

anything else is language. All real thinking involves the use of language whether natural or artificial (such as mathematics or computer languages). Van Buren makes a larger claim when he says that “it makes sense to attempt to understand a religion such as Christianity, in any of its various forms, as a linguistic enterprise, and that when we try to understand religion as linguistic behaviour, we are entering the subject by the front door, not crawling in a basement window” (ibid, p.67).

‘Magic against Magic’:an atheist priest’s use of Christ in Iris Murdoch’s *The Book and the Brotherhood*

Robert Hardy

In *Henry and Cato*¹ Iris Murdoch describes what it might be like for a priest to lose his belief in God - God understood ‘in the traditional sense of that term; and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense’.² In two later novels³ Murdoch returns to the theme of a priest’s loss of belief in God and, as was the case in *Henry and Cato*, she makes the priest’s acknowledgement of that loss central to her portrayal of his integrity as a man; in one case she also hints at the almost unbearable grief the priest suffers as he drifts into the darkness of atheism.⁴ In *The Book and the Brotherhood*,⁵ however, Murdoch takes a different path: she describes how a priest, who lost his faith in God ‘in the traditional sense’ long before, nonetheless uses ‘Christ’ to help a young woman recover from despair.

The young woman, Tamar Hernshaw, takes the advice of another character (who suggests that ‘Abortion is nothing, it’s a method of birth control’)⁶ to have her pregnancy terminated. Resolving not to ‘think about babies thrown away with the surgical refuse, dying like fishes snatched out of their water, dying like little fishes on a white slab’,⁷ Tamar enters the clinic ‘as one in a dream’⁸ and leaves it ‘all raw anguished tormented consciousness’.⁹ Murdoch does not spare the

details of Tamar's self-torture:

She saw now, now, when it was so dreadfully absolutely just too late, that she had committed a terrible crime ... against herself, against the helpless fully-formed entirely-present human being whom she had wantonly destroyed. She had condemned herself to a lifetime of bitter remorse and lying. She was sentenced to think of that lost child every day and every hour for the rest of time, the child, that child, that unique precious murdered child would be part of every picture she could ever frame of the world, and she would have to keep this appalling secret forever, until she was old, except that she would never be old, she would die of grief.¹⁰

Tamar's progress from despair to hope under the ministry of the novel's atheist priest, Father McAlister, is dismissed by one critic, Suguna Ramanathan, as the work of a deluded magician; Ramanathan suggests that

Fr McAlister ... guided by his ego under the guise of his Saviour, sets out to heal Tamar and free her of guilt and torment. The result is a new self-willed, self-centred Tamar... Fr McAlister's exorcism in the form of psychological counselling has left her last state worse than the first.¹¹

In this article I shall take issue with Ramanathan's dismissive reading of Father McAlister's ministry and suggest, rather, that Murdoch uses it to conduct a major examination of the themes of suffering and Christian salvation after the death of God. The examination is conducted in a tense and complex narrative which demands meditation and much rereading, during which the primary task is to listen to the two voices, sometimes indistinguishable from one another, of the narrator and Father McAlister. 'Let us ask of the risen Christ not whether he rose, but whether he can save',¹² Murdoch, paraphrasing Cupitt, writes elsewhere. In *The Book and the Brotherhood* Murdoch asks who can save the tormented Tamar Hershaw, and appears to answer that if Christ cannot, then certainly no one else can.

When Murdoch uses the word 'magic' she means instant change without any moral cost, as well as the exercise of power for personal gain by the 'magician'. Plato, in her dialogue 'Above the Gods' claims that 'We live in a dream, we're wrapped up in a dark veil, we think we're omnipotent magicians',¹³ and that true 'Religion ... isn't weird like magic'.¹⁴ On the face of it, Ramanathan can draw support for her dismissal of Fr McAlister as a weird magician from the tone with which the narrator initially discusses Father McAlister's work with Tamar:

Father McAlister specialized in desperate cases. Over Tamar, he might positively have been said to gloat. His eyes sparkled ... he had by now ceased to believe in God or in the divinity of Christ, but he believed in prayer, in Christ as a mystical Saviour, and in the magical power which had been entrusted to him when he was ordained a priest ... He sang both high and low ... He used the oldest argument in the book (sometimes called the Ontological Proof) which, in Father McAlister's version, said that if with a pure passion you love God, then God exists because he *has to*.¹⁵

