

“The Church Without Christ”: ❖ Radical Theology, Secularism, and Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*

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ABSTRACT

This paper engages Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* (1952) in the theological debate of the radical “death-of-God” movement and examines how the novel serves as a critique of religious secularism in the America of the 1950s. O’Connor describes her protagonist in the novel, Hazel Motes, as a Christian *malgré lui*; that is, a Christian *despite himself*. Hazel vociferously proclaims to be an unbeliever and even starts a seemingly blasphemous “Church Without Christ.” However, Hazel’s church is the least secularized among the competing churches in the novel. In the end, moreover, it is his unbelief that conversely helps him reach spiritual elevation. Hazel’s incongruous conduct and belief contribute to the comic effect of the novel and also confuse many readers. This paper, informed by the radical theological movement, “death-of-God,” in the 1960s, argues that Hazel’s Church Without Christ represents a radical theology so extreme that it is turned inside out. Drawing on Gabriel Vahanian’s theological ideas, this paper sees *Wise Blood* as a critique of religious secularism, in which capitalism is sacralized and Christianity secularized.

KEYWORDS: Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, secularism, death-of-God theology, Gabriel Vahanian

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「沒有耶穌的新教」： 激進神學、世俗主義， 與芙蘭納里·奧康納的《智血》

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摘 要

本篇論文將芙蘭納里·奧康納的《智血》置入「上帝已死」的激進神學辯論中；筆者藉此檢視《智血》為奧康納對1950年代美國宗教世俗化的批判。奧康納描述小說主角黑澤爾·莫茲為「身不由己的基督徒」（a Christian *malgré lui*）。儘管莫茲堅稱自己非信徒，甚至開創了帶有宗教褻瀆意味的「沒有耶穌的新教」，但是他的教會卻是小說中最不世俗化的教派。更重要的是，在小說結尾，莫茲正是因為他的無信仰而得到精神上的救贖。莫茲表裡不一的行徑與信仰為小說製造戲謔的一面，但也對讀者造成詮釋上的困惑。藉由1960年代激進的「上帝已死」神學辯論，本文主張莫茲的「沒有耶穌的新教」象徵一種激進神學——一種過於極端乃至於徹底倒轉的神學。援引蓋布里爾·馬赫尼（Gabriel Vahanian）的神學觀，本文視《智血》為奧康納對美國宗教世俗化以及資本主義神聖化的批判。

關鍵字：芙蘭納里·奧康納、《智血》、世俗主義、
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Flannery O’Connor’s debut novel, *Wise Blood* (1952), presents a comic believer who enacts the role of an active disbeliever in order to enter the secular world; in the end, it is in his inability to do so that he conversely reaches spiritual elevation. O’Connor’s portrayal of Hazel Motes as “a Christian *malgré lui*” and his potentially blasphemous “Church Without Christ” is paradoxical and satirical.¹ This is her astute design to challenge her contemporary readers to whom Christianity and secularism, belief and unbelief, are merrily confused. Post-War America in the 1950s witnessed a growing economy accompanied by a “religious upsurge,” which is profoundly secularized (Vahanian, *The Death of God* [DG] 61). With many theologians’ discontent with the secularization of Christian belief, there emerged in the 1960s a radical theology known as the “death-of-God” movement. This controversial movement is seemingly blasphemous but is in fact deeply religious, not unlike Hazel’s invention of the Church Without Christ. Admittedly, Hazel is too naïve and faltering to be considered a conscious leader in a theological movement. Hazel’s preaching is often unsure and even self-contradictory, yet as a drastic response to secularized Christianity, Hazel’s Church Without Christ may be seen as a rudimentary version of the radical theological movement that is to come a decade later. In other words, Hazel and his eccentric Church represent an under-articulated engagement of the secularized Christian culture in the America of the 1950s. With historical hindsight, the problems and merits of the death-of-God theology concerning belief, unbelief, and secularism are able to shed some lights in understanding Hazel Motes as a Christian *malgré lui*. Eschewing a direct comparison, this paper engages *Wise Blood* in the radical theological debate and examines how it serves as a critique of religious secularism in 1950s America.

Upon publication in 1952, *Wise Blood* was met with bipolar critical receptions, especially in regard to Hazel Motes’s religious message. A decade later, Flannery O’Connor’s note to the second edition set the record straight. Her protagonist, she states, is “a Christian *malgré lui*” whose “integrity” lies in his inability to be rid of the religious figure of Jesus (*Wise Blood* [WB] 1). Thereafter, except for a few critics’ dissents,² most critics have variously seen

¹ See “Author’s Note to the Second Edition” of *Wise Blood*.

