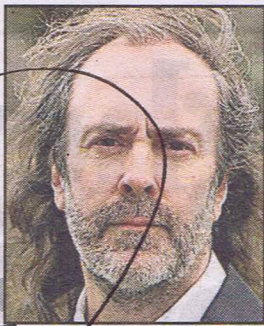


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WRITE TO JOHN AT The Irish Mail on Sunday, Embassy House, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4

## If the Church wants a real future it has to discover a new Lord of the Dance

HAVE this recurring nightmare in which all hope has been lost. A strange form of rationality has enveloped the world, making it impossible to think that life is not meaningless or to speak with conviction of things eternal. We walk around with our heads bowed, waiting for a death that will amount to no more than an insect dashing against a windscreen. Our children are terrified of losing everyone and everything they love and our words are useless to console them.

The real nightmare, though, is that this scenario is not a nightmare but the reality we are busily constructing every day in our culture. Even worse is that we see this as an unavoidable, even essential element of what we term 'progress'.

On Good Friday, I listened to a discussion on RTE's News At One that purported to be about the condition of Irish Catholicism. The participants were an agnostic religious-affairs correspondent, a Marxist sociologist, a campaigning neo-atheist and a watery Jesuit.

The entire discussion was predicated on assessing the progress of the destruction of Irish Catholicism and the subtext implied that this was inevitable and would, once completed, be a beneficial development. There was no sense that this society might have any desire to explore questions of faith in an intelligent way or that there might be ways of looking at religion that were not either hostile or patronising.

The nearest we got to a question based on attachment to or affection for Christianity was this, directed at the neo-atheist: 'Can you understand why, at a time when a lot of people in this country are going through hardship, economic or otherwise, are questioning where things went wrong, where they're going to go next, that they naturally sometimes tend to lean towards religion as a way of either filling that gap or of answering those questions for themselves?' In other words, can you not understand that people still have a need to cling to superstition, in defiance of 'reality'? This, on a discussion at lunchtime on the national radio station in a Christian country, was the nearest thing on offer to a concern about the disintegration of the culture on which our children may hope to depend for their lives and hopes.

The last thing the hosts of such discussions desire is that the discussion be restored to its proper context. Because I have written two books exploring how intelligent people might re-engage with Christianity in

its true essence, there is absolutely zero prospect of my being invited to participate. Today, hundreds of thousands of Irish Catholics may still troop into churches but the dominant conversation daily has put them on notice that their beliefs are, culturally at least, on the point of obsolescence. Meanwhile, the Church wrings its hands and prates about 'social justice' and 'morality', when the real problem is the destruction in our culture of any sense that faith has a reasonable basis as the answer to human needs.

This is the importance of John Paul II who, today in Rome, will be beatified by his successor, Pope Benedict XVI. What he stood for, above all, is the insistence that faith is not some add-on benefit but the central strand of a coherent understanding of reality. This is the meaning of his transformational engagement with global pol-

itics, the purpose of his acute sense of social justice and the cause of his seeming obsession with the abuse of human sexuality.

In 1984, he declared: 'Jesus, the Christ, He in Whom everything is made and subsists, is therefore the interpretative principle of man and his history.'

**T**O affirm humbly but equally tenaciously that Christ is the beginning and inspirational motive for living and working, of consciousness and action, means to adhere to Him, to make present adequately His victory over the world, to work so that the content of faith becomes understanding and pedagogy of life, is the daily task of the believer, which must be carried out in every situation and environment in which they are called to live... We believe

in Christ, dead and risen, in Christ present here and now, who alone can change and changes man and the world, by transfiguring them.'

Do we understand? That Christ is the meaning of history? That understanding this is the only way for the Christian to understand reality and imbue human existence with its true meaning and purpose? That Christianity is not history but current affairs?

There is no point lionising JPPI unless we face what he sought to tell us and no point harking back to 1979 unless we can confront the sneers and pseudo-science of the Marxist-secularists and cod-rationalising atheists and find a way of making Christianity light up again in our culture.

The thing is: we can. Explained properly, Christianity remains as potent and rational as the day Jesus rose from the tomb.

JPPI's visit here in 1979 was the last memorable occasion when a form of Catholicism appeared to embrace virtually the entire population. However, it is also true that his image in the Irish mind presents a real problem for the Church, in that there is this contradiction between the deep public affection he attracts and the widespread failure to understand what he spent much of his public life talking about.

His beatification again offers the Church something to work with. On past form, however, this opportunity is almost certainly going to be frittered away because of the wide divergence that exists between the moralistic-sentimental Catholicism offered by the Irish Church and the rooted-in-reason kind emphasised by the two most

recent popes. If there are representatives of the Irish Church who understand that reality, ie, everything that is, is central to the content of Christianity, they are carefully keeping it to themselves. So, secularists and atheists have free rein to redefine our culture in accordance with the principles of death and despair, to tell us what 'rationality' is, to reduce the magic and mystery of subjectively experienced human life to crude mantras about Darwinism and biology. In answer to such challenges, the Irish Church offers nothing except pieties and moralisms, insisting that Christianity is mainly a matter of social benefits.

It is time the Irish Church began to distinguish the dancer from the dance. Twenty years ago, Irish dancing was seen as old hat, sexless and uninteresting. Then along came Michael Flatley to reinvigorate it in a way nobody had thought possible. For those who understand what is at stake in the loss of Christianity, it may seem a banal comparison but perhaps this hints at the radical nature of the task Irish Catholicism now needs to undertake.

The dance of Christianity relates to its centrality to reality. It is a way of seeing things that excludes nothing about mankind - not the hope, not the longing, not the mysteriousness of being. To suggest that this is simply about morals, rules and 'good deeds' is a sin that threatens to eclipse all others. Perhaps what we need is some new voices representing the Irish Church, to speak the way Michael Flatley danced and in doing so convey the true essence of the Christian dance in a way that would bring us back onto the Christian floor.



RADICAL: Michael Flatley reinvigorated moribund Irish dancing

## High toll of the war on motorists

REGULAR readers will be familiar with my attempts to call to account those institutions seeking to turn the life of the motorist into a daily trial. I look forward to updating you on the saga concerning my minute-over-the-limit parking ticket, which should come to a head in the next month or two.

Another of my enthusiasms is toll roads. Last year, in a highly scientific study, I worked out that using the Eurolink-tolled M4 amounts to a time-saving of less than five minutes, keeping within the speed limit. The old N4 route, via Enfield and Kinnegad, is leisurely and agreeable and enables the motorist to save almost €3 while losing almost no time at all.

Now, it emerges that even the modest time-saving on the tolled route may be illusory. Return-

ing to Dublin on Thursday evening, in something of a hurry, I used the M4. Arriving at the toll booth near Enfield and having no ready change, I found that there was just one manual booth in use. This meant that there was a queue of about four or five cars - and the situation was further complicated by what appeared to be an unannounced change: the extreme left lane, which had always been a manual booth, had been converted to a tag lane, which meant that motorists were driving in and then having to reverse out. The net outcome was a complete wiping out of the time saved by using the tolled road in the first place.

Naturally, I have complained in the strongest terms to Eurolink, and will keep you fully informed.