Religious Practice Bereft of Faith

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Brian Moore (1921-1999) is an Irish novelist who is known to a wide international audience and admired by the majority of the Irish reading public. When someone is described by Graham Greene, as Moore was, as being ‘My favourite living novelist’, he deserves to be taken seriously. In many ways, however, Moore viewed this comment as a millstone around his neck and felt pressurised to write in a way that would mark him as different from Greene. His experiments with various literary genres, ranging from the thriller to the psychological novel, to the historical novel, remind one of Greene, but when it comes to his treatment of Catholicism, he is very different. Greene had all the fervour of the convert and deals dramatically with crises of faith in novels like *The Power and the Glory* (1940) and *The Heart of the Matter* (1948). This is not true of Moore as we shall see.

On hearing of the death of Moore on 12 January 1999 I felt a void. One of my favourite writers had completed his life’s work. There is a close link, almost a connivance, between Moore and his readers. Hearing him give interviews on radio and television in his gentle, slightly sad, Belfast tones, I was always struck by the honesty of his answers, especially those concerning his loss of religious faith. He was born into a middle-class Catholic Belfast family, his father being a well-respected and successful doctor, while his uncle through marriage was Eoin McNeill, one of the leaders of the Easter 1916 uprising. In spite of the Catholic fervour of the Moore household, the young man soon discovered that he ‘lacked the religious sense.’¹ His problems began – as often happens – with confession. He doubted that it was necessary to announce regularly his sexual peccadilloes to a priest. So he began to lie in the confessional and was surprised afterwards at

¹ From a 1997 BBC interview with Roisin McAuley.

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how little fear he experienced of God’s retribution. His loss of faith was probably one of the main reasons why he left Belfast in 1942. He realised that living as an agnostic in a God-fearing Ulster society would be an impossible task for him. In a passage from ‘The Expatriate Writer’ – which is repeated almost word-for-word in The Emperor of Ice-Cream (19650 – he describes a departure from Belfast. Having boarded the ferry, which marks the embarking on a new existence, the young emigrant strikes up a conversation with a man who asks him what are his reasons for departing Ireland:

I'm leaving home because I don't want to be a doctor like my father and brothers. Because I want to be a writer. I want to write ... Perhaps that's the way a lot of people become writers. They don't like the role they're playing and writing seems a better one.2

There is some autobiographical validity here but Moore’s immediate reason for leaving Belfast in 1942 was his desire to get involved in the war effort. He was disgusted by Ireland’s neutrality during World War II and volunteered in a civilian capacity as a non-conscript. Initially serving with the British Ministry of War Transport, his work brought him to North Africa, France and Italy, and he subsequently joined the United Nations, which sent him to Poland (Warsaw). Strangely enough, his first-hand experience of the latter stages of the war never formed the subject matter of Moore’s novels – Greene used similar experiences as background to his novels. From Poland Moore travelled to Canada, where he worked for three years with the Montreal Gazette before the relative success of The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne (1955) allowed him to concentrate exclusively on creative writing. After the break-up of his first marriage, Moore settled in California with his second wife, Jean. He returned regularly to Ireland to see his mother but he would never live here permanently after 1942.

He often admitted his admiration for the French literary tradition. He maintained, and with justification, that the French respect and cherish their writers and intellectuals, something that could not be said of many other countries and especially not of Ireland. He also liked to quote François Mauriac, especially one of his more famous pronouncements: ‘For the novelist, the

door closes at twenty'. By this, I presume, Mauriac meant that the experiences that mould us take place prior to age twenty. That is not to say that novelists don't use the experiences they live through subsequent to that in their novels, but that the mould is cast: the characters have been formed. When Moore himself began writing, he depended on his childhood memories of Belfast, which came flooding back to him. In The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne (1955) and The Feast of Lupercal (1958), he is highly critical of religious hypocrisy—a favourite target of Mauriac's also—and of a repressive Catholic upbringing that imbues an unhealthy distrust of all sexual activity. I should stress, however, that Moore was never anti-Catholic. There was no obvious bitterness towards religion in his writings, rather a sense of loss that people could not find in religion what they had lost in the struggle for self-respect and recognition as human beings.