² See, for instance, Susan Srigley, who maintains that Hazel Motes “insists on human independence from all spiritual reality” (1). Srigley’s reading takes Hazel’s preaching too literally and ignores the fact that Hazel’s ideas are often self-contradictory and that he tends to revise his ideas throughout the novel. Srigley’s argument leads her to conclude that Hazel’s self-mutilation in the end is his extreme means of individualism to “isolat[e] him from others” (88). This suggestion simply overlooks Hazel’s spiritual salvation in the end.

Hazel Motes as a comic portrayal of a Christian despite himself. Among others, Martha Stephens suggests that the “truth about Hazel” is that “deep down, he is a Jesus-hog himself” (56). In a similar vein, Lewis A. Lawson praises O’Connor’s characterization of a believer in disguise as the “perfect deformity” (38), who may speak louder than the saints in conventional religious stories to O’Connor’s unbelieving contemporaries. After this religious reading reached a sort of consensus, *Wise Blood* criticism diverged into different realms. Jeffrey Gray, for instance, adopts a psychoanalytic approach to reading the “grotesque” and “gothic” in the novel through the lens of Freud’s theory of the uncanny (57). Jon Lance Bacon, on the other hand, reads *Wise Blood* as O’Connor’s “critique of American consumer culture,” and sees the secular city of Taulkinham as “a world in which everything is for sale” (“A Fondness for Supermarkets” [“AFS”] 27, 35). Bacon’s research situates O’Connor’s work in the post-War America context, in which consumerism is imbedded in American identity and religion is secularized. Bacon makes convincing points through careful analyses of Enoch Emery, who is “most closely identified with consumerism” (“ASF” 29), and Onnie Jay Holy, who ripped off Hazel’s Church in order to sell religion for money. In his monograph, Bacon further proposes to reposition Flannery O’Connor in the literary history of Cold War culture in which O’Connor’s Catholicism renders her a dissident in the culture of a totalizing American religion, which is developed from the spurious “wedding of Christianity and capitalism” (*Flannery O’Connor and Cold War Culture* [FOCWC] 61). Following Bacon’s argument, Steve Pinkerton reads *Wise Blood* as a “sacrilege” of America’s “materialist religion” (463). Pinkerton argues, the most sacrilegious act in the novel is not atheism; rather, it is Hazel’s throwing money in a trash bin—“turning . . . cash into trash”—that is the ultimate sacrilege to America’s materialist religion (463). Both Bacon’s and Pinkerton’s arguments are admirable; however, when it comes to textual analyses, they both focus more on peripheral characters, such as Enoch Emery, Asa Hawks, Hoover Shoats (a.k.a. Onnie Jay Holy) and the potato peeler vendor. In so doing, they seem to skirt the central figure in the novel, leaving a missing piece in the center of the puzzle. In other words, the divergence of *Wise Blood* criticism witnessed a shift of focus from its religious meaning, in which O’Connor’s contemporary critics seemed to be most interested, to the historical context of 1950s America. This shift of focus created a breach between the religious reading and the contextual reading of the novel. It is crucial, then, to be informed of the

theological debate in the 1960s so as to have a more thorough view to reposition O'Connor in post-War American culture.

The existing O'Connor scholarship did look into the 1960s death-of-God movement to account for Hazel's eccentric church; Jae-Nam Han's essay "O'Connor's Thomism and the 'Death of God' in *Wise Blood*," for instance, is such an attempt. Han contends that O'Connor favors the classical hermeneutic in St. Thomas Aquinas's theology, compared with which, the death-of-God theology is pure absurdity. In this vein, Han reads Hazel as a negative representation of Christian atheism; he concludes that: "Through the character of Motes, O'Connor condemns those who follow the doctrines of death-of-God theology" (126). Han's observation of the similarity between Hazel's preaching and the death-of-God theology is commendable; however, his conclusion is problematic in at least three aspects. First, although Han acknowledges the diversity and varying aims of the death-of-God theologians early in his essay (116), he nevertheless treats them as the same in the following discussions. Seeing Hazel as a representation of the whole radical theology, Han risks simplifying the complex lineages of the death-of-God theology. Second, there is the simple problem of chronology in Han's conclusion. Published in 1952, *Wise Blood* is unlikely to be intended as a critique of the radical theological movement that emerged in the 1960s. Finally, Han's negative interpretation of Hazel's unbelief overlooks O'Connor's special interest in Hazel as a Christian despite himself and her praise of his "integrity" (*WB* 1). This paper, instead of seeing Hazel as a direct representation of diversified Christian atheism, considers *Wise Blood* as O'Connor's response to the secularism of Christianity in the 1950s, which also prompted the death-of-God movement in the 1960s. It is therefore crucial to note O'Connor's observation of secularism in her contemporary America.

