Combating the Forces of Evil: Georges Bernanos' Vision of the Priestly Function

Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ittbus

Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License.
Combating the Forces of Evil
Georges Bernanos' Vision of the Priestly Function

Eamon Maher


Of all the writers dealt with in this series, Georges Bernanos (1888-1948) is undoubtedly the one with the keenest grasp of the challenges faced by priests working in dechristianised parishes such as the ones he depicts in rural Normandy during the entre-deux-guerres years (1918-1939) and beyond. Bernanos was a fervent Catholic and a monarchist who harked back to the time when the Catholic Church was a bastion of French society, a guarantor of noble values. Equally, he had no time for Republicans, whom he held responsible for what he considered the calamitous secularisation of his native country. A man of passionate views, he regularly gave vent to his prejudices, a tendency that was sometimes damaging to his literary output. In his impressive debut novel, Sous le Soleil de Satan (Under Satan's Sun), published in 1926, for example, he mercilessly caricatured the writer Anatole France, as well as having a swipe at the bourgeois family of the main character, Mouchette Malorthy, who never think to question the honour of the dissolute Marquis de Cardigan, who has made their daughter pregnant. The Malorthys are fervent Republicans and hence have no qualms about sending their pregnant daughter for a consultation with the local doctor, Gallet, a public representative with designs of his own on Mouchette. Monsieur Malorthy explains why he trusts Gallet: 'After all, a doctor represents learning, science [...] he's not merely a man. He's the high priest of a true Republican.'

This type of ill-disguised imposition of his political views on his texts made some of Bernanos' earlier work less than satisfactory. His strength lay mainly in his depiction of the tortured souls of priests, men forced to minister to people who had become hostile to the message of Christianity. Characters like Donissan in Sous le Soleil de Satan are dramatic creations who demonstrate an uncanny ability to read into souls. The wonderful black and white film production of this novel, with Gérard Depardieu in the main role, was a commercial success in the 1980s with its impressive foregrounding of the dramatic struggle between good and evil, a struggle that pits the saintly priest against Satan as they vie for the soul of the misguided and exploited Mouchette.

Bernanos was not one to shy away from depicting the strange workings of grace either: in fact, miracles feature, or are hinted at, in many of his novels. Thirty years after his death, André Malraux, the then Minister for Culture in de Gaulle's government and a highly decorated writer in his own right, described Bernanos as 'the greatest novelist of his time.' Such an accolade, coming as it did from an unbeliever and a part of a
I will be using the English translation of this novel by Pamela Morris (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1999), with page numbers in brackets.


This article will confine itself to two very different novels by Bernanos, the highly regarded and award-winning Diary of a Country Priest (1936) and the enigmatic and technically challenging Monsieur Ouine (1946), in order to explore the workings of a priest’s inner life when faced with situations that have far-reaching consequences for all involved.

The Diary is a classic account of the short career of a young priest from a humble background who is appointed to the parish of Ambricourt. Shortly after his arrival, the curé senses that his parish is ‘bored stiff’ (the French word ‘ennui’ means more than simple ‘boredom’ and implies an inner malaise) and, in what turns out to be a prophetic pronouncement, predicts: ‘Some day perhaps we will catch it ourselves – become aware of the cancerous growth within us.’ (1) Towards the end of the novel, when the priest is diagnosed with cancer, readers recall this comment and realise that in some strange way Ambricourt has assumed the tumour at the heart of the parish and made it his own. The diary entries show a humble man who feels inadequate to the great task that awaits him:

I wonder if man has ever before experienced this contagion, this leprosy of boredom: an aborted despair, a shameful form of despair in some way like the fermentation of a Christianity in decay. (3) He is met with disappointment at every turn. The local aristocracy do not appreciate his attempts to intervene in their private lives – M. Le Comte is having an affair with the governess under his wife’s nose and their daughter Chantal is displaying a worrisome propensity for wickedness. He is tricked by local merchants due to his naivety when it comes to business, and his initiatives within the parish invariably end up in failure. The star of his Catechism class, Seraphita Dumouchel, cruelly announces one day in front of the others that she only listened in class ‘cause you’ve got such lovely eyes.’ (28) (We later discover that she was put up to this by some of the girls in the class who were jealous of the attention she was getting). His friend, the older M. le Curé de Torcy, is the polar opposite of Ambricourt. He rules his parish with an iron fist and does not tolerate opposition from anyone – in this, he is reminiscent of many Irish priests of the same period – and yet he detects some special quality in his timid confrere:

