

A Critique of Religion and Reason in William Golding's *The Spire*

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Abstract: William Golding is known for his *Lord of the Flies* (1954), however his other novels are also equally worthy of critical attention. *The Spire* (1964) is a remarkable novel with the underlying contention that there is no innocent work however sacred and religious it may be. This paper is an attempt to explore the novel as a scathing critique of both, religion and reason. The protagonist Dean Jocelin represents faith and master builder Roger Mason stands for reason. Jocelin's unconsummated sexual craving for his daughter-in-God Goody Pangall who is married to the impotent Mr. Pangall is sublimated in the form of the phallic symbol of the spire. But Roger has an illicit relation with Goody but ends as an unsatisfied drunkard. Mr. Pangall is killed by the workers in frenzy and Jocelin sacrifices Goody for his vision of building a 404 feet spire which he ascribes to God. In spite of insufficient foundations the spire stands as a miracle conceived by faith and accomplished by reason with a great doubt. Jocelin comes to know that his deanship which he owes to Lady Alison is result of her illegitimate relationship with the king. Thus the myth that religion leads to salvation is busted. Neither reason nor religion makes man happy.

Keywords: religion, reason, critique, spire, faith.

Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by rulers as useful. - Seneca

Sir William Gerald Golding (1911 –1993) was a British novelist, poet, and playwright, who was awarded Booker prize in 1980 and the Nobel Prize in 1983 for his remarkable contribution to literature. He “sought a greater sanity in himself and the world around him” (Gregory, 2009, p. 7) to save the world and mankind from the resident evil within man. His novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954) won him worldwide acclaim. It came to be filmed and translated in various languages and has since been adopted in school and college curricula across the world. But his other novels have been neglected worldwide in spite of being equally worthy and appealing. Probably because they have “...a weird unsettling power...” (Williams, 2012. n.p.). Among his other novels, *The Spire* (1964) is the most remarkable story because Golding probes deeper his obsession with the resident evil within man. The protagonist of the novel suffers from “the terrible disease of being human” (Golding, 1965/2013c, n.p.) like the boys in the *Lord of the Flies*. Secondly it offers an implicit but scathing critique of both religion and reason. “Golding writes of a faith so strong that its destructive powers amount to what is virtually a blasphemous travesty of faith, and still remains superior to its antithesis, reason” (McCarron, 2010, 23-24). Golding has described religions as obscure and savage:

[R]eligion[s] came in layers, each age super-imposed on an obscurer and more savage one. The layers existed together, since nothing is as conservative as religion. Dig down, and just below surface you come on human sacrifice and, at the bottom, traces of cannibalism. (Golding, 1982/2013b, n.p.)

The inspiration behind the novel was the Salisbury Cathedral which was visible from Golding's window at Bishop Wentworth's school for boys, where he taught from 1939 to 1961 with five years off for wartime service in the royal navy. Salisbury cathedral's 404 feet spire is the tallest in Great Britain. Golding witnessed the top thirty feet of the spire rebuilt between 1945 and 1951 (Mullan, 2013, n.p.). The story of the inception of the Salisbury Cathedral might have been another thing that inspired the novel:

Round about the year 2000, Bishop Poore was standing on a hill overlooking the confluence of the local rivers, according to a legend, when the mother of Jesus appeared to him, told him to shoot an arrow and build her a church where the arrow fell. The arrow flew more than a mile and fell in the middle of a swamp. There, with complete indifference to such things as health, foundations, access and general practicability, the cathedral was built. Eighty years later, with a technological gamble which makes space travel seem child's play, the builders erected the highest spire. (Golding 1982/2013a, n.p.)

Religion remains one of the major human institutions in the era of the metamorphosis wrought by science and technology. It has been influencing human action, individual and social, in a substantial way since its invention. It seems that it is older than civilizations; rather it forms their roots. "Religion was...one of the earliest human inventions...it is nearly universal in all human societies..." (Turner, 2003, p. 69). All human institutions evolved from the earliest structures of social organisation meant for establishing order and religion is not an exception to it. According to Turner (2003):

Religion is a system of beliefs and rituals pertaining to the sacred and supernatural which are organized into cult structures that have consequences for reinforcing norms, legitimating inequality, guiding socialization and social placement, and managing variable sources of tension and anxiety in a society. (p. 76)

