

MICHAEL ODOM

## How to Win Friends and Convert People: Onnie Jay Holy and the Sales Culture of American Evangelicalism

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If you want to get anywheres in religion, you got to keep it sweet. You got good idears but what you need is an artist-type to work with you. (Onnie Jay Holy in *Wise Blood*, CW 89)

In her essay “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” Flannery O’Connor contends that the duty of a fiction writer is to make her vision apparent by exaggerating societal distortions that a reading audience has come to regard as natural. O’Connor believed that Christian novelists like herself wrote in territory consisting largely of unbelieving audiences who were hostile to religious faith; consequently, distortions should be employed to startle spiritually complacent readers. In what might be her most cited prose, O’Connor argues that when a Christian writer determines that her audience does not share the same beliefs, she must make her “vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures” (CW 805-06). The territory has shifted since O’Connor wrote her essay, which has led me to wonder how her fiction might speak to an evangelical reading audience that, in many respects, has emerged into the mainstream of American culture. Walker Percy, another Catholic novelist from the South who shared many of O’Connor’s religious concerns as a writer, lived long enough to witness the emergence of evangelical Christianity into the mainstream of American culture. Percy’s novel *The Second Coming* arrived seasonably in 1980 with the rise of the Christian right; signaling this emergence, the protagonist Will Barrett returns home to the North Carolina of Billy Graham “where everybody was a Christian and found unbelief unbelievable” (156). In a novel chiefly concerned with religious inquiry, *The Second Coming* presents a southern culture of evangelical hegemony. Will states that he might find Christianity more compelling if only there were fewer Christians around; illustrating his point, Will writes to a friend, “Have you ever lived in the midst of fifteen million Southern Baptists?” (188).<sup>1</sup>

With the belief that O’Connor’s fiction still has something to say in a territory that is now quite at home with Christian faith, this essay shows how her first novel, *Wise Blood*, provides distortions that startle an evangelical audience whose vision has been dulled in its engagement with American sales culture. To achieve this startling effect, O’Connor created a minor character to function as a satirical distortion of the salesman-evangelist persona that one might observe in contemporary evangelical culture. The key to understanding O’Connor’s *malgré lui* protagonist, Hazel Motes, lies in seeing him as reactionary to the religious indifference he sees around him. Asa Hawks, the speciously blind preacher, functions as a crucial foil to ignite Haze’s backward journey of fulfilling his inherited destiny as a preacher. Haze’s initial obsession with Hawks is due to Asa’s striking contrast with the religiously complacent culture of Taulkinham. Hawks’s seemingly anomalous devotion—crystallized by an alleged act of self-blinding—provides a stumbling block to Haze’s own determination to dismiss the Christian faith. Ironically, when Haze discovers that Hawks is a fraud, he plunges recklessly toward his own conversion while evangelizing

about a new Church Without Christ in his attempts to shock (read: startle) not only the complacent onlookers in Taulkinham, but also the blind street preacher and his assistant Sabbath who hand out tracts and beg the public to give money for Jesus with such ease. Yet Haze's provocative preaching to shock the religious sensibilities of his listeners proves to be an utter failure and, much to his consternation, continually meets with the public's deafening silence of indifference. Other indicators are employed—such as blasphemous exclamations by multiple characters—in more subtle fashion to further illustrate a self-satisfied culture that nettles Haze's Christ-haunted psyche.

One of these more subtle indicators arrives with the introduction of yet another foiling preacher, Onnie Jay Holy (aka, Hoover Shoats).<sup>2</sup> In a chapter nine episode outside a picture show, there are only three people listening as Haze is preaching atop his Essex. Haze's badgering is quite appropriate, revealing much of his disgust with what he perceives as an insipid faith among the people of Taulkinham: “[D]o you care? Are you going to pay any attention to what I've been saying or are you just going to walk off like everybody else?” (CW 84). Most audiences dismiss confrontational evangelists loitering on street corners, but many will stop and listen to an easy, appealing message of reassurance. Enter Holy, who interjects to fill the sentimental void by framing his rhetoric in familiar American sales-speak. Holy serves as a critical contrast by embodying the facile Christian culture that Haze so strongly despises. This essay will trace the evolution of Holy's character through the early unpublished manuscripts of *Wise Blood*, providing readers of O'Connor's first novel an important glimpse into her process of creating such a memorable minor character to engage the cultural and religious themes that evolved over subsequent drafts. Through an examination of the drafts of *Wise Blood*, the evolution of O'Connor's novel will be shown to be one that not only explores but satirizes religion in a culture saturated with marketing and consumerism. An examination of this colorful character provides incisive critiques of an American evangelicalism subsumed by sales culture and demonstrates that while O'Connor might have been sympathetic to evangelicals, readers would be mistaken to perceive her as uncritical of them.

