“Like a Birthmark”:
Graham Greene’s Catholicism

Adam Schwartz


As the centenary of Graham Greene’s birth approaches in 2004, his standing as one of the finest, and perhaps the best of, twentieth-century Anglophone novelists seems secure. Even ardent secularist Joyce Carol Oates lauds Greene as “the supreme novelist-moralist of the twentieth-century British novel, whose work constitutes a ceaseless meditation upon the moral life as an inviolable norm from which we stray at the risk of endangering our humanity.” Yet a central mainspring of Greene’s moral imagination, his Roman Catholicism, is less well grasped, even by scholars who (like Santiago Jimenez) recognize that his work was “always influenced by his spiritual world” (657; all citations from Perceptions will be given henceforth parenthetically according to page number). Indeed, Greene is often variously miscast as, inter alia, a Jansenist, a liberation theologian, and even an ultimately apostate author. A careful examination of his religious biography, however, reveals that Greene was engaged consistently, if dynamically, with Roman Catholicism from young adulthood until death. Moreover, some of his apparent departures from Catholic orthodoxy seem less certain upon an attentive reading of his work, and even his admitted doctrinal deviations frequently obscure a continued imaginative and ethical sympathy with the Roman Catholic vision of reality. Tracing the development of Greene’s religious opinions and scrutinizing some of the labels applied to them, then, will yield a portrait of an artist who remained a member of the household of faith, even as he at times joined the Church Militant’s “Foreign Legion.”

Greene was raised in a middle-class, conventionally liberal Christian family. His maternal grandfather was an Anglican clergyman until he defrocked himself after a crisis of conscience. Whether in reaction to this incident or not, Greene’s parents were not distinctive-ly devout. His father, Charles, was headmaster at Berkhamsted School from 1910. He was a liberal in both religion and politics, with a typically Victorian trust in human nature and belief in Progress, who replaced doctrinal or devotional rigor in religious affairs with heightened concern for ethics and aesthetics. His wife, Marion, had little interest in religious
topics and often admitted her ignorance of sundry religious practices, an understandable attitude given her father's fate. She also seems to have shared her husband's benign view of human nature and his intense perception of propriety, while being remembered by her children for her pragmatic rationality. The religious ambiance fostered by Greene's parents was thus like that found in many families of their class: a no-nonsense, personal Christianity of the heart distrustful of spiritual enthusiasm, and dogmatic in matters of conduct, if not conviction.

Young Graham inherited his parents' relative indifference to religion. The faith he learned as a boy “went no deeper than the sentimental hymns” and the “prayers of a rather lay variety” said at school. He found the Anglican liturgy “interminable,” and was confirmed “only because it was expected of me.” Nor was he troubled in his early years by this lack of deep religious roots. His early childhood was happy; and even growing discontent at preparatory school occasioned by his classmates’ chidings of his clumsiness and bookishness and by his parents’ emotional remoteness was not unrelieved, as he came home to the salutary fellowship of his nurses and siblings every night after school and enjoyed happy holidays at his uncle’s house. Yet Greene claimed that even such intervals were shadowed by forebodings of the fate awaiting him at age thirteen, becoming a boarder at Berkhamsted. In September, 1918, he went through the green baize door in his father’s study that joined school and home at the start of term, aware that he would not live at home again until the holidays. His apprehensions were soon justified, as it was during his tenure as a boarder that Greene underwent a fateful encounter with human malevolence that would be his life’s seminal experience.

To Greene, his public school was the place where “one met for the first time characters, adult and adolescent, who bore about them the genuine quality of evil.” The specific evil he met was a consequence of his unique position as the headmaster’s child, one exacerbated by his younger brother being their house’s head boy. This status immediately and permanently divided Graham’s loyalties. Chiefly due to an acute fear of homosexuality, Charles Greene had established an intrusive disciplinary regime that circumscribed pupils’ privacy severely, and thus generated intense resentment among the students. Although Graham also chafed under these restrictions, he thought that his classmates would never trust someone so intimately connected to the hated authorities. He felt like “the son of a quisling in a country under occupation.... I was surrounded by the forces of the resistance, and yet I couldn’t join them without betraying my father and my brother.” Unlike his brother, though, Graham was gan-gly and studious, which made survival in the conformist, philistine adolescent culture doubly difficult by intensifying the perception of abnormality occasioned by being his father’s son.

Graham’s consequent deep loneliness made him especially vulnerable to the dynamics of relationships. This volatile potential was actualized by his interactions with two other pupils, Lionel Carter and A.H. Wheeler, in 1919-20; and what he considered their conspiracy to betray his friendship precipitated a pivotal breakdown.

As Carter and Wheeler left no known accounts of what happened at Berkhamsted, only speculation is possible about precisely what transpired between these three boys. It seems, though, that Greene confided his interest in unpopular topics, like poetry, to Wheeler, only to have Carter discover this information by suborning Wheeler and embarrass Greene by disclosing it. As Wheeler was consistently described by ex-classmates as having a non-descript temperament, he could well have been pressured by the more charismatic Carter into deserting Quisling’s son and taking his rightful place in the resistance without realizing how much he had hurt Greene in the process. Indeed, Greene reported that when he and Wheeler met thirty years later, Wheeler reminisced about the good old days at school when the three of them were bosom pals, adding dryly, “his memory held a quite different impression from mine.” Greene’s immediate impression was a feeling of utter abandonment, and, whatever the exact facts, the pain of losing one of his few friends scarred
scarred his soul permanently. In 1940, he wrote that betrayal of friends is a worse sin than murder or robbery, and in 1957 he defined a nightmare as “when your best friend might suddenly without any reason turn into your worst enemy.” In the direct aftermath of being forsaken, Greene made several inept suicide attempts and, on the last day of the 1920 summer holidays, he absconded to Berkhamsted Common, leaving his parents an ultimatum that he would not come home until they assured him that he would not have to return to school. Although his sister, Molly, quickly apprehended him, his parents were alarmed by his actions, having been ignorant of Carter’s cruelties that spawned them. After months of consultation, they took the then-radical step of sending Graham to London for psychoanalysis. In July 1921, he took up residence with self-trained psychiatrist Kenneth Richmond and his wife, Zoe.

Greene later dubbed his six months with this couple “the happiest period of my life.” He held that it was largely the contrast with school that was so therapeutic, especially the cleanliness, solitude and independence he enjoyed. But he also stressed consistently the limited efficacy of the Richmonds’ treatments, as they were unable to supply a persuasive explanation of his suffering. He returned to Berkhamsted for roughly nine months to finish his studies, and seemed at ease outwardly. Beneath the surface, though, Greene was still ruminating over the blow to his psyche struck by Wheeler and the now-absent Carter (who had left Berkhamsted in 1921 without completing his education). A close friend from this period recalls that “each fresh insight he obtained into human absurdity or wickedness” would make Greene “exuberantly skeptical and blithely pessimistic.” Greene’s school suffering was thus stimulating a worldview greatly at odds with his parents’ liberal optimism, and his reaction to his boarding school years further fostered the yearnings and themes that would dominate his adult work. In particular, Greene held that these years provided both material and motive for becoming a writer. They also shaped the sort of writer and thinker he became by giving him a tragic view of life and a distrust of innocence, positions that helped lead him to Roman Catholicism. Finally, they furnished some of his foremost roles by teaching him the virtue of disloyalty and how to take the victim’s side. Greene regarded the events of his schooldays as his work’s dynamic impetus:

In all my books perhaps I return to the duality which has marked my life from the time that I was a pupil in the school at Berkhamsted whose head was my father. ... Thanks to these books I’ve recaptured my experience of childhood, or rather that part of it when I was a boarder, at twelve or thirteen. I’ve had no wish to do away with this cleavage; I’ve accepted it as one of the constants of my work and of my life. Perhaps it was the only way to exorcise the evil, for there’s no doubt, it was a most unpleasant situation.

Just as these years gave him sources and reasons for his writing, they also shaped the outlook he voiced in it. Having not been taught to believe in original sin and to believe in human nature’s general goodness, the adolescent Greene lacked sufficient intellectual and spiritual resources to comprehend his discovery of cruelty, a discovery that contravened trusted assumptions about life’s benignity. At age fourteen, though, he found in an apparently commonplace adventure story, Marjorie Bowen’s The Viper of Milan, a way to begin to “explain the terrible living world of the stone stairs and the never quiet dormitory” in which he was undergoing Carter’s abuse. Greene saw Carter as the villainous Visconti’s objective correlative and deduced from this tale a leading, and enduring, tenet of his new, more tragic worldview:

Goodness has only once found a perfect incarnation in a human body and never will again, but evil can always find a home here. Human nature is not black and white but black and grey. I read all that in The Viper of Milan and I looked round and I saw that it was so ... religion might later explain it to me in other terms, but the pattern was already there—perfect evil walking the world where perfect good can never walk again.

