

POST-MODERN IRELAND – A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

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Introduction

In a recent article on faith and culture, Michael Paul Gallagher SJ called for 'a post-modernity of our own Christian making, an energetic seizing of the moment'.¹ At first glance this might seem quite strange. Do we not associate modernity and post-modernity with everything that is opposed to Christianity? Have we not seen the decay of Christian faith in most modern and post-modern societies? How could we have a post-modernity of our own Christian making?

At the same time Christianity is understood to be incarnational. This means that at each moment in history the story of God and humanity as told by the life of Jesus Christ and remembered by the Christian community is meant to take flesh and come alive in a fresh and life-giving way. Faced with the questions and the concerns of each new culture, the Christian community is to be 'like a householder who brings out from his storeroom things both old and new'.² There is a

1. 'Post-modernity: Friend or foe'. In Eoin Cassidy (ed.), *Faith and Culture in the Irish Context*, Dublin: Veritas, 1996, p. 81. Prof Gallagher develops his argument in *Clashing Symbols – An Introduction to Faith and Culture*, London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1997.
2. Matthew 13:52.

richness in this image of the Christian tradition as a storeroom of old and new treasures. There are treasures that are old yet valuable because the fundamental hungers of the human heart do not change from one generation to the next. There are also new treasures: each moment in history, as it brings new problems and opportunities, unfolds hidden and unsuspected resources in the Christian tradition. The Christian tradition needs these new problems, questions and opportunities to keep it alive, to energise and replenish its treasure-house of faith.

What follows is an attempt to assess some of the issues confronting the Christian tradition in the context of contemporary Ireland and then to visit the storeroom of Christian faith with a view to formulating 'a post-modernity of our own Christian making'.

Is Ireland post-modern?

The first point that must be addressed is whether or not contemporary Ireland may be described as 'post-modern'. To some extent this depends on what is meant by the term. Without going into further debate here I will accept Gallagher's description of intellectual post-modernity as characterised by a suspicion of reason, of naive claims to progress, of utopian perspectives on history; by a sense of loneliness and loss of connections; finally, by a continuity with modernity in terms of the primacy afforded to subjective personal experience. The legacy of modernity, according to Gallagher, is fragmentation of the sense of self, of the sense of truth, and of the sense of God. However, there are signs that cultural post-modernity, because it includes 'a humbler recognition of wounds and wants' can signal the opening of doors to spiritual enquiry previously slammed

shut by a modernity that was more arrogant and self-contained.³

To what extent could this description of post-modernity reflect a dominant mood in contemporary Irish society?

The Celtic Tiger: more than an economic boom

At the moment it is counter-cultural to speak negatively of developments in Ireland. Ireland is the proud home of the Celtic Tiger. Though two-thirds of the population say they personally have not experienced its benefits, few doubt its existence.⁴ Strictly speaking the Celtic Tiger refers to the current economic boom. However, it has also become shorthand for a country that is perceived as less stuffy and more tolerant, 'vibrant and outward-looking, willing to absorb many influences and listen to many voices'.⁵ Developments have been helped along by the destruction (because of scandals one might say the self-destruction) of the Catholic Church's authority. The Church's influence is now widely perceived, even by many of its members who have remained faithful, to have had a stifling effect on personal freedom and social progress.

There is also a new confidence about resolving problems in Northern Ireland. This has been marked by a growing intolerance of intransigent positions which seem, in an open and liberal society, bigoted, dogmatic and rooted in old quarrels which no longer have any relevance or importance.

3. Gallagher, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-77.

4. Cf. John Waters, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Ireland*, London: Duckworth, 1997, p. 8. Waters compares belief in the 'miracle' of the Celtic Tiger to acceptance of the authenticity of the Marian apparitions at Knock a century previously.

5. Fergal Keane, *Letter to Daniel – Despatches from the Heart*, London: Penguin, 1996, p. 221.

As Ireland prepares to take a front seat in the Europe of the twenty-first century, Republicans in balaclavas and Orangemen in bowler hats are increasingly perceived as primitive and embarrassing anachronisms.

