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‘KICKING BISHOP BRENNAN UP THE ARSE...’:

CATHOLICISM, DECONSTRUCTION AND POSTMODERNITY IN

CONTEMPORARY IRISH CULTURE

‘Kicking Bishop Brennan up the Arse...’: Catholicism, Deconstruction and Postmodernity in Contemporary Irish Culture’, in *Irish and Catholic?: Towards an Understanding of Identity*, edited by Louise Fuller, John Littleton and Eamon Maher. Dublin: Columba Press, pages, 47-67

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Abstract

This chapter will examine the changing role of the Catholic Church as structure in contemporary Ireland, seeing this altered role as part of a larger process of societal change across the western world. Indeed, what is remarkable is not that the church has lost its hegemonic status, but rather that this process has been so belated. I will trace the analysis of such structural dissemination briefly through the work of Lyotard, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, before locating the iconographic image of Bishop Brennan being kicked up the arse in a polyptich with three other images which graphically illustrate this process of structural dissemination that I see as typical of the condition of postmodernity.

The title of this chapter refers to the television programme *Father Ted*, and specifically to an episode where Ted, having lost a bet to his arch-enemy, Father Dick Roche, is forced to kick his very critical boss, Bishop Len Brennan, a Limerick man, ‘up the arse.’ In a series of hilarious misadventures, Ted finally accomplishes this feat, being photographed in the act by his friend, Father Dougal. The popularity of this anarchic programme has been huge but what is of particular interest to me is the deconstruction of attitudes about the church that it has exemplified. What is perhaps most interesting

about the genesis of this programme is that it was offered to RTÉ who refused to take it up, before buying it to show on their station on which it became one of the most popular comedies in the TAM ratings.

This comedy could be read as being profoundly anti-Catholic – portraying the classic stereotypes of the wheeler-dealer priest (Ted himself – albeit not an especially successful wheeler-dealer); the alcoholic priest (Fr Jack – whose four-word mantra ‘feck-arse-girls-drink’ became the show’s catchphrase); the idiot priest (Fr Dougal) and of course, that metonym of the role of women in the church, the housekeeper Mrs Doyle (provider of another catch-phrase in terms of her urgings of cups of tea on unfortunate guests (‘ah you will, you will, you will....!’). And yet the programme avoids any real criticism of the church as an organisation. None of the major church scandals of the past number of years has been directly dealt with, and all of the clerical characters are, in different ways, likeable. The eponymous Bishop Brennan, who, it is discovered, has a son by another woman, is obviously an allusion to Bishop Eamon Casey, but that aside, there is little direct attack on the church; indeed, there is a fondness for the priests as flawed individuals who are, in their limited way, doing their best.

What is groundbreaking about this programme however is a placing of the institutional church in a position as target of satire, however gentle that satire may be. For so long the sacred cow of Irish media coverage, *Father Ted* levels the playing field and the church, like the family, the law, the world of work and politics, becomes subject to a ludic glance. The church is now seen as just another organisation, as part of the way in which society and culture are ordered, and which is subject to the same rules, regulations and expectations as the other societal structures with which it competes.

In other words, the church is just one more way in which society structures itself: it is another example of the interaction of the system and the subject. In the same way as politics, ethnicity,

ideology and community, religion as an organisation is a system which provides support, stability and a place for the subject. It provides a structure within which the individual can exist, it provides sets of rules and guidelines which structure the individual and also provides a sense of teleology, in the provision of a set of answers to the questions posed by existence.

This chapter will examine the changing role of the Catholic Church as structure in contemporary Ireland, seeing this altered role as part of a larger process of societal change across the western world. Indeed, what is remarkable is not that the church has lost its hegemonic status, but rather that this process has been so belated. I will trace the analysis of such structural dissemination briefly through the work of Lyotard, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, before locating the iconographic image of Bishop Brennan being kicked up the arse in a polyptich with three other images which graphically illustrate this process of structural dissemination that I see as typical of the condition of postmodernity.

Jean Francoise Lyotard, in his book, *The Postmodern Condition*, has defined postmodernism as a process whereby the grand narratives of culture have become broken down. He makes the point that while a self does not amount to much, nevertheless 'no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at "nodal points" of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be.'¹ As he goes on to add, one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent. His point is that one's mobility in relation to these language game effects is tolerable, at least within certain limits

¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 15.

