CALLAGHAN AND The Church

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ORLEY CALLAGHAN'S DEBT TO CHRISTIANITY has been over-estimated and his distance from that tradition never fully explored. Content with the assumption that the author is a Roman Catholic novelist, most criticism simply ignores the seriousness of his quarrel with the Church, and to date there has been no acknowledgment of the aesthetic nature of his views. It is possible, at least, given the importance Callaghan attaches to his vocation as an artist, that his moral philosophy owes as much to aesthetic considerations as it does to Roman Catholic doctrine. Such, indeed, has proved the case. Whether or not Callaghan's criticism of Christianity arises out of his youthful determination as an artist to look at the world freshly for himself, it is clear that he plumps for individual insight and imagination in preference to doctrinal approaches to truth. He tends, in fact, to equate superior insight with artistic talent or appreciation and to delegate to the Artist the moral grandeur and the sympathy more commonly reserved for the Priest. Confidence in art, moreover, virtually replaces his faith in orthodox dogma or creed; wherever traditional belief survives it has undergone significant change. Thus, while his belief in the transcendent power of love and concern for the spiritual life of the individual are derived from the Christian tradition, Callaghan means something very different from *caritas* by love and is, for the most part, resolutely critical of orthodox, doctrinal, and institutional forms of Christianity. Not enough attention has been paid to the author's own disclaimer: "The last thing that's in my mind is to write religious books."1

Many other of his comments put his position forthrightly enough. In spite of his Catholic childhood, Callaghan is suspicious of metaphysical speculation, as impatient as his hero, Sam Raymond, with pretense about "things that could never be known," and contemptuous of Catholic conversions. It is his rejection of orthodoxy" and "authority" in *That Summer in Paris* (1963) which is chiefly important here, for this, coupled with his inherent distrust of purely rational approaches to life, makes the claim of his supposed indebtedness to the French Roman Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain, unlikely.

External evidence in support of the influence is scant and the novels themselves do not support it. Callaghan alludes briefly to the "personalist" approach of Mari-

tain in a review of Aldous Huxley² and witnesses to the personal appeal of the philosopher in an article called "It was news in Paris - not in Toronto." But the article is more a piece of Canadian flagwaving than serious philosophical appreciation and finds him, at its end, wryly suspicious of intellectual conversion by sheer force of personality. In view of their friendship in the early 1930's, it has been assumed that the dedication of Such is My Beloved (1934), "To those times with M. in the winter of 1933," refers to Jacques Maritain, but the fact goes unverified by Callaghan, and its confirmation would serve only to strengthen the irony of the novel's depiction of the decline and fall of a priest. Moreover, Callaghan explicitly denies such a debt, and in a letter written to the author in March 1976 compares the idea of tracing such an influence to "barking up the wrong tree." It is just possible that Maritain's analysis of the inadequacies of "bourgeois individualism"⁴ defined Callaghan's arguments in They Shall Inherit the Earth (1934), but the insights were his own prior to 1933 (as evidenced by works such as Strange Fugitive, It's Never Over, and A Broken Journey), and the novel contains, in addition, a damning caricature of a Catholic convert, in the person of Nathaniel Benjamin. While Callaghan would agree with the philosopher that changes in the social structure must be accompanied by profound changes within the individual heart, his own approach to that conversion is by way of neither blind faith nor doctrinal disputation. He admits in his memoirs only to an interest in the "neo-Thomism of Jacques Maritain" and maintains that even the philosophers themselves would agree that "the artist kind of knowing" could yield "a different kind of knowledge beyond rational speculation."

The hard fact is, of course, that Callaghan often finds himself in violent disagreement with major tenets of the Christian faith. He is particularly distressed by Christian pessimism about human nature and theological conceptions about the nature of love and inveighs loudly against their survival in the works of Roman Catholic and secular writers alike.

He disagrees, for example, with the dualism he discerns at the heart of Western Christianity. Indeed, he identifies it in *That Summer in Paris* with "that fantasy running through modern letters and thought that man is alien in this universe" and regards writers as various as Pascal and Henry Miller to be equally heir to that tradition, all "the children of St. Paul." In the same work, he is distressed by Christian fears of human sexuality and attacks an otherwise "beautiful writer" like Mauriac's evident "disgust with the flesh." Callaghan feels positively "pagan" in comparison and even views the "correct copulations" of D. H. Lawrence as an Anglo-Saxon over-reaction.

