

Calvinism in Flannery O'Conner's

A Good Man is Hard to Find

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من الصعب العثور على المذهب الكاليفيني
في فيلم "رجل طيب" في فلانيري أوكونر

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Abstract

Calvinism is a denomination of Protestantism that follows the teachings and beliefs of the sixteenth century French reformer John Calvin (1509-1564). This paper elucidates the five doctrines that the Calvinists believe in and how a Catholic writer like Flannery O'Conner (1925-1964) uses these dogmas, especially the doctrines of "God's Unconditional Grace" and the "Irresistible Grace", in her well-known short story *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1953). The story presents many characters; two of the principal characters, The Grandmother and The Misfit, commit a series of mistakes or crimes which make them passive and heinous. The paper sheds light on the Calvinist principles of God's grace and the irresistible grace; and discusses to what extent it is possible that these two main characters, The Grandmother and The Misfit, could achieve them.

Keywords: Calvinism, John Calvin, Protestantism, Flannery O'Conner, The Grandmother, The Misfit, God's Unconditional Grace and Irresistible Grace.

المستخلص

الكالفيانية هي إحدى طوائف البروتستانتية التي تتبع تعاليم ومعتقدات المصلح الفرنسي جون كالفن، أحد مصلحي القرن السادس عشر (1509-1564). توضح هذه الورقة البحثية المبادئ الخمس التي يؤمن بها الكالفيين وكيف وظفت كاتبة كاثوليكية وهي فلانري أوكونر (1925-1964) هذه المبادئ، خاصةً مبدئي "رحمة الله غير المشروطة" و"الرحمة غير القابلة للرد"، في قصتها القصيرة الشهيرة "من الصعب إيجاد رجل طيب" (1953). فالقصة تقدم شخصيات كثيرة، وثمة إثنان من الشخصيات الرئيسة، وهما "الجدة والمسفت"، يرتكبان سلسلة من الذنوب أو الجرائم التي تجعل منهما شخصيتين سلبيتين وكريهيتين. يسلط البحث ضوءاً على فكرتي "رحمة الله غير المشروطة" و"الرحمة غير القابلة للرد" ويناقش مدى احتمالية تحققهما لهاتين الشخصيتين.

الكلمات الرئيسية: المذهب الكالفي، جون كالفن، البروتستانتية، فلانيري أوكونر، الجدّة، غير الملائم، نعمة الله غير المشروطة، نعمة لا تقاوم.



I - Introduction

1 - I - Calvinism

Calvinism is a branch of Protestantism that follows the teachings and beliefs of John Calvin (1509-1564) and other preachers of the Reformation era. They split up from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century. Calvinists believe in predestination and the elect of God. John Calvin disagreed with the beliefs of the Catholic Church that God judges people according to their deeds, and he insists that you cannot trick God by your good work. If you are saved, it is not your good deeds that make you saved, but rather, God wants you to be saved. (Christianity.com)

Merriam Webster dictionary defines Calvinism as a “theological system of *Calvin* and his followers marked by strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God, the depravity of humankind, and the doctrine of predestination.” (Webster)

Calvinists believe in five points, summarized by the acronym TULIP. The (T) stands for Total Depravity, it emphasizes that as a consequence of the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, every human is born a sinner and is eager to achieve her/his own interests rather than serving God. While (U) means Unconditional Grace, this doctrine means that the way that God selects the saved people is not based on their deeds, virtue, or faith but rather unconditionally based on His own grace; He descends His grace on those He chooses from eternity regardless of their later work, good or evil. The (L) stands for Limited Atonement, which means Jesus Christ's sacrifice atones only the sins of those who are elected. The (I) stands for Irresistible Grace, which asserts that those whom God has given grace cannot resist it



and they will be saved in the end whether they want it or not. The last letter is (P) which designates Perseverance. It emphasizes that God is sovereign and no one can alter his will. So, if God chooses someone, s/he will be saved eventually. (Christianity.com)

