

# Love and Charity: A Biblical Humanistic Study of Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to see how Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* offers biblical humanism as an antidote to the self-centred attitude that plagues human society. Here Vonnegut is suggesting that a combination of the biblical tenets of charity and love together is the hope for the future. While humanism emphasised individualism, the Gospels insists on individual acts of charity and love. So, a biblical humanism demonstrated through individualised acts of love and charity can counteract the sufferings caused by greed-driven selfish behaviours that are responsible for most of the private and social ills. Vonnegut in this novel through two opposite characters Eliot Rosewater and Norman Mushari demonstrates how love and greed are always antithetical to each other and how the former needs to prevail. Here Vonnegut covertly and at times, explicitly seeks to underpin this theme with the help of Christ's Sermon on the Mount.

**Keywords:** love, charity, humanism, individual, biblical humanism, greed, sanity

## 1. Introduction – Humanism

Humanism is a philosophy that gained wide acceptance with the rise of Renaissance and Enlightenment. It places individuals at the centre of the universe and so is an anthropomorphic view of the world, stressing individual freedom and private enterprise. However, while humanism foregrounds individualism, it also promotes self-interest and competitive promotion of individualism at the cost of common welfare or social values. On the contrary, the Bible prioritises social values such as brotherhood, universal love and charity. Christian humanism combines the Christian spirit of love and charity with the power of individual effort of humanism. The roots of Christian humanism may be seen in the teachings of Jesus, especially in the parable of the Good Samaritan and the Sermon on the Mount. Charity, in biblical thought it is the highest form of love, signifying the reciprocal love between God and humans that is manifested in unselfish and unconditional love of one's fellow beings. This biblical humanism is one of the core themes of Kurt Vonnegut in many of his works, particularly in *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* (1965).

## 2. Review of Literature

Kurt Vonnegut began his literary career in 1950 with his short story titled *A Report on the Barnhouse Effect* which had strong science fiction elements and so Vonnegut was called a writer of science fiction. His first novel *Player Piano*, published in 1952 was also seen as science fiction. Though commercial success followed soon, Vonnegut came to be considered as a serious writer and began to receive critical attention only after his third novel *Mother Night* published in 1962. Thereafter all his works have been analysed, interpreted and reinterpreted using different frameworks and theories. Most of these critical studies range from analysing the elements of science fiction in his works to reading Kurt Vonnegut as a postmodern experimental artist. Yet, some readers and critics see him as a black humourist and some see him as a dystopian satirist.

Mary S. Schriber in her *Bringing Chaos to Order: The Novel Tradition and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* (1972) locates Kurt Vonnegut's works in the American novel tradition and explains how his on-linear narrative initiated a new narrative technique that effectively represented the of the post-world schizophrenic human mind.

Peter Scholl's article *Vonnegut's Attack Upon Christendom* (1972) sees Kurt Vonnegut as an atheist who had a greater faith in human beings their and their power to love. The article concedes the apparent nihilism in Vonnegut, but finds his humanism stronger and more enduring:

But though they [Vonnegut's works] are nearly nihilistic, the qualifier is important. In each ersatz faith, all references to any supernatural guiding force and any notions about a caring Somebody or Something 'out there,' 'up there,' or anywhere are mocked or deliberately inverted. Yet throughout his works there is an affirmative current. As he says in *Cat's Cradle*, 'Man... That's all. Just man.' (143)

Jesus Lerate de Castro in *The Narrative Function of Kilgore Trout and His Fictional Works in Slaughterhouse-Five* (1994) sees Christian elements in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He has analysed the biblical symbols used in this novel to argue that the novel was inspired by the author's faith in Christianity.

Harold Bloom's *Modern Critical Interpretations: Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five* (2001) is a collection of critical essays by various authors who analyse various aspects of Vonnegut's most popular novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* and its relationship to the oeuvre of Vonnegut. But this volume does not have much reference to *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*

Thomas F. Marvin in *Kurt Vonnegut: A Critical Companion* (2002) is one of the earliest works to analyse Vonnegut's works in their entirety. The authors see a virulent anti-capitalist streak in all the works of Kurt Vonnegut and so says that "Vonnegut points out that, left unchecked, capitalism will erode the democratic foundations of the United States" (19). Marvin argues that Vonnegut's works reveal what happens when wealth is handed down by lineage or family ties.

Brian McCammack's article *A Fading Old Left Vision: Gospel-Inspired Socialism in Vonnegut's Rosewater* (2005) locates strong socialist leanings in the novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. While drawing relevant passages from the novel, the author also cites Vonnegut's proclamation in *A Man Without a Country* that "Socialism' is no more an evil word than Christianity" (11) to support his argument.

