

Vocation, Hypocrisy and Secularization: Iris Murdoch and the Clergy of the Church of England

Peter Webster* 
Chichester

This article examines the treatment of Anglican clergy in the novels of Iris Murdoch, setting this discussion in the context of Murdoch's own engagement with Christianity: one of sympathy without assent, yet with detailed knowledge of the secularizing theologies of the period. Clerical interventions in pastoral situations, politely tolerated in the earlier novels, are openly and robustly rejected in the later books. That pastoral care is, for Murdoch, vitiated by a desire for control, against which Murdoch set her ideal of self-emptying attention. Murdoch also dramatizes the loss of faith which forced, on some of the clergy, an inconsistency between outward speech and inner conviction. For some, the apparent hypocrisy is resolved by suicide or exile; for others, their vocation must continue as a witness to something absolute, even if they themselves can no longer articulate its nature with any conviction. The Church remains necessary even if God himself is not.

Almost from its first emergence as an art form, the novel has provided a unique means by which the intricacies of human feeling and action have been dramatized and (subsequently) read and pondered by others. As a means of understanding the continuities and disjunctures between conscious belief, unconscious motivation and visible action, it provides a source for the historian that complements the diary or the memoir. The novel offers particularly rich material for the historian of hypocrisy since the very notion seems, in some way, to require a kind of narration; to conceive of an action or omission as hypocritical, we must be able to imagine and describe a better course of action.

Though born in Dublin, Iris Murdoch (1919–99) lived most of her life in England, publishing twenty-six novels, the first in 1954 and the last in 1995. For this longevity and volume alone, her career provides a case study in the changing treatment of particular themes in fiction. As well as this, Murdoch was perhaps unique among

* I am indebted to Jem Bloomfield and Miles Leeson for their comments on draft versions of this article. E-mail: peter@websterresearchconsulting.com.

novelists of her generation, and rare among novelists in general, in being a professional philosopher, with interests in matters of metaphysics and ethics that impinged directly on the concerns of the churches. As such, it is possible to read the fiction both on its own terms, and alongside her philosophy, both of which were in dialogue with the theology and philosophy of her time.¹ Murdoch's upbringing, and the spheres of acquaintance and friendship in which she continued to move, gave her work an undertow of religious concern: often faint but persistent nonetheless.² In her novels, the institutional churches are seldom shown to be anything but ridiculous or irrelevant, without purchase on the important issues in contemporary life. Yet many of Murdoch's characters who have ostensibly taken leave of the inherited faith of their class or family spend a good deal of their time discussing what is left.

As well as this, her novels are often peopled with characters from the monied, landed and professional parts of English society, and it was from these classes that the Anglican clergy were often drawn, and with whom they maintained a kind of social connection that was less common with clergy of other churches. Murdoch shows the reader a great many professionally Anglican characters: parish clergy; two of their bishops; the ordained headmaster of a public school; members of religious orders, as well as lay churchgoers. It was among these formers of opinion that much of the debate about the secularization of English society was conducted. As Murdoch's characters think and write and talk about the loss of faith and the difficulty of filling the hole where their God once was, the historian may overhear the reflections of one creative artist on the secularization of the society around her.

As well as this, Murdoch should be read as one of a generation of artists, some of whom had themselves lost faith, and some of whom had never possessed it, but who had all been formed within a class and culture that still took religious language and symbolism seriously.³ Murdoch's own religious beliefs were complex, and are the subject

¹ On Murdoch's engagement with theology at large, see Paul Fiddes, *Iris Murdoch and the Others: A Writer in Dialogue with Theology* (London, 2021).

² Peter S. Hawkins, 'Iris Murdoch (1919–1999): Anglican Atheist', in Judith Maltby and Alison Shell, eds, *Anglican Women Novelists from Charlotte Brontë to P. D. James* (London, 2019), 161–73.

³ See, for instance, the relationship between Benjamin Britten and Walter Hussey, Anglican patron of the arts: Peter Webster, *Church and Patronage in Twentieth-Century Britain: Walter Hussey and the Arts* (London, 2017), 60–1, 69–71.

of a considerable critical literature and, indeed, disagreement.⁴ She was confirmed as an Anglican in 1934 while at Badminton School, but by the early 1950s described herself as ‘more of a fellow-traveller than a Party member’.⁵ Well before the beginning of her career as a novelist, she had firmly rejected the notion of a personal God and, with it, the Christological and soteriological apparatus of Christian theology. However, while Murdoch’s philosophical writing is atheistic in character, rejecting the notion of God as active or purposeful, she held nonetheless to the reality of something beyond the physical world, which she understood in Platonic terms as ‘the Good’.⁶ The Good, though ‘distant and apart’, was nonetheless an ‘active principle of truthful cognition and moral understanding in the soul’ from which moral deliberation could stem.⁷ However, all religious attempts to posit an externally-directed framework of purpose to human existence – to construct a consoling narrative to one’s existence and ultimate destiny, from which to make sense of the contingent – was a false comfort.⁸ It was necessary to be good, but good for nothing.

The particular interest of Murdoch for the religious historian, however, lies not so much in what she rejected, as what she tried to retain.⁹ Her upbringing had given her a deep familiarity with religious

⁴ See, for example, David Robjant, ‘As a Buddhist Christian: the Misappropriation of Iris Murdoch’, *Heythrop Journal* 52 (2011), 993–1008. See also Elizabeth Burns, ‘Murdoch and Christianity’, in Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood, eds, *The Murdochian Mind* (London, 2022), 382–93.

⁵ Peter Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (London, 2001), 64, 306.

⁶ The early *locus classicus* for Murdoch’s metaphysics is *The Sovereignty of Good* (London, 1970; repr. 2001). On Murdoch and Plato, see David Tracy, ‘Iris Murdoch and the Many Faces of Platonism’, in Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, eds, *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (Chicago, IL, 1996), 54–75; Miles Leeson, *Iris Murdoch: Philosophical Novelist* (London, 2010), esp. 86–109. On Murdoch’s understanding of God, see also Stephen Mulhall, ‘“All the world must be ‘religious”’: Iris Murdoch’s Ontological Arguments’, in Anne Rowe, ed., *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment* (Basingstoke, 2007), 23–34; Andrew Gleeson, ‘Iris Murdoch’s Ontological Argument’, in Nora Hämmäläinen and Gillian Dooley, eds, *Reading Iris Murdoch’s Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Basingstoke, 2019), 195–208.