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Judith Hearne and Diarmuid Devine live in a kind of Catholic ghetto, mixing only with other Catholics—Devine's problems emerge when he falls in love with Una, a young Protestant from Dublin—and they become acutely aware of the strong connections between faith and nationalist identity. The bitterness of Moore with regard to the education he received in the diocesan school, St Malachy's, is well-documented. He hated school, especially the rote learning and the excessive use of the cane for the slightest misdemeanour. Moore felt that there was no room allowed to examine Catholic dogmas or to develop accountability for his actions. Fear was the dominant feature of Catholicism as he knew it at that time, fear of eternal damnation and the fires of Hell. Which leads us to the major literary influence on Moore, James Joyce, another spiritual exile:

3. In Julia Carson's Banned in Ireland. Censorship and the Irish Writer, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1990, p.111, he stated: 'I went to St. Malachy's, which was the only Catholic boarding school in Belfast at the time. It was a terrible school. I would say that the most serious effect of censorship that I can think of in Ireland doesn't start with book banning: it started, in my day, with the books chosen by Catholic institutions.'
In my 20s, before I began to write myself, Joyce was already, for me, the exemplar of what a writer should be: an exile, a rebel, a man willing to endure poverty, discouragement, the hardships of illness, and the misunderstanding of critics, a man who would sacrifice his life to the practice of writing.\(^4\)

Irish twentieth century novelists could not avoid looking at the Joyce icon when setting out on their literary careers. However, they had to be careful not to re-hash what had already been done in such an exemplary fashion by the greatest exponent of Irish fiction. Moore admitted how conscious he was of Joyce when writing his first novel:

I wanted to write about my own loss of faith, but did not want to risk adverse comparisons with him [Joyce] by describing the loss of faith in a young Irishman.... I decided to write not about an intellectual’s loss of faith but of the loss of faith in someone devout, the sort of woman my mother would have known, a ‘sodality lady.’\(^5\)

**NO HOPE FOR JUDITH HEARNE**

Let us now turn to this fine novel. The first comment I would like to make in relation to *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* is how utterly dark and decrepit the pervading atmosphere is. There is no hope, no light to brighten or alleviate the suffering of the main character. The first pages of the novel see the heroine, a spinster music teacher, moving in to new digs. The worn carpet and poor general upkeep of the house reveal to the reader that this is not at all the kind of place where you’d expect to find socially ambitious lodgers. Her painstaking ritual of unpacking – the placing of ‘dear aunt’s photograph in the exact middle of the mantelpiece\(^6\) and the hanging of the coloured oleograph of the Sacred Heart at the head of the bed – reveal the importance of family and religion in Judith’s hierarchy of values. The landlady’s son, Bernard Rice, ‘stared at Miss Hearne with bloodshot eyes, rejecting her as all males had before him’. (*Judith Hearne*, p. 10) It is thus evident that her single status – emphasised by the

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4. Quoted by Denis Sampson, *Brian Moore: the Chameleon Novelist*, Dublin: Marino, 1998, p.86. This is a very good reference when it comes to understanding Moore the man and writer.

5. Quoted by D. Sampson, op. cit., p.88.

'Miss Hearne' in the narrative— is imputable to a singular lack of beauty and an absence of material possessions. This latter point is overlooked by James Madden, Mrs Rice’s brother, recently returned from the United States and anxious to find a suitable (preferably, well-off) wife and settle down in Ireland:

He smiles at her. Friendly, she is. And educated. Those rings and that gold wrist-watch. They’re real. A pity she looks like that. (p. 39)

Madden’s inability to see Judith’s relative poverty is matched by Judith’s romantic imaginings of a life with this ‘Yankee’ widower. The reader’s insights are clearer than the protagonists’ and it is immediately clear that tragedy is looming. Madden is a drunkard and a sexual deviant – the flogging and subsequent rape carried out by him on the servant girl, Mary, a minor, illustrate this and reveal how removed he is from Judith’s rosy image of him. His wish is to profit from his sister’s tenant’s illusory wealth. Judith equally has a problem with alcohol and seeks escape from her miserable existence through bouts of heavy drinking in her room – we get the impression that her recent change of digs might be attributable to this problem. Before beginning what she views as a sinful act (the abuse of alcohol), she turns the Sacred Heart towards the wall. But she cannot avoid sensing His disapproval:

He looked at her, stern now, warning that this might be her last chance ever and that He might become the Stern Judge before morning came, summoning her to that terrible final accounting. (p. 112)

Judith’s impression of God is of a very authoritarian and censorious judge who is constantly on the look-out for weaknesses in His creatures. At no point does she receive any comfort from religion, as is revealed in the following lines:

Religion was there: it was not something you thought about, and if, occasionally, you had a small doubt about something in the way church affairs were carried on, or something that seemed wrong or silly, well, that was the devil at work and God’s ways were not our ways. You could pray for guidance. (p. 67)

This unthinking compliance with laws and regulations handed down by the ministers of the Church, seems quite commonplace
in Judith Hearne’s world. Attendance at Mass, receiving the sacraments, external observance of Catholic mores, are what characterise religion as practiced by all her friends and acquaintances. James Madden thinks nothing of going to Mass after raping Mary and is not in any visible way upset or guilty about his action. Fr Quigley berates his congregation during a sermon for not finding time for God, while he himself is blandly dismissive of Judith’s self-confessed crisis of faith when she goes to him for spiritual guidance. He dispenses with her quickly so that he can be away to the golf club. He does not see the contradiction between the words of his sermon and his abandoning of a woman in need. Judith is left in a state of despair; alone, unloved, without faith in a higher being. Yet she turns to the Sacred Heart for help:

O Sacred Heart, please, I need Your strength, Your help. Why should life be so hard for me, why am I alone, why did I yield to the temptation of drink, why, why has it all happened like this? (p. 139)

Judith’s prayers go unanswered. She looks hard at the tabernacle and comes to the conclusion that ‘there was no God. Only round wagers [sic] of unleavened bread.’ (p. 140) And if that is the case, what has been the purpose of her life? What has been the point of the sacrifices she has made in the name of religion? Why did she worry so much about committing sin if there was nobody watching over her?

Bernard Rice, ever a friend to the needy, asks Judith: ‘Why are you alone tonight, if it isn’t for your silly religious scruples?’ (p. 182), and adds: ‘Your God is only a picture on the wall. He doesn’t give a damn about you.’ (p. 183) Bernard is unfeeling and selfish but he is also a keen judge of character. He sees the pathetic attempts that Judith makes to maintain a certain respectability that has long since deserted her. Her Sunday visits to the O’Neills, who dread her arrival but who don’t know how to put her off coming, are the highlight of her week. The O’Neills are wealthy and seemingly intelligent – Mr O’Neill is a university professor – and endure Judith out of religious obligation. As usual, she misreads the signs and thinks that the visits are as important to the O’Neills as they are to her. One Sunday afternoon she overindulges in sherry and becomes inebriated. Mrs O’Neill is outraged, an emotion that is further heightened when Miss Hearne arrives unannounced – and drunk – in the middle of the week to elaborate on her religious problems:
God! Miss Hearne said bitterly. What does He care? Is there a God at all, I've been asking myself, because if there is, why does He never answer our prayers? Why does He allow all these things to happen? Why? (p. 229)

Bereft of suitors, condemned to a life on her own, without the comfort of friends and religion, Judith, in desperation, turns to the 'bottle', in the hope of finding 'the key to contentment.' (p. 113) She drinks to flee from oppressive reality, in order to view her trials more philosophically. But she wakes to find that her problems, instead of disappearing, have, if anything, intensified. All the props that supported the fiction that her life was bearable, cruelly tumble down around her. Faced with the sordid reality of her existence, with her increasing dependence on alcohol, with the true feelings James Madden harbours towards her, she has a nervous breakdown. The novel ends with her in a convalescence home, where her only visitors are Fr Quigley and Mrs O'Neill.

*The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* is the best novel Moore wrote and it makes depressing reading. Its realism and raw honesty are a compelling mix, as is the detached narrative, which never falls into the trap of didacticism. Then there is Moore's remarkable capacity to enter the mind of his heroine. We suffer through all her humiliations and pain, the shattering of her illusions about herself and life in general. Her faith, which has no intellectual basis, fails her in her hour of greatest need. Denis Sampson offers this excellent assessment of the novel:

The collapse of Judith Hearne's faith is accompanied by a recognition that all along she has concealed from herself her essential loneliness, and that, just as she has been free to fantasise, she is equally free to rebel against the hypocritical conformity that has repressed her freedom for herself. Hers is a desperate, drunken and failed rebellion, and, in Moore's view, that is true to the way most rebellions are aborted in life.7

The ultimate irony, according to Sampson,8 is that this novel, which depicts so truthfully the repressive climate of Catholic, nationalist Belfast, should have been banned for indecency in the Republic by the Irish Censorship Board, an institution seeking to ensure a similar climate reigned this side of the border.