(and the limits are vague); it is even solicited by regulatory mechanisms, and in particular by the self-adjustments the system undertakes in order to improve its performance. He goes on:

It may even be said that the system can and must encourage such movement to the extent that it combats its own entropy, the novelty of an unexpected “move,” with its correlative displacement of a partner or group of partners, can supply the system with that increased performativity it forever demands and consumes.²

His point here is telling in a contemporary context: the ability of a single overarching structure to answer all the questions, and provide the epistemological structures wherewith to organise a contemporary complex society has been deconstructed by the fractured nature of selfhood, and consequently, what has emerged is a number of smaller narratives, both complimentary and contradictory, which compete for the attention and loyalty of the subject.

This is in accordance with the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, who sees the self as split, and as motivated by a desire to in some way heal this split. Lacan, developing the work of Freud, undercut the notion of rationality as the dominant factor in our humanity and instead began to examine language as an index of the unconscious processes of the mind. He also coined the phrase that the ‘unconscious is structured like a language’,³ which brought the study of structures to the fore in continental thought. For Lacan, the unconscious and language could no longer be seen as givens, or as natural; instead, they were structures which required investigation. In this model, language, no matter what the mode of enunciation, was shot through with metaphors, metonymies and complex codifications which often masked, as opposed to revealed, the real self. Taking the structuralist ideas of the word as divided into signifier and signified, he stressed the lack of correlation between the two, adding that meaning is always fraught with slippage, lack of clarity and play.

² *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 15.

³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 20.

His recasting of the Cartesian '*cogito ergo sum*' ('I think therefore I am') into '*desidero ergo sum*' ('I desire therefore I am') has led to a revision of the primacy of reason in the human sciences. He also suggested that selfhood was a complex construct in which the self took on reflections and refractions from the societal context in which it was placed. His notion of the 'mirror stage' stressed the imaginary and fictive nature of the ideal-self, which he saw as predicated on a desire for an unattainable ideal which could never be actualised. In a culture where repression of desire was very much part of the socio-religious mindset, this view of language and desire would have revolutionary implications for any analysis of culture and sexuality. By stressing the primacy of desire, psychoanalysis conflicts directly with the tenets of the church.

Catholicism has generally seen desire, especially sexual desire, as a negative human quality, in need of repression. The adequation of desire with sin has long been part of the Irish psyche: the corollary of this ethico-moral equation – desire + sin = guilt – has led to serious consequences for individual development in Ireland. Indeed, it is in relation to desire that the contemporary difficulties of the church can best be understood. The capitalist, or post-capitalist, cultures of Western Europe and the developed world are in many ways, the enactment of desire: capitalism is the political system which accedes to the importance of desire in the human psyche. One need only remember the fall of the Berlin wall – there was never any great rush of people from West Germany to East Germany – the traffic was all one-way, another index of the primacy of desire. Despite the radical uncertainty of moving to a capitalist system, the desire for possessions, for a better life, for personal freedom was the motive force in determining the direction of traffic across the ruins of that forbidding wall. Indeed, commodity fetishism, the engine which drives capitalist economies, is the practical embodiment of desire – I need a new mobile phone, a bigger PC with more Ram and a Pentium 4/5/6 processor. Secular Western society is really structured by this form of reified desire and the Catholic church, with a different attitude to the satisfaction of desire, is very much out of step with this culture, and with the postmodern concept of the secular self, a self which is firmly located in history.

By dividing human subjectivity into three orders, the imaginary, symbolic and real, Lacan offered an historical and social dimension to psychoanalytic studies, the effect of which is still being felt today, and the primacy of language is central to his work. Until then, the individual was being examined very much in isolation, with the psyche being the object of analysis in terms of how the unconscious influences the self. In fact, in a Lacanian context, all subjectivity is defined in terms of what is called the Symbolic order, and this order is the structural matrix through which our grasp of the word is shaped and enunciated.⁴ For Lacan, the Symbolic order is what actually constitutes our subjectivity ‘man speaks, then, but it is because the symbol has made him man’.⁵ It is the matrix of culture and the locus through which individual desire is expressed: ‘the moment in which the desire becomes human is also that in which the child is born into language.’⁶ The social world of linguistic communication, intersubjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions, and the acceptance of the law are all connected with the acquisition of language.