From her religious perspective, Flannery O'Connor has time and again bemoaned that we are living in "an unbelieving age" when the "secular society" is populated by "a hostile audience" who understands Christianity less and less (*Mystery and Manners* [*MM*] 159, 185, 201). Indeed, post-War America in the 1950s celebrated secular values; with a growing economy, "a new generation was living the American dream" in which a worldly and affluent life, instead of spirituality, is the paramount goal (Kilcourse 45). Intriguingly, concomitant with this secular pursuit for worldly happiness in the 1950s is an "expansive church growth" (Kilcourse 45). Admittedly, secular values and religion are not

mutually exclusive, but they are certainly dubious bedfellows, especially in the view of a devout Catholic like O'Connor. To be sure, the religious upsurge in the 1950s indicated the secularization of Christian belief; as George Kilcourse Jr. observes the national climate of the time: “[t]he formula was simple: belong to visible religious institutions and be blessed with success” (46). In other words, Christian belief became a personal and spiritual assurance of worldly success and a promising life. This secularized Christianity is an adulterated belief, which accounts for O'Connor's description of her time as “an unbelieving age,” despite the growing number of church-goers.

In the 1960s, a group of theologians, sharing O'Connor's discontent with the secular turn of Christianity, fashioned a seemingly blasphemous “death-of-God” movement to register the aftermath of the religious upsurge in the 1950s. This controversial idea grew so prevalent that in 1966 *Time* magazine featured an (in)famous issue with a provocative question against a black background on the cover: “Is God Dead?”. In the cover story, “Toward a Hidden God,” the author cited from a survey by pollster Lou Harris that in 1965, “97% of the American people say they believe in God”; however, “of the 97% who said they believed in God, only 27% declared themselves deeply religious.” In other words, the majority of Americans profess to be Christians of some sort, but they are perfectly content to believe half-way; they are unwilling to have a real commitment to God. In this regard, this survey shows that the postwar religious revival in the 1950s only leave the majority of Americans to be unbelieving believers; the Christian faith has become disposable. Against this backdrop, theologian Gabriel Vahanian published *The Death of God* (1961) and set in motion the radical theology that propelled *Time* magazine to feature the 1966 “Is God Dead?” issue. Different from the nihilist idea fashioned by Friedrich Nietzsche,³ Vahanian's idea is deeply religious and theologically oriented. Rather than announce that God is dead, Vahanian recognizes the fact that God is dead and that we are entering the post-Christian era. Admittedly, the “death-

³ In his 1882 book *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche (in)famously creates a madman who proclaims that “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (*A Nietzsche Reader* 203). Nietzsche's use of God, however, is not in the religious sense. He treats God as symbolic of the transcendental Being upon which Western civilization and the moral code were built. His “God is dead” proclamation therefore shifts the philosophical enquiry from transcendental metaphysics to the significance of human existence (*Dasein*). In other words, Nietzsche's God-is-dead idea is not concerned about Christian theology and therefore does not share the same ground with the radical theology that informs the theoretical framework of this present essay. For an analysis of the genealogy of the death-of-God idea, from Nietzsche to the 1960s movement, see Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton's *Radical Theology and the Death of God*.

of-God” theology is not a coherent movement; there are many theologians who adopt this theo-less theology for differing aims and from differing perspectives.⁴ Among these theologians, Vahanian is often considered as the pioneer for his early publication of *The Death of God* in 1961. More importantly, Vahanian is also characterized as a “cultural theologian” for his specific concerns for American culture in the “post-Christian era.”⁵ Vahanian’s emphasis on the cultural perspective is most appropriate for this essay, which aims to bridge the contextual and religious readings of *Wise Blood*. For the purpose of this essay, I will focus my discussion on Vahanian’s idea, which concerns itself with secularism that is a crucial issue in O’Connor’s debut novel.

