



## THE IMPACT OF RELIGION ON IRIS MURDOCH'S FICTION

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### ABSTRACT

For some people religion is taken as an experience of individuals but for Iris, religion is always a feeling of love and goodness. In her fiction, she shows how middle class values continue to work in religious dilemma. Murdoch points out how people expect redemption from religious men and refuse to accept help from them when they lose their faith in God. The paper examines some of her novels from religious point of view. She through her characters confirms her belief in religion that if they disbelieve in the existence of god they will be deprived of the hope and consolation of forgiveness. Their lack of faith in God makes them blind to the possibilities of reconciliation.

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Religion, according to Murdoch involves goodness that has a set of beliefs in it. She has also remarked: It is felt to be important that religion should be flexible and argumentative, centered upon the individual and that no alleged transcendent metaphysical realities, such as God, or History or the Church, should be allowed to overshadow the moral life.<sup>3</sup>In her fictional work, Murdoch has shown delinking of morality from traditional religion and has also shown how it has affected the present time politics.

Religion involves more or less clearly articulated set of beliefs, practices, attitudes, and motives. Religion is fundamental to the way of life of an individual or of a society. Indeed it has often been held that morality is wholly dependent on religion: a man who has no religion cannot have any morality. Further popular or unreflective morality is inclined to lay more emphasis on rules than on ideals

Normally, to be religious is to be related to the holy in one or more ways. Worship, prayer,

forfeit, consideration, and magic are popular ways of any religion. The most important is the way of worship, and closely linked with it, is the conduct of its followers. Love towards God expresses itself and must express itself through love of man, in whatever form it can be more effectual. In Western Christian usage, indeed, "religious" came to be synonymous with "monastic" in the sense of being bound by a vow to the observance of the way of life prescribed by a particular community. Some believe that religion is the experience of individual man in isolation while others maintain that religion is essentially social. So we find, two planes have been distinguished within the moral aspect of actions: one of a subjective kind which concerns the inward observation of the rules of behavior, another of a more objective nature which-referring to society-embraces the totality of all kinds of behavior, accepted by any cultural group.

The Bell is the first religious novel of Iris Murdoch. The action of The Bell takes place at Imber Court, a place for a lay religious community. In fact

this Imber court is a “buffer state” between the Abbey, the nunnery, and the outside world. Imber Community is an experiment and privilege given to those people who cannot leave the world and yet have a yearning for spiritual life or “who can live neither in the world nor out of it” (p.81). It is midway between the spiritual life inside the walls of the Abbey and selfish yearning in the outside world. The community has been voluntarily formed by its members, and they are supposed to receive their power from the Abbey. The effort here is not to search for that place, that task, which will make their spiritual life most constantly prosper: and for this they must use a divine cunning, be as “wise as serpents, as harmless as doves”(p.81).

Like all other religious communities, Imber Community has formed the custom of not discussing their past, and leading a simple life. In fact they make an effort to “imitate monastic life in a certain way” (p.59). They want to bring back self-respect and consequence into life by working on the farm to fulfill their needs. The members of Imber Community do their prayers regularly and the hand bell rings for Mass, Martins, Lauds and Prime. It is hoped that the sound discipline of this place will enable them to give up their “personal expression.” There is also a legend linked with this Abbey about the flying of the Abbeys bell and falling in the lake. The life of the persons at the Imber Court is affected by different attitudes of James Tayper pace and Michael Meade towards morality and human behavior. They both address the Imber Community.

James represents the conventional morality and is deontological in approach. Living conventionally by outward rules is possible for him because he believes whole heartedly in God who exists outside himself and gives the rules. He says: We should consider not what delights us or what disgusts us, morally speaking, but what is enjoined and what is forbidden. And this we know, more than we are often ready to admit. We know it from God’s Word and from his Church with a certainty as great as our belief. Truthfulness is enjoined, the relief of suffering is enjoined, and adultery is forbidden. And I feel that we ought to think quite simply of these matters, thus: truth is not glorious, it is just enjoined; sodomy is not disgusting, it is just forbidden (p.132).

James desires to judge others and wants to be judged by them in the light of religiously “enjoined” and religiously “forbidden” things. He links religious faith with absolute morality. For him, religion comes from outside. James considers Nick Fawley as “pansy” and Dora as a “bitch.” When Toby Bashe makes confession of his flirtation with Michael, James judges the latter in the light of conventional morality. He says, “Look, Michael, I can’t wrap this up and you wouldn’t want me to. Toby has told me everything” (p.293). He thinks that Nick has done only one good act i.e. sending Toby to make confession. He cannot excuse Michael because he has committed something that is forbidden. But at the same time, he is not very happy in judging Michael. There is an expression of pain and misery on his face when he talks “to Michael about Toby’s confession”. He feels, Michael, the head of the community, has broken the known rules, so no good can be done to this community. Ultimately James and the Abbess decide to dissolve the community. James goes to the East End of London from where he had come.

