... I think there are problems about the nature of goodness; there are a lot of moral problems which I have gone on pursuing, both in philosophy and in the novels, which are, I think, just as important -- in a way, for me, perhaps more important -- the question of religion and what happens to people who've lost religion.

I think something very, very important and extraordinary has happened in our society since Dickens wrote, say, thinking of it in terms of what the novelist sees, that is the disappearance of religious belief, the disappearance of prayer from people's lives and what happens when you can't pray any more, and what form does a sort of aspiration towards human goodness take when one has lost a traditional religion.

How can a religious bent of mind be explained? The need
for the good, a hunger for the serious and transcendent, the 'certainty of a standard' is inherent in the human psyche; it yearns toward the good in some indefinable way. Earlier the indefinable was captured in the ritual and dogma of religion. With the growth of science in the past one and a half centuries, the new systems of philosophy and thought, and the catastrophic changes in people's ways of living and thinking, much of the ritual and dogma and much of the 'transcendent' have been rendered debunkable.

'Gods* in his heaven
All's right with the world'.

These lines now seem astonishingly simple-minded. Indeed, a modern reader might well read them ironically, so suspicious are we (perhaps rightly) of unqualified statements of optimistic cheer. It is very clear to most of us that all is not right with the world. The image of a God twinkling down at his creation seems to loom out of the lost innocence of a faded picture book.

As mentioned in the opening paragraph of this thesis, and clearly articulated by Murdoch herself in the quotation affixed at the head of this chapter, Murdoch's imagination is haunted by the absence of religion and its concomitant idea of Good. She recognizes that what has remained is some sense of the
good and the serious, and human aspiration towards it. But human aspiration for God, or in a secular world, for the Good, is flawed, and stems, like much of human desire for anything else, from the eros. This indicates that the illusion-making tendency of erotic energy is inherent in the desire for God. How is genuine aspiration to be differentiated from selfish need and illusory beliefs? Religious devotion may well be erotic love in disguise. Desire for God may be a facade for a deeper, unconscious need for emotional indulgence. The eros is all too adept at substitutions. The life of spirit could well be a substitute for a life of sex, or at least of erotic love. There is seen to be a mysterious relation between the emotions and the religious life. It is difficult to determine the role of emotions here. A total drying up of emotions could mean religious death, for it seems essential that the human heart be sensitive and quickened to feel the mysterious movements of God's workings. Too emotional a response -- an emotionalisation of the religious impulse could very easily, indeed inevitably, lead to illusion and falsification. How should a religious person tread the narrow path of the razor's edge to God, to avoid being sucked down into a quagmire of falsification and illusion on the one hand, and scepticism and disbelief on the other? The religious person in the present times has three main problems. The first is the age-old problem of refining the desire for God from ordinary
sexual desire; in other words, abstaining from illusions and self-interest, cleansing this desire of the dregs of all other desires.

The second problem (seen as related to the first in the eastern religions from the earliest times) is the problem of demythologising, doing away with consolations now seen as spurious -- the concept of Judgement and after life, redemption through suffering, in short, doing away with the awful figure of God the Father. This second problem has swum into the ken of Christianity, only in the last century or so, and thus, is seen as relatively a 'modern' problem. How is the religious person to deal with a long, richly developed tradition of any religion, in which ritual or mythological belief may obscure the 'higher' truth? The beauty of the ritual: the celebration of mass for instance; or the suggestive images that a particular myth may throw up: for example, the Passion of Christ, may ultimately be seen to screen the essence of the hidden spirit behind the religious quest. A religious human being in quest of God, besides attempting to refine his eros, also has to 'de-mythologise', to separate the chaff from the grain, not only because the chaff is not essential, but because, more importantly, he has to learn not to mistake the chaff for the grain.

There is as yet a third problem associated with
the religious impulse: the problem of religion and spiritual aspiration degenerating into a kind of magic. This demonic aspect is shown in a vivid, almost surrealistic light in the gothic novel *The Time of the Angels* where Carel Fisher shows what can happen to 'unhoused spirituality' in Conradi's words. That such a phenomenon can happen even to men who have purified their eros to some extent can be seen in the character of James, in the novel *The Sea, the Sea*. Magic, the disguised aspect of power in religion, is also the bane of the minor characters: Father Jacoby in *The Philosopher's Pupil* and Father McAlister in *The Book and the Brotherhood*. Marcus Vallar, in Murdoch's most recent novel, *The Message to the Planet*, consciously rejects magic by ceasing to take on the role of god-man.

Purification of the eros, demythologising, and the abjuration of magic, are, then, the three requirements of the authentic religious impulse. An inability to refine the erotic energy leads to a romanticising of the religious impulse; this is seen in Cato's predicament in Murdoch's novel *Henry and Cato*. The need to demythologise, together with the necessity of purifying the eros, is seen in the character of Anne in *Nuns and Soldiers*. The insidious element of magic and power are examined in the characters of James in *The Sea, the Sea*, Father Jacoby in *The Philosopher's Pupil* and Father McAlister in *The Book and the Brotherhood*. These
characters constitute the quagmire in which the religious essence can so easily be trapped. This chapter hopes to examine them in some detail.

