

2009

"Ma paroisse est dévorée par l'ennui" : Secularisation in Georges Bernanos' "Journal d'un curé de campagne" and John McGahern's "That They May Face the Rising Sun".

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Recommended Citation

Maher, E., : "Ma paroisse est dévorée par l'ennui" : Secularisation in Georges Bernanos' "Journal d'un curé de campagne" and John McGahern's "That They May Face the Rising Sun" in Bévant, T., Maher, E., Neville, G., O'Brien, E. (eds.) *Issues of Globalisation and Secularisation in France and Ireland*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, ISBN 978 3 631 59052 2

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Grace Neville/Eugene O'Brien
(eds.)

Issues of Globalisation and Secularisation in France and Ireland



National Centre for
Franco-Irish Studies

Studies in Franco-Irish Relations

Edited by Yann Bévant, Eamon Maher, Grace Neville and Eugene O'Brien



PETER LANG

Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

Introduction

Yann Bévant, Eamon Maher, Grace Neville and
Eugene O'Brien

On October 5th 2006, some members of the Party of European Socialists (PES), among them François Hollande, the then General Secretary of the French Socialist Party and Jean Glavany, a Socialist member the French National Assembly and a specialist in the area of secularism (or *laïcité* in French), gathered at the European Parliament in Brussels for a conference on secularism in Europe. The conference followed a significant debate about the centenary of the 1905 French law on the separation of Church and State and the European Constitutional Treaty, and it was an opportunity to compare the relationships between Church and State within the 25 Member States. Is there a common European religious heritage, was the main question on everyone's lips? The preamble of the Constitutional Treaty led to many strong reactions from the governments of different member states. In his introduction, Bernard Poignant, President of the French Socialist delegation to the European Parliament, stressed that secularism French-style does not necessarily apply to the 24 other members of the Union: '*la laïcité à la française n'est pas la règle automatique des 24 autres pays membres de l'Union.*'¹

The word *laïcité* itself cannot even be adequately translated into every European language. In its long evolution, Republican ideology in France has been open to compromise and to the tensions that arise from internal incoherence, yet some key features are identifiable: a distinctive conception of the appropriate political institutions grounded upon democracy and the sovereignty of the nation; a commitment to emancipation through a secular educational system; a concern for individual rights combined with a desire to further social justice, and a distinctive conception of citizenship.

¹ <http://hebdo.parti-socialiste.fr/2006/10/05/110/#more-110>.

Cécile Laborde (School of Public Policy, University College London), in a paper delivered at a conference entitled "The Future of Republicanism: Confronting Theory and Practice in Contemporary Ireland" (University College Dublin, 7 May 2004), delved deeper into the issue by examining the ban on Muslim headscarves in French schools that was approved by the French Parliament on 3 March 2004, and the threefold argument put forward by advocates of the ban in the name of *laïcité* (secularism) – *laïcité-as-neutrality*, *laïcité-as-autonomy*, and *laïcité-as-community* – arguing that this type of *laïcité* need not be jettisoned in favour of either a liberal or a multicultural conception of citizenship. In other words, if the concept of secularism has grown out of a specific historical, social and political context in France, so has its status as a model form of governance.

Indeed, according to Jean Baubérot, Professor at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, in countries like Ireland, Poland or Greece, religion is still part of the national identity, whereas countries such as Germany or Italy were Christian before the State was established.² National boundaries, however, might no longer be relevant. In his books *L'Islam mondialisé*³ et *La Sainte Ignorance, le temps de la religion sans culture*,⁴ Olivier Roy, Director of Research at the CNRS, argues that globalisation has created a market of religions that expands worldwide, irrespective of ideological territories. Besides, the notion of secularism is mentioned in very few national Constitutions. The Irish example is comparatively of interest, because the 1937 Constitution, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, established a very tenuous separation of Church and State by acknowledging 'the special position of the Roman Catholic Church.' What would have been unacceptable to many French people imbued with the values inherited from the first and third Republics was logical for a majority of Irish Catholics whose religion was felt to be part and parcel of their national identity, even though this entailed antagonising a large number of Irish Protestants in the North.

² Jean Baubérot, *Religions et laïcité dans l'Europe des Douze* (Paris : Syros, 1994).

³ Olivier Roy, *L'Islam mondialisé* (Paris : Seuil, 2002).

⁴ Olivier Roy, *La Sainte Ignorance, le temps de la religion sans culture* (Paris : Seuil, 2008).

However, the enlargement of the European Union and the spread of globalisation have accompanied a general process of secularisation in Europe. Today the separation of Church and State is a common feature of the Western world, although some counter examples such as the British Monarchy still persist. Such a trend has often been described as an inevitable consequence of the spread of human rights, seen as the rights of individuals protected by a State which has become neutral in religious matters. George Rupp gives a concise definition of this trend in the first chapter of his book, *Globalization Challenged*, when he writes:

We see fervent convictions in the headlines. The perpetrators of the horrific tragedy of September 11, 2001, are an extreme example [...] but there is an ample supply of others [...]. In the light of this awful carnage, we cannot but sympathize with the call of Western secular liberalism for religious and other ideological views to be tolerated as long as they remain private convictions that do not shape public outcomes. Put bluntly, in this secular liberal view religion and its ideological equivalents must be kept in the closet.⁵

In this regard globalisation presents a formidable challenge to local communities and cultures. It is often described as a process, steadily progressing over time and clearly inexorable in its development, but it is also a world revolution, one of the most profound revolutions civilisation has ever known, and it often appears, to quote Ian Buruma (*The New York Review of Books*, 11 April 2002) as ‘another word for “US imperialism.”’⁶ Again here, comparisons between the French and the Irish experience of globalisation may well prove fruitful. In spite of the fact that the French and the American Revolutions were often seen as sisters born out the Enlightenment, they bore fundamental differences, the main one being that the French Revolution was secular, while the American Revolution had a strong theological background. Today the French are defensive about their perceived identity in the face of Hollywood, Microsoft, MacDonalds and religious sects. The *exception culturelle* claim, as well as Claude Hagege’s stand on language, are signs of a serious suspicion as to the real impact of globalisation. Today the American-Irish connection

⁵ George Rupp, *Globalization Challenged* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p.22.

