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False Prophets/Profits: The Effects of Post-WWII Consumerism on Religious Values in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction

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Abstract

Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, "The River", and "A View of the Woods" suggests the rise in consumerism, especially since WWII, has become an 'alternative religion,' causing the loss of traditional religious values such as compassion, humility, and authenticity. The false prophets of consumerism, such as tent revivalists, televangelists and salesmen, place a higher value on the pursuit of objects than human connection and community. In O'Connor's fiction, then, a post-religious culture in which consumerism reigns supreme threatens humanity. This loss of religion and the transition to a "post-Christian" world has previously been examined by scholars such as Quentin Schultze and John Collins. Collins argues that the "religionless religion" of consumerism threatens to destroy the Christian religion and its institutions. I agree with his arguments on the effects of consumerism on humanity, but my work is focused more on the destruction of basic human values, Christian or not, than on the loss of religious institutions. My work especially differs from Schultze's, who argues that Christian institutions can—and even should—embrace the rise of televangelists and the use of mass media to further their message. I disagree because the blending of religious institutions with the market-driven focus of mass-media creates a dangerous distortion to the original message. While O'Connor characterizes her own work as "Redemption-based," my focus is on the loss of human values having devastating effects on the future of society, politics, and human interaction; the practical effects, not the

parochial effects. By focusing on this select topic in her works, I illuminate the deception of these consumerist ideals and the threats they ultimately pose to our order in civil society. In the end, it is our responsibility to recognize such deception and to not only not accept it as truth, but to actively oppose it as well.

Keywords: Flannery O'Connor, religion, consumerism, values, mass media

Consumerism is defined as “(Excessive) emphasis on or preoccupation with the acquisition of consumer goods. Frequently *depreciative*.” (“consumerism, n.” 1). While this definition is open to a broad context of uses, Flannery O'Connor, in her works, had a more specialized application of the term. She focused on the rise of American values of consumerism and its effects in opposition to more religious values. Flannery O'Connor presents the values of consumerism in direct contrast to the religious values of Christianity by injecting “false prophet” characters and material symbols of consumerism into her writing that offer a bastardized or perverted religion and the worship of items. It is a belief based on consumption as opposed to belief in the divine. Her writing shows the mixing of consumer culture and its values with the ideas and values of organized religion. As a result, the two entities sometimes become unrecognizable from each other. In the essay, “In the Protestant South,” O'Connor presents the issue of American consumerism and attempts to convey that consumer culture is a distraction to religious life and can lead us into a dark future, which we should fear. “Where Catholics do abound, they usually blend almost imperceptibly into the general materialistic background [of the country]” (O'Connor, “Mystery and Manners” 201). As consumerism deceptively replaces Christian ideals, it degrades the Christian values of love and caring for others, human

relationships, and the value of humility and human life above all else. As consumerist values replace these more traditional views, humanity is degraded to the worth of their products and material possessions instead of their inherent human value. The solution that O'Connor presents to the reader is that an act of violent divine intervention is needed to awaken those in her stories, and as an extension, those in America, to the errors of consumer culture.

In order to understand Flannery O'Connor's critical views on the loss of religious values in the country, in part due to the rise of consumerism, it is crucial to understand the emergence of consumer culture and the values inherent in its system. It is equally important to view the evolution of religion into forms of consumptive programs such as those aired on television or on the radio and how those forms of religion participated in strategies that were more worried about profits than divinity. The presentation of the history of consumerism will also provide a more direct explanation of some of the objects at use in Flannery O'Connor's works, such as cars (a commodity whose sales surged in the wake of post-WWII consumerism), an object that she uses many times in reference to her characters trying to outrun religious truth and values.