Before going on to such an examination, however, I wish to see how Iris Murdoch presents the life of Christ in her books. It has been seen that one of the problems of religion is the need to demythologise not only because of the ethos of the age in which we live, but also because mythology may obstruct the truth in religion. Though God the father, as a concept, may have been rendered obsolete, his son, Christ recurs again and again in Murdoch's novels both as a beautiful and touching concept of the ultimate refinement in moral living as well as a historical figure signifying perfect selflessness amidst extreme suffering. It may be argued that an analysis of Murdoch's understanding of Christ has no place in a chapter on the religious quagmire. But it is seen to be essential to the task of perceiving the distance between imperfect human endeavour in the spiritual field on the one hand, and the Idea of perfection which Christ embodies in Murdoch's thought, on the other. The distance has to be gauged if only to see the extent of the human task of refinement necessary to achieve even a modicum of perfection.

The influence of Plato on Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy has always been acknowledged. Plato's concept of Forms is reflected in her 'certainty of a
The Platonic myth of the pilgrim travelling through the cave into the light of the sun occurs again and again in her novels and philosophical books as a symbol used to suggest the refinement of moral life. But her concept of the good, though deriving from Plato, becomes quasi-Christian in her hands because of the emphasis she places on selfless loving. The life of Christ becomes significant in this context as a symbol of powerlessness and selfless loving even in the midst of extreme suffering.

The life of Christ is also seen in purely secular terms as a historical incident. In fact, there is seen to be a constant linking of the Holocaust, another historical incident, with the crucifixion of Christ in novel after novel in the oeuvre of Iris Murdoch. In *Nuns and Soldiers*, Anne says to her 'visitor', Jesus Christ, after he replies to her question saying he has no wounds, his wounds are imaginary:

"But indeed you were wounded, Sir," said Anne, raising her eyes. "Indeed you were. They pierced your hands and feet with nails and your side with a spear. They shot your kneecaps off, they drove a red-hot needle into your liver, they blinded you with ammonia and gave you electric shocks..." (NS, 291)
Anne is getting mixed up here, as her 'visitor' rightly points out. The life of Christ is thus seen as a historical incident symbolising love and powerlessness; it projects the idea of perfection.

II

One of Iris Murdoch's earliest novels where the theme of the problem of religion is projected is The Bell. Through its picture of a small Anglican lay community linked to a nunnery, the novel simultaneously presents the hunger for religion in the contemporary a-religious world and the emotional erotic muddles that constitute the sucking, downward-pulling forces of the moral quagmire. The bell itself becomes a symbol for the necessity of purification, and the difficulty of such a task given human nature and the double-edged pull of erotic energy.

There are three different worlds that come together in The Bell: the purely secular or worldly in the form of Dora, her journalist friend Noel and the adolescent boy, Toby Gashe; the religious and 'other-worldly' Abbey with its enclosed order of nuns looked after by the wise Abbess; and finally, the lay religious community at Imber Court on the borders of the Abbey.
It is significant that the two 'worldly' characters Dora and Toby are rendered in wholly sympathetic tones by the author. And so is the Abbey and its quiet workings. The brunt of the author's gentle irony is borne by the spiritual pretensions of the community at Imber Court. Michael Meade, a romantic homosexual is simply not careful enough about himself, either in his secular world as a teacher (the incident with Nick Fawley), or as a leader of a lay religious community (the incident with Toby Gashe). James Taylor-Pace appears to be good and able to put a practical footing to his goodness, but is not equipped to make finer distinctions in the moral aptitudes of his fellow men (he calls Dora 'a bitch' to the reader's utter surprise); the Mark couple is hypocritical; Catherine Fawley, shortly to enter the Abbey as a nun and an object of deep respect at the court, is shown to be a schizophrenic — all these members of the community aim at a moral level higher than anything they can hope to achieve.

On the other hand, Dora (before her quarrels with her ascetic but possessive husband Paul) is shown to have 'an instinct for happiness'. She also has 'no memory' (B, 66) which makes her generous about the injuries and insults done to her. She is suspicious of the Imber community because she has a feeling of being
judged. Moral weaknesses, she has, but they are of the nature of Tim Reede's failings in *Nuns and Soldiers*. It is significant too, that Toby Gashe loses his fresh boyhood innocence at Imber: his first adult problems begin after being kissed by Michael.

Very unusually for Murdoch, the Abbey (an institution comprising human beings, after all) is drawn in broad strokes, suggesting an ideal. If there are any discordant notes within the Abbey, the reader is not made aware of them. The Abbess is endowed with wisdom as well as a kindly shrewdness: Michael is aware of both these attributes in his meetings with her. The two nuns who 'discover' Toby snooping in their garden and the nun (perhaps, the same) who rescues Dora from the lake seem not only practical and happy but also supremely selfless.

It is the community at Imber which cannot begin such a process of unselfing as is necessary for carrying on with the varied pressures of life in a community. That it falls apart in the end does not come as a surprise to the reader. Clearly the people at Imber Court have not prepared themselves (as the nuns have) for the demands of the religious life. Celibacy and poverty of spirit require immense effort and discipline. The nuns in the Abbey are symbols of that on-going effort; the inhabitants of Imber Court show the rawness
of the impulse when insufficiently trained or unaccompanied by the required willed effort.