⁶ Ian Buruma, “The Blood Lust of Identity”, in *The New York Review of Books*, April 11, 2002. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/15241>.

is very strong, and a long history of emigration has played a major part in the process, but one must not forget that for a long time Irish Catholicism considered American culture as yet another Anglo-Protestant threat.

In short, Protestant values were instrumental in the emergence of what George Rupp calls 'western secular liberalism.' The fundamental elements of that secular creed are free markets and equal opportunity, free elections and liberal democracy, constitutional politics and the rule of law. Although such values were not theological, they are clearly the product of a Protestant culture. It could then be argued that the American ideology – what James Kurth calls 'the American creed'⁷ – is a kind of secularised version of Protestantism. In a global world dominated by the United States, religious issues must therefore not be underestimated, as they help us to challenge long-established constructions of religious or secular identities. Given their particular historical heritage, the French and Irish examples should provide food for thought in the debate. If old-style French secularism is being challenged by American-style multiculturalism, Irish Catholicism today has to face the challenge of a deep and rapid transformation of mentalities in Ireland: changes that would have been unthinkable at the beginning of the 1980s actually occurred even before the end of the millennium. This was the case for instance with the end of the ban on divorce in the Republic following the 1999 referendum. The rise of the Celtic Tiger also coincided with the emergence of more individualistic and materialistic values and behaviours. As a consequence, old teachings and community ties have ceased to be the norm in an increasingly individualistic and work-driven environment.

According to James Kurth, Professor of Political Science at Swarthmore College, there could be three paradigms or perspectives from which one may view the role of religion in the globalisation process: (1) the modernist, (2) the post-modernist, and (3) the pre-modernist.⁸

The Modernist Perspective: The modernist perspective will seem the most familiar. It is the perspective of most intellectuals and academics. The mod-

⁷ James Kurth, "The Real Clash", in *National Interest*, Fall 1994.
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2751/is_n37?tag=content;coll Accessed 4 January 2009.

⁸ James Kurth, "Religion and Globalization", in *The Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs*, FRPI, Vol.7, n°7, 1999, p.13.

ernist perspective has had a particular and peculiar view of secularisation. Beginning with the Enlightenment, modernists have entertained the prospect that all processes of secularisation would eventually look alike; the different religions would all end up sharing the same secular and 'rational' philosophy. At a somewhat more sophisticated level, the modernist perspective sometimes views religious revivals as a reaction to the Enlightenment and modernisation.

The Post-Modernist Perspective: The post-Enlightenment, post-modernist perspective joins with the Enlightenment, modernist one in rejecting traditional, pre-modern religions. But this perspective also rejects the Enlightenment, modernist values of rationalism, empiricism, and science, along with the Enlightenment, modernist structures of capitalism, bureaucracy, and even liberalism. The core value of post-modernism is expressive individualism.

The Pre-Modernist Perspective: There is an alternative perspective, one which is post-modern in its occurrence but pre-modern in its sensibility. It has been best represented and articulated by the Roman Catholic Church, especially by the late Pope John Paul II. The Pope's understanding obviously drew from his experiences in Communist Poland, but it encompasses events in other countries as well.

Now, at the beginning of the third Christian millennium, we are not only in the globalisation revolution, but also in the post-modern era. What will now be the responses of people to the deep insecurities produced by globalisation? Is it possible they then may be more theological and religious than ideological and secular? What alternatives exist? If we follow Olivier Roy's analysis, new religious fundamentalisms want to get rid of culture, as they perceive it as an obstacle to the true faith which is only to be found in the original Scriptures. This is what Roy calls 'la Sainte Ignorance.' But he acknowledges that ignorance is a two-way street: '*parallèlement, la culture profane n'a plus de savoir religieux [...] faute de comprendre les croyants, l'ignorance profane a tendance à voir dans le religieux une folie; elle l'envisage comme un phénomène à réduire et, ce faisant, elle contribue à réduire l'espace de la démocratie.*'⁹

In such a context, the aim of this study is to examine and compare various aspects of the French and the Irish experiences of these phenomena, and to assess what understanding and perspectives the two countries may have to offer to the debate. The book is composed of a selection of papers delivered at the highly successful 4th AFIS Conference which was

⁹ Claude Roy, « Les religions à l'épreuve de la mondialisation », in *Le Monde*, December 21-22, 2008, p.14.

held at the University of Rennes 2 in May 2008. The first section provides comparative chapters on poets and fiction writers such as Bernanos, McGahern, Heaney, Mahon, Bolger, Proust, with a view to examining how secular and/or religious representations may have influenced their works. Jean Brihault concludes the section with an assessment of how post-modern writing – taking Dermot Bolger as his example – may well be in harmony with the spirit of globalisation. The second section is dedicated to the changes affecting the notions of secularisation and belief in what are increasingly globalised French and Irish societies. Starting with a critical assessment by Catherine Maignant, there are also studies of the ‘redefinition of secularisation and restructuration of belief’ in both countries by Jean-Christophe Penet, before Eugene O’Brien concludes with how there is a need for a negotiation between the twin forces of globalisation and secularisation.