Though religion as social institution exercises incredible power over humans and its evolution across human history, it couldn't always ensure its positive or moral impact over humans. Crusades and massacres in the name of religion, race, caste, and creed have blighted human history since long. Edgar Allan Poe's remark, "All religion, my friend, is simply evolved out of fraud, fear, greed, imagination, and poetry" is not unjustified. After criticising democracy and dictatorship in his *Lord of the Flies*, Golding targets religion in order to show that there is no innocent work through *The Spire*. And it is obvious from the hostile reactions it received from majority of critics and reviewers of its time that it is a scathing critique of religion as well as reason. It wouldn't be unworthy to spare a sortie to explore how Golding takes on religion. *The Spire* is an outstanding narrative which penetrates human nature more deeply

through a dark and powerful portrait of a medieval dean Jocelin's will which he dubs as that of God. It is a tragedy wrought by religious hubris, the fatal flaw in the character of Jocelin. It deals with the construction of the 404 feet high spire of a Cathedral; the vision of a fictional Dean named Jocelin who believes that he is an unprofitable servant of God who is chosen to build a spire of a cathedral which stands on marshy lands which are not known for supporting heavy structures. He justifies the building of the spire as "a diagram of the highest prayer of all" (Golding, 1964, p. 120) against the opinion of master builder Roger Mason. The spire is needed because "the children of God require a thing to look at" (Golding, 1964, p. 120). The spire thus stands for religion and faith but ironically it lacks sufficient foundation foundations. The earth under the cathedral cannot bear the burden of the structure and of course the sins of the beings involved in its building. Another important dimension associated with the spire is that of libidinal desires of Jocelin. The spire is sublimation of Jocelin's sexual craving for his daughter in God, Goody Pangall whose red hair symbolically dub her as an object of desire. The name itself is ironic; Pang+all that means pangs of suffering for all. Desire is the root of all suffering. The matrix of desire ruins three men: Dean Jocelin, Mason Roger and Goody's impotent husband Mr. Pangall. Rather the prevalent dogmatic religious and social customs do not allow her to abandon her impotent husband and marry someone else. The spire is the phallus symbolizing the desire and it is equated with prayer; prayer to relieve pain which ironically ensues from desire originating in the libido. So this is a vicious cycle in which all are trapped.

In more general terms, the seething pit of human transgression that accompanies the building of the spire reinforces man's sinful, temporal nature and suggests that religion, Catholicism in particular, cannot rise above this and, hypocritically perhaps, uses it to its advantage.... Golding's critique of religious authority... suggests that he had quite a strong aversion to the exclusionary nature and potential harm of religious dogma. (Crawford, 2002, p. 124)

The underlying contention of the novel is that even a sacred work is not without sin; "*There is no innocent work. God knows where God may be*".... "*It's like the appletree!*" (Golding, 1964, p. 222-23). Corruption pervades the building of the spire:

... yes, building always is corrupt because people always are to some extent corrupt.... The mystery about the spire is (a) that anyone got so vain that he should wish to build it, (b) it's still there and (c) that, although I'm sure it wasn't meant to be, it's extraordinarily beautiful. You see, it has all these things that are very mysterious. It's the best we can do and, ah well, you have to write what it's like for corrupt human beings to do that. (Golding & Baker, 1982, p. 150)

Golding deconstructs religion because in a way it is a mask behind which evil conceals itself. It is not surprising that the human institutions formed for common good have been exploited for individual benefits by perverted men. Richard Francis Burton has stated: "The more I study religions the more I am convinced that man never worshiped anything but himself." The spire stands opposing all material forces but the faith

which led to the construction of the spire is dismantled. David Eddings remark, "God save us from religion" is a spontaneous reaction that comes to mind. Jocelin ascribes his ardent folly of building the spire in spite of sufficient foundation to God:

The net isn't mine, Roger, and the folly isn't mine. It's God's Folly. Even in the old days he never asked men to do what was reasonable. Men can do that for themselves. They can buy and sell, heal and govern. But then out of some deep place comes the command to do what makes no sense at all – to build a ship on dry land; to sit among the dunghills; to marry a whore; to set their son on the altar of sacrifice. Then, if men have faith, a new thing comes. (Golding, 1964, p. 121)

Golding also evaluates the other side of faith i.e. reason. The master builder Roger Mason is the man of reason who vainly tries to persuade Dean Jocelin that there is no sufficient foundation for a 404 feet high spire. When Roger is about leave the work Jocelin threatens him and asks him to continue the work of raising the spire. Roger has an illicit affair with Goody. When Jocelin comes to know it he allows it for the reason that she will keep him here. According to Betty Jay (2006):

... *The Spire* also epitomizes, principally through the conflict between Jocelin and the master-builder, Roger Mason, the dialectic between faith and reason running throughout Golding's work. While Jocelin maintains that faith can override reason to create 'a miracle', Roger is equally insistent that 'the solid earth argues against us. (p. 158)