The rise of consumerism in America took off after the conclusion of WWII. Due to the war, wages were high, and jobs were steady, but during WWII, many citizens were expected to take on the role of conservative living or rationing goods so that more could go to the troops. As a result, once the war had ended and troops funneled home, there was overwhelming angst in the population, as people were ready to spend their money. This attitude came to a head, and American consumerism was born out of the age of spending that followed. Alongside this wave of spending, urban and suburban stages were expanding, and new technologies brought more products for the modern consumer to buy. Among the new technologies were cars, televisions, modern appliances such as toasters, washing machines and vacuums, and other appliances such

as refrigerators and dishwashers. Among those items, the sale of cars and televisions saw the most significant uptick in sales, with every family trying to own one no matter their income level. It was socially expected of the population to spend. As historian Lizabeth Cohen notes, “The good purchaser devoted to ‘more, newer and better’ was the good citizen, since economic recovery after a decade and a half of depression and war depended on a dynamic mass-consumption economy” (“The Rise of American Consumerism” 1-2). As a result of the citizen’s new responsibility as a consumer, people’s values were shifting from traditional values to more item-centric ones, and their attitudes shifted to reflect the culture in which they lived. As traditional values shifted, the church and organized religion were not far behind. Many televangelists and radio programs for the Christian audience were shifting from sharing the word of god and divinity to sharing “broad truths” and not bearing down on one religious sect such as Christianity (Schultze 141). The premise for these religious movements was grounded in the emerging consumer values:

Religious programs emerged upon the air without any concerted plan on the part of the great Christian bodies of the nation and today are competing with soap, cigarette, cosmetics, gasoline, food products...world views—and even churches—for the attention of and, in many instances, for money contributions from the listening public. (Schultze 140)

Flannery O’Connor surely picked up on the shift being made in terms of religion and its purpose and goal in the post-WWII consumerism boom, as many of her characters are literary representations of the greedy consumer-based false prophets that took over in the wake of these values. O’Connor states in “The Fiction Writer & His Country” that “To know oneself is to know one’s region. The writer’s value is lost, both to himself and to his country, as soon as he

ceases to see that country as a part of himself, and to know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks” (“Mystery and Manners” 35). As she understands the country and what it lacks, her writing is more meaningful, and she has the chance to suggest what direction consumer culture will lead America. She is concerned with the replacement of values such as love and compassion in Christianity with the errors of consumer values such as vanity and the value of material goods over human connections.

Flannery O’Connor injects elements critical to the emerging attitudes of consumerism in all of her texts, including *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, *Wise Blood*, *Everything Rises Must Converge*, and *The Violent Bear It Away*. I will be focusing on her discrediting of consumerism in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*’s story “The River,” *Wise Blood*, and “A View of the Woods” from *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. By looking at her presentation of consumerist ideals and values in these stories, her reason for pushing against them will become apparent, as will her outlook on humanity if we do not shun those ideas. Her solution lies in rejecting consumer values and influences as she shows the inadequacies of them. Consumerist values fall flat to O’Connor, and she conveys that they should to others as well. This is because consumerists value material items as more vital to them than human connections and emotions. She shows that violent divine intervention has to happen in order to bring people back to Christ, or at least more Christian values such as love, humility, and compassion for others.

In “The River” from *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, Flannery O’Connor presents the readers with a classic false prophet who brings in large crowds on his claims of being a healer who baptizes people in the local river and makes their afflictions go away. In this story, Mrs. Connin is babysitting a young boy named Harry, who comes from a troubled family. While babysitting Harry, she takes him to see the preacher named Bevel to baptize him. The scenario is

a microcosm for O'Connor's problem with society: they put faith and belief in these idols that are there to lead people astray, primarily for financial gain. The preacher is one of the people, as Mr. Paradise, a man with cancer who went to Bevel and was never healed, shouts out, "Pass the hat and give this kid his money. That's what he's here for" (O'Connor, "A Good Man" 38). The preacher ignores him and talks to young Harry, saying, "If I Baptize you, you'll be able to go on to the Kingdom of Christ. You'll be washed in the river of suffering, son, and you'll go by the deep river of life" (O'Connor, "A Good Man" 40). His offer seems genuine to the boy who does not seem to know a lot better otherwise, and he agrees to be baptized. The preacher baptizes him and even goes a step further in his claim to power, stating, "You count now, you didn't even count before" (O'Connor, "A Good Man" 41). I believe this quote is a direct reflection of O'Connor's view on the mixing of consumer culture and religion. It is now these men on earth who present themselves in the way of a religious figure and who claim to have the power to tell you whether you count or not. It is these kinds of people that society not only looked to for guidance but these kinds of people they shoveled money to. As "The Idolatry of the Marketplace," an essay critical of the rising consumer culture and secularism in America, points out, this was the way of life that O'Connor was combatting: "our post-Christian society is the secular city steeped in materialism, consumer-driven, and laden with the idols of property ownership" (Collins 15).