The editors wish to gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the conference and the publication of the proceedings by the University of Rennes 2, the Service Culturel de l’Ambassade de France en Irlande, Tallaght Institute of Technology and University College Cork. Nous leur en sommes fort reconnaissants, d’autant plus que cette publication ne se serait pas réalisée sans cette aide précieuse.

Yann Bévant, Eamon Maher, Grace Neville and Eugene O’Brien (editors)

Eamon Maher

“Ma paroisse est dévorée par l’ennui”: Secularisation in Georges Bernanos’ *Journal d’un curé de campagne* and John McGahern’s *That They May Face the Rising Sun*

Georges Bernanos (1888-1948) is a notable figure in the genre commonly referred to as the ‘roman catholique’ in France. He is generally known as a writer with a fascination for the supernatural and the mystical. Several of his novels feature priests as their main characters and many possess saintly qualities. He also displayed a nostalgic attachment to the French monarchical system in which the Catholic Church had a powerful role in civic governance and he bemoaned the decadence of the ‘entre-deux-guerres’ period, dominated to a large extent by secular values. In his excellent *Préface* to the Pléiade edition of Bernanos’s novels, Gaëton Picon notes how in his polemical essays written between 1937 and his death in 1948, Bernanos railed against events like the capitulation of the Munich Agreement, the second World War, the armistice, and French collaboration during the German Occupation. In all of these essays there is an underlying denunciation of what Picon describes as ‘*la décadence française, la perte du sens de l’honneur, la barbarie technocratique et totalitaire.*’¹

Never one to mince his words, Bernanos’ novels convey a feeling of despair at how easily people slip into spiritual apathy, as well as an exhortation to his readers to be aware of the dangers of unthinking and unbridled secularism. Picon states that he was a man destined for one of two specific vocations:

¹ Gaëton Picon, “Bernanos Romancier”, *Préface, Bernanos Œuvres romanesques* (Paris : NRF/Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961), p.ix. All references to Bernanos and his works will be from this edition, with the page numbers in brackets.

Il ne pouvait être que prêtre ou romancier, celui pour qui l'âme du prochain est sinon Dieu, du moins la médiation par laquelle Dieu se manifeste. Il a su très tôt que sa vocation n'était pas de devenir prêtre : il a su très tôt qu'il serait romancier. (xii)

In the difficult choice he faced between two vocations, he resembles the Irish writer John McGahern, who promised his dying mother he would one day become a priest, only to end up a writer. He wrote in *Memoir*: 'Instead of being a priest of God, I would be the God of a small, vivid world':² the world of which he spoke was, of course, a literary one. As a young boy, as a result of his mother's devotion to the Catholic faith, McGahern had no doubts as to what the future held for him: 'One day I would become a priest. After the Ordination Mass, I would place my freshly anointed hands in blessing on my mother's head. We'd live together in the priest's house and she'd attend each morning Mass and take communion from my hands.' (*M*, 62-63) Given such a background, it is understandable that his novels are shot through with references to Catholic rituals and practices. He ceased practicing his religion during his early twenties and although in 1965 he controversially lost his job as a primary school teacher in Clontarf, due mainly to his marriage to a Finnish divorcee in a registry office in London and the banning of his second novel, *The Dark* – the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, was very instrumental in this decision – he remained positively disposed to Catholicism, as expressed towards the end of *Memoir*: 'It [the Church] was the sacred weather of my early life, and I could no more turn against it than I could turn on any deep part of myself.' (*M*, 222)

McGahern's problems with religion stemmed from what he viewed as the excessive interference by priests and religious into the private (for this one can more often than not read sexual) lives of their flock. By 1950, he considered the Irish Free State had become a theocracy in all but name. His death in 2006 heralded in a way the end of a generation of Irish writers for whom a religious awareness was by dint of upbringing and education almost a given. Unlike their immediate predecessors Frank O'Connor and Seán Ó Faoláin, for whom political and social engagement were a prerequisite, writers like McGahern, Aidan Higgins, Brian Moore, John Broderick and Edna O'Brien placed much more emphasis on what

² John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber&Faber, 2005), p.205. Subsequent quotations from this text will be indicated by *M*, followed by the page number.

Maurice Harmon refers to as 'the private graph of feeling within the individual person.'³

In this paper, I will deal with the ever-increasing level of secularisation and dechristianisation in one novel by both Georges Bernanos and John McGahern. Although sixty six years separate their publication (*Journal* was published in 1936 and *That They May Face the Rising Sun* in 2002) and even though the social context is quite different in the two novels, there are enough similarities to allow for a fruitful comparative study. One should bear in mind also that the 'entre-deux-guerres' period in French history, although it saw the emergence of a rich crop of talented writers who placed the Catholic faith at the centre of their literary preoccupations, was a time when, generally speaking, Catholicism was at a low ebb in France. *They May Face the Rising Sun*, as we shall see, captures in an elegiac manner the lives of an elderly community living around a lake in rural Ireland. This community is almost frozen in time and very little about their lives has changed in the past forty odd years. They still go to Mass and observe their religious duties, but one gets the distinct impression that they are the last of their ilk.

