MOVING STATUES AND CONCRETE THINKING

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In the early months of 1985 the Irish press reported a spate of Marian apparitions that came to be known as the 'moving statues'. The apparitions of 1985 were the most recent in an intermittent history of similar phenomenon stretching back at least as far as the late nineteenth century when, in the summer of 1879, the most famous of all Irish apparitions occurred in the remote village of Knock. There was a somewhat less famous episode during the Irish War of Independence when a household statue of the Virgin Mary was said to have shed blood. There was another well-known episode in Northern Ireland in the 'Marian year' of 1954. While the 1980s apparitions took various forms and involved a range of saints and other divine beings, the majority and the most famous of them were centered on or revolved around statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. Many of the statues were located in the hundreds of outdoor grottoes that were built all around Ireland after Pope Pius XII marked the centenary of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption by designating 1954 a special 'Marian Year'. This record would suggest that Marian apparitions were relatively rare events, but it should be remembered that these were only the ones that the relatively small Irish media industry of the time picked up on.

The first apparition of the 1980s to be reported in the popular *Sunday Independent* (*S.I.*) was on St. Valentines Day, February the 14th. 1985. The next was reported under the headline 'Moving Statues' (*S.I.* 24-3-1985). They were called 'moving statues' because the people who 'saw' them often reported having seen a statue levitate, gesture, or move in some way. The media soon lost interest in the apparitions and it wasn't until the warmer months of summer that there was a plethora of apparition stories. These reports often involved a good deal of sensationalism, speculation, and exaggeration. Ryan and Kirakowski listed 31 different apparition sites and noted that the one near the village of Ballinspittle drew the largest crowds (1985: 39-44). By early August media reports were estimating that 100,000 people had visited the Ballinspittle site (*S.I.* 4-8-1985).

While they may have been the greatest religious sensation since Pope John Paul II's visit in 1979, the moving statues were just one of a whole series of new and extraordinary religious movements that had flourished in Ireland or surfaced into public view since the middle of the 1960s. The reports of moving statues was preceded by reports of surges of interest in the Charismatic Renewal Movement (CRM), Evangelical revivals, and attempts to revive 'the healing ministry' within the Catholic Church and within various Protestant denominations (Roch: 1981: 45, 186, 243). The reactionary Tridentine movement also emerged in opposition to the reforms of Vatican II and there was an influx of Christian and other missionary groups and New Religious Movements (NRMs) including Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'I, Hare Krishna, Scientology, Divine Light, Wicca, etc. The influx and/or flourishing of these new and not-so-new movements was accompanied by media reports about UFO sightings, spiritual and psychic healing, faith healing, psychic surgery, numerology, Tarot, dowsing, and various other divinatory or occult groups and practices. Occult type horror movies like 'The Omen', 'The Exorcist', and 'Carrie' were drawing large crowds to cinemas and there were occasional reports of Catholic priests performing exorcisms. However, judging by the media reports, all the new religious and occult groups were relatively small. The CRM was by far the largest but it only ever achieved a membership of around 35,000 (Szuhewycz 1989: 59; Mulholland 2007: 136-153).

In 1983, just a few years before the moving statues, an Irish bishop used his Lenten pastoral to warn about the danger of 'cults' and 'non-denominational Christian Groups'. Soon after that a priest published an article on cults and 'deprogramming' and mentioned that another priest, Fr. Michael Tierney, was working on a book about NRMs (*S.I.* 15-5-1983, 26-6-1983). As chaplain at Dublin airport in the 1970s, Tierney was well-placed to observe the influx of 'Jesus freaks' and 'itinerant preachers' who told him they had come to save the warring factions in Northern Ireland and re-Christianize Catholic Ireland (1985: 6). The references to 'deprogramming' and the Northern 'Troubles' echoed aspects of the academic debate about the many NRMs and cults that had emerged in the West since World War II and flourished in the wake of the 1960s counter culture (Hamilton 1995: 207; Arweck & Clarke 1997: xi; Barker 1989: 30). Much of that theorising highlighted rapid social, economic, technological, and cultural changes. The Vietnam War and communal dislocations of one sort or another were also cited as causal factors along with some kind of crisis of meaning, cultural confusion, or moral ambiguity (see Robbins 1988). The literature on post World War II Ireland lends support to much of that theorising.

Various writers have identified the year 1959 as being a 'watershed' in Irish history. The first Irish television station began broadcasting at the end of that year. The first

Programme for Economic Expansion was published just the year before and has been credited with having been a major catalyst for the socio-economic and cultural changes that followed (Kirby 1984: 19). As Ryan understood it, what actually happened was that 'Ireland, economically and psychologically, set out to catch up with the rest of western industrial society' and affluence became 'as powerful an integrating force as Catholicism or nationalism had ever been' (1984: 102). But the change was not a smooth one and, as the global economy lurched from one oil crisis to another, the Irish economy staggered from slow growth to stagnation and recession. Just before the 1973 oil crisis it was estimated that the 80,000 unemployed was 'the worst jobless figure since the 1950s' (*S.I.* 9-1-72). In 1977 there were 'shock' statistics showing unemployment had reached 120,000 and it was claimed that 60,000 Irish people were emigrating every year (*S.I.* 11-9-77; 22-5-77). In 1982 one news report said any hope of an end to the current recession had been dashed. Another claimed 'things have never been worse for the economy' and a journalist linked increasing crime rates, alienation and 'an alarming increase in suicides' to unemployment, unwanted pregnancies, bankruptcy, bereavement, and 'the pressures of modern living' (*S.I.* 3-1-82; 21-3-82; 25-7-82). A 1983 report on long-term unemployment alluded to 'an air of resignation' pervading the whole country (*S.I.* 11-12-83.). When the unemployment figure reached a quarter of a million in 1984 joblessness was described as being Ireland's 'biggest problem' (*S.I.* 1-7-84). That was the year that an Irish history professor predicted that 'The psychic impact of emigration… has scarcely begun to be explored' (Lee 1984: 113). By 1987 there were reports of 'thousands' applying for visas to get into the USA and of 'crowds' gathering at distribution centers to get handouts of food from the EEC surplus (*S.I.* 11-1-87; 1-3-87). It was estimated that, between 1985 and 1995, upwards of 150,000 Irish people emigrated.[1]

