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Faith and Unbelief: 
Brian Moore's Priestly Depictions

Eamon Maher

The writer is currently co-editing a book with Eugene O'Brien entitled From Galway to Cloyne, and Beyond: Tracing the Cultural Legacy of Irish Catholicism. He is Director of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies in IT Tallaght, Dublin.

Brian Moore (1921-1999) came from a strongly nationalist, Catholic family in Belfast. He was a nephew through marriage of Eoin MacNeill, a founder of the Gaelic League and the man who famously signed the countermanding order informing the Irish Volunteers that they should not report for military manoeuvres at Easter 1916, which gives you some indication of the extent to which the Moores were closely identified with Irish nationalism. His father was a doctor and their house on Clifton Street was located opposite an impressive bronze statue of King William of Orange, a reminder, if one were needed, of the sectarian divisions that have for centuries divided the two communities of Northern Ireland.¹

Growing up in such an environment became problematic for Moore when he discovered early in life that he 'lacked the religious sense,' ² an attitude that revealed itself first of all with the problems he had with Confession. Even as a child, Moore did not see the point of sharing his peccadilloes with a stranger in a dark box. Therefore, he began to invent or omit sins and was surprised afterwards at how little remorse or fear of divine retribution he felt. His loss of faith was probably one of the main reasons why he left Belfast in 1942. Already he had found his education at the diocesan school of St Malachy's unsuited to his creative nature. The strong emphasis on sin, especially sexual sin, by the priests and teachers in the school was oppressive to Moore, who also disliked the widespread use of corporal punishment. His experience of St Malachy's was not helped either by the fact that he did not fare nearly as well academically as his older brother, who followed their father into a medical career. Many things in Moore's upbringing, therefore, revealed to him that adopting a cavalier attitude towards religion would be well-nigh impossible in sectarian Belfast. Denis Sampson offers the following evaluation of the burgeoning writer's dilemma:

Moore was born into a state of conquest and colonial settlement in which racial origin and religion had been matters of life and death for centuries; the faiths of the fathers were at once absolutely true and, at every turn, under siege.³

World War II offered a means of escape which Moore grasped, joining the British Ministry of War Transport in 1942, a move that enabled him to travel and spend time in Poland, Canada and the USA. From that date onwards, he only ever returned to Belfast on the odd occasion, mainly to visit members of his family, and he ad-

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2. This quote is taken from an interview he did for the BBC in 1997 with Róisín McAuley.
mitted to a feeling of elation every time he left, such was the negative impact the city exerted on him. In a passage from an essay, 'The Expatriate Writer' – which is repeated almost word for word in the autobiographical novel, *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* (1965) – Moore describes a departure from Belfast. Having boarded the ferry, the young emigrant strikes up a conversation with a man who asks him his reasons for emigrating:

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.4

There may be a certain amount of retro-fitting going on here in order to chart the birth of a literary vocation, but Moore obviously believed that in order to become a writer, it was important for him to leave Belfast. While he 'lacked the religious sense' himself, Moore was fascinated with those who had it and his novels explore in a sensitive and revealing manner his characters' issues with faith. This preoccupation with faith may explain why Graham Greene declared on one occasion that Moore was his favourite living author, a not insignificant compliment from one of the foremost writers of his generation. In a revealing interview with Joe O'Connor, Moore explained just what attracted him to religion: '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 [...] when these beliefs are shattered. And it’s that point I seize on as a writer.'5

Given his interest in faith and religion, it should not come as a surprise to discover that priests feature in many of Moore's novels. Frequently these men are beset by serious doubts as to the existence of God and the relevance of their ministry. While they are never portrayed as being without fault, neither does Moore reduce his priests to stereotypical depictions lacking in an inner life. This article will concentrate on three novels in which priests play an important role – *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (1955), *Catholics* (1972) and *Black Robe* (1985) – which were published at different stages of Moore's career, thus demonstrating an enduring interest on the writer's part in the figure of the priest.