So at first glance the news would seem good. But have all the developments been bought at a high price? There is another side to the story.

Lives of quiet desperation

Let's take as an example the extraordinarily high suicide rate in Ireland at the present time. It is estimated that half a dozen (mainly young) males commit suicide each week. A hospital sister told me that in one regional hospital alone, five to seven people are admitted each day who have attempted to end their lives. Rarely do we find that it is people on the predictable margins who are attempting to kill themselves; the people we see begging on bridges or taking drugs in derelict buildings. Those who commit suicide usually take the community by surprise. In the wake of a suicide the comments are familiar: he had everything going for him; she had recently got a place in college or a promotion at work; he was a leading member of the local football team.

The people who commit suicide would seem to have been 'leading lives of quiet desperation' (Thoreau). On the surface everything seemed well; beneath the surface there must have been a very different sense of unrecognised isolation and loneliness, hidden pain and despair. Recently I attended a Leaving Certificate graduation ceremony at my home school. Everyone, including myself, was telling these school-leavers that the world was their oyster. We kept telling them that they had no grounds for fear, no reason to have any self-doubts. They could stand with their heads held high among the best of

their generation in Europe. As I watched each of these Leaving Certificate students confidently embrace the microphone and express words of gratitude or of hope for the future, I couldn't help contrast it with how I believe most of my class felt leaving school hardly twenty years ago, with many fears and doubts, wondering if we could make it, not expecting much of ourselves and unsure if others expected much of us either. This new confidence among present school-leavers is to be welcomed, and yet I wonder if it bears with it a great pressure, and this in a number of ways. First of all, the pressure to perform and to succeed. From those who have, more is expected. If the world is your oyster then you have no one to blame but yourself if things do not work out well. Second, what if school-leavers only seem confident but actually have hidden doubts and fears? How free are they to express their worries about the future? Are they not under peer pressure to keep up the appearance, in the words of the Simon and Garfunkel song, 'to play the game and pretend'? And are they not also perhaps under unacknowledged pressure from their parents who are proud to see their sons and daughters less inhibited and more confident than themselves; with knowledge, skills and attitudes they themselves never dreamed of possessing?

Ill-equipped for the pain of living

I question if young people today, despite their knowledge, freedom and opportunity, are being equipped to cope with the pain, struggle and general messiness that is part and parcel of any human life in any time and place. What is more, I believe that the message they hear from many voices in society is that a life free of such messiness is not only possible but theirs for the asking. This means that when pain and messiness come they are unexpected and leave young people all the more

vulnerable and confused. Little wonder, then, that they are devastated when a relationship does not work out, when a job is more than they can handle, or when they encounter failure in one form or another. Paul Murray, in his poem 'A note on human passion', writes:

...one must not anaesthetise
or dull the pain
but instead sustain
the splintered heart's
helpless yet terrifying
and sharp desire
never to be healed
of the wound of living...⁶

Obviously people who are addicted to drugs of different kinds are attempting to anaesthetise the pain of living. But any form of behaviour which compels people to give their energy to things that are not their true desires is also an addiction.⁷ Work, shaping one's career, the acquisition of money or property, expensive and often dangerous pastimes, relationships which are more about dependency than friendship, all of these can be addictions. Just to comment on the first of these: work. Today, many people become identified entirely with their work and virtually disappear behind it. Perhaps Celtic Tiger booms only come about when people do. But are we taking account of the cost in human terms? The danger of addictive lifestyles, of whatever kind, is that gradually they erode the capacity for depth.

