

The Idolatry of the Marketplace: Flannery O'Connor and Thomas Merton

By John P. Collins

Introduction

Although Thomas Merton and Flannery O'Connor never met or communicated, there was a deep mutual respect for one another, as chronicled by their editor Robert Giroux. In his introduction to O'Connor's *Complete Stories*, Giroux recounts several anecdotes about the shared admiration that existed between Merton and O'Connor. In 1959 Giroux travelled south and stopped by the Abbey of Gethsemani to visit Merton. Of Merton's interest in O'Connor Giroux wrote: "He gave me a presentation copy of the beautifully designed private edition of *Prometheus: A Meditation* to take to her." Giroux goes on to describe Merton's interest in O'Connor's peacocks, and states: "I could not tell Merton enough about them or about Flannery and her surroundings." After leaving the abbey Giroux visited O'Connor at her Andalusia farm in Milledgeville, Georgia. She was curious to hear about Merton and his monastic life: "Was Merton allowed to talk to me? Yes, without restriction. I described our walks in the woods and the monastic routine of the day: first office (Matins) at two a.m. and last office (Compline) at sunset, followed by bed."¹ Sally Fitzgerald, a longtime friend of O'Connor and editor of her letters, likewise spoke of the writers' mutual admiration in her Thomas Merton Memorial Lecture at Columbia University on November 13, 1981.² George Kilcourse, a scholar of both authors, asserts that "these artisans of American Catholic culture shared a deep spiritual and literary kinship."³ Merton's consummate respect for O'Connor is best demonstrated through his essay "Flannery O'Connor: A Prose Elegy," written shortly after O'Connor's death in 1964 from lupus at age 39, which begins: "Now Flannery is dead and I will write her name with honor, with love for the great slashing innocence of that dried-eyed irony that could keep looking at the South in the face without bleeding or even sobbing" (*RU* 37). This "deep spiritual and literary kinship" shared by Merton and O'Connor is the platform that will enable me to articulate their views on the growth of materialism in our contemporary American society and its subsequent secularizing impact on Christianity.⁴



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The Secular City and Materialism

In 2013, Pope Francis issued his first apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*. In his most authoritative writing to date, Pope Francis critiqued the "new idolatry of money" as "the ancient golden calf" of our age,⁵ leading to the tyranny of injustice and inequality in our contemporary secular society. "[M]an is reduced

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to one of his needs alone: consumption” (Pope Francis 44). The message of Pope Francis is an echo of the past when we consider the following journal entry from Merton in 1965:

The great sin, the source of all other sins, is idolatry. And never has it been greater, more prevalent than now. It is almost completely unrecognized – precisely because it is so overwhelmingly total. It takes in everything. There is nothing else left. Fetishism of power, machines, possessions, medicine, sports, clothes, etc. all kept going by greed for money and power; the bomb is only one accidental aspect of the cult. Indeed, the bomb is not the worst. We should be thankful for it is a sign, a revelation of what all the rest of our civilization points to: the self-immolation of man to his own greed and his own despair. And behind it all are the principalities and powers whom man serves in his idolatry. Christians are as deeply involved in this as everyone else.⁶

Merton’s journal entry couples the bomb with the greed for money and power which, of course, prompts one to recall his essay “A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants,” that likens the two world powers, Russia and the United States, to the figures of Gog and Magog (originally found in Ezekiel 38-39) from the Book of Revelation 20:8. Merton reminded us that the symbolism of the twin giants from Scripture is apropos to all of us when he states: “The truth is that there is a little of Gog and Magog even in the best of us.”⁷ Gog represents Russia and its lust for power while Magog is identified with the United States and its lust for money. Although “their idols differ,” they both reside in “the polluted sanctuary of dehumanized man” (*ESF* 73). Merton said he was writing from the country of Magog and although he seldom agreed with the giant, he was, indeed, thankful that he was allowed to exist under its power. He stated: “Perhaps it is not to my credit that I half-trust the strain of idealism in Magog, accepting it uncritically as a sign that, for all his blatant, materialistic gigantism, he is still human” (*ESF* 74-75). In a later part of the essay, Merton maintained that the idols of the marketplace have permeated Christianity: “And now, today, we have a Christianity of Magog. It is a Christianity of money, of action, of passive crowds, an electronic Christianity of loudspeakers and parades. . . . Christ is profitable to Magog . . . a progressive Christ who does not protest against Pharisees or money changers in the temple” (*ESF* 80).