Once a child enters into language and accepts the rules and dictates of society, it is able to deal with others. The symbolic, then, is made up of those laws and restrictions that control both desire and the rules of communication, which are perpetuated through societal and cultural hegemonic modes. Lacan condenses this function in the term the ‘Name-of-the-Father’. Once a child enters into language and accepts the rules and dictates of society, it is able to deal with others. The symbolic is made possible because of the acceptance of the Name-of-the-Father, those laws and restrictions that control both desire and the rules of communication: ‘it is in the *Name of the Father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his

⁴ See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits - A Selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. (London: Tavistock, 1977) and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

⁵ Lacan, *Écrits*, p.72.

⁶ Lacan, *Écrits*, p.113.

person with the figure of the law.’⁷ Through recognition of the Name-of-the-Father, you are able to enter into a community of others. The symbolic, through language, is ‘the pact which links... subjects together in one action. The human action *par excellence* is originally founded on the existence of the world of the symbol, namely on laws and contracts.’⁸

The connection with Religion here is all too clear. Catholicism, as a subset of Christianity is a patristic, and patriarchal, religion *par excellence*. Indeed, one of the most universal of the Catholic prayers is the blessing of the self, beginning, as we all know: ‘In the name of the father, and of the son, and of the holy spirit....’. Lacan, writing from within a French *milieu*, profoundly influenced by a Catholic Symbolic order, uses this phrase as an index of the law into which an individual, as Lyotard has pointed out, is born, and which, in many ways, reconfigures that individual. This order is patriarchal, fixed and stratified, within a given temporal and spatial structure, not unlike the hierarchy of the church itself.

What separates this order from mere notions of peer-pressure is the fact that it exerts a huge influence on the unconscious as well as the conscious self. These influences are not obvious at times, and form part of the inchoate but influential series of seemingly core values which drive our personalities. And of course, the crucial point here is that the very notion of the *Name of the Father*, of cultural construction, law, language, societal norms is one which is constantly subject to change. The Symbolic order of 2005 is vastly different from that of 1905, to take a broad sweep, as we will see in terms of a contrast between *Ulysses* and *American Beauty* later in this chapter. As Paula Murphy has noted:

The significance of the symbolic in Lacan’s theory of subjectivity has already been highlighted: it governs both the imaginary and the real, to the extent to which the real can be

⁷ Lacan, *Écrits*, p.67.

⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I*. Translated by John Forrester. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. (New York: Norton, 1991), p.230.

articulated. For Lacanian psychoanalysis, it means that while the structure of his theory remains stable, its constituents are constantly changing, shifting and modifying. For derivative theories of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the consequences are also numerous. If one accepts that the symbolic changes and develops, then it questions the objections of feminists that are based upon a patriarchal static notion of the symbolic and it allows for a fresh analysis of whether the phallus is still a master signifier in the present symbolic order of Western society.⁹

This view of the socio-symbolic order, itself hugely formative of the individual that we become, as subject to change is important in terms of the politics of theory. In fact, Lacan sees the relationship between language and reality as constantly in flux, and only kept in place by specific nodal connections, what he terms '*points de capiton*', quilting points (a metaphor drawn from the points in a mattress which are nailed down for stability), where signifier, signified and referent are in some form of stasis and harmony.¹⁰ These anchoring points, which he also calls Master Signifiers, are our key to some form of certainty: in language, for example, they are to be found in punctuation, which guarantees the stability of the sentence and allows us to retroactively make sense of what we have been reading. The particular Symbolic order of a culture, a language, a temporal period, is an important aspect of any Lacanian analysis of individuality. The key question, of course, is how such structures change? If the Symbolic order is different in different times and places, how does it change? These very *points de capiton*, which keep a structure in place, must be dislodged in some way. It is here that we come to the work of Jacques Derrida.

It was with this same issue of structurality that Derrida's work was concerned, as he presented a critique of 'logocentrism' (the central set of beliefs or truth-claims around which a culture revolves) and introduces his strategy of deconstruction (the dismantling of the underlying structure of a text to expose its grounding in logocentrism). Derrida postulates that the history of any process of meaning or signification is always predicated on some 'centre', some validating point seen as a 'full presence

⁹ Paula Murphy, *Textual Practice* 19 (4), 2005, 531–549, p. 544.