This acceptance of a secular version of the Fall also promoted an early skepticism of innocence, as his school ordeal convinced Greene that moral corruption is almost instantaneous. To him, “innocence was a slobbering mouth, a toothless gum pulling at the teats, perhaps not even that; innocence was the ugly cry of birth,” because even the “preposterously young” can have “complete theoretical knowledge of vice.” He admitted this attitude’s personal roots in 1936, when he commented that a cinematic portrayal of childhood as a period of brutality, and “the more than human evil of the lying
sadistic child,” had “an authenticity guaranteed by one’s own memories.”\textsuperscript{17}

Greene thus became preoccupied with “the discrepancy between the old liberal myths that had ruled his childhood and what his keen eye had showed” to be their flaws in his school setting.\textsuperscript{18} He hence became a rebel against these ideals and the public school ethos that had embodied them. In adulthood, he transmuted the necessity of divided loyalties suffered at school into “the virtue of disloyalty,” arguing that to be a writer is to be a rebel:

The writer is driven by his own vocation to be a Protestant in a Catholic society, a Catholic in a Protestant one, to see the virtues of the Capitalist in a Communist society, of the Communist in a Capitalist state.... Loyalty confines you to accepted opinions: loyalty forbids you to comprehend sympathetically your dissident fellows; but disloyalty encourages you to roam through any human mind: it gives the novelist an extra dimension of understanding.\textsuperscript{19}

His work demonstrates this principle’s basis in his school experiences. Noel Annan has argued that loyalty was one of the two ideals public schools strove most to inculcate in Greene’s time.\textsuperscript{20} In asserting disloyalty as a virtue, then, Greene engaged in a specific act of subterfuge against the public school spirit. As the autobiographical protagonist of “Under the Garden” is told, “you’ll have to forget all your schoolmasters try to teach you. . . . Be disloyal. . . . If you have to earn a living, boy, and the price they make you pay is loyalty, be a double agent.”\textsuperscript{21} The permanent state of disloyalty to both his fellows and his family that he confronted at Berkhamsted anxiously became a source of creativity to Greene later by widening his sympathies.

If Greene’s school sufferings taught him to broaden his sympathies through disloyalty, though, they also insured that his greatest sympathy would be with victims. He saw this advocacy, like disloyalty, as part of an author’s function: “The writer, just as much as the Christian Church, is the defender of the individual.”\textsuperscript{22} He likewise stressed this attitude consistently, and claimed that even in Junior School, “I knew already in my heart that I belonged on the side of the victims, not of the torturers.”\textsuperscript{23} While this view was ratified at boarding school, it was also transformed significantly. If he gained even greater sympathy for sufferers as his own pain intensified, his encounter with Carter and Wheeler also gave his notions of victimization more nuance. According to Greene, after his father interviewed him upon his return from the Common, other investigations began among the school’s “innocent inhabitants.”\textsuperscript{24} This inquisition, coupled with Carter’s early departure, persuaded Greene that a victim can quickly become a victimizer; and his awareness of such moral subtleties led him to conclude that “the writer should be ready to change sides at the drop of a hat. He stands for the victims and the victims change.”\textsuperscript{25}

A more immediate result of the tragic view of life inspired by Greene’s adolescent crisis was the collapse of his received liberal Christianity. This already-friable faith lacked a compelling theodicy for him, and he thus emerged from his breakdown and psychoanalysis “without any religious belief at all, certainly no belief in the Jesus of the school chapel.”\textsuperscript{26} He carried his pessimistic atheism with him from Berkhamsted to Balliol in autumn, 1922. While studying at Oxford, Greene wrote several stories attacking Christianity, including one depicting a demonic, Manichean Incarnation without a Resurrection;\textsuperscript{27} one contemporary recalled that “I’ve never heard atheism put forward better than by Graham” during these years.\textsuperscript{28} Greene thus seemed to be trying to put away what he considered his childish Christianity as he became a man.

But Oxford was also an entrepot on Greene’s path to Rome. In a March 1925 essay he referred to those who “worship” the Virgin Mary, and was promptly rebuked by “some ardent Catholic in Blackwell’s publishing firm,” who explained that people do not “worship” Mary, they “venerate” her, even supplying the technical term, “hyperdulia.”\textsuperscript{29} That ardent Catholic was Vivien Dayrell-Browning, who had become a Roman Catholic in 1923. Greene soon sought a meeting with her both to apologize for the offense his mistake had given and also out of curiosity at what sort of person would take “subtle distinctions of an unbelievable theology” seriously.\textsuperscript{30} His encounter with Vivien, though, left him unexpectedly enamored, and he began courting her. Yet how could an earnest atheist and a committed Catholic hope for a future together? Greene’s cousin, Claud Cockburn, advised him to convert outwardly to Catholicism if it was necessary to marry Vivien, but to not let it affect his real convictions, consul Cockburn came to regret when “the whole thing suddenly took off and became serious.”\textsuperscript{31}

As Cockburn suggests, Greene’s motives for converting were more complex than just a desire to wed Vivien. The link between human love and divine love did,
nonetheless become central to Greene’s religious thought. Charles Williams defined this principle as “romantic theology,” and both he and Greene believed that human love could mirror, and herald, divine love. As one of Greene’s later characters states succinctly: “Perhaps it is true that you can’t believe in a god without loving a human being, or love a human being without believing in a god.”

Greene posited further the more specific claim that romantic love could be the gateway to accepting a new religious faith, as a mid-1925 letter to Vivien attests: “I could worship with you, if you had your arms round me ... when I see that Catholicism can produce something so fine all through, I know there must be something in it.” Conversion theorists substantiate this dynamic, and Greene later extended it to include friendship and caritas, along with eros, as entrees to agape.

Vivien was thus “madly excited” at Greene’s decision to seek instruction from Father George Trollope in November 1925, which culminated in his reception into the Church on 28 February 1926. But Greene’s choice was not based solely on marital calculations. Vivien was the proximate cause of his investigation of Roman Catholicism; but once his explorations began, he quickly found aspects of it independently appealing. As he told Vivien shortly after starting his instruction, “I admit the idea came to me, because of you. I do all the same feel I want to be a Catholic now, even apart from you. One does want fearfully hard, something fine and hard and certain, however uncomfortable, to catch hold of in the general flux.” As he learned more about Catholicism, he concluded that it provided a uniquely compelling explanation for the evil he felt he had faced at Berkhamsted, as well as some hope for deliverance from it in ways that no other faith or modern outlook offered.

Yet Greene’s direct accounts of his conversion are not fully reliable. He claimed constantly that he became a Roman Catholic for completely intellectual reasons, stressing as late as 1979 that “my conversion was not in the least an emotional affair. It was purely intellectual.” Intellectual issues were genuine and significant motives in his choice, but his insistence on their exclusivity veils emotional or metarational factors of at least equal importance. What were these non-rational components? Besides his love for Vivien, Greene’s Berkhamsted break-down was also intimately connected to his acceptance of Roman Catholicism. His previous inability to find any persuasive way of comprehending his school sufferings had promoted his suicide attempts and his glorying in pessimism: these had seemed the only honest reactions to a modern world that appeared insensitive to evil’s existence and persistence. He admitted that when he applied for instruction, “I was ready to believe in the existence of evil ... the evil which surrounded me prepared me for the paradoxes of Christianity”; and he later told a friend that “I had to find a religion ... to measure my evil against.”

For Greene, that religion was Roman Catholicism, due to what he regarded as its unique emphasis on evil: “To be a Catholic is to believe in the Devil.” Greene held that the Catholic acceptance of a malevolent, but created, force in Being is the best foundation for hope. He thought this paradox of Christianity enabled a Catholic to resist manifestations of evil rather than misunderstand or deny them, as he believed his liberal Christian parents and modern culture generally had done. If modernity and creeds like Anglicanism had “almost relinquished Hell” in his era, he noted, “no day passed in a Catholic Church without prayers for deliverance from evil spirits ‘wandering the world for the ruin of souls.’” Only an acknowledged enemy can be combated successfully; and Greene thought Roman Catholics alone had a fully accurate battle plan, due to their willingness to admit the enemy’s presence and the strength of his positions. But, contrary to his Oxford Manichean tendencies, what Greene considered the Catholic stress on the Devil also assured him that no matter how powerful evil was in time, it could not conquer goodness in eternity, as symbolized by the Devil’s created, and hence subordinate, status. In short, Roman Catholicism was “a strong antidote to mere apathetic pessimism in the presence of evil” for Greene, offering a hopeful alternative to what seemed the “tepidity, indifference or boredom” of modern and liberal Christian responses to it.