The idolatry of the marketplace has compromised Christianity, foreshadowing a “post-Christian” world. Merton wrote: “It is frightening to realize that the facade of Christianity which still generally survives has perhaps little or nothing behind it, and that what was once called ‘Christian society’ is more purely and simply a materialistic neopaganism with a Christian veneer.”⁸ Merton further explained a post-Christian society when he stated: “the ‘post-Christian’ mind . . . is a mind which is no longer Christian but is still self-conscious about it, and still concerned with vestiges of Christian thinking.”⁹ Hence, our post-Christian society is the secular city steeped in materialism, consumer-driven, and laden with the idols of property ownership. In his 1957 book *The Silent Life*, Merton contrasted the life of Eastern monks with monks in our Western society who are “incomprehensible” because in a materialistic culture people expect productivity. According to Merton, the monk “appears to be completely useless” in contrast to the Eastern monk who lives in a society that “is oriented beyond the mere transient quest of business and pleasure.”¹⁰

Before Merton went on his Asian journey, he stopped at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, California, where he made a brief informal presentation. During his

talk, the question was raised about the relationship between idolatry and property ownership. Merton explained: “With property you get an idolatrous cult of possession and efficiency, and this makes for profits.” Merton further advanced this idea of an “idolatrous cult.” With the advent of cities evolving from agrarian economies, there was a growing concentration of wealth, he said, and with it, a growing passion for power. The acquisition of wealth and power became the new false idols of the city which lead to an idolatrous nation. Hence, a spirit of nationalism emerged with its militaristic ally often leading to war.¹¹ In the discussion at the Center, Merton also introduced the question of idolatry and religion. He declared: “You see, the church simply proposes a different idol. ‘This one is a better one because it is a more spiritual one,’ or something like this. But we must get rid of the idols” (*PAJ* 53). Speaking with Merton at the time was Edward Crowther. He echoed Merton’s comment on the Church and its idols, suggesting that a so-called underground church was going “to make redundant the extremely dull facets of the established spirituality within the institutional church” (*PAJ* 63). In his introduction to this volume, Walter Capps wrote that Merton was not only critical of the Catholic Church but also of the external trappings of “Christian monasticism” (*PAJ* 22).

In his “Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra,” Merton spoke of the emptiness of “technological man” (*ESF* 70), an idea developed further in his essay *Day of a Stranger*, another message to a Latin American audience.¹² In both these works Merton exhorted his Latino readers not to follow the example of North Americans but instead, to cultivate their own rich heritage. In his introduction to *Day of a Stranger*, Robert Daggy described Merton’s disdain of technology and its twin allies of money and materialism, aptly citing Merton’s famous phrase about the “growl” of the monastery tractors which reminded him “of commercial endeavors, of making money, of materialism” (*DS* 16). Although Merton admitted that tractors and other farm machinery could be part of monastery life, he also reflected on the ills of this technology, which could cause “deadening of [the] spirit” and create “a loss of awareness.” The potential damage caused by the use of technology could be eliminated if the monks worked with their hands in the fields and woods, declared Merton. Merton’s general view of technology was that if it was kept in proper perspective, technology could be good, in and of itself (*CGB* 16). Technology must serve man and be subservient to the real interest of man, he said. In other words, man must remember “the origin and goal of all being is in God” (*CGB* 230).

The automobile as an idol on the American landscape, a particularly relevant link with O’Connor’s work, was explored by Merton in vivid imagery: it is a symbol of blatant materialism and it can be used as a “weapon,” a “means of suicide,” and a “brothel” – all of which strike at the very heart of contemporary America’s problems around “race, war, the crisis of marriage” (*CGB* 63). This critique of the idols of the marketplace as articulated by Merton is found as well in O’Connor’s first novel, *Wise Blood*,¹³ which is also an indictment of commercialism, consumerism and materialism that she recognized in the growing encroachment of technology and commerce upon her beloved rural South. In his “Prose Elegy,” Merton wrote: “in a realm where the advertised satisfaction is compounded of so many lies and of so much contempt for the customer. . . . [O’Connor] had seen too clearly all that is sinister in our commercial paradise, and in its rural roots” (*RU* 40).

Like Merton, O’Connor was concerned with materialism, and in a letter to Betty Hester, she asserted: “I mortally and strongly defend the right of the artist to select a negative aspect of the world to portray and as the world gets more materialistic there will be more such to select from” (O’Connor, *Habit* 173 [9/8/1956]). Commenting on the beat writers of her time, O’Connor stated that “some revolt

against our exaggerated materialism is long overdue” (O’Connor, *Habit* 336 [6/21/1959 letter to T. R. Spivey]). In an essay, O’Connor maintained that the Catholic faith was not central to life in America but “Where Catholics do abound, they usually blend almost imperceptibly into the general materialistic background [of the country]” (O’Connor, *Mystery* 201).