John Turner's recent study provides an eye-opening assessment of the indelible mark that evangelicalism has made upon mainstream American culture. Turner specifically examines this engagement through parachurch organizations that exist alongside institutional congregations. These organizations, what Turner calls “religion gone free enterprise,” possess a unique vitality among the military, college students, and younger families through an appropriation of marketplace practices and creative technological usage (3). Examples of parachurch organizations include Bill Bright's Campus Crusade for Christ, James Dobson's Focus on the Family, Pat Robertson's 700 Club, and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association—all of which generate hundreds of millions annually in revenue. I note the significance of parachurch organizations for two reasons. First, parachurch ministries have functioned to make the most significant evangelical impact in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Turner argues, it is difficult to overstate the significance, influence, and power of evangelicalism in light of its parachurch organizations (3). Second, it is important to note that all religious activity that occurs in O'Connor's *Wise Blood* takes place outside of and beyond the church; in fact, despite all the talk of religion—Christianity, Jesus, souls, conversion—there are no actual churches in the entire novel, only references to them. By possessing a cultural adaptability unfettered by denominational boundaries and bureaucracy, evangelical parachurches alter their strategies of cultural engagement to shape not only the character of religion, but also political policies in many regions in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Evangelicalism's impact upon American culture arose from a conscious commitment to mainstream its methods and identity. The evangelical talent for promoting the faith in familiar yet fresh language can be traced back to the Great Awakening, when George Whitfield advanced pamphlets, sensational press, and advertisements prior to his arrival in towns to preach (Turner 6). This appropriation of technology and media-hype rose to new heights in the Billy Graham Crusades, with its innovative preaching techniques, "barrages of publicity, and the use of emerging media." Today, evangelical art forms amass huge revenue in a country starving for spirituality, which has moved evangelicalism toward the center of American society in a virtual "baptism of American culture" (6).<sup>4</sup> Martin Marty notes that while contemporary evangelicalism may still employ the rhetoric of converting the world and taking the country back for Christ, in reality, it actually "now serves as a means of providing ritual process for applicants to the approved world, in a day when the President of the United States, business leaders, celebrities, athletes, beauty queens, and civic figures attribute their worldly success to the fruits of conversion" (8).<sup>5</sup>

Such mainstream cultural engagement has opened evangelicalism up to scrutiny. R. Laurence Moore contends that a marketplace methodology has sapped evangelicalism's "transformative power" (272-76). While Turner contests Moore on this point, he agrees that compromises have been made by many evangelicals to achieve cultural gains and create a friendly environment for the movement to continue to flourish (7). D. G. Hart argues that this mainstream success has actually proven to be the movement's demise. He contends that the very ease with which the movement has mimicked mainstream consumer culture renders its impact shallow and inconsequential because such assimilation fails to solidify into a generative tradition. An excerpt from Hart's polarizing conclusion is worth quoting at length:

The "ministries" to which born-again Protestants have such easy access on the radio or Internet are brilliant examples of entrepreneurial and organizational genius, but they are also arenas in which celebrities thrive, thus creating genuine obstacles to the formation of a tradition. How does one hand down the celebrity of Billy Graham or a James Dobson, for example? At the same time, the music that born-again Protestants enjoy in the privacy of their cars and homes and to which they sway on Sunday mornings is as dependent on the structures of celebrity as the parachurch. Even Contemporary Christian Music has little to commend itself as a form of tradition. (185)

While Hart's critique appears sound, he proves a bit overeager in declaring the demise of American evangelicalism. If we agree that evangelicalism—through mass media and parachurch ministries—has transformed American culture (and it clearly has), we should also consider how American culture has transformed evangelicalism.

Before engaging in a reading of *Wise Blood* as a critique of evangelicalism, I want to acknowledge the dangers of this approach. O'Connor's preface to the second edition of *Wise Blood* and her many letters and essays make her authorial and thematic intent all too clear.<sup>6</sup> O'Connor's startling figures drawn for a perceived audience of unbelievers demonstrate that she, a Catholic, was sympathetic to the evangelical faith she observed in the Protestant South: "When you write about backwoods prophets, it is very difficult to get across to the modern reader that you take these people seriously, that you are not making fun of them, but that their concerns are your own and, in your judgment, central

to human life" (*MM* 204). Furthermore, O'Connor felt a sense of "kinship" with southern evangelicals and appreciated their fervor and sincere religious feeling (207).<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, O'Connor recognized that the individualistic tendencies of Protestant evangelicalism often produce "distorted images of Christ" that take a believer to "strange places" far away from ancient Christian orthodoxy (*CW* 859). While O'Connor was certainly sympathetic to her fictional evangelical characters, it would be a mistake for readers to minimize or entirely miss the satirical distortions of them.