¹⁰ Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 303.

which is beyond play.’¹¹ Derrida, and perhaps specifically his neologism ‘deconstruction’, has become a synecdoche of this process of theoretical critique. At its most basic, deconstruction consists of taking the binary oppositions which are constructive of the epistemological paradigm of Western philosophy and, as Derrida himself notes: ‘to deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment’.¹²

Some of these centres, or to use the Lacanian term *points de capiton*, can be traced as follows:

1. Early Christian era to eighteenth century: a single god posited as the centre and cause of all things;
2. Eighteenth Century/Enlightenment to late nineteenth century: God kicked out of the centre, and human thought (rationality) posited as the centre and cause of all things;
3. Late nineteenth century-1966: rationality moved out of the centre, and the unconscious, or irrationality, or desire, posited as the centre and cause of all things.

However, this reversal is only the first step in the deconstructive project. Making the point that an opposition of metaphysical concepts is never the face-to-face opposition of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination, Derrida goes on to say that deconstruction ‘does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order, as well as the non-conceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated.’¹³ It is this sense of displacement of the static oppositional criteria that is important in the context of the present discussion. What Derrida has termed the ‘structurality of structure’ stresses that very little in human culture is ‘natural’ or ‘given’; instead, all structurations are created from an ideological standpoint which, and here we would be in Foucault territory, is governed by power relationships. What we might term the ‘politics of deconstruction’ exerts a loosening force on these relationships by suggesting the necessity for alternative structures which are self-aware in terms of the power relationships.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 280.

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Positions*. Translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 41.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), p.329.

For Derrida, the teleology of deconstructive critique involves the imbrication of text with context. He is unwilling to bracket any field of cultural endeavour within its own self-defined parameters.

Deconstruction, he says, consists:

only of transference, and of a thinking through of transference, in all the senses that this word acquires in more than one language, and first of all that of the transference between languages. If I had to risk a single definition of deconstruction, one as brief, elliptical and economical as a password, I would say simply and without overstatement: *plus d'une langue* – both more than a language and no more of a language.¹⁴

The ideas of hermetically sealed-off cultures, national languages, ideologies are deconstructed to reveal a broader context of comparison and contrast, a process which will have ramifications for any exploration of Irish social, cultural and political mores.

While these theories referred initially to academic texts, and were presented in language that could be described, at best as opaque and at worst as unreadable, their political subtext was subversive in the extreme. Derrida's oft-quoted remark that '*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*' ('there is nothing outside the text'),¹⁵ meant that such theoretical approaches could be applied to all political and cultural paradigms, as they were all composed of linguistic structures, and hence all capable of being deconstructed. He would later amend this datum to the more inclusive '*Il n'y a pas de hors contexte*' (there is nothing outside of context).¹⁶ This tag has become one of the most contested items in the discussion of deconstruction. Derrida, basically, is stressing the constructedness of almost all sociocultural and linguistic structures, and adducing the need for interpretation and contextual placement if interpretative activities are to have any sense of closure, an issue underlined by Lacan in

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires: For Paul de Man*. Translated by Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler and Eduardo Cadava (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 14-15.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976), p. 158.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*. Translated by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 136.

relation to the subject: that each individual his context specific – ‘his history is unified by the law, by his symbolic universe, which is not the same for everyone.’¹⁷ In other words, it is through the relationship of text and context that meaning is to be found. So, if we are to analyse the change in role of the Catholic Church as a system or organisation, then these theorists will prove invaluable in terms of outlining the processes of transformation which are, in the Ireland of the third millennium, possibly the only form of constant that exists.

The value of *Father Ted*, I would suggest, is to place the structure of the church in the crucible of satirical commentary. Satire is very much an interrogative discourse in its mode of operation. As it pokes fun at objects, people and structures, it implicitly questions the standards and codes through which these objects, people and structures were accorded value in the first place. Rather than seeing the church as an organisation that in some way transcends the norms of system, bureaucracy, hierarchy and the normal structures of society, this programme underlines just how much the church is part of such structures. The visual image of a priest kicking his bishop ‘up the arse’, while another priest takes a photograph of this act, is an iconic metaphor of the change in the attitude of people to the church as structure, and at this juncture, I would like to bring two other visual metaphors to the fore in order to create an iconic image chain wherein the change in role of the church as structure can be traced.

