‘These Jesuits Work Fast’: O’Connor’s Elusive Politics

By Benjamin B. Alexander
Franciscan University of Steubenville (Ohio, USA)

In January, 1956, the Reverend James H. McCown, a Jesuit priest, serving a small parish in Macon, Georgia heard that 40 miles away in Milledgeville there was a “coming young writer, a Catholic” named Flannery O’Connor. She labored at her craft in obscurity at her mother’s dairy farm. Afflicted with lupus, yet eschewing self-pity, O’Connor quipped her suffering taught her more about God’s mercy than a trip to Europe. A determined Father McCown enlisted from his congregation “Mr. Ridley,” described as a “fat big-hearted unacademic whiskey salesman and lover of new Cadillacs,” to chauffeur him to the O’Connor dairy farm.[1] When Father McCown asked directions on his first trip, a neighbor replied, “Mary Flannery’s a sweet girl and comes to Mass every Sunday. But those stories, she writes! They are terrible. Everybody says so, even the Catholics. Frankly, Father, I am afraid to go near her. She might put me in one of her stories.” When Father McCown finally arrived at the modest O’Connor farm house, he recalled from assorted fowl, including shrieking peacocks, “a damned goose kept coming at me. I stood my ground. He bit me on the leg as though a snapping turtle had me. I bled through my pants.” Limping to the front door, he was greeted by O’Connor with an unceremonious “Howdy.” Father McCown identified himself and told her, “I read your stories, and I just wanted to meet you. I liked them very much.”[2]

Both Flannery O'Connor and her mother, Regina, for the next eight years, delighted when a two-toned Cadillac came up the long driveway to Andalusia bearing the whiskey salesman and the Jesuit. While this vital, little known friendship inspired in part O'Connor's story, "The Enduring Chill," about what she called the "one-eyed Jesuit," the friendship with Father McCown is important in another way: understanding Flannery O'Connor's elusive political views—indirect, ironic, and often misunderstood. Global re-alignments of nations after World War II, the Cold War and fears of spreading Communism, the prospect of nuclear annihilation, Civil Rights activism, Southern agrarian thought, and the dynamic orthodoxy of Catholicism—all have an impact on O'Connor's political views. She often expresses them paradoxically in unpublished letters to Father McCown and others.

O'Connor's dread of political labeling parallels her healthy skepticism of literary categorization. She did not want to be known as *just* a Southern or *just* a Catholic writer. In a letter to Louis Rubin, O'Connor declines an invitation to speak at a Southern literary conference because she says she writes about "two countries" and is ill-suited to talk only about the South. In l956, O'Connor wrote a friend about Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon, "The Tates were the only ones that ended up in the Church, although the Church seems a logical end for the principles they began with…. That was all part of what is now pompously called the Southern literary renascence." In another letter, O'Connor asks a professor friend who had been lecturing on Southern literature, "What is that?" [3]

As O'Connor makes abundantly clear in her lectures in *Mystery and Manners,* she did not want to be tarred by a literary brush. She embodied a paradox remarking once that the only thing that kept her from being a Southern writer was Catholicism and the only thing that kept from being a Catholic writer was being a Southerner. This stance also served her well in the determination not to take political positions, especially in regard to Civil Rights. What can be discerned, however, from her unpublished letters concerning political topics can be grouped into three areas. These concern literary politics, Civil Rights politics, and anti-Communist politics. Her views in these three areas evolve often indirectly as her friendship with Father McCown developed.

Literary Politics

Unlike Mrs. McIntyre in "The Displaced Person" who tolerated the dutiful calling of Father Flynn, O'Connor looked forward to visits from Father McCown. While Mrs. McIntyre often complained religion was unworthy of serious conversation, O'Connor discussed theological issues with Father McCown. He became a trusted friend and often served as her spiritual director. Moreover, in matters of literary interpretation, Father McCown's Oxford-educated brother, also a Jesuit, the Reverend Robert McCown, was one of a handful of clergy whom O'Connor believed "got" her stories. The few letters to Father James McCown in *The Habit of Being* are not fully representative of his friendship with O'Connor and just a handful of her letters to him appear in the Library of America *Flannery O'Connor*. The unpublished letters from O'Connor to Father McCown provide valuable insight into the tensions between O'Connor and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church about her fiction. O'Connor's friendship with Father McCown helped her negotiate the painful literary politics with Catholic officialdom that continue a half century after her death.

For example, in 2000 a controversy arose over the "The Artificial Nigger" listed as required reading at a Catholic high school in the Diocese of Lafayette (Louisiana). The Bishop decreed O'Connor's stories be removed. A leading Catholic journal noted the political irony of the decision: "The only Catholic admitted by mainstream secular literary critics to the canon of 20th-century American authors—now excised by Catholics. A major southern writer involved in the project of explaining southerners to themselves, now prohibited in a set of southern schools. A woman known in her own day for her *anti*-racism now placed on the forbidden list on the grounds of racism."[4] A local clergyman declined to read the story with the offensive title, proclaiming "I wouldn't waste my time!"[5]

While O'Connor's was a prophet without honor in Louisiana, celebrities like Bruce Springsteen and Conan O'Brien have offered praise. Springsteen remarked in the early 80s he "was deep into O'Connor…There was something in those stories of hers that I felt captured a certain part of the American character that I was interested in writing about. They were a big, big revelation."[6] Bizarre happenings and vivid characters have led to a now familiar expression, "it's like a Flannery O'Connor story." In 2009 at an international conference held in Rome near the Vatican theologians, professors and critics from Europe and the United States heard lectures in simultaneous translation (United Nations style) about O'Connor's achievement. Informal discussion arose about prospects for beatification—especially since O'Connor's contemporary, Dorothy Day, has been officially advanced for sainthood.

Moreover, Karin Coonrod's brilliant staging of "Everything That Rises Must Converge" stunned the international audience with its dramatic power.[7] The production featured the character, Caroline, singing at the end a soaring African-American spiritual that echoed through the Rome streets. The Rome audience of different nationalities and races experienced the story's unifying Marian element. The performance fittingly illustrated O'Connor's insistent theme of spiritual integration, often "converging" in dramatic scenes of epiphany in her fiction.