Hierarchical conceptions of love are thus mocked in Such is My Beloved, and the entire Christian vision of life as sorrowful rejected in A Passion in Rome (1961). Orthodox theological opinion which considers man's spiritual love for his fellow man to be but a pale imitation of Divine caritas, and where sexual pas-

sion does not rate at all, accords ill with Father Dowling's own experience in the first novel as evidenced by his reading of the "Song of Songs," while Sam Raymond contends in the second that "any fool could see" for himself that, far from being a miserable existence compounded of sex, sin and suffering wherein the only escape from "desire" was death, the human condition is frequently enjoyed by men and women, whose only sin, if any, is their obvious delight in sensual pleasure.

Callaghan is also critical of Christian conceptions of human nature as fallen and of Redemption only through Grace, regarding them as destructive of human dignity, responsibility, and free will. The idea of "original sin" does not appeal to him, nor to Strange Fugitive's hero, Harry Trotter; speculation about innate depravity bores and irritates Callaghan; and he regards Christianity's "awareness of evil" as "a hopeless spiritual trap."5 Thus, while Callaghan admits that Graham Greene's acceptance of "man and his relationship with God as something revealed with finality within the Catholic Church" gave him "a whole dramatic apparatus" as a writer, he bemoans the "dank and dismal Catholicism that came out of it." He confesses himself "completely bemused" by the reappearance of this "ancient view" of man in contemporary literature, in the works say of William Golding and Harold Pinter, since he regards conceptions of man as "naturally good, or naturally evil" as "old nonsense" himself. Convinced that "A man's nature is a very tangled web, shot through with gleams of heavenly light, no doubt, and the darkness of what we call evil forces,"6 Callaghan admires, instead, the work of Albert Camus, who arrived at the "conviction that man, just being what he was, had the possibilities for dignity and responsibility."

In truth, the whole burden of Callaghan's moral philosophy, with its emphasis upon the fullest self-realization possible and upon life as it is lived upon this earth, is often inimical to the other worldly and self-sacrificial Christian tradition of Redemption through Grace and out of Time. Regarding mortality as "a gloomy inevitable experience," Callaghan explains in his memoirs how he himself avoided morbid preoccupation with death (as well as futile speculation about the meaning of life) by immersing himself as fully as possible in the day to day business of living in order to realize, as he points out elsewhere, all his "potentialities" and "possibilities" as a man." Both Ross Hillquist, interested only in "life on the earth," and Anna Prychoda, who "inherit[s] the earth," as ideal characters in They Shall Inherit the Earth, achieve Callaghan's moral goal as it is indicated in the novel's title, while Father Dowling's sacrifice of his manhood, through his original vows of celibacy and his capitulation to religious authority, is clearly regarded as madness. Not only is chastity regarded as an impossible ideal of self-denial, but the concept of self-sacrificial spiritual love is considered a delusion and a monstrous form of egotism.

DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES SUCH AS THESE make attempts to interpret Callaghan as a specifically Roman Catholic novelist open to question at least, and, indeed, such efforts eventually run into anomalies. Malcolm Ross' introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of *Such is My Beloved*, for example, while recognizing the irony of the work, argues that "Callaghan's assumptions are thoroughly Catholic," insists that "He never doubts the divine nature and mission of the Church," and then experiences difficulty before the fact of Father Dowling's madness:

Now this sacrifice of the mind, this offering up of the priest's sickness, is not a pleasant symbol. Does Callaghan mean by it a rejection of the intellectual life as irrelevant (or even dangerous) to salvation?

Ross thinks not and is forced to argue that the priest's sacrifice of "prideful selfsufficient intelligence at work in the vacuum of the abstract" restores love. The truth of the novel is exactly the reverse. Father Dowling's self-sacrifice in the name of love is a capitulation to pride and to obedience and restores not love in the human sense, which is all that Callaghan sees as either possible or necessary for man, but as presented in the novel, futile, and essentially mindless, theological "commentary on the Song of Songs." The ironic implications are clear: instead of self and human sexuality in this life, Father Dowling should renounce the idea of sacrifice itself, idle speculation about the nature of Divine love, and the vain hope of redemption out of time.