‘I’m always calling you a ragamuffin’, he said, ‘but I respect you. Take the word for what it’s worth. It’s a great word. As far as I can see, there’s no doubt about your vocation. To look at you, you’re
more like the stuff that monks are made of. No matter. You may not have very broad shoulders, but you've got grit.' (59)

He will need plenty of the 'grit' Torcy speaks of to survive the trials that lurk ahead. The terrible stomach cramps to which he is susceptible mean that he must confine himself to a diet of bread dipped in wine (symbols of the Eucharist) and his deteriorating appearance ignites rumours that he has a drink problem. Meanwhile he sets about visiting every household in the parish, where he usually receives a less than warm welcome, and has huge difficulty sleeping. He goes to see the local doctor, Delbende, whose death in unusual circumstances shortly afterwards leads people to suspect him of committing suicide, and feels the pain that is consuming this atheist of deep socialist convictions:

True pain coming out of a man belongs primarily to God, it seems to me. I try to take it humbly to my heart, just as it is. I endeavour to make it mine - to love it. And I understand all the hidden meaning of the expression that has become hackneyed now: to commune with. Because I really 'commune' with his pain. (82-83)

He communes with many others' pain throughout the novel also, as his empathetic presence seems to encourage parishioners to unburden their problems to him: in this regard, the most important scene in the book is the exchange between himself and Mme la Comtesse. In the days leading up to the fateful interview, Ambricourt had been undergoing much turmoil as a result of the advancing stomach cancer and the nagging doubts he harboured about his spiritual life. He was definitely undergoing his dark night of the soul, as can be gleaned from the following diary entry: 'A void was behind me. And in front a wall, a wall of darkness.' (103) To add to his misery, Chantal graphically describes the affair between her father and the governess: 'I heard them in the night. I was right under their window in the park. They don't even bother to draw the curtains now.' (132) The young woman is hitting out against the domestic trauma she has witnessed after the death of her brother at a young age. From that point on, her mother had retreated into her grief, cutting herself off from her husband and daughter and living with the constant memory of what she considered the unjustified death of her son. Ambricourt confronts her with certain unpalatable facts, something that no member of the clergy had even done before: 'Don't drive her to despair, he says, referring to Chantal. 'God does not allow it.' (149) He then goes even further: 'You don't love your daughter, madame.' (150) Astonished at how this formerly meek and insignificant priest is addressing her, the Comtesse retorts:

'I know what you are. You are a very well-meaning young priest, quite without vanity or ambition, and you certainly have no love
The woman experiences peace for the first time in years...

Feeling faint, uttering words that come from some unknown source, the priest continues to bring this embittered woman to the point where she can eventually accept God’s will. But the ultimate prize does not come easily. The Comtesse’s one hope is that she will be reunited with her son in heaven, a hope, the priest reminds her, that is threatened by her neglect of the remaining family members. ‘Your hard heart may keep you from him for all eternity’ (162), Ambricourt tells her, adding: ‘Hell is not to love any more, madame.’ (163) Slowly, the broken woman’s resistance begins to fade as she succumbs to the promptings of the priest, who is aware that he is being used as a conduit of grace:

I felt as though a mysterious hand had struck a breach in who knows what invisible rampart, so that peace flowed in from every side, majestically finding its level, peace unknown to the earth, the soft peace of the dead, like deep water.

