

Logic of Religion, Logic of Fiction Gabriel Moran

The key to understanding religion is the relation between the particular and the universal. In aesthetic – and religious – understanding, the universal is found in the particular and only in the particular. And the particular is particular insofar as it conveys in its concreteness an intimation of universality. When something gives no signal of the universal, then it is a mere part of a whole. It does not invite entering into a depth of understanding.

In this essay I am concerned with how Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religions provide examples of an aesthetic logic. I supply examples from the arts, illustrating the logic in the works of Flannery O'Connor and Samuel Beckett.

The Logic of Particular-Universal

Logic in the modern world is generally assumed to refer either to using induction from many individual cases or else deduction from a general rule. In either direction, it is assumed that there is a world of individual cases from which the human mind can abstract laws or rules. The natural image for such a movement is up and down. The general rule leaves behind the messiness of individual differences for an *idea* that comprehends many cases. This kind of thinking, by means of individual cases and general ideas, occurs in all areas of life, including art, history, and religion. Every phenomenon can be examined in this way from the outside. But to study the religious experience, the artistic production, or the historical event, solely as an outsider is to miss the heart of the matter.

The natural image for aesthetic or religious thinking is a movement that circles people or events in order to reach a depth of appreciation. Instead of building a larger and larger system, an aesthetic way of thinking keeps turning toward the center. Ludwig Wittgenstein asks: How does one understand a piece of music by Brahms? His answer: Listen to it and then listen to it again. After repeated listenings one can compare it to other pieces by Brahms and then to works by Mozart or Beethoven.¹

A particular work of art cannot be universal; it can only give an intimation of the universal. Like the unique, the universal can never be fully achieved. The difference between minor works of art and the “classics” is the degree to which they approach universality. We know that Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven have a high degree of (near) universality. They continue to speak profoundly to millions of people. When a work of art cuts across gender, race, culture, and other divides of the human race, it lays claim to approaching universality.

The truth of human experience is not always captured by prosaic description. The precision of poetic speech lies in its ambiguity; concrete meanings of descriptions are used that point beyond themselves. A variety of literary genres can convey the (nearly) universal truth by the crafting of words that have a poetic quality. The poet, novelist, or playwright zeroes in on a particular person or event and goes deeper than the surface appearance. Regarding Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Northrop Frye writes: “If you wish to know the history of eleventh-century Scotland, look elsewhere; if you wish to know what it means to gain a kingdom and lose one's soul, look here.”²

The great artist does not have in mind a universal truth when working with particular materials. In fact, a conscious attempt to speak to the ages tends to distract one from the moment and materials at hand. What is constructed to attract millions of onlookers may get immediate attention but it is not likely to last. Not only the artist but also the person experiencing the work of art cannot mainly be interested in universal application. A person who leaves the particular work of art for a supposed universal meaning usually finds only the general and the sentimental.

Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Particularity

What I have said about artistic literature applies to Jewish and Christian Bibles, as well as the Quran. This profound literature is capable of conveying a (nearly) universal truth if it is received in the right way. When misunderstood, the claims in the Bibles and the Quran are an endless source of trouble and intolerance.

Within the limits of this essay I can examine only the logic of particularity in Christian and Muslim religions. I will concentrate on a single issue: Who has a share in the life-to-come according to each of these two traditions? It is obvious that the answer to this question reveals much about the tradition as a whole. If a religious group says disparaging things about anyone outside its boundaries, that attitude would show intolerance. If the group thinks that outsiders go to hell, that would be a case of ultimate intolerance.

Christian Language for Who is Saved

Within Christianity, “Christ,” “church,” and “baptism” have particular references. Christianity has control of these terms; no one else is arguing for possession of them. The meaning of each term is mainly set by Christian usage. From early in its history, the church maintained that “Christ is the one savior,” that “outside the church there is no salvation,” and that baptism is necessary to be saved. From just as early in Christian history, thinkers wrestled with the question of what these beliefs imply about the salvation of the non-Christian. Most of the Fathers of the Church, despite a fiercely held belief that the church of Christ is the ark of salvation, also imply or accept that God has his own ways.

In the fourth gospel, the later Pauline letters, and the philosophical thrusts of Justin Martyr or Clement of Alexandria, there is a connection between Christ and the order of the universe. Belief in Christ can be signaled by being deeply immersed in the truth.³ An explicit belief in Christ can only happen if the individual is confronted with the Christian gospel. Thomas Aquinas thought that an angel might be sent to someone dying in Africa who had not heard the gospel. The solutions to how non-Christians are saved were clumsy and only partially developed but they recognized the tension built into Christian claims.

