

# A Kierkegaardian Interpretation of Two Portraits of Martyrdom in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*

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## 摘 要

本論文試圖以齊克果宗教人學思想為視角，藉其透過信仰生命成為「自我」以脫離致死絕望、及殉道意義在於見證真實救贖等觀點，探討宗教政治小說《權力與榮耀》中現代殉道者既對立亦「契合」的存在趨向、心靈痼疾、與救贖之道。此研究的焦點係此小說平行刻畫之兩個非典型「殉道者」角色，一為受宗教迫害而逃命的神父，現實生活兼具有酒鬼和私生女生父的失格身份，另一為深信且獻身社會主義、竭力迫害教會並將神父趕盡殺絕的警官，深入剖析此兩種「殉道者」角色皆陷於「無我」的犧牲和「自我」的失落兩者交錯矛盾的「殉道」旅程。從小說敘事中死亡、犧牲、和救贖的意義、自我與信仰的關係、以及出於責任或理想成為「殉道者」的存在趨向是否實為絕望現象等面向，提出深刻的反問。

此研究期能結合齊克果詮釋自我、死亡和生命獨特的動態存在觀和現代小說聚焦「殉道者」的非傳統書寫，反思現代語境中世俗化的政治承諾和超越性的宗教救贖，兩者之間的對比與終極追求。

關鍵詞：殉道、自我、絕望、《權力與榮耀》、齊克果

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IN the modern context, with reason prioritized over faith and politics over religion to play the dominant power of ruling human societies, the contention between religion and politics as well as between the rational and the religious is inescapably prevalent, especially when it comes to which power promises to create a better world. For instance, according to Hannah Arendt, the pre-eminent twentieth-century political theorist and secularist thinker, the very power that governs as well as establishes the human world, i.e., a world of “human plurality,” pertains to politics, under such a rational: “*Man*, as philosophy and theology know him, exists—or is realized—in politics only in the equal rights that those who are most different guarantee for each other” (Arendt 60, 94). Against Arendt’s tendency to uphold politics—“our plural existence” (Arendt 202)—as the predominant sphere that shapes the human as well as social condition, Kierkegaard’s religious thinking provides a different view of what ultimately promises authenticity and salvation of human existence. In terms of Kierkegaard’s Christian thoughts, salvation of the world needs the “personal sacrifice” of Christ, and the sacrificial Christ is exactly the prototype of any religious existence of authenticity. Indeed, Kierkegaard maintains that ultimately it will have to be “martyrdom,” modeled on the sacrifice of Christ, rather than politics, that can really fulfill the goal of saving human souls in the crises. In this sense, Kierkegaard proclaims that “in the decisive moment only martyrs are able to rule the world” (1966 xxiv). Still, if such a sense of martyrdom means authenticity as well as ultimacy of religious existence, we wonder if a martyr can only serve for a religious cause. Is it not possible that sacrificing oneself for the political cause in order to govern and reform the world may also make a martyr who means or manages to reform the world? In fact, in opposition in some ways, politics and religion might be interchanged, a likely phenomenon Kierkegaard critiques pointedly, observing that “the whole modern mentality can be reduced to that damned caricature of religion, which is represented by politics” (1968-1978 X4 A8). In view of the complicated relationship between religion and politics, opposite yet possibly overlapped in our modern, secularized, and perhaps even anti-religious settings, the following questions thus emerge: How do we identify a modern martyr? By what principles or criteria can we judge if one’s sacrifice, for religious or political causes, means genuine martyrdom that not only promises salvation of the world but also demonstrates authenticity of human existence?

To tackle such questions about modern “martyrs” together with the issues of true salvation and authentic selfhood based on Kierkegaard’s thoughts, this study intends to investigate the contention between religion and politics in Graham Greene’s thought-provocative novel, *The Power and the Glory* (1940). Why Graham Greene and this particular novel? Published between the two World Wars, *The Power and the Glory* is, according to Michael Brennan, “the single

most important landmark in Greene's reputation as a Catholic novelist" (68), although Greene himself, when interviewed, denies such a label, proclaiming himself to be "a novelist who happens to be a Catholic" (Greene 2019: 19). Given that the present study is not meant to focus on the significance of Greene's Catholicism in his novels, the central issue in the recent scholarship authored by Brennan, the fact that Catholicism and Communism are juxtaposed and even overlapped in Greene's depiction of the mundane world, as demonstrated in *The Power and the Glory*, bespeaks the importance of the Catholic faith in the novelist's creative writing.

In fact, the religious significance of Greene's literary contribution was a frequently addressed issue among earlier critics looking back in the 1980s at the long career of Graham Greene. Roger Sharrock, for instance, observes that being a Catholic convert has much to do with Greene's status as one of "the two most outstanding novelists" (along with Evelyn Waugh, another Catholic convert) in such "a period that completed the progressive secularization of English life and letters" (14). Besides his literary presence against the cultural tides of secularism, with the tendency to incorporate the religious element into portrayals of human reality, Greene stands out as a "Catholic novelist" concerned with the change of human life due to political force as well—whether it pertains to war traumas or to world politics of his time, such as Fascism, Communism, or Americanism. In other words, we may say that in his realistic novels, Greene's Catholicism inhabits the history of the human world. Actually, besides his literary career, Greene was also a journalist by vocation—one who traveled a lot for covering "real" stories, especially in politically turbulent lands, such as anti-religious Mexico, the settings of a Catholic priest's martyrdom in *The Power and the Glory*. Most importantly, when it comes to reality as experienced by human beings, embedded within Greene's literary imagination is his dual vision of religion and politics as not just co-existent but inter-related spheres of human experience. As insightfully commented by Maria Couto, Greene is arguably "the only English writer to have recognized a larger human reality," for his novels illustrate "religion and politics, traditionally seen as antagonistic forces, Church and State, sacred and secular, God and Caesar," as "elements of the same reality" (2). Unquestionably, *The Power and the Glory*, the masterpiece among Greene's "Catholic novels," perfectly exemplifies such a distinctive character of Greene's art and vision.

Set in the background of the "obscure neglected state" (Greene 1962: 24) of Tobasco in Mexico in the 1930s, *The Power and the Glory* presents a compelling drama of religious persecution against the backdrop of Communist suppression. The spotlight of the plot is put on a fugitive-priest who eventually becomes a martyr, and whose fleeing from the anti-religious Marxist regime's persecution

progresses into his personal pilgrimage from sinfulness into (self-denied) sainthood. Ultimately, out of political execution, the martyrdom of the priest seems to bear an inspiring testimony of faith to the fearful and sometimes hostile local community under the threat of anti-religious power. The “glorious” ending appears to correspond with what the novelist declares in a letter regarding his purpose of writing the book— “to oppose the power of the sacraments and the indestructibility of the Church on the one hand with, on the other, the merely temporal power of an essentially Communist state” (Greene 2008: 206). Yet, if we take this declaration of Greene’s to mean that his attempt is to portray a black-and-white world of opposition between politics and religion or simply an atheistic political power’s oppression of religious piety, it would certainly be a naïve misunderstanding. Such a problematic understanding would definitely be too simple and shallow to grasp the profound significance beyond the surface drama of a godly martyr sacrificed in the struggle with political power.