Despite quarrels with authority and Christian doctrine, Callaghan retains affectionate respect for Mother Church. A variety of churches file across his pages as inescapable physical facts and spiritual signs of man's loftiest aspirations; priests do, upon occasion, tender perfectly good advice, and many of his characters, notably his women, draw strength and comfort still from their faith and from traditional ritual and dogma. There is, on the other hand, neither hesitation to expose imperfections, nor compunction to mute condemnation of the Church's palpable failures. The work witnesses, in fact, to the demise of Church influence in society, and to the disaffection of contemporary man.

It would seem that Callaghan hopes to fill the gap. Readily admitting "there is no doubt I'm hopelessly corrupt theologically,"⁸ while aiming, nevertheless, as he explains in *That Summer in Paris*, to "relate a Christian enlightenment to some timeless process of becoming," Callaghan proceeds by way of intuition to a set of personal convictions which owes more to his own aesthetic philosophy and the creative process than to orthodox Christian belief, and whose expression in terms of religious symbol or jargon betrays ironic distance as much as their source. There is no doubt of his indebtedness to the tradition, but just as Priest is supplanted by Artist, faith is transformed by aesthetic philosophy and traditional religious symbolism put to literary, as opposed to devotional, use.

It seems to Sam Raymond, Callaghan's spokesman in *A Passion in Rome*, for example, that "all the doctrinal ideologies of his day had been fading into myth and literature, as the fixed opinions of the Greeks and Romans had become simply literature." Certainly Callaghan's own approach to religious symbol and the use of Biblical parallel in his work is more in the tradition of artistic licence than of affirmation of literal belief. Parallels with the life of Christ inform *Such is My Beloved* and *More Joy in Heaven* (1937), but the heroes are neither modern exempla of the holy passion, nor saintly sinners whose tragic suffering and inevitable failure can only be redeemed by means of Grace. Far from a feast of suffering in order to achieve mystical release, or pious contemplation of man's fallen nature in aid of Christian resignation, the object of each novel is irony, and the discrepancy between the ideal and the actual hero is explored in order to expose an unfortunate waste of human potential.

It is clearly madness on Father Dowling's part, so mesmerized is he by the spectacle of the Cross, to attempt to emulate self-sacrificial Divine love in hopes of salvation out of time. His only real moral alternatives, Callaghan implies, lie this side of Heaven. On the other hand, Kip's crucifixion is probably preventable. As much his own as society's fault, Caley's temporal failure is the result of naiveté and fantasies of social acceptance, as well as a lack of responsibility on the part of society, and it is ultimately more regrettable than tragic. Obviously an ironic Saviour — society gets "the kind of hero [its] time deserves" — the question of whether there is "more joy in heaven" becomes irrelevant, as the novel demonstrates how mankind is cut off in some mean or desperate way from self-fulfillment this side of the grave.

Biblical myth and pattern inform *They Shall Inherit the Earth* as well. But Michael Aikenhead's movement as prodigal son, from sin through repentance and absolution to forgiveness, provides more in the way of irony and dramatic structure than pious illustration of Biblical story. It is his moral development, after all, which provides the model for his father's, and he regains an earthly, as opposed to spiritual, Paradise.

It is his use of "The Beatitudes" and the "Song of Songs" which reveals the uniqueness of Callaghan's approach most clearly. On the one hand, a Biblical text is used in *They Shall Inherit the Earth* to refute Christian otherworldliness with irony, while on the other "the bold sensual phrases" of religious poetry stand in direct opposition to theological commentary. Far from religious exhortation to transcend the sensual self through spiritual striving, Callaghan interprets "The Beatitudes" as a call for self-realization and whole-hearted commitment to the world. Similarly his reading of the "Song of Songs" in *Such is My Beloved* contradicts orthodox opinion. While Father Dowling's speculations about the nature of love are finally rejected by Bishop Foley as heretical, Callaghan clearly prefers them to passive acceptance of Holy Writ:

Father Dowling in the beginning may have loved the prostitutes in a general way and, of course, that was good. His love for them became too concrete. How could it become too concrete? From the general to the particular, the conception expressed in the image.... From the word to the flesh, the word made flesh, from the general to the particular, the word made flesh, no, no, nonsense... then the general made concrete ... no, no. (Italics mine.)