6. In *The Absent Fountain*, Dublin: Dedalus Press, 1991, p. 28.

7. Cf. Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace*, London: HarperCollins, 1988, p. 14.

Not everyone may take the path of addiction. Instead some lower their horizons, accept that this is the way life is, and settle for 'half-living their lives, half-dreaming their dreams, half-loving their loves, becoming half-people' (Brendan Kennelly). They avoid despair by converting their disappointment into 'a courageous and self-limiting fortitude'.⁸

A sense of dislocation and loss of identity

For some time now I have been puzzled and concerned about the apparent lack of a sense of history among third-level students. Events that lie outside their immediate experience, whether they happened just before they were born or centuries ago, seem totally irrelevant to them. It is not as though they were afraid of history: it is as if they lacked a category by which to consider past events. This sense of disconnectedness from the past, and puzzlement as to why it should matter, have no doubt contributed positively to moving the peace process in the North of Ireland along, where, for centuries, old battles fuelled new sources of division. Now, an increasing number of young adults in the North want to get on with life, seek their identity in a new Europe, and benefit to the full from the economic prosperity that an end to violence may ensure.

At the same time, this lack of a sense of history, this 'cheerful ahistoricity', as Paul Lakeland calls it, represents a tremendous impoverishment. It means that the present generation must virtually invent itself. It has no background, no personal story to unite and inspire, nothing to locate it in a context wider and greater than itself. To use an analogy:

8. Cf. Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity – Christian identity in a fragmented age*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1997, p. 9.

children who are adopted sometimes find it hard to live without knowledge of their birth-parents and family background. Pieces of the jigsaw essential to their personal identity and self-worth are missing. When they are unable to find the missing pieces, it can sometimes be very difficult to compensate for the loss. Similarly, a generation that has become separated from its own personal history is cut off from an essential aspect of its identity and source of self-worth, and here too the result can be detrimental and destructive.

The contemporary sense of disconnectedness is not only from the past: it is also from many aspects of the present. I am amazed how, for example, the scandals in the Church have passed so many young people completely by. Young adults may be disaffected, but it is not because of a sense of outrage at what Church representatives have done. The outrage comes more from older people who themselves feel hurt or let down by an institutional Church they once looked up to. For an increasing number of younger people the Church is not even a source of disappointment: it is simply not a part of their world at all. Their world is that of MTV and the Worldwide Web, and maybe the sports pages of the tabloids. In general, their level of interest in and knowledge of current affairs is appallingly low. Reality, whatever form it takes, simply does not sell. Anything which encourages fantasies is bound to be a success. Steadily the real world shrinks from view and a virtual world replaces it. Virtual reality is attractive because people can create these artificial worlds for themselves and therefore be gods in their own universe. They are in control and can feel secure. In virtual reality, people can hide behind assumed identities and practise an economy of self-disclosure. There, they may be alone, but at least they feel safe.

There is yet a third form of disconnectedness. This is from any sense of place. People move around more than ever before. This may be because of their work: increasingly people are employed in companies with multinational interests. Further, information technology means that many people can live and work wherever they like, at home, in the car or overseas. But aside from the requirements of their jobs people seem to have a need to be on the move; to be somewhere else; not to remain too long where they are now. There is a reluctance to form community, to get to know neighbours, to become involved in a locality. Thus people may live in a so-called 'dormer' town, drive to work, and spend the weekends socialising somewhere else. We have not yet even begun to reckon with the implications of this in terms of Church, to which the concept of community is so vital and central.

The task: self-invention, not self-discovery

Recently, speaking at a seminar on Christian discipleship, I quoted Frederick Buechner's description of a vocation as 'the place where your deepest gladness and the world's deepest hunger meet'. In response, one man in his mid-twenties said that he felt there was nothing in life he could do that would be uniquely and distinctively his contribution. He felt his life was utterly replaceable and disposable. If he stopped doing what he was doing, somebody else would simply take his place. The issue here was the absence of a unique sense of personal identity and self-worth.