This is precisely why Michael Kreyling's introduction to *New Essays on Wise Blood* remains crucial, as he asserts that O'Connor's fiction has been canonized by Christian critics due to her oft-discussed Catholic faith in her prose and letters, her untimely death from lupus analogous to martyrdom, and her obvious scorn for those who misread her fiction in a way that was not aligned with her own religious views (3). All these factors have ensured a dominant segment of O'Connor criticism to be religious, often narrowing O'Connor criticism to Christian apologetics and leaving little to no room at the table for secular readings of her fiction (10). To characterize O'Connor's fiction as subversive to evangelical Christianity would certainly be a misreading; however, it would also be shortsighted to perceive O'Connor's vision as wholly uncritical of the evangelical community.

O'Connor was troubled by the ease with which the lines between American religion and sales culture were blurred. In addition to her writing regimen in the morning, lurching at the Sanford House, and receiving guests in the afternoon, O'Connor read the local newspaper and watched television on a daily basis; such regular exposure to popular culture and media provided humorous conversation with friends and fertile material to satirize in her fiction. In the postwar years of commercial and consumer excess, celebrity ministers flooded the channels of media. Christopher Owen Lynch examines the emergence of celebrity clergy within the context of America's postwar success, using Bishop Fulton Sheen's television ministry as a conduit for his study. Sheen's television program, *Life Is Worth Living*, enjoyed a wildly successful run from 1952 to 1957 using the strategy of Billy Graham, combining an "evangelical message that a person must turn to Jesus" for salvation alongside "American patriotism and . . . anti-communism" (6); consequently, it became "the only religious program ever to be commercially sponsored and to compete for ratings" (7). Sheen would open his program addressing his listeners as "Friends," and begin "with some icebreakers—usually anecdotes about young children—and then [speak] extemporaneously for a half hour on a topic such as the dangers of communism, the values of family love, the duties of patriotism, or the need to examine one's conscience" (1), only to conclude with "Bye now, and God love you!" (qtd. in Lynch 2). Lynch contends that Sheen succeeded by taking the same approach as Graham ("the prophet of America's ideology"): stressing "the importance of religiosity" while minimizing church affiliation and doctrinal specifics (6).

In a 6 Sept. 1955 letter to Betty Hester ("A"), O'Connor referred to Sheen's dumbed-down approach as supreme "vulgarity," and sarcastically remarked "that the vulgar must be saved and that generally this is to be accomplished by the vulgar, or the vulgarer than they" (*CW* 953). O'Connor also joked to Robie Macauley that her television interviews supporting the made-for-TV-movie version of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" would corrupt her into a combination of Gorgeous George Wagner (celebrity professional wrestler) and Fulton Sheen; it was clear that O'Connor was skeptical of the sheen (pun intended) that celebrity ministers and televangelists contrived to manipulate their respective audiences (18 May 1955, *CW* 934).

In printed media, O'Connor was an avid reader of pop-psychologist George W. Crane's *The Worry Clinic*, a column that ran daily in the *Atlanta Constitution* from 1954 to 1957. Writing to Hester again on 30 Sept. 1955, O'Connor shared a story she recently read about a child who questioned his mother about why he should consider Jesus's words authoritative; the mother replied, "Because He was a gentleman" (CW 958). O'Connor's elaboration proves illuminating:

It might have been Billy Graham or Dr. Crane but I wouldn't accuse them as I'm not sure. Do you read Dr. Crane? I never miss him. He is an odd mixture of fundamentalism (against the grape), psychology, business administration and Dale Carnegie. The originator of The Compliment Club. He appears in the Atlanta Constitution on the same page as the comic strips. He is always telling Alma A. how to keep her husband by losing 75 pounds. (958)

In a separate letter to Macauley, O'Connor mentioned their shared admiration (read: comedic disdain) "of Dr. [George] Crane, my favorite Protestant theologian (salvation by the compliment club). I was glad to hear this because I think the doctor ought to be more widely appreciated. He is really a combination minister and masseur, don't you think?" (18 May 1955, CW 935). Loxley Nichols persuasively argues that *The Worry Clinic* provided O'Connor not only amusing fodder for her repeated satire of American consumerism, but also a "literary antithesis and the background against which she wrote" (23). "Anti-intellectual, xenophobic, smug, provincial, capitalistic, sentimental, mechanistic, reductive, commercial, and ludicrously Protestant," George Crane, Nichols contends, "provides a composite portrait of what O'Connor satirizes in her fiction" (23).