Amongst Murdoch’s later works, the next novel where religious aspiration is the major theme is Henry and Cato. In this book we see Murdoch’s genius as a novelist par excellence. Working simultaneously on two levels—the religious and the secular she is able to suggest several patterns of meaning with the help of ideas and actions spreading from one point. Instead of the three neatly categorised worlds as in The Bell (the secular, the religious, and the pseudo-religious), in Henry and Cato, the characters exist uneasily in their own world and would far rather inhabit another. Except John Forbes who is content with his ‘rational’ and ‘usefully worthwhile’ place in life and Gerda who can conceive of no other place than Laxlinden Hall (Henry forces her to think about living in a cottage in Dimmerstone), all the other characters are on the move. Henry wants to stop being one of the privileged rich and give up his worldly possessions mainly to spite his family and his past, and also because he has illusions about an ascetic identity to be gained by being a non-entity in a remote American town. His friend Cato, who has been converted to the Catholic faith, wishes to give up the privilege of being a priest and escape into the secular world with Beautiful Joe, while Beautiful Joe himself professes to want to earn big money through criminal enterprises. Lucius Lamb, while very
comfortable as a scrounger at the Hall, has longings of being in London and writing something worthwhile. Rhoda, the 'bird-headed' maid at the Hall flaunts the Marshalson Rose — an ancestral ring of the family. It is later revealed that she was the mistress of Sandy, Henry's dead elder brother. Her position in the world is thus left ambiguous. Stephanie, a typist turned char, misleads Henry by saying she has been his brother Sandy's mistress and has dreams of marrying Henry and settling down at the Hall. And so has Colette, the virginal young sister of Cato, who leaves her studies and her college hoping to marry Henry and settle down to being the lady of the Hall. If Brendan Craddock has any dreams, we are not told about them. Being one of Murdoch's good characters, his mind is free of falsifying illusions. He fills his place in life as a Roman Catholic priest and a theologian. His only dream is to reach the bottom of the mystery of God through speculative thought. This he abandons at the end because he decides it is an illusion. He moves from his place and goes to India: the only character in the novel, apart from Colette, who is granted the act of moving from one world to another. That Colette gets what she wants testifies perhaps to her courage and purity. But that she gets so little (Henry, the hall and happiness) in terms of moral value, testifies to her proving false to the vision of truth she has when held a
prisoner by Beautiful Joe:

And she felt with a sadness that she had lost him, not because he did not want her, but because she did not any more want him. In this darkness Henry gave no light, he was just a young girl's silly empty dream. (HC, 269)

It is Cato Forbes' religious problems, however, that will be closely discussed in the course of this chapter. Cato has had a rationalist upbringing by his atheist father. He is thus armoured against religious fervour of any kind from his childhood. It comes as a surprise to him and a shock to his disbelieving father when he wakes inexplicably to the beauty of religious mysteries in the midst of happy summer holidays. On these lazy summer days, close to his childhood haunts, awareness of his own physical powers comes to him together with the awareness of a deep pulsating joy about the mysteriousness hidden in things:

His 'conversion' did not arise out of spiritual anguish, misery, extremity or any pressing need for transcendent consolation. He had been alone a great deal, walking in the summer heat, sitting beside rivers, watching dragon-flies, swimming naked in lonely flower-girt pools. He had been happy with the
happiness of youth and innocence and intellectual self-satisfaction and infinite possibility. He was healthy, active, robust, successful in mind and body. And then — he had found, breathless with wonder and almost a spectator of himself, that this earthly joy was being steadily and entirely and quite independently of his will transformed into a heavenly joy. (HC, 35)

His conversion to the Christian faith is described in language from which irony is absent and hence it must be assumed that the suddenly discovered religious aspiration and understanding is genuine:

It was not a headlong rush into a new life of self-sacrifice and strenuous devotion. It was like a river, like a growing plant. The will did nothing, there was no will... he did not even feel himself in any danger of being deluded, since with his new cleansed vision he also saw, still existing, still there as part of the world, his old self, unchanged and perhaps unchangeable. (HC, 36)

Further, both Father Brendan Craddock and Father Milsom, in their letters to him speak of his conversion in terms
designed to convey the genuineness of the happening.

I was worried and saddened to hear that you had been speaking of leaving the order. Do not hasten to decide, and do not mistrust the revelation that led you to God. You saw Him in a clarity and with a gladness that is denied to many who are holy. (HC, 172)

Yet, how does this sudden conversion come about? If it is genuine in origin, does it mean that Cato has been unable to progress from the initial 'felt' apprehension to an apprehension of God's reality which is based more deeply and concretely on all his faculties: emotional, rational and intellectual? Does he rely totally on his emotions?

Is God for him an emotional self-indulgence? Viewed in this light, though the genuineness of his religious 'visitation' cannot be doubted, it yet has all the marks of falling in love with God's mysteries. We are back with the old erotic games of the dark energy of the eros, and it is not totally surprising that the beauty of God's being should gradually be replaced by the irresistible beauty of Cato's young parishioner — Beautiful Joe — in Cato's mind.

After some years of deep spiritual joy and certainty of belief, Cato is suddenly assailed by doubts and a feeling of depression. It is about the same time
that the young parishioner, Beautiful Joe, a 'baby crook' makes an entry into Cato's life, when he is in one of London's poor localities, running a mission. The mission closes down and the people disappear, but Beautiful Joe does not stop coming to see Cato. Cato feels the utmost curiosity about Joe (who is only too aware of the interest) and feels gratified to see that Joe really wants to talk to him and that he attends to the spiritual advice he gives him.