Indeed, materialism and consumerism were one of the themes inherent in O’Connor’s first novel, *Wise Blood*, completed at age 26 in 1952. But before I go further, I would comment that the idols of the marketplace in the novel seem mundane compared to today’s overpowering consumerism represented by mammoth financial institutions and huge shopping malls now writhing against the onslaught of online shopping. However, the symbols of materialism in the late 1940s and early 1950s were the golden calves that O’Connor imaginatively wove into her iconic tale. The setting for the novel is the secular city of Taulkinham¹⁴ with all the suggestions of commercialism, legal and illegal, including the prostitute, Leora Watts, a sex goddess, with whom Hazel Motes, the protagonist, is destined to spend some time. When Hazel Motes, or Haze,¹⁵ arrived by train to the city, “he began to see signs and lights. PEANUTS, WESTERN UNION, AJAX, TAXI, HOTEL, CANDY. Most of them were electric and moved up and down or blinked frantically” (O’Connor, *Collected Works* 15). At the beginning of chapter two, we find Haze walking through Taulkinham on a Thursday night when the stores stayed open later than usual, enticing customers with their special sale items (O’Connor, *Collected Works* 19).

These symbols of materialism in the novel reflect O’Connor’s deep concern about “our consumerist culture that is centered on advertising entertainment.”¹⁶ Sarah Gordon, founding editor of the *Flannery O’Connor Review*, described Taulkinham as an alienated urban center representing the spiritual malaise of our time manifested by a “banal materialism in which salesmanship is what counts and the traditional Christian emphasis on our fallen condition is discounted.”¹⁷ During a conversation with Robert Penn Warren, O’Connor spoke about the proliferation of supermarkets, both in the city and suburbs, as a consumer symbol: “everybody wants the good things of life, like supermarkets.”¹⁸ As for Enoch Emery, the anti-hero: “He had a fondness for Supermarkets; it was his custom to spend an hour or so in one every afternoon after he left the city park, browsing around among the canned goods and reading the cereal stories” (O’Connor, *Collected Works* 73).

Mrs. Flood, the last person with whom Hazel Motes interacts in the novel, is a living symbol of greed. She idolizes money and courts the protagonist solely for his disability pension check. “The landlady had always been impressed with [Haze’s] ability to pay. When she found a stream of wealth, she followed it to its source and before long, it was not distinguishable from her own. . . . She felt justified in getting anything at all back that she could, money or anything else, as if she once owned the earth and been dispossessed of it” (O’Connor, *Collected Works* 120). At the end of the novel, Mrs. Flood mistakenly believed that Hazel was still alive and at last she would be able to control him and his monthly pension checks.

Ted Spivey believed that Hazel Motes accepted a “totally materialistic picture of the world, with the automobile as the basic mythic fact of this world.”¹⁹ According to Sung Gay Chow, for O’Connor the automobile represented the “crass commercialism [and] materialism of a prosperous society that has overextended itself.”²⁰ George Kilcourse asserted that Haze’s automobile is yet another sign of the “industrialized world [and that car] ownership symbolizes status, prestige, and power in American culture.”²¹ According to Brian Ragen, in literature “Cars often stand for a simple materialism.”²²

In *Wise Blood*, there are numerous passages that underscore O'Connor's development of the automobile as a consumerist idol in the mind of Hazel Motes. Upon seeing Haze's new car, Enoch Emery exclaims: "Where'd you git this yer fine car? You ought to paint you some signs on the outside it, like 'Step-in, baby' – I seen one with that on it, then I seen another, said . . ." ²³ Enoch continued: "My daddy once owned a yeller Ford automobile he won on a ticket. . . . It had a roll-top and two aerials and a squirrel tail all come with it. He swapped it off" (O'Connor, *Collected Works* 49). At another point in the story, Haze states: "Nobody with a good car needs to be justified" (O'Connor, *Collected Works* 64). Speaking to a mechanic who was trying to fix his car, Haze explains: "Listen here . . . that's a good car. You just give me a push, that's all. That car'll get me anywhere I want to go" (O'Connor, *Collected Works* 71).