Nichols unearths an impressive catalogue of Crane's columns and analyzes how O'Connor satirizes his American pop psychology in a minor character written in *The Violent Bear It Away*. Meeks, a copper flue salesman, embodies the Crane philosophy that preaching is selling. Meeks, or "the salesman," offers advice for success to young Tarwater as he sets out into the world: feign interest in people (i.e., customer or convert) from whom you want to get (i.e., sell or preach) something: "He said love was the only policy that worked 95% of the time. He said when he went to sell a man a flue, he asked first about that man's wife's health and how his children were" (CW 362). Nichols's reading is complemented with a quote from *The Worry Clinic* on 23 Apr. 1954 that could come from Meeks; according to Dr. Crane, "[p]reaching, as well as school teaching is really salesmanship of ideas, instead of merchandise. And the first law of salesmanship is to win friends, for you can't sell solid 24-carat gold bricks to enemies, even at bargain prices" (qtd. in Nichols 29). To win friends, one must pay compliments—a central concept for Dr. Crane, who challenged his Chicago Temple Bible class (the "compliment club") to pay three daily compliments for a month to achieve success and happiness in life (23). By embodying the Crane sales philosophy, Meeks becomes the object of satire in O'Connor's fiction.

The centrality of paying compliments and winning friends, however, is not a concept that originated with Dr. Crane. Dale Carnegie's bestselling classic, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, has provided a blueprint for the sales tactics of flattery and manipulation even before its publication in 1936. Self-help seminars in hotel conference rooms all started when Carnegie delivered success talks, and he later organized the greatest hits into one of the most influential books of the twentieth century. It also reads like an evangelical Sunday school or sermon series, where a few points are made among a seemingly endless supply of

feel-good anecdotes. Each chapter contains principles in “handling” people and endearing yourself to them. In “Part One: Fundamental Techniques in Handling People,” Carnegie provides a fundamental principle applied in the vocation of sales: arouse in the other person an eager want; he shrewdly claims that “. . . the only way on earth to influence other people is to talk about what they want and show them how to get it” (33). The outcome of focusing on others’ desires proves immense for the salesman to endear himself, as Carnegie concludes: “He who can do this has the whole world with him” (34). As an aforementioned letter to Hester of 30 Sept. 1955 made explicit, O’Connor lumped Dale Carnegie, Fulton Sheen, Billy Graham, and George Crane into the same unflattering heap of evangelical-business hybrids who inflate egos and in turn, increase their influence and celebrity (*CW* 958). Such pretense both humored and haunted O’Connor, and it is apparent in the writing of her first novel that the assimilation of such tactics in evangelical religion remained an abiding concern in her art.

The manuscripts of *Wise Blood* housed in Special Collections at the Georgia College library reveal an early novel that is strikingly different than the published version. The manuscripts are divided into folders, referred to as entries containing O’Connor’s typed work and handwritten notes. *Wise Blood* encompasses entries 22-151, half of the entire manuscript collection. In the first entry (22a), O’Connor provides a synopsis of the first four chapters that she frames as a struggle between religious contemplation and a conquest of the city, which is reminiscent of Augustine’s binary between the city of God and the city of man. O’Connor’s binary is negotiated by the protagonist, Hazel Motes, as he joins an evangelical group called David’s Aspirants who are led by the missionary Asa Hawks. David’s Aspirants provides a clever allusion to King David. At first glance, an aspiration to be like David implies being a person after God’s heart, yet the actions of this group reveal their true aspirations to secure the wealth of a king. Growing uneasy with a spiritual compromise that fuses the city of God with the city of man, Haze’s sense of guilt increases, leading him to flee from worldliness to find something resembling Eastrod, the idealized hometown of his childhood; Haze seeks to situate himself safely away from the encroaching world of modernity. In this sense, the setting of Taulkinham functions as a city of vapid relativism where life is reduced to a world of consumption—a metaphor for modern American culture. What seems absent here in the early drafts is O’Connor’s sense of satire in her depictions of this evangelical group; moreover, Haze comes across as a more straightforward religious seeker rather than the man who wants to escape the ragged figure who beckons him to a life of faith.

In the early versions of chapter eight, O’Connor had a working draft of a character named Mercy Weaver (files 108c-f). The earliest drafts depict this character as a fat, fleshy white man, who regularly examines his hands on both sides, while delicately prodding his pocket containing a pale gold watch. In one draft, he is all flesh and no bones, as though he were a swelling growth. After Haze leaves a diner where he did not eat his breakfast, Mercy imposes upon him in an aggressive manner, leaping into the Essex uninvited for a ride home. What is fascinating about this episode is the description of Mercy’s body language: laying his arm over the seat of Haze and later putting his hand on Haze’s shoulder. Mercy possesses a creepy smile and claims that he and Haze can understand each other. In one draft (108e), Mercy asks what Haze’s name is; Haze lies, telling him it is Henry. Mercy responds in a suggestive manner, exclaiming that he loves the name Henry, and he once knew a man by that name.