If identity is no longer seen as a weapon or as a symbol of exclusion,⁹ this is a welcome change, but again it has been bought at a high price. Identity is no longer a weapon because it is too weak to be used as one. Disconnectedness both from

9. Loc. cit.

past and present realities, as well as the loss of a sense of place, mean that personal identity is fragile and brittle. This is why people are so quick to adopt surrogate identities offered to them, whether by designer clothing, fashion and pop culture, or fundamentalist religious and political movements. These help to postpone facing the painful reality that, as Jean-Paul Sartre said:

For human reality, to be is to choose oneself; nothing comes to it either from the outside or from within which it can receive or accept. Without any help whatsoever, it is entirely abandoned to the intolerable necessity of making itself be – down to the slightest detail.¹⁰

People see their task today as one not of self-discovery but self-invention. The implication is that we are nothing at birth. Culture is all, nature and inheritance little. We are who we become through our own efforts. We are what we achieve. To give up on achieving, performing, succeeding, would be to give up on life itself. We are free to make something of ourselves, but in a sense our freedom is a burden. We are, as Sartre put it, 'condemned to be free'.

The post-modern search for spiritual meaning

To return, then, to the opening question. The evidence is mounting that in a number of respects contemporary Irish society fits in with the post-modern picture. However, one aspect remains to be examined. Modernity heralded the death of God, and with it, the end of religion. In contrast, post-

10. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (trans. Barnes), London: Methuen, 1958, pp. 440-441, cited in Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 239.

modernity is marked by an openness, if not to God or religion, at least to spirituality. Do we find such an openness in Ireland at the present time? There is ample evidence that a post-modern spiritual search is well under way in Ireland. What characterises this search as post-modern is its suspicion of the intellect, rejection of institutions, resistance to structure, and emphasis on personal and subjective experience. It is also marked by a kind of 'cherry-picking' approach to the various world religions and traditions.

A glance at any issue of *Intercom* shows what 'sells' in Irish religious circles today: 'Meeting the God within through his(!) manifestation in nature', 'Discovering the inner rainbow', 'Dancing your story', 'Healing touch – therapeutic touch', and, of course, 'Celtic Spirituality'. What is ironic is that many of these courses and programmes have become the bread and butter of former seminaries and religious houses throughout the country.

One very obvious sign of the extent of the post-modern search for spiritual meaning is the recent extraordinary success of John O'Donohue's *Anam Chara*.¹¹ This book dovetails perfectly with the post-modern search for meaning. It draws widely on the various religious traditions and gurus: Buddhism, Pablo Neruda, Meister Eckhart, Zen, the Kalyani-Mitra, the Native Americans, Hegel. Celtic myths and stories also get a mention but not nearly enough to merit the subtitle to the book: 'spiritual wisdom from the Celtic world'. Little is said about Jesus Christ, nothing at all about Church. There are lengthy reflections on love but these focus more on its benefits than its cost. Nicholas Lash alerts us to the subtle danger of this kind of spirituality:

11. John O'Donohue, *Anam Chara. Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*, London: Bantam Press, 1997.

My mistrust of contemporary interest in 'spirituality' arises from the suspicion that quite a lot of material set out in bookstores under this description sells because it does not stretch the mind or challenge our behaviour. It tends to soothe rather than subvert our well-heeled complacency.¹²

The problem with much of contemporary spirituality is precisely as Lash suggests: it supports rather than challenges our post-modern lifestyles. It does not necessarily call any of our values or attitudes into question. It cannot, because this kind of spirituality is itself the product of a directionless post-modernity and thus can only be a coping mechanism for survival within it.

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It would seem from what has been said so far that Ireland is well on its way to being a post-modern society, with all the accompanying sense of disorientation, disconnectedness and fragmentation that characterises such societies. The question we must now examine is which treasures in the storeroom of Christian faith can uplift us at this lonely moment in our journey through history.

12. Nicholas Lash, *op.cit.*, p. 174. Writing on the same subject Hans Urs von Balthasar says: 'Outside the Christian domain the most important religious phenomenon appears to be an urgent and often desperate desire to flee from the senseless merry-go-round of technical civilisation to a transcendental sphere of peace. It doesn't seem to matter whether this sphere is God's or the seeker's own self or something neutral in between' ('Christian Prayer', *Communio*, 5, 1978, p. 16).

Sweeping away the debris

Before moving to a more theoretical reflection on the Christian story, a few practical comments must be made.