The sublimation of desire in *The Spire* has inevitably disastrous consequences since the desire is not fulfilled or undone. The suppression and sublimation of desire ruin Jocelin, Roger and Goody. Neither Jocelin, the man of faith nor Roger, a man of reason finds peace in the end. Their anguish and damned existence is identical with the meaninglessness and absurdity of existentialism. Goody is the object of lust for Roger and love for Jocelin and lust has it. The 'spire' with insufficient foundations can be seen as a phallic symbol of Jocelin's desire sublimated as love. The religious and the rational both end in tragedy and that is the central thematic problem explored by Golding in *The Spire*. Goody is the loose thread which unravels the whole fabric of the story. The name of the character reveals all- Pang + all. Pangall's impotence ruins both, Jocelin and Roger, through Goody. Goody gets neither lust nor love from her husband Pangall. She finds them in Roger and Jocelin. Pangall's pangs ruin him and extend to Goody, Jocelin and Roger. So it is a chain reaction which ruins three men in sequence. This matrix is a significant and serious comment of marriage, a social institution ruled by religious norms. The spire stands opposing all material forces but the faith which led to the construction of the spire is dismantled. Jocelin finds his purpose deceived since he comes to know the truth that the foundation of his faith is corrupt. His elevation to deanship is result of his aunt's illicit affair with the king. Lady Alison is Jocelin's aunt and a wealthy mistress of the King. It is through her influence Jocelin becomes Dean of the Cathedral. This is another loose thread that deconstructs the spire. The money funding the spire was a result of the Lady's illicit affair. So Jocelin's spire, the erection of both, his religious and phallic hubris,

had neither sufficient physical nor metaphysical foundations. Dust pervades everything in *The Spire* and everything is reduced to dust in the end. The idea of morality is embedded in religion since the immoral is not religious. Goody's submission to Roger and Jocelin's silence over the adultery, both are distorted incarnations of desire which rule religion. Jocelin's religion is hypocritical since it doesn't lead to the solution of moral dilemma but to death. The spire is a refuge taken by Jocelin to flee from his guilt and worldliness. Jocelin's obsession with the spire can be seen as an attempt at installing order on his own psyche. It is sublimation of Jocelin's sexual desire for his daughter-in-God, Goody Pangall. The libidinal energy leads Jocelin to his vision which is as good as a day-dream for him. Jay (2006) argues that:

Jocelin is perceived to be a fundamentally divided subject whose religiosity at a time when clerical hypocrisy is rife sets him apart from the other priests. Yet his excesses are a means of resisting transgressive desires rather than the consequence of divine inspiration. (p. 162)

His vision, [(or folly) any unrealised vision is folly] which he ascribes to god, is realised but the purpose is deceived since the spire fails to save Jocelin. Hence the spire is both a vision and folly. And it is a scandal in terms of structuralism and an unstable and subverted binary opposition from the vantage point of deconstruction. The spire has no sufficient foundations but Jocelin thinks that he has been chosen by God to make the miracle happen. It can be argued that Jocelin is Golding's mechanism to deconstruct the institution of religion. Religion can only be perceived as miracle and rationality is not a quality of religion. Religion is based on inadequate foundations like the spire. Religion can be seen as a shrewd mechanism in the novel to justify the irrational. Golding suggests that people can exploit religion to satisfy personal visions. Jocelin's vision is imposed on the institution of Church itself and the people associated with it. Jocelin is a religious totalitarian who ignores the fact that other people do not share his vision. Jocelin has lost his faith at the time of his death but begins to appreciate the suffering he has caused to others by his pride and grandiosity. "Jocelin is man tortured not by doubt, but by faith" (Mullan, 2013, n.p.). The tragic flaw in Jocelin is his overambitious nature, his religious hubris, like Macbeth. He loses faith himself when he comes to know that his appointment was due to his aunt's influence, not his merit. Jocelin is deconstructed. The roots and cut. His soul is in perpetual exile. His hubris offers no salvation.

Golding's critique of religion and reason through a medieval story of building a spire is remarkable. Golding, once again, probes human nature very deeply in his reflection *The Spire*. He presents a significant critique of not only the institution of religion and reason. It can be argued that in this novel Golding bursts the myth that religion leads to salvation. For him it leads to a revelation that the cause of all suffering is within man himself and there is nothing that can rescue him from this deadly trap. Golding's urge is to make man see in himself, introspect, realize that the beast is within him and without taming it on his own, he cannot make any human institution succeed however powerful it maybe.

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