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Puritanism and Graham Greene

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Puritanism and Graham Greene

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The introduction to the recent *Time* edition of *The Power and the Glory* by Graham Greene makes a familiar charge against the author. The editor, however, does not lend the repeated generalization its usual venomous twist; indeed, he praises Greene for the wrong reason. The charge is that Greene is a hater of the material, that he despises man's "body" and loves the spiritual in man, that he has a neo-Augustine loathing of sexual union. This observation may be true of Greene's other works. It certainly is not true of *The Power and the Glory*. In matters of sexuality, it is the abuse of this gift that Greene regrets. (And Greene would be the first to say that there are far worse sins than these: pride and greed, for example.)"

Cover Page Footnote

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Frank Salamone

The introduction to the recent *Time* edition of *The Power and the Glory* by Graham Greene makes a familiar charge against the author. The editor, however, does not lend the repeated generalization its usual venomous twist; indeed, he praises Greene for the wrong reason. The charge is that Greene is a hater of the material, that he despises man's "body" and loves the spiritual in man, that he has a neo-Augustine loathing of sexual union. This observation may be true of Greene's other works. It certainly is not true of *The Power and the Glory*. In matters of sexuality, it is the abuse of this gift that Greene regrets. (And Greene would be the first to say that there are far worse sins than these: pride and greed, for example.)

Recall the scene in prison in which an illicit sex act is being performed before the worthy pious lady and the whiskey priest. The smells in the dungeon-like cells are unbelievably horrid. It is hard to sympathize with most of the people stacked into the jail. Yet Greene writes one of his most lyrically moving scenes from this material. Greene uses the whiskey priest to show that God's grace can be received by the lowest sinner—even a whiskey priest—if he is humble enough to accept it. The wealthy pious lady has been put in jail for possessing a crucifix—a terrible crime against the state. The priest answers her objections to the filthiness of the world in these two passages.

Saints talk about the beauty of suffering. Well, *we* are not saints, you and I. Suffering to us is just ugly. Stench and crowding and pain. That is beautiful in that corner — to them. It needs a lot of learning to see things with a saint's eyes: a saint gets a subtle taste for beauty and can look down on poor ignorant palates like theirs. But *we* (non-saints) *can't afford to*. (Stress mine.)

Far from hating or merely tolerating the flesh, the priest sees it as a way to salvation. Greene argues that the *weakness* of the flesh can give man the proper humility he needs to accept the graces of God. This is the antithesis of the Puritan doctrine. It seems to me a very Catholic doctrine. The distinction between sex itself and its misuse is also very Catholic. The priest truly loves his daughter and condemns the over-pious who mistreat illegitimate children because of the sins of their parents. Indeed, there is a danger, as we are told by the whiskey priest, that we may love our sins because often the act itself is not wrong but the conditions under which the act was performed made it wrong.

The attitude of Greene toward the flesh is that of Aquinas. Man is not body *and* soul. Man is an entity — he is an en-souled body. The flesh is not to be hated or pitied — it is to be loved. That is why the noble ignoble priest is a hero and the seemingly admirable communist is the villain. Judged from a human viewpoint the dedicated lieutenant is to be preferred to the despicable whiskey priest, betrayer to all he holds sacred. However, Greene's viewpoint and frame of reference is not just a human one. It is a human one *joined* with a divine. The whiskey priest, therefore, is the hero because he knows his faults and is willing to depend on God and not on himself alone. The communist party, the priest points out, is only as good as its members. They cannot tolerate or endure weaknesses of the flesh. It is they who are the real Puritans.

Perhaps this is why so many non-Catholics cannot truly misunderstand Greene's work. And perhaps, too, this is why too many mechanical, "over-pious," other-worldly Catholics dislike Greene. But to these let me point out the numberless Gospel passages and stories that parallel *The Power and the Glory*. Christ associated with sinners. He refused to let the over-pious judge others' sins. He called on people to repent every time they fell. He did not despise the flesh. He was condemned by Puritans of his day because he ate and drank.

No, Greene is not a Puritan. He is not a Manichean. He is a Catholic who is sympathetic to man, who sees that God can work miracles of grace with the basest material.