Reiko Nitta's *Kurt Vonnegut's Fantasy Strategy in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (2012) reads the novel from a postmodern humanist perspective. The paper analyses how Vonnegut explains the bond between money and war, and then analyses the literary strategies the novel uses the fantasy framework to convey its message.

*Reflection of Postmodernism in Kurt Vonnegut's Selected Fictions* by Elaheh Soofastaei et al (2016) reads three of Kurt Vonnegut's most popular novels - *Player Piano*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* as postmodern fiction.

Peter Freese in *Invented Religions as Sense-Making Systems in Kurt Vonnegut's Novels* (2018) analyses the ideologies of the religions invented by Kurt Vonnegut in his novels, and explains their role in explaining human life. This article deals with *Mother Night*, *The Sirens of Titan* and *Cat's Cradle*, where Vonnegut created his own counter religions: in *The Sirens of Titan* it is the Church of the God Utterly Indifferent and in *Cat's Cradle* it is Bokononism. However, the article has not much to do with *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*.

Andrew John Hicks in *Posthumanism in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut Matter That Complains So* (2020) sees posthumanist elements in the works of Vonnegut. The work reassesses the current opinion that Kurt Vonnegut was a humanist writer and instead argues that his works exhibit posthumanistic elements. The book uses New Materialist, Eco-Critical and Systems Theory methodologies to foreground posthumanist elements in six of Vonnegut's most famous novels, but ignores *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* because the novel is said to have no such elements.

Patrick T. Readon in his *Book Review: God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls before Swine* (2021) sees how the values enshrined in the novel are still relevant today. Though the article finds biblical elements in the novel, it does not relate these elements to the author's humanism.

An extensive search and analysis of the critical works on Kurt Vonnegut in general, and on *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* in particular, reveals that no work has dealt with the Christian humanistic elements that are embedded in the novel and this paper attempts to fill this gap.

### **Kurt Vonnegut:**

Kurt Vonnegut (1922 – 2007) is a Jewish- American writer well known for novels like *Player Piano*, *The Sirens of Titan*, *Mother Night*, *Cat's Cradle*, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and so on. Though *Slaughterhouse-Five* is Vonnegut's most popular work, his *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965) is a key text in Vonnegut's oeuvre because, in it, Vonnegut summed up his faith in universal biblical humanism as a possible answer to the social ills that plague this world today.

### **Kurt Vonnegut's Biblical Humanism:**

Vonnegut was an agnostic and had immense faith in humanism and even served as the honorary president of the American Humanist Association. He explained his option for humanism in his autobiographical novel *Timequake*:

Humanists try to behave decently and honorably without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife. The creator of the Universe has been to us unknowable so far. We serve as well as we can the highest abstraction of which we have some understanding, which is our community. (Vonnegut, 1997)

Despite this agnostic humanism, the influence of Christ is seen in many of his works. In his autobiographical work *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut says that he was a “Christ-worshipping agnostic” (Vonnegut, 1981), because in the same book he noted that “the Sermon on the Mount suggests a mercifulness that can never waver or fade” (Vonnegut, 1981). He then writes in his non-fiction collection *A Man Without a Country*, “There’s only one rule that I know of: God damn it, . . . you’ve got to be kind!” (Vonnegut, 2005). In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kilgore Trout, who is seen as Vonnegut’s alter ego, writes a book titled “The Gospel from Outer Space”. The book is about “a visitor from outer space . . . who decides to study Christianity in order to discover why Christians found it so easy to be cruel” (Vonnegut, 1969). The visitor concludes that the purpose of the Gospels was to teach people, among other things, to be merciful, even to the lowest of the low. The biblical influence on Vonnegut is more pervasive and explicit in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Here Vonnegut combines his belief in the biblical principle and humanism. As Peter J. Reed points out,

*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* takes as its subject the impact of money, of economic policy and personal greed, upon the individual and upon the character of American society. In doing so, it may indeed be closer to the mainstream of Vonnegut’s work than the great Dresden novel it precedes, for the social injustice of economic systems has been a persistent theme throughout his fiction. (Merrill, 1990)

In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, the locale is America but the message is universal.

