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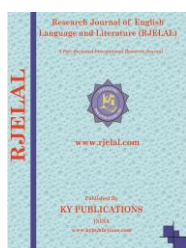
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## TWENTIETH CENTURY RELIGIOUS VIEW ON SINCLAIR LEWIS' *ELMER GANTRY*

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### ABSTRACT

This research describes the life of postmodern American society around the middle of the 20th century. The journey of the American nation as a British immigrant to a new world which is now known as the American continent; based on the desire to obtain freedom to practice religion (the doctrine of Puritanism) and to improve the standard of living of the economy, gradually experienced a shift in values, even significant changes in the process of religious life.

The development of technology and the economic prosperity of America in the 1920s inspired many citizens and even clergy, to make the most money to meet the needs of consumerism and materialism as a hallmark of post-modern society life. Elmer Gantry, as a storyteller, with the wishes of his beloved mother, has changed from a drunkard and seductress to a religious figure. However, in carrying out his vision as a religious figure, with the expertise he had succeeded in influencing every person who heard his sermon to give a donation. Unfortunately, the money earned by Elmer Gantry was spent on spree with several female partners who often changed. Without realizing it, Elmer Gantry's actions can already be categorized as moral decadence that contradicts his profession as an evangelist.

Keywords: Evangelical practices, moral decadence, religious pluralism, paradoxical attitude.

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. The Background of the Study

Historically, America was built by immigrants who came from different countries, mainly from England, as the result of religious persecution in around the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Basically, they came into the New Land in order to have free religious system and to improve their economic life. The immigrants started their own colony from the East into the West. In the New Land, America, they introduced Puritanism to each of immigrants who arrived in America (Fossum, 1981 ).

Religion is any cultural system of designated behaviors and practices, world views, texts,

sanctified places, ethics, or organizations, that relate humanity to the supernatural or transcendental (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>). It is a norm that guides the society with many kinds of regulations related to the problems believed, even the religion is often trusted as God's divine revelation. Nevertheless, the truth and holiness conveyed in religious doctrine is often put aside by the people with some reasons. The reasons sometimes emerge because the people always think about himself or herself. In other word, we can say that they tend to be egoistic and even to do illegal or irrational actions that may disturb the existence of other people. Finally, it grows something problem which is contradictory with the religious doctrine.

Ralph H. Gabriel in his book *American Values : Continuity and Change*, mentioned that from 1815 to 1914, "The rise of interest in religion stands out as one of the most conspicuous aspects of an age of anxiety. Evidence for this interest appears on every hand; the list of best-selling books, the station coverage of religious television programs, the Sunday congregations in synagogues and churches. A conference on religion and education reflects the felt needs of the times" ( 1974 : 120 ).

Literary works, are not merely the writers' own imaginations, they also function as the imitation of social life condition. Shortly, they are the portrait of the people seen precisely based on the setting. Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, describes the real condition of American people in the early twentieth century. Through the novel, Sinclair Lewis criticizes the religious condition as well as the moral failure and moral decadence of Christian people through irrational evangelism practices.

In this research I find out the existence of modern technology to improve American economic abundance in one side, and the influence of modern technology that may change the American way of life in the other side. In addition, I try to analyze how the American solved their own problem in order to stabilize their faith in understanding and realizing that "*religion was actually the basic foundation of American life especially the spiritual origins of American culture*" (Gabriel, 1974 ).

### **B. The Problems of the Study**

In this study, there are some problems which are necessary to be discussed in relation with the religious practices that may influence the characteristic and behavior of the society in America. As a researcher, I formulate the problems of the study as follows :

1. What are the influences of post modernism on the religious practices as well as religious phenomena in America ?
2. What are the illegal religious practices done by the Evangelists through evangelism ?

### **C. The Objective of the Study**

Based on some explanations in the background of the study, the objective of analyzing Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, are as follows :

- 1.To find out an the influence of postmodernism on the religious practices as well as religious phenomena in America.
2. To find out the illegal religious practices done by the Evangelists through evangelism.

