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A Hermeneutical Reading of a Secularized World: The Second Vatican Council and its Influence on Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination

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ABSTRACT

The Second Vatican Council and its hermeneutical dynamics of a progressively secularized modern world had a profound impact on the lives of millions. Drawing upon Jüri Lotman's theory of cultural semiotics, this article aims first to examine Vatican II as an attempt to incorporate frontier discourses into the centrality of the Catholic Church semiosphere, i.e., the Vatican, mainly regarding moral theology and social doctrine. Within this context, I will analyze the impact of the Council on Graham Greene's Catholic imagination. Through the study of Greene's correspondence to editors of different publications concerning such controversial topics as birth control, the right to die, and the role of the Church in the political upheavals in Central and Latin America, I will argue that Greene identified himself with Vatican II's desire to articulate Catholicism in new ways. Additionally, the analysis of his correspondence to the press will offer further insights into how Greene weaves these topics into his literary work. In this sense, Greene embodies the theological issues of the Council in his own religious and literary imagination and illustrates its reception by Roman Catholics in the 1970s and 1980s.

KEYWORDS: Second Vatican Council; Graham Greene; Greene's correspondence; Catholic social doctrine; Catholic moral teachings; Vatican II reception.

"Please be pioneers empowered by God. But do not give in to the temptation of domesticating these frontiers: it is essential to go out to the frontiers but not to bring frontiers home to touch them up with a little varnish and tame them" (Pope Francis, 2013, para. 11).

1. INTRODUCTION

Secularization –defined by religious sociologist José Casanova as "the differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy, science), usually understood as "emancipation" from religious

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institutions and norms" (2006, p. 7)– emerged in the early nineteenth century, as states ceased to be connected with a single form of religion. As Bruce and Voas (2023) observe, the state's endorsement of a specific church was reduced, either gradually or through revolutionary change, reflecting one of the fundamental principles of modernity: the accommodation of diverse religions within a single society. The separation of state and church and the decline of religious beliefs and practices in (post-)industrial modern societies (Casanova, 2006, p. 7) did not cause religion to disappear but provoked a further differentiation of spheres and a profound crisis of the religious moral ethos, with the consequent questioning of the role played by religion in the twentieth-century –and contemporary– secular states.

Contemporary interpretations of secularism serve as evident markers of modernity. For the purpose of this study, I will follow the late sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt's conception of Western modernity, understood as a set of fundamental intellectual, political, social, and religious ideas prevailing in the West, focusing on the "autonomy of man: his or her (in its initial formulation, certainly "his") emancipation from the fetters of traditional political and cultural authority. […] This project of modernity entailed a very strong emphasis on the autonomous participation of members of society in the constitution of the social and political order, on the autonomous access of all members of the society to these orders and to their centers" (Eisenstadt, 2000, p. 5)[i]. Among the crucial ideas that define (Western) modernity, inherited from the Enlightenment, we ought to acknowledge the rise of individualization; the sovereignty of the people (in contrast to monarchy); democratization; rationalization (seeking rational rather than religious explanations for phenomena); the autonomy of science from religion; a diversity of worldviews; and a concentration on individual economic progress. The adoption of these principles in Western societies resulted in functional differentiation, notably observed in the segregation of church and state, the division between science and religion, and the individualization and privatization of faith (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, pp. 15–16). In this vein, the wave of modernization in the Western world was not limited to governmental structures and societal norms; it also significantly influenced religious institutions, and the Catholic Church is no exception. Despite its initial resistance –particularly evident until the latter half of the twentieth century, following the publication of Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), which outlined the Church's opposition to and censure of individualization, rationalization, liberalism, the concept of the separation of church and state, and religious freedom– the Church has been extensively impacted by modern liberalism and the aligned process of secularization.

It is in light of this context that the Second Vatican Council and its hermeneutical dynamics of the modern world are to be understood. In line with this, the objective of this article is twofold: first, I will explore the Second Vatican Council in light of its intent to fight the progressive secularization of Western societies and to adapt the doctrine of the Catholic Church "to the needs of our times" (Paul VI, 1964, para. 1). In addressing the crisis of the

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religious moral ethos from the late 19th century onwards, Vatican II documents constitute the emergence, according to Yuri Lotman's theory of cultural semiotics, of a movement within the semiosphere of Catholicism, from frontier discourses to its centrality. In this sense, Vatican II moved away from the idea of the systematization of moral theology and encouraged a more pluralistic, hermeneutical, interdisciplinary, ecumenical, and historical reflection on the foundations of moral theology within the Catholic Church. This first part of my analysis will inform the significant influence that the Vatican II's hermeneutical effort concerning the signs of the times exerted on Graham Greene (1904–1991), a converted author to Catholicism who, as he himself often declared, always had a foot in the door –a boundary discourse, in Jüri Lotman's terminology– in his religious experience. The second aim of this essay is, then, to argue that Greene felt encouraged by the spirit of Vatican II to engender a dialectical relationship with the needs of the times based on the same principles of plurality, historicity, and ecumenism. What is more, his identification with the postulates of Vatican II in terms of the social doctrine of the Church provides deeper insights into his Catholic imagination and his openly problematic relationship with Pope John Paul II (1920–2005). As Bosco contends, Greene's Catholic imagination and his incorporation of theological themes into his literary works were significantly influenced by the spirit of *aggiornamento* from the Second Vatican Council (2005, p. 75). This aspect has been thoroughly explored by scholars in terms of Greene's fictional work –see Bonnici (1991), Benz (2003), Bosco (2005), Brennan (2016), Valverde and Bosco (2019), and Valverde (2022). However, there remains an underexplored area, i.e., Greene's correspondence with editors of the press. This study aims to address this area, in an attempt to delve deeper into Greene's reception of the Second Vatican Council's hermeneutical dynamics and their impact on his Catholic imagination. In this vein, an analysis of Greene's correspondence will shed further light on the influence of Vatican II's *aggiornamento* on his literary imagination, especially –as we shall see in the analysis of *A Burnt-Out Case*, *The Honorary Consul*, and *Monsignor Quixote*– in terms of moral theology and the social doctrine of the Church.

2. THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL AND ITS HERMENEUTICAL DYNAMICS IN A SECULARIZED WORLD

Vatican II stands out as arguably one of the most pivotal institutional events of the twentieth century. Rarely can one find an event of comparable magnitude in the last century that profoundly influenced the lives of millions and garnered global media coverage (Díaz-Dorronsoro, 2023, p. 85). The twenty-first ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church met in Saint Peter's Basilica for four sessions, each running for two to three months between its opening by Pope John XXIII on October 11, 1962, and December 8, 1965, the date of its closing by Pope Paul VI. The Council's announcement on January 25, 1959, was totally

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unexpected, less than three months after the election of John XXIII in October 1958, and it had a vast echo. Pope John XXIII convened the Council with the aim of modernizing the Church (*l'aggiornamento pastorale*, in Italian), in an effort to adapt to the times and open paths of dialogue with the modern world. He recognized the need to resonate with individuals in a progressively secular society, and, accordingly, in the Council's announcement he declared his wish for a "clear and definite correspondence of the new pontificate to the spiritual needs of the present hour" (Pope John XXIII, 1959, para. 2).

Regarding the Council's spirit, Jüri Lotman's cultural semiotic concept of the semiosphere –delineating a realm where signs interact within a network of interconnected processes– informs how Vatican II fostered meaningful dialogue and profound changes within the semiosphere of Catholicism. Inspired by Vladimir Vernadski's concept of the biosphere, with the semiosphere Lotman endeavors to examine the generation of meaning within real spaces, encompassing both physical and symbolic dimensions. Lotman defines the semiosphere as "the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages" (1990, p. 123), or, in other words, the "semiotic space, out of which semiosis itself cannot exist" (2005, p. 208). According to Lotman, all semiotic spaces form a cohesive mechanism, requiring another semiosphere to establish its framework and boundaries. However, Lotman also asserts that heterogeneity is a fundamental aspect of the semiosphere, characterized by a variety of elements and their diverse functions: "[t]he languages which fill up the semiotic space are various, and they relate to each other along the spectrum which runs from complete mutual translatability to just as complete mutual untranslatability" (1990, p. 125). On this note, to achieve full coherence, the semiosphere needs the presence of a boundary. In this regard, Lotman contends that "[c]ompletely stable invariant semiotic structures do not exist at all, generally speaking. [...] Semiotic systems, encountered in the semiosphere, display an ability to survive and to be transformed and, like Proteus, become 'others'" (Lotman, 2009, p. 114).

As the semiosphere undergoes transformation, its boundaries emerge as highly significant spaces. It is within these margins that the most relevant changes take place, highlighting the crucial importance of the frontier: "The border of semiotic space is the most important functional and structural position, giving substance to its semiotic mechanism. The border is a bilingual mechanism, translating external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa. Thus, only with the help of the boundary is the semiosphere able to establish contact with non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces" (Lotman, 2005, p. 210). This frontier is permeable, "constantly transgressed via intrusions from the extra-semiotic sphere which, when bursting in, introduce a new dynamic, transforming the bounded space and simultaneously transforming themselves according to its laws" (Lotman, 2009, p. 115). When examining the structure of the semiosphere, we observe that at its core lie the most advanced and well-organized languages (Lotman, 1990, p. 134), while the periphery –where the interaction between the semiotic space and imposed norms is more tenuous– experiences

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high dynamism due to continuous information exchange with external semiotic realms (Lotman, 1990, p. 134). In contact with these realms, the boundary serves as a catalyst, facilitating the transition of external elements into internal ones, thereby generating new texts that integrate into the semiosphere's internal semiotics (Lotman, 1990, pp. 136–137).

Drawing upon Lotman's theory of the semiosphere, Roman Catholicism can be examined as a cultural semiotic artifact with its core and its boundaries. Serving as both a symbolic and tangible entity, the Vatican would represent the center of this semiosphere, where the principles governing semiosis are established. As Lotman contends, the central languages within a semiosphere "lose dynamism and having once exhausted their reserve of indeterminacy they became inflexible and incapable of further development" (1990, p. 134). The Second Vatican Council, as a peripheral text, fostered a spirit of dialogic dynamism needed for the core of Catholic semiosphere to achieve further development, assuming a major significance in its process of transformation. The discourses of the frontier, in this case John XXIII's *aggiornamento*, penetrated the centrality of the semiosphere of Catholicism.

The participants of the ecumenical Council (the Pope, the Roman Curia, 2,500 bishops, abbots, and cardinals from diverse linguistic, ethnic, and national backgrounds) successfully pulled off the production of 16 definitive texts. These texts –resulting from varying degrees of consensus, ranging from significant disagreement to nearly unanimous support– addressed a wide array of topics. Interestingly, in the first session (1962) two opposed factions, a majority and a minority, emerged and held up to a considerable degree throughout the remainder of the Council (Blanchard & Bullivant, 2023: 25)[ii]. Majority figures such as Cardinals Josef Frings (Cologne) and Franz König (Vienna), along with their expert advisors, the German theologians Joseph Ratzinger and Karl Rahner, S.J., were generally aligned with John XXIII's *aggiornamento* and ressourcement theology in a movement of bringing boundary texts to the core of the Catholic semiosphere. The minority faction, with Cardinal Ottaviani –head of the Holy Office responsible for overseeing doctrine within the Vatican– as their de facto leader, comprised perhaps no more than 15–20 percent of the total voting members, who typically opposed departures from the status quo (Blanchard & Bullivant, 2023, p. 26) of the core of the Catholic semiosphere, both in substance and style.

Among the topics addressed during the first session, deliberations surrounding liturgical reform were relatively peaceful and, as Marini notes, liturgical renewal is probably the most visible fruit of the whole conciliar effort (2013, p. 1). The changes in the liturgy meant the integration of peripheral discourses into the core of the Catholic semiosphere, with the aim, as Paul VI ponders in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963, Principle II, article 14), of enabling the lay faithful to engage more deeply with the liturgical texts. This movement aligns with John XXIII's commitment when he called for the Council and serves as compelling evidence of the hermeneutic reading regarding the risks that the secular phenomenon of modernity posed to the Catholic Church.

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Nevertheless, not all the debates garnered levels of endorsement comparable to that of the reform of the liturgy. One of the most contentious issues during the initial session was Catholic theology on Divine Revelation. As Blanchard and Bullivant explain, in the task of drafting a document on Revelation lay a number of challenging issues, among them, "the relationship between scripture and tradition (and the nature of 'Tradition' itself), the duties (or not) of ecumenism, and the normativity of past practices and doctrinal pronouncements (what we could call their 'controlling function'). Ghosts from the Modernist crisis and the Reformation era haunted the Council Fathers during these debates" (2023, p. 25).

The death of John XXIII on June 3, 1963, conditioned the reconvening of the second session (September 29 to December 4, 1963) of the Council, led by the new Pope, Paul VI, elected on June 21. Weeks before his passing, John XXIII had published the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), addressed to "all men [*sic*] of good will" (para. 1), which constituted a decisive contribution to Catholic social doctrine advocating for dialogue. Leaders of the majority felt supported in their aim to bring to the fore ecumenical positions that had only existed on the frontier of the Catholic semiosphere.

During the second and third sessions –the latter took place from September 14 to November 21, 1964– another fundamental matter for the adaptation of the Church to the new times was discussed, namely ecclesiology –the nature, structure and day-to-day functioning of the Catholic Church. Stormy debates ensued on various topics, including the role of the laity (men and women), the Church's identity as a "sacrament", teachings regarding the Virgin Mary, ecumenism, and the Church's connection with the Jewish community[iii]. However, the most divisive issues, which brought about decisive changes in the center of the Catholic semiosphere, revolved around the doctrine of "episcopal collegiality" –the shared responsibility among all bishops for governing the Church, and their relationship with the papacy– and the fulfillment of Vatican II's focus on a baptismal understanding of the Church, where the entire People of God collaborate with their priests and bishops in the Body of Christ (Blanchard & Bullivant, 2023, pp. 30–31). In the realm of ecclesiology, three texts were promulgated at the end of the third session: *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Decree on Ecumenism), and *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite), but not without controversy, with Paul VI amending the text on ecumenism and adding a *Nota explicativa praevia* (explanatory note) to *Lumen Gentium* to avoid readings of the relationship between the pope and the bishops that he considered ambiguous and to assert papal supremacy (Blanchard & Bullivant, 2023, p. 32).

Disputes regarding draft documents on religious freedom and on the Church's relationship with the modern world (which eventually became *Dignitatis Humanae*, on religious liberty, and *Gaudium et Spes*, on the Church in the modern world) intensified in the third session but remained unresolved until the subsequent and ultimate one (September 14 to December 8, 1965), in which eleven documents were promulgated. During this last session

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further deliberations on ecclesiology continued, but it was far more focused on the role of the Church in the *whole* world, in tune with John XXIII's intention when convening the Council. Paul VI's agenda during this period –followed by the globetrotting papacy of John Paul II– resonated with a vision of the pope as a global leader and not just as the head of the Catholic Church (Blanchard & Bullivant, 2023, p. 32). *Gaudium et Spes* evidences the Council's engagement with the wider world, since this ambitious constitution aimed to address urgent and complex social topics of the time, such as marriage and family, war and peace, nuclear proliferation, race relations, and poverty or population growth (Blanchard & Bullivant, 2023, pp. 85–86)[iv].

3. GRAHAM GREENE'S RECEPTION OF VATICAN II: HIS LETTERS TO THE PRESS

The debates in the Aula changed Catholicism. However, since the Council finished, there has been a great deal of discussion on it and its legacy. Tellingly, as Blanchard and Bullivant note, the "process of the reception of Vatican II—that is, how the Council was understood and implemented, challenged or celebrated, debated or rejected—is a process that continues to this day" (2023, p. 103)[v]. What is more, the different standpoints within this –sometimes acrimonious– debate draw upon diverse hermeneutical approaches to the Council, its teaching and its significance: "Just like the conciliar event itself, paradigms for interpreting it cannot exist in a vacuum either. That is, postconciliar paradigms react to and are shaped by the most pivotal events and personalities connected to the reception of Vatican II, from the (in)famous birth control encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 to the larger-than-life personality and influence of John Paul II (pope from 1978 to 2005) to contemporary calls for 'synodality'" (Blanchard & Bullivant, 2023, p. 103).

For more than half a century now, both academic scholars and ecclesiastical commentators have deliberated on the Council's documents and teachings. Their discussions have significantly impacted the lives of Catholic laypersons, influencing their engagement with modern and political order, their interactions with other Christians, and their relations with non-Christians. Blanchard and Bullivant have typified four major paradigms regarding Vatican II:

1) the Traditionalist Paradigm: suspicion or rejection of the Council;
2) the Failure Paradigm: progressive suspicion or rejection of Vatican II as an unsuccessful reform attempt;
3) the Spirit-Event Paradigm: acceptance or celebration of the Council, but with a prioritization of the spirit of Vatican II, an insistence on doctrinal change and innovation, and an understanding of the Council as primarily an 'event';

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4) the Text-Continuity Paradigm: acceptance or celebration of Vatican II, but with a prioritization of the final texts, an emphasis on doctrinal continuity, and an understanding of the Council as primarily the promulgation of a body of teaching. (2023, p. 105)

As did most Catholics, Graham Greene –who converted to Catholicism in 1926, when he was 22– closely followed the Second Vatican Council during its four seasons. At the time, Greene was going through a profound spiritual crisis, with Querry, the protagonist of *A Burnt-Out Case* (1960), embodying Greene's attempt to unveil the challenging pursuit of genuine religious faith. As Bosco puts it,

> If Greene's religious imagination was indeed burnt-out, the Catholic Church's desire to renew itself had just begun and Greene was to be swept up in its wake. Vatican II began articulating Catholicism in paradigmatically new ways, and the theologians of the Council that Greene continued to read in the last decades of his life ultimately served to foster in him a renewed investigation in his literary texts into the centrality of Catholic ways of thinking and feeling. Greene's embodiment of the theological issues of the Council in his own religious imagination—the struggle for belief, for a justice that is the fruit of faith, and for sacramental and liturgical renewal—illustrates the developmental and piecemeal reception of the Council by Roman Catholics in the 1970s and 1980s. (2005, p. 75)

Following Blanchard and Bullivant's categorization, Evelyn Waugh –another Catholic convert and a friend to Greene– would fit into the traditionalist paradigm. Waugh held a particularly critical stance toward liturgical reform and showed little inclination toward the more complex matters on the Council's agenda[vi]. On the contrary, the Council's spirit of *aggiornamento* sparked a new interest in Greene in matters such as moral theology and the social teachings of the Church. On this note, I argue that Greene's positioning aligns with the Spirit-Event Paradigm, which became prominent in academic Catholic discourse and many post-Council ecclesial circles. In line with this paradigm, Greene embraced the Council's spirit and, while not disregarding its texts, focused on the positive doctrinal changes and innovations that occurred –a form of "discontinuity" from the standpoints at the core of the Catholic semiosphere. Along with many Spirit-Event narratives, Greene believed that Pope John XXIII initiated a new or revitalized path for the Church, a journey left unfinished by his successors. I will delve into Greene's perspectives regarding the Church's role in a secular modern world and will specifically address his positioning on some of the most contentious issues tackled during the Council. The initial corpus for this analysis will comprise Greene's significant engagement with the press, manifested in his letters to newspaper editors[vii]. The next section of this study will explore how Greene's correspondence resonates with his literary work regarding his reception of the Council's doctrine and Rome's stance on it decades later.

Greene's letters to the press inform our understanding of the emphasis within the Spirit-Event Paradigm on the doctrinal evolution and innovation prompted by the Council. Tellingly,

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the topics addressed in these letters in terms of the Church's moral and social teachings or of Catholic ethics[viii] have not faded with time; on the contrary, they have gained greater relevance in recent years. One revealing example in this sense is Greene's position concerning postconciliar intra-Catholic debate regarding birth control. Paul VI's 1968 promulgation of his encyclical *Humanae Vitae* signaled the triumph of tradition and continuity –the standpoint of the center of the Catholic semiosphere– over innovation (and *aggiornamento*?) –a frontier discourse– in the Catholic Church. Greene expressed his perception on this debate in "Responsible procreation" [ix], a letter published in *The Tablet* on November 19, 1983. This letter was prompted by *The Tablet*'s October 1 issue, which reported Pope John Paul II's assertion that justifying the use of artificial contraception under any circumstances amounted to a denial of God. In this regard, Greene writes:

> One can only hope that he has been clumsily or incorrectly reported. Pope Paul VI, even in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, left the final decision to the human conscience […]. Surely those who use 'artificial' means of contraception are no more attributing to themselves 'a power that belongs only to God: the power to decide in the final instance the coming into existence of a human being' than if in marriage they abstain from sexual relations because they cannot afford another child, or because the child might be born diseased, or a dozen other reasons which satisfy their conscience. Are they not equally attributing to themselves 'a power that belongs only to God'? (Greene & Hawtree, 1989, p. 216)

Later on, in January 1988, Greene would publish another letter confronting the official stance of Pope John Paul II's Vatican on contraception: "What we require, if we are to treat Vatican I seriously, is a condemnation of contraception by the Apostles, for infallibility, even by Vatican I, was granted only to questions of faith and morals 'in accordance with the teaching of the Apostles'. Contraception was practiced even in Roman times and when was it condemned by the Apostles?" (Greene & Hawtree, 1989, p. 248).

Greene further diverged from the central discourse of the post-conciliar Catholic semiosphere on another contentious teaching within moral theology: euthanasia. Two letters to the press stand out in this regard. The first, titled "Catholic Debate", was published in *The Times* on September 19, 1971, in response to a report published in the same newspaper on September 7: "You report […] that in an appeal for harmony in the Roman Catholic Church Bishop Harris said: 'Christ came to reconcile.' Isn't this rather unorthodox? In my copy of the New Testament Christ said: 'I came not to bring peace but a sword'" (Greene & Hawtree, 1989, p. 154). Arguing his point with a touch of fine irony, Greene continues saying:

> I feel sure that their first intention was directed, rightly or wrongly, to the protection of new-born children—'innocent people' (whether the doctrine of original sin allows even a

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> foetus to be regarded as innocent is a theological problem I leave to them). But the bishops seem to have enlarged their statement to include the duty of all individuals, always qualified by that adjective 'innocent', to live even against their will. […] But who among us is 'innocent'? I certainly don't feel myself innocent, and therefore by my guilt I can surely claim the right to die when I choose, by whatever means I prefer, like all my other non-innocent companions. It is only the poor innocents who haven't that liberty according to the Bishops of England and Wales. (Greene & Hawtree, 1989, p. 205)

In this same line of thought, on November 13, 1981, Greene penned a letter to *The Times*, "The Right to Die", expressing his objections to the statement issued by the Roman Catholic Bishops of England and Wales concerning the moral dilemmas surrounding the trial of a doctor accused of attempting to murder a Down's syndrome baby. This committee of bishops, says Greene, is "not the voice of the Church" (Greene & Hawtree, 1989, p. 205).

Greene's relationship with the central discourse of the Catholic semiosphere became especially contentious during John Paul II's papacy (1978–2005). This was primarily due to John Paul II's increasingly authoritarian approach to theological dissent and his tendency to appoint bishops who adhered strictly to the discourse of the core within the Catholic semiosphere. Many of Pope John Paul II's decisions regarding the social doctrine of the Church set the general direction in which the institution seemed to be headed. In line with the Spirit-Event interpreters, Greene perceived the Pope's rulings as a betrayal of the Council's spirit, and in his letters to the press he questioned papal infallibility, suggesting or outright stating that John Paul II's decisions might be subject to reconsideration or reversal in the future. Significantly, Greene selected Hans Küng's *The Church Maintained in Truth* as one of his "books for the year" for *The Observer* in 1980, describing it as "a short but profound book. Roman Catholics can be proud of their dissident" (Greene & Hawtree, 1989, p. 206). Additionally, in 1982, he recommended Küng's *Infallible?*, "[a] very valuable and very readable criticism, which Vatican II failed to provide, of Catholic teaching on infallibility" (1989, p. 206). In a private correspondence with Father Timothy Russ, Greene remarked, "[p]erhaps one might say that the great strength of the Catholic Church lies in the fact that it was founded by St. Peter who was certainly not infallible as he lied at the very beginning" (1989, p. 206).

In terms of the social teachings of the Church and its role in the world, the Second Vatican Council, and, especially, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today (1965) set out a new approach of the Catholic Church to issues of poverty, population growth, and social justice, taking into account peripheral discourses from parts of the world different from Europe, such as Latin America. In this Pastoral Constitution, Pope Paul VI highlighted the necessity of reporting economic inequalities among nations (1965, section 8). It is fundamental to note that *Gaudium et Spes* established the importance of scrutinizing the signs of the times, to interpret them later on in the light of the Gospel (Pope Paul VI, 1965,

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Introductory statement, 4). Along the same lines, in *Populorum Progressio* (1967), Pope Paul VI advocated the necessary function of the Church in promoting social justice (1967, section 5). At the heart of this commitment lies Vatican II's reshaping of the Church's role in contemporary society, alongside the convening of the Second Episcopal Conference of Latin America in Medellín in 1968. The latter event, and the subsequent theological current named Liberation theology, reconfirmed the reevaluation of the role of the Church in the world, particularly in response to the unique challenges that Latin American communities confronted. Essential principles in this context encompass the preferential option for the poor –the poor as *locus theologicus*– challenging economic and political systems that sustain poverty and injustice, and striving for the emancipation of the impoverished from "institutionalized violence".

Liberation theology constituted one of the most challenging peripheral discourses in the semiosphere of Catholicism in the 1970s and the 1980s, especially under John Paul II's papacy. In his visits to various countries in Latin America, Greene would align himself with many of the standpoints of Liberation theologians regarding their fight for social justice: "In South America today we certainly see Christianity as it always should have been –with the church actively involved in the struggle for justice" (Couto, 1994, p. 421). During his notable engagement with the religious evolution and political upheavals of Central and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, Greene consistently aligned himself in direct opposition to the Vatican on numerous occasions. An illuminating instance in this sense was his endorsement of Fr. Miguel D'Escoto as Foreign Minister, Fr. Fernando Cardenal, S.J., as Minister of Education and Health, and Fr. Ernesto Cardenal, S.J., as Minister of Culture, in the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, a series of appointments –all associated with the Liberation Theology movement– that faced public opposition from the Vatican. In a letter to *The Tablet* on August 25, 1984, Greene voiced his objection to Pope John Paul II's reprimand of Fr. Cardenal at the Managua airport during his visit to Nicaragua that same year: "In his unfortunate visit to Nicaragua the Pope proved himself a politician rather than a priest and yet he condemns other priests for playing a similar role in politics" (Greene & Hawtree, 1989, p. 224). On September 11, to the editor of *The Times* Greene wrote an enlightening piece in this sense, entitled "Liberation Theology": "One supposes that if Catholic bishops, like Anglican bishops, were made members of the House of Lords, the present Pope, if he proved logical, would tell them either to refuse their seats or cease to fulfil their priestly functions, especially if they supported the governing party with their votes. But in fact would he? Unlike John XXIII he himself seems to take a political and partisan line. To him, as to President Reagan, Marxism is the great enemy, black against white" (Greene & Hawtree, 1989, p. 225). Greene's attacks on Pope John Paul II's standpoint on Liberation theology and the situation in Central America became fierce. On March 2, 1985, Greene wrote in the columns of *The Tablet*:

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> Those Catholics who like myself feel no great attachment to the ideas of Erasmus will be disappointed to find that Pope John Paul II is apparently a real disciple. How could the Pope's political stand in Central America have been more closely described than in these timid words of Erasmus? 'It is neither safe nor pious to harbour and spread suspicions of the public authority. It is better to endure tyranny, so long as it does not drive us to impiety, than sedulously to resist.' Small comfort there for the victims of the death squads in El Salvador or the victims of the Contras recruited from Somoza's National Guard in Nicaragua, both supported by President Reagan, though I doubt if he is a reader of Erasmus. (Greene & Hawtree, 1989, p. 227)

A final example is his letter to *The Tablet* on January 4, 1986, in which Greene disputes Pope John Paul II's remarks on religious persecution in Nicaragua. Greene argues that the Pope must have been ill-informed, since he has just been in the country (December 1985) and has witnessed religious celebrations on the eve of the feast of the Immaculate Conception held in the cities and villages, with altars full of flowers with the image of the Virgin (Greene & Hawtree, 1989, p. 230).

4. THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL'S HERMENEUTIC DYNAMICS AND ITS IMPACT ON GREENE'S LITERARY IMAGINATION

Greene's alignment with the Spirit-Event Paradigm, along with his renewed interest in matters related to moral theology and the social teachings of the Church –as explored in the analysis of his correspondence– permeates his literary work. Among other scholars, Mark Bosco, in his seminal work *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination* (2005), Michael G. Brennan, in *Graham Greene: Political Writer* (2016), and Valverde (2022), have highlighted the significant influence of Vatican II, social justice, and Liberation theology discourses in shaping Greene's perspective on faith and his literary path during the last twenty-five years of his life. Greene's spiritual imagination consistently maintained a paradoxical relationship with the dogmatic teachings of Catholicism. Employing Lotman's terminology, Greene identified with this semiotic space but always positioned himself on its frontier, metaphorically "keeping a foot in the door" (Allain, 1983, p. 161). Placing doubt at the core of his life and work, Greene inhabited the border of Catholicism's semiotic space, engaging with the semiosphere of agnosticism. Indeed, he often described himself as a lapsed Catholic or even a Catholic agnostic (Cornwell, 1994, p. 458). In this regard, Greene was not confined to the specific semiosphere of Catholicism. His discourse –both as a public figure, as seen in his correspondence, and in his literary work, as the forthcoming analysis of a corpus of his novels will illustrate– functioned as a catalyst, incorporating new texts into the internal semiotics of Catholicism and prompting questions about the central languages within this semiosphere.

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In his early novels, Greene challenged the prescriptive nature of the central discourse of Catholicism, as exemplified in his critically acclaimed work *The Power and the Glory* (1940), a novel in which the core Vatican stance on moral doctrine within the Catholic semiosphere is profoundly challenged. As Lewis observes, *The Power and the Glory* "may be a religious novel, but it is decidedly not an ecclesiastical one" (1987, p. 22). The Vatican placed the novel on the Index of Forbidden Books on two separate occasions, and the novel was ultimately condemned by the Holy Office in 1951 due to its paradoxical nature and its exploration of "extraordinary circumstances" (Greene, 1971, p. xi). Watts suggests that the novel is so filled with paradoxes that "while the central character, the anonymous priest, comes to see himself as a great failure (a religious mismatch), we come to realize that he is, in fact, a saint in the making" (2011, pp. 98–99). What is more, as Woodman contends, "[h]is [Greene's] attitudes to sin, extreme though they may be, serve to deconstruct conventional morality in a way that has always been one crucial element of the gospel" (2002, p. 150).

As the geopolitical realities of the second half of the century developed, Greene increasingly aligned himself with the dispossessed and those within the Church who advocated for them. Greene's evolution in terms of his religious imagination revolved around the new spirit sparked by Vatican II. Whereas Catholicism had traditionally emphasized a vertical relationship between God and the individual, the influence of Vatican II prompted a new focus on horizontal relationships, seeing religious faith as impacting the social, political, intellectual, and scientific discourses of the era. In line with this, in Greene's writing moral theology gradually receded as the central focus for character and plot, and, instead, the social justice doctrine of the Church emerged as a dominant theme (Valverde & Bosco, 2019, p. 51). While Greene's discursive strategies remained a peripheral, subversive force within Catholicism's semiotic sphere, his approach shifted, evident in the portrayal of priests in his later works[x].

A Burnt-Out Case (1960) marks a crucial development in revealing new dimensions of social doctrine within Greene's religious imagination as represented in his work. Doubt and paradox regarding moral orthodoxy in *The Power and the Glory* give way to a semiotic space where the focus shifts to ecumenism and social justice in line with Vatican II debates on ecclesiology. Within the semiosphere of Catholicism depicted in *A Burnt-Out Case*, two opposing positions emerge: first, Rome's central discourse, represented by Father Thomas, a member of the religious congregation who prioritizes evangelical aspects tied to moral theology. He engages in an argument with the Superior of the religious order regarding the moral appropriateness of Marie Akimbu's lifestyle and her suitability as a teacher at the school, considering that she gives birth to a child every year, each fathered by a different man: "What kind of example is that?" (Greene, 2001, pp. 86–7). Father Thomas's morally-driven existence causes him to overlook the fact that in Africa, "practical aid may be a more direct way of expressing Christian love for one's neighbour than strict observance of the Church's outward rules" (Antor, 1991, p. 105). In contrast, the other priests living in the leprosarium choose to

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provide the native population with that same practical aid, which takes precedence over aspects of moral theology and even the preaching of the Gospel: "Souls could wait. Souls had eternity" (Greene, 2001, p. 83). These priests do not expect Africans to practice Catholicism in the same way as Europeans do; instead, they accept the way the natives interpret it, marked by religious syncretism. As Doctor Colin puts it, "[i]t's a strange Christianity we have here" (Greene, 2001, p. 58).

The tensions in *A Burnt-Out Case* echo the tone of Vatican II and dramatize the aforementioned conflicting visions of the Catholic Church's nature and the need for careful discernment regarding its priorities, in terms of addressing economic inequalities between nations (Pope Paul VI 1965, section 8) and of the Church's essential role in promoting social justice (Pope Paul VI 1967, section 13). On this note, as seen in section three, in his letters Greene aligned with the main principles of Liberation theology, which followed the path of transformation in the Catholic semiosphere set in motion by Vatican II. Liberation theology served as a bilingual mechanism on the frontier of the Catholic semiosphere, translating ideas from the semiotic space of Latin America into the internal language of Catholicism as understood in Rome. However, Greene's admiration for the stance taken by many priests in Latin America not only finds its place in his letters to the press; it is also reflected in his literary work. In *A Burnt-Out Case*, the priests' acceptance of extra-semiotic religious spaces and their advocacy for the poor foreshadow the evolving portrayal of the priest-cleric in Greene's work. However, their role in the novel does not suggest direct conflict with the center religious discourse of the Vatican. It is only with the liberationist priest Father Leon Rivas in *The Honorary Consul* (1973) that Greene adopts an overtly oppositional stance to the central discourse of Rome (Valverde & Bosco, 2019, p. 51), an opposition that became fiercer after John Paul II became pope, as Greene's letters to editors of the press clearly show. Bonnici outlines the evolution of the cleric from *The Power and the Glory* to *The Honorary Consul*, asserting that Rivas implicitly moves beyond the developmental theories of the 1950s, embracing the principles of Liberation theology from the 1970s and 1980s (1991, pp. 41–42). Similarly, Bosco regards Rivas as a postcolonial successor to the priest in *The Power and the Glory* (2005, p. 110).

In addition to Rivas' vision of the poor as *locus theologicus* and his criticism of the hierarchy of the Church, in *The Honorary Consul* Greene addresses one of the most contentious debates during the Council sessions: infallibility. Blanchard and Bullivant observe that while *Lumen Gentium* situated infallibility within the entirety of the Church, with all the faithful serving as its carriers, Vatican I's dogmatic definition of papal infallibility was emphatically reaffirmed (2023, p. 76). On this note, Vgenopoulos notes that Vatican II reiterates Vatican I's stance on papal primacy and asserts that Christ conferred upon Peter and his successor, the Bishop of Rome, a divine authority over the entire Church (2013, pp. 102–103). As evidenced in the analysis of his correspondence, papal infallibility is a doctrine within the central

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discourse of the Catholic semiosphere that Greene openly questions –aligning with Hans Küng's discourse on the frontier of Catholicism– particularly during the papacy of John Paul II. However, Father Rivas in *The Honorary Consul* (1973) already articulates Greene's questioning of this dogma in conversation with Doctor Plarr:

> 'It's a long time,' he told Leon, 'since I listened to a priest. I thought you taught that the Church was infallible like Christ.'
> 'Christ was a man,' Father Rivas said 'even if some of us believe that he was God as well. […] Some of the rules He laid down—were only the rules of a good man. A man who lived in his own province, in his own particular day. He had no idea of the kind of world we would be living in now. Render unto Caesar, but when our Caesar uses napalm and fragmentation bombs... The Church lives in time too. […] I think sometimes the memory of that man, that carpenter, can lift a few people out of the temporary Church of these terrible years, when the Archbishop sits down to dinner with the General, into the great Church beyond our time and place'. (1991, p. 218)

While *A Burnt-Out Case* and *The Honorary Consul* highlight the influence of Vatican II's *aggiornamento* on Greene's Catholic literary imagination, *Monsignor Quixote*, published in 1982, most fully reflects Greene's engagement with the outcomes of the council. Into the dialectical debates between Father Quixote and his companion Sancho, which mark the development of their growing friendship as they transition from certainty to doubt, the doctrine of (papal) infallibility finds its way. At the beginning of their travels, Father Quixote asks the ex-mayor, "Do you not think—except sometimes at night when you can't sleep—that Marx and Lenin are as infallible as—well, Matthew and Mark?" (1982, p. 58). By the end of their spiritual journey, however, both characters openly confess their doubts concerning the infallibility of their respective beliefs: the ex-mayor's, in Communism and the Party; Father Quixote's, in Catholicism and Rome (Greene, 1982, pp. 203–206). What is more, when Father Quixote is officially declared mad, much like his "ancestor", through Teresa, the priest's housekeeper and an uneducated Catholic, Greene satirizes the complex concept of infallibility: "Father Herrera said to me it was a terrible mistake that the Holy Father made appointing you a monsignor. I said to him that's blasphemy. The Holy Father can't make mistakes" (1982, p. 155).

In line with *A Burnt-Out Case*, the relevance of moral theology principles informing the decisions and responses of the faithful to events and challenges is questioned in *Monsignor Quixote* concretely, through the character of Father Herrera and his go-to book, Father Jone's *Moral Theology*. On this note, birth control is one of the teachings extensively discussed by the priest and his companion. Sancho mocks Father Jone's *Moral Theology* regarding the sin of onanism and its remarks on *coitus interruptus* as a possible exception to such sin (Greene, 1982, pp. 81–85). Father Quixote's response in this sense is enlightening: "Sancho, Moral

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Theology is not the Church" (Greene, 1982, p. 91). For the priest, love –not rules or guidelines like those found in Father Jone's book– should be the foundational element of the Catholic semiosphere. Sancho and the priest's discussions regarding the use of birth control methods resonate with then-current conflicts between Catholicism and science on whether life begins at conception. In other words, as Greene put it in his letter "Responsible procreation" (November 19, 1983), the debate regarded who held the power to decide, in the final instance, the coming into existence of a human being –a power that would only belong to God, according to the central discourse of Catholicism. Sancho, as Greene would do, ironizes this topic and defends the use of contraceptive methods in certain situations:

> 'Has sperm a soul? When a man makes love he kills a million million spermatozoa—minus one. It's lucky for Heaven that there's such a lot of waste or it might become severely over-populated.'
> 'But it is against the Law of Nature, Sancho.' […]
> 'I have always been mystified about the Law of Nature,' Sancho said. 'What law? What nature?' […] Who invented the law? […] What human first taught us that it existed? […] Can you find anything about natural law in St Paul? […] Oh, I don't deny the conscience altogether, monsignor. I would feel uneasy, I suppose, for a time if I killed a man without adequate reason, but I think I would feel uneasy for a whole lifetime if I fathered an unwanted child.'
> 'We must trust in the mercy of God.'
> 'He's not always so merciful, is he, not in Africa or India? And even in our own country if the child has to live in poverty, disease, probably without any chance…' (Greene, 1982, pp. 100–101)

Notably, Sancho's challenges to the moral teachings of the central discourse within the Catholic semiosphere significantly influence Father Quixote's spiritual journey toward boundary discourses. In an episode set in a Salamanca brothel, Father Quixote, in his blissful ignorance, mistakes a contraceptive for a balloon (Greene, 1982, p. 116). Days later, he reflects on his spiritual journey with deep concern when he remembers himself laughing about blowing up the "balloon" and his amusement concerning the love-making scenes in the movie they had seen in a cinema: "Four days of your company worry me. I think of myself laughing when I blew up that balloon. That film… Why wasn't I shocked? Why didn't I walk out? El Toboso seems a hundred years away. I don't feel myself at all, Sancho" (Greene, 1982, p. 162). His journey takes Father Quixote far not only from his blissful ignorant existence in El Toboso, but also from central discourses in the Catholic semiosphere regarding moral doctrine as voiced by Father Herrera and in his own book of chivalry, Jone's *Moral Theology*.

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5. CODA

As Musiewicz notes, with the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church made its own way to modernity, adopting a series of ideas in different areas, such as religious freedom and pluralism, elements of democracy, and individual human dignity and human rights. However, the process of adaptation to the trends of the modern world meant that such trends –in many cases peripheral discourses– were combined or balanced with more permanent principles within the Catholic Church, but without altering its foundation, i.e., the core of its semiosphere. Tellingly, full rationalization was denied, and the Scriptures continued to be a key source in assessing reality. What is more, the Church adopted only minor elements of democratization, with a focus on the common dignity of priests and lay people, while it denied any role to laity in deciding pastoral matters (Musiewicz, 2023, p. 638).

Concerning its reception, as Blanchard and Bullivant's typology of hermeneutical paradigms evince, readings of Vatican II in the postconciliar era, as an event and in terms of the promulgated texts, have been diverse, on many occasions even contradictory. As seen in this analysis, the array of letters that Graham Greene sent to the editors of different print media reflects the impact that Vatican II had on his Catholic imagination and further informs the controversy regarding the hermeneutical dynamics of the Council as well as the reception of its texts both in the twentieth century and in contemporary theological discourse across various realms. Equally significant, building on his position on the frontier of Catholic faith, in his literary fiction Greene reshapes the bounded semiotic space of pre-Vatican II discourse by elevating what is marginal in Catholic orthodoxy –especially regarding social justice doctrine– and bringing it to the forefront. In doing so, Greene mirrors in his literary work the evolution of Catholic theology and doctrine following Vatican II. In this sense, further research concerning the response of Greene and other (converted) Catholic writers would shed further light on Vatican II's hermeneutical formula of adaptation to modern times –scrutinizing the signs of the times, as *Gadium et Spes* poses– and the necessity for discernment about the Church's priorities concerning contemporary models of secularism. Regarding this necessity, as Pope Francis states in the quotation that opens this study, it would be fundamental to listen to peripheral discourses and not to "give in to the temptation of domesticating these frontiers: it is essential to go out to the frontiers but not to bring frontiers home to touch them up with a little varnish and tame them" (2013, para. 11). As we have seen in this article, Graham Greene never succumbed to this temptation.