Christian doctrines that affirmed the necessity of Christ-Church-baptism were addressed to Christian Church members not to outsiders. There is no denying, however, that these doctrines were in practice lifted from their context and applied to outsiders. It is understandable, if tragic, that ordinary Christians drew the conclusion that Jews or Muslims were damned because “Christ is my savior,” something that the Bible or my catechism tells me so. What is truly scandalous is that the Catholic Church’s official teaching left the same impression until Vatican II made it clear that church doctrine does not say Jews or Muslims are damned, but rather that those “who seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace...may attain eternal salvation.”⁴

From the very coining of the term Christ, which translated the Hebrew “messiah” but drew in other connotations, there was an intention to link a particular person and a grand divine plan of the universe. The term Christ refers both to Jesus of Nazareth and also to the foundation and end of the world. In the inner language of the church, “Christ” is by definition the only way. Anyone who is saved – something humans cannot judge – is by definition saved by, through and in Christ. W. Cantwell Smith makes the provocative statement that there are no non-Christians because “strictly speaking, no outsider can possibly reject Christ; he rejects only Jesus. What makes him an outsider is precisely that he has not seen the latter is indeed the former.”⁵

A Christian Church member who would say to a Jew or a Muslim that “you are saved by Christ” might intend a complement but the statement is likely to be received as an insult. The Christian using the inner language of his or her community is trying to say to the Jew or Muslim: You and I are traveling on different paths but we are guided by what in my language is called “Christ.” Given the connotations that “Christ” has for Jews, the Jew can hardly be expected to accept that “Christ” is a pointer to universality. A Buddhist, in contrast, might accept it as a complement to be told that he is a follower of Christ, especially if the Christian is willing to acknowledge his own Buddha-nature.

The doctrine that “outside the church, there is no salvation,” sounds embarrassing these days but it is based on the same principle of particular-universal. As “Christ” is used for both a concrete historical reference and a universal ideal, so “church” is used for an historical institution and for a “heavenly Jerusalem.” The necessity of baptism is a correlative belief. Baptism (by water) is necessary to enter the existing church; in Christian language, a baptism which is implicitly desired by the goodness of one’s life provides admission to the heavenly church.

The existence of hundreds of Christian Churches is sometimes called a scandal but it can be a reminder of the church’s incompleteness. Each church has a right to assert that its particular form is the best expression of universality, so long as it does not fill in the difference between particular and universal with its own language. Tiny churches that call themselves “the church of God” or “the church of Christ” do not pose a threat of domination. A very large church that calls itself Catholic (universal) should regularly use a qualifier in front of “Catholic.” All Christians believe in the one, true, catholic church but that is an ideal still to be realized.

Muslim Language for Who is Saved

It is hardly surprising that Christians who do not grasp the logic of their own religion find Islam to be intolerant. Of course, there are intolerant members of Islam just as there are intolerant church members. But Muslim tradition has the resources and the language to avoid oppressing outsiders, that is, those who do not accept Islam as “a religion.” Muslims often quote the text from the Quran that “there is no compulsion in religion.” (2:256). Muslims have not always lived up to that ideal. However, in comparison to Christian history, the Muslim record can at least hold its own. When Christians lived under Muslim rule in medieval Spain or sixteenth-century India, they were treated as “protected peoples.”⁶

Islam did not negate Christianity. In fact, Muhammad saw Torah, Gospel, and Quran as a single narrative (42:13). Islam is the cap stone of the religion that runs from Abraham through Moses and the prophets. Islam has one more prophet than Christianity, Jesus of Nazareth, before Muhammad,

the seal of the prophets.

The Quran thus claims to be the fullness of revelation. The paradox is that the Quran itself says that every people has its own messenger (10:47) and that the messenger speaks with the language of his people. (14:4). Like Christianity, Islam affirms a particular set of writings as incomparable but those writings include moments in which the writings point beyond themselves.

Like the Christian claim of Christ and church as necessary for salvation, the Muslim claim is refracted through the terms Islam and Muslim. Only a true Muslim can be saved; Islam is necessary for salvation. What makes Islam as a religion powerful to insiders and confusing to outsiders is that the same word is used for the religion and the practice of religion. "Islam" thus manages to unite both the ancient meaning of religion as genuine devotion and the modern meaning of religion as a socio-historical institution. The institution of Islam gives concrete and powerful force to the particular practice of "true religion," which is called Islam. Muslims who practice the religion of Islam embody the universal ideal of Islam. A non-Muslim is an infidel by definition.