Bernanos' *Journal d'un curé de campagne* provides a wonderful insight into a rural French parish that appears to have little or no meaningful engagement with the Catholic religion. The inhabitants of the 'diseased' parish are much more concerned with making money and living hedonistic lives than they are with ensuring eternal salvation. The young curé, who is regularly tricked by local traders and rebuked by his superiors for not displaying sufficient authority, wonders how his parish could be so completely in the throes of evil. On the first page of the *Journal* we read:

Ma paroisse est dévorée par l'ennui, voilà le mot. Comme tant d'autres paroisses ! L'ennui les dévore sous nos yeux et nous n'y pouvons rien. Quelque jour peut-être la contagion nous gagnera, nous découvrirons en nous ce cancer. (1031)

Ironically, the priest will fall victim in a real sense to the metaphorical 'cancer' he describes, in a process that suggests that he takes the disease

³ Maurice Harmon, "Generations Apart: 1925-1975", in *The Irish Novel in Our Time*, edited by Maurice Harmon and Patrick Raftery (Lille: Publications de l'Université de Lille 3, 1976), pp.49-65, p.54.

that is corroding his parish into himself and dies from it. For him, the ambient cancer is akin to moral decay or 'ennui':

Mais je me demande si les hommes ont jamais connu cette contagion de l'ennui, cette lèpre ? Un désespoir avorté, une forme turpide du désespoir, qui est sans doute comme la fermentation d'un christianisme décomposé.
(1032)

Although a poor administrator – he is made fun of by his catechism class, looked down on by the local aristocracy and fails in his efforts to rejuvenate his parish – this man possesses a spiritual quality that has an impact on many of those with whom he comes into contact. One of his few friends, le curé de Torcy, is as effective in running his parish as the younger priest is ineffective in his. He decries the lack of toughness in the young priests emerging from the seminaries: "*De mon temps, on formait des hommes d'Église [..], oui, des hommes d'Église [..], des chefs de paroisse, des maîtres, quoi, des hommes de gouvernement.*" (1037) But he senses in his young confrere a humble sincerity that appeals to him. He says: "*Je te traite de va-nu-pieds, mais je t'estime. Prends le mot pour ce qu'il vaut, c'est un grand mot.*" Many of the other priests in the novel go about their work as if they are simply 'fonctionnaires' whose business is about coming up with the right kind of formulae in their sermons, the correct tone when addressing people, the ability to keep as many of their parishioners, especially the wealthy influential ones, reasonably happy. At a workshop he attends, Ambricourt notes: "*Aucun de ces hommes ne saurait croire l'Église en péril, pour quelque raison que ce soit. Et certes ma confiance n'est pas moindre, mais probablement d'une autre espèce. Leur sécurité m'épouvante.*" (1054)

Unlike his brother priests, the curé d'Ambricourt feels no complacency about the future of the Church. All around him he detects evidence of slippage. In the local château, it becomes apparent that M. le Comte is having an affair with his daughter Chantal's tutor, Mlle Louise. Chantal tells the curé all the sordid details of her father's adultery and he feels her pain and the anger she directs at her mother for doing nothing about what is happening under her nose. She is a young woman in revolt against the world and God. She has a morbid fascination with the priest, searches for his prurience by describing how her father and Mlle Louise don't even attempt to hide their affair any more: "*Je les ai entendus cette nuit. J'étais juste sous leur fenêtre, dans le parc. Ils ne prennent même plus la peine de fermer les rideaux.*" (1134) Ambricourt possesses a gift for read-

ing into souls and in a moment of illumination asks Chantal to give him the letter that is in her bag. Mesmerised, she hands him a piece of paper on which she had written a harsh note to her father. She cannot comprehend how the priest could have known about the letter: "*Vous êtes donc le diable !*", she says, unable to come up with any other explanation for the discovery.

If Chantal is deeply unhappy, she shares that condition with her mother. The most famous episode in the novel is the famous interview between the curé and Mme la Comtesse in the course of which it transpires that she has never forgiven God for the tragic death of her infant son. She still fulfilled her religious duties and seemed a dutiful wife and mother, but she was dead of heart. The priest tells her that she risks being separated for all eternity from her son if she doesn't change her ways. "*Dieu vous brisera*", he shouts angrily, in a moment of unusual animation. She retorts furiously: "*Me briser ? Il m'a déjà brisée. Que peut-il désormais contre moi ? Il m'a pris mon fils.*" According to the curé, however, in one of the most quoted lines in all of Bernanos' work: "*L'enfer, c'est de ne plus aimer.*" By ignoring the needs of her remaining child, Chantal, and her husband, the comtesse is jeopardising her own salvation and that of her family. She had never really considered them or their grief in all the years since her son's passing. She was simply waiting for the joyous moment when they would be reunited in eternity.

The exchange between the young priest and the comtesse, two individuals separated by social standing, age and experience, is remarkable for putting the issue of salvation at the heart of their discussion. Slowly but inexorably, the priest breaks down the comtesse's resistance, her revolt, as he outlines the path to a peace about which he can only dream himself. As he leaves the château, he is drained from the intensity of what has occurred (he has been living on a diet of bread and wine, symbols of the Eucharist, for quite some time and is clearly unwell). Later that evening, the comtesse sends him a note of thanks: "*Que vous dire ? Le souvenir désespéré d'un petit enfant me tenait éloignée de tout, dans une solitude effrayante, et il me semble qu'un autre enfant m'a tirée de cette solitude.*" She informs him that she is going to confession later that evening and will say that she has sinned against '*l'espérance*' every day for eleven years.