2. I. A Brief Biography of Flannery O’Conner (1925-1964)

Mary Flannery O’Conner is an American short story writer and novelist born in Savannah, Georgia 1925. She is one of the most important short story writers of the twentieth century. (Stephens, xvi)

O’Conner is the only child of Regina Cline and Edward Francis O’Conner who were a Roman Catholic family. O’Conner attended Parochial schools in her native town, Savannah. Her father Edward Francis O’Conner died from lupus when Flannery was sixteen years old; it is the same disease that caused her death in 1964. One year after the death of her father she graduated from Peabody high school and registered in Georgia State College for Women in Milledgeville. She specialized in sociology and showed interest in creative writing. She completed her B.A. in 1945. (Ibid, xvi)

In 1945, O’Conner received a scholarship to Iowa University College and shortened her name from Mary Flannery O’Conner to Flannery O’Conner. Her first story “The Geranium” was published in 1946. One year later she received a master degree from Iowa State University. Then, in December 1950 she became ill and suffered from lupus. She moved with her mother, Regina, to a dairy farm called “Andalusia” outside of Milledgeville. Her first novel *Wise Blood* was published in 1952. Despite her physical illness, she remained mentally active and she finished her first collection of short stories entitled *A Good Man is Hard to Find* in 1953. This collection contains her



famous story, which carries the same title. Her second novel *The Violent Bear It Away* was published in 1960. (Bloom, 11-12)

In 1963 she became very weak to write because of an ovarian tumor, and she died in August 1964 in Baldwin Hospital because of lupus. (Eder, 4)

Flannery O'Conner was a devoted Catholic; she reviewed 120 works between 1956 and 1964. Fifty of these works were religious, 21 biographies of saints' lives, and 19 sermons. (Martin, 3)

The book reviews reflect O'Conner's religious life. Most of those books that she wrote reviews about in all categories were about religion. Moreover, those works were chosen on the basis of their relation to raising the level of Catholic intellectual life. (Ibid, 4)

II. Calvinism in "*A Good Man is Hard to Find*"

1 - II. A Review of Plot

A family decide to go to Florida for vacation but the grandmother insists that they should not because she heard that a serial killer called the Misfit has escaped from prison and now he is heading to Florida. Instead, she wants to go to Tennessee her hometown, but her son, Baily, makes up his mind to go to Florida. Although she refuses the idea of going to Florida, she is the first one to dress up, and secretly brings her cat, Pitty Sing, with her in spite of her son's instruction that she should not take the cat with them. So, now all the family are going to Florida, the Grandmother, Baily, his wife, the two children June Star and John Wesley, and the baby.

They stop for lunch at Red Sammy Butts' barbecue place, and the Grandmother discusses with the restaurant's owner Red Sammy the Misfit's



escape and how the world is dangerous nowadays. Red Sammy states that a good man is hard to find. Back on the road, the Grandmother arouses the children's interest in a haunted plantation with secret panels. She thought it on a nearby side road. The children make loud noises and force their father to leave the main road to drive on a dark, dirty road and after a while the Grandmother remembers that the plantation is in Tennessee and not in Georgia but she remains silent; she can't tell Baily because he will get enraged. She leaves him going on and on in that muddy road which is full of ditches. Worse, the hidden cat leaps suddenly out of its hiding place onto Baily's shoulder and causes him to lose control over the car and fall in a ditch.

No one is injured by the car accident and the children take it as an adventure, but it is no longer possible to drive again. The car needs to be pushed out of the ditch. They wait for a desperate help in a dark, empty road. A car is seen moving at a distance, and the grandmother starts to wave to the driver to come, thinking that the car driver is going to help them. When the car comes, a shirtless man gets out and the Grandmother thinks that his face is familiar to her but she can't recall who he is. But after she sees his tattoos, she realizes that he is the Misfit, the famous murderer and she tells him he is the Misfit. The Misfit and his two friends accompany Baily, his wife, and the children, one by one, into the woods and kill them all. The Misfit comes back wearing Baily's shirt to kill The Grandmother.

