

Religious Leaders' Influence and Individual Freedom in American Society (With Special Reference to Graham Greene's Salvation Theme)

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Abstract: Graham Greene's fiction repeatedly explores the tension between religious authority and individual freedom, showing how institutional demands for redemption can sometimes limit personal choice. This paper examines how religious leaders influence personal freedom in the United States through Greene's treatment of salvation. Although Greene was British, his ideas about faith also connect strongly with American religious culture, where faith and liberty often exist in tension. By examining key novels alongside the American religious landscape, this study shows how religious leaders can act both as guides and as gatekeepers—offering hope while also setting moral boundaries. Greene's Catholic imagination, especially his emphasis on the "religious sense" and the possibility of redemption beyond orthodox forms, allows him to question clerical authority in ways that connect with American concerns about institutional power and individual conscience. The paper places Greene's protagonists between accepting and rejecting personal salvation, showing how grace often works not simply through the Church, but sometimes despite it. This highlights the gap between strict doctrine and lived moral experience, a tension that remains important in current debates about religion, power, and the limits of individual conscience in the United States. By reading Greene against the background of American religious liberty and the role of faith leaders in public life, the paper contributes to the continuing discussion of how ideas of salvation can both support and limit individual freedom in modern democratic societies.

Keywords: Religion, Freedom, Salvation, American Society, Morality, Individualism.

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Introduction

Religion has played an important role in shaping American identity. From the Puritan communities of the seventeenth century to modern evangelical movements, religious belief has influenced the country's moral language, public values, and understanding of itself. At the same time, Americans have long placed great importance on individual liberty, viewing it as both a constitutional right and a defining national ideal. These two forces—religious authority and personal freedom—have not always been easy to reconcile. Their tension continues to shape American social life, public debate, and literature.

This paper examines this tension through the fiction of Graham Greene. Although Greene was a British Catholic writer, his treatment of faith, sin, guilt, and redemption reaches far beyond his own national and religious background. His characters—including priests, adulterers, spies, and ordinary people burdened by guilt—are often torn between religious duty and personal loyalty. Their struggles resemble those of people in American society who must balance the expectations of religious authorities with the demands of their own conscience. In both Greene's fiction and American religious life, salvation is rarely shown as simple or comforting. Instead, it is often a deeply personal and difficult process shaped by doubt, guilt, moral conflict, and the unexpected possibility of grace. Greene's relevance to American society goes beyond these shared themes. His novels also anticipate many contemporary crises of faith. Institutional religion has experienced

declining trust, while more individual and flexible forms of spirituality have become increasingly visible. At the same time, religious leaders continue to influence American public life, particularly in debates over morality, social policy, immigration, and individual rights. Greene's perspective is valuable because it is both sceptical and deeply engaged with faith. He questions the power of religious institutions without dismissing the spiritual needs that draw people toward them.

Religion and Individual Freedom in American Context

The Historical Roots of Religious Influence

America's political foundations were strongly influenced by religious ideas and communities. The Puritans, who left England to escape religious persecution, hoped to create what John Winthrop called a "city upon a hill"—a society in which religious belief and civic life were closely connected. Their vision did not clearly separate spiritual authority from political power. Instead, religious principles shaped both personal conduct and public life. This connection between faith and government remained influential long after the Puritan era, as churches and religious leaders continued to shape private morality and public policy.

Religious ideas can also be seen in the language of America's founding documents, even though the Constitution

placed limits on the relationship between church and state. The Declaration of Independence, for example, describes human beings as "created equal" and "endowed by their Creator" with certain rights. This language suggests that liberty comes from a higher authority rather than from government alone. If rights are understood as God-given, then the state does not create them and should not have the power to remove them. This belief has remained an important part of American discussions about freedom, human dignity, and political authority.

Throughout American history, religious leaders have influenced both social reform and public morality. From the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the growth of modern evangelical and Pentecostal movements, the pulpit has often served as more than a place of worship. Jonathan Edwards used vivid and frightening images of divine judgement to urge his listeners toward repentance. Billy Graham brought evangelical Christianity into national political life and advised presidents from both major parties. Martin Luther King Jr. drew upon Christian teachings to challenge racial injustice and strengthen the civil rights movement.

These figures show the two sides of religious authority. Faith can inspire courage, justice, and meaningful social change, but it can also create fear, discourage disagreement, and restrict personal expression. In the United States, religious leaders have often used moral language to influence how communities understand acceptable behaviour. The pulpit has therefore served not only as a source of spiritual guidance but also as a powerful platform for shaping public values.