O'Connor's attitude towards this turn toward consumer-driven religion is also revealed by what happens to the boy after the preacher baptizes him. He returns home and is in a daze, unaware of exactly what is going on around him, a metaphor for the result of following the new perverted way of religion. After returning home, he is again surrounded by consumer influence in his parents. They are only worried about the vintage book that Mrs. Connin gave him as a gift,

and how much money they can get if they sell it. Harry finally decides that he is unsatisfied with the preacher's baptism and his parents' consumptive attitudes (O'Connor, "A Good Man" 42-45). He runs off from home and makes it all the way to the river. When Harry arrived there, "He intended not to fool with preachers any more but to Baptize himself and to keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river. He didn't mean to waste any more time" (O'Connor, "A Good Man" 48). Harry's view seems to be an even greater revelation of O'Connor's view of the modern consumer culture preachers; they are not able to bring you to Christ and are a waste of time. Harry begins to try to baptize himself and feels much resistance like the river is not accepting him (O'Connor, "A Good Man" 48). "This was the way it had been when the preacher held him under—he had had to fight with something that pushed him back in the face. He thought how far he had come for nothing and he began to hit and splash and kick the filthy river" (O'Connor, "A Good Man" 48). Harry is not able to baptize himself either because he has not been given an accurate view of religion; he only knows of the illegitimate and tainted form given to him by Bevel. Harry gets mad and starts fighting the river, which to no coincidence, O'Connor calls "filthy" due to its association with the false prophet and his fake baptisms. Because he tries to make it to heaven under the guidance of a false prophet, he suffers a terrible fate by being swept away and drowning in the river. His story is doubly unsatisfying, considering that even though Harry was able to break away from his consumerist parents and the environment he grew up in, he was still damned by the society he turned to. Harry does not fully realize that his misguided following will condemn him: "For an instant, he was overcome with surprise; then since he was moving quickly and knew that he was getting somewhere, all his fury and his fear left him" (O'Connor, "A Good Man" 49). To O'Connor, progress is not synonymous with redemption. Harry believes that he will make it to heaven, but he will not, as his belief was

tainted by the false prophet. Harry's death is the violent revelation of sorts that O'Connor suggests is needed to awaken her audience to whom and what teaches them their religious values. As televangelists and radio talk show preachers emerge in the consumer-driven culture, it is up to the true Christian to evaluate who or what they are worshipping.

Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood* is an even greater representation of consumerism and a clear statement for what it takes to turn a blind eye to false prophets and their financially-driven religious pursuits. This novel follows the path of Hazel Motes, a profoundly religious man who cannot help but fight his innate drive to 'believe' every chance he gets. While Hazel himself could, in some regards, be viewed as a false prophet, he still holds some real belief in the divine and does not care about money. Someone who does not care about money like Hazel Motes would be hard to sell as a consumer-driven false prophet. His interactions with other consumer society products also seem to not go well for him as his car, a prime symbol of consumer culture, keeps breaking down. According to "The Idolatry of the Marketplace," "The automobile was an idol on the American landscape" (Collins 16). The automobile is what Hazel uses to try to outrun his Christian past, and it is not until the destruction of this car that he regains his intense yearning for Christ. O'Connor injects many other symbols of consumer culture into *Wise Blood*, many of which surface in the bustling consumer-centric town of Taulkinham. There, men like the potato peeler vendor make exaggerated claims about their products, such as, "You'll thank the day you ever stopped here" and "you'll never forget it" (O'Connor, "Wise Blood" 36). These vendors mirror the values of consumerism that they try to pass off as being nearly a religious or spiritual experience just from buying their products. Alongside them, a blind preacher named Asa Hawkes (whom Hazel later finds out is not blind) begs for money. He is one of the men who used to have value as a preacher but has been reduced to nothing, saying, "if you won't repent,

give up a nickel. I can use it as good as you. Wouldn't you rather have me beg than preach?" (O'Connor, "Wise Blood" 36). Equating the repentance of sin to any monetary value is the type of scams that Christians would repeatedly face with the emergence of consumer-driven preachers that had abandoned their pursuit of the divine in exchange for bigger audiences and more money.