In fact, *The Power and the Glory* presents a gripping narrative featured by its atypical and somewhat unorthodox depiction of a martyr-to-be as a shameful drunkard, coward, and guilty “Father” (with a bastard child) of the Catholic Church. Moreover, this unconventional portrait of a sinful martyr is intricately inter-woven with his destiny of falling into the despise and suppression of a morally “saint-like” and ideologically (self-)righteous representative of the State, the Lieutenant of Police. In light of the moral sense embroiled by the intermingling of religiousness and worldliness as such, it is the last thing to say what is envisioned by Greene’s novel is “the black and white contrast of religion and the secular world” (Sharrock 129), even if the two main characters, the priest and the Lieutenant, respectively represent the Church and the Government. Indeed, due to Greene’s complex and profound portrayal of these two personalities, it is far from easy to say *whose power* and *whose glory* dictate either the reality of the world they share or the meaning of martyrdom their services as well as personal lives seem to designate.

Revisiting this political and religious novel through Kierkegaard, mainly by drawing his religious-anthropological thoughts on the pathology, potentiality, and authenticity of the self from the book, *The Sickness unto Death*, this reading intends to explore the theme of martyrdom by investigating the inward dramas of the two protagonists and the truth about their selfhood. Based on Kierkegaard’s religious-existential ideas, our reading of Greene’s novel about martyrdom is concerned with what kind of existential orientation is typified by the selfhood of Greene’s two martyr-figures respectively—*unto death (of despair)* or *into life (of faith)*. To put it in another way, the intended exploration of the protagonists’ selfhood as well as the sense of their “martyrdom” is not just about the identity of “religious existence” or “political existence” per se, but

more subtly and profoundly concerned with the internal dynamism of their existence. Furthermore, by doing such a Kierkegaardian reading, *The Power and the Glory* will be ascertained as a narrative that delves into the existential crises, external and internal, of modern martyr-figures, who struggle to make life out of death or vice versa, in the midst of miscellaneous collapses—of worldly security, senses of happiness, and even the reality of being a “self.”

That Kierkegaard’s religious and existential thinking can illuminate an in-depth reception of Greene’s *The Power and the Glory* is, however, still a seldom-trod territory of criticism. One rare but remarkable Kierkegaardian study of Greene’s fiction is done by Anne T. Salvatore. In her monograph, *Greene and Kierkegaard: The Discourse of Belief*, Salvatore presents an excellent parallel study of the spirit of existentialism as well as the art of indirect communication shared and practiced by Greene and Kierkegaard. Yet, only scanty discussion is made about the novel *The Power and the Glory*. Even in the few places of dealing with this novel, Salvatore’s reading is rather controversial and thus leaves room for rethinking through Kierkegaard. For instance, on the characterization of the whisky priest, Salvatore suggests that Greene’s intent is to typify the negative “examples of existential possibilities” (76), i.e., commitment of suicide, to such an extent that the priest represents Greene’s “early treatments of self-killing” (111). Yet, it is questionable whether the priest’s final decision of giving up the escape from execution in order to do his priestly duty is really suicidal. Moreover, treating the whisky priest as a mere preacher of “Christian faith and conversion, but like the inhabitants of Kierkegaard’s Christendom, through a human weakness fail[ing] to incorporate his principles into his own life experience,” Salvatore further comments that “this error indirectly causes [the priest’s] own death” (15). Salvatore suggests that the priest’s death is partly caused by his fatal defect in character, such as his pride and the lack of self-integrity manifested by the disintegration of his belief and selfhood. While it is correct to say that the failure in such integration can be some fatal weakness, yet to cope with the complicated issue of death in *The Power and the Glory* through Kierkegaard, we are convinced that to consider the issue with reference to the ideas of despair and salvation can facilitate a more sophisticated discussion of the priest’s belief and self.

Different from Salvatore’s negative treatment of the priest’s martyrdom, there are indeed a wide array of rather opposite viewpoints held by various critics. For instance, B. P. Lamba asserts that the priest is depicted as a Christ-figure who feels “the real fellowship with the men . . . , gangsters or criminals” and eventually wills for no more escape but a “self-sacrifice” which signals “the zenith of his love” (129, 59). David Lodge too acknowledges the priest as “a genuine martyr” comparable to “the passion of Christ” (25), even if not in a

conventional sense of sainthood. Still another similar echo is found in the book of Roger Sharrock, *Saints, Sinners and Comedians: The Novels of Graham Greene*, in which *The Power and the Glory* is read as “a novel about love, not justice” (129), while Greene’s imperfect priest is viewed as “a sinful saint” (not “a holy sinner”) (121). In Sharrock’s opinion, this priest, although being a pathetically defective representative of the Church, the only one left within an anti-religious and dangerous region, has “the devouring sense of responsibility inspired by love or pity” and therefore “is a separated sinner only to himself, but united to God and his suffering people in love” (121).

Noticeably, unlike Salvatore’s emphasis on the relation between the priest’s fatal weaknesses and his death for faith, quite a number of critics tend to defend for the sinful priest, recognizing him as genuinely capable of loving albeit not really a holy servant of God. Indeed, even if we find his priesthood or martyrdom deficient to be treated as a saint or a true analogue of Christ, it is true to hold this imperfect priest as one capable of loving others, although sometimes his love is blended with the profound consciousness of his guilt, like drinking and fornication. More often than not, he has abundant love for others which is interfused with deep humility. One of the moving examples of such mixed feelings of love in the priest is his outpouring of strong love for his practically “fatherless” daughter, who to him “is more important than a whole continent” and for whom he once “prayed silently: ‘O God, give me any kind of death—without contrition, in a state of sin—only save this child’” (Greene 1962: 97). Another eloquent instance of his godly compassion and humble forgiveness is shown toward the pretentious and sly *mestizo*, his Juda-to-be. Aware of this half-caste’s secret intent of betrayal, the vulnerable priest is described as refusing to “pretend with his pride and lust and cowardice to be any more worthy of that death than this half-caste” and “pray[ing] silently: ‘God forgive me. Christ had died for this man too’” (116). However, as an illegitimate and secret “father” or a priest with saint-like compassion, the priest is, after all, a human being with his own problems and frailties. It thus demands a more careful consideration of whether the priest and martyr-to-be ultimately lives in and dies for the love of God. Most importantly, we need to question: Is Greene’s priest a martyr in *faith* at all?

To better understand what the whisky-priest’s martyrdom signifies, namely, if he really lives and dies for a life of faith, we need to think more thoroughly about the existential possibilities that the priest is bound for. In terms of Kierkegaard, to be a martyr and make genuine impact on the crises of human fellows as well as communities in a secularized and even hostile world means to become someone not only willing to die for the world but ready to suffer in order “to ‘bear witness’ to the truth *in* the world” (191), as keenly phrased by Michele

Nicoletti in his excellent essay, “Politics and Religion in Kierkegaard’s Thought: Secularization and the Martyr.” The “truth” for a martyr to bear out is not just about the religious creed that makes the foundation for the passion of belief. It should concern, first and foremost, the authentic promise of ultimate salvation for all existence. Ultimately, the real question about the priest’s sacrifice and suffering, the present study would argue, is whether or not the priest indeed bears witness to and realizes such a sense of “truth”—in and with his life. Until this important question is tackled, we may not be able to grasp either the significance of the priest’s death or the truth about his selfhood.