One might have imagined that this episode would have marked a change of fortunes in the life and career of the curé d'Ambricourt, but circumstances dictate otherwise. The comtesse dies in her sleep that night and Chantal, who had been spying on part of the interview, maintains

that the priest had caused her mother great agitation and may have been responsible for her death. The comte's uncle, M. le chanoine de la Motte-Beuvron, attempts to discover what exactly happened the previous afternoon which, given the confidential nature of the exchange, the younger man refuses to reveal. The canon also warns him about Chantal and the malicious rumours she is spreading about him. Upset at what is happening, the curé asks Torcy what people have against him, to which his friend replies: "*D'être ce que vous êtes, il n'y a pas de remède à cela. Que voulez-vous, mon enfant, ces gens ne haïssent pas votre simplicité, ils s'en défendent, elle est comme une espèce de feu qui les brûle.*" (1174) The curé d'Ambricourt lives his life by a different set of rules to those observed by others. For him, what matters is his relationship with God, making people aware of the divine presence in their lives, the importance of self-sacrifice and unconditional love for anyone wishing to live a satisfying life. He is an agent of grace for suffering souls like the comtesse, and yet he remains a '*prisonnier de la Sainte Agonie.*' (1187)

The point Bernanos seeks to make in this novel is that in the midst of what is the most hostile and apathetic circumstances, grace can win out. The curé has to cope with unenviable odds. The parish to which he is assigned is far from well-disposed to what he represents and to the message he brings. He considers himself a lamentable failure and is perceived as such by many of those to whom he ministers. Dechristianisation and the dominance of secular values mean that Ambricourt will always be swimming against the tide. His poor health further accentuates the difficulties he experiences. Towards the end of the novel, he finds himself in Lille, where a consultant informs him that he has terminal cancer and has not long to live. His first reaction is a very human one: '*J'étais seul, inexprimablement seul, en face de ma mort, et cette mort n'était que la privation de l'être – rien de plus.*' (1241)

As the awareness of his condition seeps in, however, he reaches an acceptance of his fate. What surprises him most is just how attached he was to this world, a world that seemed to bring him nothing but suffering. His last hours are spent in the apartment of his former acquaintance from the seminary, Louis Dufréty, now living with a woman who worked in the sanatorium he was sent to when suffering from tuberculosis. Dufréty is anxious to hide the true nature of his relationship with this woman. Ambricourt, impatient at his dissimulation, says to him: "*Si j'avais le malheur un jour de manquer aux promesses de mon ordination, je préférerais que ce fût pour l'amour d'une femme plutôt qu'à la suite de ce que tu appelles ton évolution intellectuelle.*" (1248) When he meets

the woman, he knows instinctively that she is the victim of her lover's self-absorption, his inability to decide once and for all that he will never become a priest. In this dilapidated apartment, inhabited by two lost souls, the priest faces up to the prospect of eternity. The final words he utters, as related by Dufréty are: "*Qu'est-ce que cela fait ? Tout est grâce.*" The crucifixion is over. Grace has prevailed. A seemingly insignificant and inept man overcomes the huge obstacles that are sent his way by calmly accepting his lot. The good he has done is only known to the few whom he has touched and yet the readers who have access to his inner thoughts are left with the impression that they have been placed in the presence of a saintly man whose humility and self-effacement tended to occlude a vibrant inner life of prayer and sacrifice.

With McGahern's last novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, the dramatic side of Catholicism is not a central concern. The local priest, Fr. Conroy, is not engaged in a desperate struggle to save the souls of his parishioners. Mostly, he leaves them to their own devices unless something serious occurs and he has no option other than to intervene. But the inhabitants of the community around the lake are elderly for the most part and thus less likely to rebel against a priest whom they recognise as one of their own. Fr. Conroy has a small farm on which he keeps some stock: he can be seen at the local marts where he is quite indistinguishable from the other farmers. The community is still attached to religion, but only because it is part of an immutable whole. They dislike change and the narrative follows a circular path in which season follows season and the religious festivals punctuate the calendar year. There is very little by way of plot and you have the impression that you are living as much as reading: you become totally absorbed in the rituals of the people as they go about their daily tasks and repeat the same formulaic verbal exchanges that they have been doing for years.

Most of the action – what there is of it – revolves around the house of Joe and Kate Ruttledge, returned emigrants, who settle on a small farm in a setting that is strikingly similar to where McGahern and his second wife, Madeline, returned to live in the 1970s. Although viewed as quaint in their farming methods – their liking for their animals elicits the following comment from the handyman, Patrick Ryan: "There's an old Short-horn they milk for the house that would nearly sit in an armchair and put specs on to read the *Observer*"⁴ – the Ruttledges are nevertheless well

⁴ John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (London: Faber&Faber,

accepted in the community. They are especially close to Jamesie, a sensitive, good-natured man with a love of gossip. In the opening pages of the novel, Jamesie inquires as to why they Joe and Kate do not go to Mass. When Joe, a former seminarian, says he would like to go but that he does not believe, Jamesie retorts: "None of us believes and we go. That's no bar." (*TRS*, 2)