The passage culminates in the priest's specially devised church service for 'the poor nameless vanished embryo', a service he views 'as a most holy farrago' which 'gave him intense pleasure'.¹⁶ Apparently the narrator shares Ramanathan's suspicion of Father McAlister and signals the fact: 'he might positively be said to gloat'.¹⁷ Nor does the narrator become any more kindly disposed to the priest as she portrays his struggles with his conscience at the approach of Good Friday:

Christ on the cross made sense of all the rest, but only if he really died. Christ lives, Christ saves, because he died as we die. The ultimate reality hovered there, not as a phantom man, but as a terrible truth. He prayed, he worshipped, he prostrated himself, he felt himself to be a vehicle of a power and a grace which was given, not his own. But his terrible truth was never quite clarified, and that lack of final clarification troubled him on Good Friday as at no other time. This mysterious Absolute was what, during those awful three hours as he enacted the death of his Lord, he had somehow to convey to the kneeling men and women who would see—not what he saw, but something else—which was their business and God's business—only there was no God. That the priest performed this task in agony, with tears, did him no credit. Rather the contrary.¹⁸

In fact this description is one of the most acute analyses in the whole Murdoch canon of what is problematic for *anyone* in a post-theist faith in Christ crucified rather than Christ resurrected, and I will spend a little time over it in order to show the complexity of the narrator's attitude to Father McAlister and his use of Christ. The last two sentences appear straightforward diegetic dismissal: presumably they derive from the conviction that Father McAlister's 'agony' is self-indulgent, the result of his attending not to Christ but to himself.¹⁹ The narrator condemns from a secure distance. But only a few sentences earlier the narrator's and character's thoughts are not so easily distinguished. 'Christ on the cross made sense of all the rest, but only if he really died. Christ lives, Christ saves, because he died as we die'. In the first of these two sentences the past tense, the 'epic preterite', suggests that the thought expressed is the

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priest's.²⁰ But in the next sentence, and the effect is startling, the shift to the present tense suddenly creates a doubt as to whose words they are—narrator's, character's, both? The next sentence again, 'The ultimate reality hovered there ...', with the verb back in the past tense, becomes more directly attributable to the priest. But that sentence's second adverbial phrase—'but as a terrible truth'—again provokes a question. Whose terrible truth? Narrator's, character's, everyone's? Within a few sentences the distance between character's and narrator's voices has widened—the 'terrible truth' becomes 'his'. But those two moments of confusion, about whose voice is speaking, narrow the narrator's distance from Father McAlister. His 'terrible truth' may be hers as well.

The result, I think, is to undermine Ramanathan's dismissal of Father McAlister as merely a magician or power-seeker. The problem with which he struggles, what to make of Christ crucified, how to use Christ crucified, is the narrator's also. Another example of the imbrication of character and narrator is to be found in the priest's formulation of this problem:

The power which I derive from my Christ is debased by its passage through me. It reaches me as love, it leaves me as magic. That is why I make *serious mistakes*.²¹

Again the narrator's stance towards the priest is not straightforward. She comments immediately afterwards that

In fact, in spite of his self-laceration, a ritual in which he indulged at intervals, the priest felt, in a yet deeper deep self, a sense of security and peace. Behind the doubt there was truth, and behind the doubt that doubted that truth there was truth ... He was a sinner, but he knew that his Redeemer lived.²²

Within the first sentence the narrative stance seems to move from adverse judgment ('a ritual in which he indulged ...') to something approaching empathic understanding ('in a yet deeper, deep self ...'). The sentence that follows that, with the italicized '*knew*', and narratorial silence, could be read as an ironic dismissal of the priest's claim to equate himself with Job. It could, however, express complicity between narrator and character, with the narrator suggesting that that depth of knowledge is irresistible when it visits the knower, whoever he is.

If one accepts this reading, of a greater complexity in the narrator's attitude toward the priest than that suggested by Ramanathan,²³ two possibilities are released into the text. The first is that the priest's knowledge of his 'Redeemer' is, in some sense, something real. His self-

flagellation is deplorable—but his ‘deeper’ knowledge of his Redeemer cannot be so easily dismissed. The second possibility is that he is right to use this knowledge to save Tamar, together with ‘sacraments and pictures and holy things’, as Socrates puts it in ‘Above the Gods’.²⁴ In Murdoch’s case-study of Tamar’s redemption the question of the continued use of sacrament and prayer in a post-theist age is treated with great seriousness, as is the question of whether the concept of ‘sin’ can have any continued validity. Hugh Dawes has, under ‘Sin’ in his book’s index, ‘see moral fragility’.²⁵ ‘Moral fragility’ does not meet Tamar’s perception of what she has done. We have seen her refer to the abortion as a ‘terrible crime’; later she refers to it as ‘the irrevocable crime for which one suffers death’.²⁶ Although she does not use the word ‘sin’, it is clear that Tamar is seeking some words, some act, which can match her own perception of her deed, something understood by Father McAlister. Hawkins describes Murdoch, in *A Word Child*, pointing out, through Hilary Burde, ‘the predicament of people who are burdened by guilt, but who have no God to forgive them, no sacrament of reconciliation’.²⁷ The description equally applies to Tamar Hershaw in *The Book and the Brotherhood*.

