinson’s Puritan legacy stood in the way of a confident affirmation of belief may be illustrated by the following poem.

All circumstances are the Frame
In which His Face is set –
All Latitudes exist for His
Sufficient Continent –

The Light His Action, and the Dark
The Leisure of His Will –
In Him Existence serve or Set
A Force illegible.
In this poem in which she has created a mortal image of immortality, Blackmur recognizes Dickinson’s Protestant heritage and its consequences.

In the “Dark Leisure of His Will” squirms the protestant, than whom nobody could have been more so [. . .] than Emily Dickinson. [. . .] she had the resignation and the loneliness and the excruciation – she had the characteristic misery of Protestantism [. . .]. We cannot say of this woman in white that she ever mastered life – even in loosest metaphor; but we can say that she so dealt with it as to keep it from mastering her – by her protestant self-excruciation in life’s name. (Sewall 84-85)

According to Bodo, “With Emily Dickinson, as with Levertov, [. . .] the skepticism is over religion more than over God and God’s existence” (Appendix). Scepticism may have several different contexts as we have seen in this study. In a religious context it may refer to a necessary stage, a “dark night of the soul,” on the way to belief. In a philosophical context, it may be opposed not to belief, but to certainty. Scepticism is of value, for with great faith comes great doubt which is so necessary for deepening one’s faith and growing in wisdom. Rather than a malady or obstacle to overcome or conquer, doubts serve as a useful tool in the development of a person’s faith. Perhaps more importantly, they serve as a tool, only on the condition that he has some anchor in place that allows some drift but not too much. Doubts and questions are to be valued like the answers
themselves for they are the precious journey, without which the destination is worthless.

Several critics have argued that Dickinson’s scepticism is central to both her temperament and her achievement. “Many types of skepticism and conditions of irony are expressed in her anthology of doubt, those poems which show the soul caught between conflicting tides of faith and disbelief” (Wells 149). In her poems Emily Dickinson reveals not only her religious depth and perceptive insight into spiritual reality but also her artistic ability in employing both scepticism and faith as a strategy to increase the dramatic tension of her poems.

Puritanism held that the divine will was inscrutable and made no sense to man. The Puritan legacy for Dickinson then, would be scepticism not about the existence of God but about his knowability. Citing several Dickinson poems, such as “Wonder – is not precisely Knowing / And not precisely Knowing not –” (Poem 1331) and “Sweet Skepticism of the Heart / That knows – and does not know” (Poem 1413), Benfey remarks: “In these poems knowing is conceived, rather narrowly, as certainty, as it is in most of the 230 instances of “know” […] in her poetry” (14).

If Dickinson wrestled with doubt and faith all her life, Levertov struggled to let faith unfold in her life “the way a poem unfolds, line by line, image by image.” As Bodo sees it, “To struggle with faith is itself a kind of faith. It is to admit that there is something to struggle with - namely faith itself - just as Jacob’s wrestling with the angel was an
acknowledgement that there was an angel to wrestle with” (103). Neither an unseemly denigration of Dickinson’s faith, nor an undue laudation of Levertov’s is intended by the conclusions drawn from this comparative study. Nothing is said either to diminish the value or the force of the poetry. The focus of the exercise has been rather on the distinction in the quality or character of their ‘knowing.’ This is best illustrated by something Levertov narrates in her essay “Work that Enfaiths.” She speaks of the faith of her mother, a singer, who “loved Handel’s Messiah aria, ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth,’ and despised any performance of it which, though technically excellent, failed to give the emphasis of conviction to that word, ‘know’: ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth’” (NSE 247). “Such passionate knowledge” is what constituted faith for Levertov – something she admits she didn’t have at the time of writing the essay. It is this distinction in the quality of ‘knowing’ that enabled Levertov to “attain / free-fall, and float / into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace” (OP 76), and made possible her confident affirmation of belief in a manner that Dickinson could not achieve.