A non-Muslim is someone who rejects the gift that God offers and refuses to submit to the will of God. The warning of God's condemnation is meant for one who acknowledges the gift of Islam and then renounces it. For that reason, conversion away from Islam to another religion is literally unthinkable. The challenge that modernity offers to the religious institution of Islam is to recognize genuine forms of religious practice that have a different name than Islam.

"Every child is born a Muslim."⁷ By naming the religion that existed from the beginning of the world as Islam, Muslim language implies that each human being is offered a gift that is consonant with its very being. Every child starts with the presence of this gift and thus to become an unbeliever (*kafir*) requires an act of ingratitude. The doctrine that only a true Muslim can be saved is a consequence of the fact that in Muslim language Islam is the fulfillment of the human vocation.

Two Revelatory Writers

All great literature prepares the way for reading and hearing literature that is said to be sacred. I choose two writers who gather up the tensions and contradictions of the modern world: Flannery O'Connor and Samuel Beckett. O'Connor was a conservative Roman Catholic who never went far from her home in rural Georgia. Beckett was an Irish Protestant who wrote strange plays in French; he is often assumed to be an atheist because he was attuned to the silence of God. From almost opposite ends in their striking particularity, Flannery O'Connor and Samuel Beckett illuminate a (nearly) universal meaning for the act of believing in a revealing God.

Flannery O'Connor

Flannery O'Connor wrote a fairly small body of work before her always frail health gave out at age thirty-nine. I will focus on the short story *Revelation* and the novella *Wise Blood* for my examples. The paradox of O'Connor is that her work brims with traditional Catholic belief but is also a cauldron of modern violence. Her peculiar and particular stories through their skillful craftsmanship manage to touch (nearly) universal feelings. Michael Cunningham in *Do You Believe?* writes: "O'Connor, in her fiction and her letters and essays is the best argument I know against dismissing Catholicism outright."⁸

O'Connor's short story *Revelation* is a deadly serious but humorous insight into who is called to the heavenly banquet. The central character, Mrs. Turpin, is a self-satisfied, ostentatiously Christian woman. There are two revelatory moments for Mrs. Turpin, the first that turns her life around, the second moment a vision of the final judgment. Mrs. Turpin, sitting in a physician's office compares herself to an unhappy young woman across from her, named Mary Grace. "If it's one thing I am," Mrs. Turpin said with feelings, "it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is'."

At that moment she is struck above the eye by a book thrown by the girl, followed by the girl herself "whose fingers sank like clamps into the soft flesh of her neck." There was no doubt in Mrs. Turpin's mind "that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition. "'What you got to say to me', she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting as for a revelation. The girl raised her head. Her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin. "'Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog'."

This revelation was not at all what Mrs. Turpin had expected. But the suddenness and the violence of it succeeded in puncturing her complacent self-satisfaction. At the very end of the story, Mrs. Turpin, while hosing down a pig pen, has a vision of a "vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth." A vast horde of freakish looking people were rumbling toward heaven. At the very end of the procession were Mrs. Turpin and her husband. "They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away."⁹

O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood* has a central character who is a mirror image to Mrs. Turpin.¹⁰ Hazel Motes is a Christian in spite of himself. His integrity, O'Connor says, lies in "not being able to escape the 'ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind.'" (8). Enoch, a blind man, warns Hazel that "you can't run away from Jesus; Jesus is a fact" (32). Hazel insists that he is not a Christian: "Do you think I believe in Jesus? Well I wouldn't even if he existed" (13). The more he protests that he is not waiting for the judgment, he was waiting on nothing," the more evident becomes his obsession with Jesus. Nothing matters but that Jesus don't exist" (33).

Hazel meets a modern day preacher, Omnie Jay Holy, who urges membership in a church in which "you don't have to believe nothing you don't understand and approve of. If you don't understand it, it ain't true and that's all there is to it" (84). In opposition to such complacent Christian churches, Hazel founds his own church as a bizarre inversion: "I preach the church without Christ. I'm member and preacher to that church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way. Ask me about that church and I'll tell you it's that church that the blood of Jesus don't foul with redemption" (60).

As happens with many of O'Connor's characters, Hazel's life does not have a happy ending. His violent contortion against the faith he cannot leave involves wearing torturous instruments and blinding himself. He has no place on earth and dies a violent death. Hazel Motes, as the one man in the story who seems to see something beyond the cultural and religious complacency of his world, is blinded by his vision and ends life in a ditch.

I will comment mainly on what are widely judged to be Beckett's two greatest plays: *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*.¹¹ I cite Beckett as revelatory of the situation of the modern individual in a desolate environment. Similar to Flannery O'Connor's, Beckett's characters are misfits in today's world, frozen in time and waiting to die. What is revealed is nothingness, which may not seem to be a religious theme, but I think most mystics would understand a religious experience of nothingness.