⁷ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 2nd edn (London, 2003; first publ. 1992), 474.

⁸ On the self-narration of the religious characters in *The Bell*, see Bran Nicol, ‘The Curse of *The Bell*: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Narrative’, in Rowe, ed., *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*, 100–11.

⁹ The paragraphs that follow build upon the observations of Hawkins, ‘Anglican Atheist’, 161–3.

language and symbolism, and the regular practice of prayer and public worship, and the novels abound with descriptions of both. In the 1970s and 1980s, she spoke of having recovered a sympathy for religious belief which had been crowded out to a certain extent during her engagement with Marx as a younger woman.¹⁰ She certainly continued to read widely in theology, and to attend services of the Church of England, though sporadically, while holding back from participating in the eucharist.¹¹ Despite the ultimately unresponsive nature of the Good, Murdoch nonetheless remained open to the notion of mystical experience and to the usefulness of something like prayer. More than once she alluded to a kind of welcome captivity to Christianity: ‘in a sense one is never outside Christianity if one has been caught up in it’, she told an interviewer in 1962, ‘nor would I altogether want to be.’¹² As she suggested in a later interview, although she could not believe the supernatural aspects of Christianity, ‘of course, I can’t get away from Christ, who travels with me’.¹³

Murdoch remained convinced that, after the removal of God, to leave a vacuum would prove intolerable. A 1988 interview with the theatre director Jonathan Miller clearly showed this preoccupation, which permeates the novels. Murdoch had come to feel a need to fill the space with ‘a kind of moral philosophy, or even neo-theology, which would explain very fundamental things about the human soul and the human being’; to be human involved ‘a kind of change, a pilgrimage ... from illusion to reality, and falsehood to truth, and evil to good’. Despite the contingency of human life in a purposeless universe, there remained a ‘particular orientation which is unique and special and belongs to us and is part of us.’¹⁴

Despite this, Murdoch was not an advocate of some new para-ecclesial body or movement that might supersede the Church. Her background and disposition led her to think, if not quite with her whole mind, that the existing institution had to survive the loss of belief that she described in her novels. It was this that led

¹⁰ Gillian Dooley, ed., *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* (Columbia, SC, 2003), 43, 211.

¹¹ Interview with Jonathan Miller (1988), in Dooley, ed., *Tiny Corner*, 215.

¹² Interview with Harold Hobson (1962), in Dooley, ed., *Tiny Corner*, 7.

¹³ Interview with John Haffenden (1983), in Dooley, ed., *Tiny Corner*, 136.

¹⁴ See Dooley, ed., *Tiny Corner*, 209–17; quotations at *ibid.* 211, 212, 213.

Murdoch to advocate positions which, while apparently quixotic, have a kind of coherence when considered together.

In 1979, Murdoch contributed to a special issue of the poetry journal *PN Review*, in opposition to the looming displacement (as it was thought) of the Book of Common Prayer by the Alternative Service Book of 1980. 'We live continually in and through words,' she argued: 'Memories of words, poetic and sacred, travel with us through life.' To lose access to the words of the Prayer Book and the Authorized Version would be, '*whether or not one believes in God*, a spiritual loss'. Believers and unbelievers alike would find it difficult to 'live by' the new words as they had by the old.¹⁵ 'Absence of ritual from ordinary life also starves the imagination', she wrote in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, the published version of her 1983 Gifford lectures: 'institutions, schools, universities, even churches abandon it.' Yet 'the inner [being] needs the outer because, being incarnate, we need places and times, expressive gestures which release psychic energy and bring healing.'¹⁶ Another such suggestion was that a kind of religious education might be preserved within families, where parents, who did not themselves believe in God, might instruct children *as if they did*. 'How could a child, starting from scratch,' Jonathan Miller asked Murdoch, 'be introduced to the virtues and the galvanising powers of Christianity while being told at the same time that the story is completely untrue?' Though Murdoch disputed the word 'untrue', her discomfort was evident.¹⁷ Later scholars have noted the considerable sophistication involved in behaving as if there were a transcendent reality whilst believing there to be no such thing.¹⁸ But that Murdoch was not alone is clear from the career of her near contemporary, the poet and critic C. H. Sisson (the editor of *PN Review*) who, despite his difficulties with the idea of a personal God, was a trenchant defender of the Book of Common Prayer and the importance of the national church.¹⁹ As Miller suggested, such a balancing act could perhaps only be attempted by one of

¹⁵ Untitled article, *PN Review* 6/5 (1979), 5; see also Dooley, ed., *Tiny Corner*, 213. Italics mine.

¹⁶ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 307.

¹⁷ Dooley, ed., *Tiny Corner*, 217.

¹⁸ Gillian Dooley, 'Introduction', in Dooley, ed., *Tiny Corner*, xvii–xxx, at xxii.

¹⁹ Peter Webster, "'Poet of church and state": C. H. Sisson and the Church of England', in John Talbot and Victoria Moul, eds, *C. H. Sisson Reconsidered* (London, 2023), 159–82.

Murdoch's generation and background. For Murdoch, it was necessary that certain aspects of the national faith should persist, even if its central beliefs could no longer be conscientiously held.

It is in this context of knowledge and sympathy without assent, and of emotional investment in the continuing presence of the Church, that we should read Murdoch's engagement with the churches. What follows is an examination of several (though not all) of the Anglican clergy in Murdoch's fiction, in terms of their integrity (or otherwise) to both their vocation and their conscience. I shall examine characters who, while themselves untroubled by doubt and acting within the norms of their profession, nonetheless fail to live up to the exacting ethical standard that Murdoch sets. I also explore Murdoch's treatment of those clergy who can no longer assent to the doctrine of their own church, and the subtleties and evasions into which they are forced as a result.

