

CHAPTER - III
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Dickinson's alienated consciousness that informs her poetry to a significant extent seems to have its primary source in her religious scepticism. Her letters and poems abundantly testify to her life-long defiance of orthodox religious traditions of her contemporary society. She had no doubt profound "puritan traits" in her character as Sewall observed (The Life of Emily Dickinson Vol. I:19). Her personal life and poetic career, however, represent a sustained rebellion against the religious inheritance of puritanism. In her own words, she did not respect "doctrines" (Sewall, Life, Vol.:19), and "sermons on unbelief" always attracted her (Letters Vol.I :311). Her irreverent attitude to traditional faith also comes out clearly in her cynical remark on a religious sermon she attended at Amherst: "While the Clergyman tells Father and Vinnie that 'this corruptible shall put on Incorruption' - it has already done so and they go defrauded" (Letters Vol.II:508). Deeply religious in her own personal way, yet, always far from the ways of orthodoxy, she could not accept with unquestioning certainty that all cosmic questions have been solved by official theology. It was hard for her to "feel at home" in a "life that stopped guessing" (Letters Vol.II : 632). Committed to the truth of her personal experience, Dickinson felt acutely the conflict between her experiential truth and her inherited religious creed. For her, they were strong incompatibles. To her sceptical intelligence, "New Testament is myth"; "Jesus is not God but man". And "Eden is a legend dimly told" (qtd.in Gelpi 48). This conflict between existential experience on the one hand and conventional piety on the other produces the difference in her religious poetry.

At the outset, contextualisation of Dickinson's religious position is necessary for a proper assessment of the magnitude of her lonely resistance against conventional faith and of the impact of this struggle on her poetry. The New Englanders were mostly followers of the Calvinistic variety of Protestantism.

The central tenet of Calvinism is the absolute sovereignty of God in both nature and spirit. It also implies that creation is a revelation of the essential attributes of God. According to Calvin, mankind could infer the existence of God through reason, but the nature of the divinity or His intention is beyond human understanding. Absolute dependence on the will of God is the basic tenet of Calvinism. A true Christian must have absolute faith in the holy scriptures.

Lives of Dickinson's contemporary New Englanders were governed by this basic Calvinist theology. Amherst, Dickinson's native place, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff remarks in her study on Dickinson (1986), was almost primitive without having hardly any civic or life-sustaining facilities. Death was a painful reality in every house. As a result, Amherst was a stronghold of old-fashioned faith. The hope of some future heaven balanced against the haunting fear of death. The influence of the Bible upon the life of the community was many dimensional and profound. In fact, the Bible's promise of the resurrection was the only remedy for the brutal reality of death. Experience of conversion was also a dominating reality in the religious lives of the New-Englanders. Absolute faith in Christ and complete self-surrender to God were the most vital aspects of the conversion experience. A converted person receives grace and assurance through complete submission to God's will. The higher power of God takes possession of the person and renovates the soul after the surrender of the personal will. William James in his perceptive study, Varities of Religious Experience (1960), profusely quotes from the experience of the converted persons to illustrate how the converted persons felt a sense of joy after their conversion. Obviously, promise of a lasting peace and of a sense of security was a great attraction to a people plagued by dread of death. Fascination for the conversion experience was particularly strong for women. This was perhaps mostly due to women's close association with the spectacle of death, sickness and suffering. Cynthia Griffin Wolff reasons that there was another psychological reason for this importance of conversion to women. It was particularly significant to women as a sign of maturity :

Since secular professions were closed to the women of Dickinson's world, a public declaration of faith was the only thing that endowed a woman with a socially acknowledged adult identity that was independent of both father and husband. (Emily Dickinson 96)

Flood of conversion swept Dickinson's contemporary world from the 1830s to the opening of the war of Independence. All the members of her family and close friends also gradually surrendered to traditional religious doctrine one after another. Only Dickinson could not submit herself to faith. She had too independent a nature to relinquish her autonomy even to God. Resisting all pressure and persuasion, she clung to her independence and the inviolate integrity of an isolated self.