NOTES

[i] In contrast to the implicit perspective found in the "classical" studies of modernization, which became a mainstay of the Western self-understanding, in his seminal theoretical study of the modern predicament, Shmuel Eisenstadt argued that "the process of modernization should no longer be viewed

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as the ultimate end of the evolution of all known societies" (2003, p. 531). Eisenstadt demonstrated that there is not a singular pattern of modernity; instead, multiple and diverse forms of modernity exist in the world which are different than Judeo-Christian. As a consequence, the notion of a globally uniform political, cultural and social civilization mirroring Western modernity is a self-delusion of the Western perspective. However, considering that this chapter addresses the formula employed by the Catholic Church and the Vatican at its center –an institution embedded in the Judeo-Christian cultural program and influenced by the Western cultural context– to adapt to modernity in the twentieth century, modernity is analyzed with reference on the one hand to its project in Western, especially European societies, but it also takes into account, as Eisenstadt notes, the "great variety of modernizing societies developed […] out of the interaction between the expanding civilization of modernity and the various Asian, African and Latin American civilizations that share common characteristics" (Eisenstadt, 1995, p. 335).

[ii] In order to avoid labels that depend on ideological stances and value judgements –e.g., "conservative", "liberal", "orthodox" or "progressive"– and that foster partisan interpretations, Blanchard and Bullivant use the descriptors "minority" and "majority" to refer to the consistent divisions that were clearly present during the Council (2023, p. 25). I have used the same terminology in this article.

[iii] Paul VI's journey to the Holy Land involved genuine gestures of goodwill towards both Jews and Eastern Orthodoxy. The tone and content of the Pope's discussions and speeches garnered a warm reception. This development appeared to affirm the Council's shift towards a dialogical attitude regarding the teachings of other religions to the core of the Catholic semiosphere.

[iv] For a comprehensive understanding of how *Gadium et Spes* tackles these subjects, see Mathew Levering's *An Introduction to Vatican II as an Ongoing Theological Event* (2017), particularly chapter 4, "Nature and Grace: *Gadium et Spes* in Context".

[v] The Second Vatican Council's communication policy is relevant to this matter. The Church became aware of the importance of media for its evangelizing mission due to its enormous educational potential for the masses, seeing it more as something to be reckoned with and less as something to be avoided (Díaz-Dorronsoro, 2023, p. 94). Media was seen as a useful instrument to allow all lay faithful to feel included in the *aggiornamento*: through media they would send their ideas and suggestions to the bishops, who were the only direct participants in the Council (Díaz-Dorronsoro, 2023, p. 88). However, the media coverage of the Council was regarded by some participants, among them Joseph Ratzinger, as having a distorting effect on the lay faithful's perception of Vatican II, since media, according to Ratzinger, carried out a political interpretation of the assembly. Tellingly, in his last meeting with the parish priests and the clergy of Rome before resigning from the pontificate, Pope Benedict XVI referred to the existence of a "parallel Council", that of the media, which transmitted a distorted image of it: "It was almost a Council apart, and the world perceived the Council through the latter, through the media. […] And while the Council of the Fathers was conducted within the faith […], the Council of the journalists, naturally, was not conducted within the faith, but within the categories of today's media, namely apart from faith, with a different hermeneutic. It was a political hermeneutic: for the media, the Council was a political struggle, a power struggle between different trends in the Church. It was obvious that the media would take the side of those who seemed to them more closely allied with their world" (2013, p. 293). In this sense, it can be argued that Greene, addressing his letters to the press to tackle some of the most contentious debates after Vatican II, used the printing industry in the way Ratzinger inveighed against when talking about the existence of a parallel Council of the media.

[vi] Waugh's respect for order and authority resonates with his view of Roman Catholicism as the most suitable form of faith to strengthen Western civilization, as its teachings were "coherent and consistent" and it was backed by "competent organization and discipline" (Waugh, 1984, p. 104). He was appalled by the liturgical changes Vatican II introduced in the rite of the mass –such as its translation into English– changes that, in his view, robbed the Church of poetry, mystery, and dignity (Waugh et al., 2011, p. 79). Tellingly, in a letter to Lady Diana Mosley in March 1966, he wrote: "I have become very old in the last two years. Not diseased but enfeebled. There is nowhere I want to go and nothing I want to do and I am conscious of being an utter bore. The Vatican Council has knocked the guts out of me…" (Waugh et al., 2011, p. 95).

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[vii] In 1989, Christopher Hawtree, in collaboration with Greene himself, collected and selected as many letters as possible and published them in *Yours, etc. Letters to the Press*. References and quotations from the letters in this study are sourced from this book.
[viii] I follow Andrew Kim's definition of the concept as "the formal academic discipline that puts both the tradition and the reflection on the tradition into sincere and prudent conversation with rival theories and alternative points of view, thus exposing both to external critique" (2015, p. xv).
[ix] The title of this piece included in *Yours, etc. Letters to the Press* is "Contraception". However, since in the original publication of the article in *The Tablet* in 1983 is "Responsible procreation", it seemed appropriate to use that title (see a carbon copy of the article in Box 44, Folder 11, Graham Greene papers, MS.1995.003, John J. Burns Library, Boston College).
[x] Significantly, in Greene's novels following *The Power and the Glory*, priests or characters with seminary training who place too much emphasis on moral theology are portrayed negatively. This is evident in the characters of Rycker and Father Thomas in *A Burnt-Out Case*, as well as Father Herrera in *Monsignor Quixote*. A revealing example of this can be found in the description of Father Jean in *A Burnt-Out Case*, a priest who "had once been a brilliant moral theologian before he joined the Order and now carefully nurtured the character of a film-fan, as though it would help him to wipe out an ugly past" (Greene, 200, p. 83).

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