The draft in file 108c depicts Mercy Weaver as a homosexual who aggressively attempts to lure Haze back to his apartment. This entry incorporates many of the parts found in the

other three involving this character (108d-f), including the last entry that casts him as an insurance salesman. O'Connor employs sexual imagery to describe an adjacent street car as a zipper closing behind them to illuminate Mercy's intentions with Haze. Mercy again invites Haze up to his apartment, noting that he can serve him breakfast since Haze did not finish his own at the diner. Upon the sudden realization of Mercy's sexual intentions, Haze tells him to get out before he kills him. One version (108e) of this dramatic episode contains only a half-page excerpt of Mercy's advances toward Haze; most interesting about this fragment are the handwritten notes by O'Connor in ink and all caps that allude to Haze's being a traveler who is wounded—perhaps in a spiritual or emotional sense.

The most provocative of the early drafts depicts Mercy Weaver as an outright sexual predator who touches Haze in the car and propositions him sexually. O'Connor uses this episode as an epiphany for Haze's understanding of himself (108f). In this entry, the sexual contact and the innuendo that reveals Mercy's sexuality are no longer foregrounded; rather, the awkward moment, combined with nature and his surroundings, serves as a realization for Haze: he is isolated, lonely, vulnerable, and emotionally wounded. This wound is evident to people like Mercy who prey upon the vulnerable. Mercy's misinterpretation of Haze's condition functions as a projection of his own sexual orientation that causes him to feel alienated from the community. Mercy reaches out to Haze for a connection, a means of intimacy and understanding. Haze realizes his own vulnerability as an exposed loner and outsider. Haze's condition is exacerbated by his life as a traveler who attempts to escape internal conflicts through external flight. It is important to note the difference in the more-developed entry of the working drafts, in which Haze dismisses Mercy from the car: he simply pulls the car over, reaches across, and opens the door for Mercy to get out. With an unspoken, peaceful understanding, Mercy gets out of the car without Haze's exhibition of violent threats and disgust. In this entry, O'Connor casts a more complex and sympathetic Haze, one who does not cast blame upon Mercy for misinterpreting his own loneliness. Haze's isolation is existential, not sexual.

Another working draft (108a) alters the episode entirely. The fat man is now named Macy Weaver—a probable allusion to the American department store that marketed itself to be the largest in the world during the 1950s. A different proposition is aggressively advanced to Haze, one motivated more by business than sex. Macy Weaver sells insurance. This depiction of Weaver's character, while less provocative, seems more consistent with the published novel's overall themes. The conversation in Haze's car is steered by Macy to cover two abstract and pliable concepts: happiness and security. When Haze mentions his discontent with Taulkinham, Macy tells him—with the same suggestive language as Mercy (the homosexual) while implying something material rather than sexual in this context—that many people are happy here and eventually find what they are looking for. Meanwhile, Haze is driving recklessly through the busy traffic, no doubt made nervous by Macy's overbearing presence in the car. Macy uses this opportunity to pitch him accident insurance. Macy does not tell him to drive more safely or slowly; no, Haze just needs to pay a little more money to insure his preferred way of life. For only a few cents a month, the people we harm or injure with our lifestyles will not cost us a cent when the time comes to repair damages, according to Macy. When this pitch does not work on Haze, Macy ratchets up the rhetoric by injecting fear and sensationalism—an often effective sales ploy—to suggest that Haze might kill someone with his driving. When the appeals for happiness no longer work, the salesman resorts to fear as an incentive to purchase the product immediately.

O'Connor's choice of insurance salesman is fascinating: Macy is trying to sell a policy needed only in the case of a disaster; meanwhile, the customer continually dumps money into the policy in the event something bad might occur. For most that never have that accident, it is paying for an illusion of security, the sort of happiness that provides enough incentive to purchase it. The development of Weaver from homosexual predator to overbearing insurance salesman demonstrates an interesting connection. This chubby, charming, and preening character embodies sinister qualities that threaten to deceive and manipulate the vulnerable of society. O'Connor sensed a connection of sorts between sexual and sales propositions—both scenarios highlight crafty predators attempting to lure their prey through charm, flattery, and persuasive rhetoric.