In fact, it is James’ great regard for society that prompts him to condemn emotions, ideas and people who threaten the “special fabric.” He realizes how easily the individual falls into a moral and psychological morass once he deviates from the simple rules like those in the Bible. His moralistic living makes him the undeclared leader at Imber Court. Even Nick whom James thinks to be having a great “capacity” to “make mischief” in the community, has great regard for him. With conventional morality and rules, James cannot have any intimate relationship with anybody. His relationship with others is an outward one, so it does not produce any moral development in the characters with whom he comes in contact. It is people like James at Imber that make Dora feel inferior and a “penitent wife.” The fact about James is that he does not tie his religion to archaic needs. His faith cannot give him any knowledge of the unsocialized inner life of himself and others. His ignorance makes him unintentionally unloving and destructive.

James and Michael have different approaches towards life. For James, “the chief

requirement of the good life is to live without any image of oneself" (p.131), but for Michael, "one should have some conception of one's capacities" (p.200). It means Michael puts emphasis on self-knowledge. James' address is a good collection of ideas, whereas Michael's address is based upon his personal experience. The latter says, "Each one of us has his own way of apprehending God" (p. 203), and further adds, "Each one of us apprehends a certain kind and degree of reality and from this comes our power to live as spiritual beings: and by using and enjoying what we already know we can hope to know more" (p.204). For James, sodomy is not deplorable, it is forbidden. But for Michael, it is vital to know how and why it is deplorable. It is forbidden. He justifies his homosexual tendencies. "God had made him so and he did not think that God had made him a monster" (p.205). It is against this spiritual background that we can properly comprehend the relationships of Michael with other characters in the novel.

Michael-Nick relationship covers a major part of the novel and plays a very important role in its plot construction. Before meeting Nick Fawley, Michael is shown to be sexually perverted. He has experienced "homosexuality at school as well as at Cambridge University" (p.99). But at the same time, he is somewhat emotional and irregular member of the Anglican Church, and wants to become a priest. He is aware of the inconsistencies of his position. On the advice of a priest, he gives up the practice of his religion" (p 100). The Bishop tells him to spend one year at school and study some theology in his spare time before he enters a seminary. It is at this critical phase of his life that Michael meets Nick, a boy of fourteen and of "considerable beauty." His homosexual instincts are awakened. He does not go to bed with Nick, because their relationship is "perfect". Michael does not feel any guilt.<sup>8</sup> For Michael, his love for Nick becomes his religion. Vaguely he has vision of himself as "the boy's spiritual guardian" and his passion slowly transforms into a vivid and more selfless affection. He imagines that Nick would ultimately play the role of a son.

Michael-Nick relationship is disturbed when towards the end of the term, an evangelist and a nonconformist preacher visits the school to speak to

the boys. During his lecture, Michael is "only thinking of Nick's embraces." But his lecture on sodomy has a deep effect upon Nick. The next day, instead of coming to Michael, Nick goes to the Headmaster and speaks everything. This leads to Michael's departure from the school and failure of his ambition to become a priest. But Michael does not bear any ill will against Nick. He understands that it is Nick's religious enthusiasm that has turned their love into a dreamy tale of seduction. Nick is temporarily affected by conservative morality. So its influence does not last long. On the contrary he becomes a well-known homosexual and leads a life of dissipation. He yearns to have contact with Michael. Nick is brought to Imber Court so that he may be near his sister, Catherine Fawley, for a few days before her entry into the Abbey. It is expected that religious atmosphere of the court will also have some good effect upon him, and he may change his way of life. But as the communication between Michael and Nick is not established, Nick feels the void in his life. No human being can live in this world without love. Without communication with Michael and his sister, Catherine, Nick would become a waif like Priscilla in The black prince. He has lost Michael and now he is not ready to lose his sister at any cost. It is to prevent the loss of his sister that he refuses her attempt of entering the Abbey. When Catherine goes mad, he realizes what harm he has done to her. As he has lost the last object of his love, he finds complete darkness in his life, and commits suicide.