Dickinson resisted the dogmatic atmosphere of her early school days at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Seminary with the same unbending determination. Amherst Academy provided her with the most sophisticated learning of the time: "we have a very fine school ... I have four studies. They are Mental Philosophy, Geology, Latin and Botany ... I don't believe you have such big studies" (Letters Vol. I:13). However, academic curricula always reinforced religious teaching. From Wolff's extensive study on the subject in Dickinson (1968), we get to know that at the Academy William Paley's Natural Theology (1802) was taught to exhibit the proof of God as a rational, purposive maker of the natural world. Edward Hitchcock, who was a distinguished professor of Philosophy at Amherst during Dickinson's time, was able to adjust the scientific to the religious truths articulated in the Bible. Hitchcock argued :

Mathematics forms the framework of nature's harmonies... chemistry abounds with the most beautiful exhibitions of the divine wisdom and benevolence. The wide dominions of natural history embracing Zoology, Botany and Mineralogy, the theologian has found, crowded with demonstration of

divine existence and of God's providential care and government. (qtd. in Wolff 79)

Apart from this intensive theological education, Prof. Hitchcock used to have evening prayer sessions twice a week in his house. Influence of his fervent preaching converted numerous students of the Academy. Dickinson's letters tell us that she stayed away from revival meetings as she was afraid to trust her easily excitable nature. She writes about this trait of her character to one of her friends : "Perhaps you will not believe dear A. But I attended none of the meetings last winter. I felt that I was so easily excited that I might be deceived and I dared not trust myself" (Letters Vol. I:27-28). This yearning for truth and authenticity of experience marks her out from others. Ruthlessness of death carrying often friends and dear ones was a fearful puzzle to her also, as she confesses to Abiah Root : "I cannot realize that the friends I have seen pass from my sight ... will not again walk the streets and act their parts in the great drama of life, ..." (Letters Vol.I :28). Belief in immortality holding delightful promise of eternal existence and of reunion with the departed was alluring for her also. But to submit reason to faith confronted with the very essence of her being. Surrender of her independent self even to God's will was, as wolff observes, "an intolerable nightmare" for Dickinson. "Better to keep one's 'I' intact even if the promise of Paradise must be rejected" (Wolff 98).

With the same unbending determination, Dickinson also resisted the oppressive religious atmosphere of the Mount Holyoke seminary. Religious teaching was the guiding force of this school also. Mary Lyon, the principal of the school, herself a devout person, almost pressurized the students to be deeply religious. At Holyoke, Dickinson attended numerous meetings in which Mary Lyon preached against sin and evil of the hard-hearted men. Emily Lavinia Norcross, her cousin and room-mate at the seminary, writes about Dickinson's rebellious state in a family letter: "Emily Dickinson appears no different. I hoped I might have good news to write with regard to her" (Leyda Vol.I:135). Dickinson

herself writes to her friend Abiah Root: "There is a great deal of religious interest here and many are flocking to the ark of safety". (Letters Vol.I : 60). This stubborn resistance — "I have not yet given up to the claims of Christ" (Letters Vol.I : 60) — led to her estrangement from the believing community around her. She was unable to own the feelings that did not well up from personal experience.

However, her religious non-conformism did not come easily. External pressures were no doubt overcome by strong determination. But she had to fight hard with her own conflicting emotions, anguish and consequent psychic loneliness. Her letters to her friends during this period vividly record her longing to gain peace that an assured belief offers and her sense of misery at her intellectual inability to repose perfect confidence in God and His promises. The last letter she writes to Abiah Root well-articulates this feeling: "I am not happy and I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian ... my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world" (Letters Vol. I:67). To Jane Humphrey also she admits to this sense of misery and loneliness : "How lonely this world is growing ... Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him and I am standing alone in rebellion ..." (Letters Vol. I :94). Here are excerpts from two other letters revealing her conflicting emotions:

There is an aching void in my heart which I am convinced the world can never fill. I continually hear Christ saying to me 'Daughter, give me thine heart'. (Letters Vol. I : 27)

To Abiah Root again "... yet I know not why, I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affection. I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, ..." (Letters Vol. I:38). In another, she considers herself "one of the lingering bad ones" and continues sadly in the same letter, "I slink away, and pause, and ponder, and ponder, and pause, ... and do work without knowing why — not surely for this brief world, and more sure it is not for Heaven"

(Letters Vol.I :98). However, she was convinced that unquestioning orthodox beliefs were unacceptable to her inquiring mind though anxiety and doubt about her spiritual inadequacy as recorded in many of her letters pained her. However, she gradually overcame her hesitations and irresolution and gained the confidence to rely on her own experiences and on her emerging sense of vocation. Letters to her friends, Jane Humphrey and Abiah Root in April and May 1850 respectively, obliquely refer to her newly acquired confidence. She writes to Jane: "I have dared to do strange things – bold things ... and I have heeded beautiful tempters, yet do not think I am wrong" (Letters Vol. I:95). To Abiah Root she talks about how "I have been dreaming, dreaming a golden dream, with eyes all the while wide open, ..." (Letters Vol.I :99). With this emerging sense of an alternative religion other than the conventional one she resisted all persuasion to follow the common path and preferred even social and spiritual estrangement from the people closest to her in order to be true to her own self. Many of her early letters record this growing sense of isolation from her once-intimate friends : "We take different views of life, our thoughts would not dwell together as they used to when we were young – how long ago that seems !" (Letters Vol. I:104). The letter to Abiah Root also demonstrates the attraction and the fear that stormed her mind and her final decision to follow her "golden dream":

... You are growing wiser than I am, and nipping in the bud fancies which I let blossom — perchance to bear no fruit, or if plucked, I may find it bitter. The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea-I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger ! (Letters Vol.I :104)

Ultimately, she emerged as a poet who is unable to accept any specific creed.