The extraordinary event on a lovely spring evening in 2009 in the Eternal City was a long time coming. Years earlier the energetic, motorcyclist-priest, Father McCown, was one of the few clerics who *then* grasped O'Connor's power. After the publication of *Wise Blood* in 1952 and *A Good Man is Hard to Find* in 1955, Father McCown and his brother stand out as vital clergy emissaries of acceptance and understanding within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. O'Connor quipped, Father McCown "was the first priest who said turkey-dog to me about my writing."[8] He introduced O'Connor's writing to other Jesuits including Father "Youree" Watson of Spring Hill College, Mobile and the Reverend Harold Gardiner, literary editor of the Jesuit journal, America. O' Connor writes the Fitzgeralds, "These Jesuits work fast. Ten days after I had the visit from the one in Macon, I receive a communication from Harold C. Gardiner, S J asking me to contribute to *America*."[9] In 1959 O'Connor's "The Church and the Fiction Writer" appeared in its pages.

The support and recognition of the Jesuits through the efforts of Father McCown were vital in O'Connor's acceptance in Catholic intellectual communities. O'Connor's Jesuit admirers were crucial in recognizing in the late 1950s the tumultuous orthodoxy of her fiction. O'Connor judged the article by Father McCown's brother, also a Jesuit, Robert McCown, published in the obscure *Kansas* magazine, the most illuminating on that difficult, troubling work.[10] O'Connor wrote him: "What you say about the book exactly reflects my intentions when I wrote it…. Most of the theories proposed about the book make my hair on end"(Gossett papers). O'Connor was impatient with critics and once remarked that she grew tired of reviewers criticizing her fiction for being "brutal and sarcastic." Hearing O'Connor read "A Good Man is Hard to Find" to a small group, Van Wyck Brooks, the Pulitzer prize-winning critic, noted it was too bad a writer so gifted wrote about murders on the roadside. O'Connor observed, "When I see these stories described as horror stories, I am always amused because the reviewer always has hold of the wrong horror."[11] O'Connor is often provoked with critics not recognizing her intentions or ultimate meaning. She traces the crucial title of *The Violent Bear It Away* to "Christ's words" from the Gospel of Matthew that seem to make "no great impression." The novel, she states, is about the "violence of love giving more than the law demands, of asceticism like John the Baptist's, but in the face of which even John is less than the least in the kingdom." She laments—"all this is overlooked." [12]

Father Robert McCown, however, is one critic who understood the novel. He is the *good man* who discovers in *The Violent Beat It Away* what other critics *do not find*:

> To those who have properly read her *Wise Blood* and *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, it should come as no surprise that the product is a work of extraordinary literary merit. Unfortunately, however, many and among them would-be admirers, have not got the central message of the novel.

Continuing, he observes there is a:

> failure to understand Miss O'Connor's use of character-symbols, that is, characters possessing their own living individualities which, however, at the same time function as symbols in a larger and more universal synthesis, in much the same way that the allegorical characters and events of the great mediaeval religious epics, represent certain historical and theological abstractions ("Education of a Prophet," Gossett papers).

While Robert McCown**,** S.J. provides astute analysis, Father James, his brother, needed instruction and deferred to him in literary matters. In his autobiography, *With Crooked Lines,* he notes "I am a Jesuit" and "you may expect some deep thinking... My mental plateaus stop short of the Alpine reaches of abstract thought."[13] This is one reason that O'Connor liked him. His energy was relentless and while she was increasingly immobile, Father James was peripatetic. The evolution of their friendship reads like one of her stories. Father McCown is cut from the original warrior mold of St. Ignatius himself. In coming to know him, another great Jesuit, Father Latour of Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, is reminiscent of Father McCown. Recalling Cather's cowboy image of Father Latour, O'Connor writes Father McCown, "I hope you will be allowed to wear a cowboy hat and spurs, along with the Roman collar" (Gossett papers). Riding a motorcycle instead of a horse, Father McCown traversed the rugged American Southwest like Cather's Father Latour a century earlier. Father McCown even went on excursions to Africa, Nicaragua, and Alaska, making tours through exotic landscapes. He regaled the travel-challenged Flannery and her mother. While he eventually would ride his motorcycle in three different countries, O'Connor wrote him about failing a driving test in Georgia. He also wrote colorful travel narratives to his parishioners that O'Connor and her mother also enjoyed reading. Father McCown's professor friend, Thomas Gossett, professor *emeritus* of Wake Forest University, writes of Father McCown: "He is I believe the best man, the most Christian I have ever known"(Gossett papers).

A half century before, the British poet, Robert Bridges, regarded his poet friend, also a Jesuit, Gerard Manley Hopkins in much the same way. There are some parallels between the two Jesuits, Hopkins and McCown, yet in other ways they are strikingly different. Both Hopkins and McCown are dedicated to the priesthood's life of service, the rigors of which contributed to Hopkins' early death at 44. Indeed, in an 1880 letter

Hopkins apologizes to Bridges for fatigue, stating “drunkards go on drinking, the filthy, as the Scripture says, are filthy still: human nature is so inveterate. Would that I had seen the last of it”[14] In Father McCown’s correspondence similar exhaustion occurs because of his tireless ministry to poor minorities in Texas in the 1950s and 60s as well as recurrent retreats he provided to laymen and religious (often at Pass Christian, Mississippi ravaged by Hurricane *Katrina*). The friendship with O’Connor provided spiritual renewal, literary edification, and human solace from the demands of the priesthood, much like Hopkins’ friendship with Bridges. Without the visits to O’Connor, increasingly immobile in rural Georgia, Father McCown’s assignments could have become what Dublin and Liverpool posts were to Hopkins—sometimes draining, somber, revelations of the human condition that left little time for writing poetry.