The destruction of his Essex automobile by a highway patrolman was the beginning of Hazel Motes' redemption and self-atonement. After the Essex was pushed over an embankment by the patrolman, Haze surveyed the scene: "The car landed on its top, with the three wheels that stayed on, spinning. The motor bounced out and rolled some distance away and various odd pieces scattered this way and that." Then a change was evident in Haze's demeanor. O'Connor wrote: "Haze stood for a few minutes, looking over at the scene. His face seemed to reflect the entire distance across the clearing and on beyond, the entire distance that extended from his eyes to the blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space" (O'Connor, *Collected Works* 118). This is the moment of grace for Hazel Motes, when he rediscovered Jesus²⁴ and subsequently blinded himself with lime. He lined his shoes with "gravel and broken glass and pieces of small stone" (O'Connor, *Collected Works* 125).²⁵ Before being hit by the fatal blow of the policeman's new billy club, Haze uttered his final words, "I want to go where I'm going" (O'Connor, *Collected Works* 131). Indeed, Hazel Motes arrived to "where [he was] going."²⁶

The Secular City and Religionless Religion

Through literary works and commentary we can better understand how the idols of the marketplace have impacted society and made inroads into Christianity. Both Merton and O'Connor explore the secularization of Christianity and its effect on the belief system of Christian church membership. In his correspondence with Bruno P. Schlesinger, Merton maintained that it is not the atheists that are killing religion but religion itself, encrusted in its abstract formalities divorced from a "humanist matrix." Because God is viewed as a Lawgiver and not as a Savior, he maintained, religion becomes perceived as irreligious because of the absence of a cultural and humanistic context. Merton further explained:

Hence, in one word, a pretended Christianity, without the human and cultural dimensions which *nature* herself has provided, in history, in social tradition, etc., our religion becomes a lunar landscape of meaningless gestures and observances. A false supernaturalism which theoretically admits that grace builds on nature and then proceeds to eliminate everything natural, there you have the result of forgetting our cultural and humanistic tradition.²⁷

The image of God as Lawmaker and not as Savior is, again, articulated by Merton in a veiled admonition when he clearly defined the role of the Church as a reflection of the Incarnate Christ who came into the world to serve and not to judge or rule. Merton further explained that the Church, to its detriment, has taken "her institutional power too seriously" resulting in its entrenchment of power against a world hostile to it (*CGB* 291). Thus a Church characterized by *superficial* "religious

routines” can be cannon fodder for a religionless religion. On the one hand, it allows its members “to run to God” and seek refuge within the safety of the institution for the comforts of a false consolation posing as the “sacred.” But in fact, it is a blatant form of secularism: once the “sacred” duties are performed the enlightened membership goes about its business of “making money and enjoying the good things of life.” As long as the membership is duly reminded of the “rigid and negative set of standards in the matter of sex” then all is well; war and civil rights can be left to the “secular authorities” (CGB 292). The role of Church leaders within a religionless religion is described by Merton: “*The struggle of Churchmen to maintain their place in the world by convincing the world that it needs them is, to my mind, a confusion and an indignity which ‘the world’ rightly regards as ridiculous*” (CGB 297).²⁸

The false belief of the believer is endemic to the construct of religionless religion. According to Merton, “The religious problem of the twentieth century is not understandable if we regard it only as a problem of Unbelievers and of atheists.” He maintained that the belief of the believer is “rigid, or complex, sentimental, foolish, or impertinent.” Merton was critical of externals of the Church with its vapid bureaucratic routines and a frenzied activism negating the spirituality of the Gospels.²⁹ He cited Martin E. Marty in his indictment of “the real unbelief of apparent believers.” This unbelief is institutionalized and is best described as a congregation of typical unbelieving believers who have no real interest in “the very ideas of a God who speaks” (FV 200) but rather align themselves with a variety of obscure superstitions and neuroses amalgamate[d] with the cliches of technology and nationalism to produce a curious half-formulated creed, claiming the support of official and churchly institutions, making occasional and expedient appeals to Christ, the Gospel and Christian ethics, and calling down wrath upon those who rock this “religious” boat. His chief purpose is to meditate upon the way “unbelief is institutionalized and presents as a more or less permanent cultural phenomenon” in American religion. (FV 199-200)³⁰

In O’Connor’s novel *Wise Blood*, aspects of materialism and commercialism are apparent within the secular city of Taulkinham and the epitome of greed is represented by the landlady, Mrs. Flood. There is likewise present a depiction of a religionless religion. The comprehensive study of *Wise Blood* by George Kilcourse provides a valuable guide for an understanding of O’Connor’s concern for the inauthenticity of Christianity in contemporary society. Kilcourse cited the superficiality of American religion and culture during the post-World-War-II years as a prominent feature in *Wise Blood* (Kilcourse, *Imagination* 46). Kilcourse refers to the insights of Merton’s friend, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose description of the contemporary religious scene is an apt commentary on the “religious predicament” presented by O’Connor in her novel. According to Heschel:

It is customary to blame secular science and antireligious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. . . . [W]hen religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion, its message becomes meaningless.³¹