The growing sense of crisis was exacerbated by mounting concerns about the so-called 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland. The war in the North featured in almost every news report and some feared it would spill-over into the Republic. A Fr. McCarthy voiced those fears in 1972 when he said he feared there would be 'a civil war where our children will be holocausted in a hell of hatred' (*S.I.* 2-2-1972). Towards the end of that year Northern loyalists began bombing towns and cities in the South and, as Keogh put it, political violence had become 'a factor in the life of the Irish state' (2005: 326). But the 'Troubles' wasn't the only political or military threat hanging over Ireland during those years. When expressing his fear that we might all be 'holocausted in a hell of hatred', Fr. McCarthy was deploying familiar 'cold war' rhetoric about the

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1   http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Europe/Ireland-MIGRATION.html

threat of a nuclear war. Ireland was officially a neutral country and had no nuclear industry or weapons. But that didn't mean that Irish people weren't concerned about the Cold War and the nuclear threat. The Catholic Church here carried on a relentless campaign against communism that was generally supported by the media and some of our elected representatives. Along with that campaign, our access to British and other international media outlets ensured that the Irish were exposed to a constant stream of Cold War news and rhetoric. In 1959 the *Sunday Independent* announced the publication of 'A New Series on Nuclear War to Startle You'. In one of the ensuing three essays Bertrand Russell, a founder of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, warned that thirty-six million Americans would die in one day of nuclear warfare. Russell's articles were followed soon after with the serialization of a novel about nuclear warfare called 'Two Hours to Doom' (*S.I.* 17-5-59). While that serialization was still running the Irish press reported that 'the Reds' in Hungary were confining Catholic monks to their monasteries and, in May, Soviet leader Khrushchev was reported as having 'boasted' that Russia could wipe 'the Western Powers off the face of the earth'. A few months later a Fr. Hennessy urged readers of the *Sunday Independent* not to 'spend all your time looking into the night of Russian barbarism and bombs' and went on to tell them that the secret of Our Lady's prophesy at Fatima was that another world war could only be averted by the 'consecration of Russia [to her] Immaculate Heart'. (*S.I.*11-1-59; 17-5-59; 7-7-59). In January 1960 a headline read 'Vatican Radio attacks Russia'. In October 1961 the Rev. Dr. J. Newman, professor of sociology at Maynooth, was reported as having argued that the growth of pacifism since WWII 'constituted an extremely grave danger from within'. He also offered clarification on the Church's position on 'modern warfare'. In the following weeks there were letters in the press accusing Newman of having justified the use of nuclear weapons (*S.I.* 22-10-61; 10-11-61). Fears of a nuclear holocaust intensified with the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. There were 178 known nuclear test explosions that year.[2]

   All this Cold War posturing and rhetoric had such a profound effect on one young Irish couple that they wrote to ask a religious columnist with the *Sunday Independent* if he thought they should be considering 'having children in a nuclear world' (*S.I.* 16-12-62). In 1965 a report said 'the fear of nuclear war is slowly taking its grip' (*S.I.* 20-6-65). There were numerous other reports of the threat of communism and nuclear war in the 1969s and '70s and they were often interspersed with articles on communist intrigues in Ireland and the repression of the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia,

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2   The rate fell to an average of 63 a year for the rest of the decade and to 52 pr. year between 1970 and 1989 (NRDC website; http://www.nrdc.org).

Poland, Russia, Cuba, China and elsewhere (*S.I.* 11-1-59, 24-4-60, 2-10-60, 25-6-61, 3-2-1963, 2-2-64, 24-10-71). In 1962 a Reverend Butler warned that 'The Reds in Ireland' were 'targeting youth' and infiltrating various educational and cultural organizations (*S.I.* 2-12-62). In 1966 a report suggested that Irish Republicans were being manipulated by communists (*S.I.* 9-1-66). And in 1970 the Bishop of Galway said he thought 'organized atheism' was the source of the 'most serious injury' being done to the young people of Ireland. Two weeks later a 'Maoist bookshop' was attacked (*S.I.* 15-3-1970). In 1971 the first Catholic dean of Trinity College Dublin felt it necessary to defend students accused of supporting communism (*S.I.* 5-1-1971). And in 1976 a Jehovah Witness said their members were being attacked by mobs accusing them of being communists. The communist and/or nuclear threat continued to make headlines as the time of the moving statues approached. In 1980 the *Sunday Independent* published a full-page article alleging that the KGB had plotted to 'discredit the Vatican and shake the faith of 500 million Catholics'. The article alleged that Pope John Paul I was poisoned 'because he showed signs of working… to reach an accommodation with Communism'. In November that year the national television channel participated in a day-long nuclear war exercise involving 5,000 volunteers in 'a simulated fallout operation' (*S.I.* 29-11-81). There were more reports, books, and films about the nuclear threat in 1982 and an Irish politician who had once been described as a 'cold war warrior' issued a warning about the amassing of 50,000 nuclear warheads by the USA and Russia (Keogh 2005: 191; *S.I.* 10-10-82). As fears of a nuclear war intensified the Vatican was reported to have sent delegations to international centres of power to explain 'the terrifying prospects' if nuclear arms were to be used (*S.I:* 13-12-1981). In January 1983 it was reported that the Vatican had condemned nuclear weapons as 'Giant Evils' (*S.I:* 16-1-83). This was the year that Ronald Regan called the Soviet Union an 'evil empire' and announced the 'Star Wars' nuclear defence programme. It was also the year that Russian planes shot down Korean Airways flight 007 and, in December, an Irish television station screened a 'Nuclear film that scared USA' and the *Sunday Independent* published a piece called 'The Doomsday Exercise' (18-12-1983). The latter was a reference to a NATO exercise that recently featured in a television documentary that described the 8th of November 1983 as having been the most dangerous moment in the history of the Cold War.[3]

