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Is There a Role for the Catholic Intellectual in Ireland Anymore?

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Is there a role for the Catholic 'Intellectual' in Ireland any more?

Many people in media and academic circles dismiss Christian writers as being without academic interest or rigour, writes **Eamon Maher**.

Ireland is a strange place in which to live if you happen, like myself, to be a person who is interested in links between spirituality and literature. From a young age, I was reading authors like Graham Greene (*The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter*), Brian Moore (*The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, *Catholics*) and Kate O'Brien (*The Ante-Room*, *Mary Lavelle*), all of which deal with issues such as good and evil, sin and grace, salvation and redemption.

When my university studies brought me into contact with the great 20th century French Catholic novelists, Francois Mauriac and Georges Bernanos, my interest in

on the French priest-novelist, Jean Sullivan (1913-1980). In so doing, I placed myself in a specific category, that of the "Catholic Intellectual." It is an uncomfortable category for many reasons. Firstly, most people in the Irish media and academic circles assume that such a position is unsustainable for anyone other than a theologian or a religious. I constantly find that I need to justify myself. Take Sullivan for example. If you were to pick up any of his better novels (*The Sea Remains* or *Eternity my Beloved*), you would never guess that the author was a Catholic priest. It is true that priests and religious appear as characters in his novels, but they are often at variance with the church's

rigour.

Blinkered attitude

This blinkered attitude to writers who also happen to be priests is due in no small measure to the fact that Ireland has moved from being a priest-dominated society to being a largely post-Christian one in the space of a few decades. The church has taken some heavy hits during this transition and has consequently become fragile and demoralised. This is not a healthy situation for a country like ours which doesn't have something like a grounding in philosophy to fill the spiritual void.

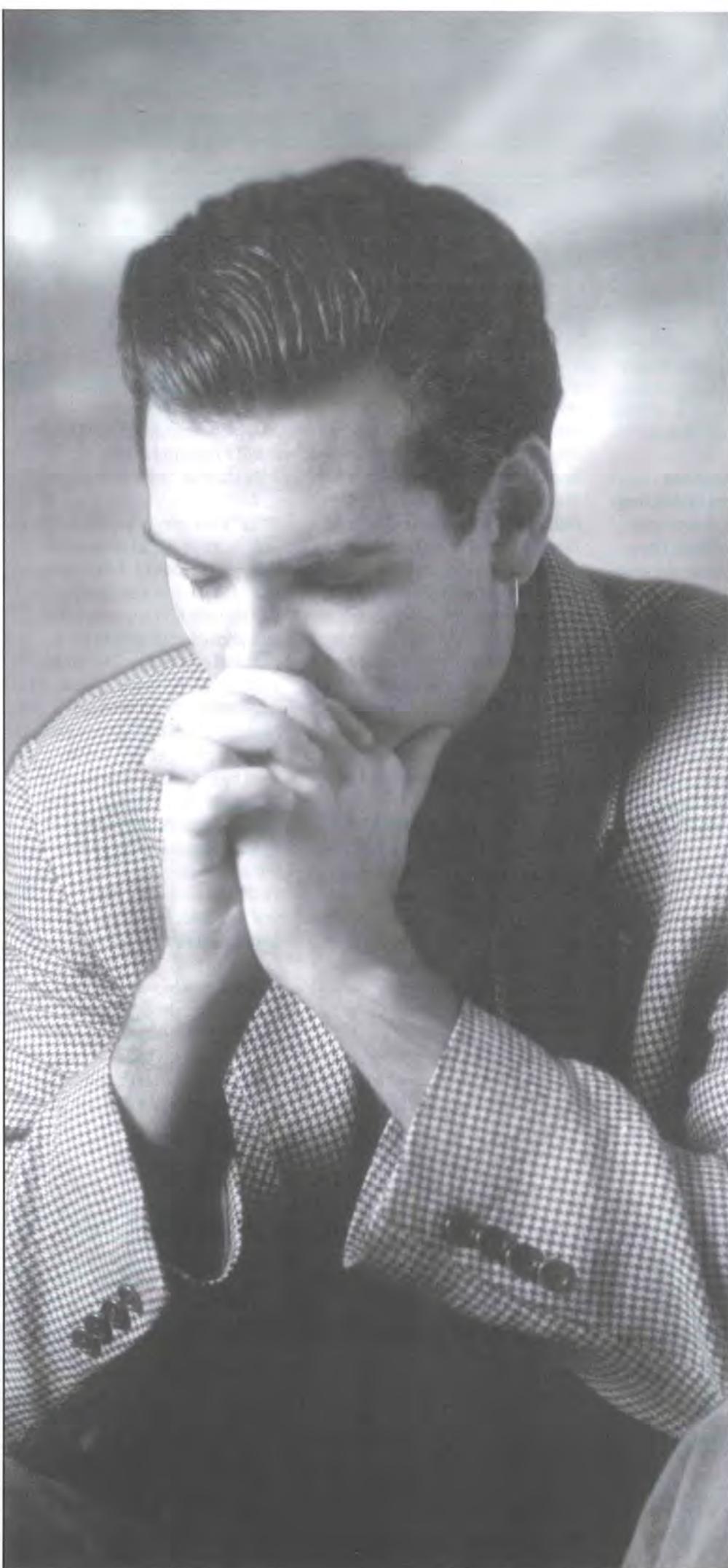
In a society that is surpassing everyone's expectations in the economic sphere, and where everyone marvels at the Celtic Tiger, why are there so many unhappy people? Why are so many of our young people taking their own lives? It's due partly to the fact that there are no certainties any more, very little direction. Religion has been traditionally important to the Irish in helping us to cope with difficult situations. Now only Mammon is being proposed in its place. Anyone who dares to point out the positive role priests and religious played in the education of generations of young Irish men and women, or who tries to deal with the role of the church in a sympathetic manner, is immediately placed in the category of "right-wing conservative." It does not seem possible to gain access to a wide audience if you have interests of an intellectual and spiritual nature.