Unlike Hopkins, however, Father McCown lifted his spirits by riding his motorcycle named “Rosanthe” on summer vacations and mission trips. In one account he writes, we “pushed through the plains of north Texas and Southern New Mexico, the mountains of Colorado, the prairies of Southern Wyoming, all of Utah, then home. It was a bizarre achievement that earned a double take even from teenagers, caused a heart-stopping friend to say, ‘Father you’re too old for that’ and a mortician to say ‘See you soon.’”[15] Father McCown’s letters and visits enlivened daily life at the O’Connor farm. In one letter, O’Connor thanks him for a bottle of wine: “we killed it off in short order and were very much obliged to you. Fr. Tavard negotiated the opening of it and got it all over himself as my mother had shaken it vigorously before bringing it in—she handles liquor as if it were milk of magnesia, or as if it would be better if it were ”(Gossett papers). It is little wonder that fellowship and good times were goals that both

O'Connor and Father McCown pursued since they pursued unusual vocations in rural Georgia. Father McCown recounts the area was bereft of Catholics and that "Irish, Italian, and Lebanese Catholics made up 1 percent of the population." He believed the situation needed "a heightening of the cultural level of the Catholics, and I was working hard to effect it."[16]

O'Connor educated him into the complexity of modern fiction while he counseled her about Church doctrine and discipline. Father McCown was a practical priest, orthodox theologically and a conservative anti-Communist in the 1950s while he and O'Connor were friends. He is self-effacing and comical about his literary abilities. Vocational conflicts that plagued Gerard Manley Hopkins who sometimes felt writing poetry compromised Jesuit zeal were unknown to Father McCown. Hopkins burned his verse; by contrast, McCown read many novels and acquired a library. He learned from O'Connor and studied what she recommended. He believed the Jesuits lacked adequate literary training and ultimately became a discerning reader of modern fiction. Learning about literature from O'Connor, he hoped, would help him heighten the cultural level of the parishes he served, the Jesuit order itself, and the larger Church. Venturing beyond the traditional clerical disciplines of theology, philosophy, and apologetics Father McCown under O'Connor's tutelage became widely read. In 1964, he writes Tom Gossett he had recently read Joseph Heller's *Catch 22,* James Baldwin's *In Another Country*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and K. A. Porter's *Ship of Fools*.

Father McCown admits, "I never claimed to know much about literature…and what I do know I think I learned mostly from my conversations and correspondence with the seeress of Andalusia, and things she gave me to read." [17] Father McCown accepted

O'Connor's criticism. She wrote her professor friends, Tom and Louise Gossett, "Father McCown breezed in here on his way to give a talk to the St. Joseph Guild on literary horizons of Catholic Thought or some such grandiose title. He knows nothing whatsoever about the subject, but was not letting that deter him" (Gossett papers). Father McCown observes, however, "in Macon Catholic circles, not a profoundly well-educated milieu, I was quite the stuff. And I could strut around like I did giving my very inept evaluations with no danger of contradiction. So I was only amused by her remark."[18]

O'Connor taught Father McCown about the "integrity of art." When he approached her about using her considerable talent "to do some polemical writing to defend Holy Church against her enemies," she replied tartly, "That ain't my cup of tea."[19] She disabused him of the notion that fiction could serve as a "pragmatic way to rout Protestant error and enthrone Catholic truth in our great country." In another letter she decries pietistic Catholic fiction as "propaganda and its being propaganda for the side of the angels only makes it worse. The novel is an art form and when you use it for anything other than art you pervert it. I didn't make this up. I got it from St. Thomas (via Maritain) who allows that art is wholly concerned with the good of that which is made, it has no utilitarian end"(Gossett papers).

O'Connor discovered, albeit painfully, some of the Church hierarchy preferred "propaganda on the side of the angels" to her own fiction. Seminary education in theology and philosophy did not equip many with the skill to understand O'Connor's often searing stories with their profound ecumenical appeal. The Misfit proclaiming free will at the core of Thomistic moral choice in Southern vernacular or the hermaphrodite extolling the beauty of the body is not the usual fare of religious orders, seminary classrooms and diocesan offices. O'Connor once noted gifted Catholic writers became anti-clerical. She, however, was devout and revered priests. Pietistic hagiography about religious, however, was annoying. Tolerating books like Bonaventure's *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, O'Connor preferred religious realism. In 1956 she writes Father McCown she has "just read a funny book by a priest named Father Robo on St. Theresa of Lisieux. It's called *Two Portraits of St. Theresa*. He has managed (by some not entirely crooked means) to get hold of a photograph of her that the Carmelites have not touched up which shows her to be a round-faced, determined, rather comical looking girl. He does away with all the roses, little flowers, and other icing. The book has greatly increased my devotion to her" (Gossett papers).

In dealing with apologetic, didactic writing O'Connor pursued a difficult path. She admired the craft of the "bad Catholics" like Hemingway and Joyce. Unlike them, she remained undeviating in faith and wrote beautiful catechetical letters to Betty Hester, Robert Lowell, Ted Spivey, and others struggling with theological issues. Caroline Gordon, her opinionated tutor, taught her the novelist is not a preacher, apologist, or propagandist. In 1951 Gordon writes to Walker Percy, "I am a Catholic, I suspect, because I was first a fiction writer. If I hadn't worked at writing fiction for so many years, I doubt if I'd have made it into the Church."[20] For Gordon, faith served craft, even if the craftsman was a Catholic rebel like Joyce or a superficial Churchman like Hemingway.