Another example of the type of new-age preachers that Flannery O'Connor writes against is the false prophet that shadows Hazel Motes named Onnie Jay Holy ("Wise Blood" 150). In a perfect example of the process that O'Connor is rejecting, Onnie takes over Haze's somewhat legitimate attempt at preaching and turns it into a for-profit venture. He tries to market it as being the total truth, though, in saying, "I want to tell you a second reason why you can absolutely trust this church—it's based on the Bible. Yes sir! It's based on your own personal interpretation of the Bible, friends" (O'Connor, "Wise Blood" 153). By pushing this false religion as something equal to true religious belief in the divine, Onnie Jay is representing the falsehood inherent in the consumer culture's teachings, which is that the excessive acquisition of goods will bring life more meaning than traditional religious values will. Onnie's false prophet identity is further solidified by his offering of the word of the Church of Christ Without Christ, which "costs you each a dollar, but what is a dollar?" (O'Connor, "Wise Blood" 153). As Onnie presents himself as an agent of religious change, Hazel, the unwilling defender of true Christian belief, shuts down his false message. While Haze rejects this man, Onnie Jay recruits another man named Solace Layfield, who works as the "True Prophet" (O'Connor, "Wise Blood" 167). Just in one night, "Hoover Shoats made fifteen dollars and thirty-five cents clear. The prophet got three dollars a night for the use of his car" (O'Connor, "Wise Blood" 203). Clearly, each man's sole purpose for being prophets is the accumulation of wealth, and they have no real care for the divine.

Flannery O'Connor makes it clear what she believes should happen to this type of false prophet figure in today's society. Hazel Motes runs Solace Layfield over with his car multiple times and finally says, "Two things I can't stand—man that ain't true and one that mocks what is" ("Wise Blood" 206). These words would be equally received if they were coming right from O'Connor's mouth. It is these false prophets who are the kinds of men who both tell lies and also mock "what is." "What is" is referring to true divinity and the traditional presentation of religion. In the end, Hazel Motes is reconnected to his religious faith due to his rejection and killing off of these false prophets, the destruction of his consumer-symbolic car, and the physical blinding of himself, the ultimate refusal of the material world. While Flannery O'Connor was not suggesting that her readers blind themselves or kill others, she intended to paint consumer objects and false prophets as an evil that will lead people astray from actual religious or divine value, in order to make a statement about the more significant dangers of American consumer culture.

The false prophet in Everything *that Rises Must Converge* story "A View of the Woods" is not traditional. Mary Fortune and her grandfather Mr. Fortune watch the progressing urban development of the land around them. Mr. Fortune owns much of the land around and sells it out little by little for the sake of development. To Mr. Fortune, development and consumer items are the epitome of value and worth:

He wanted to see a paved highway in front of his house with plenty of new-model cars on it, he wanted to see a supermarket store across the road from him. He wanted to see a gas station, a motel, a drive-in picture showed within easy distance. He thought this should be called Fortune, Georgia. He was a man of advanced vision, even if he was seventy-nine years old. (O'Connor "Everything that Rises" 58)

Mr. Fortune tries to make his granddaughter into a doppelgänger of himself by training her to carry on his values of consumerism and progress over all other values. While he is not a false prophet in a traditional sense, he is exceptionally consumerist in what he values and in the outlook of the progress of the nation. This story is a grand reflection of a post-Christian society, devoid of kindness and love, where all value lies in the material. This is an idea that resonated much with Mr. Fortune. Mary Fortune is under the impression that Mr. Fortune is a useful guide for her, at least until he tries to sell off the plot of land in front of the house that she calls the lawn (O'Connor, "Everything that Rises" 63). Mary Fortune senses nature's (the lawn and the woods) connection to the divine.