The characters in Beckett's plays can achieve nothing but they stubbornly exist, carrying on a dialogue within their own heads or with an estranged partner. At the center of Beckett's plays is a recognition that time is not a series of points with the past behind us and the future before us. As in religious revelation, there is only the present, but for Beckett's characters the present is without the depth in which the past supplies wisdom and the future offers hope. The chief image of time in Beckett is the ground coming up to bury us. In *Happy Days*, the main character, Winnie, tries to keep up optimistic chatter even though in the first act she is covered up to her waist and in the second act covered up to her neck. Soon it will be "saying any old thing with sand in your mouth."

In *Endgame*, Clov asks: "Do you believe in the life to come"? Hamm answers: "Mine was always that...Moment by moment pattering down like the millet grains...and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life"(49)(70). The religious symbol for escape from time imagined to be a series of points is a circular or spherical movement. Beckett's characters are in search of a circle they cannot locate. In *Endgame*, the dialogue goes: "Am I right in the center"? "I'm more or less in the center"? "I'd say so." "You'd say so. Put me right in the center"(26-27).

The dialogue in *Endgame* includes an attempt at prayer. Hamm begins: "Our Father, which art" followed by silence. Hamm responds: "The bastard! He doesn't exist" (55). Clov adds "Not yet." Whatever Hamm's blasphemous outburst means, it cannot be classified as atheism. The closest Beckett comes to despair is a line in *Endgame*: "There are no more coffins" (77). The abrogation of death and burial as a human ritual would be the final despair. The most religious line in the play is "To think perhaps it won't all have been for nothing" (33). Beckett's own summary of Hamm is that "he says no to nothingness."

Waiting for Godot, similar to *Endgame*, is mainly two ragged men keeping the conversation going while they wait. "What are we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blessed in this that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come"(52). The disjunction between word and deed is part of what creates humor. When I first taught this play through reading the text, students found it difficult to grasp the meaning. When I brought in a filmed version of the play, students could immediately relate to it, as being similar to an Abbot and Costello exchange or a Marx brothers routine.

What are the two characters waiting for? Probably nothing. Godot is not a character so much as a forlorn hope of the two characters that their lives will eventually mean something. The only direct reference to Christianity is "You're not going to compare yourself to Christ!" "All my life I've compared myself to him. Where he lived it was warm; it was dry. Yes, and they crucified quick." (34). Beckett was often asked if Godot was God. His response was "if I had known who Godot is, I would have said."¹²

While the two characters wait, they try to pass the time, which in Beckett's world does not pass; "it piles up all about you." They keep up the conversation, although ultimately it is presence that

counts the most. “Don’t touch me! Don’t question me! Don’t speak to me! Stay with me!”(37). They cannot find a meaning in their lives but they recognize the absence. Vladimir asks: “We are not saints but we have kept our appointments. How many people can boast as much”? Estragon’s deflating response is: “Billions” (51).

Samuel Beckett, like Flannery O’Connor, reminds us that the high and the mighty, that is, those who think themselves to be high and mighty are no better off when it comes to finding the meaning of life. People who construct elaborate systems of ideas do not come up with an answer. The disenfranchised of the world are more likely to hear a word from God in the midst of daily chatter. God may be revealed in unlikely places, including the ironic bantering that recognizes human frailties and accepts the human as it is. As Winnie says in *Happy Days*, “How can one better magnify the Almighty than by sniggering with him at his little jokes, particularly the poorer ones.”

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein’s Lectures 1930-33*, ed. G. E. Moore (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), 278.

² Northrop Frye, *Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 64.

³ Gerald O’Collins, *Salvation for God’s Other Peoples* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 215-16.

⁴ Constitution on the Church, no. 16.

⁵ W. Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 299, footnote 108.

⁶ Robert Burns, *Muslims, Christians and Jews in the Crusader Kingdom of Valencia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Jorge Flores, *Goa and the Great Mughal* (New York: Scala, 2004).

⁷ The parallel in Christianity is Horace Bushnell’s principle that “every child is born a Christian” in his influential book, *Christian Nurture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁸ Michel Cunningham in *Do You Believe? Conversations on God and Religion*, ed. Antonio Monda (New York: Vintage Books, 2007).

⁹ Flannery O’Connor, “Revelation” in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 499, 500, 508.

¹⁰ Flannery O’Connor, *Three by Flannery O’Connor* (New York: New American Library, 1962).

¹¹ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove Press, 1958); *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954).

¹² Quoted in Richard Gilman, *The Making of Modern Drama* (New York: De Capo Press, 1987), 246.