Greene’s theological grappling with his school experiences also influenced his depictions of evil’s most obvious symbol, the devil’s lair. His interest in Hell during his instruction is evident from his remark to Vivien that this doctrine supplies “something hard, non-sentimental, and exciting,” some of the qualities he found attractive.
in Catholicism generally and absent from his ancestral modernist Anglicanism, which had largely abjured this dogma. Greene often associated Hell with his school years, as in his comparison of his dormitory with Hell in The Lawless Roads and his use in relatively early novels of an image of Hell as an infinite prolongation of pain, which appears rooted in memories of what seemed at the time to be never-ending “mental torments of hellish intensity” perpetrated by Carter. Greene’s portrayal of Hell, then, shows the symbiosis between his school years and his conversion: Catholicism met his psychic and emotional need for comprehending his crisis, even as his understanding and expression of religious doctrines were shaped by the pain of that period and his reaction to it.

Greene’s discovery of a theology that could explain, and provide hope for ultimate salvation from, the evil endured in and symbolized by his schooldays gave him an emotional and spiritual succor that the mental stimulation of pondering arguments about God’s existence could not. Yet the intellectual aspects of his choice that Greene stressed should not be ignored. Understanding the specific arguments he believed, and the degree to which he adopted them, will help clarify his basic conception of Catholicism, and will also prevent common mistakes when elucidating its development. While Greene admired the all-embracing nature of Sarah Miles’s conversion in The End of the Affair, he admitted that his own, at least intellectually, was less total. The young atheist’s “primary difficulty was to believe in a God at all,” one instruction resolved but not conclusively: “It was the arguments of Father Trollope at Nottingham which persuaded me that God’s existence was a probability. ... I eventually came to accept the existence of God not as an absolute truth but as a provisional one.” His choice of Roman Catholicism was similarly contingent: “I became convinced that at any rate this might be the truth than the other religions ... the arguments for Catholicism were more convincing than those of other religions.” Greene’s probabilism may have been molded by Newman (whose general influence he often admitted), but whatever its provenance, his acceptance of God and Catholicism as probable rather than absolute truths demonstrates that a tension between belief and doubt existed in his thought from his earliest Catholic days. Indeed, he asserted that he took his confirmation name, Thomas, in memory of the doubting disciple, not the angelic doctor. This emblem of Greene’s struggle between belief and doubt reveals an early skepticism about Scholasticism, one that would intensify in later years, along with his emphasis on doubt.

Nevertheless, Greene was also attracted to the general authority claimed by the Catholic Church. During his instruction, he denounced Anglicanism for substituting “sticky sentiment” for defined dogmas; and he continued to complain in his later years that it lacked clear doctrinal standards, as when he remarked in 1979 that,

I’ve too often seen the absurdity, exemplified in the Anglican Church, of a bishop remaining a bishop even though he doesn’t believe in the Resurrection, nor even in the historical existence of Christ. There are certain points of reference which cannot be abandoned, otherwise one might as well go and become a Buddhist or a Hindu.... So long as differences between the churches exist, these differences ought to be upheld, otherwise one becomes as foggy as the Anglicans.

In Roman Catholicism, though, Greene thought that he had found not only lucidly expressed truths, but, as Chesterton put it, a “truth-telling thing.” After a session with Father Trollope, Greene told Vivien that “It’s quite possible after all to believe it at this early stage, because the acceptance and belief in the Church as a guide includes faith in everything I’ve still got to be taught.” He considered such a source of certainty the antidote to the apparent moral and intellectual flux of modernity (and those faiths, like Anglicanism, that he felt had accommodated it), a point personified by Jules Briton in It’s a Battlefield (1934). Jules, the only identifiable Roman Catholic in this novel, desires an authoritative, active alternative to what he sees as weightless modernity, but which he fails to find in fashionable political ideologies:

He wanted something he could follow with passion, but Communism was talk and never action, and patriotism puzzled him.... He wanted someone to say to him: ‘Do this. Do that. Go here. Go there.’ He wanted to be saved from the counter and the tea urn, the ‘Weights,’ and the heartless flippancy of the cafe.

For Jules, such salvation comes only from his Catholicism, which rebels assuredly against modern ennui and asserts the presence of evil:

The Lawless Roads
Always in the badly lit church, surrounded by the hideous statues of an uncompromising faith, listening to the certainty of that pronouncement—*peche, peche, peche*—he was given confidence, an immense pride, a purpose. However lost in the cafe ... here he was at home.51

Greene’s new faith intersected with his post-Berkmasted worldview to both validate and transform his vocation as a writer, his view of human nature, and his rhetorical and cultural roles. Initially, his conversion shaped his criticism of literary modernism. Greene accused Bloomsbury writers like Forster and Woolf of creating characters who “wandered like cardboard symbols through a world that was paper-thin” because these authors had lost “the religious sense,” and “with the religious sense went the sense of the importance of the human act. It was as if the world of fiction had lost a dimension.”52 He hence concluded that the religious imagination could best restore that missing humanistic dimension because “human beings are more important to believers than they are to atheists. If one tells oneself that man is no more than a superior animal, that each individual has before him a maximum of eighty years of life, then man is indeed of little importance.”53 To Greene, though, such “unimportance in the world of the senses is only matched by his enormous importance in another world,” making characters with “the solidity and importance of men with souls to save or lose” the stuff of lasting literature.54 He admitted that “my conversion gave my books an added dimension;”55 and it was this stress on the religious sense that distinguished his work from that of the secular modernists. His adolescent crisis had impelled him to write, but his conversion gave his poetics sharper definition.

Does this mean that he was a “Catholic writer”? This is a vexed question among Greene scholars, for, while Greene was often so dubbed, he detested this label, preferring to call himself “a writer who happens to be a Catholic.”56 His reasons for shunning the Catholic writer designation seem twofold. One appears to be pique at critics who (in Waugh’s terms) think Catholic writers should craft “only advertising brochures setting out in attractive terms the advantages of Church membership.”57 Besides being offended by the often patronizing tone of such criticism, Greene felt that adhering consciously to the norms connoted by “Catholic writer” would be artistically stifling: “Literature has nothing to do with edification ... doubt and even denial must be given their chance of self-expression.”58 Yet such a demand is not incompatible with being a “Catholic writer,” when that term is defined properly. What the critics who exasperated Greene misunderstood is the distinction between apologetics and fiction. Whereas the advocate lays out a brief for his church, the imaginative artist paints a world in Catholic colors. All points on the spectrum are present, though, given the holistic nature of both Catholicism and literature: since each addresses all aspects of human nature and life, describing temptation, sin, doubt and denial, as well as repentance, redemption and faith, excluding any of these hues produces both bad Catholicism and bad literature. In a more temperate moment, Greene recognized these differences and reconsidered the notion, if not the nomenclature, of a Catholic writer:

The apologist writes for a certain type of reader; the novelist addresses all ... if one is a Catholic, he doesn’t have to try to be ‘Catholic.’ Everything that he says or writes inevitably breathes Catholicism.59

Moreover, Greene once proposed an anthology of writings presenting “human life criticized from a Catholic standpoint.”60 Such statements encapsulate his writing’s shaping vision. His rejection of a misconstrued label should not obscure Catholicism’s centrality to his worldview.

In addition to molding his general artistic perspective, Greene’s conversion also helped define further his tragic view of life and his suspicion of innocence. Initially, he translated his ethical perception that human nature is black and grey into more specifically theological terms by grasping a Roman Catholic doctrine that distinguished his new faith from his parents’ liberal Anglicanism: original sin. Newman’s assertion that humanity is implicated in an aboriginal calamity became Greene’s mantra in his early Catholic years, summarizing for him the Roman Catholic attitude toward life.61 Its appeal is unsurprising, for Newman’s principle resonated with Greene’s reflections on his school years, while raising them to a higher ontological level: “Roman doctrine, and particularly the
the doctrine of Original Sin, took into account that ‘awful prison’ that he perceived about him in his childhood ... here is the boyhood pattern repeated in mature religious experience.” Beyond confirming his prior impressions of human nature, belief in original sin also enabled Greene to escape his early pessimism by providing an eternal perspective on human evil. Regarding wickedness as an “intrinsic part of human life in every place” supplied solidarity with a wide net of fellow sufferers, while thinking that God’s goodness would eucatastrophically redeem such anguish “guaranteed a happy ending” to even the most tormented human tragedies: “Perhaps that’s what the saints were at with their incomprehensible happiness they had seen the end of the story when they came in and couldn’t take the agonies seriously.” Believing in original sin shaped Greene’s views about innocence as well, as it helped him comprehend Carter’s cruelty: in a fallen world where one is prone to rapid implication in the aboriginal calamity, it would not be unusual to find a schoolboy who bore about him the genuine quality of evil. Greene’s conversion, then, gave him a theology that both ratified and enhanced the metaphysical intuitions he had gleaned from his breakdown.