### The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne

*The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* is a powerful evocation of the struggles of its eponymous heroine, a middle-aged spinster who suffers from chronic loneliness and seeks consolation in religion

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and alcohol. The novel opens with Judith unpacking her things as she settles into new digs, a not unfamiliar activity for her, it would appear. There are two items that play a particularly important role in her life: a picture of her deceased aunt and an oleograph of the Sacred Heart. Family and religion matter to Judith, in spite of the fact that both have ultimately proved something of a disappointment. Her best years were spent looking after the elderly aunt whose fortune was dissipated by poor financial management and heavy medical bills before her death. As for Catholicism, its emphasis on moral discipline and self-sacrifice has left Judith alone and abandoned in a sectarian city where drink is her only comfort. So when life proves particularly unpalatable to her, Judith purchases a bottle of whiskey, places the Sacred Heart and the picture of her aunt facing downwards so that they don’t witness her degradation, and gets down to the serious business of forgetting:

Alcoholic, she did not drink to put aside the dangers and disappointments of the moment. She drank to be able to see these trials more philosophically, to examine them more fully, fortified by the stimulant of unreason.  

Judith’s life of quiet desperation would have undoubtedly carried on without any great upheaval if she had not encountered a certain James Madden, her new landlady’s brother recently returned from New York, who she mistakenly believes has a romantic interest in her. Madden, observing Judith’s jewellery and taking her to be a woman of means, believes that she might be in a position to fund his business venture (he wants to set up a hamburger restaurant in Ireland) and the attention he lavishes on her is misinterpreted. The pair go to Mass together on one occasion and witness the powerful sermon of Fr Quigley, who berates the congregation for neglecting their religious duties in favour of drinking, going to dances and the cinema, before issuing the following warning: ‘If you don’t have time for God, God will have no time for you’ (73). These words will have a particular resonance for Judith when she later goes to see the priest to share her dilemma with him in Confession, only to find that he is anxious to get rid of her as quickly as possible so that he can meet his clerical friends on the golf course. In fairness to Fr Quigley, he was not well acquainted with Judith and did not know that her drinking had got out of hand in the wake of the failure of her relationship with Madden and the sudden realisation that the fastidious observation of her religious duties may well have been futile. For someone like her, such a discovery is enough to tip her over the precipice. Hers was a blind faith:

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 (67).

Moore is adept at capturing those moments when his characters come face to face with their unbelief. For Judith, already vulnerable and unhappy, the idea of there being no God is unfathomable: ‘In the tabernacle there was no God. Only round wafers of unleavened bread. She had prayed to bread. The great ceremonial of the Mass, the singing, the incense, the benedictions, what if it was show, all useless show? What if it meant nothing, nothing?’ (140-141). Fr Quigley is more adept at haranguing his parishioners than he is at offering spiritual guidance. When Judith arrives drunk in the church, the ‘tall man with the hollow cheeks and white face of an inquisitor’ (67) is at a loss as to how to react to her frenzied comments. He is also horrified that the Protestant taxi driver whose services Judith has engaged should observe her outrageous drunken behaviour. Fr Quigley, having spoken sternly with her and told her to go home and sober up, later comes across Judith in a heap on the altar after an unsuccessful attempt to gain access to the tabernacle—she wanted to find out once and for all if God was really present there, as she had been taught to believe throughout her life. The priest’s immediate reaction is to get her into residential care as soon as possible in order to avoid any further scandal.

Fr Quigley’s training has not equipped him for dealing with this type of spiritual crisis. When she is explaining her problems with faith in Confession, Judith is shocked to realise that the priest is not even listening to her. Jo O’Donoghue is correct in her assertion that, ‘He (Fr Quigley) has been trained to be interested only in the political control that comes from the browbeating of the masses, not in the trauma of the pathetic spinster.’ However, I cannot agree with the same critic’s claim that Moore’s depiction of the priest is ‘so harsh as to be savage.’ I would maintain, in fact, that Moore shows a good deal of empathy with the plight of the cleric who really has no idea about how to deal with the sudden doubts that take hold of Judith in the latter half of the novel.

