

(Don't) Gimme that Ole Time Religion: The Journey to Atheism in Southern Fiction

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Abstract: The essay gives examples of the different journeys to atheism (and sometimes back to religion), as described in the works of four 20th century Southern writers. The analysis of their fiction and memoirs focuses on various stages in the spiritual development of their characters – belief, agnosticism, skepticism, struggles against organized religion, stoicism, as well as “closet” atheism. The works discussed are Flannery O'Connor's “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Tim McLaurin's *Keeper of the Moon*, and Fred Chappell's Kirkman tetralogy.

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North America is, according to statistics, the most religious continent in the world. The most recent *World Almanac and Book of Facts*, giving the 2004 numbers, makes it clear: at the top of the list: 273,941,000 Christians, at the bottom: 1,997,000 atheists. In the American South the percentage of registered atheists and non-believers is even lower. Still, when eighty years ago Henry Louis Mencken called the South and the Midwest, the sections of the United States where Protestantism was most widely practiced, ‘the Bible Belt,’ he meant it pejoratively. Since the 1920s, the religious map of the South has undergone important changes, but time has confirmed what was obvious already in the 1920s, when Southern Baptists moved forward to become the largest Protestant

denomination in the United States, the South took the path to extreme fundamentalism.

Among free-minded intellectuals such a development logically incited all sorts of opposing reactions. In southern novels and short stories a wide range of doubters, skeptics, agnostics, and non-believers appeared, and not every religious quest ended with a return to God. However, most of the revolts were not against God, but against organized religion; especially against the churches which, instead of bringing people closer to Him, cared only for their worldly reputation, power, and benefits, obstructing the direct communication of the individual with the Lord.

In his book about American writers' struggles against religion D. Bruce Lockerbie recalls the well-known paradox that "too much religion leads irrevocably to irreligion."¹ In his opinion the growth of unbelief in Western civilization is the direct result of the excesses of religious extremists all over the world. But in the United States belief was gradually replaced by skepticism, mostly under the European influence. While Lockerbie put forward unbelief, skepticism, and agnosticism as three similar forms of "a simple refusal to believe," he separated from them disbelief, i.e. "a mobilized assault on faith" (Lockerbie 13-14). While non-believers can, in the course of time, turn to God through education, religious epiphany, or experience, disbelievers only subvert and destroy. Strangely enough atheism is not ranked with disbelief, but is seen as "acceptable" in the company of the "amiable agnosticism" (Lockerbie 12) that infiltrated the western bastions of Christianity in the second half of the 20th century. In his chapter on Mark Twain, Lockerbie concedes that because American society always required orthodox behavior, true religion waned early, replaced by "mere 'churchianity' and unmitigated hypocrisy," as can already be seen in Twain's Tom Sawyer-Huck Finn volumes (Lockerbie 114).

While Lockerbie wrote his book from the Christian point of view, George H. Smith provided a complementary view as a Christian-turned-atheist. According to Smith an atheist is a deconverted religious believer,

1. D. Bruce Lockerbie, *Dismissing God: Modern Writers' Struggle against Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 13.

although historically the word was originally used as a Christian invective for any dissenters. *Webster's New World College Dictionary* defines "atheist" as a person who "rejects all religious beliefs and denies the existence of God," but Smith wants to make the point more accurate, claiming that it is a person who "does not believe in any god or number of gods."² Smith, who considers the standard dictionary definitions incorrect and biased, also offers other definitions that appeared in the course of history, especially those respecting the original Greek meaning of "a-" and "theos." For instance, according to G. W. Foote, the British freethinker, atheism does not deny God's existence, only points to "the absence ... of theistic belief" (Smith, 23). Even more relevant is Robert Flint's division of atheists into "positive, or dogmatic" and "negative." Only the former claim that there is no God, while the latter's "absence of belief may stem from nothing more than 'want of knowledge that there is a God'" (Lockerbie 24, my italics). The lack of belief in God does not imply God's non-existence, which makes "negative" atheists close to agnostics. Thomas Henry Huxley, who in 1869 coined the term of agnosticism, maintained the opinion that everybody "should be able to give a reason for the faith that is in him," and not "pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable."³ He emphasized that the "suspension of judgment" (see Lockerbie 21), later considered the cornerstone of agnosticism, did not imply the closure of minds to conviction through rational arguments, as "that which is unproved today may be proved, by the help of new discoveries, tomorrow." Scientific evidence might even be found to determine what Jesus really said and did; the methods capable of proving it will be "those practiced by the historian and literary critic" (Huxley).