Along with these reports of communist intrigues and Cold War posturing Irish people were also being kept well informed of the dangers of an accident in a British nuclear power station. A 1950s leak of radioactive material into the Irish Sea resulted

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3   *The Brink of Apocalypse* was shown on SKY television on the 5th of January, 2008.

in a protracted campaign by people who feared that it was the cause of a high incidence of Downs Syndrome and cancers among the population living along Ireland's eastern seaboard. In 1978 an environmental campaign group sabotaged a pipeline they thought was discharging nuclear waste from a British power plant into the Irish Sea. Reports from the 1980s show that these power plants were still exciting fears of a 'Nuclear Nightmare' (*S.I.* 7-6-87; 14-8-88). The International Social Survey Program of 1993 found that 'the concern of Irish Catholics about nuclear power is the highest in the world'. Greeley thought this high level of concern was due to the success of the 'liberal wing of the Irish Church… insisting on the danger of nuclear energy' (1998: 157).

Greeley's mention of there being a 'liberal wing' in the Irish Church was a reference to the deep divisions that had become increasingly public since Vatican II. From the 1950s on the Church had become increasingly and more and more publicly divided over various issues. The emergence of what was sometimes called the 'the permissive society' was one example. In the early 1960s a priest called on the Irish government to 'jam… the filth and rubbish' being broadcast into Ireland by British TV stations in the North (*S.I.* 27-3-60). This was typical of a very conservative and prudish attitude that surfaced again and again in the public discourse about youth culture and morality during the next few decades.

But this dominant brand of conservative and puritanical Catholicism was being increasingly held up to scrutiny and by the early 1970s some newspapers had come out in support of those who were criticizing Catholic censorship, 'insularity' and 'prudishness' (*S.I.* 25-4-1971). By the late 1960s criticism of Church representatives had already become so unrelenting that an archbishop issued a pastoral condemning what he perceived to be a media-led 'revolt against authority' in which 'even the Holy Father himself is not immune from criticism' (*S.I.* 5-3-67). But the archbishop may have been mistaken in accusing the media of leading the revolt. In the late 1950s some Irish clerics were already calling for reform in articles that also criticised the 'anti-intellectual' and 'peasant religion' of Irish Catholicism (Fuller 2004: 61-62). In the '60s some serving and ex-religious personnel expressed their frustration at the lack of change that they attributed to the hierarchy's resistance towards implementing Vatican II reforms. The emergence of the conservative Tridentine movement was one of the clearest manifestations of the divisions that emerged out of Vatican II. The 1968 formation of a 'Catholic Priests Association' dedicated 'to combat modernism in the Church' was another. This group very publicly 'repudiated the aims and activities' of the 'bunch of dangerous radicals' in the Association of Irish Priests (*S.I.* 12-12-1971). Fathers James Good and Alan Mowles were representative of the 'radical' or liberal tendency. In the mid 1970s Mowles said 'all the revolt among young people [was] nothing short of

a cause for rejoicing' (*S.I.* 6-4-75). Fr. Good, an outspoken theologian, attacked the 'ever-increasing number of prophets of gloom [who] deplore… permissiveness, liberal theologians, the waywardness of youth and the departure of the good old days' (*S.I.* 23-3-75). He also criticised the Church's official position on contraception saying it was based on the kind of 'Augustinian theology according to which sex is a necessary evil' (*S.I.* 25-5-75). Cardinal Conway, the head of the Catholic Church in Ireland, also took an optimistic view of the situation and described the difficulties facing the Church and society as being the 'birthpangs of a new civilization' *(S.I.* 2-7-75). The Tridentinists didn't share the Cardinal's optimism and one of them declared that we were living in 'an apocalyptic age' (*S.I.* 16-1-1977). This brand of millenarianism was echoed by an ex-seminarian who believed that only a miracle could avert a 'tremendous cataclysm' (*S.I.* 9-4-1978). Then, in 1980, a well-known journalist published a book in which he claimed that God had told him that mankind would soon be destroyed (*S.I.* 30-11-80).

As the Church's internal divisions deepened Irish people were being increasingly informed about possible links between its traditionally conservative, authoritarian and puritanical, ethos and various social problems. Fr. Good's 1975 criticism of the Church's sexually repressive 'Augustinian theology' was on example. Three years earlier, in 1972, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC) associated 'shotgun' weddings with the high incidence of family violence and other problems (*S.I.* 28-3-71). An *Irish Medical Times* editorial from 1970 said 'Irish men are notoriously shy about showing affection for their wives, and this sets a pattern for their children and sows the seeds of emotional troubles in later life'. The writer expressed his dismay at the fact that the advice doctors were giving to schoolgirls and in pre-marital courses was often based on a puritanical 'Jansenistic philosophy' (*S.I.* 23-8-1970). A 1971 report said 'Irish men have their sexual desires sublimated by religion, exhausted by sport, drugged by drink, or deflected by an innate or inculturated puritanism' (*S.I.* 21-3-71). It was also in 1971 that Dr. Noel Browne, a former Minster for Health, expressed concern about the sexual 'ambivalences' of the religious personnel who were providing sex education lessons in schools (*S.I.* 4-4-1971). When Browne spoke out against the use of corporal punishment in the 1950s his argument was rebuffed by the Minister for Education and future Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, who bolstered his argument by citing Catholic teaching and Pope Pius XII's Encyclical on 'The Christian Education of Youth'. This argument surfaced again in the 1960s when Cyril Daly, a conservative Catholic doctor, was campaigning for an end to corporal punishment. Daly was challenged by an anonymous writer with a good knowledge of Catholic theology and the Church's attitude to the socialization of children. Citing Pius XII's