### **D. The Theoretical Approach**

In literary study, interpreting or analyzing literary work, we may implement two theories; i.e. the Intrinsic and Extrinsic approach ( Abrams, 1979 ). By intrinsic theory, it is a theory which is used to analyze literary work based on the text or aspects of the story. In the mean time, the extrinsic theory is used to analyze the literary work by using other aspects outside the text of the story, such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, social and cultural background. In this analysis, I especially use the combination between the intrinsic and extrinsic theory.

## **II. THE SOCIAL CONDITION OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY**

The social condition of the American people in the early twentieth century was mainly involved by the economic prosperity, religious pluralism and liberalism in many sectors. Particularly, in economic sector it tends to grow capitalism, where the people earn money easily. Having much money, the people can certainly do many cases they wish to be in fulfilling their daily economic lives.

In addition, the slogan of American Dream of success as the American historian, James Truslow Adams, stated that "*dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement*" ( Fossum, 1981 : 6). This idea will automatically encourage and inspire the American people to earn money as much as they could without realizing that the actions they have already done are contradictory to the moral or religious concept. Like Fitzgerald's view on American people through his novel, *Great Gatsby* (1925 ), he portrays

Jay Gatsby as a young man who fled the Midwest ( in the novel a symbol of a more innocent America ) pursue his dream of success in the East based on his own way.

The majority of American people is very proud of the religious freedom owned by their society. In one side, we know that religious pluralism emerges the tolerance among the religious people. In other side, however, it will create a business, even radical competition that will make the people to be confused, even to have an absurd action.

Both in the condition of competition and confusion, the churches' leaders usually try to improve evangelism in order to attract the interest of the people as well as the followers to enter the church and be the member of their church. Fulfilling this effort, they certainly need evangelists who are able to attract the people to be the member of their church. This situation is well conveyed by Gaustad in his book *Dissent in America Religion* as follows :

"The church may do other things; it may be other things; but if it is evangelical it will see its prime task always as that of saving soul. This "Churches whose religion is the Bible" must therefore be distinguished from 'all those sects that either renounce or fail faithfully to exhibit the fundamental and saving truths of the Gospel'. It is characteristic of these nonevangelical churches that they honor tradition more than convert, they in fact introduce "another Gospel". ...The evangelicals include Presbyterians (his own denomination), Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, Dutch Reformed, Moravians, Quackers, and Episcopalians. The nonevangelicals, ...included Roman Catholics, Unitarians, Universalists, Swedenborgians, Jews, Mormons, deists, and other" ( Gaustad, 1973: 22, 23).

Based on the quotation above, Gaustad finds that there are two basics of religion in America, evangelical and nonevangelical. He describes that Baptist and Methodist Church, tend to be evangelical in which main goal is to spread of the Gospel for the safety of human beings. The spread

of the Gospel is infact one of the best ways to improve human faith and it would be a good effort to prevent and fade the wickedness away.

### III.THE PARADOX IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

The paradox attitude in religious life is actually indicated by a pretense way which seems to be seriously doing the religious activities as well as teaching and spreading the Scripture, however, it will not change the mind which tends to keep doing bad deed.

According to the novel, firstly, Elmer Gantry is Christian and be a member of Baptist Church. He was unfortunately unemployed as a Reverend of the church, therefore he turns his mind to Methodist. It is a good time and chance for him to make his goals to be real-life in this church.

Although he is christian, his morality is, indeed contradictory with the christian dogma. The novel expresses that at the time Elmer was still studying at Terwilinger College, he is the man who likes visiting bar and is very fond of making love affair with some different women. This is the background of his life in the college, to which prepares him a holy profession as a reverend who has to spread the *Holy Bible* to all the people in the world.

The barroom was deliciously calming. The sour invigorating stench of beer made him feel healthy. The bar was one long shimmer of beauty—glowing mahogany, exquisite marble rail, dazzling glasses, curiously shaped bottles of unknown liqueurs, piled with a craftiness which made him very happy. The light was dim, completely soothing, coming through fantastic windows such are found only in churches, saloons, jewelry shops, and other retreats from reality. On the brown plaster walls were sleek naked girls.

He turned from them. He was empty now of desire for women ( Lewis, 1960 : 6-7).