In the search for atheists, in the "dictionary" meaning of the word, among characters in southern fiction, we have to turn to the works of strong believers. Flannery O'Connor, a devoted Catholic, described a deconversion in her notorious short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953). In this story, the Misfit, a criminal who escaped from jail and terrorizes a family of holidaymakers murmurs shortly before he sends the

2. George H. Smith, *Why Atheism?* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000), 19.

3. Thomas Henry Huxley, "Agnosticism," *The Nineteenth Century*, Feb. 1889, http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/thomas_huxley/huxley_wace/part_02.html.

first two members of the family to death: "Yes'm, somebody is always after you."⁴ Later, during his dialogue with the grandmother, the oldest member of the family, he makes evident that when he mentions "Authorities," it is not just the police, but also Jesus. The Misfit, when he appears on the scene, is a blend of "negative" atheist and agnostic as defined by Huxley: he would have believed in Jesus, if he had received proof. As a criminal, he concentrates on what he considers to be Christ's worst offense: bringing dead people to life again, "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead ... and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance" (O'Connor 132). By killing innocent people, he gives Jesus a chance to show him resurrection. This seemingly endless hide-and-seek game with Jesus, in the course of which the Misfit kills, burns down houses, and does "some other meanness," is the source of pleasure for the criminal. But miracles do not happen, and even in this last case, father, mother, their offspring, and even the grandmother, who was willing to consider the Misfit one of her own children, stay dead. In one moment of epiphany the Misfit finishes his deconversion and becomes an atheist: "It's no real pleasure in life" (O'Connor 133). In fact, this sentence constitutes a happy ending of the story: now the Misfit has one substantial reason less to perform evil, and he might never kill again.

This is a very unsettling deduction. When the Misfit was taking Christ's historical existence for granted, he was committing the most atrocious of crimes. When he finally turns to "positive" atheism, he poses a much lesser threat to society. Ironically, in this way we are getting very close to the most frequent explanation of the increase in unbelief within Western civilization: the worst crimes in the history of humankind have resulted from religious excesses and clashes, and atheism will bring more peace and freedom. To balance the views it is necessary to mention Communism – so much hated by O'Connor – which speaks of "scientific atheism," replacing religious dogmas with political propaganda.

Looking for a Communist point of view, we can turn to another notorious work of southern literature, Richard Wright's autobiographical novel *Black Boy* (1945). The first-person narrator describes his attitude toward life at the age of twelve as full of skepticism "of everything while

4. Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 129.

seeking everything, tolerant of all and yet critical.”⁵ Due to his education, Richard considered the belief in God self-evident and took God’s existence for granted. Even his first encounters with organized religion did not change his feelings; on the contrary, his affection for church hymns was the emotional base that could bring him to full belief. The doubts came from within his family: the strict religious routine, including the annoying working and dietary habits, imposed upon him by his Granny, a Seventh-Day Adventist, and the Granny’s quarrels with another relative: “There were more violent quarrels in our deeply religious home than in the home of a gangster But Granny and Aunt Addie quarreled and fought not only with me, but with each other over minor points of religious doctrine” (*BB*, 150). The summarization of the development of his opinions on religious matters, written from a distance of more than twenty years (he was twelve in 1920), comprises several stages of the journey to atheism: “I had not settled in my mind whether I believed in God or not; His existence or nonexistence never worried me Before I had been made to go to church, I had given God’s existence a sort of tacit assent, but after having seen His creatures serve Him at first hand, I had had my doubts” (*BB*, 127). The first part of this quotation ranks young Richard among natural atheists who have never been religious believers (see Smith 25-26) because they have not given a thought to it. The following statement, however, corrects the image of the ignorant natural atheist, a rare bird in the Bible Belt, and presents Richard as a believer, discouraged by the doctrines of the churches he became familiar with (the Seventh-Day Adventists of Granny and the Methodists of his mother).