Nick-Michael relationship has a deep impact upon Michael-Catherine relationship. Michael meets Catherine for the first time in the house of one of the Abbess's friends in London. Michael is informed how Catherine would be spending some time with the community at Imber Court before her entry into the Abbey as a postulant. He at once recognizes that is in his fate to re-unite with Nick again. Right from the beginning everyone including herself has thought that Catherine is going to become a nun, when she comes to Imber Court. Michael remembers how his chance of becoming a priest had been spoiled by her brother, and in some way his own as well, and the redemption of the past" (p.114). Catherine prepares herself for entering the Abbey by working very hard at Imber Court. Everybody except Dora at Imber

Court has the impression that she is renouncing the worldly pleasures for spiritual pleasure.

Everything is set for Catherine's entry into the Abbey. She is to go into the Abbey along with the new bell. But her desire to enter the Abbey, while still having suppressed emotional attachment to Michael, is irreligious. This irreligious act cannot take place in the strictly religious atmosphere of the Abbey. So when Catherine is going in the procession with the new bell which is to be installed inside the Abbey, the bell falls into the lake. The gates of the Abbey close at that very moment. Catherine had identified her entry into the Abbey with the entry of the bell. But she now strongly feels that her chance of entering the Abbey has been ruined. She says to Dora, "God has reached our His hand. A white grommet cannot conceal a wicked heart. There is no passing through that gate. Good bye"(p.276). In frustration she attempts to commit suicide by drowning herself in the lake. However, she is saved by Mother Clare. Her life is saved though her mind is unhinged. Her madness reveals her real self. Her love for Michael bursts out; in her madness all her reserve is gone. She embraces "Michael." Catherine is sent to London along with Mrs. Mark for treatment. After Nick's death, Michael feels too much pained.

He considers himself responsible for Nick's death. Now there is no body to look after Catherine, so Michael decides to marry her to compensate the loss he has caused to her with the death of Nick. Catherine's sake he leaves his ambition of becoming a priest. He realizes that he has been moulded by God in different manner and something different is wanted from him.

Toby-Michael relationship is a repetition of Nick-Michael relationship. It is a sign of his failure to reach out of himself to the outer world. For Michael, unlike for James, religion does not come from outside. He feels attached towards Toby, exactly the way he has felt attracted towards Nick. First time, Nick has ruined Michael's chance of becoming a priest by making a confession of Michael's homosexual tendencies to the headmaster of his school. Second time, it is Toby who spoils his chance of priestly life by his confession to James. Toby's confession also leads to the dissolution of the Imber Community.

Paul-Dora relationship is affected by their different attitudes towards the Imber Community. Paul Greenfield has great reverence for this place, and he expects the same from Dora Greenfield, his wife. But for Dora all these things are not appealing. She cannot imagine that the nuns would be very happy in the Abbey; and conveys her feelings to Catherine: You can't really want to go in there!.. To shut yourself up like that, when you are so young and so beautiful. I'm sorry, this is very rude and awful, I know, but it makes me quite miserable to think of you in there!' (p.138) Paul thinks that Dora is not worthy to talk to Catherine, due to moral lapses on her part; Religious folk adore having a sense of sin and living in an atmosphere of emotion and self-abasement. The penitent wife is a great catch for them. Dora revolts against this community, and wants to play the "witch" in this religious atmosphere by exchanging the old bell with the new bell. Due to their different approaches to the Imber Community, Paul and Dora part for ever.

The real natures of Michael and Dora come to forefront when after the dissolution of the lay religious community they are left alone at Imber. They become more humane. The presence of James and mother members of the community after the revelation of his homosexual tendencies becomes a torture to Michael. But Dora's presence does not trouble him because "she was useful, she rather falls in love with Michael but this love affair is of different nature from the affairs she had experienced with Paul, Neol and Toby. Michael glimpses the root cause of Dora's present being: No one had inspired her to place the least value on herself; she still felt herself to be socially unacceptable waif, and what made her unpretentious also made her irresponsible and unreliable(p304). He treats her at equal level, and does not condemn her as a "guilty wife." In fact it is their stay after the dissolution of the community that brings out what is the best in Dora and Michael. It makes Dora self reliant and independent; gives Michael calm and peace-full time to review his relationship with Nick and feel his full responsibility towards Catherine.

All the characters in *The Red and The Green* are Anglo-Irish and are closely related to each other. The action of the novel is restricted: in time, from

Palk Sunday to Easter Monday, of April 1996; and in place to Dublin and out-skirts.