The Grandmother tries to flatter the Misfit by telling him that he is not a common person and he comes from a decent family. But he is firm and she cannot make him change his mind. So, when she sees that she cannot persuade him not to kill her, she becomes speechless for the first time in the story; she opens and closes her mouth several times before she can utter any word. In the end she



touches the Misfit's shoulder and tells him "you are one of my own children." As if a snake bites him he shoots her three times in the chest. The Misfit's final commentary on the Grandmother is that "she would of been a good woman ... if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." (O'Conner, 133)

2 - II. Major Calvinist Doctrines in "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

Flannery O'Conner's Catholicism was affected by the Southern Protestant denomination. Her idea of God's grace fits in one of the Protestant's cults, Calvinism. (Strong, 102)

O'Conner's works are usually interpreted as a Christian dogma. Her well-known short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is a fine example of that statement. O'Conner describes that story as a parable of grace and redemption. (Bandy, 107)

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find", two major Calvinist doctrines, the unconditional grace and irresistible grace manifest themselves clearly through two of her main characters; the Grandmother and The Misfit.

A.2. II. The Grandmother and the Unconditional Grace

The Grandmother is a selfish, cunning woman who is eager to fulfil her desires only, no matter what happen. At the beginning of the story, she refuses the idea of spending the vacation in Florida and prefers to go instead to Tennessee just because she has sweet memories there. But she covers her real aim by her fear of the Misfit. (Taylor, 2015) She tries to persuade Baily, her son, to change the destination of their vacation from Florida to Tennessee by a cunning way: she asks him to read an article in a newspaper describing the horrible crimes of The Misfit. She tells her son:



Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. (O'Conner, 117)

The story makes it obvious that she doesn't care about the safety of the family; she wants to go to Tennessee for a selfish aim: to relish the happy memories of the past. In spite of her desire, Baily decides to go to Florida.

Moreover, the Grandmother is a hypocritical character. Although she contradicts the idea of going to Florida, she is the first one to dress up and sit in the car to go with the family. The story says "The next morning the grandmother was the first one in the car, ready to go." (Ibid, 118)

Furthermore, the Grandmother is a headstrong liar; Baily warns her not to bring her cat, Pitty Sing, with her. Yet, she hides the cat in a basket and puts it in the car. This act will affect the destiny of the family later on in the story. She has her own moral code. She cares a lot about her appearance so she dresses up nicely for the trip because she wants the people to acknowledge her as a lady if an accident occurs on the road. (Mitchell, 213)

When the family stop at a barbecue restaurant, the Grandmother reminisces about the past with the restaurant's owner, Red Sammy. She states that people are not nice like they used to be in the past, but if this statement is true, it seems then she herself has changed also. The so called nice things she has done are only means to manipulate others, like Baily and the children. (Ibid)

The best evidence of the Grandmother's superficial moral sense is when she calls the restaurant's owner, Red Sammy, a good man just because he trusts others. Once two men dined at Sami's restaurant though they had



no money. He let them go when they said they would pay him later, but they never showed up again. The two men who did not return Red Sammy's money are not good in her opinion because they cannot be trusted. Then, when the grandmother encounters The Misfit later, she calls him a good man because he is not going to shoot a lady. (Thomas 40-41)

The Grandmother is also manipulative. For instance, she manipulates the children when she tells them about a haunted plantation that has a secret panel, so the children make loud noises and force their father to change their destination and visit the plantation. Her story of the house goes in this way:

There was a secret panel in this house,' she said craftily, not telling the truth but wishing she were, "and the story went that all the family silver was hidden in it when Sherman came through but it was never found... (O'Conner, 123)

She knows that Baily will not listen to her if she tells him that she wants to visit a plantation she remembers from her youth. So, she makes the children misbehave and force Baily to change his mind and approve the idea of visiting the place that she wants to see. Thus, under the pressure of the children, Baily leaves the main road and drives in a muddy road full of ditches. Meanwhile, the Grandmother remembers that the plantation is in Tennessee, not in Georgia, but she remains silent because she is afraid that Baily is going to be angry if he knows that he is driving in a wrong direction. So once again, the Grandmother proves that she is a selfish woman who cares only about herself and no one else. Then, her cat leaps on Baily's shoulders and he loses control over the car and falls in a ditch.