Richard’s desire for an experience that could serve him as a proof of God’s existence is similar to that described by O’Connor in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” although it does not take such a malignant form. The revival⁶ episode in which Richard, having heard a sermon about Jacob and the angel, tells Granny that he would believe in God if he could see an angel, suggests an intermediate stage toward deliberate, personal atheism. Richard’s doubtful statement is misinterpreted by Granny, and consequently by the rest of the congregation, for a religious vision, and

5. Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (1945; New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 112. Henceforth: *BB*.

6. If it is held in a church rather than in a revival tent, it is a “protracted meeting.”

the whole scene turns into a farce. Richard's development corresponds with the process of the elimination of the idea of God from life, as described by Edmund T. Shanahan: belief gives way to agnosticism, and agnosticism that takes religion "as an inscrutable affair at best" gradually "shades off ... into disbelief."⁷ Later Richard gets baptized to please his mother, and most of all, not to be ostracized from the African American community. What might be interpreted as sheer hypocrisy, beyond any discussion on atheism, is explained (and excused) by Richard in the following way: "It was no longer a question of my believing in God; ... it was a simple, urgent matter of public pride, a matter of how much I had in common with other people" (*BB*, 170). Richard Wright, who had been a member of the Communist Party from 1933 to 1950, displays here what I call "closet atheism," the atheism with a fake religious face for the public.⁸

A path from religion to "negative" atheism, and back again can be found in the autobiography of another lower-class Deep South self-made-man, although white this time: Tim McLaurin. In *Keeper of the Moon: A Southern Boyhood* (1991), he vividly depicts his growing up "between the different pulls of the Primitive Baptist and Southern Baptist religions"⁹ in the community of the small town of Beard, North Carolina. Tim, like many other Southerners preferring a direct communication with God, cultivated a dislike of organized religion. The common questions of doubters of God's existence, e.g. why do good people die, or why does eternity seem frightful, as well as the seeming contradictions in the Bible, did not erase in him the belief in the basic ethical principles of Christianity. He also admits that it was the influence of the inhabitants of his home region which turned him back to religion: "A Southern atheist, I feel, is rare, for too inscribed in our heritage and upbringing is the belief that somehow this chaos is controlled by one who knows a good bit more" (McLaurin, 38).

7. Edmund T. Shanahan, "Agnosticism," *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume I, online edition. (1907; K. Knight, 2003), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01215c.htm>.

8. Paradoxically, many Christians in countries of the former Communist Eastern Bloc faced the opposite problem when they pretended before authorities that they were atheists, while privately practicing Catholicism or Protestantism.

9. Tim McLaurin, *Keeper of the Moon: A Southern Boyhood* (1991; Asheboro, NC: Down Home Press, 1998), 35.

A very good recent example of the different stages of the road to atheism and possibly back to religion, can be found in Fred Chappell's Kirkman tetralogy. Joe Robert Kirkman, the father of Jess, whose point of view dominates all the four books, presents himself as a champion of science and reason, but tries hard not to have any prejudice against religion. His home is a small farm in the Appalachian region of North Carolina, the time is the 1940s. In *I Am One of You Forever* (1985), the first volume of the tetralogy, Jess fails in deciding whether Joe Robert believed in God, or not: "I have some difficulty describing my father's attitude toward religion. Let us say that he was tolerant"¹⁰ However, while Jess's father was tolerant toward religion, he was not tolerant toward people who used religion to curtail the freedom of the neighbors who might not share their beliefs. 1940-42 was the period when non-believers were seen in the South as foreign and inimical. They were considered a threat to the traditional, most cherished southern values: the sense of family and community. In addition to that, agnosticism and atheism were considered urban and leftist.