Besides helping Greene form his general views of a writer’s function and his assessment of human nature, acceptance of Roman Catholicism also helped define his specific roles as a rebel and a defender of victims. Initially, his conversion subverted the cosmology of his upbringing. Catholicism’s emphasis on evil and original sin gave him conceptual categories he had been seeking since his crisis, but ones that Charles and Marion Greene’s religion and anthropology could not supply. As Rose Macaulay remarked, Greene had “no affection for the C. of E. of his childhood; it was too temperate and mild and benign for him. The R.C. church broke in his ears with a darker, more catastrophic thunder, and caught him up in it.” Greene renounced his parents’ outlook, not so much because it was theirs, but because he judged it an incorrect interpretation of life. Robert Evans has argued that

The situation from which men like Greene rebel in the 20th century is that liberal optimistic view of the world nurtured by the Enlightenment and brought to fruition in the 19th century. ... There is no original sin; man is by nature a good creature. For a long time now this has been the rationalist point of view. But Greene ... has rejected it ... after investigating the seediness of our world.

For example, Greene judged World War II “the just and reasonable expression of human nature left without belief,” and claimed that, unlike his secularist peers, he was prepared for its horrors, and given a hopeful perspective on them, by belief in original sin. Additionally, at a crucial moment in Sarah’s conversion in The End of the Affair, she has an epiphany while touring a “Roman church” with her husband: “I walked out of the church in a flaming rage, and in defiance of Henry and all the reasonable and the detached... I dipped my finger in the so-called holy water and made a kind of cross on my forehead.” This passage’s importance for Greene’s counter-modern rebellion becomes even clearer when it is recalled that “detached” is precisely how logical positivists like Ayer and Russell were referred to earlier in the book. In short, Greene’s writing affirms Roman Catholicism for what he considered its rejection of coldly rationalistic, anthropocentric optimism, due to its greater awareness of both malevolence and mystery.

Greene thus felt that no matter how pervasive post-Christianity becomes, “there will always exist pockets of Christian resistance,” most likely found in Roman Catholicism, due to its consistent dissent from secularist trends. To him, such fidelity to its heritage against these pressures makes rebellious Rome radically distinct from its modernizing counterparts: “It was not after all the question, can this Thing survive? it was, how can this Thing ever be defeated?” His virtue of disloyalty, then, is clearly within a tradition of counter-modern Roman Catholic rebellion that includes cognate critics of liberalism like Newman and Chesterton. Indeed, Greene felt that English Catholicism “should produce revolutionaries.”

Lastly, Greene’s conversion both drew from and shaped his sympathy for victims. His boyhood torture and betrayal had supplied imaginative sympathy with other sufferers, and his conversion was both informed by this background and affected the form his sense of...
solidarity took. Initially, the historical repressions of British Catholics seem to have enhanced Greene’s sympathy for this faith, as he referred to this tradition of subjugation frequently, thus revealing his temperamental affinities with this often wronged, rebellious minority. Whatever the extent of this motive in Greene’s actual conversion, after he became a Roman Catholic, he found his faith congenial to his concern for the downtrodden, for he deemed the crucified Christ the ultimate victim. Greene summarized the relationship he saw between sympathy and faith in a later novel: “when one suffers, one begins to feel part of the human condition, on the side of the Christian myth.” Greene thus conjoined his personal story to a communal myth by enrolling in a group that had also endured unjust persecution, and that was founded in memory of One who had suffered the greatest possible injustice, thereby gaining endorsement and expansion of his earlier empathy with the oppressed.

Greene’s conversion, then, sanctioned and enlarged his adolescent outlook and became the basis of his rebuttal of modernity. Believing that Roman Catholicism restored the absent religious and humanistic dimension to literature, offered a more accurate reading of the human condition, and provided a set of counter-cultural principles to affirm when refuting contemporary culture—especially a particular sympathy for victims—gave Greene continuity with his life’s central event while providing a foundation for adult reflections. Even when specific views altered, these core convictions remained the heart of the matter.

Once a Roman Catholic, Greene developed some of these key insights and also underwent some notable changes of heart. A signal shift in his religious outlook began in the early 1950s, as Greene began delineating a dichotomy between “belief” and “faith,” and stressing a preference for the latter. He considered “belief” to be rational assent to points of propositional knowledge, be they those of the penny catechism or the scholastic proofs of God’s existence, based in the adherent’s mind. “Faith,” however, he regarded as metarational, founded largely on the believer’s intuition and personal religious experiences. Greene defined his distinction most lucidly in 1979:

There’s a difference between belief and faith. If I don’t believe in X or Y, faith intervenes, telling me that I’m wrong not to believe. Faith is above belief. One can say that it’s a gift of God, while belief is not. Belief is founded on reason.

His earlier work had contained this discrimination, but he began to define it, and his favoring of “faith,” more clearly in The End of the Affair (1951). In this tale, Greene held, the character Bendrix represents someone who cannot accept “the possibility of a God,” the same difficulty that had bedeviled the young Greene. In Bendrix’s case, though, it is not the probable truth of certain propositions that compels a “reluctant doubt of his own atheism,” but a series of miracles worked by his former mistress, Sarah. She has been empowered to do these by an infant baptism that had been kept secret from her, a sacrament that Bendrix the rationalist scorns, yet knows the stakes of: “it wasn’t You that took, for that would have been magic and I believe in magic even less than I believe in You: magic is your cross, your resurrection, your holy Catholic church, your communion of saints.” Yet it is precisely such magic that begins to pull Bendrix toward God, as it had Sarah. Greene’s use of it as the motive force for the conversion of someone facing the same problem he had thus demonstrates how his growing fictional accent on “faith” highlighted nonrational elements of his conversion that he was simultaneously denying strenuously elsewhere.

Greene’s partiality for “faith” became more obvious in subsequent works. For instance, when the eponymous protagonist of “A Visit to Morin” (1960) is accused of losing his faith, he responds angrily, “I never told you that ... I told you I had lost my belief. That’s quite a different thing”; and similar conversations occur in A Burnt-Out Case (1961) and Monsignor Quixote (1982). To Greene, then, “faith” is what finally matters, for it endures after disbelief in formulas emerges. Beyond clarifying this general distinction and preference, Greene’s greater accent on “faith” quickened his criticism of Scholasticism, as his heightened stress on metarational experience made this “academic and systematic” approach even less compelling, especially when he compared it with those of mystics like John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila (to each of whom he was devoted), and that of the “genius” Augustine, whom Greene considered more original and poetic than Aquinas.

Greene invoked Augustine, as well as the Spanish theologian Unamuno, in support of his intensified emphasis on “faith.” In addition, the Catholic Church has affirmed the general privileging of spiritual experiences over the formulas that express them, making Greene’s position orthodox. The way he articulated his view, though, led some to question his orthodoxy. After
reading “Morin” and *A Burnt-Out Case*, Waugh, for example, thought that Greene had ceased to be a Catholic. He failed to understand Greene’s differentiation between “belief” and “faith,” and feared that characters’ losses of belief represented “a recantation of faith” by their creator. Greene tried to clarify matters, but only partially succeeded.82 Waugh’s use of the two terms interchangeably has been repeated often, an insensitivity to dictionary subtleties that has promoted similar misreadings of Greene’s spiritual state in his later years.83

Greene’s stress on “faith” is also crucial to his countermodern rebellion, for it gives primacy to the mystical, intuitive, experiential, and intangible over the claims of reason. His public protestations regarding his conversion notwithstanding, his writings and devotional practice reveal that, within the Church, Greene was ultimately suspicious of theologies that seemed too reliant on reason and was more receptive to Catholicism’s apophatic strain. Allowing for hyperbole, Morin’s attitude essentially bespeaks his creator’s: “I used to believe in revelation, but I never believed in the capacity of the human mind.”84 The religious experiences associated with “faith” not only were more genuine and enduring expressions of Catholicism to Greene; but they also contrasted Catholicism more sharply with what he considered an empiricist, rationalistic secular culture, and “the abstractions of the Methodists and Anglicans” and other Protestants whom he thought had accommodated modernity.85 It was by cleaving to the “magical heart of the faith” and rejecting rationalism, Greene believed, that Catholicism would gain lasting adherents and remain a distinct, abiding agent in modern culture.86

Although Greene’s discrimination between “belief” and “faith” was latent in his earlier work, his definition of it and his greater accent on “faith” were distinct events in his spiritual development. What precipitated this change? He claimed in 1984 that he retained faith in God’s existence but had less belief over time, and that “my lack of belief stems from my own faults and failure in love.”87 His initial loss of belief seems linked to his fault in loving not wisely but too well. Explaining his lack of belief, Morin tells his visitor, “For twenty years, I excommunicated myself voluntarily. I never went to Confession. The longer he eschewed the sacraments, the more his “belief” declined, as he acknowledged in 1979: It’s my own fault....I’ve broken the rules. They are rules I respect, so I haven’t been to communion now for nearly thirty years.... In my private life, my situation is not regular. If I went to communion, I would have to confess and make promises. I prefer to excommunicate myself.”91

Yet he simultaneously stressed that his “faith” grew stronger; and he had suggested previously, again through Morin, that that enhancement resulted from his loss of “belief”: “my lack of belief is a final proof that the Church is right and the faith is true. . . . I know the reason I don’t believe and the reason is—the Church is true and what she taught me is true.”92 The fact that Morin no longer rationally assents to propositional knowledge confirms his metarational sense that what the Church teaches is true, for everything is unfolding as it foretold. If he excommunicated himself, he was instructed, his belief would wither and that is exactly what has occurred, just as it had for Greene after his voluntary separation from at first, was Catherine Walston.