Though Dickinson was almost a rebel against traditional faith, religion forms a major part of her poetry. She wrote poem after poem on death, God

and immortality, and treated these subjects in a remarkably different way from their treatment in the long tradition of devotional poetry. Devotional poets beginning with the Psalmists usually sing the glory of God and willingly submit to the sovereign will of God despite occasional complaints or grievances. The Psalmists celebrated God's creation and urged submission to His rule : 'Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands : Sing forth the honour of his name : make his praise glorious" (Psalms 66:1-2). In his great epic, Milton set out to justify the ways of God to men. For Dante too, experience conformed to the religious truth he learnt from his teachers. True to his Christian tradition, George Herbert also regarded praise of God as man's chief function. Lines from his poem "Providence" show this clearly :

Of all the creatures both in sea and land,
 Onely to man Thou hast made known Thy wayes,
 And put the penne alone into his hand,
 And made him secretarie of Thy praise.

(The Works of George Herbert 107)

Herbert's power as a poet lies in his complete adherence to Christian faith. Commenting on this profoundly devotional character of Herbert's poetry, Coleridge observes that to appreciate Herbert "It is not enough that the reader possesses a cultivated judgement, classical taste, even poetic sensibility, unless he is likewise a Christian" (Raysor 242). Herbert's poem "The Elixir" provides sufficient testimony to the truth of Coleridge's observation :

Teach me my God and King,
 In all things Thee to see,
 And what I do in anything,
 To do it as for Thee. ("The Elixir", stanza 1)

Even when there is complaint or grievance against God, surrender to the divine will is the final gesture. For instance, his poem "Denial" begins complaining against God's heedless ears :

When my devotion could not pierce
 Thy silent ears;
 Then was my heart broken, as was my verse;
 My breast was full of fears
 And disorder.

(The New Oxford Book of English Verse 256)

The poet prays to God "night and day" but "no hearing". Yet the final stanza is one of complete unquestioning submission, in spite of the reproach to the God who gives man power to pray but seems deaf to his prayer :

O cheer and tune my heartless breast,
 Defer no time ;
 That so thy favours granting my request,
 They and my mind may chime,
 And mend my rhyme.

(Ibid 256)

Donne's poems too, notwithstanding their complexity and intensely personal stance, meditate on sin, death, judgement, salvation and resurrection from a purely religious perspective. With his Christian faith in life-eternal, Donne conquers the fear of death :

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
 Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
 For those, whom thou thinks't, thou dost overthrow
 Die not, poor Death, nor yet cans't thou Kill me.

 One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
 And death shall be no more, Death, thou shalt die.

(Ibid 197)

Hopkins's rebellion against God as it appears in "Thou art indeed just, Lord" also transforms itself into prayer ultimately: "Mine, O thou Lord of Life, send my roots rain" (Ibid 790).

Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet who preceded Dickinson in her native American scene too demonstrate this usual pattern of devotional poetry. Both were devout Christians professing total dependence on God. Taylor's best-known poem "Huswifery" illustrates this complete submission to God:

Make me, O Lord, Thy spinning wheel complete,
 Thy holy word my distaff make for me,
 Make mine affections Thy swift flyers neat,
 And make my soul Thy holy spool to be

.
 (McMichael, Anthology of American Literature 176)

With Dickinson, this usual scenario of religious poetry changes significantly. Religious questions engaged her mind profoundly throughout her life. However, her poetry is far from devotional or religious in the traditional sense. She is not a devotee but a rebel. Poem after poem explores the traditional beliefs sometimes with irony and sometimes with the despair and anguish of a soul torn between a desire for certainty and the pressure of a sceptical intelligence. Religious vision in her poems stands in sharp contrast to the humility and acceptance that characterize much of traditional religious poetry. She could not "temper her insight", as Wolff argues, "to accept the traditional mode". Wolff observes: "How can" Dickinson "justify the wayes of God to men' or sing forth the 'honor' of God's name when His signs are deceits and His promises are belied by unending spectacles of death?" (Wolff 156). "Faith" seemed to her critical mind an "invention" while "Microscopes are prudent / In an Emergency" (185). Her attitude to the Bible also deserves attention in this context. The Bible was her best-known text. Yet Dickinson never regarded it with traditional reverence