The American Ideal of Individual Freedom

The American idea of freedom was also shaped by Enlightenment thought and liberal constitutionalism. In this tradition, autonomy, self-determination, and freedom of conscience are treated as essential values. Individuals should be able to make decisions about their beliefs, identities, and private lives without unnecessary interference. Conflict emerges when organised religion claims the authority to prescribe behaviour or define a single moral truth for everyone. The American experience can therefore be seen as a continuing effort to balance religious belief with personal liberty.

The First Amendment reflects this effort. It protects the free exercise of religion while preventing the government from establishing an official faith. In principle, these protections allow religious belief and individual liberty to coexist. In practice, however, the boundary between them has always been difficult to define. Debates over reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, education, and political loyalty reveal how deeply divided Americans remain over the proper role of religion in public life. Religious leaders may appeal to divine authority when shaping moral or legal arguments, while other citizens rely on personal conscience, constitutional rights, or secular reasoning to defend individual choice.

The life of Roger Williams provides an early example of this tension. A Puritan minister and the founder of Rhode Island, Williams opposed the use of government power to enforce religious conformity. He believed that genuine faith could not be produced through coercion and that civil government should not control a person's religious beliefs. His defence of freedom of conscience helped prepare the ground for stronger constitutional protections for religious liberty. Yet the issue he confronted has

never fully disappeared: whether society can preserve religious commitment without allowing religious authority to restrict individual freedom.

Contemporary political figures continue to use religious language in different, and sometimes opposing, ways. James Talarico, for example, represents a progressive form of American Christianity, arguing that Jesus's teachings support "more rights, more freedoms, and more opportunities for more people." This interpretation challenges the idea that religion belongs only to conservative politics or must necessarily restrict personal choice. It shows that religious belief can be used to support broader understandings of equality and freedom. The American religious landscape does not offer one simple answer to the relationship between faith and liberty. Instead, it contains different interpretations of both.

Graham Greene and the Theme of Salvation

Greene's Religious Vision

Greene's novels present a morally complex world in which sin and redemption are closely connected. His characters are rarely conventional examples of goodness. They include priests struggling with addiction, adulterers longing for forgiveness, and spies weighed down by guilt. Rather than finding salvation through perfect religious behaviour, these characters move toward grace by facing their weaknesses. Greene's Catholic outlook gives this idea a strong theological foundation: redemption depends less on obeying every rule than on honestly recognising one's failures and remaining open to mercy.

The whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory* (1940) is one of Greene's clearest examples. He is an alcoholic, the father of an illegitimate child, and sometimes a coward. By ordinary religious standards, he appears unworthy of the priesthood. Yet Greene does not present his flaws as proof that grace has abandoned him. Instead, his weaknesses make him more aware of his dependence on mercy and more capable of understanding the suffering of others. His eventual martyrdom is not the victory of a perfect saint. It is the transformation of a broken man who gradually develops humility and courage.

Through the whisky priest, Greene addresses an important question in Catholic theology: does grace depend on the moral perfection of the person through whom it works? His answer is clearly no. The priest's sins are serious, and Greene does not ignore the damage they cause. Nevertheless, his failures do not completely destroy his ability to serve others or become an instrument of grace. Salvation comes not from moral achievement but from recognising that even a deeply flawed person can still be loved, forgiven, and spiritually useful.

The title *The Power and the Glory* points to this paradox. It evokes divine greatness, but the novel reveals that greatness through humiliation rather than worldly success. Greene places two kinds of power in conflict: the violent and coercive power of the state, and the quiet power of grace working through human weakness. The state attempts to enforce obedience through fear, while grace operates through compassion, sacrifice, and humility. This vision also speaks to the American religious experience, where many believers encounter God less through institutional strength than through private suffering and personal struggle.

Greene explores similar concerns in *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) and *The End of the Affair* (1951). Both novels explore the complicated relationship between human desire and

divine love. Greene does not simply excuse sinful behaviour, but neither does he treat desire as entirely separate from spiritual longing. His characters often seek love in harmful or misguided ways, yet their desires may still lead them toward a deeper awareness of God. Sin and grace are therefore not presented as simple opposites. They exist within the same troubled human heart.

The "Catholic Novel" and Universal Morality

Although Greene writes within the Catholic tradition, his moral vision goes beyond Catholicism. He questions the authority of the institutional Church while continuing to take the mystery and value of faith seriously. This distinction is important: Greene's criticism of religious institutions is not the same as rejecting religion itself. Instead, he separates faith from the people and systems that claim to speak on its behalf.