These images involve two pairs of similar events – a polyptich which in their chronology, attest to the altered role of the church as an organisation in Ireland today. The first image is the iconic one of Ted kicking Bishop Brennan up the arse, while the grinning Dougal takes a photograph of this event. The second is also an image from television, involving a camera, albeit of a different order, a bishop and a priest.

¹⁷ Lacan, *Seminar 1*, p.197

On recalling the visit of Pope John Paul II to Galway, for the youth mass in 1979, one of the images that stays in the mind is that of father Michael Cleary and Bishop Eamon Casey warming up the crowd by leading them in the hymn ‘Bind us Together.’ In a way, this scene was the apotheosis of Catholic power in recent Ireland – the pope was drawing huge crowds, the youth mass was thronged with people, and two of the most popular clerics in Ireland, both men seen as being very much in touch with younger people, as well as being telegenic, were masters of ceremonies. The future for the church in Ireland seemed bright indeed. With the wisdom of hindsight it is all too easy to unpack the personal lives of these men, and see them as synecdoches of what is wrong with the church in Ireland, but that is not the aim of this chapter. Instead I want to juxtapose the different images of bishops and priests and then turn to a different set of signifying images.

In 1999, the Film *American Beauty* appeared to widespread acclaim. The film, an intelligent probing of mid-life crises among middle class Americans, achieved both popular and critical acclaim. One of the central images of that film is the obsession of the central character, Lester Burnham, with a young friend of his daughter, Angela Hayes, a cheerleader. This obsession begins with Lester watching Angela go through her cheer-leader routine, and obsessing about one image, namely that of Angela flipping up her skirt to reveal her underwear. This is an image which will haunt Lester’s daydreams, and also fuel his masturbatory fantasies. Indeed, Lester, in his voiceover, tells us that his early morning masturbation in the shower is the best part of his day: ‘Look at me, jerking off in the shower... This will be the high point of my day; it’s all downhill from here.’¹⁸ I call this to mind because nearly one hundred years earlier, another narrative has a similar scene.

In the Nausica episode of *Ulysses*, Gertie McDowell is being watched by Leopold Bloom, and as she leans back to watch fireworks, she catches her knee in her hand, revealing to Bloom’s gaze her:

¹⁸

American Beauty (1999). Directed by Sam Mendes. Written by Alan Ball.

nainsook knickers, the fabric that caresses the skin, better than those other pettiwidth, the green, four and eleven, on account of being white and she let him and she saw that he saw and then it went so high it went out of sight a moment and she was trembling in every limb from being bent so far back that he had a full view high up above her knee where no-one ever not even on the swing or wading and she wasn't ashamed and he wasn't either to look in that immodest way like that because he couldn't resist the sight of the wondrous revealment half offered like those skirt dancers behaving so immodest before gentlemen looking and he kept on looking, looking. She would fain have cried to him chokingly, held out her snowy slender arms to him to come, to feel his lips laid on her white brow, the cry of a young girl's love, a little strangled cry, wrung from her, that cry that has rung through the ages. And then a rocket sprang and bang shot blind blank and O! then the Roman candle burst and it was like a sigh of O! and everyone cried O! O! in raptures and it gushed out of it a stream of rain gold hair threads and they shed and ah! they were all greeny dewy stars falling with golden, O so lovely, O, soft, sweet, soft!¹⁹

The similarity between the two men, both engaged in advertising and in their forties, neither of whom has had sex with their wives in years, and the two younger women who enjoy the sexual attention of the gaze is clear. The dissimilarity is also clear. This scene in *Ulysses*, first serialised in *The Little Review*, was deemed to transgress moral good taste, and lead to confiscation, book burning, legal prosecution for obscenity, and banning in 1921.²⁰ The scene from the film translated into a number of awards including a Golden Globe and an Academy Award for the screenplay written by Alan Ball.²¹

When we place these images together, two of bishops and two of sexual behaviour, what is interesting is the altered role of the church in terms of the mindset of people exposed to those scenes. The shock and horror that followed Eamon Casey's revelations in 1992 was exacerbated by the wave

¹⁹ James Joyce, *Ulysses*. Edited by Hans Walter Gabler, Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior First published 1922 (London: Bodley Head., 1989), p. 274.