This is a revealing comment when one examines the mentality that lies behind it. For Jamesie and the other people living in this area, the Mass is more a social occasion than a serious spiritual experience. Joe Rutledge abandoned his studies for the priesthood when he discovered that he could not buy into all the fundamentals of Catholicism. He feels that it would be hypocritical for him to attend Mass in such circumstances. Jamesie goes to church, in his own words, "to see the whole performance... We go to see all the other hypocrites" (*TRS*, 2), which, if we are to believe him, reduces the Mass to a spectacle bereft of any genuinely spiritual dimension. Such an attitude would have been very alien to Bernanos' curé, and yet plenty of the parishioners in Ambricourt, possibly because of the official separation of Church and State in France in 1905, would have had a rather sceptical opinion of the clergy who for too long ruled rural France in particular with an iron hand. Whereas a certain 'laïcité' had been strong in France since the Enlightenment, and manifested itself spectacularly during the French Revolution, in Ireland there was not the same tendency to resist clerical influence. Instead, what seems to have happened is that, with the arrival of increased prosperity, people have begun to find comfort in things other than religion. Hence attendance at religious ceremonies has fallen sharply – due to a multiplicity of reasons, that are well captured by Tom Inglis in his book *Global Ireland: Same Difference*: 'In the past 50 years, Ireland changed from being a very isolated, insular, Catholic rural society revolving around agriculture, to a more open, liberal-individualist, secular urban society revolving around business, commerce and high-tech, transnational corporations.'⁵

The community in McGahern's novel, because of their peripheral location, are sheltered somewhat from many of these developments. Patrick Ryan, a bachelor with no children, is conscious that they are the last

2002), p.76. Subsequent quotations from this text will be indicated by *TRS*, followed by the page number.

⁵ Tom Inglis, *Global Ireland: Same Difference* (London: Routledge, 2008), p.7.

of their kind: "After us there'll be nothing but the water hen and the swan." (*TRS*, 45) The elegiac tone is reinforced with other similar observations throughout the novel. In the course of a few months, Patrick loses his brother as well as a close friend, Johnny, and this is possibly what prompts him to observe that when he and his generation pass away there will be nobody to replace them. People might be relocated from Dublin and elsewhere to live in this rural setting, but they will not be the same sort of people; they will not share the same customs and beliefs. For example, when they are digging Johnny's grave, they make sure that his head is facing the west. When Ruttledge asks why they do this, Ryan tells him: "He sleeps with his head to the west... so that when he wakes he may face the rising sun." (*TRS*, 282) Such practices were (and sometimes still are) commonplace among Irish people who, although outwardly in conformity with the dictates of the Catholic Church, still follow their individual belief system. As McGahern observed in *Memoir*: 'Most people went about their sensible pagan lives as they had done for centuries, seeing this conformity as just another veneer they had to pretend to wear like all the others they had worn since the time of the Druids.' (*M*, 211)

We have noted how Fr. Conroy is portrayed in a largely positive light. The novel is set in the 1980s and already the waning influence of the Catholic Church in rural Ireland is noticeable. Fr. Conroy is embarrassed to have to visit the Ruttledges on behalf of the Bishop who is anxious to know why Joe decided to pack in his studies for the priesthood. Joe recognizes that Fr. Conroy is essentially a decent man who is fighting a losing battle against the diminishing levels of belief in his parish, even though he encounters none of the aggressive anti-clericalism that Ambri-court endures. Joe is struck, for example, by how few people wear ashes on their forehead on Ash Wednesday, something that would have been unthinkable a couple of decades previously. Joe and Fr. Conroy work together to ensure that Bill Evans, an unpaid labourer on a local farm, gets accommodation in the new housing scheme that is being built in the village. Bill is a stark reminder of the harsh treatment meted out to many young Irish people, male and female, who found themselves in the notorious industrial schools or Magdalene laundries during the middle decades of the last century. He is fortunate to find people who are sympathetic to his plight and give him food and cigarettes. When Ruttledge interrogates him about certain traumatic events in his life, he is promptly told to stop torturing him. Ruttledge then realises: 'Bill Evans could no more look forward than he could look back. He existed in a small closed

circle of the present. Remembrance of things past and dreams of things to come were instruments of torture.' (*TRS*, 167)

We have already noted how John McGahern exposed himself to the full rigour of the Censorship of Publications Board when, in his second novel, *The Dark* (1965), he dared to write of masturbation, sexual abuse by a father on his son, and suspected clerical sex abuse. Irish society was not ready to deal with such taboo subjects at that time, but McGahern was always someone who felt compelled to portray life as he saw it, and not in the idealised, sanitised version promulgated by both Church and State in the 1940s and 50s when he was growing up. There were several children like Bill Evans who were sent to Industrial Schools, often simply for having the misfortune to come from a deprived background or to be born out of wedlock. McGahern felt strongly about social issues and, while he was always careful to draw a clear distinction between journalism and fiction, there is a sense in which his novels supply a canvas on which the social history of a nation is inscribed. Take the disturbing opening to *The Dark* as an example. Young Mahoney, the protagonist, is the victim of an simulated beating by his father who has heard him utter an oath under his breath. Forced to remove his trousers and underpants and to bend over a chair, the boy winces as the belt strikes the leather of the seat and he is horrified when he cannot prevent himself from urinating on the floor. The father is clearly aroused by this feeling of power: 'He didn't lift a hand, as if the stripping compelled by his will alone gave him pleasure.'⁶ The son, totally humiliated by this episode, which takes place in full view of his sisters, is damaged emotionally by what can only be described as a problematic relationship with his widowed father.

Worse than the beatings is the sexual abuse, after which always comes a feeling of wretchedness and guilt at what he refers to as 'the dirty rags of intimacy.' (*TD*, 19) The father strokes his son's stomach and slowly goes down to caress his genitalia. The stark description below illustrates just how daring McGahern was, given that he was writing this in the Ireland of four decades ago:

The words drummed softly as the stroking hands moved on his belly, down and up, touched with the fingers the thighs again, and came again on the back.

