

## The Wayfarer and the Church

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*Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer* should go a long way toward bolstering Percy’s place in an American literary tradition that sorely needs interpreters who live outside of English departments—and wayfaring advocates who speak beyond the bounds of the academy altogether. Smith ably demonstrates how this novelist and man of letters casts light on the limits of the contemporary social sciences and can contribute to more thoughtful consideration of American political life, broadly conceived.

Smith’s book, then, presents a sound, balanced, and in many ways comprehensive assessment of Percy’s thought, with appropriate attention to his fiction and nonfiction alike. As a reader with a particular interest in the relationship between Christianity and American literature, I find that *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer* helps to bring into focus one lingering question: how can we best understand or characterize Percy’s understanding of and engagement with “church”—specifically, the Roman Catholic Church? This is, to be sure, a complicated matter. As Smith notes, Percy believed that most modern Westerners have lost the “language and conceptual framework” conducive to the spread of Christianity in an earlier era, and largely for this reason he “adopted” what might seem an “ambivalent attitude toward spreading his faith” (p. xvii).<sup>1</sup> It is also true that “Percy’s account of his church” can seem “somewhat muted” for a writer who is such a “committed Catholic” (p. xxx). Indeed, over the past three decades I have met occasional Catholic readers who find Percy too “cynical.” More often, I have met resolutely secular readers who admire him as an ironist—a keen satirical observer of contemporary American society—and appreciate the fact that even if he somehow sees Christianity as the vital corrective to our society’s flaws, then at least he is respectably indirect about it. Such readers admire Percy not because he is a Christian writer, but despite his being one. Often Smith himself seems to speak most directly to such readers (and in doing so, may ultimately if unintentionally further a kind of stealth evangelism that Percy himself aspired to, as made explicit in his essay “Notes For a Novel About the End of the World”).

Yet Percy’s fiction in fact emphasizes the necessity of “church”—and indeed turns upon it—in a way that *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer* can ultimately help readers to attend to more carefully. My own attentiveness to this matter is in part a function of my extended engagement with other twentieth-century Catholic fiction writers, who on the whole tend to be even more “muted” about their Church than Percy—at least in their fiction. Percy’s counterpart from the American South, Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964), provides a particularly vital point of comparison. In

most of his novels Percy might seem a genteel humanist, hardly a Christian writer at all, when read alongside O'Connor: her stories are saturated with religious imagery and feature protagonists who are clearly obsessed with or in a sense living out explicitly theological questions. Yet for all this, literal depictions of "church" are remarkably absent from O'Connor's work: her protagonists almost entirely spring from dissenting Protestant backgrounds and tend to display a fervent individualism in religious matters. She recognized and indeed emphasized that, for better or for worse, "the religion of the South"—and to a large degree, of the United States more broadly—is "a do-it-yourself religion" (O'Connor 1988, p. 350). Accordingly, this writer who lived in the heart of the Protestant Bible Belt features the Catholic Church in only three of her stories: "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," "The Displaced Person," and "The Enduring Chill." By contrast, Catholic sacraments and clergy are quite literally and vitally present in every one of Percy's novels, and in each case increasingly so as the plot develops. Insofar as the novels end ambiguously, each does so only in the protagonist's response (or lack thereof) to a Church that is itself unambiguously present. Indeed, as detailed below, *presence* is one key to Percy's sense of the absolute necessity of "church."