On the relation between martyrdom and bearing witness to “truth,” Paul Ricoeur in his essay “Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation” provides some stimulating ideas that are most relevant to our task of interpreting the martyr figures in Greene’s novel. Based on the Greek meaning of the word “martyr,” *martus*, that is, “witness,” Ricoeur correlates the two ideas to make the assertion that “A person becomes a martyr because first of all he is a witness” (2013: 148). This identification between a martyr and a witness is grounded on his argumentation that “A cause that has martyrs is not necessarily a just cause,” as there are “truthful” witnesses and also “false” ones, either of which is possible because, as Ricoeur explicates in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, there is “no manifestation of the absolute without the threat of a false testimony, and without the decision that separates the sign from the idol” (1980: 146). Inferably, in terms of Ricoeur’s paralleled thinking of being a witness and becoming a martyr, the “test” of authenticity lies in whether or not the “testimony” is given to “the sign” of “the absolute,” instead of “the idol.” Here, “the absolute” may be taken as equivalent to what Kierkegaard holds as “the truth,” also the ultimate source of salvation that a genuine martyr gives witness to. Moreover, Ricoeur’s differentiation between “the sign” (of the absolute) and “the idol,” together with his admonition that “We must always decide between the false witness and the truthful one” (1980: 146), bears important relevance to our examination of the two types of martyrdom in Graham Greene’s work, i.e., the unholy priest and his “saintly” persecutor. In light of Ricoeur’s critical ideas, we wonder which one of the two martyr-figures ultimately offers a testimony to “the absolute,” even if just “the sign” of it, and which to “the idol,” but not salvation in truth? Or, are they to be seen more as kindred than as one “truthful” and the other “false” in terms of the “testimony” in their martyrdom?

Turning to the priest’s adversary, the Lieutenant of Police, we have no problem in finding that the questions about the meaning of the priest’s martyrdom can also be applied to the identification of this secular martyr-figure. Arguably, embodying martyrdom in his own right, the lieutenant exemplifies a secular form of self-sacrificial heroism, driven by the ideology of socialism to

serve his political/idealistic cause of social reformation/revolution. Also, as he is deliberately depicted by the novelist to be another “mystic” (Greene 2008: 195), or we may say, a priest-like materialist, acting as an exact counterpart of the main “hero” of the novel—the materialist-like priest (104), the lieutenant indeed embodies the modern blurring of the boundaries of politics and religion. In fact, we may count him as a perfect model of replacing religion with politics, or making politics his religion, a real representative of what Kierkegaard attributes as “liv[ing] under the illusion that it was possible . . . to realize heaven on earth” (1968-1978: X4 A84). In the terms of Ricoeur, we may ascribe the lieutenant’s self-sacrifice for his political idealism as giving testimony to “the idol,” namely, his own false god. However, it is indisputable that the novelist does not mean to contrast the secular martyr-figure with the priest, the servant of God, simply because the former worships the false god. In fact, the contrast between the priest and the lieutenant, with the two playing each other’s counterpart, demands more careful deliberation so that we may reach an in-depth grasp of the novelist’s intent at presenting these two martyr-figures as well as the complexity of his portrayals.

As commented by Lodge, the portrayal of the communist “mystic” is intended for “deliberate irony” for the sake of “enforcing the novel’s thesis,” which we may hold as sainthood intermixed with sinfulness, and accordingly, we have an enemy of the Church who “appears much more like an ideal priest . . . chaste, honest, ascetic, and dedicated” (26). Indeed, in Greene’s narrative, the lieutenant is described to own a room “like a monastic cell,” and “[t]here was something of a priest in his intent observant walk—a theologian going back over the errors of the past to destroy them again” (1962: 23). With such a moral “puritan” and idealistic agent of Government dedicated to the mission of social purging and reformation, we cannot help wondering: What exactly is “the vision of truth” he embraces and endeavors to realize that ultimately makes him some kind of “martyr”? Moreover, in the sense that the lieutenant in his own way plays the role of a “martyr” sacrificing himself for sake of his political and social idealism, how are we to interpret the “death” he is committed to giving for the love of the world and society?

In terms of the contrastive notions in Kierkegaard’s religious anthropology, that is, *the self* as spirit, which pertains to the eternal and qualifies the human, versus *despair* as “sickness unto death,” which means, simply put, an existential possibility that turns eternity into annulled possibility, a further question to raise is whether the lieutenant and the priest are to be recognized not only as “two mystics,” as presented by the novelist, but also as “two martyrs” of some “kindred spirit” albeit adhering to opposite realms of existence, one religious, one political. Specifically, in the light of Kierkegaard’s thinking on human



selfhood, this study is animated to inquire if the socialist “world-savior” is actually no less than the Catholic “soul-savior,” that is, also a victim of “despair.” By wrestling with this question, we seek to detect whose “pilgrimage”—the priest’s dutiful albeit sinful journey toward martyrdom or the lieutenant’s life-pursuit of liberation and reformation of the whole society—pertains to the journey into genuine salvation of life, and whose “martyrdom” designates simply a journey unto “death” of the self.

### **Kierkegaardian Criteria for Ascertaining Martyrdom**

THE attempt to identify a martyr in relation to existential possibilities, i.e., what Kierkegaard terms as “self” and “despair,” or, “sickness unto death,” is made under the rationale that before there is a martyr, there is in the first place a human being. What is existentially true about a human being? According to Kierkegaard, any human individual’s life is involved in a process of becoming, thereby entailing two fundamental and opposite possibilities of existence—being a self or not being a self. To facilitate a Kierkegaardian interpretation of Greene’s two martyr-figures in terms of the existential possibilities related to their selfhood and martyrdom, the first and foremost question is accordingly about becoming a self or not. On what essentially composes human selfhood, Kierkegaard, in *The Sickness unto Death*, provides a precise definition that the self is *spirit*. Also, under the premise that existential truth of the self, Christianly speaking, is grounded on eternal truth of faith, i.e., an individual being’s union with God, whereas disunity with God would mean the individual’s disunity with his/her own spirit. The former condition is being a self, while the latter, i.e., the “misrelation” with one’s own spirit, is not. Not being a self means living to an existential (as well as psychological) state of *despair*, what Kierkegaard terms as “the sickness unto death.” Concerning Kierkegaard’s theory of what causes to this “misrelation” in a human being’s formation of selfhood, or, self-activity, Anthony Rudd offers a concise and lucid explanation:

Kierkegaard describes the self as a self-conscious synthesis of “the infinite and the finite, and the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity” (qtd. in Kierkegaard 1980: 13). In each of these three sets of contrasting qualities, there is one that stands for our limitation, . . . and one that stands for your power to transcend those limits, . . . the synthesis of the different factors in a human being is the task of that human being, which he must actively strive for. The *possibility* therefore exists that the synthesis will not be properly developed and maintained, and that the elements in human nature will become

misrelated. *This misrelation Kierkegaard calls “despair.”* (24-25, emphases added)

It is made clear that by “despair” Kierkegaard means exactly the “possibility” of “misrelation”—understood as the improper work of “synthesis” of the contradictory “elements in human nature” in three pairs. The opposite of despair is becoming a self. In other words, being a self and being in despair are contrary *existential possibilities* of human beings. Another Kierkegaard scholar, Stephen Crites, complements this exposition by adding that “despair is a pathology of self in its freedom, . . . the misrelation of self to the divine spirit that establishes it in freedom” (150, 153). According to Crites, at the core of the whole book *The Sickness unto Death* is this dialectical insight of Kierkegaard’s: “Despair will be the use of freedom to refuse its spiritual freedom” (153). In other words, in Kierkegaard’s terms, despair, or the “pathology of self,” is identified as a phenomenon of problematic spirituality manifested by the abuse of freedom, the divine gift for human beings. Indeed, it depends on one’s “relation” or “misrelation” with one’s own *spirit* that the very possibility of becoming a self or getting to despair is actualized. After all, being a spirit is the very distinctive nature of being a human, or, a fundamental truth about human selfhood. What then does it mean to be a “spirit”?