²⁰ Richard Ellmann *James Joyce*. First published 1959 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 518-519.

²¹ Alan Ball, *The Shooting Script: American Beauty* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1999).

of revelations that followed in terms of child abuse in church-run organisations. However, reaction to the image of Bishop Brennan is, I would argue, fuelled less by anger or hurt, and more by a sense that the church is now just another organisation among many. The simple fact is that the symbolic order has changed and our views and expectations of the clergy are very much not what they were twenty or thirty years ago. Indeed, kicking Bishop Brennan up the arse could well be a metaphor for the gradual disrespect, or to put it more accurately, gradual lack of importance of the hierarchical structure of the church in the day-to-day lives of ordinary people.

Various scandals, mainly revolving around sexual abuse, have become common knowledge in the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger – though perhaps the most disturbing fact of these is that when Brendan Smyth and Ivan Payne were complained for abuse, their superiors, bishops and cardinals did nothing to bring this to a halt, but rather sent them to different parishes, where the pattern of abuse continued. These cases of the abuse of children, together with the sexual details of Eamon Casey (whose scandal also involved £70,000 of Diocesan funds) and Michael Cleary, who had been most vociferous in his condemnation of sexual misbehaviour, and diminished support for traditional Catholic positions in the Divorce and Abortion referenda, further eroded the central position of the Church as a moral arbiter in Ireland. This is especially true with respect to the role of women and sexuality, as indicated in the *Ulysses* and *American Beauty* examples.

The images of the scenes of voyeurism and exhibitionism that we see from Gertie McDowell and Angela Hayes in *Ulysses* and *American Beauty* respectively, are separated in time, demonstrating the hugely different symbolic order that exists in the world of today as opposed to that of the fictive time of *Ulysses*. In both texts, there is a certain level of desire on the part of both women and men: just as the men watch, so the women are aware and participant – these are not objects of the male scopic drive: they are participants in the scopic drive. Likewise, the two wives in these two narratives, Molly Bloom and Carolyn Burnham, are active participants in the sexual aspects of the narratives.

Molly, famously, is having an affair with Blazes Boylan, having arranged that he will come to her home in Eccles Street later that day, while her husband, aware of this, has obligingly left the way clear. Thus the eternal triangle, traditionally that of one man and two women, has been inverted and it is Molly who both has her cake (seed cake in her case) and eats it. Similarly Carolyn is having a torrid affair with Buddy Kane, the Real Estate king, something of which Lester is also aware; here women are seen as free agents in terms of their sexual preferences, and no longer seen as possessions of men. The structures of the societies within which they live have radically altered, and consequently, so has their behaviours and their choices. Indeed rapid change is a characteristic of contemporary culture, and the pace of change has been rampant in Ireland over the past twenty years. This is the core problem facing the church in this present context: it still clings to the sense of itself as an unchanging organisation, when in actual fact it has changed radically over the centuries. In almost every progressive field of social change, from the mother and child controversy, through contraception and the various social issues that have come before it, the church has adopted an anti-progressive policy, one which it justifies by seeing itself as the guardian of immutable standards, frozen in the past. Many of these issues are involved with sexual behaviour, which reinforces the point made earlier that the culture of desire that permeates the contemporary western world is inimical to the attitudes of the church.

Again, in terms of postmodernism, the breakdown of grand narratives means the liberation of smaller ones, and the roles of sexual minorities, like gays and lesbians, has become ever more prominent in the wake of what I term the deconstruction of the church as we know it. Both of these texts privilege female sexuality as developing through different societies. Just as social structures change, so too does the behaviour of the subjects within those structures. Part of the problem of the church, it seems to me, is an inability to respond to the societal changes and symbolic conditions within which it exists. The issue of structure has been a preoccupation of this paper and it is with the church's own definition of itself as a structure that I propose to conclude.