The term “secularism” is central in Vahanian’s discussion. In *The Death of God*, Vahanian distinguishes “secularity” from “secularism”: the former refers to the “sphere of man’s action,” while the latter “is a form of religiosity, for which the present and the immanent are invested with the attributes of the eternal and the transcendent” (*DG* 66-67). In Vahanian’s view, “the modern religiosity looks like a curious mixture of Christianity, secularity, and secularism” (*DG* 67). That is, the Christian faith has been diluted: the “eternal” and “transcendent” God has been adulterated with the secular values that are man’s action. Through the “secularization of religion,” man has usurped the place of God and “created God in their image” (*DG* 75, 142). Therefore, the secularization of religion only witnesses the development of “universal anthropocentrism, away from the theocentrism of the Bible” (*DG* 78). And it is against this secularism in Christianity that Vahanian proposes his “death-of-God” theology. In *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes similarly creates the Church Without Christ to preach his faith which is curiously devoid of a central

⁴ Notable radical theologians of this time include William Hamilton and Thomas J.J. Altizer, who co-authored *Radical Theology and the Death of God* in 1966. Their discussion focuses on the historical development of the metaphysics of radical theology, which is different from Vahanian’s cultural engagement of the idea. John D. Caputo, on the other hand, examines death-of-God theology from a deconstructionist point of view. In this regard, Hamilton, Altizer, and Caputo are very heavily philosophically-informed in their ideas of the radical theology. In my present case of study, however, Hazel Motes is far from a conscious thinker or philosopher; Hazel develops his theological ideas in response to the secular city he lives in. Therefore, due to the disparity of the radical theologians and their differing aims, I find it necessary to focus my discussion on Vahanian’s idea, which seems most appropriate to understand Hazel’s Church Without Christ as an engagement in the radical theology from a cultural perspective.

⁵ See Jeffrey W. Robbins’s introduction to *After the Death of God* (1-2). In the afterword to the book, Gabriel Vahanian mentions that the original subtitle to his book *The Death of God* is “a cultural analysis”; it was changed into “the culture of our post-Christian era” by the editor for publication (190). The original subtitle of the book evidently signifies Vahanian’s cultural approach to the theological debate.

symbolic figure. Like Vahanian's theo-less theology, Hazel's Church Without Christ is set in a secular city, against a collection of secularized Christian beliefs.

The fictional Taulkinham is a secular city populated by the likes of Mrs. Leora Watts, a prostitute who is described by one critic as "the sex goddess of the secular city" (Kilcourse 56), and Enoch Emery, whom Flannery O'Connor simply calls "a moron" (*MM* 116). Notably, George Kilcourse Jr. identifies the biblical reference in Enoch's name. He suggests that Enoch is the name of the son of Cain, the fratricidal son of Adam and Eve. Cain founded a city named Enoch, which St. Augustine mentions as "the secular city as opposed to the heavenly city" (Kilcourse 60). This biblical allusion, Kilcourse contends, establishes Enoch as the "priest of the secular city" (73). In the novel, after spending a night with "the sex goddess," Hazel meets Enoch for the first time in the crowd before the potato peeler salesman. Critics have put much focus on this scene, where consumerism is invested with religious symbolism. The salesman, who represents the preacher of consumerism, stands "in front of this altar" (*WB* 34), where he demonstrates the peeling machine: into one end goes a brown potato, and out of the other, comes a potato completely shed of its skin (*WB* 34). Steve Pinkerton aptly describes this demonstration as "a cheapened twentieth-century version of turning water to wine" (452). In this regard, consumerism is sacralized in the secular city, as the salesman assumes a priestly role. Tellingly, vying for the audience's attention with the potato peeler man are the Hawks: the blind preacher Asa Hawks, and his illegitimate daughter Sabbath Lily. While the daughter distributes religious tracts to the crowds, the blind preacher asks people to "[c]ome on and give a nickel if you won't repent" (*WB* 36); an act that upsets the salesman at the altar, who calls the pair "damn Jesus fanatics" (*WB* 37). In this scene, Flannery O'Connor satirically portrays the curious ways in the secular city where consumerism sits high by the altar while religion begs for change. In a more religious context, it is the preacher who is supposed to sit by the altar, as a guardian, and to look down on the salesman whose primary concern is his money-grubbing business. In the secular context, however, it is the salesman who preaches his belief to the interested audience, while the preacher has to try hard to sell his belief to an indifferent crowd for a nickel. In this way, O'Connor establishes the norm of religious secularism in her fictional Taulkinham, where capitalism is sacralized and Christianity secularized.