While Weaver's character, in name, was ultimately scrapped, further study shows that he evolved into yet another character found in the published version of *Wise Blood*. In chapter nine, Haze first notices Onnie Jay Holy winking at him every time he looks his way (CW 83). Other details of Holy include pulling at Haze's pants-leg (84), brandishing a lavender handkerchief (88), and speaking to Haze in a "soft voice" when they are alone together in the car (88). Holy is described as "plumpish," having "curly blond hair that was cut with showy sideburns" (83). Throughout the episode, Holy communicates feelings of inadequacy and alienation from his family and community, similar to Mercy Weaver's attempts at solidarity with Haze's outsider-persona. The chapter eight Essex episodes from the early, unpublished drafts begin with Mercy (or Macy) Weaver's self-invitation to ride with Haze and engage him in a conversation. In the same manner, Onnie Jay Holy, realizing that Haze is getting away, "ran off just as the Essex began to slide again. He jumped on the running board and got the door open and plumped in, panting, beside Haze" (88). Identical to the early manuscripts with Weaver, Haze reacts with disgust, ordering Holy to "Get out," while "reaching across and opening the door for him" (89).

In both the early drafts and the published version of *Wise Blood*, we see Haze as a loner isolated from his surrounding culture. Haze's isolation serves to attract the sexual and sales predators found in the characters of Mercy Weaver, Macy Weaver, and Onnie Jay Holy, who all seek to exploit his loneliness for their own gains. The early drafts reveal O'Connor's deliberate process in writing a minor character that evolves from sexual predator to insurance salesman to fraudulent, sentimental street preacher. O'Connor's creative process reveals fascinating correlations that she perceived between sexuality and salesmanship, a connection visible in American marketing and sales culture today.

Jon Lance Bacon has examined the permeation of sales culture in America as it is depicted in *Wise Blood*, arguing that O'Connor was deeply troubled by the expansion and power of corporations. O'Connor's satirical critique of consumer culture is found in her depictions of Taulkinham, an urban city too busy shopping to notice the majesty of creation. Illustrated in both the signs around town and the language of business, happiness is defined by advertising with consumerism as the deferment of true selfhood (26-27). Bacon contends that O'Connor's criticism of American consumerism extended to the mainstream religious culture:

To affirm the possibility of dissent, however, O'Connor had to distinguish her form of religion from the ones that dominated American culture during the 1950s. *Wise Blood* attacks the dominant forms, suggesting that American religion had been appropriated by the "salesman's world." In the world of the novel, faith itself becomes a commodity. (39)



O'Connor hones her satiric aim upon marketplace religion by exemplifying its ethos in the celebrity minister-salesman, Onnie Jay Holy.

The descriptions of Holy serve as a burlesque of many celebrity evangelists who exude cloying self-awareness. The narrator employs verbal irony with the use of a simile: "He was not handsome but under his smile, there was an honest look that fitted into his face like a set of false teeth" (*CW* 83). This initial description encompasses a characterization of Holy as one wielding the guise of friendliness and honesty as a means of manipulation. Even when sharing a weakness or a traumatic story, Holy still maintains his winning persona. The narrator satirically suggests that Holy's outward show of humility signifies an inner arrogance: "He had a winning smile and it was evident that he didn't think he was any better than anybody else even though he was" (86). Holy's first words divulge an interesting emphasis: "Come on back heah, you folks," he said. "I want to tell you all about *me*" (84). This emphasis subtly reveals how the success of many evangelists often hinges upon a charming and engaging personality. Holy's manner is alluring, and despite his empty, falsely humble pleadings to the contrary, *he* is the message and the product that is being sold to the crowds.

Holy proves commercially savvy, as his advertising language equates material consumption with a real sense of importance (Bacon 43). Holy's marketing approach to evangelism serves as a form of reassurance, affirming the audience's essential goodness and limitless potential (43). The narrator states that Holy looks at his audience "as if he were appealing to the good judgment that was impressed on their faces" (*CW* 84). Holy enacts a key move from the salesman's playbook: appeal to the superior judgment of the customer. This logic of sales flattery is ironic, for if a customer's judgment is, in fact, so superior, then why is it necessary for him to be persuaded by salesmen? The sales vocation implies just the opposite—namely, that left to himself, the customer will make the wrong decision, for he requires the prodding and better judgment of salesmen. By appealing to his audience's superior judgment, Holy deceives them into thinking they are making their own informed decision about what they want: a sense of identity achieved through consumption.

Holy summons novelty as a sign of relevance and authenticity, selling his church as if it is the latest piece of technology: "This church is up-to-date! When you're in this church you can know that there's nothing or nobody ahead of you, nobody knows nothing you don't know, all the cards are on the table, friends, and that's a fact" (*CW* 87). Holy agrees with Haze that a new Jesus is needed, one that is up to date (90). This falls in line with Holy's fascination with pop music, as he proclaims that he can say things much sweeter with his guitar (84). Music possesses mainstream appeal, providing Holy with a conduit to move his audience with an easy spirituality that O'Connor witheringly characterized as one "big electric blanket" of sentimentality ([undated] Sat. 1959, *HB* 354). Contemporary music and worship have come to the forefront as effective evangelical tools. This utilization so prevalent in evangelicalism reveals the alluring qualities of pop culture; apart from some of the words of the songs, it might be difficult to distinguish between some contemporary evangelical worship services (lifted hands, clapping, and dancing) and the average rock concert. Responding to Haze's accusation that he "ain't true," Holy commends his radio program called "Soulsease" that provided "real religious experiences" (*CW* 88).