Gordon's understanding resonated with O'Connor. She, like Thomas Merton, preferred Joyce's (supposedly) apostate writing to works of apologetic uplift. Joyce's literary skills trumped his multi-faceted disdain for Irish Catholicism revealed meticulously in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. While complaining about his Jesuit education, he writes precise passages of ecclesiastical Latin and other exquisite prose. Excoriating Irish Catholicism, Joyce actually affirms it. Through his detailed knowledge of the faith, Joyce confirmed O'Connor in her faith and sowed the seeds of conversion in Thomas Merton. He "was struck by the respect Joyce retained for the Catholic tradition and the care he took in presenting it believably in fiction—so believably that it could convince the readers in its own right… there was something eminently satisfying in the thought that these Catholics knew what they believed, and knew what to teach, and all taught the same thing, and taught it with coordination and purpose and great effect."[21]

Caroline Gordon also admired Joyce and encouraged O'Connor to emulate his skills. Advising O'Connor about the revision of "The Artificial Nigger," Gordon states the first paragraph is not "elevated enough" and encourages O'Connor to emulate the James Joyce story, "Araby": "look at the high and mighty tone he takes throughout that story of something that has happened to every one of us in our time—to be promised a treat as a child and then disappointed."[22] Heeding Gordon's instructions to study modernist masters, O'Connor found herself at odds with the literary expectations of her beloved Church. A faithful parishioner of Sacred Heart parish in Milledgeville, O'Connor dutifully reviewed pietistic works for the local diocesan newspaper. She passed the books on to Father McCown observing in a letter, "this is a collection of stories taken from the Catholic press; they are therefore guaranteed to corrupt nothing but your taste. I enclose my review." (Gossett papers). In another letter she defends Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* criticized as unwholesome in a Catholic newspaper. In another letter, she tells Father McCown of a Jesuit who wanted to know what he "could read to preserve" his "innocence." O'Connor told him to peruse the phone book. (Gossett papers). O'Connor writes Father McCown of even more fundamental problems: "I have just recently come back from annual pilgrimage to the Macon Writer's Club breakfast where I was introduced as the author of 'The Valiant Bear It Away.' You go to all them pains to name a book something and then…." (Gossett papers).

O'Connor tolerated her share of blundering readers. Perceptive appreciation was limited to a few: the McCown brothers, some other Jesuits, Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, the Southern agrarians (Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Andrew Lytle), and the reclusive Betty Hester working in an Atlanta credit office. Her Mother, trying to understand modern fiction, once asked O'Connor, "Who is this Kafka? People ask me" A German Jew, I says, I think. He wrote a book about a man that turned into a roach. "Well I can't tell people *that*," she says" Who is this Evalin Wow?"[23] O'Connor made more progress teaching Father McCown who assiduously read works she recommended. By her death in 1964, he had completed an unusual apprenticeship with O'Connor, and with her encouragement, Walker Percy. She wrote Father McCown in December, 1963, "I'm glad you could get shut of Atlanta over the holidays and that you got a visit to Walker Percy. Hep yourself if you want to lend him my book..." (Gossett papers). Like O'Connor, Percy enjoyed McCown's travel narratives and later advised him about his autobiography, *With Crooked Lines*.

While McCown read works O'Connor suggested, he advised her about conflicts between obedience to the teachings of the Catholic Church and the practice of her craft. He observes, "as a Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor was abreast of the most advanced theological concerns in the Church, in the early days of the great Second Vatican Council…. Yet she was inclined to strictness with herself in anything concerned with morality and having to do with Church discipline."[24] For example, she writes Father McCown in December, 1957 about an ecumenical reading group meeting at her home undertaking the study of Andre Gide whose writings were on the Catholic Church's Index of "forbidden books." One of the last vestiges of the Inquisition, the Index, amounted to a kind of censorship (Dante's *De Monarchia* was on the list until 1922). It was just a matter of time before a writer with O'Connor's gifts, an inquisitive mind, and wide reading, would encounter conflict. Those writers in the Joycean tradition would have simply ignored the Index or used its strictures, like Stephen Daedalus, to trumpet the Church's repression of artistic creativity. By contrast O'Connor did not defy Church strictures and sought a dispensation from Father McCown about reading prohibited authors. She writes him:

> Not long ago the local Episcopal minister came out and wanted me to get up a group with him of people who were interested in talking about theology in modern literature. This suited me all right so about six or seven of them are coming out here every Monday night—a couple of Presbyterians, the rest Episcopalians of one stripe or another (scratch an Episcopalian and you're liable to find most anything) and me as the only representative of the Holy Roman Catholic & Apostolic Church. The strain is telling on me. Anyway this minister is equipped with a list of what he would like us to read and upon the list is naturally, Gide, also listed on the Index. I despise Gide but if they read him I want to be able to put in my two cents worth. I don't think there is any use to ask the local reverend father for permission…. You said once you would see if you had the faculties to give me permission to read such as this. Do you and will you? All these Protestants will be shocked if I say I can't get permission to read Gide (Gossett papers).

Father McCown consults Jesuit friends and writes Father Gerald Kelly, his old teacher and esteemed moral theologian:

> The gal in question has read more fathers of the church, and more St. Thomas than His Excellency ever saw. Now, does any moralist or recent ruling allow me, her spiritual father, to allow her to read Gide? Can I allow the Catholic students of the local state College to read assigned books that happen to be on the Index, or do I have to have toties quoties recourse to the bishop? I might say in passing that I agonize over the whole Index anyway. I am sure it is the obstacle keeping countless intellectuals a million miles away from the Church. They laugh at us because of it (Gossett papers).

Father McCown's questioning of the Index anticipates the reforms of the Second Vatican Council that would later convene from 1962-1965. While Father McCown anticipates a post-Conciliar outlook, Father Kelly informs him, "You have no faculties to give permission to read forbidden books," but notes "the law ceases to bind when the keeping of it would result in harm to the Cath. Faith. If what the lady says in her last sentence is true, then it looks as if she could apply this principle to the reading of Gide" (Gossett papers).

The Politics of Civil Rights

In addition to Father McCown's counsel about the Index, he shared with O'Connor the Jesuit dedication to social justice and Civil Rights activism. Politically O'Connor and McCown differed in response to the great domestic political issue of the twentieth century. O'Connor in her sickness avoided overt involvement while McCown was active.[25] Sally Fitzgerald notes O'Connor "recognized the need for and approved of Martin Luther King's crusade." Fitzgerald observes, moreover, when O'Connor witnessed a white bus driver verbally abusing a group of blacks, she became "an integrationist."[26] O'Connor, however, was torn between the social conservatism of her mother and the profound changes introduced by the Civil Rights movement. The unpublished correspondence reveals she admired individuals on different sides of the racial divide: her mother and friends unwilling to challenge segregation and Father McCown, Tom Gossett, and others dedicated to ending it.