When the family encounter The Misfit, the Grandmother tells him that he is the famous murderer, The Misfit. This fact forces The Misfit to kill the family instead of just stealing the car or their money; he tells her "it



would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn't of reckernized me" (O'Conner, 127)

As the drama of their encounter unfolds, the Grandmother's self-centered image is disintegrated. Her longing to see the old plantation appeared to be a par amnesia; the house is not in Georgia but in Tennessee. Her lying about the secret panel is to manipulate Baily to change his mind and look for the house. All these things lead to the car accident and later to the murder of the family. Her self-image as a good woman is stripped from her. (Desmond, 150)

The Grandmother moves from one tactic to another to backtrack The Misfit's decision of killing her. She does not care about the rest of her family; she is only aiming on how to save her own life. In the beginning, she tries to flatter him by saying that "I just know you're a good man," she said desperately. "You're not a bit common!" (O'Conner, 128) but for her bad luck he said "Nome, I ain't a good man," (Ibid). Then, she tries to convert him by asking him to pray and ask Jesus for help, but again he disappoints her by his firm refusal.

At this point in the story, the Grandmother is facing death but she is not ready for it and she is not willing to surrender easily. As O'Connor said:

The heroine of this story, the Grandmother, is in the most significant position life offers the Christian. She is facing death. And to all appearances she, like the rest of us, is not too well prepared for it. She would like to see the event postponed. Indefinitely. (Mystery and Manners, 110)

In the last moments of her life, the Grandmother's head clears for a moment, and now she can see the false life that she has lived. Also, she can sense the spiritual connection between her and The Misfit; she tells him



“Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” (O’Conner, 132) and she touches his shoulder with her hand which drives him to shoot her three times in the chest. Here, The Grandmother achieves God’s Grace through violence. O’Conner states:

I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world. (Mystery and Manners, 112)

Although the Grandmother has many bad traits and leads herself and her family to their death, she is still capable of receiving God’s grace. God is unconditional in His grace. He descends His grace on those He chooses from eternity.

B.2 III. The Misfit and the Irresistible Grace

The Misfit is a character who gives rise to the story to be such an acerbic satire of hollow faith in a secular age. Though The Misfit appears late in the story, we sense his evilness from the very beginning, when the Grandmother reads an article in a newspaper about his escape from the Federal Pen and heading towards Florida. (Plath, 149)

Once again, the Grandmother mentions The Misfit when she asks Red Sammy if he has heard about The Misfit:

Did you read about that criminal, The Misfit, that’s escaped?” asked the grandmother. “I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if he didn’t attack this place right here,” said the woman. “If he hears about it being here, I wouldn’t be



none surprised to see him. If he hears it's two cent in the cash register, I wouldn't be at all surprised if he . . ." (O'Conner, 122)

Up to this point in the story we still do not know who The Misfit really is because he is physically absent, but we know from the other characters that he is a cold- blooded criminal who does not hesitate to murder people or to steal their money even if it is only two cents.

When the car accident occurs and the family meet The Misfit, he appears to be a shirtless man with grey hair. He wears eye glasses which may give him a scholarly look. He approaches with his two assistants, Booby Lee and Hiram. He appears as a smart criminal, smarter than the Grandmother herself, who tries to exaggerate the car accident to draw his sympathy. She says "We turned over twice!" (O'Conner, 126) but The Misfit stops her immediately, when he replies "Once"," he corrected. "We seen it happen." (Ibid). O'Conner admits that "her wits are no match for the Misfit's" (bookscool.com, 8).

