Hard Sayings

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

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Hard Sayings: The Rhetorics of Christian Orthodoxy in Late Modern Fiction.
The Ohio State University Press, 2013.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/23947.

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In 2005, Stanley Fish predicted that religion “would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy” (“One University”). Eight years later, I can tentatively conclude that Fish was on to something. Religion has certainly not replaced these earlier foci, and its increased presence in the academy has not always entailed respect—certainly those who despise it, such as the New Atheists, have made the bigger splash in the mass media. Yet while a growing number of scholars, including Hungerford and John McClure, have focused welcome and generally respectful attention on the connections between literature and religion in the post–World War II period, it is still fairly rare for scholars to identify themselves as Christians—and even rarer for them to affirm Christian orthodoxy. The default assumption that intellectuals necessarily profess secular commitments has not been noticeably shaken.

Despite all the work that has been done on theories of secularization, I am not convinced that it is necessarily harder to believe today than it might have been in ages past, even if it is undeniable that political, social, and educational structures once did much more to promulgate and even to “enforce” Christian belief in the West than they do today. (Indeed, I am Kierkegaardian enough to suspect that Christian belief is healthier when it exists in tension with worldly powers than when it is cosseted and coopted.)
by them.) Updike’s Clarence Wilmot is probably close to the truth when he reflects, “Christ risen was no more easily embraced by Paul and his listeners than by modern skeptics. The stumbling blocks have never dissolved. The scandal has never lessened” (Beauty 18). While there is a long philosophical tradition that affirms the compatibility of a generalized theism with reason—acknowledged today both by the Catechism of the Catholic Church and by the formerly atheist but non-Christian philosopher Anthony Flew—the truly implausible claims of the Christian narrative (above all, Jesus’ divinity and salvific death and resurrection) are apprehensible only through revelation. One accepts the testimony of the tradition that has handed news of these events down and believes in it, or one does not. Or—what seems to be the most common option today—one cobbles together a belief structure and lifestyle from what one likes in the tradition and rejects the rest.

I have focused on the post–World War II period not just because it remains, in many important senses, the time in which we live, but also because of its particular rhetorical challenges. Facing a dominant narrative of secularization that would claim that the “hard sayings” of Christianity are particularly incredible to modern (and postmodern) people, Christian writers concerned with orthodoxy have responded to this historical framing with varied strategies intended to lessen this sense of radical incompatibility with the consensus of human knowledge, to show that belief is and always remains possible. There is no denying, however, that such strategies can only go so far—especially if I am correct that the difficulty of accepting Christianity has less to do with empirical questions (considerable though these may be) than with its challenge to self-esteem. As Ralph Wood puts it:

[We] must confront the hard truth that the Story here retold is not obvious but scandalous. It is not the story that we would tell ourselves. Such a story would make excuses for our massive crimes and tiny misdemeanors. It would justify our many misdeeds, both great and small. It would exonerate us from all final blame. It would offer solutions, whether simple or complex, that we could ourselves accomplish. Above all, it would not offend by telling us that we are unable to save ourselves. The Christian Story refuses to pursue all of these easier paths. It is indeed an offensive and scandalous Story. It does not report what we want to hear, but something far better—what we ought to hear and thus, at the deepest level, what we truly long to learn. (viii)

Such obstacles, I would argue, formidable enough for human beings to overcome at any time, are particularly so for most inhabitants of the acad-
emy today—often, precisely the people who have the greatest belief in the value of their own intelligence and the greatest resentment against a larger society that refuses to confirm their worth through appropriate remuneration or status.

There is a considerable irony in the fact that in the last few decades, scholars of literature, in part as a reaction to the prestige of the sciences in the contemporary university, have frequently professed a version of epistemic humility. Influenced by the endless deferral of meaning that Jacques Derrida took as his keynote, or by the absolute responsibility toward the Other that Emmanuel Levinas enjoined, much recent thought has suggested that the pursuit of knowledge often amounts to a morally dubious attempt to master others, and that the desire for certainty is totalitarian. Such thinking continually emphasizes how little it knows, rarely asserts a proposition without profuse reminders of its provisional nature, and adeptly casts a disapproving eye at those who have the temerity to assert their claims as truth. Though the contradictory nature of such discourse has been exposed time and time again—dare one claim that it is “true” that “truth” is so harmful?—it has lost none of its appeal.

Writers with orthodox Christian concerns confront this climate, for a narrative that claims to be the truth necessarily offends such a position. Perhaps the apparent contrast between O’Connor and Robinson is most instructive here: O’Connor, who assumes the hostility of her audience and assaults her readers with the shocking implications of the Christian narrative, assumes that her audience will be no less convinced of its own “truth” (whether it grounds this truth in science or in uncertainty) and will require humiliation, while Robinson, professing Christian belief, emphasizes the exalted conception of human nature that it affirms (“Marguerite” 183–84) against what she sees as a general belittlement of human capacities caused by a materialist worldview and abetted by capitalism. O’Connor, it might be said, doesn’t think much of human beings’ claims for themselves; Robinson wishes that human beings would engage in “the rigorous imagination of a higher self” (“Marguerite” 183) and thus confirm her own high estimation of them.

I would attempt to resolve this contrast by arguing not for epistemic humility but for Christian humility. I see little evidence that “epistemic humility” even exists—one believes what one believes, no matter how much one attempts to hold these beliefs at a distance, and the fact that one can imagine believing otherwise (the condition that defines Charles Taylor’s “secular age”) in no way implies that one believes less firmly. Newman’s work on assent and certainty corresponds to the structure of human belief as one encounters it; it confirms that all people are believers, if not
in Christianity, then in some set of ultimate principles, however much they may disavow such belief. Genuine humility has nothing to do with a reluctance to profess one’s belief; it has instead to do with how one conducts oneself in the practice of this belief and with whether one admits one’s unworthiness. The ironic community that Booth envisages, created through an invitation for human beings to leave their former selves behind is, I would like to believe, sustained through its gratitude for gifts undeserved and incomparable. In Evelyn Waugh’s historical novel Helena (1950), St. Helena expresses such a sense of gratitude in a prayer to the three magi who brought gifts to the Christ child: “You are my especial patrons . . . and patrons of all late-comers, of all who have a tedious journey to make to the truth, of all who are confused with knowledge and speculation, of all who through politeness make themselves partners in guilt, of all who stand in danger by reason of their talents” (224). The writers I have discussed in this book understand the attractions of such a Christian community, and as writers of literary fiction, they write to an audience composed largely of just the sort of people with whom Helena identifies herself. Though O’Connor, Spark, Updike, Percy, Gordon, and Robinson differ in the rhetorical efficacy of their arguments and in the degree to which they represent Christian belief faithfully, their efforts have much to teach about the rhetoric of fiction, the use of narrative as argument on behalf of Christianity. I venture no prediction as to whether the academy will, as Fish suggests, become friendlier toward such efforts—though I hope, ardently, that it will prove up to the challenge.
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