It is the good father's experience of the Bible as imaginative literature that has led him to his perception of its human truth. Instead of finally revealed truth or Roman Catholic dogma, the poetry of the Bible is approached as metaphorical sign, and the most appropriate attitude towards it is one of awareness not reverential awe.

One could argue, of course, that Callaghan's sense of metaphor, particularly his attempt as he explains it in his memoirs to reunite the "flesh" and the "word" in his work, is Catholic in a fundamental way. Malcolm Ross has suggested, for example, in *Poetry and Dogma* (1954), that just such a sense of metaphor, what Ross refers to as the "analogical" sense, is central to the Christian experience, at once natural to the sensibility attuned to the mystery of the Eucharist and inevitable in a truly Christian writer. Whether or not Callaghan achieves reconciliation in his work, it is likely that he has some such theory in mind in view of his distaste for separations and duality. It is possible, in fact, that what he is arguing for in novels like *Such is My Beloved* is a renewed sense of the sacredness of ordinary human experience, which the Church, in his view, has forgotten. One misses, however, in Callaghan "that sense of commitment and obligation, which," it has been suggested, "is the essence of religion."⁹ Callaghan's allegiance is all to himself:

A real writer, that very rare thing — a man who looks at the world out of his own eyes ... his loyalty is all to this humanity in himself.... If such a man has any wisdom, any philosophy, it is imbued in him, it is never consulted, never dwelt on. ... If he tried [sic] to see things as others see them he becomes a liar and hack, and above all he betrays himself. Thinking in this way, it seemed to me that all great writers by their very nature must be heretical.¹⁰

We are close here to the heart of Callaghan's aesthetic. Resisting the authority of Christian dogma by treating the Bible as a piece of literature, Callaghan effects a transformation of belief. Traditional religious concepts are reinterpreted in the light of his experience as an artist, and the Christian faith is ultimately replaced with what amounts to a theology of the creative imagination. Resurrection in terms of metaphysics is dismissed; innocence born of ignorance is a sin; and salvation is achieved through awareness.

It is, after all, his painter's eye for "form and colour" which permits Sam Ray-

mond to discern "The ages creeping back to us" in the Papal funeral, and as Callaghan's spokesman in A Passion in Rome, he continues to exercise his imagination. Thus he defines his faith in opposition to traditional belief: Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" is rejected as an "old old lie"; "that burden-of-guilt nonsense" is dismissed; and "fear of life," in opposition to innate depravity, is advanced as the cause of evil and human suffering. Sam's explanation of the true meaning of the Resurrection is perhaps most typical of his self-confidence. Explaining what the Resurrection means to a Roman Catholic, Sam equates it at once with the unquenchable spark of the human spirit and the eternal promise of spring, and replaces pious hope in Life Everlasting with a "fiercely exultant" faith in human potential and the possibilities of life on this earth. An amalgamation of personal observation and an intuitive feeling for pattern, Sam's conviction escapes metaphysical speculation and is surely what Callaghan means by his attempt to relate a Christian enlightenment to some timeless process of becoming. Sam's beliefs are described by Anna Connel, for example, as "very big stuff ... some line of love or truth or something [all the way from Egypt] right up to the events at St. Peter's."

HE EMPHASIS ALREADY NOTED IN THE NOVELS, upon selfrealization and sexual love in opposition to religious ideals of self-sacrifice and spiritual passion, is also accompanied by special efforts to combat Christian conceptions of the fatal fall to knowledge. Ultimately such efforts end in complementary myth, in a kind of redemptive quest for awareness and the approach of the Artist to God. Callaghan makes, for example, an unusual connection in his work between innocence and evil. He suggests, moreover, that innocence that is not knowing is a sin. Three of his novels in particular, *Such is My Beloved*, *More Joy in Heaven*, and *The Many Colored Coat*, illuminate the relationship between the two.