#### **The Novel:**

*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater or Pearls Before Swine* narrates tells the story of the conflict between love and greed, played out as a conflict between a man who uses his personal fortune to help the poor and another man who attempts to gain control of the fortune for himself. Eliot Rosewater is a veteran and the inheritor of the Rosewater Foundation. The foundation was built on a fortune by exploiting the poor and was established by an American senator named Senator Lister Ames Rosewater of Indiana to avoid taxes: “It was the fourteenth largest family fortune in America, the Rosewater fortune. It was stashed into a foundation in order that tax-collectors and other predators not named Rosewater might be prevented from getting their hands on it. (Vonnegut, 1965). The hoodwinking of tax collectors went on for years until the senator’s eldest son Eliot Rosewater inherits the fortune and decides to use the money to help the less fortunate: “I’m going to love these discarded Americans, even though they’re useless and unattractive. That is going to be my work of art hereafter” (Vonnegut, 1965).

At his foundation office, Eliot Rosewater receives visitors and telephone calls that seek his help. His office sign announces prominently on several windows “Rosewater Foundation. How can we help you?” (Vonnegut, 1965). Eliot Rosewater also has a William Blake poem painted on the office steps: “Little creature, / form’d of/ Joy & Mirth, / Go love / without the / help of/ any Thing / on Earth” (Vonnegut, 1965). The welcome notice and the Blake poem are symbolic of Eliot’s philanthropy and uncritical love for the poor, much like Christ’s unconditional love for His people. Eliot helps people simply because they are poor and marginalised, just as Jesus stood for the poor and the weak.

Simultaneously, Norman Mushari, a lawyer for the Rosewater Foundation, schemes to prove that Eliot is insane so that his heir, Fred receives the wealth, for Fred could be manipulated. Mushari schemes events and bribes people and ensures that Eliot ends up in a mental institution where he is visited by his favourite science-fiction author, Kilgore Trout who has authored eighty-seven science fiction novels but is still financially precariously placed and subsists on welfare food stamps. He works in a social-security stamp collection centre where he tries to help other equally disadvantaged people. Kilgore Trout is convinced that Eliot is sane and what he is doing with his fortune is right. He calls Eliot’s charity an experiment that is significant for if it succeeded it would send a strong message to the world:

It was quite possibly the most important social experiment of our time, for it dealt on a very small scale with a problem whose queasy horror will eventually be made world-wide by the sophistication of machines. The problem is this: How to love people who have no use? . . . If we can’t find reasons and methods for treasuring human beings because they are human beings, then we might as well as has so often been suggested, rub them out. (Vonnegut, 1965)

Trout also insists that “the main lesson Eliot learned is that people can use all the uncritical love they can get” (Vonnegut, 1965). Trout understands Eliot’s love and intentions and reassures the fragile Eliot that it is important to care about people because they are people. He also convinces Eliot’s father that Eliot is not insane. With the help of Kilgore Trout, Eliot thwarts Mushari’s devious plan, regains control of the foundation and continues his philanthropy.

### 3. Discussion

Eliot Rosewater, the inheritor of the Rosewater Foundation, had not been a poor-loving philanthropist always. He was once a playboy with a flamboyant life style:

He bought a town house in New York, with a fountain in the foyer. He put a Bentley and a Jaguar in the garage. He hired a suite of offices in the Empire State Building. He had them painted lime, burnt-orange and oyster white. He proclaimed them the headquarters for all the beautiful, compassionate and scientific things he hoped to do. He was a heavy drinker, but no one worried about it. No amount of booze seemed to make him drunk. (Vonnegut, 1965)

But then, one day Eliot is suddenly hit by thoughts of charity and he sees the American Dream had a seamy side to it. The American Dream seemed to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few, while denying basic needs to most of the population. Eliot Rosewater sees that this terrible situation not only kept people miserable, but also increased depression and suicidal tendencies among the poor. As Eliot remarks, “The American dream turned belly up, turned green, bobbed to the scummy surface of cupidity unlimited, filled with gas, went bang in the noonday sun” (Vonnegut, 1965). He quits New York and retreats to the Rosewater County where he then uses his wealth to help the poor and the needy.

However, Eliot’s philanthropy makes him an improbable character. Anybody could make a phone call and receive money with no questions be asked. The stickers announcing his philanthropy are found all over the Rosewater County and was stuck to the back windshields of all cars. Another act of kindness was a suicide help line that offers huge sums of money to discourage people with suicidal tendencies. The inevitable consequence of all these was a lot of fake of undeserving people profiting from this charity. Eliot’s philanthropy is highly illogical and borders on insanity. This illogical and often misdirected philanthropy raised eyebrows. In the Foundation’s office, Eliot was often spoken of as ‘the Nut,’ ‘the Freak,’ ‘the Saint,’ ‘the holy roller,’ ‘John the Baptist, and so on. Once he meets a fireman and moved by the fireman’s service, exchanges everything he has on him, including swathes of dollar bills for the fireman’s overalls. The bemused fireman asks Eliot Rosewater, “Are you crazy” (Vonnegut, 1965). When he rescues a man who tries to commit suicide, the man retorts, “You sound crazy” (Vonnegut, 1965).