On the other hand, something surprised the American people that among the students who

prepared to be evangelist, as well as a holy church worker, has moral turpitude which is never improved. We have to realize that, through education, it will create the cleverness among the people. Without being realized, sometimes one's cleverness will lessen his or her faith on the existence of God. However, as a church worker or evangelists, it should enable him to improve the truth and the existence of the *Holy Bible* to the people especially the Christ followers. This condition is described in the following quotation :

"Sementara itu, tokoh-tokoh penting sastra di antara generasi Amerika yang mulai meningkat menjadi dewasa sangat kecewa dengan gereja-gereja. Mungkin kritik paling efektif adalah novel Sinclair Lewis, *Elmer Gantry*. Gantry adalah seorang yang setengahnya penjual obat dan setengahnya giat melakukan usaha keagamaan, yang kadang-kadang bersungguh-sungguh kadang-kadang dangkal. Sebagai pendeta yang berpindah-pindah gereja dan berganti-ganti pasangan seksual, ia dapat menjadi seorang modernis, lalu revivalis, dan/atau penggerak reformasi menurut kebutuhan sesaat" (Marsden, 1996 : 277)

The novel also criticizes the students' own personality in the Missionary College, where some of them, include Elmer Gantry, enter the school without their own will. This situation is illustrated by Sinclair Lewis in the following quotation :

His mother was wringing his hand, begging, "Oh, won't you come ? Won't you make your old mother happy ? Let yourself know the joy of surrender to Jesus!" She was weeping, old eyes puckered, and in her weeping was his every recollection of winter dawns when she had let him stay in bed and brought porridge to him across the icy floor; winter evenings when he had awakened to find her still stitching; and that confusing intimidating hour, in the abyss of his first memories, when he had seen

her shaken beside a coffin that contained a cold monster in the shape of his father ( Lewis, 1960 :51 - 52 ).

Lately, there was a tendency among the parents of Toba Batak people to ask their children (usually if the children are not smart and have bad attitude) to enter Missionary School. Hoping that one time, the children will be clever and have good attitude. The same problems also happened in the story of the novel being analyzed as follows :

Eddie flushed most satisfactorily when he saw Elmer from the pulpit, started to bow, checked it, looked in the general direction of Heaven, and tried to smile condescendingly. He was nervous at the beginning of his sermon, but apparently he determined that his attack on sin – which hitherto had been an academic routine with no relation to any of his appallingly virtuous flock – might be made real. With his squirrel-toothed and touching earnestness he looked down at Elmer and as good as told him to go to hell and be done with it. But he thought better of it, and concluded that God might be able to give even Elmer Gantry another chance if Elmer stopped drinking, smoking, blaspheming, and wearing checked suits ( Lewis, 1960 : 162-163).

However, without being realized, their lives are contradictory to the lessons got from the school and will automatically have different perception in understanding the Gospel. As a father and mother, they have a great expectation that their children will be smart and beneficial for the people surrounding. However, not all our expectations are directly accepted by God, as it is stated in *The Holy Bible*, "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Mat. 22:14).

Elmer Gantry is one of the students who enters the Missionary School by her mother's encouragement and will. How proud and happy the mother is, when she witnesses her own son, Elmer Gantry, who preaches in front of the audiences.

"I was so proud-I've never known anybody to really wrestle with the Lord like you did. Oh, Elmy, you'll stay true? You've made your old mother so happy! All my life I've sorrowed, I've waited, I've prayed, and now I shan't ever sorrow again! Oh, you will stay true?"

He threw the last of his emotional reserve into a ringing. "You bet I will, Ma!" and kissed her good-night (Lewis, 1960 :56).

The paradoxical attitude can be seen in Elmer's character, we find that he is so clever and has the capability in preaching, hence he can attract the interest of the people to attend the church and listen to his preaches. In contrast, he is a man who doesn't have self-control as well as unable to practice the religious dogma with his everyday life activities.

Jim suddenly sat up, turned up the wick. He was red-nosed, red-eyed, and coughing. He stared, and unmoving, by the table, Elmer stared back.

Jim spoke abruptly :

"You son of a sea-cook! You've gone and done it ! You've been saved! You've let them hornswoggle you into being a Baptist witch-doctor! I'm through! You can go—to heaven!"