Jess, in the chapter "The Change of Heart," describes, from a substantial time distance, the state of religious affairs in their home region in the following way: "The hills around us were full of loud primitive denominations of every strange stripe, whose members proclaimed their beliefs at any public opportunity. If proclamation seemed not to persuade a skeptical listener, those zealots importuned; if importuning failed, they badgered" (*IO*, 62). Occasionally he even uses a vocabulary close to that of militant atheists and speaks about the "gospel shouters" (*IO*, 62), "Ugly Holies" and "proselytizers" (*IO*, 63). The images of "a scrawny jackleg preacher leaning on the greasy chopblock to sermonize," or "a long jawed deacon" (*IO*, 63) are very close to the caricatures and cartoons found in periodicals published since the 1890s by freethinkers and, a few decades later, Communists, anywhere in the United States or in Europe.

The targets of criticism and satire are various branches of Southern Baptists, whose members cannot agree even in their midst on the basic elements of their religious doctrine, which often makes them organize a new church. Then, however, the original dissenters are also unable to come to a consensus, and some of them dissent again. Gradually there

10. Fred Chappell, *I Am One of You Forever* (Baton Rouge: L.S.U.P., 1985), 62. Henceforth: *IO*.

comes a Rainbow Baptist Church, a New Rainbow Baptist Church, and in the end of the row of new churches, "The One True Light Rainbow Reformed Holiness Baptist Church of the Curveball Jesus" (*IO*, 64). The experienced reader of southern Literature immediately recollects Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and Hazel Motes's Church of Jesus Christ Without Jesus Christ: in both cases the followers of the new churches might be good Christians, but their founders further their own interests, often financial ones.

In Chappell's *I Am One of You Forever*, the head of the local religious dissent is the owner of the local drugstore. He provoked his neighbors even with the name of his shop: Virgil Campbell's Bound for Hell Gro. and Dry Goods. While it is very unlikely that in North Carolina in the 1940s anyone could name an enterprise just that, in the mixture of tall tale and satire it is not only unsurprising that such a store exists, but also that it is often visited by local true believers, who want to turn Virgil, Satan's "prize champion," toward God (*IO*, 63). Virgil, however, has a defendant in Joe Robert. When a particularly pertinacious lay preacher nicknamed Canary threatens Virgil with hell-fire and brimstone, Joe Robert, who usually uses the word "hell" only as an expletive, delivers his own improvised mock-sermon: "The Lord God Almighty appeared to me in a vision ... He said unto me that there was a man Canary traipsing about the county meddling into concerns of other folks. The Lord spoke into me saying, This man Canary is not to be trusted. He is using my name in vain, the Lord told me, to poke his snout where it's got no business" (*IO*, 66). The "sermon" continues for a while and ends with the threat that some "godly and modest man" might grab a meat cleaver and emasculate him, if he does not stop bothering people. But there is more than that: in the milieu that allowed Virgil the sacrilegious name of his store, Canary's view of morality does not necessarily represent the majority of citizens. We cannot be sure of it, as the narrator who was twelve at the time of the events is very unreliable, but some critics did make the next step and claimed that "Canary mouths words ... which have no grounding in the experience and knowledge of the people he lives among."¹¹ Maybe the most relevant is the viewpoint of a total

11. Karen Janet McKinney, "Tracing the Hawk's Shadow: Fred Chappell as Storyteller," *More Lights Than One: On the Fiction of Fred Chappell*, ed. Patrick Bizzaro (Baton Rouge: L.S.U.P., 2004), 222.

stranger, the anthropologist and collector of folk songs and dances Dr. Barcroft, who in the third part of the cycle, *Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You* (1996), writes about "people like any other people ... saintly and unholy and ordinary."¹² Joe Robert obviously knew the rhetoric of evangelists as well as fundamentalist preachers very well, which is confirmed in the last volume of the tetralogy, *Look Back All the Green Valley* (1999). In this novel Jess finds the evidence of his father's most elaborate prank that revealed the hypocrisy of six local preachers from different Baptist churches.