Catherine also converted to Catholicism as an adult, in 1946, and Greene was her godfather. When they met in that year, his marriage was only nominal due to previous infidelities. Catherine herself had conducted several affairs, with her husband’s tacit consent. She and Greene began a sexual relationship in 1947, which he viewed through the prism of romantic theology, regarding Catherine as a source of spiritual renewal through physical love. He credited her with his “new Catholicism,” and held that “the only way I can learn to love God more than you is with you.” Greene insisted consistently upon his religious renascence’s authenticity, but also understood the irony of such spiritual stimulation coming from a sinful union.89 He seems to have stopped going to Confession and Communion regularly by 1950 because of his refusal to leave her.89 His next novel was 1951’s *The End of the Affair*, with its heightened attention to the distinction between “belief” and “faith,” and to the latter’s primacy. These facts thus substantiate the hint of an explanation offered a decade later in “Morin,” and imply that Greene was already feeling excommunication’s effects.

Even after parting with Catherine in the late 1950s, Greene continued to have mistresses and to excommunicate himself. The longer he eschewed the sacraments, the more his “belief” declined, as he acknowledged in 1979: It’s my own fault....I’ve broken the rules. They are rules I respect, so I haven’t been to communion now for nearly thirty years.... In my private life, my situation is not regular. If I went to communion, I would have to confess and make promises. I prefer to excommunicate myself.”91
after his voluntary separation from the sacraments. In fact, the novelist echoed his character when describing his own spiritual state in 1975: “I have very few beliefs now. But I continue to have a certain faith. I have the faith that I am wrong. And that my lack of belief is my fault. And that I shall be proved wrong one day.”

His fundamental faith that the Church is a truth-telling thing, then, was paradoxically validated and deepened by his loss of belief.

Even if Greene thought his faith in certain root principles was increasing during his “semi-lapsed” years, though, he was jettisoning many strongly held specific beliefs, including original sin and Hell. It is hard to pinpoint exactly when he ceased believing in original sin, but his literary interest in it declined substantially after the mid-1950s. By 1988, he was maintaining that “I believe in ‘between the stirrup and the ground’... Original sin does not mean anything much to me.”

His disbelief in Hell developed gradually. Since the late 1930s, Greene had posited belief in “the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God,” the hypothesis that even the smallest amount of openness to grace is sufficient to effect salvation. He amplified this point from the 1950s, stressing his growing conviction that few, if any, people will possess enough determination to resist completely God’s varied and constant entreaties to offer the slight submission He requires.

Greene concluded ultimately that “I can’t bring myself to imagine that a creature conceived by Him can be so evil as to merit eternal punishment. His grace must intervene at some point.”

The writer who had once asserted the “fallacy of the death-bed repentance” and warned “Don’t depend too much on God’s mercy” eventually reversed himself entirely. When one of his characters utters Greene’s prior belief that it is a “sin to trust too much to His mercy,” another has the last word: “Oh, they have a name for that too... It’s called presumption. Well, I’m damned well going to presume.”

As significant as these alterations in his religious mindset were, they should not cloud underlying continuities. Even when the doctrine of original sin was no longer compelling to Greene, the experience in his youth that had made it attractive remained vital.”

“Since the late 1930s, Greene had posited belief in ‘the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God,’ the hypothesis that even the smallest amount of openness to grace is sufficient to effect salvation.”

and religions that had accommodated it, making Rome’s ethos a still relatively more satisfactory alternative to its modern rivals.

Coupled with Greene’s disbelief in specific doctrines was an unsurprisingly greater stress on the general virtues of doubt. He remarked in 1979 that “I have, if you like, more doubts, but my faith has grown too.” “Faith” and doubt are both less tied to the sorts of formulas and propositions that he found less convincing and more constricting with time, making them “complementary and inseparable” elements of his later religious thought. Of course, the author whose conversion was on only probable grounds and who took his confirmation name in honor of the doubting apostle had always been concerned with doubt; and there are traces of this theme in his early novels. However, like “faith,” this topic became more prominent in his work from the 1950s. By the early 1980s he was claiming that his “only message” was “fallibility. Doubts,” for he felt that doubt was not not only a fillip to to “faith” but also a guard against the “chilling certainty” he detected in untroubled true
believers like his Communist friend Kim Philby. To Greene, an accepted lack of certitude spurs that extra dimension of sympathy with another’s views that he deemed crucial, and thus fosters charity by checking the arrogant self-righteousness that often accompanies claims of exclusive rectitude: “a sense of doubt can bring men together perhaps even better than sharing a faith. The believer will fight another believer over a shade of difference; the doubter fights only with himself.” Emphasis on doubt is also consistent with his counter-modern rebellion, for accenting it became another protest against inordinate belief in the human mind’s capacity and religious accommodations of that conviction. By asserting the inability of human reason to acquire certain knowledge and the undesirability of total surety, Greene again subverted both rationalistic culture and the “unconvincing philosophical arguments” that he associated with certain theologies. But Greene’s doubt is also not the purely secular scepticism of liberalism, for it assumes that, however veiled to reason the mystical, transcendent realities are, they do exist objectively and can be glimpsed in moments of heightened spiritual sensitivity.

A similar wariness about accommodating modernity permeated his opposition to changes in the Catholic Church connected with the Second Vatican Council. The most significant issue for Greene was adoption of the vernacular Mass, which he thought disrupted vital historical and religious continuities. He joined leading secular and religious intellectuals in signing a 1971 petition to Rome (as he did again in 1978) protesting plans to eliminate the Latin rite, which they deemed a “living tradition” that was an integral element of consistency in Western culture and the “history of the human spirit.” Greene saw this defense of the Latin Mass as a logical extension of the challenge to modernity that he felt Catholicism had formerly uttered unequivocally. The 1971 letter to Rome deemed the new Mass a surrender to “the materialistic and technocratic civilization that is increasingly threatening the life of the mind and spirit,” and its authors dubbed themselves the “vanguard where recognition of the value of tradition is concerned.” To them, the Church’s break with tradition in this area signaled a larger rift with its history generally, and with the faith of those who had admired its prior unwillingness to adapt to the modern age’s norms. A defining principle of Catholicism was being lost, they feared. Additionally, Greene thought the Church’s sense of purpose in the modern world derived from this contrarian ethic, and that efforts to conciliate the dominant culture would thus lessen Catholicism’s attractiveness. For him, “Catholicism becomes rather less interesting the more permissive it gets”; and the Church is an organization which has to train for combat, one which demands self-sacrifice.... I’m convinced that the drop in vocations has to do with the fact that we don’t put across clearly enough the attraction to be found in a difficult and dangerous calling. One enlists in a venture which is total. People are attracted to the Church where there’s danger.

Greene’s dissatisfaction with these alterations persisted for the remainder of his life. His protest against them was an important thematic element of Monsignor Quixote, and he was delighted when his friend, Father Leopoldo Duran, received permission to say Latin Masses for him during the 1970s and 1980s. Even his 1991 Requiem was in Latin. In short, Greene was far from “taking the transformations of the church with equanimity.”

This survey of the course and content of Greene’s Catholicism makes it possible to correct some other common mischaracterizations of it. His tragic view of life has prompted many accusations of varieties of pessimism, including heretical beliefs in Manicheanism and/or Jansenism, most notably by Anthony Burgess. Although Greene had Manichean leanings at Oxford, they did not survive his conversion to Catholicism. In 1950, for instance, he chided the Manichean “simple and terrible explanation of our plight, how the world was made by Satan and not by God, lulling us with the music of despair.” Greene maintained such anti-Manichean beliefs unto his last years. Even as his early firm belief in the Devil became a more muted agnosticism by 1986, he still held that “I can’t believe there’s a Devil and not a God.” Greene also consistently rebutted the Jansenist charge, whether it was casting in a bad light Jansenist crucifixes showing a Christ who died only for the elect in 1949 and 1982, or asserting explicitly in the 1970s and 1980s that his theology was “the exact opposite of Jansenism” because of its “doctrine of hope” (qtd. 549). Indeed, however contrary to orthodox Catholicism Greene’s...
presumptuous universalism is, it is also the polar opposite to the Jansenist belief in limited atonement.