The Misfit explicates to the Grandmother the reason he calls himself The Misfit. He admits that he does something mischievous but he cannot remember it. A head-doctor at the penitentiary tells him that he has killed his father but he is sure that his father has died due to the epidemic flue and he has nothing to do with that. So, they put him in the penitentiary as a punishment for a crime he has not committed. Thus, he calls himself "The Misfit" as an indication to the injustice that has occurred to him. He believes that his crime does not fit with the punishment.

The Misfit is portrayed as an anti-Christ figure. He does not like children while Jesus Christ blessed them. As a former undertaker and a serial killer right now The Misfit is associated with death, while Christ has sacrificed



himself so that human beings can enjoy their lives. In addition to that, Christ does not marry in his life, whereas The Misfit marries twice. (Harris, 4)

The Misfit informs the Grandmother that he is a former gospel singer, so it means that in the past he used to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, he rejects his religious roots and turns to be a killer because he is not sure whether Christ has resurrected the dead or not (Ibid):

“Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead,” The Misfit continued, “and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can-by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,” (O’Conner 132)

Thus, The Misfit chooses to disbelief in Christ’s ability to raise the dead. He enjoys the mean things that he does to the other people, like killing someone or burning her/his house. He considers meanness the only pleasure in life. Raising the motto “No pleasure but meanness”, he becomes a ruthless serial killer, who feels no scruples in killing people, as one sees in his murder of Baily’s family. He does not kill only the father and mother, but also the children, including the few months old baby.

In spite of his murderousness, The Misfit receives God’s grace through the Grandmother when she reaches him and touches his shoulder by her hand. But he reacts in a violent way, because he can sense the humanness of the Grandmother. She gives him something that he spends his whole life trying to deny. He shoots her three times in the chest as an attempt to resist God’s grace, but eventually he receives it because no one can resist God’s grace (Fike, 315-16). O’Conner writes:



"The Misfit is touched by the Grace that comes through the old lady when she recognizes him as her child, as she has been touched by the Grace that comes through him in his particular suffering. His shooting her is a recoil, a horror at her humanness, but after he has done it and cleaned his glasses, the Grace has worked in him and he pronounces his judgment: she would have been a good woman if he had been there every moment of her life" (The Habit of Being, 389)

In spite of the fact that The Misfit is the villain of the piece, he is capable of receiving God's grace. The Misfit's attempt to resist God's grace proves to be futile because those whom God has given grace to cannot resist it and they will be saved in the end whether they want it or not. As O'Connor suggests:

"... however unlikely this may seem, the old lady's gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become" (bookscool.com, 8).



Conclusion

In the Reformation era John Calvin and other preachers formed a branch of Protestantism called Calvinism. They believe that God descends His grace on those He elects from eternity. Consequently, predestination is the core dogma that they believe in. Flannery O'Connor employs two Calvinist doctrines in her eminent short story *A Good Man is Hard to Find*.

The concept of God's grace manifests in the characters of *The Grandmother* and *The Misfit*. These two intimidating characters achieve God's grace regardless of their lousy peculiarity. The Grandmother's self-centered character dooms her son's family and leads them to death, but eventually she receives God's grace when her head clears prior her death because God is unconditional in His grace. All the same, *The Misfit*, a cold-blooded criminal, murders Baily's family and questions the authenticity of Christ's resurrection of the dead and believes that meanness is the only thing that he enjoys. Ultimately, when *The Grandmother* touches his shoulder he recoils and shoots her three times in her chest because he senses her humanness. O'Connor says: "The Misfit is touched by the Grace that comes through the old lady when she recognizes him as her child". God's grace is irresistible and *The Misfit's* endeavor to withstand it proves to be futile.

Thus, O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find* is a paragon of two Calvinist tenets, Unconditional Grace and Irresistible Grace.



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