encyclical and quoting scripture, the respondent argued that, because of Original Sin, mankind had inherited a 'weakness in the will and unbridled desires in the heart' that only the 'rod of correction' could drive away (*S.I.* 26-11-1967). The campaign against corporal punishment and the abuse of children in religious detention centres dragged on into the 1980s with Dr. Daly and others fighting for the abolition of the 1903 Children's Act that allowed children who weren't regularly attending school to be incarcerated in what he described as the Church's 'inhuman institution system' (*S.I.* 7-9-80). That campaign helped highlight the wider issue of child-abuse in Irish society. The 1971 SPCC report I referred to above said that they knew of 6,600 children who had been physically, mentally, or sexually abused and that about 20,000 others had suffered a lack of family care in the previous year. Another report said the treatment of children was 'a national scandal' (*S.I.* 28-3-71). Domestic violence and child abuse were thought to be increasing. 'Battered wives' was the subject of a 1980 report that said victims had been 'flocking' to recently-opened government-funded legal aid centres 'at a staggering rate' (*S.I.* 14-9-80). In 1983 a press report said incest was the 'little known crime' (*S.I.* 16-1-83). A 1986 report said one in four children was being abused and in 1987 the incidence of child sexual abuse was said to have increased by 100% while other forms of child abuse had more than doubled (*S.I.* 12-1-1986).

The ever-expanding national and international media also provided a relentless supply of news and information about our economic and political problems along with harrowing images of the Vietnam war, the Northern 'Troubles', and nuclear test-explosions. Though the news wasn't all bad or depressing, the media's predilection for bad news and its intense coverage of these major issues can only have exacerbated people's concerns and anxieties. That many people actually were suffering anxiety was evident in reports about the health and welfare of the population. Concerns about the scale of the use of tranquillizers and sleeping pills had been growing for some years and in the early 1970s it was reported that 'pharmacists figures put the scale of mild drug use between 50 and 75 percent of the total prescriptions' – an increase of 1/3 in the past 3 years' (*S.I.* 27-8-72). The reports of nuclear threats, civil conflict, family breakdown, suicide, economic recession and unemployment etc. ensured that the nervous and the depressed had plausible and publicly acceptable reasons for resorting to tranquillizers and/or praying for divine intervention.

Michael Allen has related many of the issues that I have just described to the emergence and growth of the cults that formed around reports of moving statues in the 1980s. However, on the basis of his ethnographic material and what was contained in the divine messages of the visionaries who 'saw' them, Allen held that the phenomenon was best seen as an attempt to halt 'the moral disintegration of Irish society through

the growing popularity of secular values' (2000: 341). He reckoned perceptions of our moral decline were largely based on the intense public debate about 'contraception, abortion and divorce… homosexuality, child abuse and clerical celibacy' (2000: 311). However, he went on to interpret the 'totality of events associated with these visionary claims as constituting processes of direct religious empowerment sought by laity without the necessity of priestly intervention' (2000: 365). He held that this pursuit of 'empowerment' was 'a major factor' and argued that it took a predominantly Marian form because of the post-Reformation cultural construction of mothers as 'influential intercessors between their powerless children and powerful patriarchal males, especially the children's own fathers'. He argued that the rise of industrialism and capitalism generated an increased emphasis on the nuclear family and cast men in a 'typically remote, authoritarian and potentially punitive' role. Then, locating the development of this pattern in Ireland's post-Famine period, he went on to suggest that it was the intensifying conflict between old and new forms of 'familism' and perceptions of our moral disintegration in the latter half of the 20th century that 'provided the emotional and imaginative fuel' for the moving statues phenomenon (2000: 307).

Allen's argument has some explanatory power but, I would suggest that, some of his assertions are questionable. I believe his estimation of the scale of the 'visionary cult' is misleading. More importantly, I believe that his interpretation of the phenomenon as being a product of our supposed moral disintegration and conflicting forms of familism is flawed. And I think his explanation of the visionary cults as being about the pursuit of 'empowerment' glosses over a key psychological dimension.

As I noted above, Irish Catholics and the institutional Church itself were deeply divided in their understanding and response to perceived changes in moral standards and behaviour. The women's movement, some politicians, people in the medical and other health and welfare professions, and elements within the Catholic Church thought that what was actually happening was a rejection of authoritarianism, the discarding of a repressive, prudish and puritanical ethos, the decline of a simplistic, literalistic form of religiosity, and the necessarily painful 'birthpangs of a new civilization'. The success of the contraception and divorce referendums suggests that a majority of Catholics actually agreed with this positive view of the changing world they lived in. Lay and religious Catholics were also divided in their views about the Irish Church's response to Vatican II, to 'modernism', to its role in education, its attitude to communism, its response to the Troubles, and its ability to influence the Irish legislature.