In much of Flannery O'Connor's works, nature is symbolic of the divinity of Christ, and the connection here is just as clear, as the child is extremely worried by Mr. Fortune's intentions. "That's where we play. We won't be able to see the woods across the road. We won't be able to see the view" (O'Connor, "Everything that Rises" 63). Clearly, the girl's obsession with the areas stems beyond the physical and shows her innate spiritual yearning, one that Mr. Fortune entirely discredits. He presents his consumer-driven pursuit as one that is of a higher purpose than anything that the woods represent. Mary Fortune is enraged at his refusal of true divinity and his latch on the material. She says, "I refuse to ride with the Whore of Babylon" to reject Mr. Fortune and his values. If O'Connor's attitude toward consumerism and false prophets was not clear enough already, this quotation puts it in perfect perspective. The Whore of Babylon is a biblical allusion to a false prophet sent from hell to lead fundamental Christians astray. Mr. Fortune is precisely this and is entirely unwilling to accept that, indicating that he will be led towards a grim future in his rejection of the true divine.

Mr. Fortune recognizes the innate spiritual presence inside of Mary Fortune, saying, “That child is an angel. A saint!” (O’Connor, “Everything that Rises” 66) Nevertheless, he still actively refuses to come around to her world view and sticks to his own consumer views, looking to sell his land to put a gas station on it. His deceptive moments come when he tries to convince Mary Fortune that he is taking her to town for reasons other than to sell the land. With her religious intuition standing firm, she sees through his lies and repeatedly challenges his decision. Mr. Fortune finally snaps after the girl’s defiance. He shows that in the daunting “post-Christian” society that the value of the material is more important than human value and love towards others. He decides that he will punish her: “Now I’m going to whip you!” (O’Connor, “Everything that Rises”78). However, still fighting for her values, Mary Fortune starts clawing back, fighting, and attacking Mr. Fortune for his evil values and his desecration of her values. The man is horrified that the girl would act this way and throws her off, pummeling her repeatedly until there was not an ounce of life left in her. This event is a reflection of the battle between Christian and material values in the “post-Christian” society, with materialism winning. The consequences though are dire, as Mr. Fortune rejects the divine inclination of Mary Fortune and puts his material values over love and human connection with his granddaughter. This is the horrifying reality that O’Connor presents the nation with if it wholly rejects Christian values in favor of materialism and secularism.

With such a heavy focus on the theme and problem of material consumption and the country’s loss of religious identity, Flannery O’Connor’s works cemented her fears in the pages of her texts. The problems that plagued modern society, especially her contemporary period, were ever-present and growing as exponentially as the technological advancements of society. With these advancements brought new mediums for the preaching of the divine and Christ. Yet,

more often than not, these airways ended up being used by ratings-driven and monetarily motivated false prophets. She reflects and critiques this in her writing by presenting these characters as a roadblock on her protagonists' quest toward grace or the divine. She also uses material objects and symbols of consumer culture, such as the car, to show that they are quite literally driving people in the opposite direction of religion. With consumer culture and true religious belief becoming unrecognizable from one another, the only redemption lay in total rejection of the falsehood and divine intervention pushing her character toward Christ.

O'Connor's writings reflected American society and presented the same roadmap. If the consumer culture society of "post-Christianity" continued to flourish, the messages of religion would be lost (Collins 15). In replacing our religious or moral values with those of materialism, O'Connor sees America as losing the purpose of life, because to her, "the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that" (O'Connor, "Mystery & Manners" 32). She believes we have headed in the wrong direction: "Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause" (O'Connor, "Mystery and Manners" 33). While O'Connor views the issue in merely redemptive terms, rejecting Christian values does not end there. A loss of the values of love, compassion, humility, and connection to humanity would be a disaster. To reject these values in favor of the material could result in a world like "A View of the Woods," where we value consumer culture in society over human life. If this continues to be the case, then we will live in a dangerous and unempathetic world that puts economic or material status above the value of human life. And while O'Connor's main fear was that the loss of religion would lead to an inability for people to experience a spiritual redemption, it seems that the real problem is that

society will face a moral and existential dilemma instead. In the present this threat looms larger than ever, and it will be up to individuals and communities to redefine and redirect from this consumer-based and economically over-infatuated society to one based on moral important and useful moral values such as love, acceptance, cooperation, and connection to humanity.

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