as a repository of eternal truth. It served her, as Cristanne Miller aptly argues, as “a lexicon” (Miller 131). The compact and terse language of the Bible served her well as an ideal stylistic model. Miller proves with profuse illustrations how Dickinson’s unusual stylistic features show close parallels with the Bible’s syntactic and lexical features. However, Dickinson can ignore all conventional religious notions and dares to write that “The Bible was an antique Volume / written by faded Men/ At the suggestion of Holy spectres - ” (1545). For her, it is a “Tale”: capitalisation only serves to emphasize her rebellion against the received ideas. It is a story of “Eden”, “Satan”, “David” and of boys who “believe” and other “Boys” who are “lost”. This rebellious stance culminates in the final lines with its slant criticism of a cold and stern God who fails to be a sweet and fascinating “Teller” as Orpheus was :

Had but the Tale a warbling Teller –
 All the boys would come –
 Orpheus' Sermon captivated –
 It did not condemn – (1545)

Her difference from the conventionally religious is expressed here in no uncertain terms.

Dickinson's poems dealing with religious ideas may be divided into three distinct groups : poems dealing with death, poems on heaven and God and poems about immortality. It is true that her poems on death do not always show explicit religious questioning. But the subtle play of irony and scepticism in her best death poems shatters all orthodox consolations about death as a gateway to heaven and immortality. “Because I could not stop for Death” (712), for instance, begins almost romantically with the poet’s journey with Death as a kind, almost a romantic suitor, offering a ride. The first two lines deftly conceal the terror of death as the poem begins :

Because I could not stop for Death –
 He kindly stopped for me –

The fifth stanza, however, shatters the illusion of a romantic journey narrated in the earlier stanzas :

We paused before a House that seemed
 A Swelling of the Ground –
 The Roof was scarcely visible –
 The Cornice - in the Ground –

At the end of the journey there is only a cold tomb - "A Swelling of the Ground". The poet sees nothing beyond the darkness of death. There is not even the slightest hint of immortality or any heavenly association. Rather, the description of the living and dynamic earth, when viewed from the perspective of the cold tomb in the last stanza, imparts a kind of quiet pathos in the scene described :

We passed the School, where Children strove
 At Recess in the Ring –
 We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
 We passed the Setting Sun –

Affection for the vitality of this earthly life rather than any yearning for a heavenly after-life is implicitly suggested through the lines. The "School" where "Children" play "at Recess in the Ring", "the fields of Gazing Grain" and finally "the Setting Sun"-all the commonplaces of earthly life seem to be far more attractive than the journey with a supposed romantic suitor. Two other remarkable poems – "I heard a Fly buzz-when I died" (465) and "Safe in their Alabaster Chamber" (216) also deny belief in immortality and negate all orthodox consolations for death (discussed in detail in the fourth chapter). The negation of the Christian notions about death also underlies the description of a dying person in no. 547. The poet watches the dying eye to find out the flicker of any divine light. But the persona dies without disclosing any such thing :

I've seen a Dying Eye
 Run round and round a Room –

In search of Something – as it seemed

.....
 And then - be soldered down

Without disclosing what it be

'T were blessed to have seen - (547)

Owing to this absence of the consolatory Christian faith, Dickinson sees death only as a dark, unfathomable mystery. Death is to her also loss of human power and energy. Death is lifelessness as opposed to life, which, in her vision, is synonymous with power: "To be alive-is Power" (677). The stillness after the death of a busy housewife in "How many times these low feet staggered" (187) emphasizes this sense of waste. The lady is no longer there. So

Buzz the dull flies-on the Chamber window -

Brave-shines the sun through the freckled pane-

Fearless-the cobweb swings from the ceiling -

Indolent Housewife - in Daisies - Lain! (187)

Simple domestic details never to be taken up by the dead housewife speak of death that destroys life and activity.

So no romantic wishfulness and no religious belief in immortality, but a despairing sense of mystery is the dominating perspective on death in her poetry. And what emerges finally from her death poems is a fond love for the earthly existence of human beings. This vision of death is something very unique against the vision of death in contemporary poetry marked either by romantic or by Christian perspective.

Negation and doubt dominate Dickinson's poems on heaven also. In a number of these poems she offers conventional picture of heaven with a quiet irony that negates the apparently innocent descriptions. Besides, her notion of heaven as visualised in some of the poems also sharply rejects the idealized version of heaven in the popular consolation literature of the time. Ann Douglas describes in detail how consolation literature developed a concept of heaven as

the idealized version of the familiar earth and thereby domesticated the fear of death. Poems and fictions gave intimate and literal domestic details of heaven to comfort the bereaved that “nothing is lost in death” (Douglas 224). Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's “Gates Ajar” is the apotheosis of the consolation literature of the day. Dickinson, however, offers no such sentimental solace for death. Rather, she shatters the ideas about heaven propagated by both the orthodox beliefs and the consolation literature. For instance, no. 374 paints a very literal picture of heaven. It is a “small Town-lit with a Ruby-/ Lathed-with Down –”. The extreme literalness of the description, however, destroys the authenticity of the picture. The apparently innocent portrayal in the next stanza betrays the imperfection of this heaven to a perceptive reader :