We have already noted that the post-modern mindset remains very suspicious of institution and structure. Thus, even aside from the various scandals, the institutional Church has a serious credibility problem. Fewer people are looking to the Church for leadership, and this includes in spiritual matters. Important statements and documents no longer attract even negative comment. Vocations to priesthood and religious life are dwindling rapidly, in quality as well as quantity, yet almost all positions of responsibility in the Church remain in the hands of ordained clergy. By international standards there is still an unusually high Church practice rate in Ireland, but the increasing absence of young people on a regular basis is significant.

Paradoxically, and in this regard Ireland may well be unique among post-modern countries, many people, young and old, remain passionately committed to the Church, but their voices are largely unheard and their energy and their enthusiasm remain untapped. Many of these are women, both lay and in religious life, and it remains to be seen just how long they will stand waiting on the sidelines.

The questions which those in Church leadership must now explore are: what changes in structures and institutions are necessary if the Church is to proclaim faithfully and effectively the Good News in a post-modern culture? What changes are necessary so that freshness, liveliness and enthusiasm are restored to the proclamation and the celebration of the Good News? The proclamation of the Good News is the Church's mission. The danger is that it would substitute for this mission, loyalty to outmoded forms and structures of

ministry. To remain faithful, the Church has no choice but to change. Structures are not ends in themselves: they are merely the particular forms which the mission of the Church takes as it journeys through history.

The Church would seem to be crumbling in post-modern Ireland. But as the debris is swept away we realise that little of the edifices which have collapsed were essential to its proclamation of the Good News. In fact, without them, and with a healthy dose of creativity and imagination, the Church might prove to be in far better condition, leaner and healthier, to speak the words of compassion, healing and forgiveness which it uniquely is authorised and commissioned to do.

With this in mind, we will now see if we can find some such words which might find an echo in the post-modern search for meaning.

From the death of God to God's burial

Modernity accepted that humanity had no need of God. It could stand on its own two feet. Not only that, modernity also understood belief in God to be an impediment to humanity exercising its freedom fully and assuming full responsibility for itself. Modernity therefore announced the death of God. Theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann responded by focusing on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, seeing in this a moment when modernity's cry of 'the death of God' takes on a whole new meaning.¹³ Here, on the cross, is God, through Jesus, identifying with humanity even in its experience of utter Godforsakenness. Moltmann was making the point that no human experience, not even modernity's experience of the absence of God, is foreign or alien to God.

13. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, London: SCM, 1974.

Post-modernity is gone beyond proclaiming the death of God. God's apparent absence is now readily accepted; it is no longer news. People get on with enduring their lives of quiet desperation. Some sink themselves in endless activity and noise. Others accept that the death of God signals the disappearance of any ultimate meaning or significance to their lives, and stoically 'suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'.

In terms of the Christian story the post-modern moment in history corresponds not to the death of Jesus on the cross, but to his burial; to those dark hours when Jesus lay in the tomb. Each Easter we gloss over these important hours so quickly. We miss the point of the non-liturgy on Holy Saturday; the stripping bare of the altars and the awkward and eerie silence. The scriptures themselves have little to say regarding the burial of Jesus. In John's highly symbolic account, however, we note a few interesting points. We find, for example, that it is two strangers who come to retrieve the body.¹⁴ Peter and the others are nowhere to be found; they are either locked in an upper room, gone to Emmaus or gone back to their fishing nets as if nothing has happened. It is two hitherto secret disciples of Jesus, Nicodemus, who first visited Jesus at night, and Joseph of Arimathea, who become the custodians of Jesus' remains. And it is a woman, Mary of Magdala, who is the first to visit the tomb, significantly, while it is still dark.¹⁵

An energetic seizing of the moment

It would seem that, at the moment of the death and burial of

14. Cf. John 19: 38-42.

15. Cf. John 20:1.

Jesus, the stage belonged not to the principal actors, but to those who, up until now, had played insignificant walk-on parts and who had been mainly observing from the wings. Nicodemus hardly counts as a disciple at all: he is described as a Pharisee, a leader among the Jewish (and therefore unbelieving) people. In John's Gospel he represents the educated yet critical and somewhat sceptical enquirer.¹⁶ Neither could Mary of Magdala, who, we are told, had seven demons exorcised from her by Jesus, be considered a leading light among the disciples.¹⁷