This tension is especially relevant to American society, where organised religion and personal spirituality do not always agree. Many people continue to believe in God while questioning the authority of churches, clergy, or fixed doctrines. Greene's fiction reflects this struggle. His characters often encounter grace outside formal religious structures, through moments of suffering, love, guilt, or sacrifice. Faith becomes a deeply personal experience rather than simply a matter of submitting to institutional expectations.

Greene's complicated relationship with Catholicism also shaped his writing. His description of himself as an "agnostic Catholic" captures the tension between doubt and belief that runs through his novels. He remained intellectually and imaginatively attached to Catholicism, yet he approached its teachings with persistent scepticism. This position allowed him to criticise the Church from within rather than simply dismissing it from outside. His fiction exposes contradictions in Christian morality while still taking seriously the possibility of salvation.

As a result, Greene raises a question that goes beyond any single denomination: should religion define the boundaries of human experience, or should religious teaching respond more compassionately to the realities of human life? His novels do not provide an easy answer. They suggest that moral rules can provide direction, but they can become harmful when they leave no room for weakness, doubt, or forgiveness. Religious authority has value only when it helps people move toward mercy rather than deeper despair.

Religious Leadership and Control in American Society

Clerical Power and Public Morality

In the United States, religious leaders have long been both moral guides and influential public figures. From Puritan ministers who enforced strict rules of conduct to modern televangelists who participate in political debates, their influence has often extended far beyond the church. Figures such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and contemporary megachurch pastors have attracted large audiences by combining religious teachings with political ideas. In doing so, they have helped shape not only how people understand faith but also how they think about public policy, morality, and national identity. This moral authority can be used in different ways. Martin Luther King Jr., for example, drew on Christian teachings to challenge racial injustice and inspire social change. Other religious leaders, however, have used their authority to demand conformity, treating disagreement or alternative ways of living as sinful. Movements for civil rights, gender equality, and

sexual freedom have repeatedly faced opposition from religious institutions. The pulpit can therefore become a force for freedom or restriction, and at times it can serve both purposes at once.

The relationship between religious and state authority becomes especially complicated when religious leaders work closely with law enforcement. In some American communities, religious figures reinforce the authority of the police and present state power as morally or even divinely justified. This partnership reflects the concerns found throughout Greene's fiction, particularly his suspicion of moral certainty and institutional power. When religious leaders celebrate police authority or publicly support particular political candidates, they risk weakening their ability to question injustice. A religious voice that becomes too closely aligned with political power may no longer be able to challenge that power effectively.

The Paradox of Freedom and Faith

The American search for freedom resembles the struggle for spiritual honesty experienced by Greene's characters. Just as the whisky priest fails to meet the Church's ideal of priestly perfection, modern believers may resist the expectations of religious authorities in order to remain true to their consciences. In both cases, spiritual integrity does not come simply from unquestioning obedience. It develops through doubt, conflict, and the difficult process of deciding what genuine faith requires.

This tension is particularly visible in American evangelical culture. Evangelical teaching often speaks of "freedom in Christ" and emphasises the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus. Such language places faith within the individual's own experience. Yet evangelical communities may also enforce strict rules concerning sexuality, gender, family life, and political identity. The believer is therefore told that faith brings freedom while also being expected to remain within clearly defined moral and social boundaries. Greene captures a similar contradiction in characters who long for grace but feel imprisoned by religious expectations.

Ronald Reagan expressed one side of this relationship when he argued that freedom prospers when religion is strong and the rule of law under God is recognised. His statement presents religious belief as a source of political liberty and social stability. Greene's fiction, however, invites a more cautious view of this claim. Religion can support freedom, but it can also restrict it. Much depends on whether religious communities accept human imperfection and make room for mercy, or demand an ideal of moral purity that produces guilt, exclusion, and fear.

Abraham Lincoln's use of prayer and religious language during the Civil War offers another example of how closely faith and politics are connected in American life. Lincoln frequently spoke of God's authority over the nation, especially during moments of crisis. Such language can provide hope and a sense of shared purpose, but it can also blur the line between religious belief and political power. When political leaders present their policies as expressions of God's will, disagreement may begin to look like disobedience not only to the government but also to God.