Although the moving statues certainly did attract large crowds, Allen's description of them as having '*seemingly* gripped the minds and imagination of the greater part of the Catholic population of Ireland', may be a bit rhetorical, but is none the less misleading

(2000: 314 emphasis added). In my own fieldwork amongst New Age groups I found that the same people were often involved in more than one group at any particular time while others told me they joined one group after another and some described themselves as being 'workshop junkies'. I also found that some of them had been enthusiastic members of the CRM and other groups associated or affiliated to the mainstream. So I believe it would be reasonable to assume that the moving statues also drew followers from a certain pool of religious enthusiasts and that a fair proportion were repeat or serial visitors at one or more sites; as were some of the 'seers' (Allen 2000: 312). Other, non-religious factors also played a significant part in swelling the number of moving statue pilgrims. The apparitions that happened in the bleak months of February and March 1985 did not attract anything like the crowds or the media attention that one might have expected of such a sensational and breaking story. The crowds and reportage both peaked at the height of the annual summer holidays when hundreds of thousands of people were frustrated by a spell of wet weather. A spectacle or a 'miracle' within easy reach would have provided the idle and the inquisitive, the cynical and the credulous, with an interesting, topical, accessible, fascinating, and inexpensive distraction; and the anxious, needy, doubtful or those of 'the simple faith' with succor, hope, or 'evidence'. Fervent believers, spiritual tourists, and the friends and family members they brought along with them were catered for by enterprising coach companies (Allen 2000: 314). When coupled with the fact that the summer closure of the Irish and numerous other legislatures left scores of local and international journalists hungry for a good story, it is no surprise that the number of reports and visitors escalated dramatically and almost simultaneously throughout the holiday season. Indeed, no less an expert on media habits than the head of Ireland's Government Information Service observed that it all 'made a great August story' (Ryan and Kirakowski 1985: 27).

Allowing, nevertheless, that there was some semblance of truth in the impressively large and conveniently rounded estimate of 100,000 visitors, the scale of the phenomenon still needs to be seen in proportion. In 1981 around 95% of the 3,443,405 people in the Republic were Catholics and there was another 586,400 in Northern Ireland.[4] In the 1970s the director of the Irish Medical and Social Research Unit estimated 'up to 100,000' of those living in the Republic would be 'admitted to hospital before the age of fifty-five suffering from schizophrenia' (*S.I.* 10-12-72). In 1982 an estimated 70,000 people attended a Rolling Stones' concert (*S.I.* 25-7-82). These figures would hardly support the claim that a majority of Irish people were in the grip of schizophre-

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4   CAIN project. http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/ni/popul.htm#cath and the Central Statistics Office: http://www.cso.ie/statistics/Population1901-2006.htm.

nia or the Rolling Stones. In reality, as Ryan and Kirakowski observed, the moving statue phenomenon was greeted with a good deal of public cynicism. It was mocked by comedians and songwriters, lampooned in TV skits and cartoons, joked about in public, explained away by a respected psychologist as being a 'childish regression', and, for some, it was a source of national embarrassment (1985: 21, 26, 69-71). Some Catholic clerics were also highly skeptical, though their public utterances at the time were restrained (Allen 2000: 316). Then, at the height of the phenomenon, on the day before the Feast of the Assumption, the *Sunday Independent* published a piece on the 'heretic' Anglican Bishop, David Jenkins, who had famously referred to the resurrection as a 'conjuring trick with bones' and advised that people view it and the virgin birth as symbolic representations (*S.I*: 14-8-1985). Soon after that Ryan and Kirakowski informed the media of their finding that the phenomenon was produced by 'ecological optics' or a simple 'visual effect' (1985: 50-1, 60). As Allen noted, that scientific explanation helped to turn more of those who 'saw' something into 'scoffers and sceptics' (2000: 316-7). As the embarrassment and ridicule intensified, and just a few weeks before a gang of Pentecostalists attacked the Ballinspittle statue with hammers, an Irish Bishop declared the phenomenon 'an illusion' (*S.I:* 25-9-85).

Even so, as Allen found, the cult of the moving statues persisted into the 1990s. But, while 'a significant proportion' of visitors 'saw' something and 'a considerable number' of them 'built... culturally meaningful superstructures upon this simple visual base', the number of visitors went into rapid decline and only a 'small band of true believers' who thought they were destined 'hopefully... very soon... to save the whole world from horrendous catastrophe' kept the cult alive (2000: 318-320, 365). This would suggest only a fraction of those who 'saw' something ever became seriously involved and Allen's findings point to there having been some kind of apocalyptic millenarianism behind the formation of the cult of the moving statues and the direction it took. This raises important questions about the psychology of the people at its centre, the visionaries and their most fervent followers: it raises questions as to why they had or reported the experiences that they did, why they built what they thought were meaningful superstructures around them, and why they thought they were destined to be the world's saviors. To put in another way, though many Irish people were concerned about the country's moral economy and direction, though many had good reason to feel anxious about their socioeconomic wellbeing, and though the entire population had good reason to fear for their physical security, only a relatively small number of people either visited the statues or became 'true believers'.

The year after the Irish statues began moving Michael Carroll published a book in which he proposed a psychological explanation of Marian apparitions. Carroll identi-