Yet, Eliot Rosewater was unfazed. He said love and charity ought to be unconditional, as Christ’s love was. As Brian McCammack remarks, “Vonnegut, whether intentionally or not, has painted a very absurd picture. The saint-like Eliot is so ludicrous that he evokes laughter rather than devotion. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether he is sane at this point” (McCammack, 2008). Peter Reed also states that, “having the sanity to feel compassion in such a world is enough to drive a man insane” (Merrill 1990).

Eliot’s philosophy of life is outlined early in the novel when he writes a letter to his possible successor as president of the foundation. Here he outlines the Rosewater family history and its shady ways of acquiring wealth. He shows a particular dislike of the wealthy who have lived on the labour of the poor: “Every grotesquely rich American represents property, privileges, and pleasures that have been denied to many” (Vonnegut, 1965). Eliot concludes the letter with the instruction, “Be generous. Be kind... Be a sincere, attentive friend of the poor” (Vonnegut, 1965). Later when he is at the baptism for twins he reverts to the message in his baptismal speech: “Hello babies. Welcome to Earth. It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It’s round and wet and crowded. On the outside, babies, you’ve got a hundred years here. There’s only one rule that I know of, babies - “God damn it, you’ve got to be kind” (Vonnegut, 1965). Eliot’s prescription here clearly echoes Christ’s Sermon on the Mount: the focus here is on kindness and the care and concern for the poor. In fact, the full title of the novel is *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater: Or, Pearls Before Swine*, and the second part of the title “Pearls Before Swine” is taken from Christ’s Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:6.

Eliot’s philanthropy is similar to that of Christ’s in another way also: Christ rejected all forms of institutionalised piety and demonstrated charity which was similar to donating large sums to popular charity organisations and what many among the rich usually do; instead, he goes out to the street and helps out individuals with their daily problems. Here, Eliot’s philanthropy is a private and intimate initiative. This shift from the impersonal to the personal, from the public sphere to a private space. Eliot Rosewater also once gave liberally large sums of money for cancer research, is essentially Christian, for Christ rebuked all forms of demonstrated public doles and insisted on unadvertised private charity: “But when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Mathew 6:3). This is, as Brian McCammack says, “private-sphere solution to public-sphere ills”(McCammack, 2008). Therefore, Hans Dieter Betz avers that Kurt Vonnegut’s suggestion through Eliot’s love for the poor and the needy reflects “the quintessence of the teaching of Jesus” (Betz, 1995). This is certainly a biblical humanism that can have a positive impact on the entire humanity.

Eliot's Christian altruism is demonstrated quite early in his life when he decides to become a volunteer for the fire and rescue department. This is a symbolic act because he sees such selfless volunteer firemen as "almost the only examples of enthusiastic unselfishness to be seen in this land" and also, they are the "people treasuring people as people" (Vonnegut, 1965). He calls the fireman the "salt of the earth": "I want to look like you. You're the salt of the earth, by God. You're what's good about America, men in suits like that. You're the soul of the U.S. Infantry" (Vonnegut, 1965). Calling the fireman "the salt of the earth" echoes Christ's words in the Sermon on the Mount in *Matthew 5:13*: "You are the salt of the earth". Here the reference is not to the taste of the salt, but to its value in the life of people. Salt is an unsophisticated but essential ingredient in food. It is also a preservative agent and also has medicinal properties. Just as Christ saw the unsophisticated ordinary people around him such as fishermen, shepherds, laborers – as valuable and significant, Vonnegut saw a lot of value in the service of the ordinary fireman.

The Sermon on the Mount had a great influence on the life of Vonnegut and he talked about it frequently. He often referred to the influence of the Sermon on the Mount on his life. In the commencement address to the graduates of Agnes Scott College in 1999, and included in his *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon*s, Vonnegut explained his agnostic humanism and its relationship with his love for the Sermon on the Mount:

Some of you may know that I am a humanist or freethinker as were my parents and grandparents and great-grandparents and ancestors . . . If what Jesus said was good, and so much of it was beautiful, what does it matter if he was God or not? If Christ hadn't delivered the Sermon on the Mount, with its message of mercy and pity, I wouldn't want to be a human being. I would just as soon be a rattlesnake. (Vonnegut, 1999)

In a talk to the congregation at the Episcopal Church at Saint Clements he remarked: "I am enchanted by the Sermon on the Mount. Being merciful, it seems to me, is the only good idea we have received so far. Perhaps we will get another idea that good by and by - and then we will have two good ideas" (Vonnegut, 1999).

In his autobiographical nonfiction **The Man without a Country**, he goes back to the Sermon and describes how the Sermon on the Mount is more important and central to humanity than the Ten Commandments:

For some reason the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes. But often, with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course, that's Moses, not Jesus. I haven't heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere. (Vonnegut, 2005)

In an interview to Pauline Sylvia for the *Playboy*, he reiterated this belief in the Christian spirit of charity and sharing embodied in the Sermon: "I admire Christianity more than anything - Christianity as symbolized by gentle people sharing a common bowl" (Sylvia, 1973).

Parallel to Eliot's love and care, a contrary and suppressive perception of religion is also offered in the novel when it deals with another branch of the Rosewater family that lives in Pisquontuit, Rhode Island. This family is the opposite of everything that Eliot Rosewater is attempting to create and practice. The Pisquontuit family also inherits a large fortune they did not labour for:

His father had left him fourteen million dollars, tobacco money mostly. That money, churned and fertilized and hybridized and transmogrified in the hydroponic money farm of the Trust Department of the New England Seafarer's Bank and Trust Company of Boston, had increased by about eight hundred thousand dollars a year since it had been put in Stewart's name. Business seemed to be pretty good. (Vonnegut, 1965)

The Pisquontuits use their wealth to virtually create an unbridgeable and impregnable class system where the poor remain poor and the rich are always rich. So, unlike the dynamic Eliot Rosewater community, the Pisquontuit clan lives in a state of inertia. One representative family of the Pisquontuit group, the Buntlines, typically embody this idea; to them the wealthy and the poor are so differently ordained by God that this status quo should be inviolable. They have a poor, lower-class maid who has to swear an oath at every Sunday dinner declaring that she "will be content with whatever station in life God Almighty may assign me to . . . and always respectful to those whom God has, in His Wisdom, placed above me" (Vonnegut, 1965). Thomas Marvin points out that here religion is invoked by the Pisquontuits to "convince the poor and the lower classes that "an unequal and unjust system is actually God's will" (Marvin, 2002). Here it is obvious that the Buntlines are clearly using Christianity in a very different and unscrupulous way that is quite at variance with Eliot Rosewater's and is contradictory to the biblical injunction.

Kurt Vonnegut's disdain for the rich and preference for the poor has prompted some to read *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* as an advocacy for socialism. Brian McCammack remarks that the novel has a strong streak of socialism in it. But it seems that Vonnegut's insistence on love and charity was derived from George Orwell also. In an interview he

told Laurie Clancy that among the writers who have influenced him most was George Orwell and that he liked to be more like Orwell because he admired Orwell's "concern for the poor . . . and his simplicity" (Clancy 1999). This concern for the poor is an enduring theme in Vonnegut; in his "Preface" to *Jailbird* (1979) where he informs the reader what sense he makes of the Sermon; he summarizes it as,

The prediction by Jesus Christ that the poor in spirit would receive the Kingdom of Heaven; that all who mourned would be comforted; that the meek would inherit the Earth; that those who hungered for righteousness would find it; that the merciful would be treated mercifully; that the pure in heart would see God; that the peacemakers would be called the sons of God; that those who were persecuted for righteousness' sake would also receive the Kingdom of Heaven; and on and on. (Vonnegut, 1979)

This is quintessentially a comprehensive summary of the Sermon on the Mount, echoing Eliot Rosewater's principle in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*.

#### 4. Conclusion

Kurt Vonnegut in many of his works has suggested that personal and individualised acts of love and charity and a new humanism offer the best possibilities for a positive impact on individuals and in private spheres. This idea of Christian humanism is emphatically and overtly demonstrated in *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*. So, Patrick Readon in his review of the novel says that "The message in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls before Swine* so enduring that it will always find a place as part of the American literature canon" (Readon, 2021). As an agnostic humanist, it was immaterial to Vonnegut whether Jesus was divine or not; what mattered to him was that Jesus preached and practiced a principle that was humane. Here, in this novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Kurt Vonnegut has effectively synthesised his understanding and appreciation of Jesus and his message in The Sermon on the Mount with the humanism that was derived from the freethinking he had developed as a creative artist.

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