Changing Archetypes:

from The Virgin Mary to the Celtic Tiger

– Some Jungian reflections on the challenges facing post-Catholic Ireland.

Mary O'Callaghan

Ireland is opening up

With these words Frank Mc Guinness opens his play *Mutability.* Although the play is an exploration of Edmund Spenser's relationship to 16th Century Ireland the phrase provides an apt description of Ireland as it enters the 21st century. Over the past three decades Ireland has moved from the status of a 'developing country' to one that had, very recently, the fastest growing economy in Europe; from a country that stood united in its Catholic faith to one that has experienced the disintegration of the power of the church.

Mary O'Callaghan (MIAHIP,UKCP) works in private practice at the Tara Centre, 8 Pembroke Road, Dublin 4.

A survey carried out in 1964 found that 90% of the population agreed with the proposition that the 'Church is the greatest force for good in Ireland today'. The same survey also revealed, however, that among those questioned who had more than twelve years education four out of five disapproved of the Church's dominance, feeling that, as one respondent put it, 'The world is too complex today for a clerical state, and that is what we have in Ireland' (cited in Kenny p258 1997). The situation in Ireland has changed dramatically since the sixties, particularly with the

introduction of free education. Ireland now has the highest percentage of educated young people in Europe. The collective Catholic mytho-religious perspective that had adequately sustained the Irish population for so long is now crumbling. Jung understood well the dangers inherent in the clash between creed and knowledge.

'The standpoint of the creed is archaic; it is full of impressive mythological symbolism which, *if taken literally*, comes into insufferable conflict with knowledge...The danger that a mythology understood too literally, and as taught by the Church, will suddenly be repudiated lock, stock and barrel is today greater than ever' (CW 10 1958 p265, italics mine)

Jung's observations have particular relevance to the Ireland of to-day. At first glance, it seems hard to ascertain what impact the collective loss of faith in the institutional church has had on the Irish people.

Fintan O'Toole, Irish Times correspondent, has suggested that

'It needs to be remembered that most Irish Catholics experience the disgrace of their bishops and the loss of trust in their priests not as a liberation but as a trauma'. (1997 p221)

If there is truth in this observation, which I believe there is, it is worth exploring what the nature of this trauma is. If Ireland were a client, albeit a very complex one, coming to us for therapy how would we approach her? As part of our assessment of this "client", it would be important for us to bear in mind the following astute observation about the Irish people: 'You don't know the Irish if you expect them to talk openly about their own past.'

These are the words of another political journalist, Fergal Keane, spoken in the context of considering whether a Truth and Reconciliation Council based on the South African model, would work in Ireland (Conflict Resolution in a Divided

Society: an agenda for hope. March 2000, North London University).

While this reluctance on the part of our client will challenge the enquiring therapist in us, we do have access, through historical commentary, to more of our client's history than the client is conscious of, even to elements of that past that have been deliberately suppressed.

Just as a family history is an indispensable tool in helping us to understand and piece together the client's story, so too a historical perspective may offer us the necessary distance to think through some of the strategies that were utilised to help Ireland maintain a certain cohesion and homeostasis in the face of trauma. In reviewing Ireland's history there is little doubt that the two greatest traumas, certainly in its recent history, were The Great Famine (1845 to 1850) and the Civil War of 1922. I shall look at each of these major events briefly and consider what psychological strategies underlay the national response to them.

The Great Famine

The famine and post-famine years wiped out more than a quarter of the population of Ireland. A million died of starvation at home. Many of those who opted for emigration as a way of escape lost their lives in what became known as 'coffin ships'.

Although the historian Margaret McCurtain suggests that 'the Famine was the first time that the Irish had

experienced a punishing God' (Mother Ireland -Video 1988), the self-questioning challenge of such a perspective was never allowed to surface. Instead, the generally accepted view in nationalist Ireland, supported for more than a hundred years by Irish historians, was that the blame for the Irish Famine could be laid firmly at the doorstep of Britain and its oppressive policies in Ireland.

Weistubb in his article 'Myth and the origins of diversity' observes that

'Religious reform may occur in response to political oppression…. Historically, major religious movements have evolved out of difficult political circumstances' (Singer 2000 p143).

Prior to the famine the practice of Catholicism was a minority observance with a maximum of 40% of the Catholic population attending mass on Sunday. From the mid-nineteenth century up until the 1970s this had increased to 90% of the population attending weekly mass (Clancy et al. 1995 p595).