fied many of the stress factors that Allen and others have associated with the emergence of NRMs and Marian cults. He argued that popular susceptibility to reports of apparitions depends on there being a high level of anxiety in the culture or community (1986: 211). Among the sources of anxiety that he identified were structural functional, religio-political, and ideological conditions including conflict and the threat of war, patronage and paternalism, the presence of a religious worldview that supports belief in the possibility of apparitions, and the support of Church authorities for apparition claims. Like Allen, Carroll also noted that imitation of previous apparitions could play a part. And he suggested that a range of personal and/or organic factors such as epilepsy, brain damage, fatigue, drugs, and deprivation, neglect, or loneliness might contribute to the incidence or appeal of Marian 'illusions' and 'hallucinations' (1986: 145-6). However, Carroll was mainly concerned with explaining the disassociation of the Virgin Mary from sex and argued that a Freudian approach would provide 'an even more complete understanding of Marian apparitions' (1986: 35, 131-2, 146). He argued that a certain kind of family structure 'intensifies Oedipal desires in both sons and daughters, and so promotes Marian devotion' (1986: 61). He held that Marian 'hallucinations' are shaped not simply by Oedipal desires but also by other infantile and adult desires and argued that 'a full account of the content of any particular apparition must involve investigation of the experiences of the seer having that apparition'. After studying accounts of some of the most celebrated apparitions he concluded that their content did 'appear to have been influenced by some of the idiosyncratic wishes and desires that characterize the particular seer' (1986: 140, 145-7). He found that the lives of several famous visionaries from different cultures and historical periods were marked by cruel or irresponsible parenting and/or experiences of being suddenly separated from surrogate 'loved mother figures'. Those experiences, he explained, left the visionaries with feelings of being 'unloved and rejected' and so, Carroll concluded, the apparitions were 'at least initially an attempt to re-establish the presence of a reassuring mother' (1986: 153, 158, 162, 189). Developing his oedipal theory of Our Lady's virginity, Carroll cited what he believed to be a relatively high incidence of Marian apparitions in Spain and southern Italy. He argued that the prevalence of Marian cults in those regions was due to the existence of a 'father ineffective family' structure that other scholars had already associated with the development of *machismo* behaviour. A 'father ineffective family' is one in which the mother 'is the authoritative figure' and, Carroll argued, this kind of family structure causes sons to develop a particularly strong mother identification while the lack of an authority father figure left them unable to 'obtain the introjected authority [necessary] to repress [their] desire for the mother' (1986: 51). Carroll explained the cult of the Virgin as providing the sons of

such families with practices that help them to 'dissipate repressed Oedipal energy or desire in an acceptable manner' while providing daughters with socially acceptable ways of expressing a strong identification with the Virgin Mother that helps them 'experience vicariously the fulfillment of their desire for sexual contact with, and a baby from, their father' (1986: 56-59).

Carroll went on to explain the success of the apparitions in regions not normally associated with *machismo* and 'father ineffective family' structures in terms of there being an appropriate 'religious worldview' and 'Church authorities' fanning the flames of devotionalism during periods of high anxiety. He applied this explanation to the famous Knock apparition and noted that it happened as local people were being evicted from their homes (1986: 202-211, 222). Those evictions occurred during the course a 'Land War' campaign against the landlord system. White found that that campaign exposed a rupture in the traditional relationship between priests and people that local clergy responded to by appropriating the apparition and adapting the seers' testimony to suit their own purposes (1999). But, as McSweeney has pointed out, the fact Church authorities sometimes use apparitions for mundane political purposes doesn't necessarily mean that their motives don't also have a personal or psychological dimension. McSweeney explained that the 18th century revival of Marian devotionalism that Pius IX initiated with his declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was a response to 'a wave of revolutionary activity… which originated in the French Revolution', an increase in anti-clericalism, and a struggle for a socialist ideology that 'headed the papal league of obnoxious ideologies' until it was replaced by communism in the 20th century (1980: 46). However, cautioning against a cynical interpretation of Pius IX's action, McSweeney pointed out that the pontiff had 'retained a deep and particular devotion to' Our Lady since his childhood and developed a deep 'personal attachment to the Cult of Mary' (1980: 44). So, McSweeney reasoned, 'belief in miracles is not logically excluded by an awareness of their political connection and function', nor is it 'intrinsically repugnant to the Catholic faith that the Virgin's interests and policies should coincide with those of the Pope' (1980: 47). This argument could just as well be applied to the Knock apparition of 1879 as it could to John Paul II's 1979 visit to that shrine (and perhaps also to the Cold War comfort that Fr. Hennessy provided in his 1959 declaration of the secret of Fatima). But the point I want to make here is that McSweeney's argument dissolves Carroll's thesis that apparitions that gain official recognition and become established or successful in the absence of machismo and father ineffective family structures are only ever the products of mundane politico-religious machinations.

Carroll's Freudian reductionism has been severely criticised. He paid little heed to the anthropological understanding of symbolic representations as having a polyvalent

or multivocal quality; and even less to the theological distinction between literal and allegorical or other approaches to scripture such as the kind of that Bishop Jenkins advocated in 1984 and which sees the Virgin birth as symbolizing a profoundly personal spiritual event (see Ramsey 1986: 29-41). Nevertheless, while Blackbourn (1991), Bornstein (1988), and Byrne (1988) have highlighted the historical, sociological, theological, and psychological failings of Carroll's thesis, Blackbourn has credited his analysis of the famous seers' experiences as having produced some 'illuminating passages' (1991: 748). Taylor's 1995 anthropology of Irish Catholicism helps explain what he may have been thinking of.

Taylor found that bad parenting played a crucial part in the religious development and orientation of one of the members of the charismatic prayer group that he studied in the decade before the moving statues. The person in question, 'Mary', told him of having felt unloved by her parents and explained her trips to the site of the apparition in Medjugorge as having been motivated by the hope of recovering her 'Christian values' and developing a sense of trust in people that would allow her to develop stable relationships. Taylor took Mary's story as evidence for the view that one's personal religious development and orientation in later life can be shaped by the way in which 'Intimate childhood experience resonates with Church structure' (1995: 218-219). Though this part of Taylor's argument compares well with Carroll's findings relating to unhappy childhoods and parenting failures, there is an important difference. Taylor found that while Mary's religious behaviour and experiences were largely the products of unfulfilled childhood needs, it was a loving aunt that served 'in the Marian role of a kind of mediator vis-à-vis the distant, punishing parent' (1995: 219). So, despite their very substantial differences, Taylor's argument lends support to Carroll's view that psychological needs stemming from childhood experiences can play a vital part in the formation of Marian cults. William Christian arrived at a similar conclusion in his analysis of what he called the 'trans-national pattern of visions' and UFO sightings that accompanied the Cold War. Christian explained that pattern as being a response to a widespread appreciation and dread of modern 'techniques of mass annihilation' (nuclear and biological). He held that individual visionary experiences originated in 'movements very deep in the individual consciousness with a collective, often systemic [a]etiology'. However, as with Taylor's reference to 'resonances', and Allen's talk of 'empowerment', Christian didn't propose any particular psychological theory or framework that would help explain the origins and dynamics of the 'systemic aetiology' or why particular people in particular families had the visionary experiences that he thought of as being 'the crystallization of the Cold War not only within a community, but even within the family' (1984: 240, 244, 258-60).