Andrew-Pat relationship shows how religion affects human relations. The temperamental differences between their fathers also show the differences between the British attitude towards life and the Irish attitude towards life. Andrew and his father pick their way, like Britishers, cautiously behind, while Pat, like his father Brain Dummy, has a different way of life. Andrew is proud of his British uniform while his cousins Pat Dumay and Cathal Dumay hate him for this. Pat is one of the Irish volunteers who revolt for independence of Ireland. We find there has never been any cordial relationship between Andrew and Pat. Whereas the former neither likes Ireland nor ever wants to live there, latter is proud of his country and is ready to sacrifice his life for it.

Murdoch points out in 'An Accidental Man', how people have suffered during the World Wars. Ludwigs' maternal grandfather is said to have disappeared during the war and was thought to have died in a concentration camp. A strong and rigid disapproval of Hitler had led families of both Ludwig's father and mother to migrate westward. His parents decided to migrate to America. As they knew only German and French, they came to England for a brief visit to improve their English and Ludwig was born there. But he was brought in USA. We were told, "He felt ashamed of being an Aryan German and yet also ashamed of having ceased to be one" (p13). When he comes to Europe, he is confronted everywhere with the "ghost of Hitler." Murdoch describes his predicament "In America, he felt European, In France he felt German, in Germany American" (p14)

Ludwig's accidental birth in England gives him British nationality. He wants to live in England and continue his academic pursuits by joining Oxford University as a Don teaching History, and also to marry Gracei Tisbourne, with whom he was fallen in love. He hates the war because he thinks it is foolish and brutal.

In fact by showing too many accidents in life of Austin in An Accidental Man, Murdoch makes him representative of everybody. It appears life is a series of accidents, But at the same time, Murdoch gives the opposite view that human beings are busy

contriving at and even at unconscious level enacting and re-enacting some sort of drama. What Murdoch is trying to prove is that human beings have a natural desire to rationalize accidents? The idea of sheer inexplicable accidentalness is inconceivable. Murdoch believes that there are serious moral and aesthetic problems console themselves in the way. It means that the process of consolations so not only the responsibility of the characters who are portrayed but also of the novelist who creates them and of the readers also to realize that they are consoling themselves by contriving that a certain kind of drama shall be enacted and re-enacted.

Thus in An Accidental Man, Murdoch presents a society having no faith in God. Here the characters try to evolve their own type of spiritualism. The characters while looking for a place where they can have peace of mind, reiterate again and again the absence of God. They yearn for some past experience. This makes it clear that these characters are simply looking for their childhood.

Murdoch makes the individual spiritualism of two important characters, Dorina and Matthew, clearly visible in the novel. They articulate a formula for reaching an ideal each devises deeply. The contexts are different but their common formula is to "change magic into spirit," which Murdoch holds as a major task for the artist.

Henry and Cato is the most serious religious novel. Here the novelist discusses religion from different angles through an unusually stark, profoundly ironic and simple story. Through discussions about guilt, sin, intellectual interoperations, conversion and Christian theology, Murdoch makes her views clearer in Henry and Cato than she had done in earlier novels.

In Henry and Cato, Murdoch shows the nice upper class values continues to work in some facsimile of contentment and control. There is no other moral alternative as few show capacity for relevant belief and suffering.

For Murdoch, religion makes one rise above selfishness and prepares one to make big sacrifices. The followers of Christ do not stop after doing one good deed; their life is a continuous effort for good:

'Your life doesn't belong to you, 'said Anne. 'Who can tell where his life ends? Our being spreads

out far beyond us and mingles with the beings of others. We live in other people's thoughts, in their plans, in their dreams. This is as if there was God. We have an infinite responsibility' (p.454).

In *Nuns and Soldiers*, Murdoch shows the human beings like the nations play politics to retain their personal happiness. Mrs. Mount in a very clever way succeeds in keeping Manfred for herself. She has in fact been manipulating most of the things. It is she who has informed through an anonymous letter to the count that Gartrude and Tim are having affair. Again it is she who informs Tim when he has been shunted out of the flat in Esbury Street that Gratrude is alone at Les GrandsSaules. By doing so, she succeeds in bringing Gertrude and Tim together. She was afraid if Gertrude does not marry soon, she herself loose Manfred. She has spread the rumour that guy never killed Manfred though the reality was the opposite.

Religion is an important feature of Murdoch's novels. She has proved that the orthodox religion and the traditional morality are outdated in the present times. People should believe in Christianity shedding myths of "Christology". She is in favour of the intellectual interpretation of religion. For Murdoch, it is not necessary for a religious person to believe in the existence of God. A devout Christian may not essentially have faith in God but he must have faith in Christ. For her, it is no use to ponder whether there was a physical resurrection of Christ or not. The real thing in Christianity is to follow the path of Christ.

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