⁶ John McGahern, *The Dark* (London: Faber&Faber, 1965), p.8. Subsequent quotations from this text will be indicated by *TD*, followed by the page number.

"You like that. It's good for you", the voice breathed jerkily now to the stroking hands.

"I like that."

There was nothing else to say, it was better not to think or care. (*TD*, 20)

What makes passages like this all the more horrendous is the fact that Mahoney senior is not portrayed in a completely negative light. He is seen in some ways as a pitiful, lonely figure, dissatisfied with his life as a small farmer and ultimately powerless to control his unhappy destiny. In many ways, the Catholic Church, in the way in which it bolstered and supported paternal authority, could be held some way responsible for a domestic life governed by fear and loathing. I am making this brief digression in order to demonstrate that McGahern's view of the Church and Irish society had mellowed somewhat between the publication of his second and final novel. A certain amount of anger is palpable in *The Dark* in relation to the type of hypocrisy that characterised religious practice in Ireland in the past. Mahoney senior is one example of an outwardly devout Catholic who feels no compunction about beating and abusing his children.

However badly he may be perceived (his son is reconciled with him at the end of the novel), he compares favourably with the lecherous Mr Ryan, whose lascivious attentions cause Joan Mahoney to ask her brother to arrange for her departure from the position set up for her in this house by their cousin, Fr Gerald. Mr Ryan is considered one of his most up-standing parishioners by the priest. This all happens the summer before Mahoney's Leaving Certificate when he visits Fr Gerald in order to explore his interest in becoming a priest. The visit starts badly when his sister, during their stop off at the Ryans', tells Mahoney: "It's worse than home." (*TD*, 63) Late that night, Fr Gerald enters the boy's room on the pretext of discussing his vocation with him:

[...] you stiffened when his arm went around your shoulder, was this to be another of the midnight horrors with your father. His hand closed on your arm. You wanted to curse or wrench yourself free but you had to lie stiff as a board, stare straight ahead at the wall, afraid before anything of meeting the eyes you knew were searching your face. (*TD*, 70-71)

Fr Gerald then asks his cousin if he has made any decision about the priesthood and proceeds to ask a series of leading questions, as if they are in the confessional: Has he ever desired to kiss a girl? Did he excite himself at the thought? Cause seed to spill in the excitement? Mahoney an-

swers the questions truthfully and proceeds to ask the priest if he ever had to fight the sin of masturbation himself when he was younger. Fr Gerald does not reply, however: 'There was such silence that you winced.' (TD, 73) The boy feels awful at having revealed his peccadilloes without any reciprocal admission from the priest. Then comes anger:

What right had he to come and lie with you in bed, his body hot against yours, his arm around your shoulders. Almost as the cursed nights when you father used to stroke your thighs. (TD, 74)

There is a sense in which this unsavory incident with his cousin confirms Mahoney's decision to abandon his vocation for the priesthood. It also strengthens his resolve to no longer passively accept the abuse which his father has inflicted on him. Nothing untoward actually happens with his cousin, but it is clear that he is potentially under threat from this quarter also. The following day, in a rare manifestation of defiance, he frees his sister from the clutches of the Ryans and announces to his cousin that he is leaving sooner than expected. He also explains how Joan is being interfered with by Mr Ryan but realises that Fr Gerald will not do anything that would potentially alienate one of his most influential parishioners. The priest then seeks to regain the lost ground by talking more honestly to his cousin about the pitfalls of the priesthood:

A priest who ministers to the *bourgeoisie* becomes more a builder of churches, bigger and more comfortable churches, and schools than a preacher of the Word of God. The Society influences the Word far more than the Word influences the Society. (TD, 99-100)

But it is now too late to make such pronouncements: the young boy has already made up his mind that the priesthood is not for him. Fr Gerald's comments above would chime with the views of the curé d'Ambricourt, who conspires to place himself at a remove from the local aristocracy, but not in a way that gains him favour with the merchant classes or the labourers. He is in no doubt that his commitment has to be to the Word. In that respect, a discussion he has with Dr Delbende, a friend of Torcy's, is revealing. Delbende resents the fact that the Church does nothing to prevent the spread of injustice. His agnosticism has its roots in what he views as the elitism that lies at the heart of religion:

Reste qu'un pauvre, un vrai pauvre, un honnête pauvre ira de lui-même se coller aux dernières places dans la maison du seigneur, la sienne, et qu'on

n'a jamais vu, qu'on ne verra jamais un suisse, empanaché comme un corbillard, le venire chercher au fond de l'église pour l'amener dans le chœur, avec les égards dus à un Prince – un Prince du sang chrétien. (1095)

The curé d'Ambricourt senses a 'blessure profonde de l'âme' in Delbende and is aware that such wounds seem to attract him to people: '*Une douleur vraie qui sort de l'homme appartient d'abord à Dieu, il me semble. J'essaie de la recevoir humblement dans mon cœur, telle quelle, je m'efforce de l'y faire mienne, de l'aimer. Et je comprends tout le sens caché de l'expression devenue banale « communier avec », car il est vraie que cette douleur, je la communie.*' (1096) Perhaps this is the type of approach that is needed if the Catholic Church is ever going to successfully combat secularism: priests with the ability to 'commune with' suffering, to make it their own. An identification with the poor (in the spiritual more than in the material sense) is also essential, as is an ability to provide prophetic witness rather than triumphal demonstrations. Delbende dies in a shooting accident (that bears all the hallmarks of a suicide) and Ambricourt reflects on what he should have said to the doctor:

J'aurais dû dire au docteur Delbende que l'Église n'est pas seulement ce qu'il imagine, une espèce d'État souverain avec ses lois, ses fonctionnaires, ses armées – un moment, si glorieux qu'on voudra, de l'histoire des hommes. Elle marche à travers le temps comme une troupe de soldats à travers des pays inconnus où tout ravitaillement normal est impossible. (1103-1104)

Bernanos was a firm believer in an evangelising, democratic Church which would value its least significant member as much as the wealthiest and the most famous. In the curé d'Ambricourt, we have a man whose heredity is somewhat dubious (he was born into a family containing hopeless alcoholics and unsuccessful businessmen), but who places his trust in a religion where only God is fit to judge one's actions; only He can determine whether a person is saved or damned. The spectacular moments when the curé is granted insights into others' souls are counterbalanced by the drudgery of his daily routine, which is marked by embarrassing rejections, repeated proof of his inadequacy. We sense he may well be a saint but, like Graham Greene's whiskey-priest in *The Power and the Glory*, he is ministering to people who are in general incapable of a strong interior life. They are far more concerned with saving money than saving their souls. And yet he perseveres, in the hope that one day perhaps God's glory will illuminate the earth.

There is much more that could be written about the manner in which Bernanos and McGahern, albeit in very different ways, delineate two communities dominated by a secular 'ennui'. Whereas Bernanos, in the person of Ambricourt, sets about combating the 'cancer' of secularism, McGahern, like his alter ego Ruttledge, conveys a sense of a peaceful dying out of local Catholic beliefs and customs. For McGahern, there were no certainties when it came to contemplating eternity. Ruttledge's reply to Jamesie who asks him if he believes in an afterlife is revealing in this regard: "I don't know from what source life comes, other than out of nature, or for what purpose. I suppose it's not unreasonable to think that we go back to whatever meaning we came from." (TRS, 294) Such an answer would not have sat easily with Ambricourt who faces into eternity with definite convictions: '*Pourquoi m'inquiéter ? Pourquoi prévoir ? Si j'ai peur, je dirai : j'ai peur, sans honte. Que le premier regard du Seigneur, lorsque m'apparaîtra sa Sainte Face, soit donc un regard qui rassure !*' (1256)

Both writers wrote movingly about death. In Bernanos' case, there was the consolation that the afterlife would bring his characters into personal contact with the Divine Presence. With McGahern, there was no such conviction. One should not read too much into his decision to organise a traditional funeral Mass, concluding with a decade of the Rosary at his graveside in Aughawillan cemetery. Patsy McGarry wrote a year after the writer's death: 'Maybe it was this desire to avoid any shadow being cast on his mother's deep trust in God which prompted him – and unbeliever – to allow the funeral Mass to be said and his Christian burial beside her afterwards.'⁷ A great upholder of local tradition, McGahern would also have been keenly aware of what family and friends might have expected from a funeral. So long a victim of religious and moral intolerance, McGahern had the ability to differentiate between the Church as institution and as a manifestation of the People of God. The rampant secularisation of Ireland would not have filled him with any joy and he retained, though in a different way to Bernanos, a nostalgic attachment to the riches the Catholic Church brought him, as well as an awareness of the pharisaic attitude it instilled in many people. This supplies adequate explanation, if such were needed, for the type of funeral service he or-

⁷ Patsy McGarry, "Writer's Funeral Was Triumph of Compassion", in *The Irish Times*, 28 March 2007.

ganised. One final quote from *Memoir* demonstrates the attachment the writer always retained for religious rituals:

The church ceremonies always gave me pleasure, and I miss them even now. In an impoverished time they were my first introduction to an indoor beauty, of luxury and ornament, ceremony and sacrament and mystery. I remember still the texture of the plain, brown, flat cardboard boxes in which the red and white and yellow tulips came on the bus when there were no flowers anywhere. (*M*, 202)

In this chapter, I wish to show how a poetics of the present, discernible in the work of Heaney and Mahon, suggests a keen awareness of the agency by which we can begin to adjust to global cultural transformations with our local environments. Globalisation demands that we understand the phenomenological terms of this relationship. Mahon was prompted one critic to comment that it is 'the very condition of our times that informs his poetry'.¹⁰ We can observe in Heaney also how the poetry measures the fundamentally paradoxical terms that constitute experience, the curious details of being that Heaney describes in 'Postscript',¹¹ where a subject rendered contingent by an unpredictable world is described in the poem: 'You see neither here nor there / A lurry through which knows all / Strange things pass'.¹² These words foreground a notion of the literary that works around the paradoxical condition of the present: neither their common, nor not at all, most useful. It provides a qualifying ground re-forming our idea of the contemporary Irish poet as he relates to the theme of postmodernity and the subject.

¹⁰ Nick James, 'Reading Postscript': 'The Reader's Introduction of Derek Mahon', in *Contemporary Irish Poetry: The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (London: Colin Lyndon Clark, 1992).

¹¹ Heaney's reader never also ignores the condition of one being contingent with the world. Heaney is certainly a poet who is acutely aware of the condition of being contingent. Lynda R. Hughes has argued the lurry poem is 'a poem about a poem as it is written, just as it is, in the world of the poem and the world of the poet'. 'The lurry poem is a poem about the lurry poem and the lurry poem is a poem about the lurry poem and the lurry poem is a poem about the lurry poem.' *The lurry poem is a poem about the lurry poem and the lurry poem is a poem about the lurry poem*. (London: Faber, 1999), p. 20.

¹² Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, 257.