



LANDSCAPES OF ENCOUNTER: THE PORTRAYAL OF CATHOLICISM IN THE NOVELS OF BRIAN MOORE

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Chapter 7

Moore's Portrayal of Catholicism: A Conclusion

SINCE Judith Hearne's ill-fated liaison with James Madden, Moore's narratives have personalized the encounter of both cultures and continents. Invariably, shifts in physical, metaphysical, and cultural geography—often though not exclusively through migration—push characters' identities, especially their Catholic identity, to the limit, and often to crisis. A complex of physical, overtly stated geographical locations, Moore's narratives represent too a dense literary realm of ideological and theological intertextuality. These literary environments encompass in the broadest sense the confrontation of Catholicism with other, often conflicting, worldviews. We have examined at some length the particularities of novels whose primary focus has predominantly been Ireland and America, though, as with so many of Moore's novels, his texts are both cross-cultural and transcontinental. It has been contended that these physical and metaphysical, political and religious, landscapes of encounter represent Moore's distinctive literary portrayal of Catholicism; and, crucially, that the formation and reformation, the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of Catholic identity which these novels contain are best understood by placing the novels themselves and their portrayal of Catholicism in the context of a wider Catholic theological history, particularly in the light of the Councils of the Church. It is the period surrounding the Second Vatican Council which is the most significant, indeed pivotal, context for understanding Moore's portrayal of Catholicism.

Yet a major area of neglect in critical appraisals of Moore is precisely the analysis of the theological detail of Catholicism so portrayed in his novels. It has been the consistent underlying premise here that an examination of the wider cultural, social, ideological, and theological development of Catholicism as an historically evolving worldview is thus required. As

consistent benchmarks of Catholic Christian theology over twenty centuries, the Councils of the Church provide the key defining positions of Catholicism over the full extent of its history. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I have argued, then, that Catholicism has been defined by two such Councils: Vatican I and Vatican II. Sufficient detail has been addressed to these as appropriate theological reference points for Moore's novels; indeed, to the extent that pre- and post-Vatican II Catholicism provides the fundamental structure for this work. Even for the one novel outside of a nineteenth- or twentieth-century context, *Black Robe* enables too a (partially anachronistic) reading of post-Vatican II theology within a literary treatment of missionary activity in early colonial Canada.¹

In broad terms, the case for developing a neglected (and essential) theological hermeneutic for understanding Moore's portrayal of Catholicism has been strengthened not simply by the abiding presence of Catholic themes within Moore's novels but because of the contemporary theological transformation of Catholic tradition itself. While a crucial area of this transformation is Catholicism's self-definition, or ecclesiology, just as important in a post-Vatican II era has been the character and direction of Catholicism's encounter with religious and ideological difference.² Thus, while sectarianism still characterizes Catholic encounter with, for example, the Protestant "other" in Irish society on many levels³ (as evidenced by Moore's Irish fictions), the post-Vatican II Catholic encounter with religious and ideological difference has been and continues to be of a qualitatively different order from that of pre-Vatican II days. It is such reformulations of theology, especially subsequent to the Second Vatican Council, that need to be considered when surveying Moore's portrayal of Catholicism, especially in later works where theological and ideological concerns are so forcibly conjoined.⁴

There is here, though, in Moore's portrayal of Catholicism, a point of significance which extends beyond developments within Catholicism itself: Moore's increasing preoccupation with the public role of religion. This is especially apparent in his ambivalent portrayal of Catholicism's relations with imperialism and colonialism, and with ideology in general. Moore hereby provides literary focus on the growing sociological and historical evidence that counters the once-unchallenged premises of Enlightenment-derived secularization theory: that with increasing modernization, societies

become increasingly less religious; that diminishing public and political significance for religion effectively entails the residual presence of religious belief and practice as an increasingly private phenomenon.⁵ The secularization thesis is thus countered by the global persistence of religious belief and practice in a number of studies, again both historical and sociological.⁶

Moore's oeuvre sets, then, a literary agenda which implicitly calls for renewed critical focus on the theological in the study of literary texts; particularly in the manner in which such intertextuality highlights the ambivalent relationship between the theological and the imperial.⁷ What becomes most clear is that many of the assumptions concerning the complicity of theology—especially Christianity—in the history of imperialism and colonization needs to be revised in the light of contemporary transformations in theological thinking.⁸ Within Catholicism, the need for such revision of assumptions is highlighted by post-Vatican II developments in theology: most significantly in social teaching, but also in an increasingly pluralized (if not democratized) ecclesiology and a universalist soteriology. In an historical period which has witnessed revolutions in postcolonial relations and post-Vatican II theology, the late Brian Moore's five decades of writing—from *Judith Hearne* to *The Magician's Wife*—confirm the need for such revision within a literary context; and it is perhaps surprising that biocritical commentators have not remarked on how Moore's perspective as a committed non-believer adds weight to this case for re-assessing the place of theology in the literary representation of postcoloniality.

Moore's later novels share similar theological and ideological preoccupations. Aside from those novels which reflect Catholicism's complicity with imperialism, as in *Black Robe* and *The Magician's Wife*, his portrayal of post-Vatican II Catholicism draws upon the political influence of theology in giving voice to those marginalized within colonial and imperial histories. In the novels, this invariably highlights the ambivalent historical and contemporary role of the Catholic Church. This joint ideological and theological focus is apparent where, for good or ill, Catholicism retains a prominent public role. Thus, in *The Colour of Blood*, the Catholic Church struggles to maintain a balance between national life and religious identity in the context of atheistic communism in Eastern Europe. In *No Other Life*, a priest-president—a fictionalized Aristide—struggles against the dictatorial aftermath of French and American

colonization, even in the face of ecclesiastical intransigence from the Vatican. In *The Statement*, Moore portrays contemporary attempts within the Church to make amends for Catholic anti-Semitism during the Vichy regime in France, while the author's final work, *The Magician's Wife*, examines Catholic theological complicity within French imperialism in nineteenth-century North Africa.

In line, then, with that already-highlighted tension between Catholic theological universality and the particularity of its cultural, and specifically geographical, expression, post-Vatican II Catholicism has increasingly lost its Eurocentric focus, a tension not without its own ecclesiastical conflicts.⁹ It is thus entirely natural that Moore's novels should themselves reflect an increasingly evident geographical as well as theological diversity: the author's continuing preoccupation with religion reflecting substantive and not simply metaphorical interests in Catholic tradition.¹⁰ Indeed, where post-Vatican II Catholicism seems to have gained greater strength in the diversity of its global, and not simply Eurocentric, development, Moore's novels demonstrate renewed theological meaning in issues of social justice, especially since Medellín; but, as we have seen, both in literary and historical terms, such potentially "revolutionary" politicization has not been without its conservative critics.¹¹ Thus, from the 1980s onwards, and from Cardinal Wojtyła's accession to the papacy in particular, Vatican thinking has demonstrated a shift away from the potential political upheaval inherent in radical interpretations of Vatican II, especially the overt politicization of the Church through theologies of liberation. Especially in the realm of Church-State relations, Moore's later fictions reflect too the tension between the temporal and the transcendent which is so current an issue in contemporary Catholicism and its unfolding theological history.