Is 'an energetic seizing of the moment' in response to the post-modern sense of loss and disorientation possible? At the moment in the Christian story when loss was most keenly experienced we find that the energy comes not from those most readily identified with the story, but from people who have been lurking on the perimeters. Could this be telling us that we need to listen to those on the edges today; to novelists, artists and musicians, scientists and social-workers; to the many sometimes critical voices who evidently remain captivated by the Christ-event, but who, whether like Nicodemus out of scepticism, or Joseph of Arimathea out of fear, are unwilling to become explicitly identified with Christianity?

He descended into hell

There is one further aspect of the death and burial of Jesus to consider. What happens to Jesus during this dark night between burial and resurrection? The Apostles' Creed answers this question with the often neglected line 'he descended to the dead',

16. Cf. John 3:1-21.

17. Cf. Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2.

or, in the more traditional translation, 'he descended to hell'. Hell, we understand, is the place of eternal punishment for those who have refused God's love. What was Jesus doing in hell?

In recent times Hans Urs von Balthasar has considered this question.¹⁸ He sees in Jesus' descent to hell God's clear message that no matter how we try, we cannot put ourselves outside the range of God's love.

Those in hell have freely chosen to reject all love; they have sought absolute loneliness. God wishes to respect their freedom yet at the same time let them know that their choice has not diminished God's love for them. As a last gesture of love, therefore, God 'sends' Jesus to hell. God allows Jesus to become one of them; to experience all they experience, even to share their sense of being cut off and abandoned. Jesus appears before them as one of themselves. He is not pretending to go through what they are going through: he actually goes through it. This means that hell, the state of utter abandonment, loneliness and desolation, is no longer outside God's loving presence.¹⁹ Thus the lines of the psalm take on a whole new significance:

Where could I go to escape your spirit?
Where could I flee from your presence?
If I climb the heavens, you are there,
there too, if I lie in Sheol.²⁰

But God's presence in this most desolate of places becomes possible only by Jesus surrendering everything: authority,

18. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The von Balthasar Reader*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982, p. 153.

19. Op. cit., pp. 421-422.

20. Psalm 139:7-8.

power, life itself. It becomes possible because Jesus is prepared to share fully the sense of desolation and Godforsakenness of those in hell. Only by Jesus so doing is their state of abandonment brought within the reach of God's love.

Post-modernity: strength in weakness

In Jesus' descent to hell we have a moment in the Christian story that corresponds to the post-modern sense of loneliness and desolation. There is Good News here for people whose life experience is a 'living hell'. Though their experience is one of abandonment and Godforsakenness, the Good News is that they are not abandoned or forsaken. They have not and they cannot put themselves outside the reach of God's love.

There is only one way for the Christian community to communicate this message. It must become at one with those who experience abandonment and desolation. It must itself become abandoned and desolate. When we pause for a moment to consider it, this is exactly what is happening the Church today. The Church is experiencing abandonment, loneliness, isolation, desolation. And perhaps there is a divine economy in this. Because of it, the Church can both reach and redeem the loneliness and desolation of the post-modern age.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to sketch a post-modernity of our own Christian making. It has attempted to discover in the Christian story something that corresponds to the moment in history in which we find ourselves. It would be nice to end this article with a reference to the resurrection. But that might console us prematurely and anticipate a moment in history which is yet to come. For the present perhaps the

most appropriate stance is summed up in these lines from T.S. Eliot's 'East Coker':

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon
you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of
darkness on darkness,
And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant
panorama
And the bold imposing façade are all being rolled away –
... I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait
without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet
faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the
waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for
thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the
dancing.¹⁸

18. 'East Coker' from *Four Quartets*, London: Faber&Faber Ltd.