Stiller-than the fields
 At the full Dew –
 Beautiful – as pictures —
 No Man drew. (374)

This beautiful heaven is like life-less “pictures” lacking the vitality of her preferred earth. Finally, the attitude of indeterminacy and ambivalence in the final lines – “Almost-contented / I-could be-/ 'Mong such unique/ society–” also exposes her dissatisfaction with the sentimental notions about heaven usually found in the consolation literature. No less iconoclastic is the perception of heaven as an illusory promise in sharp contrast to the orthodox beliefs. She tells us ironically that “Heaven beguiles the tired / As the Brooks in deserts babbles sweet / on ear too far for the delight” (121). No. 489, however, shows her ironical dig at the smug confidence of believers who “prate of Heaven” and “relate-when Neighbours die/ And at what o'clock to Heaven – they fled –”. The use of the word “prate” makes clear her satirical intentions. The next stanza gives up this ironical stance. It directly questions this naive faith in the existence of a supposed heaven: “Is Heaven a Place-a Sky-a Tree ?” (489) and juxtaposes this scepticism with her melancholy conviction that “Location's narrow way is for Ourselves”:

Unto the Dead

There's no Geography – (489)

Irony is her telling weapon also to suggest her doubt about “going to Heaven” as the believers suppose:

Going to Heaven!

I don't know when –

Pray do not ask me how!

Indeed I'm too astonished

To think of answering you! (79)

However, in the next stanzas, under the impact of intense feeling, irony is transformed into angry refusal to accept this dominant lie about going to heaven. The stark reality of death shows itself in “I'm glad I don't believe it/For it would stop my breath”. The next two lines articulate her passionate fondness for this earth :

And I'd like to look a little more

At such a curious Earth! (79)

She is certain that she “shall not feel at home in the handsome skies” (413) and declares decisively “I don't like Paradise –” (413). Heaven seems inferior to her preferred earth :

Because it's Sunday – all the time

And Recess – never comes” – (413)

She is afraid of the passivity and the loneliness of heaven :

And Eden 'll be so lonesome

Bright Wednesday Afternoons – (413)

Her personal correspondences also demonstrate her longing for this earth. Revealing her preference for the earthly world, she writes to Susan Dickinson: “–this is but Earth, yet Earth so like to heaven, that I would hesitate, should the

true one call away" (Letters Vol. I:195). With equal enthusiasm she negates the sublimity of heaven in her letter to Samuel Bowles : "The Charms of the Heaven in the bush are superceded, I fear, by the Heaven in the hand, occasionally" (Letters Vol. II:338). Her letter to Mrs. Holland also emphasizes her firm belief that Earth is Heaven : "Vinnie says you ... dwell in Paradise. I have never believed the latter to be a superhuman site" (Letters Vol. II:508). "Our old home", this "finite" earth (696), is ever present in her verse while heaven remains "the House of Supposition / The Glimmering Frontier that / Skirts the Acres of Perhaps-" (696). "I am sorry for the Dead Today-" (529) also touchingly reveals her yearning for this familiar earth. The poet pities the dead farmers and their wives, who, she is sure, are "homesick" for their "Sunburned Acquaintance", who "Discourse between the Toil - / And laugh, a homely species" / That makes the Fences smile -" (529). The poet wonders "if the Sepulchre" feels "lonesome" to them "when Men and Boys - and Carts and June / Go down the Fields to "Hay" (529). The poem, indeed, very successfully reverses the orthodox belief in heaven as our true home. To Dickinson, "Paradise" remains always a surmise, "an uncertain certainty" to be "inferred" by "it's Bisecting/ Messenger -" (1411).

This estrangement from orthodoxy, however, provokes her to seek a personally validated conception of heaven. Heaven means different "signs" to her (575). Sometimes nature's magnificence offers her a taste of heaven. She perceives heaven in the "look at dawn" that "settles in the Hills" or in the "Carnivals of Cloud" when "the Sun is on" (575). A glorious sunset or "the Rapture of a finished Day" is to her what "men call 'Paradise' " (575). Similarly, the cherubic voice of a bird also is an emblem of the heavenly quality of the earth :

The Robin is the One
 That overflow the Noon
 With her cherubic quantity -
 An April but begun - (828)

The idea of heaven also serves as a fitting symbol for what is transient, distant or inaccessible : "The Apple on the Tree--/ Provided it do hopeless-hang-" (239). In her more philosophical moments, heaven is after all a creation of the human mind :

'Tis vast - as our Capacity –
 As fair - as our idea –
 To Him of adequate desire
 No further 'tis, than-Here – (370)

Dickinson restates the idea in a slightly different manner in one of her prose fragments: "Paradise is no Journey because it is within - but for that very cause though it is the most Arduous of Journeys" (qtd. in Anderson 265). Thus, she rejects the idea of heaven as a definite locale as it seemed to her both naive and dogmatic. Rather, she employs heaven as a multifaceted symbol as the poems cited above demonstrate. This multidimensional idea of heaven in her poems marks them out from the contemporary poetry on the same subject.