Regina O'Connor was the matriarch of an active dairy farm where drinking among the workers threatened domestic violence. O'Connor writes a Georgetown professor friend, Ward Allison Dorrance, "my Mother is getting ready to sell out the dairy and going in on beef cows. We are now being done in by the local moonshine...and she HAS HAD ENOUGH." In another letter she observes, "Our staff has already started celebrating the season with unstamped whiskey. I don't know whether they are still celebrating Thanksgiving or started celebrating Christmas, but the effect is the same." Such festivities sometimes spawned quarrels leading to the brandishing of shotguns. O'Connor admires her mother's cheerful intervention to prevent a shooting, "now lets not have any more of this unpleasantness. Bring that shotgun over here and leave it."[27] O'Connor notes such potential violence would have reduced her to "idiocy."[28] In another letter to the Fitzgeralds, O'Connor writes her mother "delivered several sermons on the theme thou shalt not kill during the Christmas time."[29]

O'Connor also listened carefully to discussions about race at the Monday night reading group meeting at her home. She writes Father McCown about the deliberations. O'Connor's precarious deteriorating health should always be taken into account by those critical of her lack of Civil Rights activism. By contrast, McCown was energetic and healthy and early on in his ministry challenged segregation that he witnessed in the

Catholic Church and in larger society. A native of Mobile, Alabama, Father McCown grew up with racial paternalism. In his 1990 autobiography, *With Crooked Lines* Father McCown confesses,

> We southerners showered our black domestics with shallow affection then exploited them shamelessly. We claimed really to know blacks, but lived with our own self-serving image of them. We paid them starvation wages, then feigned disappointment when they turned out to be ungrateful or shiftless or thieving….We kept them from getting a good education, then complained of their ignorance. We forced them to live in slums, and then condemned them for their violence. We read happiness and contentment in their comedy and obsequiousness and then were outraged if they expressed their human dignity. For our own use we stereotyped them and their language and habits.[30]

O'Connor was clearly aware of Father McCown's outspoken views and shared with him her own thoughts. She writes him about "Everything That Rises Must Converge," noting, "I'd like to write a whole bunch of stories like that, but once you've said it, you've said it and that about expresses what I have to say on That Issue"(Gossett papers). Based partially on the desegregation of public transit inspired by Civil Rights heroine, Rosa Parks, O'Connor's story ends in painful eschatological integration of Julian, his mother, and Caroline. The story reveals O'Connor's unusual treatment of integration. She asks her friend Rosalyn Barnes in June, 1961, "Can you tell me if the statement 'everything that rises must converge' is a true proposition in physics? I can easily see its moral, historical, and evolutionary significance, but I want to know if it is also a correct physical statement" (Gossett papers). A few months later, she writes Father McCown, "It looks like we are going to be integrated by the atom, don't it?"(Gossett papers).

Shortly before her death, O'Connor was thinking of spiritual integration.[31] Her precarious health led her to employ Teilhard de Chardin's quest for unity to comment through her stories on the volatile racial tensions of her era. Teilhard's theories provided a way for her fiction to do the talking. Her situation was like that of Ralph Ellison who after the publication of *Invisible Man* in 1952 remained "invisible" from later Civil Rights activism and once wept publicly when accused of being an "Uncle Tom." The withering criticism of another African-American writer, Zora Neale Hurston, for her public opposition to school integration also illustrated the need for caution. Unlike Hurston, O'Connor remained aloof, avoiding protest marches and declining a luncheon with the activist writer, James Baldwin. The stakes were too high, her time too short, and too much writing needed to be done.

O'Connor's letters to Father McCown reveal she learned fiction writing from some of the Southern agrarians, but she was careful not to marshal her writing talents in behalf of the movement's coded advocacy of segregation. In one letter she is provoked that a small Georgia college started a lecture series with an invitation to Donald Davidson, one of the original "Twelve Southerners" of *I'll Take My Stand*. O'Connor writes, "I hope D. Davidson didn't cure them of having Southern lecturers. At least they started at the extreme. How far to the right can you get?"(Gossett papers).

Davidson's adroit defense of Southern regionalism entailed a shrewd advocacy of segregation. Davidson's 1962 *The Attack on Leviathan* begins with an effective Jeffersonian rebuke to Hobbesian statism. The brilliant title puts Southern regionalism in the context of Enlightenment political philosophy lacking in the celebrated *I'll Take My Stand*. Davidson attacks Hobbesian political consolidation under the "Sovereign" by insisting an individual state retains the right to "preserve its bi-racial social system." This regional prerogative includes "the furtive evasion to raw violence to which it is now driven when sniped at with weapons of Federal legality."[32] (Davidson does not specify exactly what he means by "raw violence").

O'Connor kept her distance from Davidson's nuanced defense of segregation, but she was equally wary of outside Civil Rights activists who challenged the social mores of what Davidson calls "regional cultures."[33] O'Connor was not impressed by the dramatic notoriety of Father McCown's friend, John Howard Griffin. A Catholic convert, Griffin had stained his skin and traveled through the segregated South in 1959 and recorded his adventures in *Black Like Me* that became an national bestseller in 1961. When McCown wrote O'Connor that Griffin may call on her, she replied, "If John Howard Griffin gets to Georgia again, we would be delighted to see him; but not in blackface. I don't blame in the least any of the people who cringed when Griffin sat down beside them. He must have been a pretty horrible looking object" (Gossett papers). To O'Connor, Griffin's efforts were postured and flamboyant, whereas Father McCown and Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain, respected his "black face" dangerous trek. It was a highly visible witness in stark contrast to the Catholic Church's passivity in the late 1950s to racial injustice. Griffin received in 1964 the *Pacem in Terris* award from the Church for his efforts to advance social justice.