In the chapter "Old Times There Are Not Forgotten," a friend of Joe Robert, Mr. Hillyer, tells Jess about the year when he and Joe Robert visited about fifty different churches in Harwood County. The inspiration indirectly came from his pious mother-in-law, his friendly opponent, whom he held in great esteem, but who often criticized him for not attending church. Joe Robert's scientific approach resulted in a list of inconsistencies in the preachers' sermons, notably in the years when the world was supposed to end. The preachers are offered \$1,200 if they agree on one exact date, but of course, they never came to an agreement. But this is not the end of the prank. Joe Robert turns the preachers' greedy minds to the idea of investment in sin as the only commodity that will be flourishing and topical till the end of our days. While at first Jess, who accidentally and long after his father's death, finds a suspicious red (i.e. not only infernal-looking, but also Communist-looking) leaflet advertising investment in Satanic Enterprises Amalgamated, may toy with the idea that his father was a secret Satanist, later he sets his mind at rest when it is proven that Joe Robert believed, as a true scientist, "only" in the "heat death of the universe,"¹³ and the Satanic hoax served to demask the local clergymen. All preachers to whom the leaflet was sent decided to "invest" their money in sin, and when Joe Robert sent their deposits back to them after he announced "bankruptcy" due to the fact that "the scarlet opportunities Satanic Enterprises was offering for money, all the interested clientele already know how to get for free," he enclosed them in condolence cards saying, "The wages of sin is death" (*LB*, 196-97).

12. Fred Chappell, *Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You* (New York: Picador, 1996), 197.

13. Fred Chappell, *Look Back All the Green Valley* (New York: Picador, 1999), 195. Henceforth: *LB*.

The above-mentioned episodes describe the quixotic struggle of an individual against the windmills of individual as well as institutional hypocrisy, but they do not solve the problem of the approach of such individuals as Joe Robert to matters of personal belief.

It is obvious that not every believer must be a member of a church, and not every member of a church must necessarily be a believer.¹⁴ The main conflict within evangelical Protestantism is that on one hand it relies on the concept of denominationalism that emphasizes the coexistence of different kinds of Protestantism "in friendly rivalry" (Hudson 388). On the other hand, as Jan Nordby Gretlund aptly reminds us, it stresses the role of people in saving their own souls: "Each individual is supposed to maintain his personal relationship with God and is expected to work out his salvation without the help of any man-made institutions."¹⁵

Joe Robert insists that beliefs, including the religious ones, are anyone's deeply personal matter, *not* a topic for small talk. In the school boiler-room he once spills to his friend Sandy what religious principle he holds: "No sensible person talks publicly about his religion."¹⁶ In the story "The Tipton Tornado" (incorporated into *Look Back All the Green Valley*), his opinions on that matter are summed up by Jess when commenting on the fact that his father was constantly refusing to say table grace, or render parting benedictions: "Public prayers are embarrassing. Prayers are supposed to be utterly sincere, are they not? As full of intimate untrammelled feelings as love letters. I, for one, would not care to have my purple-prose romantic missives read aloud to kin or strangers while the lettuce wilted and the soup grew chill" (*LB*, 34). When Joe Robert announces a family praying competition, he wants to prove that everybody is able to produce an example of "singsong phoniness" at the table, regardless of age, sex, or belief system. Aside from Joe Robert's mother-in-law, nobody passes the test. Joe Robert, with his scientific approach, defiles his prayer with too many foreign words. Jess presents an incoherent improvisation, and his mother recites religious clichés in

14. See Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 399.

15. Jan Nordby Gretlund, *Frames of Southern Mind: Reflections on the Stoic, Bi-Racial & Existential South* (Odense University Press, 1998), 76.

16. Fred Chappell, *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 90. Henceforth: *BC*.

an embarrassing “hushed, sanctimonious tone” (*LB*, 48). Jess’s sister Mitzi, only a first-grader, prays so ardently that a miracle happens and a halo appears around her head, but when it becomes obvious that she prays for the unhappiness of one of her schoolmates, the room plunges “into a fathomless blackness that extinguished even the dimly burning candles.” But even the unannounced winner, the grandmother, with her plain prayer, building words “like an experienced carpenter” (*LB*, 50,49), at the moment of her death, in *Farewell I’m Bound to Leave You*, does not meet Jesus.