Yet Greene’s differences from Jansenists, Manichees and pessimists also rested on more orthodox grounds, especially a radical sacramentalism. In his work, a world-weary asceticism that scorns the material is always suspect, be it that practiced by Pinkie of Brighton Rock, the lieutenant of The Power and the Glory, Minty of England Made Me, or Scobie of The Heart of the Matter. Rather, Greene endorses the perspective of a character like Sarah Miles, who begins with such gnostic inclinations but abandons them for faith in what Chesterton called the “divine materialism” of the Word made Flesh:

I thought I could believe in some kind of a God that bore no relation to ourselves, something vague, amorphous, cosmic...So today I looked at that material body on that material cross, and I wondered, how could the world have nailed a vapor there?... Suppose God did exist, suppose he was a body like that, what’s wrong in believing that his body existed as much as mine? Could anybody love him or hate him if he hadn't got a body? I can't love a vapor... 118

Even when Greene stressed suprarational “faith” in his later years, he asserted concurrently the importance of concrete signs of his religion’s truth. He relied particularly on historical touchstones. He was fascinated by John 20:1-10 (in which Peter and John race to Christ’s tomb, find it empty, and thus believe in His resurrection), deeming this passage in 1984 as being “like reportage,” and thus helpful in refuting theologians who deny the resurrection’s historicity.119 More generally, when defining Catholicism’s bedrock principles for him in 1979, Greene stated, “A man lived: Christ. He lived in history.” As this passage indicates, Greene also retained a Christocentric faith for, as he claimed in the same interview, “it is easier to pray to Christ than to an abstract entity”; and he was fond of citing Father Du-ran’s remark that “I don’t believe in God, I touch Him” in the Eucharist. For all his sympathy with mystical religion, then, Greene also thought Catholicism needed a corporeal component to prevent it from becoming “fit only for a handful of visionaries,”120 for “I don’t look for God up there, do you? He’s not up there. He’s down around here” (qtd. 33). Greene’s consistent stress on the holy synergy of the temporal and the transcendent therefore reveals an essentially hopeful standpoint for, as Valerie Sedlak points out, “the comic vision encompasses human joys as indicators of the wholeness of life and part of the equation that shapes the religious dimension” (613). His providential hope in the comedy of redemption thus redeemed his acute awareness of temporal life’s fundamentally tragic nature. Greene could hence be simultaneously “pessimistic about the human condition and optimistic about man,”121 for he accepted the orthodox Christian paradox, as Thomas Woodman describes it, “of victory in the midst of and through defeat and weakness” (150).

Yet, if Greene’s tragic sensibility did not make him a pessimistic Manichee or Jansenist, it also ensured that he would not conflate hope with optimism. His tragicomic vision dissuaded him from adopting synoptic ideologies promising temporal Progress and theologies that accommodated such beliefs. This aspect of Greene’s thought is often misunderstood, however, as numerous critics (of whom Darren Middleton is typical in this volume) depict him as a devotee of Teilhard de Chardin’s evolutionary process theology, or label him a liberation theologian (as Middleton also tends to do). Greene made approving direct references to some of Chardin’s ideas; but his fictional portrayals of them were more critical, especially in A Burnt-Out Case and The Honorary Consul (1973), which are usually taken as proof-texts of Greene’s Chardinean sympathies.122 In A Burnt-Out Case, for example, its leper colony’s doctor, Colin, advocates a Chardinean notion of evolution:
We are riding a great ninth evolutionary wave. Even the Christian myth is part of the wave, and perhaps, who knows, it may be the most valuable part. Suppose love were to evolve as rapidly in our brains as technical skill has done... I think of Christ as an amoeba who took the right turning.

To his interlocutor, Querry, though, “It sounds like the old song of progress,” which Colin then defends, arguing that progress’s benefits have been worth its costs, and that since change is inevitable, it is best to be “on the side of progress which survives.” Love’s inability to keep pace with technical skill, however, prevents Querry’s survival, as he is shot to death by a needlessly jealous husband, an event Greene presents as an “absurd” farce rather than the regrettable, but ineluctable, price of advance.  

His opinion of Chardinean ideas is even clearer in The Honorary Consul. The lapsed priest turned political revolutionary, Rivas, holds that there are coequal day and night sides of God that battle for supremacy: “It is a long struggle and a long suffering, evolution, and I believe God is suffering the same evolution that we are.” When his friend, Dr. Plarr, echoes Querry’s objections, Rivas utters a rebuttal akin to Colin’s:  

But I believe in Christ ... the day side of God, in one moment of happy creation, produced perfect goodness...God’s intention for once was completely fulfilled so that the night side can never win more than a victory here and there. With our help. Because the evolution of God depends on our evolution. Every evil act of ours strengthens His night side, and every good one helps His day side. We belong to Him and He belongs to us. But now at least we can be sure where evolution will end one day—it will end in a goodness like Christ’s.  

If some have considered this outlook orthodox, such a reading is neither accurate nor Greene’s intention. Rivas’s theory is a monist version of Greene’s Oxford Manicheanism translated into a Chardinean vocabulary, and Greene intended it to be heretical: “I invented this for him because he’s got to have his theology, as it were, as he had left the church and married. Well, I thought it would probably not be acceptable to the Catholic Church.” While Greene was more favorable to these ideas elsewhere, the novel’s rhetoric confirms this assessment. Like Scobie, who also went “off the rails” due to a “monstrous pride” that manifested itself in pity for God, Rivas claims “I pity Him.” Rivas also denies free will, and asserts his own authority over the Church’s, deeming his beliefs Catholic ones, “whatever the bishops may say. Or the Pope.” As Greene had previously portrayed pity as an index of obscene arrogance, stressed free will consistently (another departure from Jansenism), and emphasized dogma’s importance even when he did not fully accept specific doctrines (as will be shown), it is clear that Rivas’s theology is not to be imitated.

Such employment of Chardinean ideas suggests distrust of their premises. In depicting a theology that attempts to reconcile Catholicism with modern ideas of progress and evolution as naive, brutal, and heretical, Greene demonstrated his own counter-modern standpoint. His tragic view of life is evident in his implication that moral progress and the capacity for love will not evolve as rapidly as technical skill in a black and grey world. He stressed this concern further a few years after writing The Honorary Consul by confessing that the growing nuclear threat provoked “almost the same sense of impotence before human ‘malevolence’” as Hitler’s technologically sophisticated means of mass slaughter had. In both cases, technology was the servant of the worst who were full of passionate intensity, while the best lacked all conviction of how to understand and oppose such horrors. In addition, Greene’s empathy with individuals and his distrust of abstractions made him suspicious of any worldview that justified current pain in the name of distant, ethereal gains, as Colin’s and Rivas’s outlooks are painted as doing. Indeed, Rivas undermines his own theory at the novel’s climax by refusing to kill a hostage and by reverting to a traditional idea of his priestly duties by trying to minister to a dying man, though doing so costs him his own life. An innocent life and an unshriven soul are finally not inevitable casualties of evolution for him, but things worth dying for; their present (and eternal) value is greater than that of any future temporal utopia. The sense in Greene’s novels, then, is that Chardinean theology discounts evil, and is hence willing to downplay immediate suffering due to an ill-grounded ontological optimism. Beneath the hymns of praise to love and Christ, Greene heard the same old siren song of progress that had always struck a false note with him.

He was similarly suspicious of liberation theology. He claimed cautiously that “I like the idea of liberation theology—the option for the poor, and their base communities”; and he condemned John Paul II’s reprovals.
liberation theologians.” Yet some liberation theologians’ willingness to bless violence clearly troubled Greene. While affirming that clerics have a legitimate political role, he insisted that “things went too far” when a Columbian priest, Camillo Torres, participated in guerrilla military operations. Greene’s desire to depict The Honorary Consul’s Rivas (who may have been based on Torres) as a heretic, in part because he substitutes politics for religion, confirms Greene’s uneasiness with marrying the sword and the cross. His most lucid assessment of the ideas behind liberation theology came in The Comedians (1966), written when liberation theology was still widely unknown. Preaching on the words of Greene’s patron, Thomas the Doubter, “Let us go up to Jerusalem and die with him,” a priest asserts that Catholic political violence is sinful but is venial compared with apathy because it at least proceeds from a kind of love:

our hearts go out in sympathy to all who are moved to violence by the suffering of others. The Church condemns violence, but it condemns indifference more harshly. Violence can be the expression of love, indifference never. One is an imperfection of charity, the other the perfection of egoism. In the days of fear, doubt and confusion, the simplicity and loyalty of one apostle advocated a political solution. He was wrong, but I would rather be wrong with St. Thomas than right with the cold and craven.