In the secular city of Taulkinham, moreover, religion is an

incomprehensible practice, which is evidenced by the columnist who advises the city folks of their problems. The blind preacher's daughter, Sabbath Lily, gives an account of how she once wrote to a newspaper columnist Mary Brittle, seeking advice about whether or not to "neck" with a boy she liked at the time. In Sabbath Lily's reasoning, since she is an illegitimate child who is destined to hell, a little sexual transgression would not seem to do much harm. Mary Brittle, however, replies that she thinks Sabbath Lily's "real problem is one of adjustment to the modern world," and she suggests that Sabbath Lily "ought to re-examine [her] religious values to see if they meet [her] needs in Life" (*WB* 117). Mary Brittle's advice reveals the prevalent anthropocentrism in religion; religious values, for her, are disposable when they do not meet personal needs. The person has the right to forego religion when it gets in her way. This is exactly the secularization of religion that Gabriel Vahanian finds problematic. Another secular voice in the novel is embodied in Hazel Motes's non-religious landlady, Mrs. Flood, who thinks that religious people are all "a little bit off in their heads" (*WB* 213). For Mrs. Flood, religion seems to prevent one from enjoying themselves in the world, which is simply incomprehensible. In this regard, the secular voices, represented by Mary Brittle and Mrs. Flood, question the pragmatic aspects of religion. Therefore, to survive in the secular city, religion has to show its pragmatic side. In O'Connor's satirical portrayal, this results in the commodification of religion.

In the novel, Asa Hawks takes advantage of his appearance as a blind preacher to beg for money, but the one who truly begins a religious enterprise is Hoover Shoats, "a preacher and a radio star" (*WB* 156), who gives himself a holy name of "Onnie Jay Holy" (*WB* 150). Hoover's "the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ" and his "True Prophet" (*WB* 151, 166) are both replicated from Hazel Motes's idea and image. This replication is suggestive of the mass production process in a consumerist society, where everyone can purchase a piece of something that "ain't true," as Hazel accuses Hoover and his business associate (*WB* 152, 205). Hoover's preaching does indeed cater to his secular audience's taste. He advises Hazel that, if he wants to get anywhere in religion, he "got to keep it sweet" (*WB* 157). Therefore, with a sweet tongue and "a winning smile" (*WB* 152), Hoover preaches his "Holy Church of Christ Without Christ" where the incoming members "don't have to believe nothing [they] don't understand and approve of," because "[i]t's based on [their] own personal interpitation [*sic.*] of the Bible" (*WB* 152-53), only at the expense of one-dollar

fee. Bacon recognizes that Hoover's preaching has adopted "the widely popular idiom of 'the cult of assurance'" (*FOCWC* 64), which is established by Norman Vincent Peale who published a best-seller *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) in the same year as *Wise Blood*. Peale preaches "a gospel of self-realization," which transforms religion into a form of positive thinking (*FOCWC* 64). In addition to being reduced to mere positive thinking, in Hoover's Holy Church of Christ Without Christ, religion is customized to every consumer's personal need. Nothing holds in the center anymore; nothing is transcendental. It is a religion that believes more in man's doing than in God's making.

Remarking on the commodification of religion, Gabriel Vahanian suggests: "For the sake of easy consumption, the radical character of Biblical faith is diluted into religiosity: purely formal, innocuous, and somewhat hygienic" (*DG* 49-50). Vahanian implies that true faith requires a complete commitment to a God that is incomprehensible and forceful sometimes; it is a belief in a transcendental Being that demands. The secularizing turn of Christianity, however, is growing "hygienic"; this God does not demand, he only helps the religious people to feel good and think positively. On account of this secularization, Vahanian suggests: "God dies as soon as he becomes a cultural accessory or a human ideal" (*DG* 231). From this perspective, it is against the secularization of religion that Vahanian recognizes the death of God. His radical theology is to get rid of the God that has become a man-made "cultural accessory"; his theo-less theology is therefore deeply religious. In *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes's Church Without Christ is the only religious institution that does not seek a profit. The name of the Church is seemingly atheist and blasphemous, yet it is the least secularized among the competing churches. The paradox of this establishment may be understood through the "death-of-God" theology. As Thomas Merton rationalizes the intention of Vahanian's theology, he suggests: "When the god invented by man 'dies' (he never really lived) then the true God is once again mysteriously present precisely because 'God is absent'" (197). In this aspect, the "death-of-God" theology, like Hazel Motes the Christian *malgré lui*, recognizes the death of God only in anticipation for His intervention and for His Revelation once again. In *Wise Blood*, Hazel likewise awaits to have his Christian faith affirmed, through his professed nihilism.