It is difficult not to take the question of God’s existence seriously in the region where for many children the only literature they grow up with are biblical stories. Susan Ketchin, in the introduction to her anthology *The Christ-Haunted Landscape* (1994), claims that stories from the Bible were always a part of Southern everyday life and “informed the worldview of all, believers and unbelievers alike.”¹⁷ Paraphrasing William Faulkner, she adds that Southerners are “absorbing Christianity as if by osmosis” (Ketchin xii). Under such circumstances, however, the knowledge and use of the Bible is, to use the terms of the structuralist language theory of binary oppositions, “unmarked” in exploring someone’s approach to religion, while the hypothetical unfamiliarity with the Bible and its contents would be “marked,” suggesting unbelief in God in the form of natural atheism. Chappell uses Biblical metaphors and symbols throughout his tetralogy in great abundance, from the image of Joe Robert’s and Cora’s garden damaged by a local paper-producing factory as the Garden of Eden (in “The Overspill”), to the epiphany Joe Robert, Jess, and their friend Johnson Gibbs experience during a summer thunderstorm similar to the whirlwind from which God addresses Job, or the storms from which God’s voice emerges in Psalm 29 (in “A Change of Heart”).¹⁸

In the second volume of Chappell’s tetralogy, *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* (1989) named after one of the most famous American church songs, Joe Robert, as a teacher of physics and general science, is

17. Susan Ketchin, *The Christ-Haunted Landscape: Faith and Doubt in Southern Fiction* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), xi.

18. See John Lang, *Understanding Fred Chappell* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 220.

willing to accept only such a form of religion that is compatible with science. But in the fundamentalist environment he does not find the necessary tolerance. Susan Ketchin emphasized the role of Calvinistic doctrines for southern evangelical Protestantism: the belief in absolute sovereignty of God, the inborn depravity of humans, the soul's salvation by grace alone, and the total impossibility to understand Divine Will. These doctrines are incompatible with Darwin's theory of the Origin and Development of Species Joe Robert dares to teach at the local school, but there is one that is, "the doctrine that the individual is terrifyingly free to choose to do good or evil" (Ketchin xii). The only problem is that Joe Robert's unbelief in God's creation of the world in seven days is seen by many of his neighbors – Biblical literalists – as evil.

Brighten the Corner Where You Are describes Jess's dreamy version of his father's last day at school as a teacher, the day when a committee of local citizens, "light on the Constitution and terribly heavy on the Bible" (*BC*, 90), is supposed to decide whether he, despite the fact that he exposed his pupils to Darwin, is eligible to continue teaching. Joe Robert is asked both to defend his positions and repent, but never enters the classroom where the committee convenes. Instead, one hour before the scheduled session he holds a colloquy on that controversial theme with his students. In what seems to be a Platonic dialog, he stands against his favorite Greek philosopher, Socrates (who was also accused of corrupting the youth), impersonated by one of the least eloquent pupils, who miraculously shatters his speech impediment and appropriates enormous rhetoric abilities, and loses in the battle of arguments. It is difficult to say whether the imaginary classroom battle of minds that originated in Jess's brain gives more insight into the beliefs of father or those of son. In any case, it posits the question of the possibility of reconciling the religious and scientific modes.