This is precisely the kind of confusion Greene's novels treat as spiritually dangerous. Human institutions are imperfect, even when they claim to serve divine purposes. Religious and political leaders may sincerely believe that they are defending morality, yet their certainty can silence individual conscience and hide their own capacity for error. Greene's work suggests that faith is most authentic when it remains humble, recognises human weakness,

and resists the temptation to turn spiritual belief into unquestionable political authority.

The American Religious Psyche through a Greenean Lens

Guilt, Grace, and the Search for Meaning

American religiosity, particularly within Protestant traditions, places strong emphasis on personal salvation and individual moral responsibility. Faith is often understood as a deeply private relationship between the individual and God, shaped by personal struggles, conscience, repentance, and the hope of redemption. This personal dimension of American spirituality resembles Graham Greene's portrayal of moral conflict. His characters are frequently caught between sin and grace, and their longing for forgiveness reflects the believer's desire for reassurance in the midst of uncertainty.

Scobie's struggle between love, duty, and sin in 'The Heart of the Matter' can be compared with the anxiety many believers experience when they question their moral adequacy. In both cases, faith is not simply a matter of following external rules or belonging to a religious institution. It involves an intensely personal encounter with guilt, responsibility, and the possibility of forgiveness. However, Greene develops this idea in a more complex and troubling direction. He suggests that guilt is both an objective reality and a deeply subjective experience. A person may recognise that forgiveness is possible, yet still remain unable to accept it.

This emphasis on individual responsibility can become spiritually overwhelming. When people believe that they alone are responsible for their moral failures, they may find it difficult to make room for mercy. Scobie's tragedy lies partly in his inability to accept that forgiveness might be greater than his sin. Instead, he allows guilt to dominate his understanding of himself and his relationship with God.

Individualism and the Crisis of Belief

Contemporary American spirituality increasingly shows a movement away from organised religion toward more individual forms of faith. The expression "spiritual but not religious" captures this change. It is used by people who continue to believe in transcendence, prayer, morality, or spiritual meaning but reject the authority of churches and other formal religious institutions. Their position does not necessarily represent a complete rejection of faith. Rather, it suggests a desire to experience spirituality on more personal and flexible terms.

In this respect, Greene's fiction appears remarkably relevant. His characters rarely experience faith as a source of easy certainty. Instead, belief emerges through doubt, suffering, moral failure, and inner conflict. Greene does not present religion as a simple system of answers. He portrays it as a difficult encounter with human weakness and divine grace. This approach resembles the outlook of many contemporary Americans who seek spiritual meaning while remaining suspicious of rigid doctrines and institutional authority.

For Greene, however, personal conscience cannot be separated entirely from moral and spiritual responsibility. His characters may resist institutional authority, but they cannot escape the consequences of their choices. Their freedom is therefore both liberating and difficult. This tension helps explain why Greene's

work speaks to people who value spiritual independence but continue to wrestle with guilt, doubt, and the need for forgiveness.

Salvation and Freedom: A Comparative Synthesis

Salvation as Inner Freedom

For Greene, salvation depends less on accepting every religious doctrine and more on being released from guilt and despair through grace. A similar idea can be found in the American understanding of freedom. Whether freedom is discussed in moral, political, or spiritual terms, it is often associated with the liberation of the individual conscience. Both perspectives resist forms of authority—whether exercised by the Church or the state—that prevent people from thinking, choosing, and living according to their deepest convictions.

This suggests that salvation and freedom may describe related experiences: the ability to live honestly despite human weakness and imperfection. Greene's theology does not present human beings as capable of achieving moral perfection through determination alone. Instead, it recognises that people need grace precisely because they are limited, vulnerable, and sometimes unable to overcome their failures by themselves. His understanding of imperfect humanity therefore speaks to Americans who seek freedom not only from religious legalism but also from the emptiness and uncertainty of a purely secular existence.

The American belief that fundamental rights come from God rather than from government reflects a similar understanding. If human dignity arises from divine creation, then no government has unlimited power over the individual. Political authority cannot legitimately violate the rights that are considered inherent in human beings. This theological basis for liberty corresponds with Greene's view that grace liberates rather than imprisons. In both perspectives, true freedom rests on something greater than political power—whether that foundation is described as God, natural law, or the individual conscience.

Institutional Religion and Personal Faith

Greene's fiction often shows the ethical weaknesses of religious institutions. He draws attention to their hypocrisy, rigidity, and tendency to value rules more than compassion. American society has experienced a similar tension. Religious institutions can provide moral guidance and a sense of community, but they can also accumulate power in ways that restrict personal belief. Despite this tension, both Greene's novels and American religious life reveal a continuing human desire for transcendence, moral meaning, and spiritual belonging.

