

Michael Brennan, *Graham Greene: Political Writer*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. xxiv + 208, £58.00, ISBN: 978-1-137-34395-6

In the twilight of his career, Graham Greene declared that ‘politics are in the air we breathe, like the presence or absence of a God’ (p. ix). This musing encapsulates the synergy of politics and religion that is a hallmark of Greene’s thought, one that Michael Brennan notes ‘profoundly stimulated’ his creative vision (p. 175). Unfortunately, Brennan’s panoramic monograph does not delve deeply enough into this relationship and its ramifications for Greene’s writing. The hints of an explanation that he offers, however, should spark inquiry by readers into the Catholic-informed moral imagination that undergirded Greene’s evaluation of modern social systems and ideologies, especially communism, and his critique of liberation theology. In the end, as much as he recognized an interplay between sociology and eschatology, Greene judged that religion does not merge into politics.

One crucial element of Catholicism that animated Greene’s political writing was a tragic sensibility. As Brennan notes, John Henry Newman’s maxim that humanity is implicated in an aboriginal calamity is a mantra throughout Greene’s oeuvre. But Brennan does not explore systematically the repercussions of this idea for Greene’s politics. For instance, he mostly overlooks how Greene applied Newman’s theological insight into human fallibility to social issues, specifically by distrusting concentrated power. In fact, Greene’s politics always had a libertarian—even anarchistic—streak, as he detected a common stateolotry in all modern political systems and thus considered each of them potentially totalitarian, be they fascist, communist, or the British wartime and welfare states. Greene thought that these outwardly different regimes were also alike inwardly because of a fealty to abstraction, which abetted abuses of power by imperfectible people. In his mind, twentieth-century ideologues of all kinds saw persons as interchangeable ‘grains’ or ‘dots’ (p. 82) to be remade in the image and likeness of a political myth instead of as particular individuals created uniquely by God. He therefore concluded that Catholicism was singularly sensitive to how readily human dignity could be violated by flawed men in thrall to worldly dogmas, making the Church ‘the only body in the world today which consistently—and sometimes successfully—opposes the totalitarian State.’ (Graham Greene, *The Lawless Roads* [London: Penguin, 1939], 74.)

Greene’s Catholic criticism of totalitarianism guided his response to a species of it that enticed him, communism. He held that Catholicism and communism shared certain deep structures, as ‘they are both protests against injustice’ and authoritative teleologies. (Graham Greene, *Monsignor Quixote* [New York: Washington Square Press,

1983], 43.) Greene nevertheless perceived grave incompatibilities between the two codes. Brennan claims that this awareness was due to 'subjective choice' (174), but it actually arose from Greene's consistent application of Catholic principles to this modern polity. First, his tragic view of life led him to regard the communist promise of temporal human perfection as the 'facile and over-confident statement about man having nothing to lose but his chains,' and to claim that because human nature is in truth fixed and imperfectible, people must have a limited conception of political possibility. (Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* [New York: Penguin, 1940], 120.) As he put it in a late interview (ignored by Brennan), '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.' (Greene quoted in Dinesh D'Souza, 'Beyond Marx and Jesus', *Crisis* 2 [May 1988]: 21.)

Greene contended that when communists uphold this belief in human nature's plasticity, they fixate on the abstract New Man to the exclusion of sympathy for actual men (a point Brennan's analysis largely elides). *It's A Battlefield's* Surrogate, for example, is lured by 'the lovely abstractions of Communism,' and substitutes his hopes for Humanity for the fate of one man, a party member facing execution whose release other activists campaign for: 'He resented even Drover's intrusion as an individual to be saved and not a sacrifice to be decked for the altar....He felt rattled and betrayed by the individuality of men.' (Graham Greene, *It's A Battlefield* [London: Penguin, 1934], 50.) Brennan also does not address Greene's consequent deduction that Catholicism is more inclined to respect people as individuals than communism is, and hence is better equipped to defend the poor without violating their dignity: 'Perhaps 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.' (Greene quoted in Maria Cuoto, *Graham Greene: On the Frontier* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988], 213-14.) Greene's Catholicism, then, bred sympathy with communism as supplying a sense of purpose that reprobated inequity, even as his faith explained how Marxist idealism could degenerate into inhumanity and provided a view of political action's extent that was more attuned to each person's individual integrity.

Greene had a similarly textured attitude to his century's chief attempt to blend Catholicism and communism, liberation theology. Although Brennan argues that Greene embraced this outlook 'with enthusiasm,' his approach to it was more nuanced (p. 143). He claimed cautiously that 'I like the *idea* of liberation theology', but his tragic view of life made him wary of some liberation theologians' willingness to bless violence. (Greene quoted in *Graham Greene: Man of Paradox*,

ed. A. F. Cassis [Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1994], 470.) Brennan depicts Greene as an unequivocal admirer of one such cleric, the Colombian priest Camilo Torres. Yet Greene actually insisted that ‘things went too far’ when Torres fought in guerrilla military operations. (Greene quoted in Cuoto, *Frontier*, 215.) Moreover, Brennan recognizes that *The Honorary Consul’s* lapsed priest, Rivas (perhaps based on Torres), transfers his loyalty from traditional religion to violent revolution, views the Latin American poor as a transnational abstraction, and casts his liberation theology in Manichean terms. But Brennan misascribes the novel’s portrayal of this politicized, ideological heterodoxy as ‘doomed’ (p. xxi) to Greene’s ‘nihilistic perspective’ (p. 148) rather than to his orthodox conviction that the lance of power can only be broken by the sword of the spirit. Greene’s appraisal of liberation theology is therefore a consistent restatement of his sense that the quest for justice, even among Catholics, can be derailed by human frailty and detachment.

Brennan concludes correctly that Greene’s ‘political and Christian instincts remain inextricably intertwined’ as he limns a ‘postlapsarian world of tragi-comic political narratives’ (p. 176). If his own exploration of these themes is truncated, it should inspire deeper examinations of Greene’s political Catholicism. Greene’s assessment of modern social orders and ideals was shaped by a sensitivity to the ease with which power can be abused, and the consequent necessity for rejecting what he deemed naive illusions about human beneficence, a stance he found articulated best by Roman Catholicism. He was convinced that Catholicism, unlike its ideological rivals (even one as otherwise attractive as communism), maintained firmly that an earthly New Jerusalem cannot be built out of the crooked timber of humanity. The Church must thus forbear liberation theology’s marriage of the rifle and the cross, as *caritas* cannot replace *agape* in a perfectly Catholic heart. The heart of the matter of Graham Greene’s political writing, then, is a belief that the power and the glory belong to a kingdom not of this world.

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In summoning the Second Vatican Council in October 1962, Pope John XXIII sought *aggiornamento*—that the Roman Catholic Church