Carroll's is the only systematic attempt to develop such a psychological framework for explaining Marian visions and Byrne has suggested that it might have been a much better one had he not isolated himself 'from the rich repertoire of explanations found in contemporary empirical psychology' (1988: 297, 283). Though Byrne doesn't mention it, John Bowlby's neo-Freudian 'Attachment Theory' has become one of the most influential examples of a 'contemporary empirical psychology'. And it is one that has been defended and used to good effect in the study of Christian, New Age, and 'mother goddess' worship (see Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990; Kirkpatrick 1997; Granqvist and Hagekull 200; and Nuckolls 2001).

The fundamental assumption of Attachment Theory is that a child's regular experiences of repeated patterns of interaction with its carers cause it to form expectations about the pattern and quality of these interactions. These patterned expectations become embodied as 'representational models of attachment and of self' which 'tend to persist relatively unchanged into and throughout adult life' (1977: 141). The resulting 'inner working models' are used to assimilate any new person with whom a bond is formed; but they can just as readily 'cause biased perceptions and expectations that lead to various misconceived beliefs about the other people' (1977: 141-142). The development of an insecure mode of attachment can impair adult relational competence and result in 'neurotic symptoms and personality disorders' that can become particularly virulent in anxiety-arousing situations and when an individual is distressed, ill, afraid, or threatened with the loss of a valued attachment figure (1977: 129, 135, 139). Bowlby observed that parents treat their children differently and 'may provide excellent conditions for one and adverse ones for another'. He identified the key predisposing variables for different patterns of attachment behaviour as being 'the extent to which a child's parents (a) provide him with a secure base and (b) encourage him to explore from it'. The provision of a 'secure base' entails carers having 'an intuitive and sympathetic understanding of a child's attachment behaviour and a willingness' to respond appropriately (1977: 136). Mary Ainsworth developed a laboratory procedure that tested Bowlby's theory and proved that individual differences in patterns of attachment behaviour could be measured and predicted. The 'strange situation' procedure involved observing the behaviour patterns that ensued when a child's mother was removed and then returned to the room. Ainsworth observed three distinct patterns of attachment behaviour. She called one of these patterns 'secure' and the other two insecure patterns 'avoidant' and 'resistant' (see Goldberg 2000: 10-26).

Peter Fonagy and others have developed Bowlby's theory and explored the complexities of the causal relationship between an individual's childhood attachment experiences and the appearance of neurotic symptoms and personality disor-

ders in adulthood. When provided with a 'secure base' by a consistently empathic carer, they explained, a child is empowered and can 'explore the mind of the caregiver and develop a 'full appreciation of the nature of mental states' (1993: 12). Empathic care allows the child to 'find itself in the other' as a 'mentalizing individual', meaning a 'desiring and believing' person (1993: 13). This enables the child to 'acquire a self-structure capable of containing conflict and distress' (1993: 13). When carers consistently fail to adequately 'contain' a child's 'primitive and overwhelming feelings' or 'affects' the infant becomes incapable of appreciating that its ideas 'merely "represent" external reality'. Repeated failures of this sort can hamper the development of one's facility for self-reflection, one's ability to envisage the psychological states of others, and lead to 'a widespread failure of 'symbolisation'' and the development of a predilection for 'concrete thinking' (1993: 16). The result can be a failure to acquire an adequate 'theory of mind' or 'mentalizing' capacity and the development of defensive strategies, such as a heightened suspiciousness. Where parenting is authoritarian, playful interactions between carer and child are inhibited and 'the social scaffolding for the development of mentalization… may be absent'. The less severe forms of neglect or abuse associated with authoritarian and disciplinarian parenting can produce a proclivity for concrete thinking, suspiciousness and other defensive strategies (Fonagy et al. 1999: 2). Severe abuses can result in paranoid anxiety and borderline or narcissistic personality disorders that involve a 'primitive level of mental functioning' and the 'externalization' of 'conscious or unconscious - mental representations of (real or fantasized) interpersonal conflicts… [and] socially unacceptable desires that generate painful feelings of anxiety, helplessness, guilt, shame, anger, fear, rage, and so on' (Fonagy et al. 2004: 4-11, 199-200, 295, 413).

As Bowlby observed, the ability and/or willingness of carers to provide a 'secure base' and respond appropriately to a child's attachment needs can vary. My references to the findings of the SPCC and aspects of the debate about corporal punishment showed that the manner in which the attachment needs of many Irish children were catered for was often deficient and frequently abusive. Many were immersed in cold or harsh, authoritarian, puritanical, judgmental, and punitive life-worlds. And, as Inglis has cogently argued, the Catholic Church played a major part in the 'downward dissemination' of the theology and behavioral models that justified the authoritarian ethos that supported those life-worlds.

