CHAPTER V

The Handmaid’s Tale: Religious and Moral Dysfunction-

Religion has been described in various ways by different individuals and by different schools of thought. While on one level religion can be considered to be a set of instructions regarding spirituality, it may also be considered to be a means by which a community is able to ascertain its right to an identity in a world so full of community and religious distinctiveness.

There is nothing in the world which has at once been the object of deep reverence and the centre of so much criticism as much as religion. It has been equated with ‘salvation’ and characterized as the ‘opiate of the people’ (Abraham 194). On the one hand, it is viewed as the ‘group-supported road to salvation’ ‘the path to eternal bliss, or the light of mankind. On the other hand, it is said to be a survival of the primitive or ‘simply a vestige of an illusion or collective phantasmagoria’.

In summary we can enumerate the following elements of religion:

1. An irresistible obsession with the sacred, variously defined as god, totem, super-natural or the ultimate.
2. Symbols- any sacred objects like trishul, cross, beads.
3. A social form with networks of institutional arrangements and status roles (priests, monks, churches).
4. A moral philosophy which unites the mundane and the spiritual in a mystical blend.
5. Holy texts believed to be based on revelation and containing the tenets of faith and rules of conduct.
6. A system of rituals including festivals, ceremonies, prayers, feasts, sacrifices etc.
7. An expressive culture particularly visual and performing arts including dancing, singing, procession etc.
8. Congregation which includes meetings, discourses and devotional gatherings.

The key functions of religion maybe summarized as follows:

1. It helps individuals reconcile to the hardships and inequities in society by interpreting failure and frustrations symbolically and by advising believers not to take vicissitudes of mundane existence seriously.
2. It promises salvation or nirvana to those who tread the prescribed path.
3. It provides a kind of psychic insurance policy by uniting believers into a fellowship of shared experience.
4. It offers support when other institutions are rapidly changing, throwing the individuals life out of gear. This is really true of periods of crisis like sickness, death, depression, war etc.
5. It gives the individual a sense of personal identity, meaning an inner experience and may bring transcendence of the same.

The functional theory in Sociology distinguishes six functions of religion in these terms: (O'Dea 14).

1. Religion by its invocation of a life beyond which is concerned with human destiny and welfare, and to which human beings may respond and relate themselves, provide support, consolation and reconciliation.
2. Religion offers a transcendental relationship through cult and the ceremonies of worship, and hence provides emotional ground for a new security and former identity amid the uncertainties of the human condition.
3. Religion sacrilizes the norms and values of established society, maintaining the dominance of group goals over individual wishes and of group disciplines over individual impulses.
4. Religion may also provide standards of values in terms of which institutionalized norms may be critically examined and found wanting.
5. Religion performs important identity functions.
6. Religion is related to growth and maturation of the individual and his passage through the various age gradings distinguished by his society.

The Handmaid's Tale can be read as a religious dystopia as it narrates the story of Offred who has lost her voice in the Republic of Gilead as she is only a sexual object now and a reproductive machine. The Handmaid's Tale is a story that shows us "explorations of fundamentalism and feminism, dystopias and patriarchies" (Sherwin7). Offred is not allowed to read or write as women in the Republic of Gilead are merely cogs in a wheel. The interpretation of religion by those who run the business of religion is revealing in that it point blankly shows a bias against the female kind. Religion is not a set of beliefs here; it is an encrusting cage the captures a woman and makes her game of evil intentioned men. The Republic of Gilead is not
able to understand what the true essence of religion is and what its functions really are. Gandhi said that the laws of nature are changeless, unchangeable, and there is no “infringement or interruption of Nature’s laws” (Gandhi, My God 31). We may try to copy God, but not He us. Time for him is eternal. For us there is a past and a present and a future. And human life of a hundred years is like a speck in the “eternity of time” (Ibid). Both Gandhi and Atwood want a spiritual swaraj (freedom) and not a religious one.

Margaret Atwood leans toward a sort of inner faith which embraces the whole creation as a manifestation of Truth or God. It is in this context that Atwood’s position resembles Gandhi’s as both of them resist the singular, monolithic and dysfunctional “religion” that binds people to one book, on God and one meaning. Both Gandhi and Atwood warn human beings not to fetishize their “religion” and hate other religions.

The kingdom of Gilead was created many years after upheavals in the human demographic cycle, characterized by low birth rate and thus the almost invisibility of babies. There are several reasons attributable, prominent among them were the widespread availability of birth control methods including abortion. Some infertility was willed in some cases. Besides birth control, the AIDS epidemic and the R-strain syphilis wiped out a larger population of sexually active people from the reproductive pool.

Gandhi considered contraceptives a sin in the garb of virtue. He said that he objected to contraception on special grounds. Young men in India do not know what sexual restraint is. They are married early and no one tells them to restrain in married life. Parents are keen to see their grandchildren. Gandhi said that in such an atmosphere, the use of contraceptives can play more and more havoc. The poor girls who are expected to submit to their husband’s desire, are now taught that it is a good thing to desire sexual satisfaction without the desire to have children. And in order to fulfil the double purpose, they have to recourse to contraceptives (Paul 93). Gandhi said much on Brhamacharya and its importance as a spiritual condition. He said that Brhamacharya, like all other observances, must be observed in thought, word and deed. We are told in the Gita that the foolish man who appears to control his body, but is nursing evils in his mind, makes a vain effort. It maybe harmful to suppress the body, if the mind is at the same time allowed to go astray. The conquest of lust is the highest endeavour of every man and woman. Without overcoming lust, man cannot
hope to rule over self. And without rule over self there can be no Ramaraj (Gandhi, *My Religion* 109).

Besides this there were many stillbirths, miscarriages and genetic deformities due to nuclear-plant accidents, sabotage, leakages from chemical and biological stockpiles and toxic waste disposal sites. Gilead is the result of the concept of Sustainable growth and Development being ignored to dangerous extremes. Sustainable Development “presents one of the most ambitious calls for inter-sectoral collaboration to date” (Bigg 191) and this is what has failed before the creation of Gilead. The effects of pollution are seen in the way reproductive functions have been seriously affected in Gilead. Pollution has been defined as a ‘direct or indirect introduction as a result of human activity of substances, vibration, heat or noise into the air, water or land which may be harmful to human health or the quality of the environment, result in damage to material property, or impair or interfere with amenities and other legitimate uses of the environment (Harris 231).

Interestingly, Gandhi had envisioned the problems related to industrial waste long before it became fashionable tete’a tete’. Gandhi said that the concept of waste is born with modern society. Fly ash from thermal plants, slag from steel-mills, plastic fallen into disuse, and effluents from the chemical industry are inevitabilities from the chemical industry. Gandhi said that it was here that modern science violates ‘human chastity’ (Raghuramaraju 187).

So what was urgently needed by the regime were babies. The regime created a quick pool of such women by ‘declaring all second marriages and nonmarital alliances as adulterous, arresting the female partners and confiscating the children they already had’. Highly placed men were thus able to pick and choose among women who were highly reproductive. The republic of Gilead enforced only surrogacy and not artificial insemination and fertility clinics as they felt that the latter two were unethical. Examples of surrogacy, according to the officials at Gilead were there in *The Bible* itself and they replaced serial polygamy with the older form of ‘simultaneous polygamy’ practiced both in the Old Testament times and in the former state of Utah in the nineteenth century. The extent to which the exploitation takes place is not a matter of concern to the officials in Gilead. As in the words of feminist writer Maria Mies, “We tend to forget the historical fact that technological innovations within the exploitative and unequal relationships lead to intensification,
Christianity as a religion of the moral force was not able to provide the succor that it was expected to provide. The institutionalization of religion put it up to many corrupt practices by both the clergy as well as the congregation. The publication of Darwin’s “Origin of the Species” threw the concept of ‘Divine Creation’ out of orbit and in its place was put forward the bolus of ‘Evolution’ which filled the minds of even the conservative Christians with spools of doubt. The failure of the Christian religion to provide all the answers to metaphysical and material problems is evident in many works of that time. TS Eliot’s The Wasteland is a fine example of the anguish and angst that was faced by the people of the day. He truly believed that the very existence of Western civilization was threatened. The Waste Land had poignantly described the decay of civilization, and subsequent events only heightened Eliot’s sense of crisis. It describes a spiritually desolate, spiritually dysfunctional Europe which can be revived only when people follow daya (giving), damyati (self-control) and dayadhwam (compassion) and become true Christians or true practitioners of spiritual values.