According to Kierkegaard’s Christian-existential explanation, being a spirit means impossibility to die. Based on this understanding, Kierkegaard highlights the correlation between the definition of self as spirit—with its inherent nature of eternity—and the conception of despair as perpetually hopeless sickness of the eternal being—unto death but “unable to die” (1980: 18). That is to say, the essence of a self and the nature of despair are homogeneous, as both self and despair share the same attribute of eternity, namely, impossible to die. This thinking is certainly Christian in that just like the Creator, human beings are not merely material but also spiritual, and in terms of spiritual reality, or, in eternity, “death itself is a passing into life” (1980: 17). It follows that the self’s sickness, despair, has nothing to do with the inevitable end of all mortals, namely, the physical death. Rather, it has everything to do with the spiritual torments of existing in contradiction—in a sense, between being a spirit and not being a spirit due to its *mis-relationship* with the eternal power that creates it. In the words of Kierkegaard, the sickness of the self is “this tormenting contradiction, . . . perpetually to be dying, to die and yet not die, to die death” (1980: 18). The contradictory notion of dying impossible death explains why despair is designated as sickness *unto* death.

Evidently, such a contradictory idea, “to die death,” or “to die and yet not die,” is religiously meaningful. From the Christian point of view, it involves two

*im-possibilities*. On the first level, “to die” signifies negation of the possibility of living (eternal life); on the second, “to die death” points to the impossibility of death (of the self as spirit). However, if thinking reversely, namely, turning impossibilities back to possibilities, that is, restoring life possibility to substitute “to die,” which means embracing the spiritual possibility of no death, not “to die death,” we would be able to see the spiritual embryo of *salvation* emerge from the pathological reality of despair. Indeed, the possibility of salvation is the promise always kept in perspective as well as underscored in the context of *The Sickness unto Death*, even in the entire oeuvre of Kierkegaard, and this hopeful possibility of existence must take its root in faith, or in Kierkegaard’s description, in “the battle of faith . . . for possibility” (1980: 38). Kierkegaard underlines “possibility” itself as *the* salvation, vital for human life, as deliberated in the quotation from *The Sickness unto Death*: “When someone faints, we call for water, eau de Cologne, smelling salts; but *when someone wants to despair*, then the word is: Get possibility, get possibility, *possibility is the only salvation*. A possibility—then the person in despair breathes again, he revives again, for without possibility a person seems unable to breathe” (1980: 38-39, emphases added). The reiterated notion, “possibility,” means to live rather than to die (impossible death). With possibility, a person who has the sickness *unto death* would have the opportunity of being re-oriented back *to life*, for the person can “breathe again” and thereby embrace the salvation from dying. Thus, salvation means exactly the promise of life. It is in this sense that Kierkegaard designates “possibility” as “the ever infallible antidote for despair” (1980: 39).

More importantly, Kierkegaard emphasizes that it is “the believer” who possesses this “antidote,” not simply because being a believer is like a warrior of faith striving for possibility but also “because for God everything is possible at every moment” (1980: 39-40). In other words, salvation for despair ultimately depends on believing or not believing the everlasting source of possibility, i.e., God. From this perspective, the remedy for despair lies in faith, or, to use the well-phrased notion of Donald Hall, in “the embrace of existential faith” (13), meaning to exist before God. Hall goes even further to conclude that the embrace of faith is the “embrace of the human” (45). Hall’s insight is summed up in his provocative title for the first part of his book: ultimately it is a matter of “to be or not to be human.” Actually, all the key ideas of Kierkegaard’s religious anthropology about the existential possibilities of becoming a self, choosing and miring in despair, or embracing the true promise of salvation in faith are based on this possibility, or freedom, of making a human choice as such. In this sense, human selfhood can be held as a “project”—of choosing or not choosing to be oneself.

### Greene's Martyr-figures of "Sickness unto Death"

CERTAINLY, as a "choice" that serves to build up selfhood, to have despair or not may be resulted from the personal inclination or habit of mind under the rein of circumstances. However, it is equally true that for any act of choice, there must be an exercise of will, whether one knows or admits it or not, even if one simply "surrenders" to it. Take "the whisky priest" in Greene's novel for example. Addicted to "the taste of brandy" that promises "temporary relief from fear, loneliness" (1962: 70), this priest on the run, we are told, has had a life "littered with" many "surrenders":

feast-days and fast-days and days of abstinence had been the first to go: then he had ceased to trouble more than occasionally about his breviary—and finally he had left behind altogether at the port in one of his periodic attempts at escape. Then the alter stone went—too dangerous to carry with him. He had no business to say Mass without it: he was probably liable to suspension, but penalties of the ecclesiastical kind began to seem unreal in a state where the only penalty was the civil one of death. The routine of his life like a dam was cracked and forgetfulness came dribbling in, wiping out this and that. (1962: 70)

Compared to be a "cracked dam," the less and less priestly lifeways of the priest not simply reveal his increasing surrender to his off-the-track habits of life. In fact, his "surrender" has a deeper meaning than the failing life outwardly. In the narration about the priest's state of mind on the verge of returning to the "home" village once again where once drunk and lonely, he slept with a woman and fathered a child whom he has never seen, we readers seem invited to overhear some deep and hidden sighs of *despair* at those situations he once surrendered himself to:

Five years ago he had given way to despair—the unforgivable sin—and he was going back now to *the scene of his despair* with a curious lightening of the heart. For *he had got over despair* too. He was a bad priest, he knew it: they had a word for his kind—a whisky priest—but every failure dropped out of sight and out of mind: somewhere they accumulated in secret—the rubble of his failures. One day they would choke up, he supposed, altogether the source of grace. Until then he carried on, with spells of fear, weariness, with a shamefaced lightness of heart. (1962: 70, emphases added)

Clearly, in the priest's thinking mind, he is aware that his failures, caused by and also entailing his "despair," would *possibly* devour and destroy the grace from heaven, which will mean eternal damnation to his life. The very thought that "he had got over despair" so that he can now carry on with "the lightness of heart" must be taken as a misbelief, or blindness, or even just a façade that covers up his un-dispersible despair. This despair, haunting and hiding in the dark abyss of his soul, cannot be taken as merely a psychological problem, something to be coped with or wiped away in heart by will. Rather, in terms of the Kierkegaardian conception of despair, the priest's despair reveals the existential possibility of his choice: he is actually a surrenderer of his life by choosing not to be a self but to be in despair, which means not to live before God authentically.