Larkin in his book *The Devotional Revolution in Ireland* (1976*)* argues that both post-famine trauma and the suppression of their native language resulted in the Irish creating a new ethnic identity based on Catholicism. A principal effect of this new identity was to distinguish the Irish from the colonial establishment.

Catholicism as a majority observance was soon rewarded with a very auspicious visitation. On 21st August 1879 in County Mayo, in the town of Knock, to quote the words of the charismatic parish priest Monsignor Horan:

'She (the Virgin Mary) appeared here at Knock. She had her family with her. She was dressed in white with a cloak tied here at the neck. She had a crown on her head with a rose at the verge of the crown and the forehead, which is a symbol of purity and chastity. Our Lady was praying for the Irish people, that they might settle their differences in some orderly way, in some democratic way ... that they should settle their differences through prayer and through religion'.

(cited O'Toole 1990 p27)

The conflation of politics and religion seems clear in Monsignor Horan's analysis of the function of Our Lady

and our resorting to a very devotional form of religion to aid the democratic process. Jung suggests that

'visions, illusions etc. only occur when [one] is suffering from psychic dissociation, that is when there is a split between the conscious attitude and the unconscious contents opposed to it…In addition there are cases where the same collective cause produces identical or similar effects, ie the same visionary images' (CW10 p319)

An important question remains as to what were the difficulties that the Irish could not address without recourse to such heavenly visions and prayer. Colm Toibin in *The Irish Famine* addresses this question as follows:

'An entire class of Irish Catholics survived the famine; many, indeed, improved their prospects as a result of it, and this legacy may be more difficult for us to deal with in Ireland now than the legacy of those who died or emigrated…there were things you could not say in 1946 about the Famine, such as that ordinary Catholic traders in the towns and the stronger farmers speculated in food and made profit' (1999, p15).

Perhaps, for a traumatized and oppressed people that had stood together united against a common enemy, namely the British, the betrayal in their own camp was too unbearable to face or resolve. That a new breed of Irish middle class was born out of the suffering of their fellow citizens was too much to digest or speak of. Recourse to visions and prayers may have been the only cohesive container for such splitting. Jung observed that phenomena such as visions emerge when people are 'confronted with a situation from which there seems to be no way out' (CW10 p319)

The Civil War

The events that occurred in 1922 and 1923 have had a monumental effect on the course of Irish history. Without going into the troubling history of the Collins and de Valera relationship, suffice it to say that as a result of their difficulties a bloody Civil War broke out. More people died in the Civil War than had died in the War of Independence; in fact more people died in those two years than have died in the past thirty years of the Northern Troubles. Yet comparatively little has been written about that troubled time. As the historian F.S.L. Lyons has observed:

'It was an episode which has burned so deep into the heart and mind of Ireland that it is not yet possible for the historian to approach it with the detailed knowledge or the objectivity which it deserves and sooner or later must have. So many of the divisions and hatreds that were to scar the political and social life of Ireland for the next two decades – and are visible even today – stem from those months of internecine warfare that charity and the interests of truth alike demand a certain reticence about events which *are still felt so profoundly and yet so little understood in their inner meanings'*. (1971 p63, italics mine)

Many of the men and boys who fought in the Civil War have gone to their graves unable to share their own personal story or trauma with their nearest and dearest.

What is significant is that the power of the church increased enormously in the years that followed the Civil War. It was to take another sixty years before the church would lose its tight grip on the burgeoning Irish State. The role of the church with its rigid morality and censorship laws seemed crucial in creating a certain homeostasis which allowed us to distance ourselves from the underlying traumas. An example of this is offered by J.J. Lee who, reflecting on post-Civil War Ireland and its preoccupation with sexual morality, observed that 'the obsession with sex permitted a blind eye to be turned to the social scars that disfigured the face of Ireland'(1991 p159).

Back to the Consulting Room

What does this family history of our 'client' tell us about her coping strategies in the face of trauma? In the Famine scenario we saw that by projecting all the blame onto the British we created a false memory that helped us to distance ourselves from betrayals within the family itself. Furthermore, as a protection against having to face the falseness of that coping mechanism and as a way of maintaining a semblance of national and social cohesion, we resorted to the devotionalism that Knock so dramatically represented.

In the case of the Civil War, what could not be spoken of was left unsaid but this time, instead of falsifying our memories, we suppressed them. Likewise, in our striving to maintain some sort of cohesiveness and homeostasis in a very split society we resorted, not to devotionalism as we had done before, but to submission to a powerful and authoritarian Church.