Communism arose in the East and fascism on the Continent. Eliot was particularly indefinable in discussing the interaction between church and state which is the normal contact point between Christian ideals and society. He said that his comments on this point had limited value outside of England. Eliot believed a state of strain would always exist between church and state, and that individual Christians would feel a dual allegiance. “A higher religion imposes a conflict, a division, torment and struggle within the individual . . . we escape from this strain by attempting to revert to an identity of religion and culture which prevailed at a more primitive stage; as when we indulge in alcohol as an anodyne, we consciously seek unconsciousness” (Eliot 68) Eliot did not make an effort to lessen the strain, he in fact saw the church as the ”salt of the earth,” affecting society at its deepest levels. To accomplish its goal, the church needs a hierarchy to maintain official relations with the state, and another structure in direct contact with the smallest units of the community and also with the Community of Christians (Philip Yancey).

In The Bible too Jesus condemns the so called ‘teachers of law’ and the Pharisees. Jesus said that the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees were the ‘authorized interpreters’ of Moses’ Law and so the people must obey and follow
everything they tell them to do. However Jesus puts a just rider on the exercise when he says, “Do not imitate their actions because they do not practice what they preach” (The Bible, 58). When religion becomes narrowly institutionalized it becomes a network of power-relations which often make it a handmaiden to politics and dogma. Religion if it becomes and remains a way of life and continues to be open-ended, inspires people to practice life-giving values and believes in the sanctity of all life. In a similar vein in Matthew 23 of The Bible Jesus says to the Pharisees that they were impostors as they took advantage of widows and robbed them of their homes. Jesus also laughs at their so called missionary zeal when he tells them that they sail the seas and cross whole countries to convert and when they succeed “you make him twice as deserving of going to hell as you yourselves are” (Matthew 23).

Jesus also criticized the keepers of the faith as they gave one tenth of their seasoning herbs like mint, dill and cumin to God but they did not follow the true teachings of the Law such as justice, mercy and honesty. He makes scathing attacks on these impostors. They fix up heavy loads and tie them on men’s backs, yet they are not willing to even lift a finger and carry the loads of these poor distressed people. They love the best feasts and the reserved seats in the meeting houses. “See how big are the containers with scripture versus on their foreheads and arms, and notice how long are the hems of their cloaks” (Matthew 58).

Dharma according to Hindu tradition was a holistic concept which dealt with a lifestyle aimed at spiritual fulfillment, rather than a set of norms or a list of rituals to be followed. To quote from the Upanishads, “Dharma is the royalty of royalty, so there is nothing higher than dharma. Through Dharma a weaker man overcomes a stronger one, as though through a king. Dharma is truth; so they say of one who speaks truth, ‘He speaks dharma’, or of one who speaks dharma, ‘He speaks truth’. Both are the same” (Upanishads: 23). In Christian ethics these words of The Bible can be seen as revealing, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding men’s misdeeds against them” (2 Cor. 5:19- New English Bible). The Gospel is that God himself has taken the initiative to incarnate himself with man, atoning for sin and bringing free Divine forgiveness to him, so that he is reconciled to God through the Crucified and risen Jesus Christ, and brought once again into right relationship with God, neighbor and himself (John et al 42-43). The moral aspect of religion has been strictly emphasized here, as a human being is expected to follow the path of righteousness so that he can be morally just and he can also atone for his sins.
Gandhi was of the view that in matters of sex, there has to be self-restraint. He remarked that eighty drops of the blood in the body are used to make one drop of semen and so nature could not have intended this pleasure to be enjoyed within limit; “the most robust of constitutions will wear out and become diseased in a few months if morbid lustfulness is allowed to become a habit of mind” (Gangadhar 24). Gandhi has also said that man is often the tempter and the aggressor. ‘It is not woman whose touch defiles men, but he is often himself too impure to touch her’ (Ibid).

The regime of Gilead is a kingdom in which there is a total reversal of roles and permissible standards of behavior of both men and women. Women are looked upon as only reproductive machines and they are not allowed to mix with men except for sex. Since fertility is an important issue in Gilead, women who are able to have children are glorified while those who are barren are almost considered non-existent. John Stuart Mill says that women are brought up from the very beginning with the belief that their character is to be opposite from men-‘not self-will and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others’. He was also of the view that a woman was expected to ‘live for others’, ‘make complete abnegation of themselves’ and to ‘have no life but in their affections’ (Mill 168).

Gandhi was against the view that society was preoccupied with the chastity of women. It is a morbid anxiety that exists about female purity. The exact opposite is also true as women have never raised any objections about the purity of a man. Men should not arrogate to themselves the right to regulate female purity. It cannot be superimposed from without, it is a matter of evolution and therefore it is a matter of self-effort (Gandhi, All Men Are My Brothers 206). This is exactly what is happening in the Republic of Gilead. Women are guarded and kept chaste so that they maybe used by the Commander and other men in order to increase the population while deriving sexual pleasure at the same time.

It is interesting to note that the novel begins with epigrams from the Bible that talk about fertility and the premium that rides on it. A woman’s reputation is strongly based on it.

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.

And Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?
And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. Genesis 30: 1-3

The epigrams that have been used at the beginning of the book are a pointer to what could be expected in the novel, with emphasis on fertility and the onus of running the race totally lying on the shoulders of the woman.

The Handmaids Tale is often read as a religious dystopia which takes religious interpretation to its extreme. Women in Gilead live as commodities whose wombs are literally up for sale and they are only needed for sex and procreation. Like The Edible Woman, The Handmaids Tale is based on Marx's four basic types of alienation—people’s alienation from their labour, from their species, from nature, and from themselves—but he has concentrated on the fundamental site of alienation for women; their bodies (Singh 71). For Marx religion was always “dysfunctional” and as “opium”, it was bound to engender more “dysfunction” in society. According to Marx, religion is an expression of material realities and economic injustice. Thus, problems in religion are ultimately problems in society. Religion is not the disease, but merely a symptom. It is used by oppressors to make people feel better about the distress they experience due to being poor and exploited. This is the origin of his comment that religion is the “opium of the masses” — but his thoughts are much more complex than commonly portrayed (Austin Cline).

Atwood takes a clear stand on alienation which is very different from that of Karl Marx. Cut off from her “ethical roots” or “moral duty”, which lies at the core of religion in Atwood’s fiction, the modern human is alienated from her own self. The vital separation from one’s own self creates all the forms of “alienation”. The perfect examples of this alienation can be seen in her female characters in Surfacing and The Edible Woman in particular. Both the characters build a bastion around themselves which alienate them from the evil ways of a consumerist and a lustful society. They see their bodies as common property which they wish to personalize by a systematic process of ‘cleansing and anointing’. They have to do this in isolation, through means that the world does not understand at all. This is the extreme expression of Atwood’s alienation. Religion does not answer any of the questions that the characters face as even this institution has become laced with the poison of greed and exploitation.

Religion plays an important role in the lives of almost every member of the society. Religion has a number of important functions to perform. Religion acts as a means of social control, through a series of positive and negative sanctions and thus
encourages socially acceptable behavior (Ferraro 308). It also helps in conflict resolution by reducing stress and frustrations that lead to social conflict. Besides this religion imparts Group solidarity as it helps people to express their common identity in an ‘emotionally charged environment’. It has cognitive functions in that it ‘explains the inexplicable’ and gives us comfort about things which could have otherwise unsettled us a great deal. The emotional function of religion is to help people cope with anxieties accompanying illness, death and other misfortunes. The functions of religion are positive in nature but it is only the misinterpretation of religion by the ‘keepers’ of the religion that give religion its evil shape and colour.