In fact, the *possibility* of having "the source of grace," which means exactly his relation with God as well as the source of his salvation, to be "choked up," eradicated by the result of his despair, in a Kierkegaardian sense, reveals precisely the "annulled possibility" of having his despair healed by the grace from heaven through his faith. Such an "annulment" is existentially enacted by the priest him-self. In this sense, we may infer that the priest's consciousness that he is such a damned sinner who does not in the least deserve the title of martyr, together with his restless fear that his "martyrdom" will do no good but "bring mockery on the Church" (Greene 1962: 149), actually fails to ring totally true about his selfhood. In fact, what leads him into potential damnation may not merely be his failures, or indecency, and the subsequent consciousness of his own sinfulness. More crucially, he becomes a conscious sinner toward damnation because of his tendency to hold on to despair, instead of faith, despite his constant consciousness of his guilt. In a sense, the priest embodies the tension between committing guilt and repentant consciousness, a state of contradiction somewhat analogous to what Kierkegaard identifies as the conflict between two forms of despair, that is, between "despair of defiance" / "in despair not to will to be oneself" and "despair in weakness" / "in despair to will to be oneself" (1980: 113). For any human being, let alone a priest, to see oneself as damned although in the meantime yearning for forgiveness from the divine grace, is to live in conflict and contradiction, which ultimately is not overcoming of despair but despair all the same. Indeed, given that the priest is afflicted by his self-consciousness of being a sinner and therefore undeserving of the honor of martyrdom, he, nonetheless, is ignorant of the truth that the very despair at sinfulness is sin by itself. In the second part of *The Sickness unto Death*, with the title of "Despair Is Sin," Kierkegaard identifies sin as "the intensification of despair...before God," under the rationale that "the conception of God...makes sin dialectically, ethically, and religiously what lawyers call 'aggravated' despair" (1980: 77). In terms of this, the priest's sense of guilt lingering in his

head as well as his self-consciousness denotes not simply humility and repentance but, more poignantly, his “aggravated despair” along with lack of authentic faith in the promised redemption, i.e., salvation and purification of his sinful selfhood, which, in another word, refers to the possibility of becoming a self before God. To put it in another way, as a believer as well as a minister of the belief in God who, however, fails to have faith in the divine grace and sanctification of selfhood, the priest is ultimately not a sinner as he understands but one with “aggravated” “sickness unto death.” How then is his intensified despair, or, sin, related to his position as a “martyr”?

Anxiously (yet not purely humbly) refusing to be identified as a martyr figure, the whisky priest declares his strong conviction that “Martyrs are holy men” and that one becomes a martyr not “just because one dies” (Greene 1962: 117). By his own definition, when at last he dies because of his priesthood, he is at best an impossible martyr, dead but not holy, although as the only priest left in the desolate land he indeed suffers severely till the very end from being relentlessly chased, and his suffering is marked by a tinge of bravery intermixed with cowardice. Besides, on the one hand, he is depicted as such a suffering priest whose heart is full of persistent and marvelous love for the people. On the other hand, the narrative demonstrates that his love shown to his Juda-traitor is not meant for nothing; it is partly for satisfying his immediate need of the spirits in the mestizo’s flask. If the sacrifice of this priest with his weaknesses and frailties is counted as martyrdom, clearly his self-denial of such an honor based on his “mortal sin” and the inexorable sense of guilt lay bare his hopeless struggle against the despair within. That is to say, though a believer in forgiveness of sin, this self-condemned martyr figure finally achieves “martyrdom”—with an inevitable ironic twist.

The irony of the priest becoming a martyr lies in the contradiction he embraces till his death, that is: he dies for his ministry for sake of the truth of divine love and its power of redemption of the world and yet without genuine confidence at all that the divine love and forgivingness will ultimately and really be his salvation. This is a sign of his deficiency in faith, and such spiritual weakness bears a keen sense of irony if we recall his words in the earlier conversation with the lieutenant:

That’s another difference between us. It’s no good your working for your end unless you’re a good man yourself. And there won’t always be good men in your party. . . . But it doesn’t matter so much my being a coward—and all the rest. I can put God into a man’s mouth just the same—and I can give him God’s pardon.” (Greene 1962: 232)

According to Fr. Edmond Bliven, “[i]n this conversation Greene underlined the basic flaw of Marxism: it does not take into account the weakness of human nature, or to use theological language, original sin” (5). Indeed, the priest’s words as quoted above highlight the difference between Marxism and Catholicism, underlining, on the one hand, the former’s problem with tackling human frailties and on the other, the priest’s own Catholic belief in the divine mercy for sinners like him. However, such a belief as well as self-assurance—as the servant and even agent of “God’s pardon”—seems to fade away at the last moment of his life, in which the priest at the doorstep of death gets despairingly confused. Feeling a deep sense of uselessness, the priest could not but think that “perhaps after all he wasn’t really *Hell-worthy*” (250, emphasis added). Inferably, lurking behind the priest’s sense of regret and impotence and extremely ungodly self-damned confusion is actually the shadow of *despair*, i.e., the sin of annulling the possibility of being the pardoned self before God, with its gripping impact upon his whole being.

Out of despair, he “dies with a hope of salvation only he himself fails to acknowledge” (108), as poignantly commented by Sharrock. But, in Kierkegaard’s terms, we may observe that the priest actually, in a sense, “has died before he dies,” and he dies not just of the persecution of the totalizing hostile regime, which kills his body only, but more significantly, of his “sickness unto death,” namely, despair. In view of this, although we can agree to Lamba’s viewpoint that the priest’s “pain of sin is a means to the ultimate salvation” (23), yet, concerning the priest’s selfhood, which affects how he thinks about his (undeserved) “martyrdom,” we cannot but picture him as such a victim of the “sickness unto death.” In despair, he turns into, as it were, a martyr of his faltering faith—self-sacrificing but failing to whole-heartedly believe that even if he is an “impossible saint” unworthy of the glory of heaven, yet in the power of God, everything is possible. That is to say, with the divine grace and power of salvation, even such a sinner like him can be sanctified and also worthy of the title of a genuine martyr.

With this Kierkegaardian understanding of the priest’s selfhood as well as his sense of unworthiness in self-identity, we may now see better how come this supposedly heroic priest, daringly staying behind while other Catholic fathers are either running away or having been “converted” into marriage, is described as a little man marked out by an unspeakable air of “hollowness,” the appearance of a neglectable nobody, and even with the image of “death”: “He had the air in his hollowness; and neglect of somebody of no account who had been beaten up incidentally, by ill-health or restlessness”; his “dark suit and sloping shoulders reminded” one “uncomfortably of a coffin: and death was in his carious mouth already (Greene 1962: 11). As a matter of fact, the same feel of death and

hollowness in the person of the priest and martyr-to-be is explicitly, or we may say, deliberately re-presented in another mystic, another “martyr,” namely, the political and pseudo-religious Lieutenant of Police.