Inglis argued that it was through making Irish mothers the key 'organizational link' between Church and home that the Irish Catholic Church advanced its 'civilizing mission' and inculcated an emotional awkwardness and communicative incom-

petence that perpetuated an 'awkward distance between the sexes' and sustained a rigid adherence to religious rules and regulations at the expense of internalised self-restraint (1998: 122, 141, 198, 249). There was an abundance of support for this view in the media archives that I reviewed and Inglis's argument shines a penetrating light on the transgenerational effects of the Church's pessimistic view of human nature (1998: 12, 101). That view rested on St. Augustine's doctrine of Original Sin. According to the widely circulated 'penny catechism' or 'Little Green Book', it was because of the Original Sin of 'our first parents', Adam and Eve, that we are all 'conceived and born *children of wrath*' with a 'strong inclination to evil'. Augustine's sexualised interpretation of original sin became a key component of Catholic anthropology and Fuller reckoned that, although the 'moral rigorism' of traditional Irish Catholicism may have been derived from it, it probably had 'considerably more complex' origins (2004: xxvii-xxix). Elaine Pagles, a theologian, explained those origins as being the basic human tendency to accept personal guilt rather than feelings of helplessness. Pagles found cross-cultural evidence for this tendency in Evans-Pritchard's interpretation of the Azande practice of using sorcery to identify human malevolence in the event of misfortunes that they know to have had natural causes. This led Pagles to suggest that, had Augustine's doctrine not met this same need to feel empowered, it 'would not have… become the basis of Christian doctrine for 1600 years' (1988: 145-6). Pagles's argument is congruent with the well researched and widely supported finding that abused children often 'opt for the attribution of *self*-blame… [because] it offers them some sense of hope and control….[and] some opportunity for atonement'. As Harter went on to explain, the 'negative self views' that abuse can cause are in part due to 'the internalisation of the opinions of significant others' (1999: 278-9). And, where shame and guilt are inculcated under an authoritarian, disciplinarian regime children are forced to develop a 'hypervigilant' and 'otherdirected' way of being (1999: 269). These are adaptive postures of the kind that Fonagy et al. linked to insecure attachment and the development of relational problems in adulthood and a tendency to 'externalize' psychological contents and conflicts.

These psychological and theological insights help to explain why some people reacted to the very real stresses and strains of the 1960s-1980s by having visionary experiences and forming magico-religious or magical-devotional religious movements and millenarian cults. They help unpack the psychosocial dynamics of the 'systemic aetiology' that Christian identified behind the 'trans-national pattern of visions' that accompanied the Cold War and which manifest Ireland's 'moving statues'.

Conclusions

The moving statues were a modern manifestation of the kind of 'magical-devotionalism' that sections of the Irish Catholic population have long been prone to resort to during periods of personal or collective distress (Inglis 1998: 11, 25-26, 38). They were products of the kind of literalistic, magical-devotionalism that Irish clerics condemned in the 1950s and '60s as being 'anti-intellectual' and a 'peasant religion'. They were products of an authoritarian, pessimistic, and guilt ridden religious ethos that stymied the emotional, religious, and cognitive development of many Irish children, undermined their capacity for self reflection and the possibility of developing a mature capacity for containing their inner fears and anxieties. The relational habitus that that ethos helped develop affected socialization of successive generations of Irish people and provided the 'prophets of gloom' and 'doom' and 'cataclysm' with a pool of people who were already receptive to their millenarian moralizing and the kind of anti-communist, messianic fervor that Allen found in 'visionary cults' (2000: 320-1, 357, 365).

None of this is to say that the kind of father ineffective family structure that featured in Carroll's theory cannot contribute to the formation and frequency of Marian apparitionism. Any family structure and any socioeconomic, political, or what Carroll called 'organic' problem that undermines the provision of empathic socialization and the development of a mature mentalizing capacity could contribute to the development of visionary episodes and the cults that form around them. But Catholic theology and anthropology also played a crucial role in creating the conditions that gave rise to the kinds of formative experiences that propeled people on religious quests and into experientially-based movements.

So, while there was some substance in Allen's interpretation of the cults as having been fuelled by perceptions of our 'moral disintegration' and family decline, it wasn't permissiveness or new forms of familism that created them. Rather it was the puritanical morality and pessimistic, Augustinian anthropology that propagated the relational and communicative incompetence that fed the many forms of what Taylor described as 'possession cults' (1995: 233). Allen's analysis of them as being about 'empowerment' lends support to this interpretation for it was the psychologically disempowered, the relationally challenged who were having difficulty containing their inner fears and insecurities in a time of intense social anxiety, that sought and/or felt empowered by the cult of the moving statues. But the cults were not, as Allen argued, manifestations of peoples' fears of moral or familial decline. Rather, in the end, it was largely the outworking of St. Augustine's answer to the human tendency to accept moral

responsibility for suffering rather than endure feelings of helplessness in the face of real and imagined threats that moved the statues. That Allen failed to make this connection between childhood experiences and the cult of the Virgin is not surprising for, as Fonagy *et al* noted, capturing such formative experiences can be difficult (2004: 109). Nevertheless, a psychoanalytically informed approach to ethnography can improve the chances and show, as Taylor did, how intimate childhood experience can profoundly affect an individual's personal development and adult religious behaviour. Or, as the attachment theorists put it, how 'even a single secure/understanding relationship may… "save" the child' (Fonagy *et al*, 2004: 109, 476).

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Abstract

In the early months of 1985 Irish newspapers reported a spate of apparitions that came to be known as the 'moving statues'. By late summer reports said 100,000 people had visited just one of many apparition sites. In this paper I will argue that the phenomenon was largely a media-created one; that only a relatively small number of people ever took the apparitions seriously; and that understanding why they did so requires a synthesis of sociological, historical, theological, and psychological approaches and insights..