While O'Connor kept her distance from Griffin, she did admire the boxer known to her as Cassius Clay. He threw his Gold Medal from the 1960 Olympics in the Ohio River after being refused service at a restaurant in his native Louisville and in 1963 became a Black Muslim. O'Connor, however, liked his amusing rhymes in which he predicted winning the heavyweight crown in 1963 from the menacing Sonny Liston. Ali proclaimed, "Clay comes out to meet Liston and Liston starts to retreat, if Liston goes back an inch farther he'll end up in a ringside seat. Clay swings with a left, Clay swings with a right, just look at young Cassius carry the fight. Liston keeps backing but there's not enough room, it's a matter of time until Clay lowers the boom… the crowd did not dream, when they laid down their money, that they would see a total eclipse of Sonny.[34] Ali became a global, beloved sports legend who in halting steps carried the Olympic torch at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta.

Unlike Ali who achieved global fame, others labored in obscurity to end the segregation he deplored. For example, Father McCown introduced O'Connor in the late 1950s to Thomas Gossett, a little known professor at that time. As their friendship grew, Gossett pioneered in the then nascent academic fields of African-American history and literature. When Gossett was teaching in 1958 at Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia he publicly supported integration, a position that led the college president to suspend him from the faculty. O'Connor wrote him on November 30, 1958: "you had been treated in a low down fashion. I hope you tear up that briar patch before you leave" (Gossett papers).

Gossett's subsequent seminal study, *Race, the History of an Idea in America*, first published in 1963, has become a canonical work in African-American history. Gossett wrote it in a time of entrenched segregation and undertook a thorough analysis of its origins in texts like Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Unlike O'Connor's negative view of Griffin's *Black Like Me*, she was steadfast in support of Gossett's *Race: the History of an Idea in America*. She wrote Gossett in March, 1964, "Thanks for the hog-slopping card. It was real inspiring to me… I was real pleased to see that *Time* took so heavy to your book. Better to have people for you than agin you even though they don't have much sense "(Gossett papers). Echoing O'Connor, Father

McCown wrote Tom Gossett in April, 1964, “Congratulations a thousand times over, Tom! I am so proud of you and your work and being a friend of yours…. The writeup in “Time” which I feverishly found after half of Macon half told me about *[sic]*, was wonderful…. Flannery was so visibly pleased over it that it did me good” (Gossett papers).

Race: the History of an Idea was republished in 1997 in the Oxford University “Race and American Culture” Series. The editors, Shelley Fisher Fishkin and Arnold Rampersad, note in the foreword, “serious readers today and in the foreseeable future will have access to one of the most important books published in the United States in the last fifty years on the subject of race as an idea in the development of American culture.”[35] Nobel-Prize winner, Toni Morrison, draws on Gossett’s analysis in her latest novel, *A Mercy* (2008). The novel portrays what Gossett earlier probed in *Race: the History of an Idea*. He and Morrison address how racial categories, as Morrison observes, were “planted,” “institutionalized” and “legalized.”[36] *A Mercy* portrays the pattern in the 1680s in a primitive ordeal of survival of slaves and slave masters a century before the American founding. Morrison and Gossett both deal with how the African in the New World was separated as a menacing “other,” enslaved, and judged incapable of cultural assimilation because of skin color. The early practice of racial separation coupled with theories of inferiority constitutes a process of what Morrison calls being “raced.” [37] *A Mercy* portrays how Africans in the new world were first “raced” before the American founding in colonial Maryland and Virginia. Gossett examines the pattern systematically in later phases of American history. He begins with analysis of racial attitudes of the eighteenth century and ends with social agitation of the Civil Rights movement to end segregation. Morrison, by contrast, portrays the beginnings of racial separation in the primitive society of the new world.

International Politics

Admiration for Gossett's analysis of racism is as far as O'Connor would go in challenging segregation. She was more vocal as an anti-Communist and consistently supported, as did Father McCown, the stern admonitions of President Kennedy in the 1960 inaugural address.[38] The President's aggressive pro-American foreign policy was personified for Father McCown in John Howard Griffin. Because of the controversy *Black Like Me* had caused in the United States, he retreated to Mexico only to find more trouble in with the Communists there. While McCown and Griffin were vocal critics of racial injustice in the United States, their social activism did not include Marxist remedies. In McCown's unpublished travel narrative written in 1962 about Mexico, he praises Griffin's defiance of "Marxist thugs." Both O'Connor and her mother read his account and were entertained by McCown's descriptions. O'Connor writes, "We loved your travelogue. Regina said to tell you it was her kind of literature—places and folks. She also likes to read about wild animals." In another letter she tells McCown, "I don't think you could possibly be too old to go to Mexico if you ain't too old to knock about the states. They just like your face and want to keep it in sight"(Gossett papers).

In the Mexico narrative McCown is troubled that the University of Puebla, sponsored originally by the Jesuits, had been "appropriated by the government" and is "controlled, staffed, and run by the Communists. There were no Catholics on the teaching staff—in Mexico!" At the city of Morelia, he recounts, "Communism reached a peak of arrogance" when a mob broke "into a Catholic college and burned in a great bonfire in the street all the furniture, the office equipment, books etc." Father McCown praises Griffin, "a truly great writer" who in the "splendid daily paper in Mexico City, *Excelsior,* used "incontrovertible evidence" to show that "the so called 'students' were simply professional agitators hired and financed by Moscow. This angered the Communists so much that they had a mob gathered and advancing on Griffin's house to burn it and kill him and his family when they were able to escape and return to this country"(Gossett papers).

While Father McCown praised Griffin's defiance of Marxists in Mexico, O'Connor provided a pithy summation of its theological meaning. She updates Winston Churchill's comment in 1939 that the Soviet Russians were "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." Witnessing the global expansion of Communist regimes during the Cold War, O'Connor solves Churchill's "riddle" by proclaiming as a believer: "Communism is a religion of the state and the Church opposes it as a heresy."[39] She speaks in Thomistic, Dantesque terms in perceiving Communism of the Cold War period as a heretical replacement of what was once the medieval order of Christendom.

