

A Prayer for Owen Meany: A Review

Neil Gerrard

All quotes are from *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, John Irving,
William Morrow and Co., 1989, unless otherwise noted)

This book may represent the most sophisticated and systematic exposure yet of the modern “church” put into a fictional novel. But it is also entirely possible the author did not consciously intend it to be so! The movie – renamed *Simon Birch* and significantly diluted and reduced in comparison to the novel – certainly comes across as a slam against the phony religiosity so rampant in “church” circles, particularly in the 1950s and 60s. But the novel’s main character may hold some of the keys – or at least point out the ambiguities – that show this novel to be either a significant achievement in recognizing “church” for what it is or else it is only another indicator of just how deceptive the “church” can be. Either way, it opens up questions of depth one is not likely to encounter at “church”!

The novel, written by *John* Irving, is set forth as a first person narrative. The narrator is *Johnny* Wheelwright, who was born in the same year as the author, and his experiences in the novel undoubtedly have many parallels in the author’s life. Throughout the novel we are given a fairly comprehensive view into Johnny’s opinions and thoughts. How much of the novel and the character’s opinions come directly from the author’s own life and mind is a question only the author could answer.

For example, Wheelwright narrates:

How could Owen Meany have known what he “knew”? It’s no answer, of course, to believe in accidents, or in coincidences; but is God really a *better* answer? If God had a hand in what Owen “knew,” what a horrible question that poses! For how could God have let that happen to Owen Meany?

Watch out for people who call themselves religious; make sure you know what they mean – make sure *they* know what they mean!” (p. 504)

First, a caution should be sounded. J.B. Phillips, an Anglican minister – surely Johnny Wheelwright would appreciate that! – wrote an interesting warning about religious fictions:

The author of fiction (and this is not the least of the attractions of authorship) is in the position of a god to his own creatures. He can move in a mysterious way, or an outrageous way, or an unjust way, his wonders to perform; and no one can say him nay. If he works skillfully (as, for instance, did Thomas Hardy) he may strongly infect his reader with, for example, the sense of a bitterly jesting fate in place of God...

We need therefore to be constantly on our guard against the “second-hand god” – the kind of god which the continual absorption of fictional ideas nourishes at the back of our minds. One tiny slice of real life, observed at first hand, provides better grounds for our conclusions than the whole fairy world of fiction.” (*Your God Is Too Small*, 1961, p. 47)

Surely John Wheelwright, the professor of Canadian literature at the end of the novel, could also appreciate the insight into Thomas Hardy! But let us notice that in *Owen Meany*, we

are dealing with John Irving's ideas of God as expressed through the fictional character John Wheelwright. Will we really even be able to glimpse God as He truly is after subjecting Him to so many twists? It is a credit to John Irving's skill as a writer that he can approach such a vast subject and leave us wondering where the lines between Irving and Wheelwright really are and still leave you with a plausible, however fictional, rendering of a story about God. Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* is a similar work in that vein.

Let us subject what happened to Owen Meany to a spiritual analysis *as if* it were real life. What did Owen Meany "know" that was so extraordinary? He knew, years in advance, the exact date of his death and that he would be a 1st lieutenant in the Army. Some six months before his death, he is so certain of his visions that he carves his own headstone. Events certainly proved Owen correct. Possible? Certainly. Plausible? That is, would God move in such a way? Possibly. As the apostle Paul wrote, "I stand amazed at the fathomless wealth of God's wisdom and God's knowledge. How could man ever understand His reasons for action, or explain His methods of working?" (Rom. 11:33, Phillips' translation)

But the accuracy of the visions is not the only thing to consider. Long, long ago, God said to Moses, "If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, 'Let us follow other gods' (gods you have not known) 'and let us worship them,' you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love Him with all your heart and with all your soul. It is the LORD your God you must follow, and Him you must revere. Keep His commands and obey Him; serve Him and hold fast to Him." (Dt. 13:1-4 NIV) Or as Jesus much more succinctly said later, "By their fruit you will recognize them." (Mt. 7:20)

Owen Meany's most visible fruit is that he saves the lives of some Vietnamese refugee children. He is not particularly religious throughout the novel though he does attend "church" for some while. Owen is rather moral about many things and even experiences moral growth during the novel. Owen's father, in his ignorance and superstition, believed Owen to have been a miraculous, divine birth just like that of the Christ. (Note well the mother's silence on the subject! And there is no evidence that Owen, after coming of an age to understand such things, believed it either, though he did always believe himself an agent of God's work and will.) But the real fruit that seems to be the point of the novel is Wheelwright's faith which he explicitly attributes to Owen Meany's influence.

But what kind of faith does Wheelwright have? In the opening lines of the novel, he says of himself,

I am a Christian because of Owen Meany. I make no claims to have a life in Christ, or with Christ – and certainly not *for* Christ, which I've heard some zealots claim. I'm not very sophisticated in my knowledge of the Old Testament, and I've not read the New Testament since my Sunday School days, except for those passages that I hear read aloud to me when I go to church. I'm somewhat more familiar with the passages from the Bible that appear in The Book of Common Prayer. I read my prayer book often, and my Bible only on holy days – the prayer book is so much more orderly.