8. Ibid., p.105.
The Feast of Lupercal is just as damning an indictment of unthinking and blind religious practice as you are likely to find. Diarmuid Devine, an English teacher in the Catholic Belfast school, Ardath, is upset one day to overhear two of his colleagues refer to him as an ‘old maid’. He wonders if there mightn’t be some truth in their opinion of him. Thirty-seven years of age, a bachelor, with no obvious attributes apart from a capacity to anticipate examination questions for his students and to organise the local drama group, he begins to look on himself in a more critical light. From being indifferent as to whether or not he ever entered into a serious relationship with a woman, he begins to actively seek out female company. A colleague, Tim Heron, invites him to his house to mark the occasion of his daughter’s engagement, and there he encounters Heron’s niece, Una, a Protestant from Dublin. Devine’s reaction to his discovery that he has actually met a Protestant captures the type of stereotypical reaction of his caste:

Protestants were the hostile Establishment, leaders with Scots and English surnames, hard, blunt businessmen who asked what school you went to and, on hearing your answer, refused the job.... To them, Catholics were a hated minority, a minority who threatened their rule.  

More importantly, given his present desire to broaden his sexual horizons, Protestant girls were generally known to be fast. As if to prove this particular thesis, Devine discovers that Una has been forced by her parents to leave Dublin because she had been ‘carrying on’ with a married man. When Devine is asked by Fr McSwiney to get a cast together to put on a play to raise funds for a charitable cause, he decides that Una might be a suitable choice for the leading female role. Private tuition sessions follow and the English teacher’s feelings become amorous. It’s an impossible dream that they might end up together, given their differing religious backgrounds and the forces that are working against them. Devine is aware that he is in danger of alienating his employers by being seen publicly in Una’s company:

Man was born sinful, he must avoid the occasions of sin. The men who ran Ardath did not believe in words of honour, they

9. A thinly disguised representation of St Malachy’s.  
did not consider human intention a match for the devil’s lures. (*The Feast of Lupercal*, p. 79)

The hero is ‘playing with fire’ but, consumed with passion, he cannot bring himself to avoid further emotional involvement. New clothes and an improved general appearance bear witness to a man out to impress a young lady. He takes dancing lessons to prepare him for the dreaded night when Una might want to attend a dance in his company—he is awkward and clumsy on the floor. Moore builds up the tension very effectively as we wait for events to take their logical course. Sure enough, after having been turned down for the main part in the play—mainly as a result of the covert machinations of Fr McSwiney—Una asks to be brought out the following night. The dance floor brings them closer and afterwards Una asks to be brought back to Devine’s digs where, to his horror, he finds that she is prepared to offer herself to him. This is not what he wants; he is incapable of going through with it:

In this, his own solitary bed where he had sinned a thousand times in sinful imaginings, repented nightly in mumbled acts of contrition, in this bed this very night, real sin would be consummated. There was no getting out of it. She would be here in a moment. (p. 144)

Devine’s shock and fear are obvious to Una, who looks on his reaction to her naked body as a demeaning rejection. Upset and confused, she falls asleep in the flat and is caught entering her uncle’s house the following morning. The worst is suspected: Devine and she have obviously slept together. Tim Heron ends up caning his colleague in front of the Priests’ House and they’re both brought to explain themselves to the Headmaster, Dr Keogh, in his office. Dr Keogh is one of the only positive portrayals of a priest-character in Moore’s early work. He does not automatically view his English teacher’s actions in the worst possible light and urges him to explain what actually transpired between himself and the young lady on the night in question. He accepts the explanation and, contrary to the wishes of his Dean, Fr McSwiney, decides not to dismiss either Heron or Devine.

The overall portrayal of Catholicism in this novel is, once more, a very negative one. When thinking about his travails with Una, Devine notes:

If I had been a Protestant, this would never have happened, he
thought. I would have had my fill of girls by now. I would never have had to go to confession. (p. 212)

There is far less reference to Devine’s private feelings about religion than there is to Judith Hearne’s. The social pressures of his position as a teacher in a Catholic school are what Moore dwells on in his second novel. Devine is a less pathetic figure than Judith. He has reasonable economic independence and does at least exert some power in the classroom. He doesn’t think too much about questions of faith but becomes aware of how powerful his Catholic upbringing has been when he confronts the danger of committing a mortal sin with Una. He cannot go through with it; he cannot forget what he is about to do. I don’t in any way feel that this in itself is a negative – in fact, it has the one very positive effect of ensuring the hero’s continued employment in Ardath – but there is a marked impression given in the novel that the sin of the flesh is a major taboo. Tim Heron cannot discuss the matter without yielding to blind violence and Fr McSwiney is inclined to similar sentiments. The crude poems written by some pupils about Devine and Una on the toilet walls in the school display a warped attitude to sexuality held by virtually all the characters in the novel. The hero is aware that he has no real choice about his religion and recognises that it has had many drawbacks for his personal development.

