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Searching for the Irish Soul

Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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Searching for the Irish Soul

One would imagine that we Irish are a soulful people, but what exactly is 'soul'? Eamon Maher reviews a book which could be a first step towards a rediscovery or a redefinition of the Irish soul

Like a good number of people, the first I heard of this book was when the controversy broke surrounding comments made in it by Cardinal Desmond Connell in relation to the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, Walton Empey. These are just two of 16 people interviewed by the author, Dr. Stephen Costello, on the highly relevant topic of the Irish soul. In spite of all the furore caused by the Cardinal's comments (he claimed that Dr. Empey would not be considered one of the Church of Ireland's theological "high-fliers"), the interview itself concentrates mainly on a rather high-brow discussion of angels and the French philosopher, Malebranche. It did not captivate this reader.

One would imagine that we Irish are a soulful people, but what exactly is 'soul'? In his Preface, the author uses a quote from Wordsworth which I always liked: Soul is what permits us to "see into the life of things." But it is a lot more than that depending on whom one asks. *The Irish Soul: In Dialogue* allows a number of people from various walks of life to give us their assessment of the Irish soul – writers, Churchmen, an artist, a prison governor, singers, academics, a sports commentator, and so on. About half the interviews are fascinating, and all are interesting. Costello, solid academician that he is, had done his research before conducting the interviews. He therefore comes across as comfortable talking about music as he is discussing philosophy or sport. His breadth of knowledge is impressive, and he doesn't attempt to impose his own opinions on his interviewees.

Stimulating comments

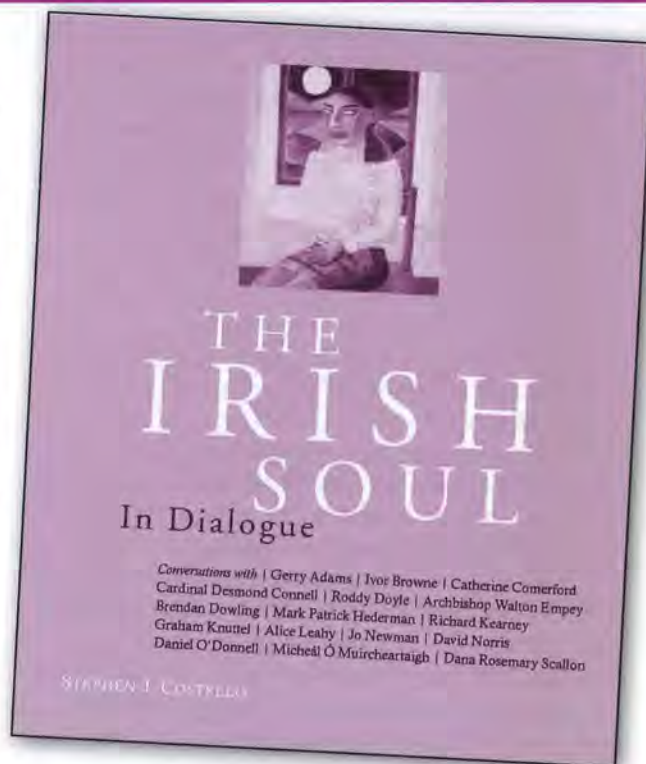
The most stimulating comments of all come from a monk who is somewhat at a remove from the Catholic hierarchy, Mark Patrick Hederman of Glenstal. If the Catholic Church in Ireland is to regain some of its former vigour, it will need people of the intellectual calibre of this man to put across its message.

(However, I somehow doubt he will ever be chosen as a spokesman for the hierarchy.) I first encountered him through his book, *Kissing the Dark* (Veritas, 1999), which emphasises the role of art and literature in providing food for the soul. When asked how he would describe his relationship with God, Hederman replies: "It is like connecting with a very refined and reticent aristocratic animal." (p.118) That is a wonderful response! It is clear from his remarks that this man has been exposed to many cultures and experiences. Having done his doctorate in philosophy in Paris under Emmanuel

Levinas during the 1960s, it is clear that Hederman has had to question and justify his approach to faith and religion on numerous occasions.

He chose not to become a priest because he couldn't assume the responsibility of telling people in the confessional how they should conduct their lives. *Humanae Vitae*, he says, promulgated views with which he could not align himself. Hederman points out that it is difficult to determine what is sinful: "Our own self-will is so fraught with doing what we want to do and calling it something else, but in principle I would agree that every part of you is in the service of God and if, for whatever reason, it was required of you to do anything that God wants you to do, then it is correct." (p120) Indeed, it is impossible to apply simplistic labels like right or wrong to many human actions – there are so many shades of grey involved that no one except God has the competence to pronounce on these matters.

Hederman is something of a maverick



when it comes to the stances he adopts. He is in favour of women priests and believes divorce is not always wrong. He also states that the pronouncement reportedly made by the Pope that homosexuals are "unnatural and evil" was totally off the wall. He has problems with the Roman Curia and the entrapments of power that characterise that particular institution. And yet he is a deeply soulful person. His knowledge of literature is immense and, as founding editor (along with Richard Kearney) of *The Crane Bag*, he is someone with his finger on the cultural pulse of Ireland. I feel that it would be worth buying *The Irish Soul: In Dialogue* for this interview alone. It is full of quotable quotes like this one on prayer:

"That's what I have to do, to get over the centre of gravity of myself so that I can move upwards, but not as flight in the sense of leaving my body behind or of taking off into orbit but of curving my attention towards a particular point... That's what I mean by prayer. In the monastery (Glenstal), we sing in Latin at

Vespers, so prayer for us is liturgical. It's wonderful. It's like a river, being in some kind of movement. Singing and breathing are very important. It's breath and earth. It's not about mind." (p.123) There is much food for thought in those lines!