Joe Robert makes a grave mistake when he dwells on the strict separation of both: "It is my strong personal opinion that there is no basis of conflict, that the religious and scientific modes are two entirely separate kinds of understanding, and that they reach disagreeing conclusions without genuine conflict or come to identical conclusions without really complementing one another" (*BC*, 160). Then, however, he is made to admit that all scientific theories are provisional and transitory, while the religious beliefs of the local citizens are stable and unchanging. When

Joe Robert concedes that great scientists do not agree with one another, he is not able to add that churches are in a constant opposition as well. In the end it is he, not Socrates, who is accused of corrupting the young by preferring what is “to be found false at a later time” to “what is believed to be eternal” (*BC*, 165). In his adoration of Darwin’s theory, Joe Robert is close to the British poet and essayist Matthew Arnold, who, in addition to that, also monitored the coming of the new world where there is “not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve.”¹⁹

The whole chapter of Chappell’s novel obviously refers to the 1925 “Monkey Trial,” in which John Thomas Scopes, a high school biology teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, agreed to challenge the Butler Act, forbidding the teaching of evolution in any public school in Tennessee. The role of the act, proposed by John Washington Butler, a farmer-turned-politician, and after some hesitation signed by Governor Austin Peay,²⁰ was often marginalized by southern historians. As late as in 1978, I. A. Newby in his book *The South: A History* claimed that the law, and similar laws enacted in Mississippi, Arkansas and Oklahoma, “were not intended to be punitive and never became instruments of oppression.”²¹ From the fact that there was a “near unanimity of southern opinion against evolution,” which meant that “few teachers ‘believed in’ Darwin’s theories or had any desire to ‘teach’ them,” it is unfair to suppose that the passage of these laws “represented no actual curtailment of classroom freedom” (Newby 417). Chappell’s Joe Robert insists on the classroom freedom he is being deprived of. Nevertheless, even though science is of primary concern for him, he never doubts the existence of God – only His communicative competence and efficiency as a creator and ruler of destinies. In his belief, God is “something of a windbag, continually talking to mankind, but pitching His discourse beyond our abbreviated human capacities.” His method “was too optimistic, and God lost most of His

19. Matthew Arnold, “The Study of Poetry,” *English Literature and Irish Politics*, vol. 9, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 161.

20. See William J. Cooper, Jr. and Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South: A History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 620–34.

21. I. A. Newby, *The South: A History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), 417.

audience.” What is left is just “the flashy phantasmagoria of rational life, the wild endearing circus of sense and circumstance” (*BC*, 34-35).

This seeming conflict between the rational and the religious reflects the old southern tension between the long tradition of Stoicism and Christian faith. Jan Gretlund, who in his 1991 thought-provoking essay on Walker Percy and his uncle, William Alexander Percy, stood against the incorrect use of the word Stoicism as “a synonym for all non-Christian ideas” (Gretlund 75) and concentrated on the points that Christian theology share with Stoicism rather than those that constitute a difference. The strong sense among Southerners of community is in full agreement with the Stoic tradition, and so is the emphasis on a proper, moral life: “Whether God exists or not, the moral issues remain unaffected for the Stoic.” The situation of Chappell’s Joe Robert is the one of a moral man under the schism most Southerners, albeit unaware of it, live in, when they inhabit “the world peculiarly balanced between ... Christian otherworldliness and the Greco-Roman ethics of individual responsibility.” Joe Robert is, more than his fellow citizens, dedicated to *kathékon*, the Stoic sense of duty, which orders people “to do the most rational thing possible under the circumstances” (Gretlund 75-76).

Another conflict within Joe Robert is between reason and emotion. Warren Rochelle, in his analysis of the Kirkman tetralogy, observes that Joe Robert is “an embodiment of a Platonic soul,” as he “is ruled by reason, but integral to his being are the emotional, the appetitive, and thus the imaginative.”²² Like Socrates, he uses myths to approach truth, but lacks the discipline of the Greek philosopher. That is why Socrates ceases to be Joe Robert’s role model and hero, and the clumsy defendant of science repudiates him in an awkward outburst of emotions: “The students are right. What you are is a windy old crank whose only real talent is just to aggravate people out of their minds ... I’m going to give you a fat lip and a black eye and a bloody nose. Stuff that in your dialectic and smoke it” (*BC*, 166). This southern Socrates is the one who is accusing, not the one who is accused, but uses the reasoning known from Plato’s conversations with him. But as we lack any information about the quality of Plato’s memory and his inclinations toward fiction, we can challenge the authenticity of Socrates’ statements. Again, the

22. Warren Rochelle, “The Flashing Phantasmagoria of Rational Life,” *More Lights Than One*, 192.

distance from the authorities is too big, and the philosophers, like God, too unreliable.