In relation to the portrayal of religion in the two novels with which we are dealing, Jo O’Donoghue makes this observation:

For the two main protagonists, Judith Hearne and Diarmuid Devine, religion is not a choice, not a gift, not in any sense a joy or a blessing. It has been imposed on them, with all its devotions, its limitations and its prejudices, by their families and their backgrounds. Their belief is not really a belief at all because they only observe their religion by default.\(^{11}\)

This is a fair summation of Moore’s treatment of religious belief in the early Belfast novels. An examination of later novels such as *I Am Mary Dunne* (1968) and *The Temptation of Eileen Hughes* (1981) shows how Moore came to see the futility of the secular gods, money and sex for example, to whom his characters turn in an attempt to find a replacement for religious belief.

Devine’s attitude to religion is different to that of Judith. He is not a person of deep religious convictions: he is a victim of compliance to the demands of his job and of his presumed role and behaviour in society. He is weak and he suffers, but never turns to God for help him out of his difficulties. Therefore, he doesn’t suffer from the same sense of divine rejection as Judith.

Although he was never a practising Catholic after he left Belfast, Moore held on to a fascination with religious belief that would always stay with him. In a letter which Denis Sampson quotes in his book, Moore wrote:

... while I left the Church, I’ve always had a very strong interest in Catholicism. I’ve felt as a writer that man’s search for a faith, whether it is within the Catholic Church or a belief in God or a belief in something other than merely the materialistic world, is a major theme.\(^\text{12}\)

HELPLESS

These lines encapsulate the attitude of Moore with regard to faith. Sometimes he appears to be buying into the Joycean religion of art and at other times he seems to be genuinely fascinated with characters who have real faith, which he never found in his own life. The two novels we have looked at briefly illustrate a negative portrayal of religion as lived out by two hapless characters in the dark and oppressive atmosphere of Belfast, a city that has been witness to far too much sectarian hatred and violence. Judith and Devine are trapped in the past, especially in a religious past that has hardly changed in two centuries, and desperately seek the freedom to choose a new life. Their helplessness, however, is just as obvious at the end of the novels as it was in the beginning. In an interview with Joe O’Connor in the *Sunday Tribune* (1 October, 1995), Moore stated:

Belief is an obsession of mine. I think that everybody wants to believe in something – politics, religion, something that makes life worthwhile for them. And with most people there’s a certain point in their lives – usually in their 30s – when these beliefs are shattered. And it’s that point I seize on as a writer.

Judith Hearne and Diarmuid Devine are two good examples of how meaningless life becomes when belief is taken from them

and when religious practice is shown to be bereft of faith.

Maybe Mauriac was right in saying that for the novelist the door closes at twenty. Genes, education, family, education, religion and society shape and mould physical, mental and moral attitudes that neither Joyce nor Moore could discard. Neither could Mauriac nor Bernanos. They thus transformed them into literary treasures that illuminate the vistas of humanity.

Eucharistic sharing in inter-Church families – 1  Some Catholic partners in inter-Church marriages have followed the long-standing Catholic tradition of epikeia (whether they know it or not) in relation to receiving communion in their partner’s Church. It is important that ministers of other Churches, especially Anglicans, recognise the nature and status of this tradition in the Catholic Church, and the ways in which Catholics are helped to make moral decisions when they experience a conflict of values. Otherwise, with a straightforward Anglo-Saxon approach, some might say to Catholic partners (this has happened in a few cases): I cannot give you communion because by asking for it you are not in good standing in your own Church. The British and Irish bishops have never said that a Catholic who receives communion in another Church has by that act excommunicated himself or herself.

Ruth Reardon, Roman Catholic founder, with her Anglican husband Canon Martin Reardon, of the English Association of Inter-Church Families, in One in Christ, vol. xxv, no. 2, 1999.