Kilcourse contends that O’Connor’s novel was prophetic of the “God is Dead Theology” that occurred a decade after the publication of the book. Friedrich Nietzsche, an atheist,³² is cited by Kilcourse as

an influence on the “God is Dead” thinking of the day. Nietzsche’s “The Parable of the Madman” is particularly descriptive of “our indifference to religious mystery.” Kilcourse introduces the “Parable” with a portrayal of the “Madman” coming into the central marketplace with a “superfluous lantern as the brilliant light of day comes with sunrise. He exclaims incessantly, I am looking for God! Where has God gone . . . ? I shall tell you. *We have killed him* – you and I.” According to Kilcourse, the “Parable” is “the late nineteenth century’s stinging indictment of institutional Christianity.” He argues that the “Parable of the Madman” marked the beginning of the “post-Christian” world (Kilcourse, *Imagination* 49-50).

One sub-section of Kilcourse’s discussion of *Wise Blood* is entitled “Asa Hawks’s Counterfeit Religion.” He asserts that the main purpose of the novel was “to expose all forms of pseudoreligion in the modern world” (Kilcourse, *Imagination* 63). Asa Hawks is a pretentious preacher in a secular city immersed in a religionless religious atmosphere. As an able representation of the “unbelieving believer,” Hawks surrounds himself with a number of unbelieving believers whose sole purpose was to commercialize religion. Hazel Motes recognized their inauthenticity and maintained his integrity throughout the novel, preaching his nihilistic “church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified” (O’Connor, *Collected Works* 31).

As noted above, Haze’s final conversion at the end of the novel occurred after the destruction of his Essex automobile. About Haze’s integrity which he maintained throughout the novel, O’Connor remarked:

Wise Blood has reached the age of ten and is still alive. . . . [It] was written by an author congenitally innocent of theory, but one with certain preoccupations. That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it is a matter of no great consequence. For them Hazel Motes’ integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author Hazel’s integrity lies in not being able to.³³

Thus, the integrity of Hazel Motes is a counterpoint to the religious charlatan, Asa Hawkes, and his associates. The conversion and atonement of Hazel Motes at the end of the novel are further testimony of his integrity which has remained consistent throughout the novel. Indeed, Hazel is the “medium through which [O’Connor] delivers her message: the Christian religion is serious business and must be accepted *in toto* or rejected similarly” (Whitt 16).

Bill Oliver has noted that O’Connor spoke often about “the current of secularism that she felt all around her” which found expression in her satirical writings.³⁴ Robert Donahoo, in an essay on *Wise Blood*, explained the pernicious consumerist culture of the 1950s which promoted the happy life as represented by the purchasing power of money leading to the instantaneous change of the “quality of human life; it can convert existence into happiness.”³⁵ The materialism of the secular city and its impact on Catholics was a real concern for O’Connor, who believed strongly in the deep mysteries of her faith: the Fall, the Incarnation, the Eucharist and the Resurrection; but she expressed her disdain for the externals of the institution and the apparent shallow faith of Church membership. In a letter to Cecil Dawkins she stated: “I think that the reason . . . Catholics are so repulsive is that they don’t really have faith but a kind of false certainty. They operate by the slide rule and the Church for them is not the body of Christ but the poor man’s insurance system” (O’Connor, *Habit* 230-31 [7/16/1957]).

Ralph Wood described O'Connor's disdain for shallow Catholics. He declared that O'Connor had little tolerance for "mass Catholics" who received the Eucharist on Sunday and gave no thought to its real meaning (Wood 30). Concern about a secularized church was also expressed in a letter to Ted Spivey: "If the church is not a divine institution, it will turn into an Elks Club" (O'Connor, *Habit* 337 [6/21/1959]). In his book on O'Connor, Spivey wrote that she was concerned about the "the easy going ways of the middle class" who did not relate to the "idea of a God of grace" (Spivey 52). In a letter to Louise Abbot, O'Connor wrote about the real cost of religion and that in general, people do not think about their faith in terms of the cross but rather as a "big electric blanket" (O'Connor, *Habit* 354 [undated, 1959]). Commenting on *Wise Blood*, Carter Martin asserted that Flannery O'Connor revealed "the silliness of a shallow, pedestrian attitude toward religious commitment."³⁶ Bringing the shallowness of commitment a little closer to home, Ralph Wood told the story about his friend, Paul Wells Burns, who was invited to a Benediction service at Sacred Heart Church by O'Connor. Wood explained that as they arrived at the church, there was the expectation that O'Connor's mother, Regina, would join them for the service after she parked the car. He wrote: "Instead, she deposited them at the church and summarily announced, 'Y'all go pray while I get the groceries'" (Wood 210).³⁷