The complementary careers of Father Dowling and Kip Caley demonstrate clearly that pride born of ignorance goes before a fall. Both are saintly sinners and innocents abroad whose palpable naiveté about themselves and the world around them betrays egotism, profound disillusionment, and despair. Whereas self-knowledge and faithfulness to his original dream of obscure anonymity and the ordinary life of the common man could have saved Kip from his fantasies of social acceptance and prevented his untimely end, Father Dowling's manhood might have been redeemed if he had followed his natural instincts and intuition instead of accepting the Christian vision as his own. Social and religious conformity are equally unsatisfactory alternatives: every man must seek his own truth, and innocence compounded of naiveté is a sin. Harry Lane reaches similar conclusions in *The Many Colored Coat* (1960). Forced to ponder the ambiguity of human motivation, including his own, and the difficulty of determining absolute truth, he abandons the idea of innocence as a dangerous form of pride. "Innocence" is described as a murderous weapon, a "Two-edged sword without a handle" which wounds both the person who wields it and its intended victim. Later he equates "the greatest of sins" with "unawareness" and embarks for "a new world of new relationships with people," armed with sensitivity and awareness.

Of particular significance is the distinction Harry draws between a fall "into some awareness that could give width and depth to a man's whole life" and the primal Christian tragedy. Far from a fall "into corruption," Harry's abandonment of "innocence" paradoxically saves his life. On the other hand, Kip Caley's conversion to Christianity, also described as a redemptive fall, ultimately proves illusory. Supposedly making him "innocent" in a new kind of way, Father Butler's good influence upon him in prison quickly gives way to cynical aggressiveness again, as impossible Christian idealism proves unequal to the realities of the world. It is clear that the theme is a conscious one, and Callaghan explains it himself:

Well, if what I'm talking about is *prized*, innocence, I mean innocence as a *prized* thing, I guess innocence is not knowing. The whole Jewish-Christian thing about man in the Garden of Eden, the symbolic story of man losing his innocence, this never convinced me. I just never could quite understand this as a symbolic story. Man knew nothing about good and evil. I don't even know what that means, unless it means there *was* no good and evil. According to this Christian-Jewish myth, man must have had no awareness before the fall. But what makes man interesting *is* in his awareness of right action: what he does, what he doesn't do. We know this from our experience in this world. The most insensitive person in this world is a man who is unaware; he's frightening always.¹¹

As sensitivity and awareness usurp innocence as virtues in Callaghan's eyes, salvation through imaginative consciousness, which is what Callaghan means by awareness, replaces redemption by means of Grace. Similarly the Artist himself assumes greater significance in his work. Indeed, as the Bible fades more and more into literature, the Artist ultimately emulates God as Seer of Divine Truth.

A tendency towards moral superiority is apparent in most of the novels.¹² What has been called "compassionate irony,"¹³ the prevailing tone of Callaghan's work, often disguises paternalism and a kind of rueful contempt on the part of Callaghan for his characters. Never more apparent than in *Such is My Beloved* where priest and prostitutes are children, the temptation to take unfair advantage is rarely resisted elsewhere. He delights, for example, in the fumbling incomprehension of Harry Trotter in *Strange Fugitive* and that of Scotty Bowman in *The Many Colored Coat*. On the other hand, most of his successful heroes adopt poses like the author's own: Harry Lane and Sam Raymond, his surrogate, both become

seekers after truth, and Sam in particular resolves like Callaghan to "see the ends of the earth and judge them." Indeed, describing himself in his memoirs as an observer par excellence, Callaghan comes perilously close to identification of the Artist with a merciful God:

We are born, we live a while, and we die, and along the way the artist keeps looking at the appearance of things, call it concrete reality, the stuff of experience, or simply 'what is out there.'

Certainly he sees the Artist and God as eternally vigilant and the ultimate judges of the human condition. "The great fiction writer," he explains, "must not only have a view of man as he is, but of man as he ought to be,"14 and God, like the author, waits patiently for recognition of His truth. "God sees the truth," a priest in The Many Colored Coat explains to one of Callaghan's characters, "but He sometimes waits.... He is waiting and watching" for "Recognition of His truth." God, the Artist, and the idea of perfection are also associated in Callaghan's mind. Musing, for example, about the poet Ezra Pound's interest in St. Anselme's proof of the existence of God, Callaghan goes on to speculate that if God is equated with perfection, then the Artist must surely approach Him in his longing for the ideal.¹⁵ Elsewhere, as we have noted, he equates the end of separations between "words" and "the thing or person being described" with the "word made flesh" in his work, which leads one reluctantly to the conclusion that as long as the Artist is in his heaven everything is right with the world. The Artist evidently emulates God as Divine Seer and Judge of truth, but as Word-maker, he reigns supreme.