The period of Murdoch's career was also one in which the social status of Anglican clergy was shifting.²⁰ Though the social composition of the clergy changed to a degree, the more significant disruption was of the conventions that surrounded their role in public and private life, and the response their interventions might receive. Though its effect in private is hard to document, the increased readiness in public to question authority figures of all kinds was made most visible in the so-called 'satire revolution' of the early Sixties.²¹ As well as this, the professional competencies of the clergy were increasingly usurped by secular specialists, in health, education and pastoral care. This was in part the continuation of a longer-term growth of the state, but also due to the availability of a greater range of voices offering spiritual counsel of different kinds, and multiple agencies offering advice on more pragmatic matters of physical and mental health.²² This article, then, also explores the attitudes among Murdoch's characters to the clergy of the Church of England as a whole: the degree to which their pastoral interventions were assumed as a matter of course, and how far

²⁰ Martyn Percy, 'Sociology and Anglicanism in the Twentieth Century', in Jeremy Morris, ed., *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, 4: Global Western Anglicanism, c.1910–Present* (Oxford, 2017), 137–59.

²¹ On the portrayal of the clergy on film and television, see Nigel Yates, *Love Now, Pay Later? Sex and Religion in the Fifties and Sixties* (London, 2010), 44–5.

²² Anthony Russell, *The Clerical Profession* (London, 1980), 278; Frank Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: The Disinherited Spirit* (Oxford, 2006), 148–61.

the social glue that fixed the clergy in such circles retained its adhesive power. I leave aside, however, a detailed exposition of the theology these characters articulate, which has been explored by others.²³ My concern here is with the Anglican clergy as social actors, and with the interplay of belief, status and action. As a result, I set aside other characters through whom Murdoch explores the same issues of belief, but who are set in quite different networks of social relations and expectations: the Roman Catholic priests Brendan Craddock and Cato Forbes in *Henry and Cato*, the abbess in *The Bell*, and the former nun Anne Cavidge in *Nuns and Soldiers*.

This article, then, aims to contribute to the critical literature on Murdoch, but its primary motivation is historical. Though the novel often appears in historical writing as a primary source, it rarely forms part of the load-bearing structure of an argument. Why this should be is far from clear, but there is perhaps among historians a wariness of the novel as a source, an uncertainty as to how best to interpret it. To change the metaphor, the novel can be a kind of garnish to the main dish, an impartor of flavour. That the flavour is one that suits the dish is often taken for granted, but it is not quite clear how or why it should be so.²⁴ But in the case of novels that may be classed broadly as realist – or, at least, as not fantasy, science fiction or magical realism – there exists an unspoken contract between author and reader that a character must act in ways that are at least plausible in one of their age, gender, class, occupation and location. As such, historians may legitimately read these characters as having some meaningful correspondence with how their real-life counterparts were present to the mind of the author. Whether or not the author's sense is typical does not wholly vitiate the novel's usefulness. Once

²³ For Carel Fisher in *The Time of the Angels*, see Peter J. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist: A Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch*, 3rd edn (London, 2001; first publ. 1986), 174–8; Hawkins, 'Anglican Atheist', 166–8; Fiddes, *Murdoch*, 49, 60; Miles Leeson, 'Morality in a World with God', in Alison Scott-Baumann and M. F. Simone Roberts, eds, *Iris Murdoch and the Moral Imagination* (Jefferson, NC, 2010), 221–36; A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom: The Early Novels of Iris Murdoch*, 2nd edn (London, 1994; first publ. 1965), 251–60; Gary Browning, *Why Iris Murdoch Matters* (London, 2018), 49–51; Hilda Spear, *Iris Murdoch*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke, 2006; first publ. 1995), 56–62. The other characters I examine have attracted less attention. On the bishop, and on Angus McAlister, see Fiddes, *Murdoch*, 26, 54–5, 65. See also Reginald Askew, 'The Occasional Clergyman', *Iris Murdoch Newsletter* 12 (1998), 7–9.

²⁴ See the contrasting approaches in Peter Clarke and Charlotte Methuen, eds, *The Church and Literature*, SCH 48 (Woodbridge, 2012).

published, the novel then becomes part of public discourse, a set of characters whom unknown readers are invited to identify with, admire, ridicule or condemn. As such, it itself becomes an object of historians' attention as part of the conversation within a community of readers about the right way in which to live. What follows is an essay in the interplay of fact and fiction on both these levels. It commits to no particular theory of the relationship between reality and representation. It is offered as a reconstruction of a set of relations between author, character, reader and the state of Anglicanism at a point in time that, though hard to theorize, merits attention.

One of Murdoch's characters illustrates the formal but ultimately insubstantial basis on which many of her characters interact with the parish clergy: Mr Enstone, in *An Accidental Man* (1971).²⁵ The scene is the deathbed of Alison Ledgard, around which are assembled her two adult daughters and others of the family. She seems to be saying one word over and over again, which sounds like 'priest'. Alison was brought up a Methodist, but has not been near a church for many years. Her daughter Charlotte is horrified at the idea of some Roman Catholic priest mumbling and sprinkling holy water, an offence to her mother's dignity. What about 'that nice man, the local parson chap', someone suggests. He had visited a few times, had he not? Mr Enstone is summoned, and in the meantime the family fumble for the fragments of a remembered religious death. There is a Bible in the room; perhaps someone should read from it? 'The Lord is my shepherd' comes to mind, but which number is it? At length, the psalm is found and, as it is read, even Charlotte is quieted by the words, that take charge, 'silencing all voices but their own, soothing the place into something ancient and formal and calm, making of it the temple of a mystery, the perennial mystery of what was about to be enacted.' The family retain enough in their memory to recognize something distinctive and significant in the words and their recitation.²⁶

Mr Enstone's arrival breaks the spell, and he is asked to talk to Alison, though Charlotte thinks him a 'dolt [who] cannot speak of ultimate things'. He takes Alison's hand and speaks of the self and God: a way of leading a soul to conversion at the last which, we are to understand, he has followed many times. His speech is gentle

²⁵ Throughout this article, I adopt whichever form of address Murdoch uses: in this case, Mr Enstone; later, Fr Jacoby.