A reluctant Cold Warrior, O'Connor, once provoked, weighed in with resolute theological conviction. After Soviet tanks in 1956 rolled into Budapest to crush the Hungarian revolution, she writes her publisher, "I wouldn't want my work published in any Russian occupied country as the danger that it might be used as anti-American propaganda is apparent. I understand some of Jack London is now being used that way" (Gossett papers). The later political turmoil of the 1960s did not shake O'Connor's faith and she remained unflinchingly anti-Communist until her death in 1964.

On the other hand, Father McCown's pursuit of social justice would eventually lead him to abandon anti-Communism and to champion liberation theology, with its anti-Americanism, popular among the Jesuits in Central America in the 1980s. McCown's drift into theological heterodoxy is evident as early as October, 1974 when on an extended retreat he rode his motorcycle to the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley**.** He wrote a communal letter to friends praising campus radicalism: "Posters everywhere in gaudy colors and words invited sympathy for Huey Newton, exoneration of the Rosenbergs…. There were announcements for lectures on Socialism, variant sexual lifestyles, transcendental meditation, yoga, dietary advances, hypnotism, and occultism"(Gossett papers). Embracing humanistic ecumenism, McCown observes the opening celebration at the Graduate Theological Union "was held in a beautiful Lutheran chapel, with a mixed denominational choir, scriptural readings by an Episcopalian woman, a Franciscan monk, and the main address by a Jesuit faculty member"(Gossett papers).

O'Connor treated such gatherings satirically. A decade before McCown's enchantment with the Berkeley scene, O'Connor wrote him in 1963 about a Religion and Art symposium she attended where she says, "did I ever get a stomachful of liberal religion." She was left with the "impression that religion was a good thing (or at least unavoidable) because it was art and magic. They had a Methodist-Universalist there who talked about how the symbology of religion was decayed." A third speaker "told them about how God was a grandfather image and they had better shuck it. I gave them a nasty dose of orthodoxy in my paper but I think it passed as quaint. It is later than we think" (Gossett papers).

Father McCown's later theological and political views departed from O'Connor's "nasty dose of orthodoxy" and stalwart anti-Communism. After her death, McCown tested his new views out on Walker Percy. In 1964, he writes Tom Gossett, "Did I ever tell you that a few weeks ago I spent the better part of a day with Walker Percy, author of THE MOVIEGOER. Flannery says he is very good. Certainly he is one of the most charming people I have ever met" (Gossett papers). Father McCown's friendship with Percy after O'Connor's death is vital in seeing how she and McCown would probably have had sharp political differences about American foreign policy as the political turmoil 60s unfolded. O'Connor endured a Presidential assassination but did not live to witness, as did Percy, the deaths of both M. L King and Robert Kennedy, nor the protracted Vietnam War and its vocal opposition. During this tumultuous period, Percy, managed to embrace both anti-Communism and the Civil Rights movement.

Jesuit associates of Father McCown in New Orleans, the Reverend Louis Twomey and the Reverend J. H. Fichter, had a profound impact on Percy repudiating the racial paternalism of his early years. [40] As Jay Tolson notes, they urged "the church and churchmen to take a more active role in pressing for social and racial justice."[41] Father McCown's excoriation of segregation in his autobiography, *With Crooked Lines*, echoed the sentiments of both Twomey and Fichter. McCown lists Percy in the acknowledgements for his autobiography.

Percy approved of the Civil Rights movement, but he did not link the quest for social justice to the morality of the Vietnam War. Percy was careful to separate himself from anti-war activism with its latent anti-Americanism. This was not the case with Father McCown and other anti-war religious. When Percy's friend, Thomas Merton and Trappist monk, sent him his article "The Long Hot Summer of 67," Percy replies he largely agrees with him, "although I must confess I have reservations about uniting race and Vietnam under the same rubric since I regard one as the clearest kind of moral issue and the other as murderously complex and baffling."[42] In another letter written four years later, Percy criticizes Daniel and Phillip Berrigan, anti-war Catholic priests. They attracted national attention for breaking into a government office in Catonsville, Maryland and pouring blood over draft records. In the late 60s they were listed on the "FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives" for such acts of vandalism. Percy writes the editors of *Commonweal*, "you and the Berrigans consider the United States' policy in Southeast Asia to be criminal. It is hardly necessary to point out that a great many people, perhaps as decent, as courageous, as equally distressed by the Vietnam War, do not agree with you and the Berrigans. Shall the issue be determined then by the more successful stratagem of violence?"[43]

Later developments such as liberation theology in Central America in the 1980s, movements to ordain women as Catholic priests, and opposition to the Pontificate of John Paul II likewise elicit Percy's disapproval. By contrast, Father McCown praising the "new spirit" of the Jesuit order advocated these trends. In 1988 he met with members of the Sandinista Nicaraguan government and heard liberation theologians preach. Father McCown wrote Tom Gossett that President President should be "impeached" and that he has "been unmasked as not being a man of peace….Bullets for peace is his motto" (Gossett papers). He also complained to Percy in a letter about Pope John Paul II and his successor, known then as Cardinal Ratzinger. Father McCown writes the Holy Spirit was "not just in the mind of Pope John Paul via Cardinal Ratzinger. All this from-the-top down correction of theology will paralyze creative thinking, and we are going to be back in the frozen eras before good Pope John."[44] Entranced by liberation theology and the leftist politics of Central America of the late 80s, Father McCown ended up in criticizing the two great figures of the last half of the 20^{th} century: President Reagan and John Paul II. Walker Percy replied emphatically he was adrift politically and theologically: "with all your denunciations of U.S.-as-imperialist, Pope-as-monarch, etc. you never once uttered one murmur of complaint against the Sandinistas (e.g. attack on civil liberties, closing down of La Prensa, etc.)."[45]

Had O'Connor lived, she would have probably approved of Percy's admonishment of Father McCown. The force of her character and beliefs may have deterred McCown from his theological meandering. While she was alive O'Connor judged the recanting of the faith by other friends such as Robert Lowell and Betty Hester a spiritual disaster. O'Connor wrote the Fitzgeralds in 1964 Lowell cited "claptrap about Henry Adams being a Catholic anarchist and he was the same only agnostic too." O'Connor noted "his not being in the Church was a grief to me" and the "Sacraments gave grace."[46]

While Father McCown never considered abandonment of the faith, his later waywardness would have troubled O'Connor. He remains, however, a fascinating, resourceful figure in the rich correspondence with O'Connor and in the few letters to Walker Percy that have been published. Father McCown would write poignant and comforting words to Tom and Louise Gossett about Flannery O'Connor's untimely death:

> Well I know how you feel about our precious Flannery and you know how I feel. God has his own reasons for removing from our needful world such choice souls so soon. But it is an exercise in Faith to accept it. That faith tells me that the souls in Heaven can by their prayer achieve more good among us wayfarers than they ever could

> by her efforts on earth no matter how skillful they may be. And I believe this. But it's not easy to adjust my human feeling to it (Gossett papers).