John Paul II, in his Apostolic Letter, *Ordination Sacerdotalis*, of 1994, made the position of the church clear in terms of reasons as to why women have not been, and should not be, ordained. He said:

Christ chose his apostles only from among men

...the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for His Church

Christ's way of acting [only choosing men] did not proceed from sociological or cultural motives peculiar to his time. Rather it is to be seen as the faithful observance of a plan to be ascribed to the wisdom of the Lord of the universe.

[Quote from Paul VI]: The church does not consider herself authorised to admit women into priestly ordination

I declare ... that this judgment is to be definitively held by the Church's faithful

This tradition [of excluding women] has been faithfully maintained by the oriental churches.²²

The clear point here is that Christ, as son of God, is a transcendental consciousness at work in a particular place and time: he is in it, but not of it, and as such, is not trammelled by its socio-cultural and linguistic mores and limitations. So, his reasons for not ordaining women as part of his apostolic structure had less to do with the prevailing socio-economic status of women, which was little better than livestock at the time, and more to do with a transcendental grand plan. The church, by extrapolation, is above and beyond the systems and structures of particular places and times, existing as a transcendent structure.

This is fine if one is willing to accept the discourse of the church at face value, but when deconstructive theory is brought to bear, problems arise. If this specific choice of Christ is not to be explained by his contemporary symbolic order, why have other such choices been explained

²² http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jpi_apl_22051994_ordinatio-sacerdotalis_en.html

differently, and have not been subsumed into church dogma? Christ chose to be a carpenter, he chose his apostles from a number of trades such as fishermen, tax collectors etc. Why are contemporary priests not asked to undergo training in carpentry or to receive certificates of mastery in different types of fishing? Christ went into a church twice in his life that we know of according to scripture, once to argue with the learned doctors, and once to purge the church of money changers and hucksters. How odd, then, that the Vatican can give sanctuary to Archbishop Marcinkus, who stands accused of fraud, and liable to arrest if he leaves the precincts of the Vatican. All of the apostles were Jews, where does that leave a series of Italian popes, a Polish pope and German pope? Why are those decisions not seen as beyond the prevailing sociology of Christ's place and time? I would argue that the reason that those questions were not asked before was precisely because the bishops were those *points de capiton*, those master signifiers who controlled the play of meaning. Iconically, the kicking of Bishop Brennan up the arse is a ludic demonstration of the displacement of those master signifiers, and concomitantly a sign that the church has lost its sense of being a transcendent organisation. Instead it is now just another structure in a crowded marketplace.

Indeed, further critique would reinforce this point. How can the church claim to act outside of time, in a transcendent manner, when it avails itself of every possible safeguard of contemporary culture to defend itself against accusations. In a deal done with former minister Michael Woods, the church has deflected payment liabilities to victims of institutional abuse onto the taxpayer. It has also taken legal action to defend itself against victims, and had Bishop Laws say one of the requiem masses for Pope John Paul II, while he himself was under a cloud in terms of his inaction in the face of rampant child abuse in his American diocese.

Yet, despite all of this, there is a glaring need for a form of the transcendent in contemporary secular Ireland. In many instances, this desire for something in which to believe has become displaced after the fall from grace of the church. We see it in the fetishization of sport and spectacle, as the almost

countrywide investment into the championships of the GAA in both hurling and football provides a communal outlet for people to express a sense of the beyond themselves. It has been seen in the crowds who flocked to the relics of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, it can be seen in the popularity of alternative forms of spirituality, and in the outpouring of genuine emotion that greeted the passing away of Pope John Paul. Ironically, the grief, the communal sharing of sorrow, the widespread media coverage called to mind an event some 8 years earlier, namely the death of Princess Diana. Here too, there was a similar outpouring of grief, a binding of people around a departed icon – in a way the epitome of religious desire. Interestingly, however, in the aftermath of her death, things have progressed very much as normal: her name has gradually been forgotten and Prince Charles finally married the third person in his marriage to Diana, namely Camilla Parker Bowles.