Gandhi had a unique way of telling us what his religion was. He did not wish to define it in terms of a dogma or a dictum; rather for him it was a way of life. He said that his religion was not the Hindu religion which he certainly prized, but it was something that even transcended Hinduism. It is that which changes one’s nature, “which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies” (Gandhi, My Religion). It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself (Ibid).

Gandhi said that European civilization is no doubt suited for Europeans but it will ruin India if India tries to copy it. The incessant search for material comforts and their multiplication is such an evil that even Europeans will have to remodel their outlook if they wish not to perish under the weight of comforts which are becoming their slaves (Gandhi, India of My Dreams 5). He also talks of the kind of ‘Swaraj’ he envisioned when he says that by self government he meant a continuous effort to be independent of government control, whether it is a foreign government or a national government. Swaraj government will be a sorry affair if people look up to it for the regulation of every detail of life (Ibid 8).

Gilead is a result of pre-Gileadean urban deterioration. Urban sociologists have developed two perspectives in studying the causes and consequences of urban problems: the first is the disorganization perspective. This perspective perceives urban environment as a ‘dehumanizing place’ in which secondary and impersonal relationships are the norm. This perspective sees crime, delinquency, mental illness and poverty as a result of large scale unskilled migrations to cities. Unable to cope here, these people develop a lifestyle that is based on ‘unacceptable ways of acting
and behaving’ (Ramcharan 19). The other approach is the conflict approach. This approach perceives urban environment as composed of a large number of interest groups competing with each other. There is an inadequate allocation of resources to deprived groups and the governing group creates conditions of depravity which lead to crime, poverty, alienation and despair. The Gileadean Republic seems to have been built upon the foundations of a world which had become chaotic due to a combination of both these perspectives. The world had been dehumanized to such an extent that a utopia (read dystopia) was but inevitable.

Gandhi has been very candid about the ensnaring capacity that urban life has on the rural populace. Rural life is placid and self-sufficient with an income based on agriculture and handicrafts going parallel. As long as there is no urban influx and influence, there can be no harm done to the rural economy. Similarly rural migrations to urban areas bring about tectonic changes in demography. Gandhi was of the view that the wealth of the cities came from the blood of the poorest. He regarded the growth of cities as an evil thing and he was also of the opinion that England exploited India through its cities (Gandhi, *Village Swaraj* 25).

In an interview of Margaret Atwood by Bill Moyers on the programme *Faith and Reason* aired on 28 July 2006. Atwood said that religion is a nebulous word and the language of *The Bible* was often self-contradictory and “schismatic”. She was of the view that what is generally represented as religion is actually a misinterpretation of what religion really is. Atwood said that people use their belief systems “to terrorize other people” and this is where the interpretation between what religion should be and what it has become because of its so-called followers gets myopic (Ibid).

Atwood views Christianity in Canada as a religion that has been “imported”. She says that the assumption of the book, if there is one, is that Gods do exist here, but nobody knows about them. She is of the view that the ‘authentic’ religion that there was in Canada has been destroyed and one has to discover it in some other way (Atwood, *Canadian Essays* 23). Like in *Surfacing* the problem for the young lady is one of transformation, of immersing herself in nature to make “connections with the Gods of place” (Djwa 183). The unnamed woman protagonist aims at establishing an “advaita” or union with whole life including nature.

For Gandhi, true religion was the inner voice, that little voice that told one what was right and wrong. It is your conscience that tells you to make a distinction between what is right and what is wrong. He said that whenever he hears the little voice he is
often plagued with a sense of uncertainty as he is generally faced with a difficult decision to make. However it is the little voice which always directs him to do the right thing (Gandhi, My Faith in God 47). Gandhi emphasized that “Truth is God”. He said that the process of realization of satya (truth) through ahimsa (non-violence) is the meaning of dharma or religion. Whenever one tries to use or abuse religion in order to pursue one’s truth through himsa (violence) or greed or lust or injustice, “religion becomes “dysfunctional”. Ahimsa is not the mere crude thing that it is made out to be. Not to hurt any living thing is no doubt a part of ahimsa. But it is its least expression. Gandhi says that “Ahimsa is violated by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill to anybody. It is also violated by our holding on to what the world needs. But the world needs even what we eat day by day” (Gandhi, My Religion 105). Ahimsa is the means and truth is the end. Means in order to be means must always be within our reach and ahimsa is our prime duty. Whatever difficulties we face, whatever apparent reverses we sustain, we may not give up the quest for Truth which alone is being God Himself.

In the poem The Stone for His Grave written in 1972, Monkan talks of a nondescript man who goes about the general activities of his life, unknown and invisible. He does not pray to God “though he believes in God”. He is not a hermit, nor is he absurd and even his children are accidents caused only because “it was Sunday and the drugstores closed”. Inspite of it all (and this is how the poem ends) ‘God believes in him’. (Daymond and Leslie). Monkan shows us the simplest form of spirituality, which is a moral sense of doing right without following difficult dogmas or dictums.

Nancy Workman in her article Sufi Mysticism in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale is of the view that the three epigrams at the beginning of the novel perform the function of demarcating an ‘ideological boundary’ by showing ‘contrasting world views’. The first epigram is taken from the Book of Genesis and it gives a ‘biblical foundation’ for the society Atwood wishes to portray in her novel. Similarly, the second epigram, taken from Jonathan Swift’s "A Modest Proposal," alludes to his feelings towards careless landowners and depraved Irish tenants by calling upon cannibalization of children as a panacea for ‘social illnesses’. Atwood makes fun of American Puritanism in a similar vein.

The term "sufism" comes from the word suf, which means wool of which garments were made and these garments were worn by Islamic mystics. The first
practitioners followed interior spiritual development and did not believe in Islamic ideas of religious ceremony. As The Encyclopedia of Religion states the emphasis among Sufis has always been on "interiority," or private mystical union with God. "The goal of every Muslim mystic is to recapture this experience of loving intimacy with the Lord of the Worlds." Workman compares Offred to a Sufi female saint who looks inward with the aim of finding the answers to her existence in moments of seclusion and tyranny.

False or fake religion or "religious consciousness" creates a religious dysfunction which presents religion in its perverted forms- full of violence, lust and greed. Gandhi has over and again emphasized this "interiority" with God and the deep relation that one needs to share which goes much beyond the four walls of a place of worship. Gandhi stresses the importance of prayer He says that it is the intensity of faith, whereby he loses himself in an ‘Invisible Power’ (Gandhi, Food for the Soul 50). He says that many things have happened in his life which he never could have achieved, but it was only a burning desire that propelled him into achieving them. He said that his faith in silent prayer has kept increasing over the years. It is itself an art- perhaps the highest art, requiring the most refined diligence.

The third epigram which is a Sufi one of the stones in the desert shows that "modern Christianity offers stones in its desert as nourishment to various needs, actually encouraging the practitioners to partake of non-nutritional experiences on many psychic levels". The world in which Offred lives is biblical in its influence. It is essentially a Christian world in which cars and shops have Christian reverberations. Offred shops at the Lilies of the Field, the Milk and Honey (The Handmaid’s Tale 34), and the All Flesh (36), bringing to mind Christian parables laced with instruction and moral injunction. The fact that these stories are frequently “empty of good attests to the fundamental emptiness of Christianity”.

Christianity as a religion is based on the many teachings of Jesus Christ which were later compiled by his disciples. Jesus advocated “determinate inner dispositions (virtues), loving obedience to rules of duty (deontology), and the production of morally good states of affairs (consequences)” (Groothius 64). All three aspects must be taken into consideration to fully understand the approach that Jesus had towards spirituality and life. All these three aspects must be held together in order to do justice to Jesus’ approach.
Groothius emphasized upon several tenets that seem to encapsulate the teachings of Jesus. They may be studied as follows:

I Virtues of the kingdom
a. Jesus says that those who are ‘humble’ and ‘meek’ will inherit the kingdom of God. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble at heart, and you will find rest for your souls”.
b. Jesus also propogated that those who are “persecuted because of righteousness” are blessed (Matthew 5:10) as are those “who mourn”.
c. Jesus preached the importance of virtues of goodness, love and kindness. He was dead against lust and as Roger Scruton observes lust replaces an objectively existing individual to one who is open to “one’s arbitrary mental manipulation” (Groothius 67).