...Elmer slept four hours and went out, staggering with weariness, to bring cinnamon buns, a wienie sandwich, and a tin pail of coffee for Jim's breakfast. They were laboring windily into new arguments, Jim a little more stubborn, Elmer ever more irritable, when no less a dignitary than President the Rev. Dr. Willoughby Quarles, chin whisker, glacial shirt, bulbous waistcoat and all, plunged in under the fat soft wing of the landlady.

..."Oh, Brother Elmer, that was a brave thing you did! I have never seen a braver! For a great strong man of your gladiatorial powers to not be afraid to humble himself!

And your example will do a great deal of good, a grrrrreat deal of good! And we must catch and hold it. You are to speak at the Y.C.M.A. tonight –special meeting to reinforce the results of our wonderful Prayer Week."

"Oh, gee, President. I can't!" Elmer groaned.

"Oh, yes, Brother, you must. You must! It's already announced. If you'll go out within the next hour, you'll be gratified to see posters announcing it all over the town!"

"But I can't make a speech!"

"The Lord will give the words if you give the good will! I myself shall call for you at a quarter to seven. God bless you!" (Lewis, 1960 : 58-59 ).

Actually Elmer Gantry's contradictory behavior with religious doctrine has already stated when he was still a student at Terwillinger College. This condition was illustrated by Sinclair Lewis in the following quotations :

Elmer Gantry was drunk. He was eloquently drunk, lovingly and pugnaciously drunk. He leaned against the bar of the Old Home Sample Room, the most gilded and urbane saloon in Cato, Missouri, and requested the bartender to join him in "The Good Old Summer Times," the waltz of the day.

Blowing on a glass, polishing it and glancing at Elmer through its flashing rotundity, the bartender remarked that he wasn't much of a hand at this here sing business. But he smiled. No bartender could have done other than smile on Elmer, so inspired and full of gallantry and hell-raising was he, and so dominating was his beefy grin (Lewis, 1960 : 5 ).

#### **IV.EVANGELISM AS ONE OF THE WAYS TO DESTROY AND PREVENT WICKEDNESS**

Based on previous discussion, there are two basic kinds of religion in America; they are evangelical and nonevangelical. The main purpose of evangelism in this case, however , is not more than



religious task, but as the way to glorify God by spreading the Holy Scripture to all the people. By getting religious teaching from the evangelists, the people's own mind will automatically be changeable from bad into good attitude.

We understand that the efforts of evangelicalare extremely dominated by the workers' good spirit as well as the evangelists and the churches' members especially in financial support.

The Holy Bible in 2 Kor.9:6-7 states that:

(6) 'But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully.

(7) Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let me give; not grudgingly, or necessity : for God loveth a cheerful giver'.

The above statement reminds us not to be hesitant of giving donation to the evangelical works, but we have to participate in the work itself for the glory of God. The work, is not only the evangelists' own task but it also belongs to all the religious people. Therefore, if we have much money, we have to put it aside and donate to the church as one the ways to glorify God.

When Elmer Gantry tries to destroy the wickedness in the society, Elmer seems to have a hypocritical attitude. In chapter 25-27, it describes Elmer's activity to promote him self, so he is regarded to be a good evangelist who is able to destroy the wickedness among the people. By this promotion, he expects that both his profession and salary will be improved in the future. Having followedby the assistance of the detective, they try to find the places of the vases, and Elmer is successful to lead the operation. The result of the operation, is then spreaded through newspaper, so his success is known by many people. This condition was portrayedby Sinclair Lewis, the author of this novel, as follows :

Elmer's metaphysical lecture, entitled "Whoa Up, Youth!" with its counsel about abstinent, chastity, industry, and honesty, its heaven-vaulting poetic passage about Love (the only bow on life's dark cloud, the

morning and the evening star ), and its anecdote of his fight to save a college-mate named Jim from drink and atheism, became one of the classics among Chautauqua masterpieces.

And Elmer better than any one else among the Talent (except perhaps the gentleman who played national anthems on water glasses, a Lettishgentleman innocent of English ) side stepped on the question of the K.K.K.

The new Ku Klux Klan, an organization of the fathers, younger brothers, and employees of the men who had succeeded and became Rotarians, had just become a political difficulty. Many of the most worthy Methodist and Baptist clergymen supported it and were supported by it; and personally Elmer admired its principle—to keep all foreigners, Jews, Catholics, and Negroes in their place, which was no place at all, and let the country be led by native Protestants, like Elmer Gantry.