Faced with the trauma now being presented to us by an Ireland that has lost trust in its priests and whose bishops are in disgrace, what can we be on the look out for, given what we know of this client's history in dealing with trauma? Let us examine the adequacy of some of this client's familiar strategies when faced with their current trauma.

Devotionalism and Authority

In Joseph Campbell's book *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* we are made aware of the universality of the human need to create mytho-religious systems in order to bring meaning and a sense of the 'sacred' to our lives. Jung describes myths as our way of projecting our own complex natures, both conscious and unconscious, onto the gods. Myths are not manifestations from on high that the supplicant has to accept unquestioningly. Different cultures do different things with myths and, although the same god or gods may be involved, the myths inevitably come out of different cultural and socio/political matrices which require us to interpret them differently.

Myths are so complex and rich and so capable of offering a multiplicity

of perspectives on any given situation that it is vital, particularly in times of collective or individual crisis, that we remain open to exploring *for ourselves* the deeper meanings for us within our own mytho-religious systems. When our individual and collective myths are subordinated to religious or political authority, they lapse into dogma and lose their potency.

Furthermore, when any mytho-religious system is breaking up, such as is happening in Ireland today, we are afforded a crucial opportunity to step outside our shedding skin, so to speak, and to reflect on what the individual and collective projections

we resorted to tell us about ourselves. This is of course a vulnerable and lonely place that can be characterised by a sense of meaninglessness and depression. We see manifestations of this regularly in our consulting rooms when we encounter people who have temporarily lost their sense of meaning. There is the common phenomenon of the client who, fearing the depression that such a loss of meaning in life creates, rushes to construct prematurely some new meaning system rather than face and work through the depression and learn from it.

Just as the traumatised individual is tempted to avoid going into their depression and benefiting from it, so too does our client Ireland face this temptation in her present crisis. Furthermore, just like the individual client, Ireland is susceptible to a repetition compulsion in which we may collectively rush to solutions which will be a re-creation of the same difficulties as before, even if under a different guise.

While devotion to Catholicism has been on the wane other devotional objects have filled the void, some of them of more substantial content than others. Regardless of the comparative qualities of these new attachments, the question still has to be asked whether in choosing them we are unthinkingly projecting the same needs on to the new as on to the old. Is it not remarkable that the Irish people are today willing to pay 19,000 euro for a two weeks workshop with a self-styled 'guru' in the Bahamas and further sums of money to get the benefit of his absent prayers'. In the 1960s my mother, from scarce means, was making weekly offerings to the Poor Clare nuns in the hope that I would pass my Junior Certificate exams. Although the guise and context are very different, these devotional acts share a similar structure. The 'guru' becomes the hero in the same way as all the credit for my achievement went straight to the power of the

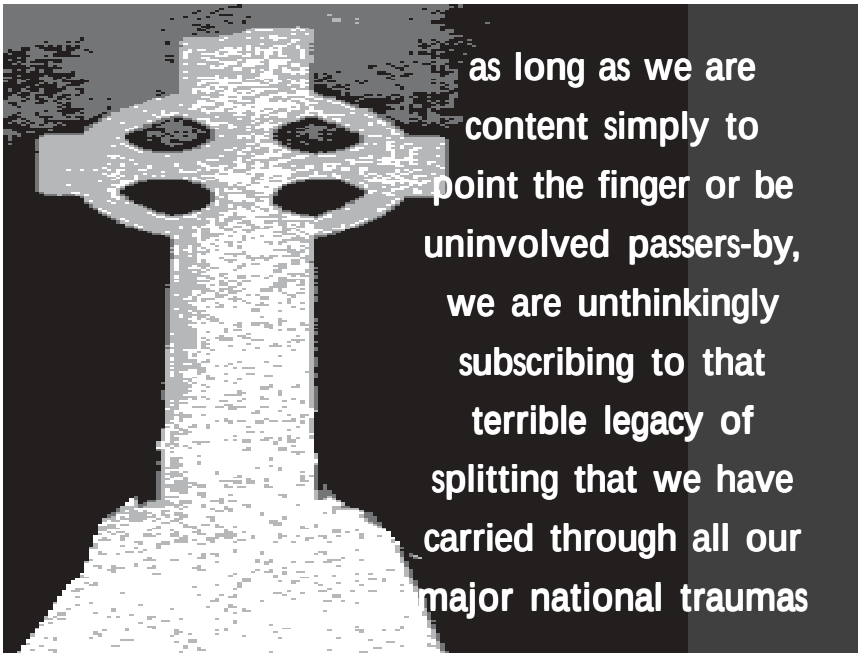
nuns' prayers. Small and insignificant though this example may seem to be, it does illustrate that when we *unthinkingly* embrace any new system, be it Buddhism, Scientology or New Age philosophies, we end up grafting on to the new systems whatever remains unresolved from the old. Plus ca change plus c'est la meme chose!

