

Editorial

‘... even their virtues were being burned away.’

Fr Chris Hayden
Editor



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Mrs Turpin, the central character in Flannery O'Connor's short story, 'Revelation,' is overweight and has 'little bright black eyes.' She is also deeply committed to her own sense of respectability, and when an unhinged girl calls her an old wart hog from hell, she isn't just affronted – she is thrown into crisis. It's not so much the insult, as the lurking fear that maybe her respectability is not quite what she imagines it to be. Yes, she is respectable, but so what? What is respectability worth?

At the end of the story, Mrs Turpin has a vision in which she sees a huge company of unlikely souls making their way to the next world. It's not a 'respectable' sight, not a sedate procession, but a mass of people 'rumbling toward heaven.' The heaven-bound horde includes 'battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs.'

As Mrs Turpin gazes, she notices the people at the rear. They are respectable people, like herself and her husband, Claud. They march with dignity, 'accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key.' Then follows the revelation, also a revolution, turning Mrs Turpin's thinking on its head: '... she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.'

Historically, religion and respectability have tended to go hand in hand. Up to a point, that is just fine. Mrs Turpin's good order and common sense and respectable behaviour are not unimportant, and if religion helps to create a decent, orderly, cohesive society, that is well and good. It's a different matter, however, when religion is a pillar in the edifice of respectability, when respectability becomes a focus rather than a fruit of authentic religion.

We don't leave our foibles behind us as we rumble towards heaven, and if some defects look *passé*, we can be pretty sure they've changed shape rather than disappeared. The desire for respectability is one such defect. It is every bit as entrenched in believers, both individually and institutionally, as it has been at any time in the past.

It's become fashionable to portray the 1950s – and laterally, the 1980s – as a time of pathological, religiously-motivated respectability. The problem with this myth is that it is merely the new respectability. If, as believers (again, whether individually or institutionally) we kowtow to current notions of respectability, we shouldn't delude ourselves that we've overcome any past limitations.

Religion and respectability are no longer regarded as travelling companions. That need not burden believers, or impel us to set forth our impeccable secular credentials to the greatest extent compatible with our faith. The new, secular respectability has cut religion – especially the Catholic faith – loose. We're not actually expected to conform to its demands, and there is freedom in that, if we care to use it. A freedom to be prophetic, to proclaim the Gospel of Life and the vision of human sexuality and flourishing.

The valley of the squinting windows may have a motorway running through it by now, but its sense of respectability, which has changed shape rather than disappeared, is as astringent and punitive as ever. Thank God, as Church, we have been evicted from it. That's one virtue, at least, that has been burned away!

Chris Hayden



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