The prescient voices of Merton and O'Connor, therefore, prophesied the dangers of the marketplace idols and the concomitant secularization of Christianity, and specifically of the Catholic Church. But they were not alone. The externals and idols of the ecclesial institution contributing to a shallowness of faith among its membership was also a concern of Church historian Martin Marty, who listed seven features of secularized institutionalism within the Christian churches, including one which is certainly among "the usual suspects" as we evaluate the Church in 2015: "whenever the church's first concern is *self-perpetuation* and thus when it rejects reform as being revolution." Marty discussed belief systems of churches which are unknown to the membership and not even a "subject of curiosity." The belief system of the church is the task of the religious professional and although the members assume the belief system is important there is very little serious discussion about it. Busy pastors enmeshed in administrative details attend to "spiritual" matters only as a secondary concern.³⁸

Fortunately, a modern Catholic voice can guide us in our search for spirituality within the "institution" of the Catholic Church. Pope Francis's *The Joy of the Gospel* not only provides a prophetic critique in the section entitled "No to the new idolatry of money," as noted earlier, but gives hope to Catholics in the section "No to spiritual worldliness," in which he underscores problems articulated decades earlier by Merton and O'Connor. He writes:

In some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine, and for the Church's prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel have a real impact on God's faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time. . . . [Spiritual worldliness] can lead to a business mentality, caught up with management, statistics, plans, and evaluations whose principal beneficiary is not God's people but the Church as an institution. (Pope Francis 66-67)

Similar guidance is provided for grappling with authentic spirituality within the "institution" by O'Connor and Merton. Jane Hannon maintained that O'Connor insisted that the Church will survive in spite of questionable "institutional standards and practices."³⁹ As an orthodox Catholic, O'Connor spoke often of dogma and, as expressed to Betty Hester, saw it as "a gateway to contemplation and as an instrument of freedom and not restriction" (O'Connor, *Habit* 92 [8/2/1955]). O'Connor embraced

the mysteries of her faith and in a letter to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald she noted that one of her correspondents used the words contemplation and meditation interchangeably, which might suggest a deeper understanding of contemplative prayer than she had indicated in any of her other writings (O'Connor, *Habit* 40 [Summer 1952]). Although she never identified herself as a contemplative, I would conjecture that her unshakeable faith was enriched by a penetration of the “mysteries” through meditative practices, perhaps leading to deep interior prayer or contemplation. Kilcourse maintained that both Merton and O'Connor had “profoundly contemplative gifts, enabling them to dispel illusions and to summon the true self to replace spiritual impersonations” (Kilcourse, “Icons” 119). Merton, of course, has written much about the search for deep spirituality through contemplative prayer, which can perhaps best be summed up by his succinct description of his spiritual journey at the time of the opening of his archives at Bellarmine College: “Whatever I may have written, I think all can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ.”⁴⁰

1. Flannery O'Connor: *The Complete Stories*, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991) xiv. Merton referred to O'Connor's novels and short stories a number of times in his journals and other publications as well as in his memorable elegy about her: see Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 37-42 (subsequent references will be cited as “RU” parenthetically in the text); first published in *Jubilee* 12.7 (Nov. 1964) 49-53. Conversely, there are only two references to Merton by O'Connor, both found in her collected letters, *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979) (subsequent references will be cited as “O'Connor, *Habit*” parenthetically in the text). In a letter to Ben Griffith, O'Connor comments about her first book of short stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*: “My editor wrote me that the book was selling better than anything on their list except Thomas Merton – which doesn't say much for their list, I guess” (89 [7/9/1955]). In a letter to Giroux about her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, she writes: “After Lent I would be obliged if you would send Fr. Paul at the monastery at Conyers a copy of my book and if Fr. Louis [Merton] reads it, I'd like to know what he thinks” (380 [3/6/1960]). Though O'Connor wrote more than a hundred book reviews for two Catholic diocesan newspapers in Georgia, covering many of the serious Catholic books of her times (see *The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews by Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Carter Martin [Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1983]), it is rather surprising and puzzling that she never reviewed any of the numerous Merton publications of that era.
2. See Sally Fitzgerald, “Rooms with a View,” *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 10 (Autumn 1981) 5-22. Fitzgerald and her husband Robert contributed greatly to O'Connor's literary reputation both during her lifetime and especially after her death in 1964. O'Connor lived with the Fitzgeralds at their home in Redding, Connecticut from 1949 to 1951. In addition to editing *The Habit of Being* Sally Fitzgerald co-edited with her husband *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), a collection of O'Connor essays and lectures (subsequent references will be cited as “O'Connor, *Mystery*” parenthetically in the text), and was editor of the Library of America volume *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works* (New York: The Library of America, 1988) (subsequent references will be cited as “O'Connor, *Collected Works*” parenthetically in the text).
3. George A. Kilcourse, “O'Connor and Merton: Icons of the True Self in a ‘Christ-Haunted’ World,” *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 23 (1994-95) 119; subsequent references will be cited as “Kilcourse, ‘Icons’” parenthetically in the text.
4. Although this essay references Christianity in general, most of the critiques by Merton and O'Connor are directed specifically at the externals of the Catholic Church as an institution.
5. Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2013) 41; subsequent references will be cited as “Pope Francis” parenthetically in the text.
6. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 230; subsequent references will be cited as “DWL” parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 71; subsequent references will be cited as “ESF” parenthetically in the text.
8. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 72.

9. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 301; subsequent references will be cited as “CGB” parenthetically in the text.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957) viii.
11. Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 51; subsequent references will be cited as “PAJ” parenthetically in the text. The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, established by Robert Hutchins and his associates in 1959, was a place where “the major issues of the day would be addressed in depth, with the intention of anticipating the needs and vulnerabilities of the democratic society” (PAJ 1). W. H. “Ping” Ferry, a senior fellow at the Center and a close friend of Merton, had asked him to participate and present his views in a forum shortly before his trip to Asia, a dialogue transcribed and published in this volume. See also President Dwight Eisenhower’s Farewell Address on January 17, 1961, when he stated in part: “In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist” (*Documents of American History*, ed. Henry Steele Commager [New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968] 667).
12. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981); subsequent references will be cited as “DS” parenthetically in the text.
13. *Wise Blood* (O’Connor, *Collected Works* 3-131), ranked sixty-second in *The Guardian*’s list of the one hundred greatest novels of all time, is a story of protagonist Hazel Motes and the loss of his Christian faith and the eventual regaining of it before his death.
14. In a reading notebook, Merton characterized Taulkinham as a secular city and identified Enoch Emery with it: “Enoch and the secular city. ‘He had come to the city and – with a knowing in his blood – he had established himself at the heart of it. Every day he looked at the heart of it; every day; & he was so stunned & overwhelmed that just to think about it made him sweat.’ He had discovered a special mystery in the heart of the city – to reveal to special person see . . . If the person doesn’t come the nerve in his will grow so big he’ll jump a woman or something – & – his blood tells him the person is coming” (Merton, “Reading Notebook 25” 143 – Thomas Merton Center [TMC] archives, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, quoted with permission of The Thomas Merton Legacy Trust). Subsequently in the notebook Merton added: “Enoch has the new Jesus. It is the mummy at the heart of the secular city. He will steal the mummy & put it in the gilded washstand” (147).
15. According to Margaret Earley Whitt, *Understanding Flannery O’Connor* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), “The shortened name is a reference to a glazed impaired way of seeing” (17); subsequent references will be cited as “Whitt” parenthetically in the text.
16. Ralph Wood, *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ Haunted South* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2004) 242; subsequent references will be cited as “Wood” parenthetically in the text.
17. Sarah Gordon, *Flannery O’Connor – The Obedient Imagination* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000) 103.
18. *Conversations with Flannery O’Connor*, ed. Rosemary M. Magee (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1987) 30.
19. Ted Spivey, *Flannery O’Connor, the Woman, the Thinker, the Visionary* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997) 118; subsequent references will be cited as “Spivey” parenthetically in the text.
20. Sung Gay Chow. “Strange and Alien Country: An Analysis of Landscape in Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*,” *Flannery O’Connor Bulletin* 8 (1979) 38.
21. George A. Kilcourse, *Flannery O’Connor’s Religious Imagination* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001) 58; subsequent references will be cited as “Kilcourse, *Imagination*” parenthetically in the text.
22. Brian Abel Ragen, *A Wreck on the Road to Damascus: Innocence, Guilt, & Conversion in Flannery O’Connor* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1989) 57; in his book, Ragen devotes a chapter to the automobile in literature: see chapter two, “The Automobile and the American Adam” (55-105).
23. This is an incomplete sentence in the novel.
24. In a letter to Betty Hester, Flannery O’Connor wrote: “It seems to me that all good stories are about conversion, about a character changing” (O’Connor, *Habit* 275 [4/4/1958]). Writing to John Hawkes, O’Connor explained the meaning of “wise blood” and its effect on the conversion of Hazel Motes. She wrote: “Haze is saved by virtue of having wise blood, it’s too wise for him ultimately to deny Christ. Wise blood has to be these people’s means of grace – they have no sacraments” (O’Connor, *Habit* 350 [9/13/1959]). Another form of “wise blood” is possessed by Enoch Emory, a foil for Haze in the novel. Emory has a comic form of wise blood which intuitively guides him as a symbol of the secular city of Taulkinham. In her April 4, 1958 letter to Betty Hester, O’Connor wrote: “All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it, but most people think of these stories as hard, hopeless, brutal etc.” (O’Connor, *Habit* 275).