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the Catholic problematic in literature was enhanced. How does the novelist reconcile his/her religious beliefs with the responsibility of portraying the human condition in a realistic manner? The danger of producing edifying material or hagiography is always great when one happens to be a committed Catholic. Interestingly, in the case of Brian Moore, it can be noted that although, by his own admission, he "lacked the religious sense" and was an agnostic, he remained fascinated by those who possessed faith.

I ended up doing a dissertation

teaching and live on the margins. Strozzi, the main character in *Eternity my Beloved*, is based on Auguste Rossi, a priest who left the relative security of life as director of a seminary to live among the prostitutes of Pigalle. Down-and-outs, tramps, wanderers, people in search of meaning in life, all feature in his books, but mention the fact that he was a priest and the attitude hardens. This is because many people of influence here in media and intellectual circles dismiss "Christian" writers as being devoid of academic interest or



Labelled as religious

I find it revealing that a recent publication of mine, *Crosscurrents and Confluences: Echoes of Religion in 20th century Fiction* (Veritas), which falls very much within the realm of literary and intercultural studies, is located in nearly all bookshops under the Religion category. The fact that Veritas is the publisher probably plays a big role in this. The bookshops are not alone in their reaction either. The number of times I have been asked by colleagues if I was a clerical student when in college in Maynooth is remarkable. Because of my particular interests, it appears that people need an explanation for how I could ever have got mixed up in such irrelevant matters as religion and spirituality. At times I feel the need to state that I am not acting as an apologist for the Catholic Church, that the writers about whom I write often take a very critical stance when it comes to organised religion. But what is the point? People will go on thinking what they like in spite of anything I say. Most of the time they will judge my material without ever reading it.

In France, it is much easier to play the role of Christian intellectual. That is because they are interested in debate and ideas in a way that we Irish are not. Also at a time when, in an enlarged Europe, cultural specificity is being eroded, there has been a weakening of the links between the Catholic religion and our Irishness. There has similarly been a sharp reaction to clerical scandals that fuelled feelings of resentment towards the domineering role that Catholic clergy played in the period from 1921 to the middle of the 1960s. Whatever the possible causes for the shift, I think we have gone too far down the path of irreverence towards everything religious, and that a reappraisal is long overdue. Now, more than ever, the voice of the Catholic "intellectual" needs to be heard. ■

Eamon Maher's translation of Jean Sullivan's memoir of the death of his mother, *Anticipate Every Goodbye* was published recently by Veritas.