II Divine Duties: Deontology
a. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”. This is the first and the greatest commandment.
b. “Love your neighbor as yourself”.
c. Jesus teaches his disciples that the “revolutionary obligations of love can only be fulfilled through the dependence upon the spiritual power of Jesus himself, who is the true vine “and the source of good ethical and spiritual fruit in his followers”.
d. Jesus endorses heterosexual and monogamous marriage and the blessings of children as God’s “original and normative pattern for the full expression of human sexuality” (Matthew 19: 1-12; Mark 10: 1-16; Genesis). His views on divorce were much stricter than many of his contemporaries.
e. Jesus taught his disciples that collecting material possessions was not the aim of a true Christian. One must store treasures in heaven rather than collecting “corruptible possessions of earth”.
f. Jesus showed concern for the poor. This does not mean that one must give everything to the poor but it shows the willingness to follow Jesus in all that he does.

The state-controlled religion of Gilead, like the patriarchal societies of Israel and the Puritan theocracy of Massachusetts, offers its followers little spiritual solace. Its belief system is a harsh theology based on ‘judgmental father God rather than a
nurturing divinity’ (Stein 60). The state selects the texts which gives it the privilege to authorize its political control, and holds religious rituals. Bibles are kept locked up and are only to be read and interpreted by the Commander. There are computer fed prayer machines but no one really listens to them. All of it really falls on to deaf ears.

Reverend Dr M Stephen in his book Christian Ethics: Issues and Ethics has made a detailed study of Christian Ethics in the Gospels and he comes up with a list of teachings that run through the Gospels. Dr Stephen’s analysis of the Gospels is somewhat similar to the analysis that has been made by Groothius, although Dr Stephen’s evaluation of the Gospels is based on four major premises of the Gospels: love, law, marriage and sex. Rev Dr Stephen talks of these teachings of the Gospel with a special focus on how Jesus wanted them to be implemented in the life of every true Christian.

1. Law and Love- Both Law and Love have a dominant position in the teaching of Jesus. According to George Eldon Ladd, “His Messianic mission and the presence of the kingdom are the fulfillment of the law and prophets” (George Eldon Ladd quoted by Stephen). Jesus rejected the “easy going tradition of the scribes re-affirmed the authority of the Old Testament scripture and drew out the full and exacting implications of God’s moral law.” Jesus stressed on the interior disposition of the law which was more important than the exterior trappings or the mere written word. God’s kingdom had two laws- Love God and love neighbor. According to Ernst Scott, all the commandments are in reality a summary of the two main principles of Christianity – love God and love our fellow-men. (Ernst F. Scott, quoted by Stephen).

2. Sex and marriage Jesus has related marriage to the marriage in the creation story. Jesus held that marriage was an institution for a life time and hence there was really no scope for any kind of dissolution of the same. Jesus regarded women not a sexual creatures but as spiritual creatures. “From the beginning of creation, he created them male and female...and the two are to be one flesh” (Mark 10: 2-9). In extreme cases however a marriage could be dissolved only on the grounds of adultery. In matters of sex the teachings of Jesus are very clear. Jesus preached against sex outside marriage whether practiced by married or unmarried people. Regarding sex and marriage Jesus made three radical statements:
I. The creation of the human race as man and woman is the foundation for the unity of marriage.

II. Marriage unites man and woman so deeply and personally that it cannot be dissolved by the law.

III. A man can be answerable to his own wife as an adulterer.

For Mahatma Gandhi, God was synonymous with the truth. His religion was an application of the principles of truth and the recognition of the supremacy of the truth under all circumstances, no matter however trying they could be. Truth is not only truthfulness in word but truthfulness in thought as well. Gandhi has remarked on the path of truth “I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest. Even if the sacrifice demanded be my very life, I hope I may be prepared to give it….Though this path is strait and narrow and sharp as the razor’s edge, for me it has been the quickest and the easiest” (Gandhi, *The Supreme Power* 53). Gandhi felt that truth was an all encompassing term in which was included Ahimsa, love, knowledge, tenderness, humility, patience and truth. Truth purges us of harshness and adds to our tolerance.

Gandhi also gives us the path on which we have to tread in order to realize the truth. By single minded devotion (*abhyaasa*) and indifference to all other interests in life (*vairagya*) - replies the Bhagvad Gita, one can attain the truth. Wherever there is an honest effort, “it will be realized that what appear to be different truths are like the countless and apparently different leaves of the same tree”. Mahatma Gandhi says that looking for the truth has to involve two things: *tapa which is* self-suffering which could even sometimes lead to death. Note the similarity between what Gandhi preaches and in what Jesus proclaimed that blessed are those who suffer. In fact it was Jesus who gave up his life for the ‘sins’ of others. Gandhi also said that the pursuit of Truth is *Bhakti* which is devotion. It is the path that leads to God. There is no place for cowardice and no place for defeat. It is the “talisman by which death itself becomes the portal to eternal life” (Gandhi, *My Religion* 7).

Similarly Hinduism reveals many similarities with Christianity in as far as morality, virtues, penance and deliverance are concerned. Hinduism as a religion is a “human phenomenon of immense magnitude and is overpowering not only by reason of that, but also owing to its bewildering diversity” (Chaudhuri 66). Hinduism is marked by an inseparability of the secular from the religious. This was argued by Bankim Chandra Chaterjee in his article written in Bengali and translated in English.
With other peoples, religion is only a part of life; there are things religious, and there are things lay and secular. To the Hindu, his whole life was religion. To other peoples, their relations to God and to the spiritual world are things sharply distinguished from their relations to man and the temporal world. To the Hindu, his relations to God and his relations to man, his spiritual life and his temporal life are incapable of being so distinguished. They form one compact and harmonious whole, to separate which into component parts is to break the entire fabric” (Ibid).

V B Kher in his editorial note in the book *The Essence of Hinduism* says that Hinduism is essentially unlike Christianity and Islam in two ways. Firstly it does not believe in any dogma and and rejects the “exclusive claim” of an individual no matter however ‘highly evolved’ to the ‘monopoly’ of Truth. It believes that the Supreme Being maybe approached through several paths such as knowledge (*Dnyana*), Action (*Karma*) and Physical Control (*Yoga*). In fact the path that a seeker chooses, maybe a combination of two or more disciplines depending on mental makeup and attitude.

Gandhi said that Hinduism abhors stagnation. Knowledge is limitless and so is the application of truth. Everyday we add to the powers of Atman, and we shall keep on doing so. New experience will teach us new duties, but truth shall ever be the same. The Vedas represent the infinite truth. However no one can know the ultimate truths that exist in these great treatises. Gandhi says ‘As with Self, so with the Universe’. It is not possible to scan the universe as it is to scan the self. Know the self and you know the universe. But even knowledge of the self presupposes ceaseless striving- not only ceaseless but pure, and pure striving presupposes a pure heart, which in its turn depends on the practice of *Yamas* and *Niyamas* - the cardinal and casual virtues. *Yamas* according to the Yogashastras are *Ahimsa* (non-violence), *Satya* (truth), *Asteya* (Non-stealing), *Brahmacharya* (Celibacy), *Aparigraha* (Non-possession). The *Niyamas* consist of *Shaucha* (Bodily Purity), *Santosha* (Contentment), *Tapas* (Forberance), *Swadhyaya* (Study of scriptures) and *Ishwara Pranidhana* (Gandhi, *Hinduism* 78).