When Hazel first sets eyes on Asa Hawks in the scene of the potato peeler

salesman, he immediately shows a great obsession with the blind preacher, whose appearance fits the stereotype of a religious prophet. Handed a religious pamphlet by Sabbath Lily, Hazel immediately reacts to tear the pamphlet into small pieces and let the shreds sprinkle to the ground (*WB* 38). This is Hazel's deliberate performance to make his statement clear to the preacher: he is *not* a believer. He then follows the Hawks father and daughter to the theater where they prepare to hand out religious tracts to theater-goers. Hawks, as an experienced religious con-man, deftly adopts a rather prophetic rhetoric to talk to Hazel: "I can smell the sin on your breath," and "[s]ome preacher has left his mark on you" (*WB* 45, 46). Whether by luck or coincidence, Hawks's words really hit the mark, for Hazel did sin by having sex with Leora Watts the night before, and his grandfather is indeed a preacher who has a profound influence on him. Hawks thus manages to intensify his image as the blind prophet, which encourages Hazel to take his demonstration as a non-believer to the next level. Refusing to hand out Hawks's religious tracts, Hazel announces to the passersby that he is going to preach a new church, "the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified," which is "not started yet but it's going to be" (*WB* 51).

This new church that is later to be his Church Without Christ is merely Hazel's rebellious act designed as a challenge to the supposed true prophet. Some days later, Hazel hunts down the Hawks and moves into the boardinghouse where they live. Visiting the blind preacher to break the news that he has started his Church Without Christ, "Haze had expected a secret welcome"; but he is only met with the preacher's cold shoulder (*WB* 104). Then Hazel murmurs, "What kind of a preacher are you? . . . not to see if you can save my soul?" (*WB* 104). Here Hazel unwittingly reveals the reason of his obsession with the preacher: he wants to be saved. A few pages onward, Hazel bombards Hawks with religious questions, such as "[i]f Jesus cured blind men, howcome [*sic.*] you don't get Him to cure you?" (*WB* 107). This scenario is like a catechism in reverse, where the student Hazel seeks to have his religious doubts answered by the master preacher Hawks. What is more, Hazel's nightmare in his car reveals his secret desire to be rescued by Hawks. In his car, Hazel "dreamed he was not dead but only buried" (*WB* 61), which is reminiscent of his nightmare in the train in the opening chapter where he feels "like a coffin" (*WB* 13). This time, lying in the car Hazel dreams of a lot of people whom he has met in the secular city looking at him through the oval window at the back. This nightmare is as if Hazel were trapped in a coffin,

where the onlookers peek in at the deceased. And the narrative goes, “[h]e kept expecting Hawks to appear at the oval window with a wrench, but the blind man didn’t come” (*WB* 161). Hawks cannot save him from the nightmare, nor can he bring God back to his belief. Hazel’s creation of his rebellious Church Without Christ has come to no avail.

At this point, it is crucial to ask the question, how did Hazel, the boy who once knew he was “going to be a preacher” at the age of twelve (*WB* 15, 16), become a Christian *malgré lui*? In the novel, Flannery O’Connor only gives a sketch of the backstory, of how Hazel is raised in an ultra-religious family, where the grandfather is an evangelist “circuit preacher” (*WB* 14). Many critics have returned to this primal scene in order to answer the question. The common reading is that Hazel’s grandfather and mother have put the fear of Jesus in him, which accounts for his endeavor to avoid Jesus all through his life. Robert Brinkmeyer Jr., for instance, contends that “[a]s a boy, Haze strives to avoid Jesus because he fears the violence of his love” (86). Yet with a closer look at the backstory, what Hazel fears the most is not the violence of Jesus’s love, but that Jesus is simply not there. In Chapter Three, Hazel spends his second night with Leora Watts, who reminds him of the “SINsational” woman he saw at a carnival when he was little (*WB* 56). In his reminiscences, after his mother finds out about his visit to the woman and reprimands him for it, Hazel fills his shoes “with stones and small rocks” and walks in them as a penance (*WB* 59). “He thought, that ought to satisfy Him,” but as it turns out, “[n]othing happened” (*WB* 59-60). In this scene, it is the silence of God, the nothingness in return that deeply unsettles Hazel; as the narrative goes, “If a stone had fallen he would have taken it as a sign” (*WB* 60). But there is simply nothing. Hazel is not afraid of submitting himself to God and taking violent deeds as repentance, but for him it is more horrifying that his extreme submission of himself is not answered, that there might not even be a God up there. This fear implanted in his heart would grow during his army service, and finally it would blossom into his plunge into the secular city, rejecting Jesus altogether while secretly believing in him inside.