²⁶ Iris Murdoch, *An Accidental Man* (London, 1973), 44–9.

and orthodox, yet it jars in the scene that Murdoch has drawn; it is definite, assertive, when the words of the psalm were open. He is cut off in mid-flow by Alison, again repeating the word, which the family now decides is not 'priest', but something else. 'I'm so sorry, Mr Enstone ... I don't think she wanted a priest after all.' Perfectly politely, he is put back in a box.²⁷ We meet him only twice more in the novel, both times at parties. 'Won't somebody go and talk to Mr Enstone?', frets the hostess; 'I don't think people should invite clergymen,' says a guest.²⁸ There is still, in the early 1970s, a certain residual status accorded to the parish clergy in middle-class society. However, as the generation that Alison represents passes away, this thin social connection, forgetfully maintained as a matter of good manners, increasingly loses its force, and becomes merely an embarrassment.

In *Henry and Cato* (1976), the Roman Catholic priest Cato Forbes is told by one of his young charges that 'you're the only one who has ever cared for me, Father, you're the only one who can really *see* me at all.'²⁹ The notion of vision as the key to moral behaviour has become central to readings of Murdoch's ethics, as expressed both in her philosophical writing and in her novels.³⁰ Christian ethicists, working during and in the wake of the sweeping changes in the moral content of English law that were largely complete by 1969, had in hand a project of reconstruction.³¹ What was the substance of a Christian morality that was now no longer the basis of secular law? Did it deal in deeds, or in intentions? Theologians influenced by the thought of Paul Tillich, notably John A. T. Robinson, bishop of Woolwich, tried to direct attention away from this or that specific act, and towards the primacy of love as a governing principle.³² Murdoch's

²⁷ Ibid. 49–51.

²⁸ Ibid. 427.

²⁹ Iris Murdoch, *Henry and Cato* (London, 1977), 38. Italics original.

³⁰ See, *inter alia*, Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (Oxford, 2000), 3–24 and throughout; see also the several essays in Antonaccio and Schweiker, eds, *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*; other relevant collections of essay are Scott-Baumann and Roberts, eds, *Iris Murdoch and the Moral Imagination*; and Anne Rowe and Avril Horner, eds, *Iris Murdoch and Morality* (Basingstoke, 2010).

³¹ On the legislative programme in general, see Peter Webster, *Archbishop Ramsey: The Shape of the Church* (Farnham, 2015), 65–90; Yates, *Love Now, Pay Later?*, 88–108.

³² See the chapter on 'The New Morality' in John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London, 1963), 105–21.

conception of morality, despite its atheistic basis, tended in the same direction.³³ The only guide to right behaviour was the good of the other, and in order really to learn from them – really to see them – a kind of renunciation of self was necessary. In three of Murdoch's clerical characters we are shown a kind of hypocrisy, or at least a disconnection, between a correctness of doctrine on the one hand and, on the other, actions that, whilst ostensibly well-meant, were ultimately self-serving.

Like Mr Enstone, the reader first meets Douglas Swann (*An Unofficial Rose*, 1962) in connection with a death. It is the funeral of Fanny Peronett (of a similar age to Alison Ledgard), to whom Swann had been spiritual advisor to the last. Fanny's husband Hugh was relieved that it was not Swann who had presided at the funeral: 'words of such terrible weight are best not profaned by those whom one has caught out being, if not positively frail, at least certainly absurd.'³⁴ The reader is not told the details of this past transgression of boundaries, but it involves their daughter Ann. Some in the family bear Swann's regular presence about the house with a kind of gentle mockery; Ann's estranged husband Randall is more frank: 'must we have that bloody priest infesting the house all the time?', he asks.³⁵ Ann herself defends Swann, but is uneasy with his attention. Despite the domestic setting, Swann, in a smart dark suit and collar, has 'a professional air of slightly self-conscious benevolence' and a 'clinically compassionate stoop'.³⁶ Ann feels as if 'he did, even if unconsciously, want her to break down so that he could console her.' This reading of him is correct, we find: as Ann attempts to end a conversation, he detains her. Does she pray, he asks? At this, her tears come: 'there, my child, my child,' he murmurs, with 'a sense of achievement, as of one who has brought a difficult piece of navigation to a successful conclusion.'³⁷ By the end of the novel, Ann's unease has become an unspoken but firm rejection of Swann's authority. She had hitherto been 'zealous, serious, on the whole undoubting, but a little vague about

³³ On Murdoch's engagement with Tillich, see relevant references throughout Julia T. Meszaros, *Selfless Love and Human Flourishing in Paul Tillich and Iris Murdoch* (Oxford, 2016).

³⁴ Iris Murdoch, *An Unofficial Rose* (London, 1964), 14.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 53.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 51.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 110–11.

dogma', including on the Christian doctrine of marriage.³⁸ A request for a divorce is received; Swann believes he has convinced Ann of the indissolubility of her union, and that she will reject Randall's request. But he leaves the scene (and the novel) not knowing that his advice has only confirmed how impossible it would be for her to live so. Ann is now free, both from Randall and Swann: there had been 'a change in the structure of her world, as if the crystals were forming with a difference.'³⁹ Few novelists have captured so precisely the subtle erosion of the authority of the churches, one issue and one person at a time.