To Greene, a church that was of the world was more forgivable than one that refused to even be in it.

But his ideal faith was one that inspires political activity while remaining metaphysically superior to it. Some prominent Catholics have accused Greene of muddying religion and politics, and becoming something of a Communist fifth columnist in the process. Yet, as drawn as Greene was to a political teleology like Communism, he nevertheless felt that Christian charity was a more appropriate response to suffering than the chiliasm of Marxist revolutionaries. To Greene, there could be no strictly political solution to the problem of evil, because its deepest roots were in fallen human nature rather than in flawed social structures. While he held that social improvements and elimination of particular injustices to victims were possible and should be pursued actively, he regarded utopian efforts to radically reorder society as impossible due to the temporal imperfectability of human nature. Politics could only be meliorative, not transformative. In Greene’s mind, the Christian loves people in their present imperfect state and seeks to ease their current agony, whereas the ideologue’s allegiance is to the men who will be like gods in a future reengineered polity, a commitment that only produces further pain when it inevitably founders on the unchangeable incorrigibility of fallen human nature. For him, attempts to build a New Jerusalem out of the crooked timber of humanity could only end in the gulag. He concluded by 1988 that as “the Church becomes more concerned with poverty and human rights the Marxists become less concerned with poverty and there’s nothing to show they are concerned with human rights;” and that “it is not possible to create a New Man, so all we can expect is a change in conditions so that the poor are less poor and the rich are less rich. I am for more humanity, not for a new concept of humanity.” For Greene, then, Catholics must prioritize religious belief over political belief, as Rivas does when he renounces violent revolution for self-sacrificial ministry. As Jae-Suck Choi argues, “in Greene’s world, material gain is not so much accounted as moral or spiritual victory”

As orthodox as Greene was on many of these matters, his troubled relationship to Catholic authority has fostered much speculation about his ultimate spiritual state. William Thomas Hill reports that most of his fellow Greene scholars see their subject as “an apostate who continued to use Catholic themes in some of his work even after he lost his faith” (1). Greene is somewhat culpable for this perception because of mischievous remarks he made to intrusive interviewers about being a “Catholic atheist” or a “Catholic agnostic.” Careful consideration of his ties to Catholicism, though, discloses that he managed to keep at least a foot in the church door. Just as Greene’s belief in God’s existence was conditional, so was his obedience to His vicar. Greene came to disagree strongly with many of the Church’s teachings, but he never broke with it fully, often saying he was “a protestant inside the Church.” What makes his case especially complex is that, unlike some dissenters, he continued to insist on the importance of dogma. As he put it in 1979, “I’m not in opposition to Rome.... I believe in the necessity of a minimum of dogmas, and I certainly believe in heresy. ... If one considers one’s self a Catholic,
there are a certain number of facts which have to be accepted.”

He felt that Catholics were taught the Truth and would be held accountable for that knowledge, but he was still willing to give only limited allegiance to the teacher. This tension is evident in his qualified backing for practices and doctrines like the Index and papal infallibility. His studied ambiguity on these issues, being unwilling to endorse or condemn Church teaching wholeheartedly, is indicative of his general posture toward the Rock of Peter: “though it repulsed me, I couldn’t help admiring its unyielding facade.”

Moreover, he sought (however unconvincingly) to situate some of his more outright dissent, such as his opposition to the ban on artificial contraception, in an orthodox framework, stressing that *Humanae Vitae* was not an infallible statement and rooting his objections to it in defense of one’s family rights, church tradition, and his support for the Church’s proscription of abortion. His self-excommunication also reveals an intellectual respect for the Church’s moral code even when his will was too weak to conform to all of its demands. Greene even connected his increased emphasis on “faith” in his later years to his desire for authority, commenting in 1982 that “I believe less and accept more, through obedience. For instance, I could easily do without the virgin birth. But my faith tells me I am wrong.” The Church’s stolidity had enticed him, and he did not want it to repeat what he saw as the Anglicans’ mistake of sacrificing its standards to suit individual members’ objections, including his own: The household of faith would not be worth residing in if it was remodeled to oblige every crazy uncle in the attic, even one named Graham Greene.

Michael Brennan is thus incorrect to claim that Greene “entirely rejected the concept of the Roman Catholic Church as a precise, unified and authoritative institution” (261). Rather, Greene was (in Hemmingway’s phrase) a “rotten Catholic,” someone who recognized the Church’s truth-telling function even when he was unable to believe in the intellectual rationales behind some of those truths or was unwilling to match his behavior fully to its ethical imperatives.

Greene acknowledged his faith’s tortured nature, admitting in 1984 that “many Catholics would prefer me to have left the religion altogether,” but he nonetheless considered himself open enough to grace for God’s appallingly strange mercy to work on his soul. He made an identical reply to two separate interviewers who asked if he still felt pursued by God in his later years: “I hope that He is still dogging my footsteps” and his sense that he remained within at least a penumbra of grace is demonstrated both by his receiving Extreme Unction on his death-bed and his comment two years before he died that “I disagree with a good deal that the Pope has said and done but that doesn’t mean that I have left the Church” (qtd. 484).

The broader perspective offered by conversion theory also helps substantiate the permanence of Greene’s Catholicism. E.D. Starbuck judged that “persons who have passed through conversion, having once taken a stand for the religious life, tend to feel themselves identified with it, no matter how much their religious enthusiasm declines.” Following his reception into the Church, Greene made Catholicism an integral aspect of his identity, a component he struggled with constantly but never surrendered, even when he lost belief in what had been some signal Catholic doctrines to him. As Joseph Pearce has concluded,

He never felt comfortable with Catholicism but nor was he ever comfortable with anything else ... he remained a member of the Church. Although he continued to doubt, he gave God the benefit of the doubt, believing that to be anything other than a Catholic would be to become something less than a Catholic.

No matter how much he swerved and detoured along the way, Greene never went off the rails completely, and he finally reached the destination he had never fully turned back from. His journey was always with maps.

Greene famously dubbed some lines from Browning the epigraph for his *oeuvre*:

- Our interest’s on the dangerous edge of things
- The honest thief, the tender murderer The superstitious atheist, demi-rep
- That loves and saves her soul in new French books
- We watch while these in equilibrium keep
- The giddy line midway.

Greene spent much of his life seeking that equilibrium in his mind, heart and soul. As a legate of liber...
alism, he was unprepared for the ostracism and abuse he underwent at boarding school due to his unique status, but neither his inherited Anglicanism nor modern surrogates like psychotherapy could account persuasively for the evil men do. Cynical pessimism seemed his only honest attitude until love called him out of his virtual despair and, despite his infidelity to Vivien, he never forgot how human passion had led him to divine grace. He accepted Roman Catholicism as both rationally probable and emotionally satisfying, as it provided an explanation of evil that ratified theologically Greene's antecedent tragic sensibility, while also offering hope of overcoming the aboriginal calamity's effects. His adopted religion also molded other elements of his prior worldview, such as giving him a cause that transcended secular justifications for rebellion and deepening his compassion for victims; and it spawned new notions as well, as when it supplied a framework for contesting literary modernism's aesthetics.

Even when his respect for Church rules led him to excommunicate himself, with a consequent diminution of “belief,” Greene's “faith” grew, as he stressed more strongly the metarational side of Catholicism. Even doubt became a spur to faith, for he felt it freed him from a rationalistic form of religion that had become more untenable with time. Yet these changed views did not lessen his sensitivity to evil nor his desire to combat a culture that he thought discounted or ignored it. When Catholics seemed to be accepting the kind of thinking that he had abandoned even before joining the Church, his opposition was resolutely clear. But Greene also found specific theological tenets and moral precepts to be an often enervating challenge.

In the midst of his struggle, though, he managed to hold on to the archimedean beliefs that Christianity is historically and tangibly true; and that Roman Catholicism was the variety of it most loyal to its essential heritage in his time, and thus the one best suited to rebel against a modern culture that devalued or denied the existence and persistence of evil by upholding orthodox sacramentalism, providential hopefulness and rendering unto God rather than Caesar. As with his whiskey priest (of The Power and the Glory), Graham Greene's Catholicism was “like a birthmark.” His interest was on the dangerous edge of things, but these core convictions kept his equilibrium and prevented him from crossing the midway mark on that giddy line. Like a favorite mentor, Chesterton, Greene knew that an inch is everything when one is balancing.

NOTES
4 Greene, SOL, 164, 68, 31; and unpublished passage of A Sort of Life (quoted in Sherry, Life, 1: 254).
6 Greene, SOL, 74.
7 Greene quoted in Sherry, Life, 1: 77.
8 Sherry, Life, 1: 82-3.
9 Greene, SOL, 84.
Peter Quennell, quoted in Sherry, Life, 1: 111.