If Greene’s whisky priest leads a life of “death” as well as “unto death” because of his spiritual “sickness” of self-damnation, then, in the morally superior lieutenant, the novelist offers a similar portrait of a modern figure of self-sacrifice for the “truth” he believes in, which makes him a “martyr” too. Absolutely devoting his life to “loving” people by re-forming the society, which sometimes means crushing life, such as killing hostages for hunting down the priest, this second “martyr” is equally a pathetic sufferer of despair yet without any consciousness of possible salvation in eternity. Religiously speaking, his due damnation, that is, rejection of salvation, is not self-conscious but self-willed. In terms of Kierkegaard, the lieutenant is a representative of a self-damned soul choosing “not to be human,” as he embraces only finitude and disregard completely infinitude, that is, his spirit. Besides putting to death his own infinitude, the lieutenant is also a victim of blindness of his self-sufficiency, believing that with his own hands and self-sacrifice, via living like a “mystic” or perhaps even laying down his life, he can transform and save the society without the need of relying on the “fiction” of a so-called “loving and merciful God” of power. According to Kierkegaard, such self-sufficiency is a typical mindset, indeed blindness, of modern politics, as noted by Nicoletti:

The illusion of human self-sufficiency is based on a vision of the person as capable of infinity. The contradiction lies in posing such a self’s opening to infinity as a political reality without taking into account the finitude of politics. . . . the political sphere cannot satisfy the needs of a being capable of infinity. (189)

In other words, self-sufficiency in the sphere of politics is not truthful but illusionary because it is contradictory for politics, which concerns and pertains to the temporal, finite realm of beings in the world, to claim that it is all possible to accomplish everything by politics. To embrace such a contradiction, i.e., the illusion of self-sufficiency, according to Kierkegaard, is equal to choosing despair, as it fails to accommodate finitude and infinitude synthetically. In short, self-sufficiency means failed synthesis. Thus, being self-sufficient, ironically, means not being a self.

Contrary to the “hollow” priest haunted by the impossible ideal of his religion, i.e., to achieve sainthood by work or moral deeds rather than by the aid of faith as well as divine grace, this self-assured and willful “martyr” of political idealism is preoccupied with vehement repulsion against religion, which is



manifested by his personal belief in the power of politics, more precisely, by his total commitment to the anti-religious ideology of socialist revolution. Ironically, such a belief makes him no less “hollow” than the priest. As revealingly narrated in the passage below, the lieutenant’s political and anti-religious belief brings to his private life—lived like a “mystic” but before no God, let alone so-called divine love—nothing but real experiences of “vacancy,” the haunting consciousness of *death*, and a deep sense of *purposelessness*:

It infuriated him to think that there were still people in the state who believed in a loving and merciful God. There are mystics who are said to have experienced God directly. He was a mystic, too, and what he had experienced was vacancy—a complete certainty in the existence of a dying, cooling world of human beings who had evolved from animals for no purpose at all. He knew. (Greene 1962: 24)

What the self-confident lieutenant fails to know is that the ghost of *despair* within him has turned himself into someone he does not really know. Coming from a traumatic background of deprived childhood, which leads him into becoming a disciple of materialism, the lieutenant is, in truth, a victim of despair symptomatic of desire of death in different forms. Aside from killing the possibility of infinitude and a relationship with a “loving and merciful God,” the lieutenant cherishes some compulsively destructive desire, as laid bare in the psychological description of how he would like to “destroy everything,” such as music, that reminds him of what once being a deprived child felt like:

A radio was playing somewhere: music from Mexico City, or perhaps even from London or New York, filtered into this obscure neglected state. It seemed to him like a weakness: this was his own land, and he would have walled it in with steel if he could, until he had eradicated from it everything which reminded him of how it had once appeared to a miserable child. He wanted to destroy everything: to be alone without any memories at all. (Greene 1962: 24)

Making a “steel” wall for one’s stronghold serving to keep life from “any memories” of the miserable past bespeaks, on one level, the lieutenant’s strong will of self-empowerment. On another level, such a desire and tendency for destruction of life-memories is, in itself, an indication of the lieutenant’s embrace of “death” instead of life. To use the words of the novelist, the lieutenant lives by “stifl[ing] life” (1962: xiv), or, we may add, by a drive to “death.” The pathology of such a death drive, which is seemingly a psychological problem, may be counted as a substantial crisis of existence in terms of Kierkegaard’s religious anthropology. More specifically, the existential crisis in the case of the lieutenant

is reified by his self-surrender to the imprisonment of despair that “walls” him off from such gifts of faith as the promises of life in abundance and eternity.

Building up his own prison of despair out of steel-like willpower, this self-empowered keeper of his “land” and life is portrayed, with an ironical hint, as the devoted contributor of an ultimately *life-stifling* stronghold-prison not only for himself but also for the lives sharing the land with him. On the one hand, the lieutenant’s purposeful vow within his mind to fulfill his socialist and “altruistic” kind of idealism is exposed to readers with the internal monologue delivered at the sight of a boy inside a household the lieutenant passes by after completing his task of executing the priest: “He said to himself: ‘I would do much more for him and them, much more, life is never going to be again for them what it was for me’” (Greene 1962: 265-266). Yet, immediately following such an expression of the lieutenant’s inward vow, motivated by his traumatic memories of the deprived childhood, to advance his fellow people’s living condition to what he believes as social equality and justice, we read: “but the dynamic love which used to move his trigger-finger felt flat and dead. Of course, he told himself, it will come back” (Greene 1962: 265-266). This brief but meaningful afterword of the narrator poignantly reveals that along with the lieutenant’s enactment of the mission—as an executor—by “his trigger-finger” is a profound experience of *death* in his feeling of “the dynamic love” behind all his commitment to reform the society, even by means of putting to death the priest and other innocent scapegoats in the chase. The whole delineation of the lieutenant’s subjective pathos, with feelings of “love” blended with cynicism from the personal experience of social inequality and then mingled with the sense of “death,” prompts us to ask whether the so-called “dynamic love” which “felt flat and dead” after the priest’s death is truly the sustainable momentum for this duty-bound, purpose-driven and self-empowered socialist executor.

To our question, the novelist seems to suggest a possible answer, which can be found in an earlier narration regarding the lieutenant’s state of mind after finally capturing his “prey”:

he felt moody, as though now that the last priest was under lock and key there was nothing left to think about. The spring of action seemed to be broken. He looked back on the weeks of hunting as a happy time which was over now for ever. He felt without a purpose, as if life had drained out of the world. (Greene 1962: 246)

Evidently, what is subtly displayed here concerning the triumphant hunter’s mentality and subjective experience has nothing to do with any momentum of “the dynamic love.” Instead, it conveys a genuine and profoundly nihilistic sense of purposelessness and even life-lessness. Why on earth does the “selfless”

idealism, or the deeply-felt “dynamic love” driving this mystic-lieutenant and executor to pursue his socialist dream, end up with nothing but *nothing*, i.e., no meaning or purpose or life? Viewed from the perspective informed by Kierkegaard’s religious-existential concept of despair, the lieutenant’s ultimate loss of purposefulness and even a sense of life in his subjective consciousness designates the very truth about his selfhood—that his full dedication to a “religious” call from his political ideology ultimately proves the subjective truth of his *despair*. In other words, as a pursuer and practitioner of socialist idealism, the lieutenant is ultimately a martyr-figure superficially leading a life of “self-sacrifice” but actually “stifling life” itself along with the possibility of becoming a *self*.