The same themes appear, albeit drawn more strongly, in *The Philosopher's Pupil* (1983), in the person of Fr Bernard Jacoby. Though troubled, Jacoby is neither a comic, nor a malevolent figure. When pressed by others, he intervenes to try and help George McCaffrey, the figure at the heart of the novel; in the final crisis, he acts on the side of mercy against a strict idea of justice. But he has his 'fans', a number of penitent and needy folk, often women, with whom there are intense pastoral relationships. He is aware of the feeling of power in such pastoral situations, and the temptation to dominate, and he knows that the McCaffreys distrust him accordingly. Not being part of his tiny flock, they view him with a mixture of faint interest and suspicion, a 'creepy priest' in whom they detect a desire to 'see the strong made weak and the lofty made low, and to make those thus afflicted his spiritual prey.'⁴⁰ George, in his final refusal to submit to Jacoby's ministrations, sees through it all: 'you grow fat on people's troubles, you grow fat and sleek and purr.'⁴¹ The assumption of good faith and of ease of access to homes and to inner lives, integral to a certain image of the parish priest, which in *An Unofficial Rose* is in question, but not yet openly attacked, is now approaching its end.

Murdoch revisited the theme with Angus McAlister in *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987), but this time made the point still more starkly. Fr McAlister 'specialised in desperate cases', and so when his country congregation is swelled by visitors, it is Tamar, a young woman secretly pregnant and in turmoil, that he immediately spots.

³⁸ Ibid. 225.

³⁹ Ibid. 228.

⁴⁰ Iris Murdoch, *The Philosopher's Pupil* (Harmondsworth, 1984), 50, 108.

⁴¹ Ibid. 494.

Tamar's case is a particular delight to him, over which 'he might positively have been said to gloat.'⁴² To the consternation of Rose, her confidant and hostess, McAlister intrudes where he had not been invited, involving himself with someone to whom he had not even been introduced. What cheek, Rose thinks: 'it's not his business! He'll upset her!'⁴³ Tamar's first reaction is to reject his intrusion, but as she makes to leave the church, he grasps her by the wrist and instructs her to kneel. As she does, the tears flow, he prays and she begins to tell him of her situation. The reader is left to decide whether this is a brilliantly intuitive pastoral intervention or an abuse of power, or both. Their relationship, as McAlister leads Tamar through baptism and confirmation, deserves a fuller exposition than can be accommodated here, but the imbalance of power is clear. McAlister clearly *sees* Tamar clearly (in Murdochian terms), or at least thinks he does, working hard at judging her needs and '[singing] both high and low' to meet them.⁴⁴ Yet at the same time, McAlister enjoys the process more than is comfortable for the reader to see, and Tamar too knows it. His careful staging of a confrontation with Tamar's mother Violet slips from his control, and in her fury and grief Violet voices the critique that was made of Jacoby: 'you loathsome hypocrite, I know your type, peering into people's lives and trying to control them, breaking up families, smashing things you don't understand!'⁴⁵ In the end, McAlister manages only to release Tamar not into selfless love, but into a new selfishness. His reaction is a kind of shrug of resignation, as he moves on to the next difficult case. Murdoch's critique of the pastoral clergy is the same in all three cases: of a well-intentioned, but often inept interference, prone always to self-consciousness, and often self-interest, and open to the charge of exploitativeness.

It is not difficult to produce examples of clergy in novels of other periods who are similarly held up against the standard of their own profession and found wanting, from Jane Austen's Mr Collins onwards. But the theological atmosphere in which Murdoch was writing, and with which she engaged, was quite distinct in its professed focus on the secular. 'Modern Man', recently come of age

⁴² Iris Murdoch, *The Book and the Brotherhood* (London, 1987), 487.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 282.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 488.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 507.

(as it was sometimes said) had no time for – indeed, could make nothing of – the stuff of traditional doctrine, which had to be demythologized and restated in non-supernatural terms. The setting was as important as the doctrine, it was thought. Only a new practical religion of love and service, carried out not within the walls of the church but in the street or the workshop, could now reach those whom (it now seemed clear) the Church had lost. The bishop of Woolwich, John A. T. Robinson, in *The New Reformation?* (1965), emphasized not the network of parish ‘settlements’, but rather ‘signs’ of reformation such as the anti-apartheid stand of Trevor Huddleston or the Christian-led work of the Notting Hill Housing Trust in Murdoch’s familiar west London.⁴⁶ In this reading, the churches needed to efface themselves, if not indeed to dissolve themselves completely, in order fully to go out into the world.

This vogue for ‘religionless Christianity’, or what Mark Chapman has called an ‘English Bonhoefferism’, was short-lived.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, it is clear that Murdoch was aware of it; her own library included a copy of *The New Reformation?* and it seems likely that she also read Robinson’s *Honest to God* (1963), perhaps the classic text of English Bonhoefferism.⁴⁸ Murdoch’s engagement with Bonhoeffer himself in her philosophical writing is very slight, but revealing of her attitude to what she later described as the ‘mild tinkering’ of Robinson and others.⁴⁹ In *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), Murdoch does not work out her position on the non-existence of God, but asserts it as one of her assumptions. As such, she continued, ‘when Bonhoeffer says that God wants us to live as if there were no God, I suspect he is misusing words.’ There is no God in the traditional sense, and ‘the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense.’⁵⁰ While its implications for Christology were drastic, the project of demythologization at this point remained theistic in character. For Murdoch, however, the churches were only tinkering if they imagined that it were possible to recast their structures in a convincing way, while trying to cling to the objective extramental existence of God. Such a realist position was no longer tenable, in Murdoch’s view: the task for the churches

⁴⁶ John A. T. Robinson, *The New Reformation?* (London, 1965), 103–4.

⁴⁷ Mark D. Chapman, ‘Theology in the Public Arena: The Case of “South Bank religion”’, in Jane Garnett et al., eds, *Redefining Christian Britain* (London, 2007), 92–105.

⁴⁸ Murdoch refers to *Honest to God* in her later *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 452.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 455.

⁵⁰ Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, 77.

was to face the reality of the death of God, and to work out what might remain. Four of her clerical characters, from *The Time of the Angels* (1966) through to *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987) dramatize the loss of faith and the dilemma that it presented to a clergyman in his office.