Dickinson's poems on immortality, her "Flood subject" (Letters Vol. II:454), are equally distinctive. She wrote a few poems professing orthodox beliefs. But the lack of conviction evident in them makes them hardly interesting or impressive. The flatness of the poem cited below betrays this compromising stance :

If my Bark sink
 'Tis to another sea –
 Mortality's Ground Floor
 Is Immortality – (1234)

With her sceptical intelligence, it was very difficult for her to accept a literal belief in the orthodox notion of immortality. Doubt haunts her persistently at every critical juncture as her letter to Reverend Charles H Clark after his brother's death testifies: "Are you certain there is another life? When overwhelmed to know, I fear that few are sure" (Letters Vol. III: 779). Her famous letter to John Greaves best expresses her distrust of the conventional perception of

immortality:"It is a jolly thought to think that we can be eternal-when air and earth are full of lives that are gone and done-and a conceited thing indeed this promised resurrection" (Letters Vol. 2:328). She keenly feels that belief in immortality is a desperate psychological necessity for man in the face of death:

Immortal is an ample word
 When what we need is by
 But when it leaves us for a time
 'Tis a necessity. (1205)

Death compels us to believe in an after-life to compensate for the loss of loved ones :

Of Heaven above the firmest proof
 We fundamental know
 Except for its marauding Hand
 It had been Heaven below. (1205)

A number of poems on immortality betray her overtly rebellious stance under the veneer of conformity. The poet concedes that "it is an honourable Thought" that "we've immortal Place". However, the subtle irony in the verse that follows immediately subverts the proposition stated earlier :

.
 Though Pyramids decay
 And kingdoms, like the Orchard
 Flit Russetly away (946)

Similarly, no. 501 begins with a quiet assurance that there is a world beyond, a spiritual existence – "This world is not Conclusion". Yet as the poem advances, faith gradually weakens and "plucks at a twig of Evidence". Despite all preachings – "much Gesture from the Pulpit" – the gnawing doubt persists :

Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
 That nibbles at the soul – (501)

The very word “Narcotics” reminds one of Marx's opinion of religion as the opium of the soul. The nibbling “Tooth” as a telling image of the spiritual torment compares well with Herbert's description of inner conflict in “Affliction” in which he writes “My thoughts are all a case of knives”. Herbert, however, submits to faith finally while Dickinson sticks to her rejection of conventional faith in an after-life.

However, Dickinson discovers a philosophical way out perceiving immortality in the consciousness of man, and also in the moments of perfect bliss human beings enjoy in rare fleeting moments. For her, immortality is a timeless zone away from earthly flux – “whose even years / No solstice interrupt”- It is a domain of “perpetual Noon” and “perfect Seasons” immeasurable by human notion of time :

Whose Summer set in Summer, till
The Centuries of June
And Centuries of August Cease
And consciousness - is Noon. (1056)

Anderson opines that this poem offers us Dickinson's “transcendent vision of immortality” (Stairway of Surprise 282). Moments of perfect bliss and happiness are also symbols of infinity for her even though these moments cannot be permanent :

The soul has moments of Escape -
When bursting all the doors -
She dances like a Bomb, abroad -
And swings upon the Hours, (512)

But the realist in Dickinson knows that these transcendent hours cannot last in the imperfections and commonness of daily life :

Glory is that bright tragic thing
That for an instant
Means Dominion – (1660)

But her ultimate conclusion is that she had the "Glory" : "That will do/ An honour" (349). Achievement of this vision is a comfort and a transforming experience. So here is a new kind of faith at a great distance from the traditional doctrine of immortality.