With the above explorations of the selfhood of both the whisky priest and the idealistic lieutenant, we can definitely hold that Greene’s novel indeed presents two counter-part but similar “martyrs.” Enemies to each other as they are, their self-sacrifice/martyrdom, nevertheless, bears common relevance to a Kierkegaardian sense of “self-lessness” due to *despair*, which, understood reversely, means to have the opposite existential possibility of faith/life annulled. Based on this understanding, their journeys toward fulfilling either religious or political purposes and duties—even to *death*—are not crossed just because the two “martyr” or “pilgrim” figures get involved in, so to speak, a deadly cat-and-mouse chase. In fact, their “pilgrimages” are significantly overlapped because their inward journeys into “martyrdom” are similarly laden with “sickness unto death.” To put it in another way, moving toward their “martyrdom,” both of the two martyr-figures embark on a similar journey *unto death*—not in the sense of their readiness to sacrifice life, but in the sense that within their life-journeys, or if we may, “pilgrimages,” they actually experience “death” more or less. Such a subjective experience of “death” prior to death, according to Kierkegaard, does not refer to the loss of mortal life, or human finitude; rather, it is equal to lacking a self, or, spirit, to have human finitude and infinitude synthetically sustained not by human beings’ willpower but by the faith in the divine power of God. From this Kierkegaardian interpretation of their ways to “martyrdom,” we can infer that to view either the priest or the lieutenant as a sort of *self-less* “martyr” is perfectly legitimate—as long as we are aware at the same time of the irony in the novelist’s portrayal of their selfhood.

### **Conclusion: The Underlying “Power” and “Glory”**

AFTER the above exploration of the priest’s and the lieutenant’s selfhood, a further question emerges, that is: Why does the novel present two martyr figures of *despair*, instead of one only? A close response to this question seems elicitable

from the novelist's own explanation: "I had to invent him [the lieutenant] as a counter to the failed priest: the idealistic police officer who *stifled life* from the best possible motives, the drunken priest who *continued to pass life on*" (Greene 1962: xiv, emphases added). In this thought-provocative remark on what ultimately differentiates the whisky priest and the idealistic lieutenant, particularly intriguing to the present study is its highlighted concern with what their work contrarily does to "life."

Concerning what is meant by Greene's idea that the priest-martyr eventually "continued to pass life on," we find that Greene's affirmation is often and quite rightly echoed by the criticisms, such as Brennan's highlight of the failed priest's "ultimately inspiring" martyrdom that is followed by the "unnamed new arrival" of another priest, thereby "ensuring...the unending cycle of missionary work" (73). Yet, if we take the narrative evidence of a new priest's arrival to mean literally the continuation of "missionary work" passed on from one (dead) priest to another, we will miss out on the potentially deeper meaning of the "life" addressed by Greene that is triumphantly passed on by the whisky priest. Actually, besides referring to the undying impact of the priest's martyrdom, we may as well turn our attention to the intended contrast in the portrayal of the two martyr figures, or, we may say, to their martyrdom of discrepancy. In the part of the lieutenant, his self-less dedication to social revolution and regeneration through stamping out the Church and executing the last priest makes him a political "martyr" indeed, and yet such "martyrdom" leads to his hopeless experiences of loss, on the top of which is the loss of existential possibility of "being a self" and living a life of hope rather than despair. Contrarily, in the whisky priest's case, the ending of his becoming a martyr is presented with certain promising differences, seeing that for all the un-becoming effects of "despair" upon the priest's life of multiple failures, this flawed priest does not totally lose his battle either against "despair" or in the fulfillment of his priesthood and martyrdom.

Implicit but strong evidence of such positive thinking of the priest and his struggles, other than inspiring a newcomer to follow in his footsteps, can be seen in the vivid description of the priest's feelings and thoughts in "the morning of his death":

He couched on the floor with the empty brandy flask in his hand trying to remember an act of contrition, 'O God, I am sorry and beg pardon for all my sins . . . crucified . . . worthy of Thy dreadful punishments.' He was confused, his mind was on other things: it was not the good death for which one always prayed. He caught sight of his own shadow on the cell wall: it had a look of surprise and grotesque

unimportance. . . . What an impossible fellow I am, he thought, and how useless. I have done nothing for anybody. I might just as well have never lived. . . . perhaps he wasn't really Hell-worthy. Tears poured down his face: he was not at the moment afraid of damnation—even the fear of pain was in the background. He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed. With nothing at all. It seemed to him at that moment that it would be quite easy to have been a saint. . . . He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted—to be a saint. (Greene 1962: 250-251)

Barely able to focus on “an act of contrition” and tormented by shattering senses of “unimportance,” “uselessness,” and “disappointment,” the priest comes to see at last the truth about himself—not authentically lived and to him, not even “Hell-worthy.” However, at this moment of lamenting the irreversibly wasted life, the sinful priest, now painfully and genuinely repentant, still held onto the belief that he would “go to God,” albeit “empty-handed.” Furthermore, arguably, the priest’s ultimate realization that “to be a saint” is the foremost task in life did not come from nowhere; rather, the epiphany-like thought tellingly suggests that, to use a fitting expression in *The Sickness unto Death*, he “became decisively and eternally conscious as spirit, as self” (Kierkegaard 1980: 26-27) before God. Accordingly, we may infer that the moment of this epiphany comes along with the repentant priest’s ultimate turn against his *despair*, for now more than ever, he has genuine *faith* and becomes a self before God. In light of this, to our questioning about the paradoxical portrayal of the failed priest becoming a genuine martyr, we can now affirm (with Kierkegaard) that ultimately the priest’s way to martyrdom is fulfilled through an opposite turn from despair—*into life*. Moreover, it may also be argued that the priest eventually deserves to be regarded as a *gloriously* “genuine martyr” not simply because of his “persistent loyalty to his vocation” (Lodge 25) but more importantly, by his authentic act of faith demonstrated in his painful yet deeply spiritual repentance. In other words, it is not exactly “the pain of sin” (Lamba 23) or “the unreserved gift of [his] life for the Divine cause” (Brennan 72) but rather his spirit of repentance that makes the priest a true martyr and above all, a *self*. Ultimately, the priest’s martyrdom is not a portrait of *death* of hopeless shame, as thought by the priest himself, but the portrait of a *life* of faith, who comes to the truth that God is the ultimate salvation for human beings, and thus the only valuable life to live is “to be a saint”—to live by divine grace and faith instead of despair.

Through such a Kierkegaardian re-estimation of Greene’s portrayal of the flawed priest with his selfhood once lost *unto death* and ultimately transfigured into, to borrow the well-put phrase of Jon Stewart, “a life of faith” (582), we can

clearly see how Greene portrays another martyr figure, the idealistic lieutenant, in crucial difference. Despite their commonality of leading a life of despair, the atheistic lieutenant is a total contrast to the priest, especially in terms of the latter's repentance of the wasted life of sin as well as his eventual progress into "the Fullest Time" of "the Truth," i.e., a moment referred to in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* as "decisive and filled with the Eternal" (1962: 22). To put it in another way, the contrast between the two martyr figures is manifested by the fact that one ended up "being a true self" (Stewart 582) and martyr, while the other, as fittingly profiled in Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*,

went on living so deceived by life's...sorrows that he never became... conscious as spirit, as self, or, what amounts to the same thing, never became aware and in the deepest sense never gained the impression that there is a God and the 'he,' he himself, his self, exists before this God. (1980: 26-27)

One Kierkegaard scholar, Michael Steinmetz, rings very true in referring to this pathetic profile as "the utter tragedy" of living "the 'spiritless' life of despair" (46). Indeed, in this second martyr figure—a political "mystic," "self-less" communist-revolutionary, and obstinate opponent of the Church and the God-belief, a portrait of "martyrdom" is discernibly connected with a tragic project of selfhood, one that not only "stifles life" but also suppresses possibility of salvation. In terms of such striking contrast between the two figures of martyr, does it mean that the lieutenant ought to be seen more "Hell-worthy" than the priest?