Gandhi too bases his belief in religion in general and Hinduism in particular on similar beliefs. He however uses religion almost as a synonym of morality to be followed in everyday life. Gandhi was once scathingly asked by a correspondent to defend his Hindu position as he did not accept the dictates of Hindu Pandits, or even all the dictums of the Shastras, the Smritis and the Puranas. To this Gandhi replied that he believed in the Vedas, Upanishads, the Puranas and the writings left by holy
reformers. “I reject everything that contradicts the fundamental principles of morality...I am not required to accept the *ipse dixit* or the interpretations of the pundits. Thereafter in very simple terms, Gandhi gave a synopsis of who a real Hindu was:

He is a Hindu who believes in God, immortality of the soul, transmigration, the law of Karma and Moksha, and who tries to practice Truth and Ahimsa in daily life, and therefore practices cow-protection in its widest sense and understands and tries to act according to the law of Varnashrama (Gandhi, *Sarvodaya* 23).

The *Handmaid’s Tale* is labelled ‘feminist dystopian’. It is offered as a prediction of the future if its warnings against oppressive central powers to mute protests are ignored. The narrators’ story is on one level a subversive act because of the time in which she lives. She lives in a dystopian time here there is ‘patriarchal state domination of information’ (LeBihan 15). To hide information or to spread unauthorized material is an act of treason for which punishment is very severe.

There are four levels of time in the novel:

1. The pre-Revolution past, in which are stored memories of Offred’s mother, her school, her daughter and her days with Moira.
2. The period of the Revolution and time after that which includes time spent at the Red Centre.
3. The ‘Gileadean’ time which is interspersed by dream sequences. The events of the present are told as past occurrences actually narrated on a cassette tape.
4. The time of the ‘present’ which is really our future, the time of the Symposium of Gileadean Studies- 25 June 2195.

In Gilead there is a new world order, a new religion, a new (read scathingly cruel) code of conduct for women, and a high premium placed on producing children. The dictatorship established in Gilead puts a harsh gag on sharing of conversation, talking of the past and having sexual desires (read for women only). A woman in Gilead is treated with a dubious duality. Like the biblical epigrams at the beginning of the novel, a woman at Gilead is considered worth her salt if she is able to produce children. Poet Adrienne Rich has written that the body has been made so problematic for women that very often it has appeared to be “easier to shrug it off and travel as a disembodied spirit” (Frueh 578). Art, mythology, literature and religion have constructed popular concepts which have created two interdependent ideas that have
been deeply internalized by women. One notion is that the female body is ‘impure and
dangerous and provokes corruption’. The other notion is that the female body is
‘sacred, nurturing and asexual’ (Ibid). The “Mother- Whore” ideology makes it
difficult for women to be comfortable with their bodies. This is exactly what happens
in Gilead. This dubiety is what plagues Offred but she is not afraid to reconstruct her
life and seek to find all the answers.

There are many instances of Biblical language in the novel and many religious
instructions. Aunt Lydia in the beginning of the novel tells Offred to wait in the
corner for her turn. “They also serve who only stand and wait” (Atwood, The
Handmaid’s Tale 23). Aunt Lydia is caustic when she says that all of them may not be
lucky. Like a preacher she says that some of you will fall on dry ground or thorns.
Some of you are shallow-rooted...Think of yourselves as seeds...(23) A little later
she says “Blessed be the fruit” and this is an accepted greeting at Gilead and the reply
to the greeting is a sarcastic “May the Lord open” (what is to open is easily
understandable). It is worth noting that the word ‘seed’ and ‘fruit’ are emphasized to
mean the reproductive powers of a woman as children are rare and one who has a
child is hailed (at least for just a while). Gilead is a ‘totalitarian theocracy’ and behind
the barrier, at the narrow gate-way there are two men in green uniforms of the
‘Guardians of Faith’ (25). Even their designations are sarcastically religious even
though we later see that they are dumb headed or disabled. A Guardian of Faith could
be promoted as an Angel and then he could be allowed to marry and even have a
Handmaid of his own. In Gilead, clothes are called habits and it appears that all the
women are living in a Spartan nunnery. There is a total effort at implementing a
religious Utopia. Atwood has said that the trouble in real life is that once you
implement a Utopia, you will end up with the ‘Inferno’. You will end up pulling out a
lot of fingernails from the people who do not agree with you (Atwood, What to Write
222).

Gandhi held the place of a woman to be very sacred in society. He believed that
a woman had the characteristics of masculinity as well as femininity which gave her the
unique characteristics of tolerance and strength. Gandhi said that a woman should not
regard herself as dependent, weak or helpless. Gandhi held that married life as well as
motherhood was a religious duty. A woman was naturally endowed with the
capabilities of nurturing a child and hence this became her prime responsibility
(Kaushik 323). But unlike the Gileadian woman, whose sole duty is procreation, the Gandhian woman has more roles besides being a sexual partner and mother.

The meaning of the epigram in the beginning of the book is made fairly clear on page 33 of the novel when a pregnant woman is seen on a walk. She is an object of envy and everyone’s ‘fingers itch to touch her’. “She’s a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She’s a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 33). The Handmaids are like Rachel of the Bible while the pregnant woman is like Bilhah. A woman is an object in Gilead, either a pleasure giving object or a baby producing machine. It is worth noting that even religion seems to sort of endorse the view about a woman’s fertility. Margaret Atwood has said in the article *If You Can’t Say Something Nice* that women are socialized ‘to please, to assuage pain, to give blood till they drop, to conciliate, to be selfless, to be helpful, to be Jesus Christ since men have given up on that role, to be perfect, and that load of baggage is still with us (Galt 20).

It is interesting to note that most blessings given to women in various communities relate to child-bearing. The Indian “*Dudo, nahao, puto, phalo*” or the Biblical “May you have a hundred sons” make women receptacles to carry and bear the seed. Offred makes a telling comment when she says that she avoids looking at her body not because it is shameful and immodest but that she does not want to look at “something that determines me so completely” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 78). Offred is a fictional product of 1970’s feminism, and she finds herself in a situation that is a fictional realization of the backlash against women’s rights that gathered force during the early 1980s (Neuman 858). Offred’s life of daily shopping, of ‘bursts of daring and darkened version of a woman’s customary existence’ is a kind of window through which glimpses of her pre-Gileadean days ‘flicker with the light of paradise’ (Ibid).

There is a church turned museum in Gilead which reminds the Handmaids of the sensibilities of the age. There are paintings of women in long somber dresses with heads covered under white caps and upright men in dark clothes and stern faces (39). Religion seems to have endowed them with a ‘facelessness’ which is never the aim of religion. Followers seem to have been straitjacketed into Spartan and moralistic. The religious life that we seek should not be one of ‘occasional solemnity’ and ‘superstitious prohibitions’ or ‘sad or ascetic’. It must do with rules of conduct and
must be ‘happy with the joy of creation’ in a world of initiative and hope (Russel 141).

The Catholic church achieved during the middle Ages the most ‘organic’ society and the most harmonious inner synthesis of instinct, mind and spirit, that the western world has ever known (Russel 138). However, because of the convention that clergymen are more virtuous than others and the system of endowments the church began to become corrupt. This combination slowly eroded the efficacy of the church. Believers in the traditional religion look to the past for inspiration rather than to the future. They look for inspiration in the teachings of Jesus which are “quite inadequate for many of the social and spiritual issues of modern life” (Ibid). Russel says that there are some things that we will have to change in order to make the Catholic religion a greater life force:

1. Establish a morality of initiative and not a morality of submission
2. A morality of hope rather than a morality of fear.
3. Of things to be done rather than of things to be left undone.

The faith of Christianity is centered in Jesus Christ. The faith of Christianity consists in the affirmation that Jesus Christ has revealed to the world; the final goal awaiting it and that he calls men and women in every generation everywhere to seek to realize it (John et al 21). In the faith of a Christian, God is all sovereign who is eternal, independent and self-existent. He made the world as an expression of his love and he endows it with goodness. It is God who combats evil in the world and guides it along the path of ‘final perfection’. The world is a dynamic entity that has been brought forward by God and it is being led towards a final goal by God. So every faithful Christian is expected to follow the path of righteousness in order to be able to attain salvation (John et al 31).