Eventually priest and Comtesse say the Our Father together, placing particular emphasis on the words, ‘Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.’ The woman experiences peace for the first time in years and later that evening writes to thank Ambricourt for what he has done for her. ‘I have lived in the most horrible solitude, alone with the desperate memory of a child’, she notes. ‘And it seems to me that another child has brought me to life again.’ (175) The priest marvels at how he could have brought serenity to another while he himself remains in the throes of pain. News reaches him the next day that the Comtesse died in her sleep. Chantal, who had been spying on their interview, was amazed at her mother’s animation during the exchange with the curé, convinces some of his superiors that he may have had a role in her death. Not being in a position to reveal what had transpired between him and the Comtesse, Ambricourt must endure yet more suspicion in relation to his behaviour. M. le Comte’s uncle, Canon la Motte-Beuvron, questions the curé during a visit to the presbytery. He detects a deep spirituality in his young confrere, a quality that marks him out from others coming fresh out of seminaries:

‘Your power over some souls must be great. I am an old priest. I know how the seminaries mould boys down to the same ordinary level, till often there’s unfortunately nothing to choose between them. But they couldn’t do anything with you. And the secret of your strength lies in the fact that you are unaware, or daren’t realize, how different you are from the others.’ (185)

Difference in an organisation like the Catholic Church is not usually an asset, and it certainly does not work in Ambricourt’s favour. His
health deteriorates even further and one evening he stumbles half-blind through the countryside, falling three times (like Jesus on the climb to Golgotha), waking up in a pool of blood, the result of a haemorrhage, only to see Seraphita ('My little Samaritan', 219) wiping his soiled face with a towel. She admits the fascination he inspires in her: 'It isn't that you're anythin' to look at ... It's just 'cause you're sad. You're sad even when you smile. I think if I only knew what you was sad – I shouldn't be wicked no more.' (218-9)

Unfortunately, the sadness will be reinforced when the cure heads to Lille to consult with a doctor (the wrong one, in fact) addicted to morphine, who gives a diagnosis of lympho-granulomatosis, a form of incurable cancer. Ambricourt is shaken to the core: 'May God forgive me! I never thought of Him.' (273) He marvels at how he should be so dismayed at the thought of departing a world in which he has never really been happy. He also finds it hard to believe that he can look at death as 'a wiping out, and nothing more' (275), something that is at complete variance with his religious faith. He heads to the apartment of his former seminary friend, Louis Dufréty, now working as a commercial traveller and living with a woman who has sacrificed everything for him. Ambricourt can see how his friend is completely wrapped up in himself, to the point of trying to disguise the nature of his relationship from the outside world. The priest tells him that it would be better to go back on the vows of ordination for the love of a good woman rather than to pursue what Dufréty describes as his 'intellectual evolution.' (284) It is in Dufréty's sombre Lille apartment that the priest passes away, tended to by his friend's partner. His last words, relayed by Dufréty, are, 'Does it matter? Grace is everywhere....' (298), which shows that he recovered his faith at the end of his spiritual journey. The peace which he had made possible for Mme la Comtesse is now his own. Instead of having someone like Torcy to administer the Last Rites, he has to make do with the 'failed priest' Dufréty, but in a sense the cure d'Ambricourt has no need for an intermediary between him and God: he has earned the right to join the ranks of the saints in Heaven.

A dystopian atmosphere permeates the experimental novel Monsieur Quine, whose setting is once more a parish in Normandy where the Devil's presence is palpable. In his Introduction to his own translation of the novel, William S Bush states that Bernanos 'understood the human race to be not only fallen, but also radically destitute and unable to save itself from death and disintegration.' (xv) It is clear from the outset that the parish of Fenouille has many hidden secrets and crimes. We learn in the opening pages that a young peasant boy has been killed. Having discovered he had been working at the local
The book is a type of murder mystery...

château, some suspect that Woolly-Leg, the despised chatelaine, may have had something to do with the murder. She is seen regularly out riding in the middle of the night on her white horse. Others think that the retired Professor of Languages, M. Ouine (whose name is a composite of ‘Oui’ and ‘ne’, yes and no), may have been involved, or the local poacher Arsène. The book is a type of murder mystery, with the difference that it is never discovered who the criminal is.