I would suggest that the same is true of the religious fervour which gripped Ireland and indeed, the catholic world, in the aftermath of the death of Pope John Paul. The emotional desire for religious experience, for that sense of communal belief, for an identity between the immanent and the transcendent, is very much part of being human, and in Ireland, the Catholic religion, has for a long time filled this void. Now, however, that the two sense of the church as structure have been deconstructed, and that it is seen as just another organisation striving to protect its own patch and its own members, people have moved on. To attempt to preach morals and ethics, while at the same time using every legal and political means to defend the organisation against legitimate charges from victims of abuse, has really just placed the church as one more set of systems – it is the metaphorical equivalent of kicking Bishop Brennan up the arse. He is no longer seen as a religious icon, not to be touched by the venality of human failings: he is just one more abuse boss, who has instilled fear and resentment among his staff, and suffers the consequences accordingly. This of course, is a metaphorical equivalent of the sense of disappointment felt by Catholics when two of the more charismatic figures within the church, Eamon Casey, the bishop who scourged governments about the third world, who reputedly drove too fast and drank too much, but who was seen as a decent man,

and Michael Cleary, the original singing priest, were both found to be involved in sexual relationships. In the wake of later scandals, these were relatively minor offences among, after all, consenting adults. And indeed, the church has had a long history of sacerdotal sexual connections: it is not for nothing that there are Irish surnames called Mac an Sagairt (McEntaggert); Mac an Easpaig (McEnespy) and Mac an Papa (Pope).

However, what was significant here is the differentiating of the status of the church as transcendent system and an immanent one. To preach about the redress of poverty or about sexually correct behaviour, as both Casey and Cleary did, on the one hand, and to be found violating those very precepts themselves on the other, made it clear that the church's warrant to be seen as a transcendental system was in no way sustainable. The position of women in this structure has also been significant, though interestingly, the church, as already noted, as the one remaining state institution which generically discriminates against women (with the exception of certain clubs) has rarely come under sustained attack from the feminist movement. Now this could be because women as a group have taken on board the pope's transcendental justification for the men-only rule on ordination. However, I think that this state of affairs is a further index of the increasing sense of irrelevance with which the church is viewed by women – they are just not interested in this last bastion of patriarchy.

Instead, feminists have concentrated on issues of sexual liberation, stressing the freedom of women to control their own procreative processes, and with the increasing availability of contraception of all types, the control of the church over sexual matters has waned completely. Thus the difference between those skirtdancers separated by over 100 years, Gertie McDowall and Angela, is that the latter, while still a virgin, is so by choice, and is quite happy to have sex with Lester towards the end of the film with no sense of guilt whatsoever. The pathways of desire are now open to exploration by both sexes, and any form of external control by the church has just lost all validity. People, in this

secular age, are now inclined to voice their desire, and the concomitant guilt is no longer the price that such desire must pay.

In this way, they are voicing the presence of a different structure, a new symbolic order, a dissemination of control, and, in short, are joining Father Ted and Dougal in symbolically kicking Bishop Brennan up the arse. Thus through two sets of visual images, one dealing with power figures and the other with sexual desire, the alteration in the grand narrative of the Catholic Church in Ireland is mapped out. The first images, one set dealing with a bishop in his pomp, accompanied by his priest, addressing the multitudes in front of the pope, the other of a bishop being kicked up the arse by one of his priests, delineates the deconstruction of the central position of the Catholic church in Ireland. The second set, of two young women allowing themselves to be the object of the male scopophilic drive, but also to a degree controlling that gaze, is another index of the primacy of desire, both sexual and other, and of a form of liberation of desire from the repressive regime of traditional Irish Catholic doctrine. The change in female attitudes to sexual desire is an index of that the symbolic order of Ireland has changed and is changing, a process which has and will continue to cause reverberations within the Church.

In the wake of the revelations in October 2005, of the report on child abuse in the diocese of Ferns, with strong blame being placed on the bishops of the diocese for not taking the required action, it would seem as if the broader community is engaged in a parallel process of deconstructing the power of the church and its pretensions to being an unchanging vehicle of moral certitude. In this context it is important to note that deconstruction, contrary to popular belief does not equate with destruction; instead it suggests a dismantling of the traditional binary oppositions and the creation of a new structure wherein the power relations are more equally defined. In our context this deconstruction has been imaged in terms of the power of the bishops being kicked up the arse, to use a colloquialism, and the desire of women being recognised as equal to that of men. If the church is to survive within

the new symbolic order of a postmodern, postcolonial, secular Ireland that has more in common with either Boston or Berlin than Rome, it will need to take these lessons seriously.