The Time of the Angels is played out in the rectory of a ruined church in a twilight east London wasteland, blanketed in snow and shrouded in fog. There are two Fisher brothers: Marcus and his elder brother Carel, the rector of St Eustace Watergate. Marcus has become concerned about Carel, living as a recluse in the rectory and refusing all callers. Marcus is writing a book, *Morality in a World without God*, which will ‘rescue the idea of an Absolute in morals by showing it to be implied in the most unavoidable human activity of moral evaluation’.⁵¹ No longer would either theological metaphor or crude existentialism be necessary in order for society to function. Despite his professed wish to start afresh, in the eyes of his friend Norah, Marcus is a Christian fellow-traveller. The sooner the West can pass through its current twilight of the gods, the better, she thinks. For Carel, there is simply no God, but the crisis is even deeper and more implacable than this. All philosophy and theology, theistic or otherwise, has been and remains a means of distracting attention from the senselessness of a universe of pure chance. Goodness is impossible, he believes, and Marcus’s project futile: ‘there is only power and the marvel of power, there is only chance and the terror of chance.’⁵² Carel intends to stay just where he is, however, since ‘[i]f there is no God there is all the more need for a priest’. Marcus begins to object – surely it would be wrong to act so – but is cut short: ‘if there is no one there no one is going to mind.’⁵³ Later, Marcus presses the point: ‘you are going to go on with that farce, with all those things inside you?’ This time Carel’s reply is less sanguine: he will carry on, but (quoting the *Dies irae*), ‘*nil inultum remanebit*’: nothing would remain unpunished; ‘although there is no judge I shall be punished quite automatically out of the great power of the universe. ... Meanwhile I endure in the place in which I am.’⁵⁴

⁵¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 72.

⁵² *Ibid.* 172.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 79.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 174–5. Italics original.

Though the reactions of most readers are lost, it is hard to imagine many Anglicans receiving the ‘High Anglican Gothic’ of *The Time of the Angels* as very typical of church life.⁵⁵ Carel, who within the sepulchral darkness of the rectory exercises the most baleful power over his housekeeper, his daughter and his niece, could have found few documented counterparts. There had long been clergy who had lost their faith; from time to time, there were scandalous examples of those who, like Fisher, fell short of the moral standards expected of them, and both had their representatives in fiction. However, the period from the early 1960s onwards was characterized by a certain sense of professional crisis among the clergy across the churches, alongside – and mutually constitutive of – the broader intellectual crisis that Murdoch dramatized. In the Church of England, there was an awareness that existing clergy were deployed inefficiently, and rewarded unevenly. Numbers of new vocations fell sharply, and there also seemed to be an increase in the number of those leaving. Murdoch may well have known that the philosopher Anthony Kenny had arrived in Oxford in 1963 as a new agnostic immediately after having left the Roman Catholic priesthood; Kenny certainly encountered her, most likely at some point in the mid- to late 1960s.⁵⁶ By 1970, in the words of Cardinal Heenan, ‘the path which [Kenny] trod has now become a great high road’, and the problem was not only among Roman Catholics:⁵⁷ a survey in 1973–4 found that around eleven per cent of men ordained in the Church of England between 1951 and 1965 were no longer working within the church, and nearly half of those had formally resigned their orders.⁵⁸ The mid-1960s also saw a very particular discussion about the status of the Thirty-Nine Articles, the central doctrinal statement of the Church of England, unrevised in four centuries, to which clergy were required to assent in a very public and precise way. This was thought to be a difficulty to an increasing number of ordinands.⁵⁹ A report of the church’s doctrine commission

⁵⁵ The phrase of A. S. Byatt in *Degrees of Freedom*, 260.

⁵⁶ Conradi, *Murdoch*, 301; Anthony Kenny, *A Path from Rome: An Autobiography* (Oxford, 1986), 191–203; idem, *Brief Encounters: Notes from a Philosopher’s Diary* (London, 2018), 175–7.

⁵⁷ Kenny, *Path from Rome*, 205.

⁵⁸ Russell, *Clerical Profession*, 265.

⁵⁹ Paul A. Welsby, *A History of the Church of England 1945–1980* (Oxford, 1984), 234–5, 143–6.

recommended in 1968 that the public element of that assent should end, and the form of words be adjusted. At some point, Murdoch acquired a copy of the report, and parts of it concerning the form of assent are marked in the margin.⁶⁰

So although the reasons for the draining away of the numerical strength of the clergy were complex, their professional position was certainly in question in a new and particular way. In *The Time of the Angels*, Murdoch explores the reactions of others to Carel and his likely future. Concerned about Carel's state of mind, Norah and Marcus consult with his bishop. Murdoch does not name him, but the parallel is very clearly with John Robinson.⁶¹ He is clean, with a boyish face, and seems to Marcus to be too young to be a bishop. (The description matches the photograph of Robinson on the cover of *The New Reformation?*; Robinson was forty-five when it appeared, having become bishop at forty.) Surely, Norah thinks, something must be done about a rector who has lost his faith, and perhaps his mind. 'I should certainly call Carel an *eccentric*', he replies, and the Church of England has been noted for those. Perhaps it would not do to cause too much of a fuss that might be difficult to manage; 'it'll all come out in the wash!'⁶² But this will not do for Norah: is it no longer important what a clergyman believes? Frowning slightly at being put on the spot, the bishop replies: 'It is a time,' he says, 'when, as one might put it, mankind is growing up. ... Much of the symbolism of theology ... is, in this scientific age, simply a barrier to belief. Our symbolism must change.' As for Carel, the key is not his beliefs, but 'passion, Kierkegaard said, didn't he, passion. That's the necessary truth.'⁶³ (Rowan Williams has pointed out a certain cult of earnestness in the period; for at least some adherents of the so-called 'South Bank Religion', what one believed was not so important as the seriousness with which one believed it.⁶⁴) Despite his confession of

⁶⁰ Archbishops' Commission on Christian Doctrine, *Subscription and Assent to the 39 Articles* (London, 1968). Murdoch's copy of this report first belonged to Scott Dunbar, then a graduate student in the philosophy of religion, with whom Murdoch became friends in 1967; Kingston, Kingston University Archives and Special Collections [hereafter: KUAL], Iris Murdoch Papers, IML296.