Dickinson's poems on God also transcend conventional Christian verse. She perceives God in a variety of ways ranging from quiet belief to biting satire, from childlike devotion to angry rebellion. Her rejection of faith is not tantamount to a renunciation of the belief in God. In her own personal way, she is deeply religious. She writes with absolute conviction without her characteristic ambivalence or indeterminacy that "He exists / Somewhere in Silence / He has hid his rare life / From our gross eyes" (338). She is equally certain that "All circumstances are the Frame / In which His face is set" (820). What she rejects is the optimistic interpretation of God's character as a loving and benevolent heavenly father as is ordained by the scriptures. Her experience of the human world ravaged by disease and death negates such a belief. Almost blasphemously for a woman of New England upbringing, she ponders over God's guilt. She calls Him "Burglar – Banker – Father!" (49) when her friend dies. God is a "sneering mighty Merchant" in "I asked no other thing" (621). In her view, God is generally indifferent to human desires and even to life :

The Perished Patterns murmur
 But His Perturbless Plan
 Proceed – inserting Here – a Sun
 There – leaving out a Man – (724)

God is "jealous" (Letters Vol. II: 512) of human happiness like a child "who cannot bear to see / That we had rather not with Him/ But with each other play" (1719). God also approves "Frost", a "Blonde Assassin" beheading flowers with repeated "accidental" exercise of his "power" (1624). Dickinson also frequently uses legal and economic terminology to demonstrate God's untrustworthiness as a judge. In "Alone and in a Circumstances" (1167) she accuses God of an

injustice far worse than any humankind :

.
 If any take my property
 According to the Law
 The Statute is my Learned friend
 But what redress can be
 For an offence not here nor there
 So not in Equity –
 That Larceny of time and mind
 The marrow of the Day
 By spider, or forbid it Lord
 That I should specify (1167)

To this indifferent God, "Creation" is "the Gamble of His Authority-" (724). He hardly cares for human prayers :

Of course I prayed
 And did God Care ? (376)

In her more sceptical moments, she finds God fully unavailable and ultimately absent. God is a power behind the "Cloud / If any power behind it, be," (293).

Anguished by God's remoteness, Dickinson almost denies His existence :

His house was not-no sign had He
 By Chimney – nor by Door
 Could I infer his Residence –
 Vast Prairies of Air
 unbroken by a Settler –
 were all that I could see –
 Infinitude – Had'st Thou no Face
 That I might look on Thee ? (564)

Sometimes, she deftly uses the naivety and innocence of her child persona to

make her attack on God. The child in 1201 flippantly disobeys God :

So I pull my Stockings off
 Wading in the Water
 For the Disobedience' Sake
 (1201)

In another, a child prays for her share of heaven to God :

Great spirit – Give to me
 A Heaven not so large as yours,
 But large enough – for me – (476)

But the irony in the next quartains gradually exposes the duplicity of God. The candid child believes that "Whatsoever ye shall ask-/Itself be given you". God is amused at the simplicity of the girl who believes seriously in prayer :

A Smile suffused Jehovah's face –
 The Cherubim – withdrew –
 Grave Saints stole out to look at me
 And showed their dimples - too- (476)

The poet tells us in the next quartain that the angry child stops her prayer and leaves the place :

I left the Place, with all my might –
 I threw my Prayer away –

The child, grown adult in the final stanza, denounces God for his malice:

But I, grown shrewder- scan the Skies
 with a suspicious Air-
 As children –swindled for the first
 All Swindlers – be – infer – (476)

The term "swindler" suggests a cruel God who betrays His children. Sometimes, her anger and despair are so keen that she portrays a God who is nothing short of a hypocrite :

We are dust –
 We apologize to thee
 For thine own Duplicity – (1461)

To Dickinson this unconcerned God plays hide and seek with man :

'Tis an instant's play
 'Tis a fond ambush – (338)

But man's despairing search for this inaccessible God only proves to be a “too expensive jest” :

Would not the fun
 Look too expensive !
 Would not the jest –
 Have crawled too far ! (338)

So God in her poems does not seem “all love” as in George Herbert's “Evening Song”

However, Dickinson's sacrilegious view of God turned her into an outsider amid her believing community and caused her all the agony that goes with that identity. Without any settled conviction –“standing alone in rebellion”- she is often gripped by panic : “I am far from the land” (qtd. in Gelpi 34). Gelpi argues that recurrent metaphors of “sea-voyages, drowning, shipwreck and safe harbour” employed in various contexts articulate this sense of anxiety and fear (The Mind of Emily Dickinson 34). In some of her best poems also, we notice her yearning for belief and her sense of despair for her insuperable sense of cosmic alienation. This spiritual dilemma finds a telling expression in “These are the days when Birds come back” (130). The summer like beauty of late-Autumn pervades the first two stanzas :

.
 These are the days when skies resume
 The old-old sophistries of June –
 A blue and gold mistake.

This "blue and gold mistake" almost "induces" her "belief" in the permanence of summer :

Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee -
 Almost thy plausibility
 Induces my belief. (130)

The testimony of nature tempts her to believe in immortality despite contrary evidence of her reason. The final stanza poignantly articulates her child like yearning for a union with nature:

Oh Sacrament of summerdays,
 Oh last Communion in the Haze -
 Permit a child to join.