Holy's theology asserts that humans are innately good, endowed with a "natural sweetness": "Every person that comes onto this earth is born sweet and full of love" (*CW* 85). The trials of life caused by experiences and people, particularly our families, drive that sweetness inside us to where it cannot be seen anymore. All we need is someone to

help us “bring it out” (86). Holy’s message of self-help and self-love was quite popular in the 1950s when Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* promised happiness and fulfillment by urging people to harness their inner powers by thinking positively and not getting bogged down in the difficulties of life. Holy’s preaching emphasizes passive surrender and abandonment of effort, giving the true “self” a rest. This pep-talk, what William James often characterized as “mental hygiene” (105), is a pill much easier to swallow because it appeals to human vanity and an eagerness to defer personal responsibility.

Stirring his audience to make a commitment, Holy fabricates a sensational testimony of life before he met the prophet: “I was ready to hang myself or to despair completely. Not even my own dear old mother loved me” (85). Robert Brinkmeyer analyzes the use of evangelical sermons in O’Connor’s fiction to highlight the preacher’s use of a “highly rhetorical style punctuated by illustrative stories and anecdotes to electrify his listeners’ sensibilities and ensure his success” (7). Sensationalism manipulates listeners to make an impulsive commitment, an effective move in closing the sale. In his most defining passage, Holy explains to Haze that moving an audience to make a commitment is a work of art: “You ought to listen to me because I’m not just an amateur. I’m an artist-type. . . . You got good idears but what you need is an artist-type to work with you” (CW 89). It is remarkable how such “artists” can permanently alter the lives of so many impressionable people in such a brief encounter. Holy exemplifies the manipulation of evangelists who use their magnetic personalities to prey upon unsuspecting listeners, his awkward pseudonym implying the deception of his message and approach. Even though he turns out to be an opportunistic fraud, Holy’s image, actions, and rhetoric embody a saccharine evangelicalism where charming personalities prey upon the impressionable in a skillful simulation of sales tactics: endear yourself, create a want, and close the sale.

Joel Osteen, also known as the smiling preacher, embodies the continued success of contemporary televangelists and self-help gurus; he serves as the pastor of Lakewood Church, easily the largest evangelical church in the America with a congregation of over 40,000 members in Houston, Texas. The sanctuary of Lakewood Church is located in the Compaq Center—the former arena of the Houston Rockets professional basketball team. Every Sunday service kicks off with concert rock-hymns and multi-media presentations on jumbo, high-definition screens, followed by Osteen’s reassuring sermons wherein he smilingly addresses his audience as “friends.” These pep talks are eventually bundled together and published in a book, selling millions of copies with Osteen collecting a hefty advance before it releases. His 2004 best-seller, *Your Best Life Now*, contains the core of the health and wealth gospel found in his sermons: that anyone can achieve prosperity and happiness by imitating Osteen’s own positive outlook. Osteen urges his readers to implement the following seven steps for their own success: enlarge your vision, develop a healthy self-image, discover the power of your thoughts and words, let go of the past, find strength through adversity, live to give, and choose to be happy. It is interesting to note that none of these seven steps contains anything exclusively or explicitly Christian in their aims to achieve abundant life. Osteen serves as an abiding reification of O’Connor’s “combination minister and masseur” by reinforcing the American culture of self-centeredness, rendering God to be a genie who grants wishes to his happy followers.

As fiction writer, O’Connor pursued an artistic commitment to clearly depict the world in which she lived, even if that vision were unflattering to Christians and ran the risk of being read as subversive. If this meant unattractive portrayals of Christians, so be it. In a letter to Sister Mariella Gable, O’Connor responded to complaints that her fiction

did not “. . . make Christianity look desirable.” O'Connor responded that her duty as a writer was not to romanticize faith, for “Ideal Christianity doesn't exist, because anything the human being touches, even Christian truth, he deforms slightly in his own image.” To ask such questions, O'Connor says, is to tend “always toward the abstract and therefore toward allegory, thinness, and ultimately [toward] apologetic fiction” (4 May 1963, *HB* 516). Because O'Connor's figures are, in her own words, so largely and clearly drawn, readers familiar with evangelical culture will recognize her prophets and preachers are as much realistic as exaggerated. And while Hazel Motes was certainly created to startle an unbelieving audience, Onnie Jay Holy ought, in a different manner, to startle an evangelical audience.