Which is not to say that Callaghan ends by making a religion of art, far from it in fact. Sam Raymond, after all, is a failure as an artist, and the point seems to be that he must put his personal life before his career. Callaghan still seems to prefer the artist's life. Responding with some amusement to the suggestion that he might have been a priest himself, he paints a harsh portrait of the religious life, and although he evinces sympathy for the calling, it is clear that "the ecclesiastical life would have been a horror for [him]."¹⁶ The preference is reflected in the novels. Whereas Father Dowling and Sam Raymond are equally failures in terms of their professions, the artist is permitted "success of the heart." Sam restores to life and to reality not only himself, but Anna Connel as well.

It is tempting to read Callaghan's work as an exercise in rationalization. If the sudden finality of revealed truth is rejected, then the artist is obviously free to choose his own. Certainly he insists upon his own insights. Whether or not, or how serious the author is in his equation of the Artist with an All-seeing God, it is clear that he usurps "the old authoritarian priest."¹⁷ Indeed, Callaghan's treatment of the Roman Catholic Church is related to an essentially aesthetic philosophy of life, and the effect of this upon the work is crucial. Not only are efforts

made in the novels to combat traditional concepts of innocence and the fatal fall to knowledge with complementary myth, with a kind of redemptive quest for awareness and the approach of the Artist to God, but orthodox ritual and symbol are put to literary as opposed to devotional use. The religious impulse itself is seen in *A Passion in Rome* to be an inevitable response to mortality, pointing to nothing beyond itself but the indomitable courage of man:

[St. Peter's] had long been the place of the dead. Rapt as [Sam] was, he could believe that behind the figures in the aisle, conducting their burial rite on this Vatican Hill, he saw the shadowy figures of others in antique processions, precursors of those he saw now, who were perhaps saying as the others had said, that man was a unique creature on earth because he was aware of the mystery of existence and death, and now was facing it...

If God has not quite disappeared from Callaghan's pages, His Church has become historical fact, and as the Bible fades more and more into myth and literature, it is clear that it is imaginative approaches that are redemptive, and that everyone ought to pursue.

NOTES

- ¹ From an interview by Robert Weaver, "A Talk with Morley Callaghan," *The First Five Years: a selection from The Tamarack Review*, ed. Robert Weaver (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), p. 138.
- ² Morley Callaghan, "'Ends and Means' and Aldous Huxley," *Canadian Forum*, 17 (March 1938), 422-23.
- ³ Morley Callaghan, "It was news in Paris not in Toronto," Saturday Night (5 June 1951), pp. 8, 17-18.
- ⁴ Jacques Maritain, Scholasticism and Politics, 2nd. ed. (1940; rpt. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945), p. 62.
- ⁵ Morley Callaghan, "An Ocean Away," TLS (4 June 1964), p. 493.
- ⁶ "A Talk with Morley Callaghan," p. 136.
- 7 Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid., pp. 135-36.
- ⁹ Helen Gardner, Religion and Literature (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 134.
- ¹⁰ Morley Callaghan, "Solzhenitsyn," Tamarack Review, No. 55 (1970), p. 72.
- ¹¹ From an interview by Donald Cameron, "Defending the Inner Light: An Interview with Morley Callaghan," Saturday Night (July 1972), p. 20.
- ¹² Callaghan appears to have noticed this tendency recently himself. In A Fine and Private Place (1975), the author, Eugene Shore, is accused of being "[his] own church."
- ¹³ Frank R. Scott, "Lorne Pierce Medal: Morley Callaghan," Royal Society of Canada Transactions, 3rd series, 54 (Proceedings, 1960), 57.
- ¹⁴ Morley Callaghan, "Novelist," in *Writing in Canada*, ed. George Whalley (Toronto: Macmillan, 1956), p. 32.
- ¹⁵ "Anthology," a CBC radio broadcast, 14 November 1972.
- ¹⁶ "Defending the Inner Light ...," pp. 18, 20.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 18.