Father McAlister offers Tamar the words, and a series of acts, which can meet her desperate psychological need. During the funeral ‘rite’ for the dead child, the narrator records,

Tamar murmured that she acknowledged her transgressions and her sins were ever before her, that she had been poured out like water and all her bones were out of joint, that she desired to be washed and to be whiter than snow, that a broken and contrite spirit might not be despised, that broken bones might after all rejoice, and she might put off her sackcloth and be girded in gladness.²⁸

It is difficult to do justice to the compassionate complexity of this. On one level the tone is that of the sophisticated onlooker ironically reciting ‘old familiar words’ from a long-vanished past, in a metaphorically mixed assortment, comically mismatched to the pitiful event; an ‘event’ which can moreover scarcely be described as such. A ‘kind of burial or blessing’²⁹ are the narrator’s words. But because of the mismatch between the words and the narrative tone, and words and event, the effect is intensely moving and gives an insight into the depth of Tamar’s need. For the distance between the deep ‘familiar words’ and the sophisticated tone in which the narrator recites them is an image, as it were, of the distance between Tamar’s ‘sophisticated’ consciousness (which originally found Father McAlister’s religious utterances ‘like the gabble of a witchdoctor’)³⁰ and her deeper consciousness which knows and cares nothing about sophistication, and seeks, as one drowning, for

safety. That she finds it in the depth of the 'old familiar words' is, the narrator records, evident from her 'tear-stained and radiant' face.

Together with the words and the act of contrition which the priest's service provides, Tamar also experiences other acts, other rituals, which meet the extremity of her need. 'In an empty church in Islington her face had been touched with water, in a crowded church in Primrose Hill her head had been touched by a bishop's hand'.³¹ These also, the narrator records, are instrumental in bringing about her changed consciousness, which Tamar herself surveys with puzzlement: 'Well, she had new being, she had been permanently changed'.³² Father McAlister, meditating on the transformation, asks himself

Or why not simply say it was like an analysis, neurosis, transference, liberation into ordinary life, an *ordinary* life in which the liberated patient could snap his fingers at the therapist, and go his way realising that what he took for moral values or categorical imperatives or even the *devil* and the *eternal fire* were simply quirkish mental ailments such as we all suffer from, a result of a messy childhood, from which one can now turn cheerfully and ruthlessly away.³³

From there it is not far to the next question the priest asks himself as he observes Tamar: 'Have I liberated her not into Christ, but into selfish uncaring power?'³⁴ We have seen Ramanathan's strongly affirmative answer. Tamar herself does not give that answer, and the narrator's endorsement of her consciousness as we see her for the last time suggests that, 'Magic against magic',³⁵ Tamar's transformation has been for the good, and was achieved through the priest's use of sacrament, prayer and his own post-theist conception of Christ:

Tamar did not believe in God or a supernatural world and Father McAlister, who did not believe in them either, had not troubled her with these fictions. What he had, in his fierce enthusiasm, wrestling for her soul, intended to give her, was an indelible impression of Christ as Saviour. Tamar was, in her privileged interim, prepared to wait and see what later on this radiant presence might do for her. She prayed, not exactly to, but in this reality, which turned evil suffering into good suffering.³⁶

Tamar is not the only character to think that her transformation has been for the better: a minor character disagrees with the assessment of another that 'religion' has done Tamar no good, and suggests that 'it was something deep'³⁷. The last image we have of Tamar is one of her and 'the priest ... having a jolly good laugh together'.³⁸