I've always been a pretty regular church goer. I used to be a Congregationalist – I was baptized in the Congregational Church, and after some years of fraternity with Episcopalians (I was confirmed in the Episcopalian

Church, too), I became rather vague in my religion; in my teens I attended a “non-denominational” church. Then I became an Anglican... I am an Anglican now, and I shall die an Anglican. But I skip a Sunday service now and then; I make no claims to be especially pious; I have a church-rummage faith – the kind that needs patching up every weekend. What faith I have I owe to Owen Meany, a boy I grew up with. It is Owen who made me a believer. (p. 13-14)

Let us also consider the faith of the Rev. Lewis Merrill, Johnny’s real father – no, Johnny’s mother was *not* Mrs. Merrill. After Johnny discovers Merrill to be his true father, that night he plays a trick on Merrill wherein he places his real mother’s dress dummy in a poorly lit garden and then lures Pastor Merrill out to see this “body double.” Pastor Merrill sees the dress dummy and believes it to be the ghost of Johnny’s mother. After this, especially at Owen’s funeral, Merrill preaches the Scriptures with conviction and faith. Wheelwright then says,

I don’t hate my father, I just don’t think about him very much – and I haven’t seen him since that day he committed Owen Meany’s body to the ground. I hear from Dan [Johnny’s stepfather] that he’s a whale of a preacher, and that there’s not a trace of the slight stutter that once marred his speech. At times I envy Lewis Merrill; I wish someone could trick me the way I tricked him into having such absolute and unshakeable faith. For although I believe I know what the *real* miracles are, my belief in God disturbs and unsettles me much more than *not* believing ever did; unbelief seems vastly harder to me now than belief does – but belief poses so many unanswerable questions! (p. 504)

One could wish that Wheelwright had trotted out some of these “unanswerable questions”! Maybe if he read the Bible more and truly acquainted himself with the God in whom he says he now believes, many of these questions wouldn’t be so mysterious to him! As it is, the New Testament has several things to say to John Wheelwright:

James wrote, “You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe – and tremble! But...faith without works is dead...” (Jas. 2:19-20)

Paul wrote, “[Christ] died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but *for Him* who died for them and rose again.” (2 Cor. 5:15 - emphasis added)

And “I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20)

Wheelwright is all too much like many “church” goers today. His “faith” does not lead him to any direct interaction with Christ and God. God remains a fuzzy “Something Out There” kind of thing for him. Jesus said however, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.” (Jn. 14:23) One who has Christ and God living within by His Holy Spirit does not think of God as some

unknowable, distant, intangible “Something Out There”! The life *in, with and for* Christ is not a life for zealots only – it is the real and genuine faith, that implanted word that saves the soul. (Jas. 1:21) Wheelwright’s “faith” more resembles that “form of godliness that denies the power of God” from having any way to change his life. (2 Tim. 3:5) If Owen Meany truly connected with the real God, he must surely be “rolling over in his grave” with regret that he ever led Johnny Wheelwright into embracing this kind of a “faith”!

Wheelwright, (first as a shallow, aimless “Joseph” youth – taken from the passive role Joseph is almost always given in the Christmas pageants – and then as a fussy, curmudgeonly, cranky, slightly eccentric professor of Canadian literature, as a neurotic, post-American/non-Canadian news junkie still emotionally crippled by the Vietnam war, and as a self-centered eunuch who can’t even recognize that maybe God has placed a strong, evenly matched (to him) woman (Eleanor Pribst – p. 466, etc.) in his life (to help him pull his head out of his own malaise!), knows nothing of the abundant and divine *life* and would probably consider it too distasteful anyway because that *life* is too disorderly and untamed! God, who is honoring whatever genuine faith might be lurking underneath all that apostasy, is offering Wheelwright a chance to leave “church” behind and truly enter into the kingdom of God, that realm of eternal and abundant and divine life (Jn. 10:10, Rom. 14:17, 1 Jn. 5:20, etc.) – but it is doubtful he will ever take it. No, he likely will die as an Anglican, never really knowing God.

Thus we come to the real questions regarding this novel: Does the author intend to paint us a portrait of Wheelwright’s apostasy so that we might forsake all elements of churchianity and find some true life in God? Or is the author offering this pale imitation and counterfeit of Christ life as if it were the real thing and thus we should just quietly accept and tolerate all those who have a similar lifeless “faith”? Is the author justifying his own existence or subtly speaking out against the wrong and evil thing men most commonly call “church”? Or is there some of both motives sprinkled throughout the novel? Only the author could answer those questions. But if the author is simply justifying his own apostasy, what does that say about the real God who, even in such a novel, can still show someone something of Himself, His real nature, in spite of the author’s error? Big. God is just Big!

Merrill’s zeal (Wheelwright calls it faith) is based on Wheelwright’s trick and thus his faith is placed onto a fictitious “God.” Wheelwright’s “faith” is based on what happened to Owen Meany and thus his faith in Owen Meany’s God. The New Testament tells us that faith is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8) If we would desire the kind of faith that honors and pleases God – and not just ourselves – we must request it from Him. Then we will have an “absolute and unshakeable faith” that draws near to God and receives its rewards and confirmations directly from Him. (Jas. 4:7-8, Heb. 11:6) While we may not have every troubling question answered, we can have peace that surpasses understanding as we trust in Him who is faithful and true. (Phlp. 4:6-7, 1 Pet. 4:19) It would no longer bother us that sometimes God calls on an Owen Meany (or a Jim Eliot or an apostle Paul, to name but two who died “early” deaths – as He also did with Jesus Christ Himself) to live and die a short but meaningful and fruitful life. (Jn. 12:24)

Irving’s book, for those whose eyes can see, places the current apostasy and the downfallings of modern “church” life plainly before us – not so much in Owen Meany but in John Wheelwright. Few however will indeed be able to go beyond judging this work on its appearances and evaluate it on the basis of true righteousness, that which is right in God’s eyes. (Jn. 7:24)

Let he who has ears hear what God is saying to His people.

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