Gandhi said that a living immovable faith is all that is required for reaching the full spiritual height attainable by human beings. God is not really outside this earthly case of ours. The divine music is ‘incessantly going on inside us’ but it is the loud senses that drown the delicate music,’ which is not like anything we can ever perceive or hear with our senses (Gandhi, My God 7). The universe is an expression of all the love that God has for us and he wishes us to maintain a relation of deep spirituality with him which can transcend the barriers that exist in human life.

Religion is not only pervasive in human societies; it is also very unique to human societies (Curtis 345). In fact in most societies it is a determining factor in social
relations, political choices and economic activities. The sociological perspectives on religion suggest that religious beliefs, rituals, and practices may show ‘symbolic transformations’ of actions and structures from other parts of a society but the economy and the polity of a society could have its foundations in a religious source. The religious composition of Canada can be studied in order to understand the dominant religious groups and the role they play in everyday life in Canada (Ibid).

**THE LARGEST RELIGIOUS IDENTITY CATEGORIES IN THE 1981 CENSUS OF CANADA (1% OR MORE OF THE POPULATION)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Identity</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>46.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Church</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Religious Preference</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek Orthodox</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The religion that dominates Canadian society is the Roman Catholic religion and shades of it can be seen in the novel itself. The language of the Bible, the names of the characters and the teachings in the novel are Biblical, with an air of irony in it. No wonder that the old church has been converted into a museum, like a relic of the past. Similarly the attitude towards women is regressive and a lot of it can be directly seen in versus of the Bible or in the words of great saints. St Thomas pronounced woman to be an “imperfect man”, an “incidental” man. This is also symbolized in Genesis 138.
where Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called “a supernumerary bone” of Adam (Beauvoir 265).

Various aspects of Christianity have been studied by various thinkers in order to understand the intricacies of its dogmas and dictums. These may be studied under the following heads (Davies 2949).

i. Creation- It is God who establishes and creates all things. It is because he wills the universe that it exists. All life possesses a moral dimension and hence good and evil are linked to the law and the commandments of God.

ii. World and Society- The view of the world is in the form of the ‘Promised Land’, the ‘Holy Roman Empire’ which is a promised actual territory to a chosen people. Christianity makes a distinction between God’s people and the Gentiles or the non-Jews.

iii. Humans and animals in nature- In the book of Genesis beasts, cattle, and human beings were created on the sixth day. Humanity is given a clear command to ‘fill the earth, subdue it and to have dominion over these various animal groups’. That is why human beings were created in the image of God.

iv. Scripture worship and nature- God is the supreme creator. He stretches out the heavens, establishes the earth, causes the grass to grow and fills the sea with creatures (Psalm 104). However, Christians are not supposed to worship nature as it amounts to putting created things in the place that really belongs to God.

v. Evolution- The theory of evolution is regarded as antagonistic to Christianity as God is believed to be the Creator of the world. It was in the nineteenth century that the theories of evolution posed a challenge and made Christians think of God differently.

When Nick tries to speak to Offred she does not answer him as they are not supposed to talk. She then recalls a dictum “All flesh is weak” and she puts in a sarcastic rejoinder “They can’t help it...God made them that way but He did not make you that way. He made you different. It’s up to you to set the boundaries. Here a clear distinction is being made between the carnal desires of a man and a woman. A woman has to control the upsurge of carnality while a man is forgiven as he has no ability to control his lust. “The body of a man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of a woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself...Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man” (Beauvoir 265).
Mahatma Gandhi has been emphatic of the role of God and religion in our lives. He says that one who loses himself, finds God. Gandhi has likened a human being to an ‘animal’ and a ‘contemptible worm’. He says that a human being is an animal but he has been endowed with intelligence and the ability to distinguish between good and evil by God. He says that if we use this ability to know God then it will work wonders but if we misuse our talent, and change it into an “instrument of evil” and we become like a ‘scourge’ and a ‘plague’ filing the earth with the evils of bloodshed, unhappiness and misery (Rao 110).

Aunt Lydia is matronly in her approach and she is forever censoring the Handmaids over any overt sexual behavior. When she thinks of the women of the past, Aunt Lydia is filled with a sense of shame. These women were perverted in her mind as they oiled themselves like ‘roast meat on a spit’ and they moved around with bare backs and shoulders and bare legs. She thinks of them in the past and passes a statement which could be seen as sexist when she lays the blame on women for the violations that men would make against them. “…no wonder those things used to happen.’ Things, the word she used when whatever it stood for was too distasteful or filthy or horrible to pass the lips” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 68). Aunt Lydia squarely blames a woman for being seductive with ‘oil’ and ‘no stockings’ but does not chide a man for lascivious behaviour.

Women in Gandhi’s scheme of thought have been suppressed under custom and law for which man has been responsible. She has thus had no hand in the shaping of her own personality. He said that wives should not consider themselves to be slaves or dolls in the hand of a man. In fact during the Freedom struggle in India, Gandhi called on the service of women as ‘honoured comrades in common service’(Gandhi, *Constructive Programme* 17). He said that a good liberal education was the most important gift that could be given to a woman in order to emancipate her from the throes of ignorance and illiteracy.

Similarly, when Offred goes to get a checkup by the Doctor he says that the old men around could not make her pregnant or maybe they are sterile. Offred is scared to hear the word and she says to herself that “there is nothing like a sterile man anymore….There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (75). The bias against women is a matter of faith and a matter of law in the land of Gilead. As the doctor examines her (read hands sliding up her leg, fingerling her breasts and telling her that she’s soft), he suddenly makes an offer to make her
pregnant. Offred says that she is keen to have a baby and the epigram at the opening of the novel is repeated. “Give me children, or else I die” (ibid). Even though she refuses the doctor’s offer, the extreme interpretation of a Biblical quotation is used to show the levels of desperation as far as matters of the female reproductive system are concerned.

Offred says that she is a ‘national resource’ now and she can never fade into another landscape. The ceremony of cleansing herself and getting ready for the big moment is interesting. She scrubs herself clean and she wishes to be really clean, “without bacteria, like the surface of the moon”. She knows that after sex she will not be allowed to wash herself as it was a risk, too risky to take (80). Her cleansing and cleaning is almost religious in its feel. She is like the proverbial, sacrificial virgin, being sacrificed to please the Gods. Offred says that she feels like a ‘prize pig’ in the whole ceremony. After the sex is over she keeps checking for blood every month, for when it comes, it is a sign of failure. There is a total preoccupation for women in matters of reproduction and its related concerns.

Our understanding of the psychology of women has undergone a lot of change in the past twenty years. Instead of describing women as what they are or what they should be, psychologists are attempting to describe and understand ‘diversity and commonality of experience’ of women that affect their development (Burt 265). Women share the experience of being female in male-dominated societies, but their experiences are also determined by the ‘complex environments’ within which they live in as women. In Gilead however there is a norm at straitjacketing women as sexual beings whose sole aim is to reproduce. In this whole exercise, Gilead heavily depends on the interpretation of Biblical versus. Religion is used to ‘terrorize the neighbourhood’ (Jackson Thriller).