The main focus of the novel is an adolescent boy, Steeny, who lives with his mother and her pernicious friend, Miss, a woman with an undisguised dislike of young boys. The relationship between the two women appears to be lesbian in nature, a fact that steers Steeny into the orbit of M. Ouine, who is portrayed as having paedophile tendencies. The plot, it can be seen, is quite complex and the narrative dream-like in its horror. The curé de Fenouille is the character of most relevance to this article. He feels overwhelmed by the happenings in his soulless parish and wonders at how far into the pit of evil people have slipped. At the burial of the little boy, the priest shares his concerns with the congregation:

‘There are many parishes in the world. But this one is dead. Perhaps it has been dead for a long time. I didn’t want to believe it. I said to myself, “As long as I’m here....” Alas, one man alone does not make a parish.’ (169-70)

He goes on to talk about the fire of hell and argues that for him hell is cold: ‘It used to be that the nights weren’t long enough to wear out your malice, and you got up each morning with your breasts still full of poison. But now the devil himself has withdrawn from you. Ah, how alone we are in evil, my brothers!’ (171) Those in the church resent the curé’s words, which forms the pretext for Bernanos to dwell on the diminished role of the clergy in society:

Hatred of the priest is one of man’s profoundest instincts, as well as one of the least known....’

Bernanos’ fascination with the figure of the priest is evident from the many memorable representations he has of them in his work. What is striking about M. Ouine is the fact that it is not the curé who holds centre stage in this instance, but the eponymous hero, or anti-hero, a
Spirituality

M. Quine's passing leaves more questions than answers...

former seminarian and someone with an insatiable curiosity about the workings of evil. M. Ouine recognises the truth of what the curé has said and admits to Steeny what constitutes the essence of his being:

'I was hungry only for souls. Hungry? What am I saying: I coveted them with a different kind of longing not meriting the name of hunger. Otherwise a single one of them would have sufficed, the most wretched one: I alone would have possessed it in the most profound solitude. But I didn't want to turn them into my prey. I watched them take their pleasures and suffer as He who had created them might have seen them Himself...' (251)

M. Ouine seeks a God-like understanding of souls; he wants to watch them in their pleasures and suffering, to be the unique witness to all that stirs them to life. Bernanos' priests are notable for their ability to read into souls and to act as an intermediary between God and His people. Their role is to lead those they encounter to the path of grace. In this task they sometimes come face to face with the Prince of Evil, who is eager to bring souls in the opposite direction. M. Ouine, with his mysterious past and unwholesome aura, has many traits that one would associate with priests, and with Satan. On his dying bed at the end of the novel, he tells Steeny: 'I have fallen precisely where no judgement can reach me. My child, I am going back into myself forever.' (254)

Unlike the death of the curé d'Ambricourt, M. Ouine's passing leaves more questions than answers. Nothing is resolved at the end of the novel, but one has the distinct impression that evil is in the ascendancy. M. Ouine is certainly no saint and yet it cannot be denied that he shares many of the preoccupations of such figures as Donissan (also obsessed with souls) and the curé d'Ambricourt. The Second World War had shown the world to be headed towards self-annihilation; existentialism and other belief systems were gaining the upper hand as people struggled to understand how an all-loving God could have allowed the horrors that marked the first half of the twentieth century. In France, there were worrying signs that the Catholic Church had colluded with the Nazis. So Bernanos, fanatical defender of the Catholic faith, had much to ponder from his place of exile in Brazil, where he composed this novel. This may go some way towards explaining the ominous mood engendered by M. Ouine. Equally, this novel could well be just a natural extension of the author's constant concern with combating the forces of evil, with priests as the front-line soldiers. He is indisputably the most successful chronicler of these men whose lives are devoted entirely to God and the human race, to ministering the sacraments and easing suffering, to bringing about the triumph of good over evil. For all the torment they endure, some of them still can say that 'grace is everywhere', even when it seems as though the opposite is the case.