The conclusion to which one is led—firstly as to the moral status of

Father McAlister's use of Christ, prayers and the sacraments, and secondly as to their effect on the lost soul Tamar Hernshaw—is not, therefore, straightforward. In her presentation of the interaction between Tamar and the priest Murdoch meditates deeply on the part Christian ritual might continue to play in a post-theist future, since suffering people like Tamar will continue to need religious healing, the kind that only the rarest of psychologists (like Thomas McCaskerville in *The Good Apprentice*,³⁹ who is more like a priest than a doctor) might be able to give. Ramanathan suggests that in *The Book and the Brotherhood* Murdoch contrasts the ingenuously good Jenkin Riderhood, one of Murdoch's saint figures, with the disingenuously bad Father McAlister; but the contrast works against Jenkin as well as for him. For Jenkin, faced with Tamar's distress, 'spoke of helping her' but 'did not see any way in which it would be possible'.⁴⁰ Jenkin can help Tamar no more than Stuart Cuno, the saintly older brother, could help Edward Baltram, the distraught younger son, in *The Good Apprentice*. Good 'magic', which can transform 'evil suffering' into 'good suffering',⁴¹ is necessary for the salvation of both. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch writes that

Extreme suffering, from one cause or another, is likely to be the lot of everyone at some time in life; and innumerable lives are hideously darkened throughout by hunger, poverty and persecution, or by remorse or guilt or abandoned loneliness and lack of love. Here every individual is ultimately alone, and in relation to actual cases it seems impertinent to consider what use is made of religious consolation. Theological truth is abstract. Out on the battle-front of human suffering people will use such devices as they have for survival.⁴²

More than most, Murdoch knows the dangers that religion runs when it becomes confused with magic, but more than most, also, she knows the minds of those 'on the battle-front of human suffering', and in the story of Tamar and Father McAlister she shows why, after the death of God, we might still need Christ.

- 1 Iris Murdoch, *Henry and Cato* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1976).
- 2 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970; reprinted, London: Routledge, 1991), p. 79.
- 3 Iris Murdoch, *The Philosopher's Pupil* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1983; reprinted, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984), and *The Green Knight* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993; reprinted, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1994).
- 4 Fr. Damien, in *The Green Knight*, is described by Bellamy as having 'despaired', and following 'the way of brokenness' (Penguin ed., p. 465).
- 5 Iris Murdoch, *The Book and the Brotherhood* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987; reprinted., Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1988). Page references are to this edition.

- 6 Ibid., p. 328.
- 7 Ibid., p. 328
- 8 Ibid., p. 344.
- 9 Ibid., p. 344.
- 10 Ibid., p. 344.
- 11 Suguna Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 199.
- 12 Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1992; reprinted, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 453.
- 13 Iris Murdoch, 'Above the Gods', in *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1986; reprinted, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p.101
- 14 Ibid., p. 104.
- 15 *The Book and the Brotherhood*, p. 488.
- 16 Ibid., p. 493.
- 17 Ibid., p. 487.
- 18 Ibid., p. 541.
- 19 See David Lodge's account of diegetic and mimetic modes of narration in "Middlemarch and the idea of the classic realist text" in *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990)
- 20 'The use of the past tense, or 'epic preterite', still implies the existence of the author as the source of the narrative; but by deleting the tags which affirm that existence, such as 'he said' ... etc, and by using the kind of diction appropriate to the character rather than to the authorial narrator, the latter can allow the sensibility of the character to dominate the discourse, and correspondingly subdue his own voice, his own opinions and evaluations' (Lodge, *ibid.*, p. 49).
- 21 *The Book and the Brotherhood*, p 517.
- 22 Ibid., p. 517.
- 23 Ramanathan also has difficulty knowing what to make of the sentence beginning 'Behind the doubt there was truth...'. She asks 'And even there, who knows how much and at what times something is believed or disbelieved' (198)—suggesting that she herself feels some empathy with Father McAlister.
- 24 'Above the Gods', Penguin ed., p. 119.
- 25 Hugh Dawes, *Freeing the Faith* (London: SPCK, 1992).
- 26 *The Book and the Brotherhood*, p. 365.
- 27 Peter S. Hawkins, *The Language of Grace: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy and Iris Murdoch* (USA: Cowley Publications, 1983), p. 118.
- 28 *The Book and the Brotherhood.*, p. 493.
- 29 Ibid., p. 492.
- 30 Ibid., p. 483
- 31 Ibid., p. 490.
- 32 Ibid., p. 541.
- 33 Ibid., p. 509.
- 34 Ibid., p. 510.
- 35 Ibid., p. 543.
- 36 Ibid. p. 544.
- 37 Ibid., p. 594.
- 38 Ibid., p. 595.
- 39 Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* (Chatto and Windus, 1984; reprinted., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985)
- 40 *The Book and the Brotherhood*, p. 544.
- 41 Ibid., p. 544.
- 42 *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Penguin ed., p. 504.