In the United States, the idea of salvation sometimes appears in secular forms. People may pursue happiness, self-realisation, social justice, or personal fulfilment rather than use explicitly religious language. Even so, these pursuits often retain a moral and spiritual dimension similar to Greene's understanding of grace. His portrayal of flawed human beings offers a useful way to understand how people attempt to maintain a meaningful faith while resisting religious domination.

The conflict between institutional religion and personal faith has shaped American history from its early stages. Religious figures who questioned established traditions, from Roger Williams to more recent reformers, helped reshape debates about religious freedom, conscience, and social change. Their efforts demonstrate that religious reform often depends on the freedom to

challenge accepted beliefs. Individuals and communities must be able to reinterpret their traditions, develop new forms of worship, or choose not to practise religion at all.

Contemporary Applications and Future Directions

Religious Freedom in Modern America

Current debates about religious freedom show that the tension between religious authority and individual liberty continues. Some people believe that religious exemptions from generally applicable laws are necessary to protect freedom of conscience. Others argue that such exemptions can give religious believers privileges that are not available to secular citizens or members of minority faiths. Greene's fiction does not offer an easy solution to this conflict. Instead, it suggests that both positions contain some truth and that the issue is more complicated than either side often admits.

Organisations such as the First Liberty Institute support strong legal protection for religious practice. They argue that the founders understood religious freedom as a fundamental right grounded in "nature and Nature's God." This view reflects the traditional American belief that basic rights come from a source higher than government. At the same time, such reasoning can also be used to justify exemptions that create difficulties for other people. Protecting one person's religious conscience may sometimes place an unwanted burden on a third party. This conflict reflects the kind of moral complexity that Greene explores in his novels, where one person's sincere conviction can have painful consequences for another.

Toward a Greenean Approach to Religious Pluralism

Greene's work suggests a way of thinking about religious pluralism that takes faith seriously without allowing it to override individual freedom. His characters represent a spirituality shaped by doubt, moral struggle, and an awareness of human weakness. They do not approach faith as a possession that makes them morally superior to others. Instead, grace appears as an undeserved gift that must be received with humility. This perspective could contribute to American religious life in several ways.

First, it could encourage religious leaders to exercise authority more carefully. They would need to recognise that they, like everyone else, are capable of misunderstanding, error, and moral failure. Second, it could help believers distinguish between the central principles of their faith and moral rules that may have been shaped by particular historical or cultural circumstances. Third, it could reinforce the idea that genuine faith should make people more capable of love, compassion, and freedom rather than bind them to rigid rules.

A Greenean approach would not remove every conflict between religious authority and personal liberty. Disagreements about exemptions, public policy, and the limits of religious freedom would certainly continue. However, it could make these debates more open and humane. Instead of treating religion only as a threat or freedom only as individual choice, it would acknowledge both the good religion can achieve and the harm it can cause when combined with unchecked power.

Conclusion

Religious authority and individual freedom continue to have a complex relationship in American society. Religious leaders influence public discussions about morality, while individuals increasingly assert their right to make decisions according to

personal conscience. Although Greene wrote within the context of British Catholicism, his understanding of sin, grace, and salvation offers a broader framework for examining this conflict. His view of human beings as imperfect but capable of redemption reflects the American effort to reconcile faith with liberty, divine authority with personal choice, and moral responsibility with compassion.

In a period marked by political polarisation and uncertainty about moral values, Greene's idea of human imperfection remains meaningful. He suggests that salvation does not come simply from obeying religious authorities or following external rules. It begins with the courage to confront one's own sin, doubt, fear, and desire for grace. In a similar way, American freedom need not mean freedom from religion. It can also mean the freedom to believe, question, practise, change, or reject religion according to one's conscience.

The continuing relevance of Greene's work to American religious experience shows how literature can help us understand social and spiritual questions that do not have simple answers. His novels do not provide political programmes or legal solutions. Instead, they encourage readers to think more carefully about the relationship between faith and freedom. They acknowledge contradiction, accept moral complexity, and resist the temptation to divide the world into the completely righteous and the completely wrong.

For this reason, Greene remains more than a British Catholic novelist. His work speaks to a universal human problem: how individuals should live responsibly in a world where divine authority, institutional power, personal conscience, and human freedom continually meet and conflict.

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