But he perceived that in the cities there were prominent people, nice people, rich people, even among the Methodist and Baptists, who felt that a man could be a Jew and still an American citizen. It seemed to him more truly American, also a lot safer, to avoid the problem. So everywhere he took a message of reconciliation to the effect :

"Regarding religious, political, and social organizations, I defend the right of every man in our free American citizen to demand that such an organization shall not dictate his mode of thought or, so long as it be moral, his mode pf conduct."

That pleased both the K.K.K. and the opponents of the K.K.K., and everybody admired Elmer's power of thought.

He came with a boom and a flash to the town of Black-foot Creek, Indiana, and there the local committee permitted the Methodist minister, one Andrew Pengilly,

to entertain his renowned brother priest (Lewis, 1960 : 378-379 ).

By the assistance of the detective, they try to find the places of the vases, and Elmer is successful to lead the operation. The result of the operation, is then spreaded through newspaper, so his success is known by many people.

However, his success is only the external point of view which can be seen from Elmer's activities. Personally, all these efforts do not improve his own morality. He keeps being ambitious and makes love with some women, even though it is a moral turpitude for a christian people, more over as a reverend.

The description of Elmer's own hypocrisy and immorality that is covered by his profession and efforts to destroy wickedness, becomes a serious criticism toward the hypocrisy of the evangelical works in America up to the middle of twentieth century.

It is the existence of a bad christian people who is regarded to be Jesus's followers, however they just confess Christ in good words through pray, song, and other activities, but the main purpose is far from being expected and done by Christ during His life in the earth, who is ready to sacrifice Himself for all of the human beings' immortality. The implementation of evangelisms, therefore, was really contradictory with the practices of the evangelists, as it is described in the following quotations :

Oh, yes, I am singularly blessed! But, uh, but – Given these people, who really do the work, we've been able to put over some pretty good things – with God's leading. Why, say, we've started the only class in show-window dressing in any church in the United States – and I should suppose England and France! We've already seen the most wonderful results, not only in raising the salary of several of the fine young men in our church, but in increasing business throughout the city and improving the appearance of show-windows, and you know how much that adds to the beauty of

the down-town streets! And the crowds do seem to be increasing steadily. We had over eleven hundred present on my last Sunday evening in Zenith, and that in Summer! And during the season we often have nearly eighteen hundred! And with all modesty – it's not my doing but the methods we're working up – I think I may say that every man, woman, and child goes away happy and yet with a message to sustain 'em through the week. You see – oh, of course I give 'em the straight old-time gospel in my sermon – I'm not the least bit afraid of talking right up to 'em and reminding them of the awful consequences of sin and ignorance and spiritual sloth. Yes, sir! No blinking the horrors of the old-time proven Hell, not in any church I'm running! But also we make 'em get together, and their pastor is just one of their own chums, and we sing cheerful, confronting songs, and do they like it ? Say! It shows up in the collections!"

"Mr. Gantry," said Andrew Pengilly, "Why don't you believe in God ?"( Lewis, 1960 : 380-381 ).

## **V. CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the analysis above, we can take some information that can be considered as the conclusions, they are as follows :

1. Religious phenomena in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was described by the existence of religious pluralism, religious liberalism and the existence of the churches' democracy. This reality was actually influenced the American people as well as the evangelists to be competitive by way of business as well money oriented in attracting the people to be the churches' members through the evangelism activities started from America into many countries around the world
2. In effort to attract the interest of the society to be a church member through the evangelism activities, there were so many

priests and evangelists who were not responsible and loyal for their task to be a good preacher. Behind the holy task, they have already been involved with many immoral actions and moral decadence such as making love with some of women, and enriching himself by doing corruption. The deception was finally acceptable by the congregations because of their smartness and capability in doing the holy responsibility to implement his personal ambition.

3. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century was noted as the American economic abundance, and the improvement of technology. This era was automatically helpful for each of the individual as well as the American society to inform evangelism activities around the world.
4. By writing *Elmer Gantry*, the writer, Sinclair Lewis wants us to save our soul, to see the light and to know all about heaven, but not about Elmer's own whiskey and women.

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