⁶¹ On the similarity between Robinson's views and those of Murdoch's bishop in *Time of the Angels*, see Fiddes, *Murdoch*, 53–4, 55.

⁶² Murdoch, *Time of the Angels*, 91. Italics original.

⁶³ Murdoch, *Time of the Angels*, 90–4.

⁶⁴ Rowan Williams, 'Honest to God and the 1960s', in idem, *Anglican Identities* (London, 2004), 103–20, at 106.

atheism, the bishop regards Carel as ‘a profoundly religious man’. Norah thinks the bishop is playing with fire; it would be better to state plainly that God did not exist. Marcus is disturbed. Despite not believing himself in the redeeming Christ or the Trinity, it was important that someone else did, and that ‘all that business should go on in the old way’. Anticipating a later insight of Grace Davie, Marcus’s religion had been enacted vicariously on his behalf, but now ‘behind the scenes it was all being unobtrusively dismantled.’⁶⁵

Between *The Time of the Angels* and *The Philosopher’s Pupil* in 1983, much of the confidence of Robinsonian radicals that the Church of England could be saved by a kind of relocation in the secular world had evaporated. As Sam Brewitt-Taylor has shown, by the early 1970s, some clergy associated with religionless Christianity found themselves sufficiently frustrated to leave parochial ministry entirely. Robinson returned to academic life in 1969; one of his priests in Woolwich, Nick Stacey, worked first in the charity sector, and then in social services in local government.⁶⁶ Murdoch had, in the meantime, read a good deal of the most controversial modern theology, including *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (1974) by Maurice Wiles, and the notorious collection of essays edited by John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), both of them radical statements of a non-incarnational Christology.⁶⁷ Reading them, she wrote, with mock surprise, ‘I have discovered that I am a Christian’, in that her understanding of Christ matched that of Wiles and Hick and colleagues.⁶⁸ Also in her library were works by Don Cupitt, who, while a contributor to *The Myth of God Incarnate*, was shortly to go further, and take a position of explicit theological non-realism. The earliest of the three books by Cupitt in Murdoch’s library was *Taking Leave of God*, published in 1980, which marked his ‘coming

⁶⁵ Murdoch, *Time of the Angels*, 95; Grace Davie, ‘Vicarious Religion: A Response’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25 (2010), 261–6.

⁶⁶ Sam Brewitt-Taylor, ‘Inspiration and Institution in 1960s Anglican Radicalism: The Cases of Nick Stacey and John Robinson’, in Charlotte Methuen, Alec Ryrie and Andrew Spicer, eds, *Inspiration and Institution in Christian History*, SCH 57 (London, 2021), 318–40, at 334–7.

⁶⁷ Her copies, both of them heavily annotated, are at KUAL, Iris Murdoch Papers, IML59 and IML322.

⁶⁸ Murdoch to Scott Dunbar, 19 October 1977, in Avril Horner and Anne Rowe, eds, *Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch, 1934–1995* (London, 2015), 450–1.

out' as a non-realist.⁶⁹ Writing in 1989, from what he regarded as a kind of internal exile (as dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge), Cupitt asked what courses of action were open to those who, without owning a loss of faith, could not subscribe to theological realism and the dogmatic structure of the Church's theology. Should they leave and join an 'entirely unorganized invisible church of heretics, artists, writers, humanitarians, lovers of spiritual freedom and of the poor'?⁷⁰ A kind of exile was probably the only honest course of action. Cupitt was also a reader of Murdoch;⁷¹ her characters had, he thought, modelled just such a kind of modern contemplative, who left the Church behind to 'go out into the world and into solitary, anonymous reflection and service [as] a symbolic action, a way of bearing unofficial witness to the extremity of the times.'⁷² In Bernard Jacoby and Angus McAlister, Murdoch explores two possible responses to Cupitt's question.

Fr Jacoby, in *The Philosopher's Pupil*, had once prayed freely, but now has ceased to believe in any personal God, even though the idea of Christ somehow persists. His prayer, although it contains forms of words that suggest a feeling of petition, is largely a free flow of thoughts, a kind of meditative practice that – to his parishioners – seems to be nothing more than a kind of disciplined breathing. In the set piece debate between Jacoby and Rozanov (the fearsome philosopher of the novel's title), in which they probe together the emptiness of a world without a God, it becomes difficult to distinguish the two voices, so alike are their positions, and so far from anything resembling orthodoxy. Yet Jacoby does retain some sense of priestly distinctiveness. Part of it is pastoral, as I have already shown, but Jacoby also holds onto some idea of the sacraments, even though they are not a symbol of a wider spiritual reality, but something more magical, shamanic, which he finds 'endlessly and thrillingly arcane.' 'I enact rites,' he says, and 'wait for people to summon me.'⁷³ This, it seems, is

⁶⁹ Murdoch's annotated copy is at KUAL, Iris Murdoch Papers, IML1105; Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 452–5.

⁷⁰ Don Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church* (London, 1989), 118.

⁷¹ On Cupitt's engagement with Murdoch, see Don Cupitt, 'Iris Murdoch: A Case of Star-Friendship', in Anne Rowe and Avril Horner, eds, *Iris Murdoch: Texts and Contexts* (Basingstoke, 2012), 11–16; Fiddes, *Murdoch*, 57–8.

⁷² Don Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church* (London, 1989), 121.

⁷³ Murdoch, *Philosopher's Pupil*, 156, 190. On Murdoch and the magical nature of religious symbols and ritual, see Fiddes, *Murdoch*, 26–7.

enough for him. But Murdoch shows us the gap between Jacoby's public and private faces. Rozanov asks the question: is it not time that Jacoby left the priesthood? 'With your beliefs you must feel you are in a false position, living a lie. You must have taken vows. Aren't you breaking them?' He had assented to the Thirty-Nine Articles, but they were just 'old-fashioned realistic theism', in which they agree that Jacoby does not believe. How can he go on? Jacoby, discomfited, answers: 'I just can, that's all.'⁷⁴ But he is put on the spot by his flock, vulnerable people who rely on him, to whom he lies directly. The final crisis of the novel sees him abruptly resign and leave England for an abandoned chapel on the Greek coast, where he can work out his vocation of finding true religion in the absolute repudiation of even the idea of God.