The use of religious words such as "sacrament", "immortal" "communion" in a non-religious context demonstrates the intensity of her desire for a faith opposed by her uncompromising intellect. Perhaps, through this desire for identification with the beauty of nature, she wishes to enjoy serenity and ecstasy which unquestioning faith offers.

In another, she dreams of a time when there are only "Certainties of Sun/ Midsummer - in the Mind" / "A steadfast South – upon the Soul" (646). This vision of tranquil certainty, "pondered long", becomes "so plausible" that she imagines the "fiction" real and "the Real-fictitious seems" (646). No less touching is her painful feeling that "To lose one's faith - surpass / The loss of an Estate / Because Estates can be / Replenished -faith cannot" (377). The lack of a vigorous and sustaining faith leads her sometimes to near-desperation. Without faith, 'Being's Beggary" (377). She even thinks for a moment that "The abdication of Belief Makes the Behaviour small -" :

Better an ignis fatuus
 Than no illume at all - (1551)

The agonized sense of fear and alienation that afflicted her, owing to her denial of faith, reveals itself subtly, but in no less a telling manner in "I saw no way-The

Heavens were stiched" (378). Shut away from the gates of heaven, and abandoned by her dear earth, the poet finds "no Way":

I touched the Universe—
And back it slid – and I alone – (378)

Without the shelter of received religion, she is terribly alone in an infinite space:

A Speck upon a Ball
Went out upon Circumference
Beyond the dip of Bell – (378)

"Beyond the dip of Bell" perhaps signifies her distance from the traditional religion.

This sense of anxiety frequently shows through very subtly in some poems which are open to various interpretations. For instance, she yearns for the steadfast company of the "Sweet Mountain" in 722:

Sweet Mountains – ye tell Me no lie –
Never deny Me – Never fly –
Those same unvarying Eyes
Turn on Me-when I fail or feign, . . . (722)

Her reference to herself as "Way ward Nun" (722) is her way of indicating that she has repudiated the organized religion in favour of the alternative religion of poetry. Her plea "Never deny Me–Never fly", we may interpret, reveals her keen desire for the steady vision she has lost through her apostasy. Dickinson's poems on religion thus occupy a distinctive place among the tradition of religious poetry in general and make a very interesting reading in their dramatic revelation of the varying and contradictory moods of her mind.

In the ultimate analysis, Dickinson the poet is born out of the rebel. Her creativity taught her not to give up her sense of truth even though it caused an ever present sense of estrangement and loneliness. Comparable to Blake in her passion for individuality, she followed her lonely pilgrimage with experiential

reality as her only prop. She was determined to win her “crown” not through surrender of her self but “through the assertion of self in golden lines of her verse” (Wolff 132). She considered words extremely powerful and valued human language, “this loved philology”, much more than the divine word. In one of her best-known poems, Dickinson celebrates the glory of human language by contrasting God's word with human “Philology”:

A word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die (1651)

God's word cannot die : “It may expire if He- / 'Made Flesh and dwelt among us”. But the poet feels that “could condescension be / Like this consent of Language / This loved Philology” (1651). Cristanne Miller, in this context, observes in Emily Dickinson: Poet's Grammar (1987) that “here conditional 'Could' calls into question whether divine language is capable of the service human language routinely performs” (177). Adrienne Rich, one of the early -twentieth-century feminist poets and a great admirer of Dickinson, also points to the intense significance of word in Dickinson's mind as an emblem of the sustaining power.

Rich writes about Dickinson in a poem :

You woman, masculine
In singlemindedness,
For whom the word was more
Than a symptom –
A condition of being

(Necessities of Life 33)

To Dickinson, power of words is often beyond human perception also:

Could mortal lip divine
The undeveloped Freight
Of a delivered syllable

'T would crumble with the weight. (1409)

With faith in this extraordinary power of language, Dickinson chooses the vocation of a poet. Poets, she tells us, "illuminate" with their mastery over words. They "go out", but the "wicks" they "stimulate" cause a vital light to "inhere" to them. The range and influence of the poets can be limitless:

.. . . .
 If vital Light
 Inhere as do the Suns -
 Each Age a Lens-
 Disseminating their
 Circumference (883)

She would "compete with death" through her verse, which counters her sense of isolation also:

The fellow cannot touch this Crown

 No wilderness -can be
 Where this attendeth me - (195)

Language helped her to create an alternative religion of poetry that "Comprehend the Whole" (569). Cynthia Griffin Wolff rightly observes that "with the 'breath' of her verse she would vie with the God of Genesis who had breathed life unto dust and made man" (Wolff 151). The vocation of poetry finally provided her access to her own personal world far worth having for her than the world of conventional religion.