Greene in an interview once refuted the misunderstanding of the "superficial readers" that he is a novelist "fascinated by damnation," proclaiming that "nobody in [his] books is damned," and "the possibility of...salvation is left open" even to those trying to damn themselves. Interestingly, to support what he said, Greene then referred to "the priest's final words" to comment that "nobody, not even the Church, knows enough about divine love and judgment to be sure that anyone's in hell" (Greene 2019: 19). This understanding of divine salvation as *an open and true possibility* even for those "who damn themselves" can surely be applied to his whisky priest, who eventually acknowledges the vital importance of striving in life "to be a saint." Yet, attempting to ascertain whether Greene's religious view of salvation as an open possibility or Kierkegaard's idea about turning to faith/becoming a self for healing of despair is applicable to the anti-religious lieutenant is a considerably harder challenge. With Greene, our answer could be: nobody knows. with Kierkegaard, perhaps we can modify our answer to be a little more positive: life means possibility. In fact, either "answer" points at a shared understanding of divine salvation, given that one gestures at

the ultimacy of “divine love and judgment,” and the other counts salvation as possibility. What they share, more specifically, is the conviction that thanks to divine grace, salvation ultimately transcends human understanding, expectation, and judgment. Indeed, it is based on such a conviction that we can legitimately take “the priest’s final words” to mean his ultimate “conversion” from a life of despair into the hope of salvation. Such a hope transcends time, politics and even the Church, represented respectively by life of the past, religious persecution, and priesthood. In the same vein, we may, therefore, hold it *possible* for the lieutenant to experience the hope of life and salvation which ultimately does not lie in politics but in divine grace.

Moreover, in the light of salvation as possibility and hope of a *transcendent* rather than *worldly* order and equally applicable to the priest and the lieutenant, indeed, to any human existence, we can make a further inference that “the power and the glory” embedded within Greene’s portrayals of the two martyr figures must pertain to the divine, rather than the religious or the political. In fact, the *transcendent* meaning of “the power and the glory” underlying Greene’s novel finds an explicit echo in the novelist’s statement of his intent of writing the novel, that is, “to oppose the power of the sacraments and the indestructibility of the Church on the one hand with, on the other, the merely temporal power of an essentially Communist state” (2008: 206). Discernibly, for the Church to remain “indestructible” and its “sacraments” to be powerful, in contrast to the Government that is “merely temporal,” it takes “the power and the glory” that pertains to neither the worldly nor the temporal but what is transcendent and eternal, precisely the aforementioned *divine grace*, or to use Ricoeur’s notion, “the absolute.”

To support this association between the title of Greene’s religious and political novel and the grace of divine salvation, St. Paul’s confession of faith may shed meaningful light:

And he [Christ] said unto me, My grace is sufficient to thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (2 Corinthians 12.9)

For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious. (2 Corinthians 3.11)

In light of this confession of faith, it is certainly true to see how Greene’s whisky priest fails in living a faith like a saint. For one thing, up to the very last moment of his life, this failed priest cannot get rid of his pathetic sense of shame as well as self-depreciation. Nevertheless, the wish he makes at the end— “to be a saint”

—can be taken as a revealing sign of how he finally decides to (re)turn to the authentic life of faith, i.e., to live in spirit and become a self before his God—in spite of all his failures and “infirmities.” In this sense, we may justifiably view the priest as sharing St. Paul’s understanding of “the power and the glory” pertaining to his Savior. As to the lieutenant, the self-willed atheist as well as self-sufficient idealist, it seems out of the question that he could possibly share the saint’s faith; nor are we presented in the novel with any sign of his possible turn from a state of despair to existing *a self*, in the Kierkegaardian sense. Still, as revealed by St. Paul’s conviction of the divine grace for helping him tackle whatever weaknesses he struggles with, the power of the Redeemer, in term of the Christian faith, can make the impossible turn, or change, possible—from shame or pride—into the witness of the glory of His grace. If we hold such a *possibility* as true, which is a belief shared between St. Paul and Kierkegaard and probably also Greene, we may proceed to understand Greene’s title “the power and the glory” as indeed referring to what Greene said, the “indestructibility of the Church” and its “sacraments,” with the notion of “indestructibility” pointing to the eternal and transcendent salvation promised to the life of faith. Certainly, it is not any faith in humans or (worldly) religion or politics, but a Paulian sense of faith in “that which remains.” With this understanding of what “the power and the glory” signifies in Greene’s novel about the two kindred but contrasted types of martyrdom, we may make a further estimation of Graham Greene’s achievement in *The Power and the Glory*. That is, our Catholic and political novelist indeed manages to present a truthful testimony to the powerful sacraments and the indestructible Church—what Ricoeur terms as “the sign of the absolute.”



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# A Kierkegaardian Interpretation of Two Portraits of Martyrdom in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to do a Kierkegaardian reading of *The Power and the Glory*, a religious and political novel featured by unorthodox and paradoxical portrayals of two “self-less” martyr-figures to represent Church and Communist Government—a sinful priest faced with (undeserved) martyrdom and an anti-religious but “mystic-like” lieutenant of political idealism. Through the lens of Kierkegaard’s thoughts about authenticity of being a martyr and becoming a “self” as the spiritual antidote to despair, or, “sickness unto death,” this paper means to explore the novel’s related themes of martyrdom, selfhood, despair, and salvation by interpreting its intriguing representation of the priest and the lieutenant as two “martyrs” of some “kindred spirit.”

To wrestle with the intriguing question about the “kinship” between the two opponents, Kierkegaard’s religious-existential ideas about pathology and potentiality of subjective existence, specifically his conceptions of despair, self, and salvation as existential possibilities, are appropriated to probe into the meanings of death and martyrdom and the truth about the two central characters’ selfhood. Key questions for investigation include: Does the priest embrace death before he dies as a martyr? Does a life unto death (despair) or a pilgrimage into life (faith) ultimately define this sinful priest’s selfhood and martyrdom? Being a “saint-like” and self-made “martyr,” does the lieutenant, self-sufficient and “selfless” as he is, have a self for sacrifice at all? Whose martyrdom, the priest’s or the lieutenant’s, possibly promises salvation even to the “martyr” himself?

To further this Kierkegaardian interpretation by seeking to grasp the novel’s title, Greene’s declaration of his intent to contrast the “indestructible” Church and the “temporal” Government deserves serious consideration. Moreover, with light gained from St. Paul’s confession of faith, the study reaches the conclusion that “the power and the glory” of salvation ultimately pertain to “that which remains,” rather than politics or religion.

**KEYWORDS:** Martyrdom, Selfhood, Despair, *The Power and the Glory*, Kierkegaard