Facing the Shadow

The danger of bringing to any new devotional object the same fervour and unquestioning devotion that we brought to the old is that in this leap we will have lost our capacity for self reflection. What we will have lost in particular is an understanding of the anatomy of our own shadow and ultimately the strength that comes from confronting it. Without embracing our shadow side we are incapable of the wide-eyed compassion that sees through complexities to their core. When we embrace our shadow we can reach a more imaginative place where we can take responsibility for the mytho-religious system that emerges instead of adopting the strategies of the 'helpless child' which, as I have argued, we did in earlier times.

As we come to grips with the incalculable trauma of clerical child sex abuse in Ireland today we are in danger of ignoring or neglecting the shadow side of our laudable concern to make erring priests and bishops accountable for their failures. This shadow side emerges when we adopt a lop-sided position whereby they the clergy carry exclusive blame. What is missing in this one- sided view is an understanding of the matrices from which these priests and bishops emerged. In a culture of blame (projection) it is all too easy to adopt a them-and-us stance, forgetting that these priests and bishops are our sons, brothers, uncles, cousins and nephews. These were the adolescents I remember in the fifties and sixties being sent off to the various religious institutions and whose cleaving to their religious vocation ensured a certain prestige and respectability for the family. They were also the boys and men who realised that leaving behind their 'vocation' would result in a certain shame for the family. I remember as a child the disgrace a neighbouring family felt when their son left the Christian Brothers: for years he was not allowed to share in family meals and had to eat alone and in shame. By such treatment of these unfortunate young men – putting exalted demands on them in the first place and then making outcasts of them when they could not deliver – we have created a terribly legacy for ourselves, a legacy of splitting in which a false dichotomy is made between two utterly interdependent elements of our society.

It is true, of course, that the institutional Church has a long road to travel before it can recover its integrity and open the door to the possibility of receiving authentic forgiveness. Few would argue that it will have to come forward on that road in a more transparent, responsible, vocal and humble way than it has to date. But as long as we are content simply to point the finger or be uninvolved passers-by, we are unthinkingly



subscribing to that terrible legacy of splitting that we have carried through all our major national traumas. If we make a false dichotomy in our society and conveniently view them (the institutional Church) as solely to blame and ourselves, therefore, as blameless, we repeat *for the same reasons* the shadow projection that our Famine-time forebears cast onto the British.

In my experience, admittedly limited, of working with victims of clerical abuse in London and Dublin, one of the greatest difficulties my clients often face is the blind eye that their parents turned to what was going on or, even worse, the punishment they received when they attempted to tell their parents what had been done to them. Such 'silence' on the part of the victim's family and any silence to-day in the face of clear evidence, for anyone willing to think about it, of the societal inseparability of 'priests' and 'people' smacks of the conspiracy of silence we used after the Civil War to avoid facing the national shadow overhanging us all.

In the film, The Magdelen Sisters, the most powerful scene for me is when the father brings his daughter back to the laundry after she attempted to escape. Despite its brutality I have been struck by the lack of attention which that scene has generally received. It is as if it is easier for us to ignore the part that 'we' played in that brutal system and to concentrate instead on the wickedness of the nuns. I suspect that the film makers gave that scene such graphically brutal treatment so as to highlight the complexity of the problem and bring

it into a collective awareness. It could be said that they failed in their purpose for the simple reason that we could not face the terrible shadow that this film exposed for us all and could only, once again, split into the false dichotomy that allowed us project that shadow on to those 'others', the priests and nuns of the institutional Church.

As psychotherapists, we also need to be on the look out for splits in the way we view survivors and perpetrators of clerical sexual abuse. How well are we responding to the healing and reconciliation needs of a society torn asunder by child sexual abuse? There seems to be no shortage of therapists who have undergone specific training to work with survivors of sexual abuse. This is in sharp contrast to the lack of specific training available for those who might work with abusers, including clerical abusers. Is this lack of training our way of marginalising the abuser and our way, albeit unconscious, of re-enforcing the myth, proclaimed by Fergal Keane, that you can't expect the Irish to talk openly about their own past? Before someone can muster the courage to talk there has to be someone equipped to listen deeply. If we do not rise to this challenge, not only do we deny the marginalised a voice but we also, in the more general sense, lose the opportunity to integrate a very important part of our own history and our national shadow.

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