The Commander is the head of the house. In this totalitarian theocracy, the Commander is like a typical male patriarch whose word is an injunction. He is the head of the house-hold. “The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part. The hold of a ship. Hollow” (99). It is easy to note the irony that exists in the last sentence. The marriage vow is being poked fun at when it is used to describe the relationship that the Commander has with the household. The immediately following sentence exemplifies the relationship, by calling it a hollow hold, as hollow as the hold of a ship. The biological division of power in The Handmaids Tale is not only according to gender but also according to fertility. ‘Gender ambiguity,
bisexuality or plurality of sexuality are impossibilities in Gilead’ (Le Bihan 102). The signposts are on the genitalia. The narrator is determined in her effort to ‘undermine the division into the two gendered posts which keeps her attached to the subordinate half of the binary’ (Ibid)

The republic of Gilead is a theocratic regime that is based on the principle of violence. Silence is the most preferred rule and an outspoken person like Moira or Offred can face nothing less than being driven out into polluted colonies or execution. There is a dubiety here as religion and violence have no meeting point. For Gandhi dharma or religion was synonymous with truth and Ahimsa or non-violence. Gandhi said that Ahimsa is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction that has been invented by the ingenuity of man. The first requirement of non-violence is justice all around society. A votary of Ahimsa cannot subscribe to the utilitarian formula of the greatest good of the greatest number of people. He will work hard for the greatest good of all and he will also be ready to die in the pursuit of the goal (Gandhi, All Men 116). What is important is the fact that Gandhi was vocal about the misuse or abuse of institutionalized, dogmatic religion- professing only one truth and one God. That’s why, Gandhi used the more open-ended, more spiritually –loaded word “dharma” and “satya” to characterize his idea of “religion”.

The Commander once comes into the room of the Handmaids and very ceremoniously takes out a Bible which has been kept away from the gaze of the maids. It is black in colour with gold-edged pages. He reads out from the Bible versus that hinge around reproduction and fertility. Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth. Then came the story of Rachel and Leah which had already been drummed into their heads at the Red Center. Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed be the meek. Blessed be those that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Then there is another one which is added and that is: Blessed are the silent. Offred knows that this one has been made up in order to keep them under the order of subjugation. Religion is used in a manner in Gilead that undermines the very functions that it is truly meant to perform. Religion is used in order to popularize a cruel dictatorship based on violation of the rights of women and a misinterpretation of the true spirit of religion. All the beatitudes are only a means of proliferating timidity, weakness and silence in Gilead so that the Commander and his regime could function in the most undemocratic manner possible. It is noteworthy that
The beatitudes are meant only for observance by women so that they could turn out to be even more invisible and faceless, yet providing sexual pleasure and doling reproductive largesse.

The Commander reads to the maids from the Bible, the story of Leah. “And Leah said, God hath given me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband”. Thereafter there is an austere religious ceremony in which both Offred and Serena Joy are cleansed and dressed and laid on one bed so that the Commander could make love to both of them at the same time. It is as if Leah is giving her maid to her husband and he makes love to her for the sake of having a child. The entire thing is disgusting to Offred. She says that she has no term to describe the activity, she cannot call it love making or copulating or rape. It is beyond her comprehension. She sarcastically says “But isn’t this everyone’s wet dream, two women at once?... Exciting, they used to say (116). Under the garb of religion and the Bible, exploitation of innocent handmaids takes place unabated at Gilead.

Gandhi was greatly influenced by the teachings of all the religions of the world and thus Christianity came under his ambit of study. When he had seen the picture of Jesus on the cross in Rome, he could not help but acknowledge the supreme sacrifice of Jesus to the world. He said that nations like individuals can be made through the agony of the cross. He remarked that “Joy comes not out of infliction of pain on others but out of pain voluntarily borne by oneself” (Gandhi, My Religion 25). Gandhi said that true religion was faith based on the broadest possible toleration. He refused to accept a man for his fanatical deeds.

Offred feels stifled in Gilead and she secretly remembers Luke and her family. She is like a stone in a republic where rules are made for women to follow without any regard for their sentiments. She admires Moira who was bold enough to try and run away. She realizes that no one ever dies because of the lack of sex, but people can die due to the lack of love. She pines for Luke because in the Republic of Gilead, there is only sex, forcibly thrust on you and no scope of love at all. She realizes that she has no hope at all and compares herself to a room that is unused. “I am like a room where things once happened and now nothing does, except the pollen of the weeds that grow up outside the window, blowing in a dust across the floor (128).

Aunt Lydia tells Offred that men are just sex machines. They only want sex all the time and a woman has to learn to be able to manipulate them for her own good. “Lead them around by the nose; that is the metaphor. It’s nature’s way. It’s God’s
device. It’s the way things are. Aunt Lydia attributes a man’s desire for sex all the time to God’s device. Does it mean that God made men lusty so that they could keep making women pregnant or so that women could manipulate them all the time?” (180). Similarly, Offred’s mother is of the view that a man was worth only ‘ten seconds’ worth of half babies. She said that she was capable of looking after her own children single handedly. (151). Christianity preaches that Christians should see their own bodies as a ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’. What happens at Gilead is an antithesis of what is preached in The Holy Bible.

There is an interesting instance of a store in Gilead known as the Soul Scrolls. It is a franchise and there are Soul Scrolls in every city center and every suburb. It is a profit making enterprise and it is based on the selling of prayers. The windows of the Soul Scrolls are shatterproof. Behind it are printout machines known as Holy Rollers. The machines print prayers endlessly. There are five different prayers: for health, wealth, a death, a birth, a sin. You have to pick the one you want, punch in your number so your account will be debited and then punch in the number of times you want the prayer repeated. Religion is being used to proliferate commercial activities. Prayers are a part of business and the activity is highly profitable. The prayers also include prayers for death and a sin. Even the prayers are laced with mercenary intentions. Offred and Ofglen find all this very funny. It is even funnier to note that the Soul Scrolls store has been set up in a shop that earlier sold lingerie—‘coloured pantyhose, brassiers with lace, silk scarves. Something lost’.

Gandhi was a staunch opponent of crass materialism. I quote from an article that Gandhi wrote on the “Inadequacy of Materialism” in the Natal Advertiser on February 1, 1895.

Nothing that the modern civilization can offer in the way of stability can never make any more certain that which is inherently uncertain; that, when we come to think of it, the boast about the wonderful discoveries and the marvellous inventions of science, good as they undoubtedly are in themselves, is, after all, an empty boast. They offer nothing substantial to the struggling humanity, and the only consolation that one can derive from such visitations has to come from a firm faith not in the theory, but in the fact of the existence of a future life and a real Godhead (Iyer 85-86). Offred and Ofglen wonder if the prayers in the Soul Scrolls are ever heard. They both know in their hearts that God is a non-entity but they dare not speak about it. They know that it will amount to, ‘subversion, sedition, blasphemy, heresy, all rolled into
one’ (210) even though they say no together. Similarly Offred prays so hard when the Commander was about to make love with her even though she did not know the meaning of the prayer—*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. She later comes to know that the Latin translation of the prayer was ‘Don’t let the bastards grind you down’. She then realizes that it was a very appropriate prayer at the time.

The handmaids at Gilead are taught to pray in very severe positions and with synchronized movements. She wanted that the aesthetics of the praying position be maintained, rather than the sanctity of the prayers themselves. She wanted their heads bowed just right, their toes pointed together and pointed, their elbows at the proper angle. She wished them to look like “something Anglo-Saxon, carved on a tomb; or Christmas card Angles, regimented in our robes of purity” (243). The lines are a mockery of prayer and how prayer has been made a ritual empty of any spirituality on several occasions. What they pray for is emptiness, so that they would be worthy to be filled with ‘grace’, ‘love’, ‘self-denial’, ‘semen’ and ‘babies’ (243). The Christian values of love, grace and self-denial are actually mocked at because in Gilead the Handmaids are empty and can never be expected to be filled with virtues. Another painful thing in Gilead is the lack of democracy. Democracy is a mixture of majority rule and minority right, and the minority which most clearly has the right is the minority of those who try to resist a passive response, and in the bargain risk the resentment of those who regard them as trying to be undemocratically superior (Fry 28-29). In Gilead there is no scope of any democratic principles to flourish and in this dictatorship; the voice of the powerful is the only voice that is heard.