It is not the duty of the Christian artist to provide assurance to an evangelical audience that resembles American sales culture. If the Christian artist does not perform the duty of startling the complacent audience, then she might as well give them over to the “advertising agencies,” for as O'Connor declared, “[t]hey are entirely capable of showing us our unparalleled prosperity and our almost classless society, and no one has ever accused them of not being affirmative” (*CW* 806). As one also concerned about the deformities he observed in American Christianity, Percy commended the virtues of satire for the Catholic writer: “Satire attacks one thing in order to affirm another. It assaults the fake and the phony in the name of truth. It ridicules the inhuman in order to affirm the human. Satire is always launched in the mode of hope” (*More Conversations* 112). It is my hope that O'Connor's fiction startles an evangelical audience who appears largely at home in American culture. 🍷

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In a 1979 interview with Dorothy Kitchings, Percy discussed the seemingly universal Christianity of the South as the setting for the novel:

The novel I'm now writing has to do with a man who finds himself in an extremely Christian environment and makes a kind of joke of it. He's retired. Well, this is Will Barrett and he's retired and it's twenty years later. He has married a very rich girl. She's dead. He's retired to a very plush resort in North Carolina, which I say is the most Christian state in the most Christian country in the world, and in the county close to Montreat . . . you know, where the Billy Graham thing is. Here he is and everybody's a Christian. Kierkegaard talks about that. Will Barrett still doesn't believe it. He's an unbeliever. He's surrounded by 100% so-called Christian society and would almost rather be like Sartre, or a Camus agnostic. This present book, if I ever get it right and finish it, will probably be understood as an anti-Christian statement in that sense. (*More Conversations* 7)

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the essay, I refer to the character exclusively as Onnie Jay Holy, the fictional persona portrayed by Hoover Shoats, who embodies the performance, charm, and influence necessary to be a successful minister-salesman.

<sup>3</sup> Many evangelicals envision voting as a religious imperative to promote and protect their cherished values. Evangelical voters had an enormous impact on the 2004 re-election of George W. Bush. As amendments banning same-sex marriage were placed on the same ballots as the presidential candidates, cultural conservatives were galvanized in many key swing states. This political approach was pregnant with implications: Republicans carried the mantle of traditional Judeo-Christian values while Democrats were saddled with a

secular liberalism that sought to overthrow the family structure upon which society stands. At the time, I was studying theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, where I was urged during a chapel service by Jerry Falwell to vote for Bush in a message aptly titled "Vote Christian."

- <sup>4</sup> Contemporary examples might include Thomas Kinkade paintings, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind*, or Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*. The extent to which each artist can be described as an evangelical, as in the case of Gibson's being Catholic, is irrelevant, for it is precisely the evangelical market that is shrewdly targeted to generate so much revenue for these artists. The mass success and appeal of these art forms demonstrate evangelicalism to be firmly in the mainstream of American culture.
- <sup>5</sup> I want to be clear how I define the terms *evangelicalism* and *evangelical*. Historians regard American evangelicalism as a Protestant movement or coalition that began a decade after World War II as an alternative both to mainline Protestantism—believed to be too liberal and assimilating with secularism—and to fundamentalism—believed to be too belligerent in its engagement with American culture (Hart 176). Walter Elwell defines evangelicalism as the "movement in modern Christianity, transcending denominational and confessional boundaries, that emphasizes conformity to the basic tenets of the faith and a missionary outreach of compassion and urgency. A person who identifies with it is an 'evangelical,' one who believes and proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ" (405). John Turner defines evangelicals as "Protestant Christians who readily talk about their experience of salvation in Jesus Christ, regard a divinely inspired Bible as the ultimate authority on matters of faith and practice, and engage the world in which they live through evangelism and other forms of mission" (4).
- <sup>6</sup> Brinkmeyer discusses the early misreadings of *Wise Blood* that frustrated the author:
- Interestingly, a number of early reviews asserted that O'Connor's work revealed the evils and the fraudulence of evangelists; they failed to note the great respect and concern that O'Connor felt for her characters. In the introduction to the 1959 French edition of *Wise Blood*, Maurice-Edgar Coindreau devoted a good deal of space to a discussion of some of America's more notorious evangelists; O'Connor's Catholicism, he asserted, gave her the perspective to recognize the terrors of evangelism. Such misreadings in turn intensified both her scorn for modernity and her doubts that as a writer of fiction she could communicate with an overwhelmingly hostile audience. (11)
- <sup>7</sup> I am not arguing that O'Connor herself was an evangelical. Her fiction and nonfiction, however, make it abundantly clear that she was sympathetic to their commitment to confront a secular culture with the gospel.

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