25. For an interpretation of Hazel's self-blinding and ascetic practice of gravel, glass and stones in his shoes, see Christina Bieber Lake, *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O'Connor* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005) 88-90: "while self-blinding and self-mortification may seem to be a turn away from the physical world, it can actually be a turn toward it. Critics note that when Haze blinds himself, he does so as a medieval ascetic might; he repudiates the physical world in favor of the spiritual" (89).
26. In her article "Theology cum Fiction" (*America* 186.17 [20 May 2002]), Kathleen Feeley summarizes the four stages of Hazel Motes' journey back to God: "first, medieval spirituality (the penitential action of rocks in his shoes as a boy); then Romanticism (he could avoid God by avoiding sin); then postmodern nihilism (he has no soul); and finally, the search for a new Jesus, the failure of which leads to his emptying of self and embracing God" (30).
27. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 542 [12/13/1961].
28. For a lively and frank exchange of ideas about the Church as an institution, see Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. Mary Tardiff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).
29. See Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 213; subsequent references will be cited as "FV" parenthetically in the text.
30. For his critique of the triumphalist tone of pronouncements by the Catholic Church, see Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 184-87.
31. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder, A Spiritual Anthology*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (New York: Crossroad, 1997) 39-40 (quoted in Kilcourse, *Imagination* 47-48).
32. Since the terms "atheism" and "nihilism" appear frequently in the interpretative literature on Flannery O'Connor, I find it instructive to note the distinction between the two words rendered by Ralph Wood, who maintains that while the atheist may deny the God of the Old Testament and Jesus Christ of the New Testament he/she still retains "an objective moral sense, as did the ancient Greeks and Romans." By contrast the nihilist regards "religious belief and moral virtue as mere social conventions" – delusions bereft of reason and revelation (Wood 179).
33. *Three by Flannery O'Connor* (New York: New American Library, 1962) 2.
34. Bill Oliver, "Flannery O'Connor's Compassion," *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 15 (1986) 3.
35. Robert Donahoo, "The Problem with Peelers: *Wise Blood* as Social Criticism," *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 21 (1992) 54.
36. Carter Martin, *The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968) 202.
37. For an insightful understanding of the relationship between Flannery O'Connor and her mother Regina Cline O'Connor, see Jean W. Cash, *Flannery O'Connor: A Life* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2002) 145-73. The relationship between O'Connor and her mother was complex. Regina was an astute business person who managed the farm, Andalusia, with a high degree of efficiency and acumen. She was also dedicated to caring for her daughter, who was ill with lupus. As a result of her illness, O'Connor was solely dependent on her mother, who, to her credit, provided an environment conducive to her daughter's writing activities. Regina, however, had limited knowledge of literature and struggled to understand her daughter's short stories and novels. Regina was frustrated with Flannery's writing, of which she had little understanding, and urged her to write stories that her friends could understand. Cash wrote: "Regina may have preferred that her daughter write for a mass audience, producing popular fiction in the style of *Gone with the Wind* but she had to accept the reality that her daughter was not the writer of best sellers" (172). O'Connor portrayed some of Regina's characteristics in several of her short stories, most notably the story, "Good Country People," in which Mrs. Hopewell reflects some of Regina's character traits as she interacts with her highly educated daughter, Joy Hulga, who has a Ph.D. in philosophy (O'Connor, *Collected Works* 171).
38. Martin E. Marty, *Varieties of Unbelief* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964) 172, 174. Although Marty was discussing Christianity in general, in "The Unbelief of Unbelievers," his review-essay of Marty's book, Thomas Merton found Marty's commentaries particularly applicable to the Catholic Church (see FV 202).
39. Jane Hannon, "The Wide World Her Parish: O'Connor's All Embracing Vision of Church," *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 24 (1995-1996) 20.
40. Thomas Merton, "Concerning the Collection in the Bellarmine College Library," in Thomas Merton, John Howard Griffin and Monsignor [Alfred] Horrigan, *The Thomas Merton Studies Center* (Santa Barbara, CA: Unicorn Press, 1971) 14.