Lay views

But let's get away from churchmen for a while and listen to what one of our best-known contemporary writers, Roddy Doyle, has to say about the Irish soul. A self-professed atheist, he was active on the 'Yes' side of the divorce referendum, which polarised Irish society during the 1990s. Doyle writes mainly about the Dublin working classes, many of whom would have experienced marital breakdown at first hand. He saw how alienated these people had become from organised religion and from politics. The quality of their lives was not seen by them to be of huge import to the religious and church leaders of the day. Unemployment was very high with all its attendant social and moral problems. References to Mass and the Sacraments are rare indeed in Doyle's novels for the simple reason that they had no impact on his characters' lives. Similarly, Doyle says of himself: "Religion now in Ireland doesn't inflict itself on me. The new cardinal is an irrelevance in my life, whereas he wouldn't have been 20 years ago; my job prospects as a young teacher would have been a lot slimmer, etc." (p.98) The wheel has come full circle. There was a time when religion was socially and politically advantageous in Ireland. People are now far more circumspect when it comes to declaring their religious beliefs – it's definitely not "P.C." anymore to state that you are a practising Catholic. A few decades ago it would be taken for granted.

Some of Roddy Doyle's creations could end up coming under the jurisdiction of Catherine Comerford, who is the Assistant Governor of Mountjoy Women's Prison. It is revealing to read the case histories of some of the inmates of our prison system. Victims of unemployment, educational disadvantage, sexual abuse, drug addiction, violence, the women with whom Catherine Comerford spends many hours are both dangerous and strangely vulnerable. The families of many hardened criminals see nothing untoward in the actions for which their relatives have been convicted. The same can be said for most of the prisoners.

Comerford recounts how she got talking to a male sex offender one day. She asked him if he knew his victim, and when he replied "Yes", she enquired who it was. It turned out to be his two-and-a-half-year-old daughter: "Then he said, 'You know, it wasn't my fault'. I wanted to be physically sick. He wanted to blame a two-and-a-half-year-old because of his problems. He just didn't think he did anything wrong." (p.48)

Comerford is working side-by-side with those who are reviled (sometimes with good reason) by many people who would like them to disappear off the face of the earth. And certainly there are difficulties dealing with those who have perpetrated heinous acts, especially against children. Camus found the unnecessary suffering of children one of the reasons why he couldn't reconcile himself with the concept of a loving God. Comerford's job is described by Costello as being part of a divine mission (Christ entreated his followers to visit those who are sick or in prison) and she comes across as being a caring, spiritual person. She says: "Yes, I am a practising Catholic. My faith is very important to me. I try to see good in everything. The way I look at life is this: as far as I am concerned, everybody is good until they prove otherwise." (p.50)

Nail on head

Space does not permit me to refer to all the interviews in this book. David Norris' contribution was somewhat disappointing, as was that of Gerry Adams. Dana Rosemary Scallon hits the nail on the head when she says in relation to contemporary Ireland: "There's a great anxiety about the pace of change in the country and I think there has been such an unbalanced presentation of Christian values. You can't remove something and have nothing in its place." (p.266) I believe that the negative portrayal of organised religion in the Irish media has been unbalanced but that the time is fast approaching where commentators are beginning to realise that you have to offer something to fill the void created by the diminished importance of religion in the Irish psyche. Unlike the French, we don't have a philosophical training to help us to conceive of life without the belief in God. The author of this book has clearly found ways of nourishing his soul outside of traditional religious practice. Similarly,

Richard Kearney is "hoping that the next Pope will be more like John XXIII. But if not, I'll remain a Catholic, because I don't believe that the Church belongs to the hierarchy. It belongs to the people, to people like Sister Stan(islaus) and Jean Vanier and to people who are actively thinking and working through their faith on a day-to-day basis." (p.155) He echoes the views of a good number of Irish people in these lines.

It has always struck me that people in Ireland are all-or-nothing when it comes to their religious practice. They either accept Church teaching and obey it blindly or else they disagree with aspects of doctrine and turn away from it completely. The middle path suggested by Richard Kearney is much preferable. His following observation is also insightful: "I think a revolution in the Irish Church is necessary to retrieve what is genuinely spiritual, mystical and healing and to acknowledge the sins that have been committed in the name of God – and there have been a lot of them." (p.161)

Community of searchers

This book could be a first step towards a rediscovery or a redefinition of the Irish Soul. Certainly, it is a most worthwhile and attractively packaged publication. My own preference would have been for Costello to approach some other people like Fr. Peter McVerry and John McGahern, who would both have had interesting comments to make on the subject. But then again, I would never have thought of Catherine Comerford and she was one of the most enlightening of the people interviewed. At times, the central issue of soul is not too apparent, and that is a pity. However, when people like Hederman share some of their innermost thoughts, the effect is electric. Here's one more quote from him about the spiritual adventure: "The more discovery I am given access to, the more I am intrigued, but it means more reading. It's a community of searchers because no one person understands it all... You meet your brothers and your sisters in the search." (p.121) You meet a group of searchers in *The Irish Soul: In Dialogue*, each of them embarked on a quest for the elusive soul. I recommend it highly to the readers of *Reality*. ■

The Irish Soul in Dialogue, Stephen J. Costello, The Liffey Press, 2001, pp.270.