Democracy was the dream that Gandhi saw for not only for a colonially battered India but also for the entire world. True democracy or the dream of Swaraj was Gandhi’s conception of how power had to be devolved in a welfare state and how resources would be allocated to people living in a welfare state. Gandhi begins by saying that his nation of democracy is that under it the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest and that can never happen in the absence of non-violence. The true source of rights is duty. If we all discharge our duties, right will not be far to seek. To Gandhi political power was not an end but a means of enabling a people to improve their condition in every department of life. Hence the classical statement that “that government is best which governs the least” (Gandhi, *All Men* 178). Gandhi said that true democracy can only be an outcome of non-violence. The structure of a world
federation can only be raised on the foundation of non-violence and violence will have to be totally be given up in world affairs.

Offred enlists her prayers which are worth notice:

1. Oh God, King of the Universe, thankyou for not creating me a man.
2. Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled.
3. My God. Who Art in The Kingdom of Heaven, which is within.
4. I wish you could tell me Your Name, the real one I mean. But You will do as well as anything.
5. I wish I knew what You were up to. But whatever it is, help me to get through it, please. Though maybe it’s not Your doing; I don’t believe for an instant that what’s going on out there is what You meant.
6. I have enough daily bread, so I won’t waste time on that.
7. Now we come to forgiveness. Don’t worry about forgiving me right now. Keep the others safe. Don’t let them suffer too much. If they have to die, let it be fast. Provide a heaven for them. Hell we can make for ourselves.
8. Deliver us from evil.
9. Then there’s Kingdom, power and glory. It takes a lot to believe in those right now.

If I were you, I’d really be sick of it. Offred then says at the end of all her supplications that her existence is no joke and she cannot go on living in such a manner in the Republic of Gilead. From the prayers that Offred makes to God, one is able to decipher that she has a relationship of love with God. She presents before him the predicament of her existence and asks to be delivered from the empty existence that she is going on with.

A little later the Handmaids go to the Prayvaganza to show how obedient and pious they all are. The Prayvaganza is a place where religious ceremonies take place in full view of the Gileadean public. When they are taken to the Prayvaganza this time they are to pray and be witnessed by Wives and Daughters of high-ranking officials, the Marthas and the Econowives. At the Prayvaganza, there is a board that reads: God is a National Resource. The Prayvaganza, interestingly, for women is for prayer and group weddings, as women have to conform to the codes that have been set aside for them to follow. The men also attend Prayvaganzas but they are to celebrate military victories. There is a clear demarcation between what a woman has to do and what a
man has to do, roughly based on the spiritual and the materialistically respectively. They have to pray and fall in line in obedience and piety. Religious observances too are enforced very strictly and two Guardians with a submachine gun each is on the lookout for “whatever dangerous or subversive acts” they think the Handmaids may commit (267). God has been commercialized and we see that He is treated as a National Resource. Any property of the physical environment, such as minerals, or natural vegetation, which humans can use to satisfy their needs, is a natural resource. Technically speaking, a property only becomes a resource when it is exploited by humans; by this definition, climate may be considered as a natural resource, especially for countries dependent on tourism. Natural resources may be classified as renewable and non-renewable.

A resource maybe defined as a thing that is available naturally in the environment and can have many uses. A resource is meant to be used, but not indiscriminately and if used wisely a resource can add to the wealth of a country and to the people that benefit from it. God really cannot be compared to a resource but in Gilead God has such a status. He is meant to be used and misused as the situation would demand.

Gandhi believed that resources have to allocated and distributed equally in order that all may enjoy the fruits of a real democracy. This doctrine he called Trusteeship. It is based on the principle of equitable distribution of wealth. A rich man will have to be expected to use out of his wealth what he requires and then he will act as a trustee for the remainder to be used for the society. Honesty and non-violence are a part of the concept of Trusteeship. The rich actually cannot collect a lot of money without the cooperation of the poor. If the poor man understands this principle he can rise in his strength and even overthrow the rich man. But things should never come to such a pass as non-violence is the creed that has to be followed in the equitable distribution of wealth among all, masses and classes (Gandhi, Village Swaraj 38).

Jesus preached worship of the Lord and stressed on the importance of his relationship with God. He said that this faith was more important than any sacred Temple. In fact when he saw God’s Temple being misused by money lenders, he did not hesitate to say “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19-21 Davies).

Along with strict (and shallow) prayers at Gilead, there is a conspicuous presence of class distinction here. Every religion seeks to demystify and destroy these distinctions but it is exactly the opposite that happens in the Republic of Gilead. There
is a clear demarcation of status between the Commander, the Handmaids, the Commander’s wife, the Marthas, the Econowives and the Guardians. There is also a marked difference in status between women who have borne children and women who are barren. Janine who has consecutively lost two children is looked down upon and blamed for the unfortunate incident. In fact even she feels responsible for the incident and brands herself as ‘sinful’. Religion is helping to proliferate stereotypes and widen the chasm between the more fortunate and the less fortunate in the kingdom of Gilead.

On the day of the thanksgiving, the Commander makes a long speech and says that it is a day of praise. The marriage ceremony of twenty angels takes place and it is a highly sanctimonious ceremony. There is another ceremony that takes place, that of a conversion. When a nun recants she is made to give up her celibacy and “sacrifice it for the common good” (276). Such ceremonies are grand affairs where converts kneel before the Commander who prays and then takes off their red veils. They are however not elevated to the position of a wife as they are considered dangerous for positions of power. There is ‘an odor of witch bout them’. A convert is generally trapped between what she was and what she has now become, never being able to enjoy the fruit of either world.

The thanksgiving ceremony then includes many prayers by the Commander all for woman and her moral progression. All the prayers are regressive and put a noose on the necks of women who are burdened with being morally policed (276-77).

1. “I will that women adorn themselves in modest apparel...with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls or costly array”
2. “But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works”.
3. “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression”.
4. “Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing, if they continue in faith”.
5. “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjugation”.
6. And charity and holiness and sobriety”.
All the rules of sobriety and piousness are to be followed by women. Women are to be dressed simply and carry on them looks of modesty without any make-up, hairdos or jewellery. The only thing good that a woman should have is her ‘good deeds’. The Commander clearly gives stringent injunctions to women about how they should austerely remain within their boundaries, without trying to influence or teach a man and never try to ‘usurp’ his position. A woman in Gilead was only supposed to remain in silence. The Commander then makes the Biblical reference putting Adam at the top of the Creation story and blaming Eve for the transgression which led to their being turned out from the Garden of Eden. A woman can be saved if she bears children and that is the only hope that women have at the Republic of Gilead.

In the Republic of Gilead sexual coercion is a means of social control. In uncovering the systematic nature of sexual coercion feminists have shown that sexual intimidation is ‘integral to maintenance of dominance’ (Wilson 131). Everyday occurrences of sexual harassment, obscene phone calls, sexual humour and plays on violence all remind women that they are at risk because they are female. One in four Canadian women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime and half of the 143 homicides in Canada were of women killed by their husbands (Mukherjee 155).

It is interesting to note that in matters of sex, male and female differences are very marked. Men more frequently endorse items dealing with ‘pornography, orgies, voyeurism, prostitution, impersonal sex, promiscuity, pre and extra marital sex, sexual excitement and other indications of libido’ (Eyesenck 222). Women are more prudish and display more guilt. Similarly while sexual performance declines with age in both men and women, libido actually increases in men, while it decreases in women; thus ‘libido in women parallels the decline in sexual performance, but goes counter to it in men (Ibid).

Gandhi said that dharma (for which he, at times, used the word religion) can never be used as a means to intimidate and coerce. The functions of religion have far more depths than even the holy books may contain. Religion is a means of attaining spiritual connection with the Maker and spiritual contentment with the Self. Gilead is a republic where the meaning of religion has been distorted by those in whose hands power has been vested. It is used as a means to coerce and intimidate in the name of prayers and religious ceremony. The swaraj that Gandhi dreamed of was one in which no religion was superior to the other and Truth and Ahimsa formed the bedrock of Gandhi’s spiritual and cultural swaraj. Swaraj had to be based on the principle of
democracy and Trusteeship which could never happen without non-violence. The path of Truth was a difficult path rife with challenges but the test of true religion was a life of truth (satya) and non-violence (ahimsa).