Interest, curiosity, concern and vanity: the ingredients necessary for erotic love are already there and the erotic substitution which Cato makes in his mind, Joe instead of God, is not surprising. He realises that he is enjoying the conversations with Joe, and that however busy he is, he always has time for Joe. He makes half-hearted attempts to put Joe on to some other priest and is guiltily touched when the young boy refuses to talk to anybody other than Cato. Cato knows it is unwise to have this sort of a 'negative teasing relationship' with Joe, where Joe makes attention-catching remarks about his violent doings and opinions and fields Cato's responses. But he is unable to get out of the tenacious web binding him and the boy together, for Cato is not content to love Joe in a detached manner as he should love any member of his flock -- he wants to possess him and be the one to save him. He makes plans for Joe and himself about
educating him, taking him away from the crime and dirt ridden environment. Cato plans, moreover, to give up his priesthood and live as a loving guardian and companion to his young friend.

He is seen to feed upon images. The face of Christ had haunted his inner eye on his conversion to Christianity. As Brendan Craddock tells him, "Up till now you have seen Christ as a reflection of yourself. It has been a comfortable arrangement." (HC, 133) As Christ's face is replaced by Beautiful Joe's, Cato begins to experience the conviction that there is no God. He says to Craddock, "The person. The person has gone. There's no one there." (HC, 150)

God, for Cato, is an emotional experience. So long as the emotion lasts, Cato is in perfect tune with the religious life. With the shift in emotions Cato experiences emptiness, and in place of Christ, Beautiful Joe fills his thoughts and images:

And he gazed into the darkness and the darkness was not dead but terribly alive, seething and boiling with life. And in the midst of it all he saw, smiling at him, the radiant face of Beautiful Joe. This is love, thought Cato, and it is not an illusion and I must be faithful to it and undergo it. And
everything to do with his belief and his faith seemed to him at that moment flimsy and boiled and seethed up in this darkness which was his love for Beautiful Joe; and he felt himself confronted with an ineluctable choice between an evident truth and a fable. (HC, 155)

He was earlier 'invaded by Christ' and he is now 'invaded' by Beautiful Joe. His religious experience has been, like his emotional relationship with Joe, a falling in love. Craddock tells him that priesthood is like a marriage (HC, 347), and the first realisation of God is like falling in love:

"... You fell in love. That's a start, but it is only a start. Falling in love is egoism, it is being obsessed by images and being consoled by them, images of the beloved, images of oneself. (HC, 348)

Cato's fall from grace is a painful affair. Beautiful Joe, childishly outraged and disillusioned at the sight of a Cato minus his cassock and priestly distinction and authority, understanding the power that he has over Cato's emotions, gauging the extent to which Cato can be bullied, imprisons him in an underground cell. He frightens and terrorises Cato with talk of the gang (non-existent, as it happens) which plans to kill him.
Cato meekly submits to the indignity of writing letters of help to Henry and Colette. Cato is again seen to buckle under emotions — here those of fear and terror. Henry arrives with money for ransom. Colette comes with great courage to save her brother's life. Hearing her scream, Cato manages to come out of his dark cell and into the candle light only to see Colette being molested by Beautiful Joe. Is this emergence a parody of Cato's earlier emergence from out of the cave and into the light of the sun, finding, "that it was easy to look at and that all was white and pure and not dazzling, not extreme, but gentle and complete, and that everything was there, kept safe and pulsating silently inside the circle of the sun." (HC, 34) Cato kills Joe, the boy whom he wanted to save. As if this is not enough, he also comes to realise that there was no gang helping Joe; it was just Joe and his power over his (Cato's) emotions. Cato's fall is complete — no God, no priesthood, no Joe and, most important of all, no self-esteem — it is a descent into hell:

"One realises that there are no barriers, there never were any barriers, what one thought were barriers were simply frivolous selfish complacent illusions and vanities. All that so-called morality is simply smirking at yourself in a mirror and thinking how good
nothing but self-esteem, nothing else, simply affectations of virtue and spiritual charm. And when self-esteem is gone there's nothing left but fury, fury of unbridled egoism." (HC, 307)

Cato's violent and pathetic downfall is the result of his emotional fluctuations, an inability to come out of self-delusion. Unable to discipline his emotions he passes easily from ecstasy into black despair. While emotion is indispensable for religious experience, it cannot be relied upon totally by itself in an aspiration for the good and the holy. It has to be honed away from images and from its intrinsically possessive nature. An inability to purify his eros proves Cato's spiritual undoing. Father Brendan Craddock's last act in the novel shows by contrast the distance that Cato has to travel in his task of refining his religious aspirations. The unfulfilled wishes of Cato, to be the perfect priest, and of Henry, to renounce his world, are beautifully caught in the final scene of the novel — Father Brendan Craddock pulling apart his belongings to go to India. The novel's religious and secular threads meet at this point, as indeed they do at frequent points in the course of events, to provide reverberations of meaning.
III

This section of the chapter will examine the task of demythologising so necessary to the process of religious purification. Brendan Craddock begins the process of demythologising in *Henry and Cato*, though he is still very much a part of the established religious structure. Indeed, demythologising is not seen simply as some abstract or even intellectual problem connected with religion. It is as much an emotional problem as refining the emotional aspiration or need for God. Purification of the eros for the religious person would also constitute some degree of pruning away of the emotional and psychological myth surrounding the concept of God. It is precisely because there is a need to grow and develop beyond the initial emotional experience of holiness that there is need to demythologise. Brendan Craddock, being one of Murdoch’s figures of good and the ideal priest, is thus seen as a person in whom eros has been disciplined and refined; his emotional susceptibilities about other human beings are balanced; furthermore, he has the ability to experience the Spirit or the Absolute as beyond the concept of a personal God. He is not trapped in the quagmire. He tells Cato when the latter wants to give up his priesthood, "Being a priest, being a Christian, is a long long task of unselfing." (HC, 153) and again after Cato’s disastrous downfall:

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"... It's the greatest pain and the greatest paradox of all that personal love has to break at some point, the ego has to break, something absolutely natural and seemingly good, seemingly perhaps the only good, has to be given up. After that there's darkness and silence and space. And God is there. Remember St. John of the Cross? Where the images end you fall into the abyss, but it is the abyss of faith. When you have nothing left you have nothing left but hope." (HC, 348)

Anne Cavidge, the next character under discussion in the chapter, has been considered a figure of good by many critics. That she is not will be made clearer a little later. But the grounds for thinking that she is not caught in the quagmire of her emotional aspirations may rest on her success in demythologising her concept of a personal God. When compared with the almost total length of the novel where she is shown silently and dourly battling with her erotic energies, the initial few pages devoted to her struggle to understand and reconceptualize the meaning of religion and God are apparently slight. But they are of considerable
importance in understanding how the mythological part of religion, though helpful in the earlier years of 'apprenticeship' to God may ultimately become a snare in which religious aspirations get trapped. Anne is successful in at least not letting herself sink into scepticism and disbelief after years of continuous prayer and devotion to God; she is able to redefine to herself the meaning of religion and God.

Anne Cavidge in Nuns and Soldiers makes her appearance in the novel after she has left the enclosed order in which she was a nun. Her experience as a member of the convent is revealed only in a sort of 'flashback' in the novel. 'In her desperate flight from the world' to the religious life of the convent, Anne sacrifices even intellectual achievements and for a number of years she rests there in simplicity and innocence, content to be in the presence of God. Like Cato's conversion to Christianity, Anne's conversion too is described in language from which irony is totally absent, pointing to a genuine mystical experience. Like Cato she too accepts the concepts of the Trinity and of a personal God with a fervour which amazes her friends:

When she was being converted she was already purposing to be a religious. Conversion could have, for her, no other outcome. Naively at the start, and later out of a deep personal
reflection, she had thought of her goal, any goal which at that stage concerned her, in modest terms. She was giving her life for a quiet conscience... She wanted to be independent of worldly thoughts, her own and those of others, to reach a certain level where she could float free. She did not, at the start, think clearly of 'goodness' or 'holiness' as a visible goal. She took to a fervent belief in a personal God, a personal Saviour, with an ease which took her friends' breath away. (NS, 56)

How then does such a fervent belief change to, -- not doubt, certainly, but a kind of nebulous uncertainty? The whole account of Anne's crisis of faith is rendered in muted tones, half clear and half ambiguous. It is certain that Anne is not cast into a black despair like Cato -- her spirituality is too refined for such drastic emotional fluctuations. Anne, because of the 'Time Ghost' which the author refers to (NS, 57) or because, simply, of the nature of religious aspiration itself, cannot anymore believe in a personal God. As she tells the Abbess 'her sense of the living God had, perhaps profoundly, changed' (NS, 60). She has a feeling of being in the wrong place and refuses to regard the feeling as a temporary phase of darkness habitual to the religious person, a phase which must be endured. What
is clear to her is that she must move away to some other place; there comes to her an urgent sense of duty to move, to go away somewhere else, as if the work, the task that she has to perform, lies, not in the convent, but out in the world.

There are profound religious and moral implications raised by 'this sense of duty'. Does the religious person (in the present time or at any time before or since) have to relate back to the world to complete his spiritual task? In other words, does the true meaning of religion lie in separated cloisters or out in the open world? Anne departs from the convent, with the Abbess's consent, determined to be an 'anchoress' in the world, but without retaining a formal connection with the convent, known to God alone. Though Anne does not believe any more in a personal God, the experience of God's love stays with her. And of course, her concept of Christ:

Had they been wasted, those years, had she spent them inventing a false Christianity and a false Christ? She could not think so ... Christ belonged to her and would travel with her, her Christ, the only one that was really hers. (NS, 62)
What exactly does the spiritual crisis in Anne's religious aspirations constitute? Perhaps it shows the intrinsic necessity and inevitability of trimming away the mythology colouring any religious experience. As Iris Murdoch says in *The Sovereignty of Good*, 'Almost anything that consoles us is a fake... In the case of the idea of a transcendent personal God the degeneration of the idea seems scarcely avoidable...' Scott-Dunbar in his article on Iris Murdoch observes:

... The Christian religion (including, of course its images) at its most widely endorsed and popular level offers the most consoling framework this side of the eternal. In doing so, it lacks realism about the human condition and fails to take the human pilgrim seriously. Indeed, it would hardly be too much to say that the Christian religion at its most popular level, cannot see the human pilgrim: the supernatural background of its imagery provides an escape from the human condition, rather than a realistic encounter with it.

An ability to successfully demythologise the basic concepts of God and the spiritual task entrusted to one, prevents the religious person from succumbing to a
confusion of raging self-deluded emotional feelings about God and faith. Anne dexterously steps from the firm ground of deep faith to an equally firm ground of agnostic faith in the world and in her own self, avoiding the quicksands of despair. That she remains true to herself and to her Christ is proved by Christ's appearance to her when she is out in the world. This chapter will not discuss this visitation, important as it is in the understanding of Murdoch's concept of Christ and religion in general, because it does not contribute to the thesis of this study: the quagmire of religious aspiration.