The historical “death-of-God” theological movement may help to better understand Hazel Motes as a Christian *malgré lui*. Nevertheless, Hazel’s Church Without Christ is far from a success, and the historical “death-of-God” movement likewise never attracts many followers. These two similar radical theological movement and institution share the same problems. Thomas Merton

indicates, one crucial problem in the "death-of-God" theology is that "it implies a marriage of quietism and revolt which is a little hard to understand. It *accepts* everything 'with passivity' yet waits for some inexplicable breakthrough" (247). Hazel's preaching shares this same problem; he preaches the truth without Jesus in anticipation for Jesus's revelation. It is radical in a way, yet it is peculiarly passive at the same time. It achieves nothing. Merton further argues that "[t]he trouble is that isolated insights like those, taken out of their context, transferred from the realm of subjective experience into that of dogma or theodicy, easily form misleading systems of thought" (271). In *Wise Blood*, Hazel's preaching similarly misfires and sends the wrong message to his followers. The Church Without Christ has very few members: aside from Hoover Shoats who soon starts his own preaching career and Enoch Emery who follows Hazel in secret, there is only one other follower, "a boy about sixteen years old who had wanted someone to go to a whorehouse with him" (*WB* 146). Of course, this follower is only a mistake and confesses to be a "Lapsed Catholic" himself (*WB* 147). In this regard, instead of attracting believers in his "truth," Hazel only succeeds in alluring the half-believers whose faith has already gone awry.

Another problem of such a theo-less theology is that it still needs to "formulate a new image and concept of God" ("Toward a Hidden God"). From an etymological perspective, a *theology* without a *theo* is just not viable. In *Wise Blood*, Hazel says that "The Church Without Christ don't have a Jesus but it needs one! It needs a new jesus" (*WB* 140). This speech, overheard by Enoch, leads to his stealing of the mummy from the museum to present to Hazel as the new jesus, which is one of the most grotesque scenes in the novel. Notably, when Hoover Shoats insists on knowing what this new jesus is, Hazel replies that "[t]here's no such thing as any new jesus. That ain't anything but a way to say something" (*WB* 158). Hazel concedes that "the new jesus" is just his symbolic language to replace the symbol of Jesus he tries to deny. This reveals the problems and limits of language and symbol. Vahanian, informed by the deconstructionist idea, recognizes language as an essential issue in theological discussion. Vahanian suggests that "[l]anguage is a transformer": "it transforms and alters even while embodying our understanding both of the world and of ourselves" (*Praise for the Secular [PS]* xii). The transcendent God, through language, is necessarily transformed and altered in our perception of Him. Hazel's idea of calling for a new mysterious being in his church is also altered through his phrasing it as "the new jesus." This, however, not only reveals the

problem of symbolic language in talking about a transcendent religious being; worse still, Hazel's phrasing of "new jesus" only summons a mummy that is a grotesque "idol." Vahanian contends: "[a]theism, especially from a biblical perspective, was never a threat to 'God.' Idolatry, yes. Because the idol, far from being no God, both is and is not God. It is an idol and it is not" (*PS* 2). If Hazel's Church Without Christ is a form of religious atheism, the new jesus he accidentally summons is an idol that is sacralized to become a God, but it is not the real God. It is in this sense that Vahanian says that the idol "both is and is not God." Idolatry creates a false God that would undermine religion. This is why Hazel has to shatter the new jesus into pieces and dump this idol out onto the fire-escape (*WB* 188). Nonetheless, this incident reveals that the theo-less theology risks idolatry, which would definitely cause the demise of the belief.

In spite of the problems of the "death-of-God" theology, there are still some admirable attributes in this radical thinking: first of all, it is a reassertion of iconoclasm; second, its paradoxical nature underlines the values of mystery in Christian belief. Vahanian contends that iconoclasm is essential in Christian belief; he suggests that "Biblical iconoclasm is directed against man's most subtle and degenerate idol—himself" (*Wait Without Idols* [*WWI*] 24). Thomas Merton agrees that "[t]he Death of God is a necessary iconoclastic protest against every form of popular religion which has blasphemed God by trying to sell him on the same terms as next year's Chevrolet" (193). In this regard, faced with the secularization of religion, in which God has become a man-made idol, it is ever more necessary to resort to iconoclasm to pull down the false idol of God. In *Wise Blood*, Hazel similarly preaches that "[t]he only way to the truth is through blasphemy" (*WB* 148, 152). It is through blasphemy of the existing God, which is man-made, that the truth, the real God, could be reached. The iconoclasm embedded in the "death-of-God" movement, in this regard, is to completely destroy the false image of God, so as to welcome the revelation of the real God.