Of all Murdoch's priests, Fr McAlister in *The Book and the Brotherhood* is arguably the most fully-drawn, and also the most ambiguous. The son of a clergyman, he, like Jacoby, once believed the language of his upbringing, which flows freely from him still: 'the high spiritual rhetoric of the Bible and of Cranmer's Prayer Book was more familiar to him than nursery rhymes.' But he too has ceased to believe either in God or a divine Christ. Some kind of mystical Christ remains, however, as does the 'magical power' that his ordination conferred on him, to 'save souls and raise the fallen.'⁷⁵ His sense of there being something to which to direct prayer is stronger than in Jacoby; his intention to help his difficult cases is genuine. His improvised rite in memory of Tamar's aborted child, conducted in private and wholly uncanonical, is to him a 'most holy farrago', and yet somehow it provides what is needed.⁷⁶ He also remains sure that the whole of existence could not simply be an accident: 'it was something absolute, and what is absolute cannot be an accident.' Without the 'endlessly rehearsed drama of Christ ... there was nothing at all'; nothing could separate him from the love of Christ, even the vague kind of Christ in which he could believe.⁷⁷

McAlister is, however, strongly reminded of the precariousness of his position by the rites of the church. He is separated from the crib at

⁷⁴ Ibid. 229–30.

⁷⁵ Murdoch, *Book and Brotherhood*, 488.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 493.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 539–40.

Christmas, that ‘glowing radiant object ... because he was a liar, because a line of falsity ran all the way through him and tainted what he did.’⁷⁸ At Easter too, he is troubled by the message he still had to convey, ‘the terrible particularity, the empirical detail of his religion’.⁷⁹ How, he asks himself, can he affirm in speech things about God or Christ that he did not believe? ‘I have to,’ he answers. ‘Why? In order to carry on with the life which I have chosen and which I love.’⁸⁰ Though McAlister prays and worships, and feels himself to be ‘a vehicle of power and a grace which was given, not his own,’ there was all the while a ‘terrible truth’ never clarified. During the eucharist, he enacts something, points towards business transacted between God and his flock, but no longer with him, ‘in agony, with tears’, which ‘did him no credit. Rather the contrary.’⁸¹ While Fr Jacoby is propelled out of his position by doubt, Fr McAlister, like Carel Fisher, endures because he must. For him, unlike Murdoch’s other priests, his dilemma is not resolved for him by events; as the reader sees him for the last time, on he goes, with his next hard case. Despite the loss of God, for Murdoch, the Church must endure because it is necessary.

Iris Murdoch’s treatment of her Anglican clergy can be read, then, as an extended meditation, over nearly thirty years, on the faults of the church as she knew it, and at the same time as an assertion of its enduring necessity. Her characters, drawn largely from the upper strata of English professional and landed society, maintain a kind of social connection with the clergy as part of the givenness of English life, though it becomes increasingly threadbare as her novels enter the 1980s. But despite that connection, the apparent presumption of the clergy in trying to intervene in pastoral situations, politely tolerated in 1962 and *An Unofficial Rose* is, by 1987 and *The Book and the Brotherhood*, openly and robustly rejected. The character of that pastoral care is, for Murdoch, vitiated by the intrusion of the ‘fat, relentless ego’ that for Murdoch threatens all human relationships, and by a desire for control, against which Murdoch always sets her ideal of self-emptying attention to the Other. Though

⁷⁸ Ibid. 516.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 539.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 516.

⁸¹ Ibid. 540–1.

these men are apparently blameless when judged against conventional Christian moral standards, Murdoch's other characters point, both silently and out loud, to a subtle hypocrisy in them, a falseness of motive. Murdoch holds these clergy against the rule which she would advocate as the truly Christian standard and finds them wanting.

In the same characters, Murdoch also dramatizes the loss of Christian faith which was for her a settled reality, but which presented the working clergy with acute agonies of conscience and a daily disjuncture between outward speech and inner conviction, to which other characters draw attention. Some of these men remain in place simply because they can; others persevere because if there is no God and no objective standard of belief, it no longer matters, and the very notion of hypocrisy falls away. Others again remain, somehow loyal to a sense of vocation and to those whom they can, in their way, continue to help. Largely absent in these characters, however, is any appeal to the teaching authority of the Church that might head off the charge of hypocrisy; any sense that, even if they cannot themselves assent to certain doctrines, they nonetheless accept them as a datum, in submission to the weight of historic orthodoxy and in fidelity to the historic and present Body of Christ. These men are largely alone. As Rowan Williams has noted, for all her turning to the everyday – and the attachment to the idea of the Church that I have explored – there is little sense in Murdoch's fiction of the Church as a community, or of the importance of a 'shared life, social and ethical tradition and the disciplines of common experience and common challenge'.⁸²

In the case of Carel Fisher, the dilemma is resolved only by suicide; for Bernard Jacoby, it is resolved by external events which jolt him out of place and into a kind of exile; for Angus McAlister it continues, in struggle and tears. The ministrations of the Church must continue as a witness to something absolute, even if McAlister himself cannot resolve its nature. For him, as for Murdoch, the Church remains necessary, even if God himself is not. With this quixotic proposition, Murdoch exemplifies a tension in her generation which had not arisen quite so acutely before, and which is now much less common, and inflected differently. Some Anglicans are still disposed to try to recover a necessary connection between established church, nation

⁸² Rowan Williams, 'Writing Morally', in Hopwood and Panizza, eds, *Murdochian Mind*, 376–81, at 378.

and culture, and the value of the Prayer Book and historic ritual. However, such loyalties are now less something in which people are (in Murdoch's terms) 'caught up', but a matter of conscious choice.⁸³

⁸³ On this, see Peter Webster, 'Poet of Church and State', 174–5.