What comforting counsel about "precious Flannery" sometimes known otherwise as flinty, opinionated, and austere. Father McCown knew another person, the loyal friend. O'Connor's letters to Father McCown, the Gossetts, and others shows that friendship often transcends politics or reveals its limitations**.** Global re-alignments of nations after World War II, the Cold War and fears of spreading Communism, the prospect of nuclear annihilation, Civil Rights activism, Southern agrarian thought, and the dynamic orthodoxy of Catholicism—all have an impact on O'Connor's political views. For O'Connor, however, political positions and trends did not overrule the loyalties of friendship. Her unpublished letters reveal her political views were indirect, ironic, and often misunderstood. Her devotion, however, to her friends, and they to her, were overt and constant. Their politics varied, but joy and good humor quieted the shrill voices of partisanship.

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[1] James H. McCown, "Flannery O'Connor," lecture, University of South Alabama, Mobile, April 26, 1985, n p.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Thomas F. and Louise Y. Gossett papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C. Subsequent references in text will be cited as Gossett papers.

[4] J. Bottom, "Flannery O'Connor Banned," *Crisis* 18, no. 9 (October, 2000), 48.

[5] http://www.amywelborn.com/flannery/banned.html.

[6] http://www.doubletakemagazine.org/mag/html/backissues/12/steen.

[7] http:// www.columbia.edu/cu/news/01/11/karinCoonrod.html.

[8] James H. McCown, "Flannery O'Connor," lecture.

[9] *Habit of Being*, 135.

[10] The Reverend Robert McCown "The Education of a Prophet: Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*, Gossett papers, Duke University.

[11] *Habit of Being*, 90.

[12] Ibid., 382.

[13] James Hart McCown, *With Crooked Lines* (Mobile: Spring Hill College Press, 1990), iii.

[14] Claude Colleer Abbott ed., *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 110.

[15] McCown, "Flannery O'Connor," lecture, np.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Walker Percy papers, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.

[21] Paul Elie**,** *The Life You Save* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 90.

[22] Sally Fitzgerald papers, Robert Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga.

[23] *Habit of Being*, 33.

[24] McCown, "Flannery O'Connor," lecture, n p.

[25] The decade of their friendship from 1956 to O'Connor's death in 1964 saw the social fabric of the United States ripped asunder with violence associated with the Civil Rights movement. For example, in December, 1956 NAACP member, Rosa Parks, refused to give up her seat to a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama leading to a bus boycott and the eventual desegregation of public transit. In September, 1957 nine black students were blocked from integrating Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas on the orders of Governor Orval Faubus. President Eisenhower sent federal troops and the National Guard to intervene on behalf of the students, who became known as the "Little Rock Nine." In fall, 1962, James Meredith became the first black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi. Violence and riots surrounding the incident caused President Kennedy to send 5,000 federal troops. In 1963 Martin Luther King was arrested and jailed during anti-segregation protests in Birmingham, Alabama; he wrote his seminal "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," arguing that individuals have the moral duty to disobey unjust laws. In June, 1963 just hours after President John F. Kennedy's speech on national television in support of Civil Rights, an assassin gunned down Medgar Evers in the driveway of his Mississippi home. Later that year, 200,000 people joined the March on Washington and listened to Martin Luther King deliver his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. In September, 1963 four

young girls attending Sunday school were killed when a bomb exploded at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, a popular location for Civil Rights meetings in Birmingham, Alabama. In November, 1963 Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated President Kennedy in Dallas. In June, 1964 the Ku Klux Klan brutally murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney.

[26] Sally Fitzgerald, "Introduction," *Habit of Being*, xviii**.**

[27] Ward Allison Dorrance papers, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.

[28] Ward Allison Dorrance papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.

[29] Sally Fitzgerald papers, Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga.

[30] James H. McCown, *With Crooked Lines*, 16**.**

[31] At this time international nuclear conflict appeared increasingly likely. In April, 1961 a group of Cuban exiles, trained by the CIA and supported by the American government, attempted to invade Cuba and overthrow Fidel Castro. They were quickly killed or captured. In August, 1961 the East Germans erected the Berlin Wall, galvanizing the tension between Eastern bloc Communist countries and the United States and the Free World. The tensions culminated in a near nuclear exchange between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962.

[32] Donald Davidson, *The Attack on Leviathan* (New York: Peter Smith, 1962), 128.

[33] Ibid,.128

[34] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_Ali_vs._Sonny_Liston

[35] Thomas F. Gossett, *Race the History of an Idea in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), vi.

[36] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IZvMhQ2LIU

[37] Ibid.

[38] Kennedy in the 1960 inaugural proclaimed:" Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

[39]*Habit of Being*, 347.

[40] Fr. Twomey founded the Institute for Industrial Relations in 1947, later called the Institute of Human Relations located on the campus of Loyola University, New Orleans. In 1991, the institute was renamed the Twomey Center for Peace Through Justice. In the last 50 years, through

its work and many programs, the Twomey Center has addressed issues such as workers' rights, racism, poverty, and economic development.

[41]Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 204.

[42] Walker Percy papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Patrick Samway, S. J. *Walker Percy, A Life* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997), 394.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Sally Fitzgerald papers, Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga.