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A Sense of the Spiritual : Spirituality in John McGahern's "That They May Face the Rising Sun"

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Ireland has moved away from institutional religion in a spectacular fashion in the past decade or so. Numbers attending Mass are on the decrease, as is recourse to the sacraments.

Economic success contributed to establishing a more secular attitude in Irish people, and the revelations with regard to clerical sex abuse have alienated even some of the most fervent supporters of the church's moral authority.

We are living in a post-Christian, modern society with all the traits associated with same: liberal attitudes towards sexuality, increased mobility leading to a more global view of the world, material prosperity for a minority of people while a large number continue to live below the poverty line.

In some ways, we are merely following the path that other developed countries – I think in particular of France – have followed years before us. But we Irish are a special case in that we have been extremely loyal supporters of Rome. It is true that religion played a repressive role in Ireland up until the very recent past. Since independence in 1922, Catholicism was the dominant religion south of the border, and, as was evident when the Eucharistic Congress was held in Dublin in June 1932, there was massive public support for any

event closely connected to the Catholic religion. Fervour can border on theocracy, and our artists, in particular, often found themselves at variance with the Catholic Church.

Joyce abandoned Catholicism in order to devote himself to the God of Art. After him came a number of Irish writers who were at a remove from organised religion because of severe censorship laws and a State whose policies were at times indistinguishable from the dictates of the church. Any attempt to portray sexual relations between men and women (or between two men, as Kate O'Brien discovered to her cost) or to present a slant on religion that didn't conform to the dominant mores of the time, was likely to incur the wrath of the Censorship of Publications Board.

One writer who fell foul of this system was John McGahern, whose second novel, *The Dark*, was banned in 1965. Although he has maintained that censorship was considered something of a joke by writers at the time, McGahern was unfortunate to be on the State payroll as a national school teacher. Therefore, he lost his job after the banning of his book and his marriage in a registry office in

England. He paid a high price for his depiction of the voyage to manhood of an adolescent male, Mahoney, who was the victim of sexual abuse by his father.¹ In addition to that, Mahoney's cousin, Fr. Gerald, causes him to feel more than a little uncomfortable when he visits the boy's bedroom late one night, ostensibly to discuss his vocation. Referring, even obliquely, to a clerical paedophile in the Ireland of the 1960s was moving in on dangerous territory. The boy also has problems with masturbation, and there are many descriptions of his self-abuse.

Hidden Ireland

When we look back on it now, McGahern was reflecting some aspects of the 'hidden Ireland' whose ugly face has begun to reveal itself in the last few decades. In spite of the role Archbishop John Charles McQuaid played in having him removed from his position as a primary school teacher in Scoil Eoin Bhaiste in Clontarf, no bitterness obscures McGahern's view of his religious upbringing. He admits that he "found the Church ceremonies tedious" and he has vivid memories of the Stations of the Cross and the Corpus Christi processions "where flowers and rhododendrons were taken from the woods, and the village was ornamented,



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and the Sacrament was taken out of the church and carried round the village.”² He also admitted in the course of an interview I conducted with him that he has “nothing but gratitude” to the church for introducing him to rituals and a sense of the sacred. He is no longer a practising Catholic but retains an affection and reverence for what is best in Catholic religious observance.

Superb earthly pastoral

But my concern in this article is his most recent novel, *That They May Face The Rising Sun*, which was called a ‘superb Earthly Pastoral’ in Eileen Battersby’s review of it in *The Irish Times*. It describes a year in the existence of a community living around a lake in a setting that closely resembles McGahern’s present abode in Co. Leitrim.

There are no young people in the book, and it is clear that the characters are the last of their ilk. They are in the main still attached to their religion, but this is due as much to habitual adherence as to any deeply felt spiritual convictions. When Jamesie gently teases the Ruttledges, whose house he visits on an almost daily basis, about not going to Mass, Joe replies: “I’d like to attend Mass. I miss going.” (p. 2) A former seminarian, he finds out in the course of his training that he doesn’t

possess faith enough to believe. Jamesie’s reaction to this explanation is: “I don’t believe. None of us believes and we go. That’s no bar.” (p. 2) We have the impression that religion is part of the social fabric of the community in the same way as the other rituals that mark their lives: saving the hay, going to the mart to sell the livestock, having a drink in the pub.

Joe Ruttledge and his wife, Kate, are the exceptions in thinking that there has to be more than habit to religious observance. When Joe left the seminary, his uncle, known as ‘The Shah’ in the local community, “had been supportive at a time when the prevailing climate had been one of accusation and reproach. ‘Let them go to hell’, the Shah had said.” (p. 39) Joe heads to London, partly in order to escape the inevitable questions about why he had ‘cut,’ and returns after a number of years to eke a living out of the land.

Positive witness

Fr Conroy is depicted as a pleasant and unobtrusive man, a force for good within the community. He doesn’t go in for dramatic sermons or laying down the law to his parishioners. Rather he attempts to provide a positive Christian witness. He visits Joe Ruttledge on one occasion and apologises that he is there mainly on the instruc-

tions of his bishop: “I’m not here on my own account. I believe in living and letting live. The man up in Longford (the bishop) is very interested in you and why you left the Church and has me persecuted about you every time he comes.” (p.66) There is a mutual respect between the priest and the agnos-

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tic who co-operate on a number of issues, as in the case of Bill Evans, for example.

Bill was one of the number of Irish children born out of wedlock, or whose parents were poor or deceased, who, on reaching seven, the age of reason, were transferred to places run by priests or religious orders. At the age of 14, Bill was sent out to his first farmer. Joe Ruttledge remembers the boys who worked as skivvies in the college he attended: “they scrubbed and polished floors, emptied garbage and waited at tables.” (p. 10) One unfortunate incident concerning one of them stuck in Ruttledge’s mind. One of



sense of the spiritual

A strong appreciation of the spiritual runs through John McGahern’s That They May Face The Rising Sun, writes Eamon Maher

the boys accidentally ran into the Dean of Studies who administered a brutal beating: "Many who had sat mutely at the tables during the beating were to feel all their lives that they had taken part in the beating through their silence." (p. 11) Bill's visits to the Ruttledge house provide an opportunity for Joe to question him about his life

remembered when everybody in this town would have worn the mark of earth on their foreheads, and if they failed to attend church would have thumbed their own foreheads in secret with the wetted ash of burned newspapers." (p. 232) People now move about as though it was just another day. Naturally enough, his uncle the Shah, does have ash, but he belongs to those whose "culture was that of the church and the family." (p. 236) He is part of a dwindling breed. The Ireland of the 1980s that is captured in this novel is embracing technology and change. The telephone poles that scar the countryside at the end of the novel provide concrete proof that no community is safe from this evolution.

The ash worn on Ash Wednesday serves to remind people of their mortality, which leads me to my last point, the death of Jamesie's brother, Johnny, who followed the woman he loved to England before discovering that his feelings were not reciprocated. Johnny stayed in England but came home every summer. After a pleasant day spent playing darts (his skill was much admired by those who witnessed his exploits in the local pub), he passes away peacefully. Joe is asked to lay out his corpse, which proves to be one of the high points of the novel:

The innate sacredness of each single life stood out more starkly in death than in the whole of its natural life. To see him naked was also to know what his character and clothes had disguised—the wonderful physical specimen he had been. (p. 273)

The spirituality of this moment is not lost on Ruttledge, who says later to Kate: "It made death and the fear of death more natural, more ordinary." (p. 279) When it later comes to burying the corpse, local custom dictates that the head should be facing the rising sun (hence the title of the book) which is at variance with the wishes of the clerical authorities. There is a touch of Celtic mysticism surrounding the laying out of the

body and the burial ritual. We have the impression that their closeness to the land, to the shifting seasons, to life and death, has influenced the people's approach. Joe Ruttledge is a spiritual man who is sensitive to the beauty of nature.

Many people have expressed some disappointment with the novel because it doesn't have a strong story-line, but what I find best about it is its descriptive passages which speak to our soul. I'll end with the following description of the landscape to give people who haven't yet read the novel a chance to appreciate its lyrical qualities:

The night and the lake had not the bright metallic beauty of the night Johnny had died: the shapes of the great trees were softer and brooded even deeper in their mysteries. The water was silent, except for the chattering of the wildfowl, the night air sweet with the scents of the ripening meadows, thyme and clover and meadowsweet, wild woodbine high in the whitethorns mixed with the scent of the wild mint crawling along the gravel on the edge of the water. (p. 296)

You can tell how closely observed nature is in the above quotation. It's as though McGahern is seeking to capture his rural Ireland before it disappears from the landscape. *That They May Face The Rising Sun* is a lyrical and spiritual evocation of all that he holds most dear. I think it's a marvellous novel as well as being an informative one about the evolution of Irish society. ■

1 In The Land of Spices (1941), Helen Archer returns home one day to find her father and a young man, Etienne, 'in the embrace of love'. This harmless line was enough to have the book, which provides a sensitive and sympathetic portrayal of life in a convent boarding school, banned.

2 Interview with Liliane Louvel, in *la Licorne, Numéro Spécial John McGahern, Poitiers: 1995, p.20.*

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but it is clear that he doesn't want to dwell on it. He associates the past with pain and prefers to banish it from his mind. Joe is taken aback one day when Bill cries out: "Stop torturing me!" (p. 12) in response to the questions. After a time Ruttledge realises that he is dealing with a man who chooses to live in the present and who is quite happy as long as he is supplied with food and cigarettes: "Bill Evans could no more look forward than he could look back. He existed in a small closed circle of the present." (p. 167)

His presence in McGahern's novel serves to prod our memories about issues which are very topical at the moment; the poor treatment meted out to children in industrial schools, orphanages, and also, let's not forget it, homes. Our record in Ireland is not in any way admirable in terms of looking after the most vulnerable in our society.

Face of change

I was struck when reading through the novel at how change is reaching into even the most traditional communities in Ireland. Ruttledge is surprised on visiting the town on Ash Wednesday at how few people are wearing ash. "He