At the end of that fateful day in May 1946, when Joe Robert quit teaching forever, although he had the support of his students, he might have left the position of a Stoic or an “amiable agnostic,” and start the real deconversion; i.e. set out on the road to atheism. The last chapter investigates this possibility through Joe Robert’s dream in which the God-abiding citizens of the fictitious town of Tipton are about to hang Charles Darwin, but Joe Robert is given the last chance to persuade the public about the merits of the scientist’s teachings, and thus save Darwin’s life.

The dream turns out to be another version of the classroom philosophical discourse that took place in the early afternoon, but roles are distributed in a different way. This time, Joe Robert’s identity is split into Darwin facing punishment for his teachings, and Socrates expected to deliver his defending speech. The role of the crowd of local citizens is twofold as well: that of the audience resembling pupils in the classroom, and of the lynching mob turning against everything that is perceived as different and incompatible with their stock beliefs.

Joe Robert’s speech based on the notorious Socrates’ self-defense has a similar result - the death of the defendant.

The fact is that Dr. Darwin was mistaken. We did not begin as blobs of simple slime and work up to higher states. We began as innocent germs and added to our original nature cunning, deceit, self-loathing, treachery, betrayal, murder, and blasphemy. We began lowly and have fallen from even that humble estate ... It is the nature of the human animal to subject its earnest seekers and most passionate thinkers to humiliation, degradation, imprisonment, and execution. If you now condemn this great man to death, you shall be guilty of nothing more than your most ordinary humanity. (BC, 211-12, Chappell’s italics)

But after the cartoon-like Darwin on the gallows gave “a small embarrassed farewell gesture with one hand” and said “in a tiny mousy voice: ‘Bye-bye’” (BC, 212), Joe Robert “giggled in his sleep,” and made a vain attempt at drawing his wife into the dream. From this gesture it is obvious that, unlike in the previous classroom colloquy, he considers himself a winner, as the death of martyrs regularly confirms the importance of their teachings.

There is, however, the possibility of a different interpretation of the dream. Standing on the scaffold, Joe Robert is in the position of a person

who took the stand at the foot of Jesus Christ's Cross, and such people obviously see the world "with all its values inverted, with vice conquering virtue ..." (Lockerbie 21). Therefore, according to Lockerbie, this view must be complemented with another one, the view from the door of the empty tomb of Jesus, because only then can we see that "death has been swallowed up in victory!" It is not certain that Joe Robert is capable of having this accompanying view, or even whether he is willing, as an atheist, to adopt it. Nevertheless, this interpretation likens Darwin to Jesus and, consequently, science to religion. This is not so far-fetched as it might seem, as Darwin's theory of evolution was from the very beginning considered such a threat to Christian faith that, besides diminishing its relevance, there were attempts to incorporate it into religion. William G. McLoughlin gives the examples of the biologist Asa Gray who claimed that "Darwin, though an agnostic, had postulated 'a first cause' in nature,"²³ as well as Henry Ward Beecher, who even called himself "a Christian evolutionist" (McLoughlin 154).

In the modern age, when "freedom of religion also means freedom from religion, if so preferred" (Lockerbie 12), some trends of thought within modern theology work even harder to reconcile science and religion. Fred Chappell shows it in *Look Back All the Green Valley* through symbols borrowed from popular culture. The life of Joe Robert terminates on the day of the biggest triumph of science – the moon landing in 1969 – and his last journey is described as a *Star Trek* cosmic trip during which Captain Kirk(man) dies, but opens up space for his followers. This is a scene that champions of both science and religion can be happy with. The target is the Moon and, in the future, other planets, but there is also the spiritual dimension to such a quest. God might be somewhere out there, and the possibility of the direct communication with Him, with science serving as a mediator instead of church, gains a new momentum. From this point of view, the line between atheists and believers blurs, and there is just a human being on the quest for a controlling force, which need not, but might, be God.

23. William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 154.