Greene, SOL, 92.


Greene, SOL, 117.


Greene to Marion Greene, 6 March 1925, quoted in Sherry, Life, 1: 179.

Greene, SOL, 164; Sherry, Life, 1: 179-80.

Cockburn quoted in Sherry, Life, 1: 193.


Greene to Vivien Dayrell-Browning, quoted in Sherry, Life, 1: 220. Emphasis in original.


Vivien Dayrell-Browning, undated but sometime in November, 1925 (Sherry, Life, 1: 256).

Greene to Vivien Dayrell-Browning, 2 November 1925 (Sherry, Life, 1: 256).

Allain, Other Man, 144. See also Journey Without Maps (1936; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1980), 213-17 (JWM); SOL, 167-8; Sherry, Life, 1: 257; and Graham Greene: Man of Paradox, ed. A.F Cassis (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1994), 197, 342-3, 459.

Allain, Other Man, 148.


Greene, CE, 40-1.


Greene to Vivien Dayrell-Browning, quoted in Sherry, Life, 1: 260, who is imprecise about the exact date.


Greene quoted in John Cornwell, “Why I Am Still a Catholic,” in Cassis, Paradox, 459. His faith’s proba-
blist nature was life-long, as he claimed in 1986 that “I think there’s a sporting chance that God exists ... if there is
a God, the Catholics probably come nearest to getting Him right” (quoted in John Mortimer, “I’m an Angry Old
Man, You See,” in Cassis, Paradox, 436-7).

48 See SOL, 169; Reflections, 305. Greene highlighted numerous statements of the probablist position by
Newman in his copies of the Cardinal’s works. See, e.g., Newman, Apologia Pro Vita Sua, ed. Charles Harrold (New
Charles Dessain (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1962), 289. Greene’s extant library is held by the John J. Burns
Library, Boston College.

49 Greene to Vivien Dayrell-Browning, 24 December 1925 (Sherry, Life, 1: 260); and Allain, Other Man, 158-9.
He highlighted Newman’s similar contention in Letters and Diaries, 12: 168. Greene often focused on arguments stress-
ing the importance of dogma in his annotations of Newman and other authors.

50 Greene to Vivien Dayrell-Browning (Sherry, Life, 1: 259, who estimates its date as early Dec. 1925).
52 Greene, CE, 91.
53 Allain, Other Man, 152.
54 Greene, CE, 91-2.
56 Greene, WOE, 77.
58 Greene, Why Do I Write? 32.
59 Greene quoted in Pere Jouve and Marcel More, “Table Talk With Graham Greene,” in Donaghy, Conversa-
tions, 26.

60 Greene notes, Alan Redway Papers, Box 3, Folder 3, Georgetown University. Greene’s sense of this identity
persisted. In 1985, for instance, he told Shusaka Endo that he hoped Endo would “continue writing ‘Catholic’ litera-
ture as if on his behalf” if Greene predeceased him (George Bull, “A Literary Love Affair,” The Chesterton Review 27

61 See LR, passim and Alan Redway Papers, Box 3, Folder 3, op. Cit. Greene also took special note of this pas-
sage in his extant copy of the Apologia—which he could not have obtained before 1947—revealing this idea’s persistent
importance to him.

62 Stratford, Faith and Fiction, 55.
63 Greene, LR, 34, 96.
64 Greene, CA, 65-6. See also CE, 333-6.
65 Rose Macaulay, “Hypnotized by the Church,” in Cassis, Paradox, 105. Greene’s experience thus exempli-
fies Hugh McLeod’s judgment that “Anglicanism remained important in a negative way even for those who rebelled
against their public school upbringing: the rebellion tended to include a bitter rejection of the religion that had held

66 Robert Evans, introduction to Graham Greene: Some Critical Considerations, ed. Robert Evans (Lexington:
University of Kentucky Press, 1963), xiv-xv.
67 Greene, CE, 334-6. See also “Escape;” in Reflections, 84-6.
69 Greene, “The Last Pope,” in Reflections, 118, 120. See also “The Last Word” in The Last Word and Other Stories
70 Greene, CE, 298, 262.
71 See, e.g., LR, passim; CE, 311; “The Virtue of Disloyalty,” 268-70; Shelden, Within, 396.
72 See his 1 April 1948 poem quoted in Sherry, Life, 2: 294.
73 Greene, BOC, 186.
74 Allain, Other Man, 162.
75 See, e.g., Greene, YWM, 213; and Cates Baldridge, Graham Greene’s Fictions: The Virtues of Extremity

76 Greene, WOE, 143.
77 Greene, EOA, 164-5.
80 See MQ, 90-97-9; and WOE, 265-7.
81 See Catechism of the Catholic Church, Articles 156 and 170. For evidence more contemporaneous with Greene, see J.C. Whitehouse, “Grammars of Assent and Dissent in Graham Greene and Brian Moore,” Renascence 43 (Spring 1990): 158.
84 Greene, “Morin,” 224.
85 Allain, Other Man, 146.
86 Greene, P&G, 154.
87 Greene to Leopoldo Duran, 30 April 1984; quoted in Duran, Friend and Brother, 289.
90 See Sherry, Life, 2: 278, 324-5; and C.C. Martindale to Greene, 8 August 1951, Greene Papers, Folder F14 “Father Martindale,” John J. Burns Library, Boston College.
91 Allain, Other Man, 161-2.
92 Greene, “Morin,” 227. See also BOC, 158.
94 Allain, Other Man, 162.
95 Maria Cuoto, Graham Greene: On the Frontier (New York: St. Martin’s, 1988), 212.
96 Greene, BR, 247. See also, e.g., Living Room, 44; BOC, 81; MQ, 64.
97 Allain, Other Man, 151. See also Duran, Friend and Brother, 289.
98 Greene, P&G, 118, 188. For akin cautions, see BR, 107-8, 178-9, 228; MOF, 71; The Heart Of the Matter (1948, 1971; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1978), 210 (HOM). Significantly, all such discussions are in works prior to The End of the Affair.
100 Cuoto, Frontier, 212.
102 Allain, Other Man, 148.
103 For Greene’s continued belief in modernity’s denial of evil, see, e.g., Gloria Emerson, “Our Man in Antibes,” in Donaghy, Conversations, 130.
104 Allain, Other Man, 162.
106 See, e.g., Rumor at Nightfall (New York: Doubleday, Doran, & Co., 1932), 144; Orient Express (1933; reprint, New York: Pocket Books, 1961), 177; Battlefield, 170; CA, 10; HOM, 210.
108 Greene, CE, 311.
109 Greene, MQ, 53.
110 Greene, SOL, 168.
113 Allain, Other Man, 157-8.
115 Greene, CE, 86.
116 Mortimer, “Old Man,” 437. This persistent rejection of Manichean ideas is thus a further example of a religious insight outlasting an initially persuasive theological explanation in Greene’s mind.
118 Greene, E0A, 109-12.
119 Greene to Duran, 30 April 1984 (Duran, Friend and Brother, 28990). See also Ibid., 186; Mortimer, “Old Man,” 436; Cornwall, “Still a Catholic,” 462. He noted the empty tomb passage in a Bible given to him in 1948.
120 Allain, Other Man, 159, 155, 147.
121 Cuoto, Frontier, 214.
122 See SOL, 168; and Greene to C.C. Martindale, 13 June 1962, Greene Papers, Folder F14 “Father Martindale.”

His extant library contains Chardin’s The Phenomenon of Man and Robert Speaight’s biography of Chardin.
125 See Duran, Friend and Brother, 111.
126 Greene quoted in Emerson, “Antibes,” 129.
128 Greene, WOE, 125. For Scobie as “off the rails,” see Greene quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, The Brideshead Generation (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 401. See Emerson, “Antibes,” 129 for his appraisal of Rivas as “off the rails.”
129 Greene, HC, 253, 260, 262.
130 Allain, Other Man, 148.
132 Cuoto, Frontier, 215. See Ibid., 161, 186, and Duran, Friend and Brother, 73-4 for Torres as the model for Rivas.
133 Greene, Comedians, 283. He highlighted Thomas’s words (John11:16) in a Bible given him in 1948.
135 Cuoto, Frontier, 213-14.
137 For a more extensive treatment of Greene’s critique of Communism, see Adam Schwartz, “A ‘Catholic Fellow-Traveller’?: Graham Greene and Communism,” Explorations (forthcoming).
138 Allain, Other Man, 158-9.
139 Greene, SOL, 193. See also YE, 39, 206, 248.
140 See Allain, Other Man, 157, 166-7; YE, 247-8; and Greene’s 1981 Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech.
143 See Allain, Other Man, 154; and Sherry, Life, 1: xxii.