So much for the issue of demythologising. What about the state of Anne's eros? Is it sufficiently refined and purified, is it a clear stream of love? The answer would be hard to make, for Anne is theoretically good enough: the dedication of her life to God, first in the convent and then outside in the world as an anchoress, Christ's revelation to her, the sacrifice of her own love for the Count so that her friend Gertrude may have a clear field, all point to Goodness. But Anne strikes the reader as an exceptionally dour person with none of the openness and warmth which characterise the good figures in Murdoch's works. She seems secretive, as if sullenly passing judgement on everyone, which feeling Gertrude quickly grasps when she tells her not to be so censorious. One of Anne's major failures is
her sheer inability and unwillingness to 'see' Tim. She even tells Gertrude that Tim is a moral imbecile: "I don't suppose he knew himself what he intended," said Anne, "he's a sort of moral imbecile." (ND, 346). And earlier, when Gertrude has confessed to having an affair with Tim, Anne says, "He isn't up to you, darling, he's a small man, you are so much more than he is ..." (NS, 247) and again, "I don't dislike him. I just don't see the point of him." (NS, 247)

Not to see 'the point of somebody' even in a lay person is a serious moral shortcoming. In a religious person, it is disastrous. She does not 'see' Daisy either, or if she does she soon forgets her; only remembering her in the end after Tim and Gertrude are reconciled and the Count has been caught in their magic circle, she realises with a rush of remorse that everybody had forgotten about Daisy. This sudden sympathy, one feels inclined to suspect, is because Anne feels a kinship with Daisy: both having been left out in the cold. Anne is quicker to censure than to love. Tim senses intuitively her dislike of him and is afraid of her. And the reader senses intuitively that while raiding other people's refrigerators (Tim's weakness) is a moral lapse, it is a much more serious lapse not to extend a generosity of spirit, in failing to apprehend a human need.

Anne's love for Gertrude too is suspect. It is
clear that she loves her dearly, but there is an aura of possessiveness, made clear by Anne's emotions when Gertrude takes up with Tim, a possessiveness which is morally indefensible. Anne is also given to a slight sarcasm in her talk with Gertrude, particularly noticeable at the end when Gertrude tells her that she has made the Count happy by asking him to stay on as a part of the family circle. Anne rather unkindly quips, "Whatever would Guy think of it all." (NS, 466) In fact, their whole conversation is loaded with ironic punctuations from Anne.

Her relationship with the Count too is not such a heroic case of unselfing as we might like to believe. Murdoch has said in her essay 'Existentialists and Mystics':

As we readily recognise and sympathise with the hero of will-power, so we can also recognise and sympathise with the mystical hero. He too is a man in tension, but here the tension is not between will and nature, but between nature and good. This is the man who has given up traditional religion, but is still haunted by a sense of the reality and unity of some sort of spiritual world. The imagery here is the imagery of height and
distance. Much is required of us and we are far from our goal. The virtue of the mystical hero is humility. Whereas the existentialist hero is the anxious man trying to impose or assert or find himself, the mystical hero is an anxious man trying to discipline or purge or diminish himself. The chief temptation of the former is egoism, of the latter masochism.

Does religious aspiration then lead to masochism? Too enthusiastic an assumption of religious beliefs may lead to a desire to purge the ego by diminishing the self. Accounts of physical self-laceration by religious persons are not unheard of. Mental or emotional self-laceration may be the subtle result of an extension of the idea of purging the soul of vanity and illusion. It is another interesting off-shoot of such a phenomenon that masochism in religious affairs can ultimately be seen as a subtly and dangerously self-centered exercise.

That Anne is masochistic (note her unbearable headaches brought on perhaps by constant self-denial) in thwarting her own interests by promoting relations between the Count and Gertrude is clear. There are two distinct strains in the novel -- one towards Eros, that is Gertrude and Tim, and one towards Thanatos, that is Anne. The beauty of the novel is that even characters
who are distinctly survivors move at some time or the other towards death: Gertrude after Guy's death, Guy himself, Tim after parting with Daisy and Gertrude, the Count after his hopes are dashed, and of course, Anne. This shift towards a feeling of total extinction at some time or the other, testifies to, perhaps, the existence of the good in them and the capacity to unself to some degree. But Anne's Thanatos seems to be self-centered masochism. There is clearly something other than pure love working when she resolutely exposes poor Tim (so that the Count can have Gertrude, and she, Anne, be denied any satisfaction in her love for the Count) on purely circumstantial evidence without understanding, or even wanting to understand, the true state of affairs. Anne has a long way to go in the purificatory pilgrimage. She is not even endearingly human.

IV

This brings us to the last issue of this chapter: in Murdoch's own words, the 'dangerousness of the road to goodness', that is, the problem of magic. This problem can be clearly seen as related to the problem of power. Power is the topic of the next chapter and the issue of magic discussed here overlaps with it. Surrendering to the will to power in religion results in a kind of magical, spurious religion, where the quest
for God or Goodness is superseded by the desire to control and manipulate. The irony underlining the situation is that the magic starts off, in most cases, innocently enough, but has disastrous consequences. As James Arrowby in *The Sea, the Sea* says:

"White magic is black magic. And a less than perfect meddling in the spiritual world can breed monsters for other people. Demons used for good can hang around and make mischief afterwards. The last achievement is the absolute surrender of magic itself, what you call superstition. Yet how does it happen? Goodness is giving up power and acting on the world negatively. The good are unimaginable."