Percy's tendencies in this regard can be viewed in either an international Anglophone or an American context. His fiction with its recurrently strong representatives of the Church—Val Vaught in *The Last Gentleman*, Percival in *Lancelot*, Father Smith in the Tom More novels—in some respects actually mirrors the "confident, triumphalist endings" of earlier twentieth-century novels by English Catholic writers Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene more than it does O'Connor's fiction (Reichardt 2010, p. 5). One might object that Percy presents his Catholic clergy and religious as quite flawed characters, and indeed they are; but on the whole they and their Church come off better in Percy's fiction than in, say, Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, which is set in a deeply corrupt Mexico and features a "whiskey priest" (whom Percy occasionally cited as a kind of exemplar). Percy's specifically American setting is, of course, quite different from historically Catholic Mexico, or from Waugh's England, and Smith's work implicitly speaks to this fact. Insofar as Smith considers Percy's engagement with "church," he does so by focusing on how Percy shows that any church "can fall prey to extremes that reflect the broken, deranged nature of human communities," even—if not especially—in America (p. 172). But it is important to recognize that Percy is a bit of an American oddity in writing both recurrently and sympathetically about "church" at all. Using the term "church" as implicitly ecumenical, Protestant theologians Stanley Hauerwas and Ralph Wood—both admirers of Percy—have noted the scarcity of even remotely positive depictions of "church" in American literature at large. This scarcity, as they see it, reflects the fact that particular churches in the United States have failed to properly imagine, embody, and enact what it means to be "church." Put simply, "our major [fiction] writers [and poets] have little substantive regard for Christianity because our churches have made it impossible for them to do so": individual churches have "made the gospel of Jesus Christ seem all too much like the gospel of the United States," and "the church" universal has therefore by and large failed to make its "unique and distinctively Christian witness" in this, "the one nation founded almost entirely on an Enlightenment basis" (Hauerwas and Wood 2010, pp. 159-60). These authors decry the general collapse of Christian tradition into a broad "American Creed" that unites the nation, as the faith has become radically acculturated to "a triumphant individualism centered upon a new definition of freedom" that enshrines "the autonomous self" and fosters two "mirror evils": on the one hand, a "moralistic liberalism" that involves spreading a gospel of blindly self-referential "optimism about human nature and destiny"; and, on the other, a necessarily isolating "individualistic pietism" (Hauerwas and Wood 2010, p. 165).

Smith's own reading of Percy in some respects implicitly complements the argument of Hauerwas and Wood. I wonder, though, if it could be more pointed than it already is in distinguishing "church" from "community"—and at articulating the extent to which Percy saw "church" as at once absolutely indispensable to and separate from the success of his American community or communities. At times Smith seems to imply that "community" and "church," though distinct, are for Percy in many respects equal in value. He is surely correct to note that there are inevitable connections between the two: for Percy, "coming to faith" does indeed involve a specific experience of community, as it "reflects not so much an intellectual experience as a relational one" (p. 175). In Percy's novels the relationships that lead to, parallel, prefigure, or oper-

ate in tandem with “church” are often (though not always) marital or otherwise familial. Thus, Smith is entirely correct to say that “Percy’s characters begin and end their journeys in relation to family, community, and the church” (p. 160). The rub comes when he posits simply that each one of these—family, community, and the church—“*can* [emphasis mine] help support a decent life” (Ibid.). The language here suggests that these three are equally valuable, or perhaps equally limited in value. Smith goes on to stress that “None of our communities or churches or relationships can provide a complete source of stability; all of them together can only occasionally allow the human person a sense of fullness and rest that we might believe a glimpse of where we really belong” (p. 177). The accompanying claim that Percy “showed that faith and a church form an irreplaceable resource for the self in an otherwise hostile, meaningless world” cuts both ways: *irreplaceable* stresses value, whereas *an* suggests that this valuable resource for the self is simply one among others (p. 176).