In addition to iconoclasm, the paradoxical nature of the radical theology reaffirms the mysterious nature of Christian belief. The "death-of-God" theology is a form of religious atheism. Atheism, however, is an "etymological paradox": "[w]ithout the *Theos*, those who are *a-theos* would have nothing to set over against themselves, nothing to reject and deny" (Wood 31). In a way, atheism confirms God from a negative perspective. Flannery O'Connor has written in a letter to a friend, saying: "I was a Catholic not like someone else

would be a Baptist or a Methodist but like someone else would be an atheist" (*Collected Works* [CW] 930). So for a devout Catholic like O'Connor, an atheist is like a mirror image: it is in the opposite side of herself, but it is not that different from her after all. This is probably why O'Connor describes Hazel Motes as "an admirable nihilist" (*The Habit of Being* [HB] 70). In this regard, O'Connor identifies something admirable in the unbelieving atheist. Gabriel Vahanian, in shaping his death-of-God theology, also foregrounds the significance of unbelief and doubt in Christian belief. Vahanian suggests that the Bible is invested with such a paradox: "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief" (qtd. in *DG* 12). From this biblical allusion, Vahanian beautifully writes, "Only the unbeliever can believe: only the sinner can be justified. He who believes, believes as only an unbeliever can. He who is justified, is justified as only a sinner can be" (*DG* 12). According to Vahanian, doubt is contingent with faith in the biblical sense. This is a mysterious paradox that the modern and secular man, predominated by reason and science, fails to grasp.

God works in a mysterious way, which is unfathomable by man's limited perspective. This mystery, however, is not appreciated in the modern world. O'Connor had written, "for the Catholic they stretch far and away into those depths of mystery which the modern world is divided about—part of it trying to eliminate mystery while another part tries to rediscover it in disciplines less personally demanding than religion" (*MM* 145). In other words, the modern and secular world cannot fully account for religious mystery, which is probably not meant to be accounted for through reason and science in the first place. The Catholics, instead of trying to explain the mystery from man's limited mind, "stretch far and away into those depths." The "death-of-God" theology aligns itself with this religious mystery through its paradoxical nature as an unbelieving belief. Thomas Merton credits this movement for revealing God's mysterious grace for unbelievers; he suggests that "there appears to be a special mercy and love of God for the unbeliever in his sincerity, his honest inability to accept and admit formulas which to him have no meaning" (273). In *Wise Blood*, this special mercy of God is granted not only to Hazel Motes, who is the professed atheist, but also to his landlady Mrs. Flood, who is the true unbeliever of the secular world.

In the last chapter of *Wise Blood* after Hazel mutilates his sight, the narrative shifts to his landlady's perspective. Mrs. Flood, who is "not religious or morbid, for which every day she thank her stars" (*WB* 213), appears to be a

worldly and secular woman as she is very mindful of money matters. And when she learned that Hazel throws away spare money in the trash bin, Mrs. Flood plotted to marry him for companionship and, moreover, for his sizable army pension. This secular woman, however, shows great interest in the enigmatic self-blinded Hazel: she enjoys snooping in Hazel's room and develops a fascination of looking into Hazel's damaged eye sockets. Martha Stephens thus argues that Mrs. Flood represents the secular world "as it tries to peer, sometimes with uneasy curiosity, into the mystery of religious belief" (80). And it is through her insistent peering into this mystery beyond her comprehension that Mrs. Flood somehow begins a journey she doesn't understand. In a similar vein, Robert Brinkmeyer Jr. sees Mrs. Flood's "faith slowly and fitfully emerging" in the last chapter "by her being witness to Haze and his mystery" (87). With her eyes shut, Mrs. Flood peers in Hazel's blinded eyes on his deathbed, and sees him as "the pin point of light" (*WB* 236). Unwittingly perhaps, Mrs. Flood's unbelief and incomprehension of the religious lead her to the realm of God. With an intent curiosity for mystery, Mrs. Flood does not try to make sense of the mystery but plunges into the mystery. Like O'Connor's idea of a Catholic who "stretch[es] far and away into those depths of mystery" (*MM* 145), the unbelieving Mrs. Flood delves into the depths as she tries to see through Hazel's mutilated eye sockets. In Mrs. Flood, then, O'Connor probes the special mercy of God for unbelievers. And aptly, it is Hazel Motes, who embodies the paradox of Christian belief in his Church Without Christ, who acts as an agent for the unbelieving woman to begin her spiritual journey.

Thomas Merton, evaluating the "death-of-God" theology, contends that, despite its problems, it is best to see this radical theology "as an absolute religious *kenoticism*, a Christianity emptied of all, even of God himself"; in other words, "[i]t is a kind of extreme faith, so extreme that it turns itself inside out" (266-67). Hazel Motes's Church Without Christ is a similarly extreme faith turned inside out. In the face of prevalent secularism, which sacralizes consumerism and commodifies religion, this radical theology resorts to the paradoxical nature of Christian faith. Belief and unbelief can co-exist, but the secularized God that is a false idol would have to go. For the true God to reveal Himself, the secularized Christian faith has to empty itself first.

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