(SS, 445)

'Yet how does it happen'? is the question which echoes and reverberates in Murdoch's work, in different contexts. It is interesting to see that this particular problem of magic in the spiritual connection occurs in novels which have a figure of power at their centre — *The Sea, the Sea*, *The Philosopher's Pupil* and *The Book and the Brotherhood* among the later novels of Iris Murdoch. This question also occurs in *The Message to the Planet*; but here the powerful figure at the centre and the spiritual magician, as it were, who asks the question, 'Yet how does it happen'? is also the
powerless figure in the end, stripped of everything but that with which he wants to be identified. In fact, James Arrowby and Marcus Vallar bear some faint resemblance to each other in spite of their apparent differences. Both save somebody from death, both give up power in the end and die of their own will. But they are seen in entirely different contexts: Marcus Vallar in the Judaeo-Christian background and James in the Buddhist framework. Figures of Good has a brilliantly analysed chapter on the Buddhist framework in The Sea, the Sea, where James, in spite of his significant lapses into magic, is seen as a Sotapati:

a ‘stream-winner’, the first rough version of a saint who has detached himself from worldly existence and followed the path to goodness.

Elizabeth Dipple on the other hand, sees James Arrowby as more power-hungry than even his egotistical cousin, Charles Arrowby, the well-known man of theatre:

... and we are forced to realize that this spiritually highly developed man has indeed taken a wrong turning as Charles had so long ago intuited. In the rescue of Charles, as earlier in the death of his Sherpa, he succumbs to the power of his brand of potent
magic: the dangerous road to goodness for a man like James who takes a spiritual route more subtly tempting and finally more devastating than the egotistical path Charles has so blindly followed.

Charles Arrowby on hearing the news of James' death thinks:

No, I could not attach this 'casting off' to any ordinary or present cause. James' decision belonged to a different pattern of being, to some quite other history of spiritual adventure and misadventure. Whatever 'flaw' had led, as James saw it, to his sherpa's death, belonged, it might be, to some more general condition. Religion is power, it must be, and yet that is its bane. The exercise of power is a dangerous delight.

Perhaps James wanted simply to lay down the burden of a mysticism that had gone wrong, a spirituality which had somehow degenerated into magic. (SS, 474)

In the 'Indian' doctor's letter, James is described as, an "Enlightened One". (SS, 473)

Without trying to arrive at a conclusion, I think it is enough to recognize that the exercise of magic,
the acquisition of supernatural powers through a life dedicated to spiritual discipline is, even for a highly spiritual person, dangerous and fraught with disastrous outcomes. It is made more ambiguous by the fact that James uses his powers to save his drowning cousin, which act seems entirely proper and in keeping with all religious tenets. What is the answer? Does Titus die because James, by saving Charles, freed the demons who were responsible for the death of the young boy? Or is Charles responsible for Titus' death for having failed to warn him (through a vain desire to show off) about the perilous rocks?

It seems to me that a better reading of James' spiritual problem is to look at the sub-text of the novel. It has been seen how Anne Cavidge, in *Nuns and Soldiers*, for all that the text establishes her as a figure of good, is really, seen from the sub-text, a good person in the making, having a long way to go to refine her eros. The same, inverted, is true for James. Though the text may offer enough evidence to show James' spiritual degeneration, the sub-text bears out all the time that James is 'the enlightened one'. His concern for Charles, his ability to see, not only the natural phenomena of birds and trees but also to perceive people and their feelings, to offer practical help, to be quiet and cheerful (Anne is never cheerful), the fact that everyone comes and tells Charles how much they like him,
the fracas over Lizzie which Charles takes so ill and which can be read as James wishing that the truth be told, lest it interfere with his plans of 'the long journey' — all establish the fact that though the road to goodness is dangerous, an attempt can be made to traverse it.

The next two figures to be discussed in connection with magic are Father Bernard Jacoby of The Philosopher’s Pupil and Father McAlister of The Book and the Brotherhood. Both are relatively minor characters, but both are important to the novels in adding one more strand to the complex web of moral issues. They also function as contrasts and foils to the central figure of power in the novels. Through them religion becomes a spurious force, magical and without an ethical centre.

Father Bernard Jacoby is allowed the saving grace of being able to see and to be aware of the necessity of morals in human life. Though eccentric and given to kneading his women parishioners' hands while counselling them, an unbeliever in God's existence, but alive to Christ's mystery and thrilling spirit, he yet manages to make some good sense when he advises people. But religion, or ritual, the medium of apprehension is just magic to him:

... And everyday, by the magic power which had been entrusted to him, he changed bread and
wine into flesh and blood. He continued to revere this mystery and to find it endlessly and thrillingly arcane. (PP, 155)

A student of chemistry and a boxer before that, Father Jacoby has, much to his parents' distress, become a priest. But there is no strong compelling force of devotion here as in the case of Cato. Priesthood is just a mode through which he exercises magic:

After messing about with human sexual adventures he decided to devote his love, that is his sexuality to God. When God passed out of his life he loved Christ. When Christ began, so strangely, to withdraw and change, he just sat, or knelt and breathed in the presence of something or in the presence of nothing. (PP, 156)

This is the old game of erotic substitution. The problem with Father Jacoby seems to be that he is able to conceive of goodness and the morally right, but unable to apply these conceptions to himself: he says to Rozanov, the philosopher and the power, figure of the novel:

"... but -- when we love people — and things
— and our work, and — we somehow get the assurance that good is there — it's absolutely there — it's in the fabric — it must be." (PP, 191)

and later confesses to Rozanov's question:

What do you regret most in your life?" said the philosopher. "What kind of regret? Not to have established unselfish habits..." (PP, 195)

Rozanov's death in the end suddenly gives spurt to a lot of activity and change in the people who are directly or indirectly under his spell. Father Jacoby, in a dilemma whether or not to reveal Rozanov's suicide note, does not reveal it in the end, afraid though he is of getting into trouble for concealing evidence. He immediately asks the Bishop to laicise him. He then goes to Greece taking George's mistress Diane Sedleigh with him, though he proceeds to 'lose' her in Paris. The last we hear of him is through a letter, which he writes to 'N' the narrator of the story, where he offers some illuminating insights into the concept of religion and the concept of a priest:

Metaphysics and the human sciences are made impossible by the penetration of morality into the moment to moment conduct of ordinary life; the understanding of this fact is religion.
... There is no beyond, there is only here, the infinitely small, infinitely great and utterly demanding present. This too I tell my flock, demolishing their dreams of a supernatural elsewhere. So you see, I have abandoned every kind of magic to preach a charmless holiness. (PP, 571)

Though the author's own views are behind the illuminations, yet the reader feels a sneaking doubt about how it should be received. The tone of the letter -- the part which has gone before the excerpt quoted above -- is too ecstatic and exultant, and smacks, ever so slightly, of the absurd:

{ ... It is vitally important that I live now in a cave... I live in a solitary place beside the sea surrounded by white stones and brilliant green pine trees. I have made a wooden cross. Fireflies are my lamp at night... My bread is as pure as the stones, I drink from a nearby spring. (PP, 570)

Is the enlightenment genuine or is it again an arid illusion? Father Jacoby's case illustrates with extreme precision the discrepancy between an intellectual understanding of the good (simplicity, humility, invisibility, selflessness), and spiritual purity even...
in the actual apparent practice of the good holy life (Father Jacoby after all, is following the example of the saints to the letter).

Father McAlister in *The Book and the Brotherhood* is a darker version of Father Jacoby: the latter for all his eccentricities amid the illusory haze of religious magic, is capable of some kind acts — he tells Rozanov to be kind to George, and moreover, his kind of magic is not harmful. But Father McAlister, the instrument of change in Tamar is redeemed by no kindly touches. From a submissive and timid girl Tamar becomes a strong-willed, half-cynical and selfish young woman, and though one is glad to see Violet (her mother) thwarted and not having her own way for once, we are also shocked at Tamar's suddenly indifferent, even callous, attitude.

The manner in which the priest runs after Tamar after the Sunday service and induces her to tell him of her problems (that she is pregnant) does not show genuine quiet help, of the sort Jenkin Riderhood is able to give, but reminds one of a hunter tracking down his quarry. It is later revealed that he specialises in desperate cases. There is an impure strain mixed with Father McAlister's Christian sense of duty. His release of Tamar from one kind of demon: fruitless, insane guilt, only serves to make her an easy prey for another
kind of ruthless demon : selfish power. His help is only a kind of exorcism :

Tamar had faced the devil and the eternal fire, he had seen her face twist with terror, and later, when he had exorcised the spirit of the malignant child, seen it divinely calm and bathed with penitential tears. Now Tamar seemed endowed with an extraordinary authority. Even Gideon, he could see, was startled by it. She was authoritative and detached and able, in this crisis with her mother, to freeze her feelings. (BB, 509)

The exorcism itself consists of a magical rite which he invents, 'a kind of burial or blessing of the dead child, a formal affirmation of love and farewell, containing an act of contrition.' (BB, 492) The invention of this rite gives him intense pleasure. Magic in The Philosopher's Pupil was a matter of erotic substitution seen in the relatively harmless character of Father Bernard Jacoby. Father McAlister of The Book and the Brotherhood is more sinister and projects the idea of the spurious element in religion. He is perfectly aware of his spurious role. He knows he makes serious mistakes :
The power which I derive from my Christ is debased by its passage through me. It reaches me as love, it leaves me as magic. That is why I make serious mistakes. (BB, 517)

In spite of the self-acknowledged admission that he makes mistakes, and even though he is horrified at the drastic change in Tamar, Father McAlister cannot stop exercising his magical power. With a sort of self-preservatory cunning he sees his next task (divinely ordained, of course) as Violet Hernshaw, Tamar's mother:

... in spite of his self-laceration, a ritual in which he indulged at intervals, the priest felt, in a yet deeper deep self, a sense of security and peace. Behind the doubt there was truth, and behind the doubt that doubted that truth there was truth... He was a sinner, but he knew that his Redeemer lived ... His Master, handing back the problem to him had informed him that his next task was Violet Hernshaw. (BB, 517)

What makes Father McAlister's charlatanism worse is that it has the backing of a religious establishment and the sanction of public morality. What might, in an ordinary person, have been termed harmful meedling, becomes a priestly act conveying divine help.
The last part of this chapter has dealt with the problem of magical power in religion as seen in three novels in Iris Murdoch's later oeuvre: *The Sea, the Sea*, *The Philosopher's Pupil* and *The Book and the Brotherhood*. It has been noted that magic in religion is an aspect of power. A more detailed examination of these works and three other novels will be made in the next chapter which deals with power - a very important feature of the moral quagmire.

The readiness with which the erotic enters the religious impulse and drags it downward; the readiness with which the real turns, through petrification in images, into the false; and the readiness with which the magical enters the religious life and feeds the ego, are some of the aspects considered in this chapter on the religious bubble in the moral quagmire.