Smith does acknowledge that Percy shows—“indirectly” but consistently—how “faith completes his characters’ varied searches for meaning and truth in life” (p. 172). Yet those characters have to learn not to place too much hope or trust in a church. So what need, then, does faith have of a church? Is church simply a “community” of individuals who each have faith? For Percy, the answer to the latter question is “No.” He could indeed be quite “ecumenical” at times, and he sincerely respected both Judaism and Protestant Christianity (p. 173). Yet he was ultimately altogether clear about his own seemingly “preposterous” belief that Christ founded not churches but “a church” commissioned to make God’s grace sacramentally present in the world, with Peter as its appointed head, and that Christ would guide “this institution until the end of time” (Percy 1983, p. 253). The necessity of such a Church to signify the presence of a transcendent but also immanent God is absolutely essential to whole notion of “wayfaring” as Percy saw it. Furthermore, and more provocatively, Percy’s novels are concerned—on the whole, increasingly so—with the teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church, with the need for a Church to guide a human reason that seems doomed to go astray on its own. This is in many ways a hidden concern in *The Moviegoer*, but it begins to move out of the shadows in *The Last Gentleman* as the fatherless Will Barrett constantly seeks for someone to tell him what to do, and the nun Val Vaught speaks explicitly regarding the relationship between education and authority. The question of proper authority is clearly at the very heart of *Lancelot*. *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome* place bioethical concerns including euthanasia and abortion at center stage—and whether in the novels themselves or in Percy’s remarks related to them, his views on these issues arguably most demonstrate his specific relationship to the Catholic Church in the context of U.S. politics in the 1970s and 1980s.

Smith briefly addresses Percy’s sense of the Catholic Church’s authority in his discussion of the Civil Rights movement, albeit indirectly. First he correctly outlines Percy’s view of the faulty ethos which had characterized both his family and his regional community in the first half of the twentieth century: “Southern Stoicism resulted in a kind of moral blindness, an in particular an unwillingness to embrace either any conception of universal natural law, or a Christian conception of the moral equality of human beings” (p. 94). Notions of national community are relevant here as well, as embrace of a “universal natural law” should ostensibly be a very American virtue—though it is questionable as to what extent “community” in fact exists on a large national scale, as Smith suggests via his recurrent emphasis on subsidiarity. Yet the fact is that in the deep South, neither a national history of inclination toward recognizing universal law nor the deep flawed regional ethos brings about necessary change. Rather, Percy emphasizes the seemingly foreign authority of “the Archbishop” in criticizing “typical Southern attitudes about segregation or labor relations” (p. 95). Percy does see ending racial discrimination as a broadly Christian imperative, not a specifically Catholic one; as Smith notes, he admired Christian leaders of all sorts in this area. Yet as I have argued elsewhere, Percy’s own conversion from young Stoic-agnostic segregationist to mature Catholic opponent of segregation was very much marked by a sense of the Catholic Church’s authority in this regard, and this experience shapes his early fiction in particularly (O’Gorman 1999).

All this being said, I think that there are essentially two reasons why, on the whole, Percy can seem not so committed to “church.” One is that in his fiction the protagonists are always left with an ongoing choice

to join or leave the Catholic Church (unlike the protagonists of, say, O'Connor's two novels, who clearly undergo radical conversions to some seemingly more individualized form of Christianity). The other is that in his nonfiction, he at times lapses into the older Percy family role of public servant—modeled by his Uncle Will—and, speaking to a broad audience, can indeed be quite ecumenical. In such contexts he often wanted to be at least somewhat hopeful about the American future. In the final analysis, though, he believed that the “standard American-Jeffersonian Republican-and Democratic platform self” was lost because it knew not that it was lost, and that it was in need of both a divine sign and an authoritative guide such as he found in the Roman Catholic Church (Percy 1983, p. 12).

Having stated all this to an audience that is much more directly attuned to political concerns than I am, let me close by clarifying: my emphasis on Percy's sense of the importance of the Roman Catholic Church—and of its authority—is not meant to suggest that he was an American Catholic integralist along the lines of Adrian Vermeule. Nor is it necessarily to say that he was as radical a critic of American liberalism as Patrick Deneen or D. C. Schindler have been recently. Having benefited from Smith's careful and compelling assessment of Percy in *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer*, I find myself wondering about Percy's likely reaction to these scholars—a topic that Smith is far better prepared to consider than I am. His book has better prepared me to pose such questions and offered renewed hope that Percy's work will endure and continue to speak to the broader audiences that he always sought to reach.

## NOTES

- 1 All page references are to Smith unless specified otherwise.

## REFERENCES

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