Whereas the doubts about faith are confined to a member of the laity in Moore’s first novel, in Catholics we have an example of one of the many priests in Moore’s work who seriously question their belief system. This novella is set in Muck Abbey, a remote island off
the Kerry coast in the post-Vatican IV era. The monks of Muck have started saying the Latin Mass again in contravention of the ecumenical thrust of Vatican IV. The clash between the traditional and the modern is finely drawn as James Kinsella, a progressive American priest, is sent to Ireland with the task of bringing the monks in line with Rome's new stance. The Abbot, Tomás O'Malley, has lost his faith, but he cares deeply for his community and appreciates how attached the monks are to the old rituals. Nevertheless, he is also realistic enough to know that James Kinsella has travelled to Ireland because of the commotion on the mainland caused by the monks' decision to say the Latin Mass:

Most could see the Mass rock and the priest only from a distance, but all heard the Latin, thundering from loudspeakers rigged up by townsfolk. Latin. The communion bell. Monks as altar boys saying the Latin responses. Incense. The old way. 

Sadly for the community in Muck Abbey, 'the old way' is not Rome's way and this is the message that James Kinsella carries with him to the island. Having been left on the mainland by local boatmen who would not believe he was a priest, Kinsella arrives on the island in a helicopter, where the Abbot greets him with the comment: 'You've brought us the symbol of the century. Just when I thought we'd be able to close the hundred years out, and say we missed our time'

Kinsella bears all the hallmarks of the modern global cleric: he is intelligent and ruthless in equal measure and never allows sentiment to detract him from what he sees as carrying out his duty. When one of the monks, Fr Manus, bemoans the fact that 'this new Mass is not a mystery, it's a singsong', Kinsella does not flinch, emphasising the importance of orthodoxy and conformity: 'We are trying to create a uniform posture within the Church. If everyone decides to worship in his own way, well it's obvious, it would create a disunity'.

It is interesting to note that Moore wrote this novel at a time in Ireland when the changes in the liturgy brought about by Vatican II were causing a lot of pain. Many Catholics were nostalgic for the familiar Latin ritual, the vestments, the incense, the priest with his back to the people, and the move to the use of the vernacular was a far from simple transition. Fr Manus' comment about the Mass being a 'singsong' rather than a true celebration of the death and passion of Christ was regularly voiced by those who were opposed to change in Ireland. Tomás O'Malley's position is therefore delicate in that he recognises that the central authority vested in the Pope is designed in such a way as to ensure that Catholics all over the world worship in a similar manner and adhere to agreed fundamentals in terms of
When he starts mumbling the words of the Our Father, the reader is led to believe that he may have regained his faith.

The Abbot's loss of faith had occurred years earlier during a pilgrimage to Lourdes. He was appalled by the tawdry religious supermarkets he saw there, the certification of 'miraculous' cures, the lines of stretchers on which you could see the sick and the maimed. It caused him to flee to his room where he discovered he was no longer even able to pray. At the end of Catholics, when faced with the possible rebellion of his community after the announcement that they must conform to Rome's dictate, O'Malley finds somewhere deep within himself the key that unlocks his unbelief. It does not matter, he tells the monks, what means you employ to adore God. He is there in the tabernacle when you believe in the Real Presence. 'Prayer is the only miracle', he says. 'We pray. If our words become prayer, God will come' (91). When he starts mumbling the words of the Our Father, the reader is led to believe that he may have regained his faith.

**Black Robe**

*Black Robe* was a very different undertaking by Brian Moore, in that he decided to base his novel around the story of a French Jesuit mission in a remote outpost in mid-seventeenth century Canada. In the course of his research, Moore had become fascinated with the American historian Francis Parkman's description of the voluminous letters the Jesuits in Canada sent to their superiors in France describing their interactions with the native Indian 'Savages'. The correspondence described how the Indians could not comprehend the 'Blackrobes' (as the Jesuits were known) preoccupation with material possessions, as well as their inability to recognise that the land, the rivers, the animals, were all possessed of a living spirit and subject to laws that must be respected. The novel describes therefore a clash of cultures, a journey into the remotest wilds of northern Canada, where Fr Paul Laforgue is determined to relieve a dying priest of his post. He is accompanied by a group of Indians and his protégé, Daniel Davost, who is having a sexual relationship with a native, Chominga, whose family are part of the travelling party. Laforgue and Daniel encounter physical hardship, cruel torture, cannibalism and spiritual despair in the course of their journey, which takes the form of a spiritual quest. Daniel cannot forsake Chominga and Laforgue slowly begins to realise that there are worse sins than the sins of the flesh. He himself encounters moments of doubt when he feels abandoned by God, as well as the odd flash of joy such as when one morning as his resolve was weakening he observes an eagle soaring in the sky above him:

And as Laforgue knelt there, his struggles, his deafness, the
dangers of this journey were transformed miraculously into a great adventure, a chance to advance God's glory here in a distant land. God was not hidden; He had shown Himself in the eagle's flight.¹¹

The moments of desolation are more commonplace, however, as the party makes its way north through a countryside that has the capacity to transform those who are exposed to its strange power. Lafargue senses that his moral compass is vastly different at the end of the journey than it was at the beginning. He can observe Daniel and Chomina in a loving embrace without any of the usual feelings of abhorrence. At a certain point, rules and regulations lose their lustre as one struggles to survive in a hostile environment. Doubts are a normal part of the spiritual journey, especially when one is trying to change the Indians' whole approach to life. Lafargue ponders on the success of his mission: 'Would it ever be possible to convert such people? It is as though this country is far from the sun of God's warmth. Even I, who now beseech His aid, can only think of eating my fill, then brutishly huddling among other warm bodies in the smoking stench of tonight's habitation.' (95)

When he finally arrives at his destination, Lafargue is not free from danger, as the Indians blame the Blackrobes for the illness that has taken hold of their village. It takes a solar eclipse, which the Indians look on as a proof of the need to convert to Catholicism, and a lifting of the fever, to ensure the safety of the Jesuits. At the end of it all, Lafargue wonders if it is the hand of God that has intervened to save them, or just simple fate. As with so many of Brian Moore's characters, the Jesuit missionary rediscovers prayer as he looks at the tabernacle in the wooden chapel that has been erected by his Jesuit confrère and resolves to work as best he can with the 'Savages', whose superstitions are possibly no worse than those that often sustain their more 'sophisticated' colonisers:

He went to the chest in which vestments were stored and took out a linen alb, pulling the long white smock-like garment over his black cassock. He took up a gold-embroidered stole and, from habit, touched his lips to it before putting it around his neck (223).

The priestly work continues, even as the doubts about the ministry persist. With Brian Moore, there is something about the priestly function that makes it possible to persevere in the face of the most challenging moments. His fascination with priests and Catholicism makes the writer's own agnosticism all the more interesting, as he delves into the minds and hearts of those people who possess something which he would appear to have lost at a young age.
Living the Mystical

Everyday God – Sharing Loreto Spirituality

Eoin Garrett

The writer is a piano teacher and a spiritual director. He lives in Dublin.

In the days ahead, you will either be a mystic (one who has experienced God for real) or nothing at all

(Karl Rahner)

It started for me with a phone call from a complete stranger. Would I like to be involved in a spirituality outreach of the Loreto sisters? The spirituality of Mary Ward, founder of the Loreto order (the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, IBVM), was based, I was told, on the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola, with which I had some familiarity. My complete ignorance about Mary Ward, and scant knowledge of the Loreto sisters did not disqualify me from becoming involved. I was hooked!

In 2008, the Irish province of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary was preparing to celebrate the following year the 400th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute by Mary Ward. They began a discernment process to find an appropriate way to mark the anniversary in a lasting manner. The process entered into was an Ignatian one, Ignatius of Loyola being Mary Ward’s, and the Institute’s, spiritual inspiration and guide. Time was taken in exploring possibilities and making prayerful choices. The Loreto sisters, along with lay associates, eventually articulated a desire to share the spiritual heritage of the Institute. A project was proposed which would enable people to find a pathway to God, through reflection on everyday events. Becoming aware of God’s working in ordinary events would enrich the everyday lives of people, while not impinging on ministries already existing in this area.

VISION STATEMENT

A Vision Statement was drawn up: ‘To invite others to share with us our spirituality of experiencing God in ordinary, everyday life.’

This broad aspiration, summarized in the vision statement, was a response to the call of the Institute’s General Congregation in 2006 ‘to sharpen its engagement with the Church and world’ and to ‘share the Ignatian Mary Ward spirituality entrusted to us with those with whom we live and work.’ Mary Ward’s own expression of the Ignatian desire to find God in all things was her encouragement to her sisters to ‘refer all to God.’ This would be an invitation to an everyday experience of mysticism.

SPIRITUALITY OUTREACH

As its focus began to sharpen, the project acquired a provisional...